

## A Conversation with Bhupen Khakhar

Bhupen Khakhar on his visit to Calcutta in connection with an art camp sat with Tapan Bhattacharya for an interview in winter 2002. Jogen Chowdhury who was also a participant in the camp spoke occasionally at the same time excerpt from the dialogue transcribed by Tapan Bhattacharyya. In it 'B' stands for Bhupen, 'J' stands for Jogen and 'T' stands for Tapan.

T :- In late 50's and 60's when you began career as an art history student and later on as artist, Cubism, Picasso were highly influential factor. Artists like Souza, Hussain, Ramkumar, Tayeb Mehta etc were all influenced by cubism. What was your response?

B :- At the time I also noticed cubism, Picasso influenced works but unfortunately I could not see apples, violins (objects used in foreign country, also main subjects in cubism, French paintings) on our tables.

Even from those days I was more interested in things around me. Also in late 50's and early 60's I could see lot of abstract, non objective works but I was somehow not convinced about totally abstract, non-objective works. I had a feeling except few exceptionally non- objective works, abstract art was very grossly international and as such acceptable and that was at par with politics of time. Rather figurative painting can create a genuine regional quality and that should be retained. I somehow could not accept our art to be borrowed from Paris. Whatever works after French influence were done at that time did not interest me, totally non-objective works also have no roots here. Abstract painters' idea of absolute did not attract me. These are often simplistic in relation to our complex culture.

T :- Tell me about your late beginning as a painter, your awkwardness about drawing etc.?

B :- I had an advantage that I came much late in paintings, that I had to face problems of doing paintings with certain human maturity. I painted figurative. I started doing very small figures, making a cluster of figures on a very huge canvas. And I had no confidence till late. At the same time I liked to draw people I knew and people who were particularly my friends. It was out of necessity to correct my drawings. I painted my friends like Gulam Sheikh, Nilima etc.

T :- But your handling of oil paint even in the beginning were sophisticated, delicate. They used to be very neat.

B :- This might be true. Famous poet-critic Nissim Ezekiel named my first exhibition as 'inverted sophistication' in a catalogue.

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T :- You were labelled as 'pop' artist. Also your works were full of provocation from the beginning.

B :- My approach to pop art was totally different than copying American or British pop art. I could not accept art without certain root. I used to choose my subjects as individual.

Of course I like Nandalal, Binod Behari but even then they have not entered into different zone of art. And that must be accepted. Their art is easily acceptable to the society. But body could be observed in so many ways but they did not venture there. Their works are being directed towards Gentry class but Jogen Chowdhury, Arpita Singh or my works are not all that. We began doing Vulnerable works. I personally passed through manifestation of private / personal area. Same was true for Jogen.

Even during 50's Indian artists were peculiarly influenced by Picasso, as if there was no need to create a personal language, consciousness searching beyond Picasso. Compared to that British artists like Bacon, Kitaj, Kossoff, Auerbach, Lucian Freud were far more individuals. There were also rigid codification in Baroda art too, such as Bendre. I could understand all those. Apart from Jogen, Arpita I was also attracted to very few early Bikash Bhattacharyya's works.

T :- In your narrative homosexuality is a part. Tell us about your idea about it.

B :- My relation with other men were fun to many even in art world, they could talk about it with verve. But there I wanted to paint these relations, no more was shy to put them behind.

Homosexuality in my paintings are not directed to any group, sect, underground etc. Even though there are some homosexual groups in our country but I did never go there, nor subscribed them. Homosexuality in my works are not part of any scandal but they are aesthetical, meaningful and also directed to whole humanity. This homosexuality is a deep search for a friendship and that could happen between two unequal age groups also. And right from Greek Philosopher Socrates to Michelangelo etc. many had longed for such friendship. My desire for friendship, longing for a male friend was often severely criticised but now time has drastically changed. Even art history from Michelangelo, Caravaggio to now is being written in an entirely different way giving completely a new context. Again I must repeat that I did not belong to any homosexual circle or group. I did never join even once in their meeting, neither I did subscribe any money or membership.

Even artists made fun of my sexuality. I passed through such a deep manifestation of private/personal. May be every artist faces stiff resistance in their own way. Same

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may be true for Jogen (makes a gesture to Jogen sitting near him).

T :- So when did you first see Jogen's works?

B :- I came to know Jogen, Arpita (Singh) much later. I first saw Jogen's 'Ganapati' at Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi and I was very impressed.

J :- In '72 I first saw Bhupen's show and also came to know him. There were collages, photographs in that exhibition. I found his works very acceptable to me. Because of very intelligent humour sense, also an intervening dignity Bhupen's works appeared to me very original even in those days. Also I used to consider, Bhupen was a very rich man. His fashionable white hair also prompted me to think this way.

B :- But actually I was short of money those days. I used to work as a Chartered Accountant in a Commercial firm. I joined there in 60's with a salary of Rs. 250 per month. When I retired in 1985, my salary was only Rs. 1000. Now my single painting costs more than the Provident Fund amount received after 25 years of service. Much of my life has been spent with scarcity of money. Gulam Sheikh used to help me sometime.

Jogen's works, Arpita's works I liked from the beginning. Every time I saw ...

Suddenly Jogen Chowdhury leaves the room to attend a phone call. So I confront Bhupen alone.

T :- How will you give a value judgement of Jogen's work? Can you please elaborately speak about him?

B :- Crossing the limit and entering into the danger zone. I respect the art where people become totally vulnerable in their danger zone. There are artists whose works look courageous to a certain limit but there are artists who enter into difficult zone not just courageous and become totally vulnerable. Jogen is one such artist.

Though there was controversy of Hussain's Saraswati, but it was a kind of work based on Mark making. Here in Jogen's case 'Ganapati' is more sensuous and more Vulnerable, so more genuinely provocative. In a way if one is to react, one should react with Jogen's 'Ganapati' rather than Hussain's 'Saraswati'. It is not difficult to be unconventional in the eyes of the world when your unconventionality is but the convention of your set. It affords you then an inordinate amount of self esteem. You have the self satisfaction of courage without inconvenience of danger.

But alas, there is hardly any serious criticism of contemporary Indian art, one notices certain camouflage or unnecessary non-contextual descriptions. Because of this we do not notice proper criticism of Hussain or Tyeb Mehta etc. May be people are not courageous enough. Even recently film criticism has taken a root, serious

reviews of even Satyajit Roy's works are available but hardly there is any art criticism except like Geeta Kapur's.

In the meantime Jogen Choudhury joins again with us.

J :- In a recent development international art has taken a complete new direction including post modernism, how do you react Bhupen?

B :- Validity of Art depends on individual's substantial experience which gets channelled into the work, that is also true of serious postmodernist avant-grade art. One such example is Joseph Beuy. His political engagement, exhibition of felt suits are all contextual. Face of art changes because of newness of our experiences. Look at Beuy's wrapping in fur etc, you can see validity of my point.

J :- You are right, Bhupen. This is also true of Anselm Kiefer.

T :- Kiefer's Jewish experience of holocaust did never leave him. But this memory should not be lived one only, that can be constructed too in a right perspective and place. Proper context is absolutely essential for any assessment. Often parent's experience gets transferred to children through time. Along with Kiefer one can name Christian Boltanski, Richard Long etc. They dealt with utmost truthfulness with sign of time. Here if you do not mind. I will discuss both of your works in short. I notice Jogen has a tendency for space cancellation. His use of black back ground often is sort of a burden of the past, his uprootedness after partition. In fact Jogen has a prolonged sense of uprootedness which he experienced as a boy coming from Faridpur, Bangladesh to refugee colony in Calcutta. Jogen's figures look like thrown into forefront from dark background. But Bhupen has a tendency to absorb and elaborate space in his works. His stretched space includes marvellous smaller slices of life. Bhupen's ability to transform his root into criticality, mortality is all very important like Jogen's deep sense of loss in a prolonged uprootedness. Jogen places despair in his depiction of body where as Bhupen offers mature compassion. In both the artists' cases along with Arpita Singh human condition, mortality remain prime. Three in their own ways are marvellously attracted towards erotics of life.

J :- Yes, yes these are all very true. In fact we were so moved by voluptuousness or sensual gratification of body. We first seized body without ramification. Before us there were only idealised body in Indian art.

B :- Often this singularity in the path of excellence transcends limit of time, I used to like Rabindranath, Benode Behari, K.G. Subromanyan but some how I always try to interact with images of banal everyday, my first hand experience. I did never paint under a programmed hollow. May be this is why I love and respect Pieter Brueghel so

much as if I am part of his world. My canvases are also crowded canvases that are packed without any inhibition.

T :- You often imagine vast expanse of space filled with small size figures. Even there one or two individuals are big eyed wonderer like a singularity. Like Brueghel you have also attempted to paint proverbs like 'yajati', or 'you can not please all', you have a temperament for design of absurdity placing contemplative time and actual time together in a canvas. Human folly, laughter, deep sense of pathos are being described in one painting after another.

B :- My entire art depends on my interaction with society and culture. I have always valued my experience of life around. Even I have drawn my own body in new artistic term. Recently I have to frequently attend to hospitals, x-ray, scan departments to check my cancer. But same experience now gets manifested in my new work. You can notice this change, this completely new use of anatomy in my recent works. One requires isolation of the emotion to portray these works. But I enter into this difficult zone to turn very subjective i.e. my medically scrutinised diseased body into art work.

T :- Often you have shown two extremities of body like youth and old, luring, caressing each other, even a haunting sense of 'double' developing magical growth of phalluses, hands, even animals turning as a possessive lover. All these remind me of Antonin Artaud and his making of 'counter figure, perpetually protesting against the law of the created object.'

B :- May be this observation has a valid point. Now I am after body scarred, gutted with pain.

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