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## Deepak Ananth on Jogen Chowdhury

Jogen Chowdhury's paintings also focus on the human figure, but his attitude as well as treatment is quite different from Patwardhan's. He has developed a highly original idiom which allows him to explore a private world of real and imaginary beings, of dreams, fantasies, childhood recollections, as well as the objects and people he sees in his environment. Working in ink and pastel, he builds up his images through a fastidious process of cross-hatching, allowing a mild tint of colour gradually to seep in. This gives his images a dull, pellucid sheen which is emphasised by the dark background against which they are set.

While his imagery is thematically wide-ranging, his method of working has remained consistent. It is also possible to identify a recurrent fascination with the grotesque, an underlying quality in almost all his work which manifests itself in strange and sometimes startling ways. His early work explored a terrain inhabited by the creatures and objects of his imagination. In a series of dream-pictures, for instance, he has as it were, tried to plumb the depths of an abundantly fecund unconscious, coming up with images at once fantastic, archetypal and visually poetic. The familiar stuff of dreams: snakes, fish, fruit, flowers, hand, breast, appear in a soft welter of forms curiously afloat or held in limbo, evoking associations which are erotic in a most tender, mellow way. The animal and vegetable forms are both friable and damp, so that they seem to possess a strange kind of sentience. While this has surrealist undertones, it is largely absent in the rest of his work.

He is also able to indulge his taste for the grotesque in quite uncanny ways when dealing with human figures. They usually appear as clumsy, monstrous creatures, with demented faces, engulfed by flabby, pendulous flesh. Their bodies appear to be made of a rubbery integument as they heave and swell within the folds of musty, mouldering upholstery. The women are deformed: bloated, squint-eyed, misshapen, but of course there are exceptions, especially when he deals with specific characters in Nati Binodini, for instance, he invests the portrait of this old-time Bengali actress, who once a prostitute, with a starkly haunting persona.

But the most gross treatment of figures is evident in the **Ganesa** series of paintings. Here we see one of the most innocuous deities in the pantheon of Hindu gods transformed into a devastatingly obscene creature. His body, despite its corpulence, seems to be, slowly, decomposing. The limbs droop wrinkled and flaccid. He exudes a prurience which is totally in contrast to the benevolent nature generally associated with

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this deity. Perhaps here one could mention the strong sexual undercurrent which exists in the delineation of all these figures. The treatment of the hands and limbs, for instance, is unmistakably phallic. This is also evident in some of the still lifes. In one of them we see a massive bolster resting on an elaborately draped bed. It is painted in a way that makes it appear simultaneously tumescent and relaxed. And this is all the more emphasized by the pictorial means used, which give the surface a soft velvet lubricity.

In his most recent paintings Chowdhuri presents an entire gallery of social types-politicians, middle class women, village folk. Some of the figures are satirical while others are imbued with a more complex psychological dimension. These figures are smaller in scale than in the previous works, but they emerge, like many of the earlier paintings, from a deep seated anger and loathing of certain manifestations of human nature. As the figures here are isolated, rather than placed in upholstered settings, the social origins of the artist's anger are less clearly defined but not his insight into their deformities. Their faces provide the clues to their inner states they rarely confront the viewer head on, or return his gaze. They seem to be slowly consumed from within, touched by a strange malaise that forces on them an enfeebling passivity.

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