
Speaking of Jogen

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It is hard enough for an artist to write about his own work. But It is harder to write about the work of another. For no artist can handle this with clean hands, soiled as they are with the sweat of his responses. And no artist will readily agree to wear what one may call gloves of impartiality.

I confess I am partial to Jogen's work, particularly its kind of eroticism. I find it quite special, a home-grown, not theatrical eroticism; an eroticism that is more disarming than provocative. And I am struck by the simple devices he contrives this with - a strange fusion of graphic sophistication and naiveté; an over- layering of languor, not tension, on his human subjects, men and women in ambiguous encounters; where males, more often than not, look droll, flabby, disproportionate, even helpless in the company of tantalising females in various stages of dishabille; who look naked even when they are heavily clothed. He unpacks their attractions by a variety of graphic devices, making them fall loose, sag, fold, crinkle, almost dissolve into a costume; investing them in the process, a kind of intriguing physicality or thing-ness. In reverse, he projects on the things he paints—plants, pots, flowers and fruit- a weird or voluptuous figuration and animates them with an awkward libido.

Art critics have imputed all this to satire and social comment. Jogen himself has perhaps led them to do so. But one can easily think of other explanations. In the guilt ridden society of ours the body's gifts are unpresentable unless they are dressed with a moral lesson or shown under the cover of a religious theme. This is an age-old practice. Some of the most engrossingly erotic pictures one can think of are those hell scenes that were popular in the east and the west; where sinners were shown to suffer all kinds of physical assault with obvious sadistic or masochistic undertones, making us wonder whether these lurid and salacious scenes did not drive people to sin, and earn thereby the right to undergo such orgies of suffering.

But one can think of other alternatives; and say that these works carry a larger implication; of how pleasure, by its own nature, debunks itself; how the body's enchantment becomes a strangulating snare, transforming a Garden of Eden to an Island of Circe. For, in most of these the languorous females are the star performers; the males are accessories like the dwarfs and clowns in a circus. And the whole show seems to imply that indulgence leads to abasement, that beauty tends to lose its freshness and rigour in no time, but, all the same, this is an engaging and inescapable part of the story of life.

Or, again, we may discover in these paintings a deviant grammar for the high-

lighting of the erotic; that outlines that the attractions of physical beauty are most intense when they overstep the canon and loosen up, where a touch of disproportion, inelegance, oddity or aberration enhances them. How lifeless the lacquered mannequins of the beauty pageants look—with their every feature polished to perfection—compared to the youthful peasant girls working in the fields, who take no recourse to cosmetic embellishments!

Paintings like Jogen's are bound to encourage many such readings and speculations in each viewer.

Jogen has had a chequered and eventful career. He is one of those young men who had to move to Calcutta from East Bengal early in life and work hard to establish himself. Trained to be an artist in reputed schools inside and outside the country he had to work, initially, as designer and later as the curator of an art collection to support himself; which experience he, however, still values. He was also, on the side, an art activist involved with various artist groups and art Journals. But his real vocation was to be a teacher, though the chance to be one came to him rather late in life. But it was a chance worth waiting for; as this brought him to Kala Bhavana (Santiniketan)—an art institution which had from its beginning upheld the necessity for academic freedom, creative innovation, and cross-cultural interaction. He could not have asked for a better placement.

With a sense of social commitment and keen concern for the environment Jogen took full advantage of it. He had an inborn talent to get close to his students, to put enthusiasm into them and pipe out their latent potential. And besides this, a keen desire to inform them about the specialities of their environment and the need to be responsive to it if they wanted to discover their true language of expression. At a time when the rapid commercialisation of the art scene is floating around various facile stereotypes his stress on this is most timely and appropriate.

Jogen is, however, a widely travelled artist and he has many foreign artist friends. His work is appreciated by many, cutting across cultural barriers. So when he pleads for responsiveness to the environment he is not being chauvinistic; he has enough evidence to show that the world accepts an artist more readily when he is genuinely himself than when he conforms to a running stereotype. What it looks for is authenticity and depth not easy legibility. All serious art lovers will be pleased to confront an art that needs some unravelling.

Jogen's students adore him. And he, on his side, takes a lot of interest in their welfare. In a country where the official support for the growth of a wholesome art environment is scanty, and often ill-conceived, he is always thinking of establishing self-supporting agencies. If, in this effort, his co-workers and followers share his enthusiasm in full measure he is sure to succeed.
