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## Images of Experience An Interview with Jogen Chowdhuri

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Jogen Chowdhuri is a highly self-absorbed painter who belongs inalienably to the place and culture he was born into. They have fine-tuned his sensibility and responses to the level of individuality. The pulse and rhythm of his art comes from this filial affinity to nature and milieu. This gives his oeuvre a pervading unity which is outwardly expressed through the individual idiom he has shaped and nurtured for the last 25 years.

The academic training he has received was designed to reflect the outer surfaces of objects, not to reflect upon the inner depths of the self as his sensibility would demand. So it was imperative that he transform it into a personal idiom through which the self could seep through. This he did by transforming conventional hatching into a tracery of interlaced lines that wove the images into a tenuous existence. While such intricate webs in pen and ink softened by a veneer of colour which was his means of expression — until he recently turned to oils — suggest an improvisational deviation that resists categorising his work into drawing or painting. The subtle co-inherence of naivety and distortion in the relaxed contours of his forms suggests a deep-seated vulnerability. Their existence in tandem is as revealing as his repertoire of motifs.

In his early works, pen and ink images of snakes, fishes, flowers, and occasionally of human fragments appear floating against a dream-screen of undefined darkness; and a pale wash of colour gives them a dream-distance. In the work that followed, the hatching becomes visually less mimetic but more multi-sensory and tactile. The sensory experiences of cloth, bolsters, sofas and the human body are cross-projected to produce an uncanny world of transubstantiated tumescence and flaccidness.

Clearly the human body is central to his imagination. Every motif in his repertoire is metanomically related to the body, and the body is always experienced from the blinding proximity of a child pressed against its mother, or of a lover exploring the body of his partner. The boneless expansive amplitude of flesh/surface seems to privilege the infantile experience; suggests the displacement of the lover's experience with that of the child's, or their intermingling in the corridors of memory. Reminiscential displacements and personal associations add to the symbolic ambivalence of his motifs. And this makes his images come closer to inexplicable experiences than to explicit signs.

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His art appears surrealistic but it is more a presentation in riddles of what is apprehended rather than a spontaneous self-revelation and the elements of fantasy and poetry woven into it are simultaneously evocative and distancing. The images do not always originate in the inner world, they imbibe the voice of interiority. The rich enigmatic *Tiger in the Moonlight* was born of a newspaper advertisement of a circus, the immediate impulse for *Nati Binodini* was a performance of the play about her, and the Ganeshas are take-offs from a popular icon.

The element of satire manifested in some of these works led to an interim phase of social engagement. The thrust of his critique and the metaphors he employs are rather commonplace but their corporeal realisations are incisive. Further, the exercise has had an impact on his recent work where the personal has re-emerged. In them the figures are wrought by a combination of decorative willfulness and expressive distortion and imbued with an effusive sensuality. In the postures of some figures we feel an animal sentience, in the ripe anatomy of others we savour a fruity succulence. It is difficult to judge whether they are metaphors of description or displacement. However, these figures are clearly born of local figure types and in groups suggest dramatic scenarios that are open to reading. And the full-blooded colouring foregrounds the passions and tensions of the situations. It is an art rich in suggestions, an art that ought to be apprehended without bracketing our fund of knowledge, experience or memories, but also one that cannot be narrativised without also trivialising it, without depleting its sensory particularities. It is an art that resists translation.

In the interview that follows Jogen Chowdhuri speaks about his life and art, and of the shifts in them in a manner that will help us to contextualise his images and yet experience their spell. The interview is an edited transcript of a taped conversation, and in it 'J' stands for Jogen Chowdhuri and 'S' for Siva Kumar.

S : You were born in East Bengal; that is, present-day Bangladesh; and spent a part of your childhood there. How important has it been to you?

J : My birth in Bengal, particularly in East Bengal ... which in any case was India at that time ... is a factor that has affected me deeply. It has moulded my nature. The ponds and rivers, the trees, the green paddy fields, the village ceremonies, the activities and the intimate life around; all these, which should have been difficult to have in any other place, have given me my nature. And I have carried it all through, it finds expression in my work, in its spirit, in its formal qualities, in the rhythm and plasticity of my forms.

Life in the village was not complex. It gave me a feeling, a sensitivity, for my sur-

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roundings and it helped me to grow differently. As a child I saw people make images of Durga with three large eyes and colour them yellow, and it was so hypnotic. That hypnotic look I still carry within me, it has a certain magic. I believe that the people who originally created it must have felt a similar magical or spiritual quality, a sense of eternity, in these eyes and the yellow colour. I did not use much colour in my earlier work but now that I am using colour in my paintings I find such colours coming out, and see in my images the clay images of Durga I saw in my early life.

Then the bottle gourd creepers, knotted and leafy, which wove their way through the gardens or fell gracefully from roofs, the proliferous greenery and the abundant fish, their movement and rhythm have come into my drawings. So, my childhood observations lend themselves to my work. I suppose it is also so with many other artists.

S : This comes out most clearly in your later works. It is as if your earlier experiences had lain dormant; your earliest works, with their agonised figures, seem to relate more to your initial experiences in Calcutta. When you emigrated to Calcutta after the Partition you should have been about 8 or 9 and the experience naturally should have been very traumatic?

J : It was, and it has definitely affected my work. Before we came to Calcutta I was completely innocent. I had no idea of the social and political aspects of life. But with our coming to Calcutta after the Partition suddenly everything was different. Life became difficult. In the city we had no place to stay and nobody in the family was earning. In Calcutta we ..my mother, four brothers and my younger sister, my elder sister was already married .. stayed with my paternal uncle who was a sub-inspector in the police. He had a big family and so we were a burden on him. My father followed us two or three years later. He and his mother were reluctant to leave East Bengal, which had then become East Pakistan. He could not sell the land he owned there, so even when he came we had little money. Such things were common during that period. Being a zamindar my father had never done a job and was not capable of doing one. Eventually my eldest brother had to take up a job early in his life, and the whole family's burden was on him at one stage. And then, after three years, we left my uncle's house and went to live in a colony in Dhakuria.

S : In a refugee colony?

J : At that time the refugee colonies were cropping up. People were moving into vacant lands, some of it left behind by the Muslim families who went to East Pakistan, some of it barren and unused. Places like Jadavpur and Dhakuria were then uninhabited, here the refugees were given small plots. We too were given 2½ cottah(1800

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sq.ft.). It was an empty plot with a mango tree. There my father built a mud hut with bamboo partitions and a tiled roof. In Calcutta we started our life again from scratch. We, and most of the people around us, were poor.

The food movement had already started, there were refugee processions and I knew that there was something called politics. The refugees played a major part in the left movement at the time, and the leftists were then truly progressive. My brother was a Communist and he brought home magazines like *Swadhinata* and *Parichaya* and books by writers like Devi Prasad Chattopadhyay, Sukanta Bhattacharjee and Subhas Mukherjee. My involvement with literature began through them and they provided an intellectual framework to my activities. I became involved with social activities, with literary clubs, magazines and debates. I also began to write poetry.

S : This was before you went to the art college?

J : Yes. My two brothers were members of the Communist Party, also my sister-in-law, and a lot of people visited us and I was familiar with what they were talking and thinking about. Besides this there was a lot of cultural activity in the area we lived in. The years between 1951 and 1955 ... that was the starting point of such activities though it became more concrete while at the art college.

S : And then you went to the art college in 1955? In the work you did there one sees the influence of the Bengal School and of academic realism. Like most others at that time you seem to have been torn between these two. And then you also did those largish drawings of the refugees on the Sealdah station. Looking at your work then some of it seemed part of the academic training and did not connect up with your life, and some of it came closer to it.

J : The drawings of the refugees were done towards the end of my college days. When I joined the art college I was a novice. I had seen just one exhibition of the Indian College of Art to which my brother had taken me one evening. That apart, while I was at school, perhaps in Class X, I remember watching Prabir-da (Prabir Das Gupta who is now in Sriniketan) and some of his friends from the art college do watercolour landscapes near my house. This encouraged me to do some watercolours. I used to do small amateurish drawings prior to that. I remember one of a peacock with all its feathers meticulously drawn. I also remember trying to imitate some kitschy landscape paintings once. Of serious art, I had reproductions of Abanindranath's *Passing of Shahjahan* and Picasso's *Dove*. I still have them somewhere. I also think that economic difficulties led to an indirect psychological suppression, and I did not have much reason to feel self-confident. So academic training was everything to me in the beginning, what I was taught by my teachers I tried to

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sincerely follow.

S : And what kind of training did you have?

J : Dhiren Brahma, a student of Nandalal, and Aparna-di, probably also a student of Nandalal, taught us to do foliage with lines and to make compositions in the Indian style. In the second year we worked with Maniklal Bandopadhyay who was very good at a slightly realistic kind of tempera painting and had some reputation as an artist. Our understanding of art at that time centred around Abanindranath, Nandalal and our teachers. And so we were following that school in the beginning.

S : And what about academic realism?

J : Academic realism was also there. There were classes in still-life, perspective drawing, portrait painting and life-study. Kishori Roy, Satyen Ghosal and Deb Kumar Roy Chowdhury taught these classes.

S : So you had teachers who belonged to the Bengal School tradition and those who did not.

J : Since many of them worked in the Bengal School manner that was the example for us. The only diversion was Gopal Ghose. He used to work in a corner of the class demarcated by a screen on which were pinned photographs and reproductions, specially of Degas and Picasso whom he liked. He was the first person who showed us how contemporary work could be done. He was an Expressionist within the Bengal School *Gharana*. And I must also mention his use of ink and pastel, he was the person who gave me the idea. During the later part of my college years we also went to the exhibitions of various artists at the Artistry House or the Academy of Fine Arts. The most important exhibition I saw at that time was that of Kathe Kolwitz at the Indian Museum. I also saw the works of Ram Kinkar, Somnath Hore and of the Calcutta Group painters.

S : But weren't your parents amateur artists of sorts?

J : They were, and I think their work had definite qualities. My father had a knack for drawing, he used to draw even on the back of official papers. He was not trained, but he was imaginative and sensitive. He also made images of Durga but his real creations were the curtains and the drop-scenes he drew for the village theatre. I still vividly remember one with the image of Krishna dancing on the snake, with blue sky and blue waters. My mother, she did *alpona* and was very good at stitching. Her work was meticulous and sensitive.

S : Did that influence you?

J : Not directly at least. Perhaps I got my talent from them and they were very supportive. Though I was good at school .. and the usual thing for someone in my

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situation would have been to take up academic studies... my father was happy when I decided to join the art college.

S : After you left the art college you spent some years in Calcutta, initially as an art teacher in a school, and during these years, I gather, your contacts with the larger cultural scene grew and with these your interest in the social and political scene.

J : Actually this awareness about society and the cultural scene started during my college life, perhaps even earlier. By the time I was teaching in school my thoughts were more concrete. This was the formative period and the rest is only a continuation. This should be the case with almost everyone. During this period I read a lot and I had friends who were poets and writers, and who were politically active. Although I was never a member of any political party I was completely in agreement with the leftists then. I wrote poems and articles, began a literary club with friends, and started publishing a little magazine called *Nandimukha* which still continues to be occasionally published. I was also going to youth festivals, Banga Sanskriti Sammelans, attending music, dance and theatre performances, and going to film shows and art exhibitions. It was the busiest period in my early life.

S : Did this affect your work or was it a continuation of the work you were doing ?

J : You know the kind of studies and drawings I did during my art college years : portraits and drawings of my family members I did at home, the drawings done at Sealdah station, and the model studies I did in the class. There were paintings that grew out of the studies of the refugees and others that developed from the model studies done in the class. And after I left the college I started working from imagination, representing the people around me. Although we were active, life, as I said, was difficult, and we had no electricity at home, so I worked in the light of a lantern at night using only ink and black colour. It was depressing for various reasons and I was led to the dark images, to the morbid images of men and animals in paintings like the *Representative from Hell and Retired*. I also did some drawings during this period.

S : So the darkness of colouring came from your depressed state?

J : Yes, it is clear in my painting of the refugee family which I did in class, in the images of skeletal figures with hollow chests done slightly later, in the paintings *King* and *Christ*. I felt a psychological affinity with them. The themes were depressive, this was both due to the social scene and our family situation.

S : So the period between your leaving art college and going to Paris was your formative period as a painter?

J : About this time I was beginning to gather my ideas about painting. I could draw well and had a flair for dramatisation. Women entered my art at this time and I made

images that dramatised their appearance, personae and sensual qualities. Such images of women have since become a part of my repertoire and my psyche.

On the other hand I was beginning to feel that my work ought to be rooted in the social situation and I was trying to relate to it consciously. I was also thinking about the necessity of being original while relating to your own tradition. Something of this comes through in the unfinished painting *Spring*. Abanindranath's *Kacha Devayani* was at the back of my mind but I introduced an element of satire into it. I painted the figures against a vermilion background and made the man middle-aged and the woman young, and made him hold out a blue flower. They are evidently mismatched. I have almost returned to this theme in one of my recent paintings, also called *Spring*. But it is more complex.

S : But this second version is not satirical, it focuses more on the asymmetry if human relations and its psychological complexity.

J : Yes, but I had a satirical attitude in the beginning. Man on the sofa was another theme I was to do more than once. I first did it in 1965. It was a large painting for its time and one of my favourites. I saw in the old corpulent figure a representative of hell; it expressed my disdain for the social exploiter. I also tried to express it through the image of an old skinny horse. I found these images important at that time. My work was developing a thematic focus but I was searching for my individual expression or idiom. I began to achieve this in a series of heads I did at the end of this period. I decided to do some larger works and prepared six or seven large canvases. Before I could work on them I got a scholarship to Paris and when I returned I found that my father had used them to mend the leaking roof.

S : You went to Paris on this scholarship in 1965 and it brought you into direct contact with modern western art. What did you react to most?

J : Besides modern art I also saw the old masters in the Louvre, in fact I lived very near it. I also visited the museums and churches in Europe and saw the special exhibitions like the huge Picasso exhibition organised by Andre Malraux and the contemporary works in the galleries. At that time it was like going to the moon. After seeing all that you forget your own position, where you actually stand. And then the alchemy starts working. You begin to see and think. What is *our* work? What should I do? I was really restless. This society was new and different. On the one hand I was trying to come to terms with it as an individual and on the other as a painter. The two were in a sense also inseparable. Initially I tried to do the kind of work I had been doing in India but I couldn't continue with it since the situation was so different.

S : Your works became a little more gestural and expressionistic?

J : Expressionistic, but they also had a relation to my earlier work. Earlier I was doing the figure as seen from the exterior. Now it was completely opened and dissected. In one or two cases it had become nearly non-objective. I guess it had something to do with my prolonged health problems.

S : But wasn't there any artist you are particularly drawn to, someone with whom you felt an affinity?

J : Picasso I was always fond of. It is his whole personality, the total expression of his life, that attracts me. He was one of the most important painters of all time. I also admire Van Gogh, Matisse, Rouault, Leger, Paul Klee, Dali, Rousseau and Rembrandt. But actually I am more interested in particular works than in particular artists. And I never wanted to be influenced by these or any other artists.

S : Perhaps at a stylistic level there could be some comparison between what you were doing and Buffet.

J : Bernard Buffet?

S : Yes.

J : Actually I am not very fond of Bernard Buffet, I find him very superficial. There is no psychological or social involvement. He was the government sponsored new French master.

S : And Dubuffet?

J : I may have some relations with his work. I like it, he does some spontaneous dabbling. But I am interested in finding images which are clearer and more intimate than Dubuffet's.

S : Yes, I can see that, and in any case your thematic elements were in place even before you went to Paris.

J : Right, they were there much earlier.

S : After you returned from Paris you left Calcutta and went to Madras and once again there was a break and your work changed. Since then there has been more continuity.

J : Paris to Madras was a big change, and there was my usual difficulty in adjusting to a new place. I also began to feel the absence of the art world that had a big presence in Paris; and to an extent, of friends. I withdrew into myself and began to reflect on art; on what ought to be our relation to past traditions and to modern western art; on how our predecessors reacted to them and how my contemporaries are responding to them, and so on. I began to write down my daily reflections on such issues and this, I believe, gave me a clarity of thought. Ultimately I felt that a lot of what was happening was superficial, directly influenced by western art and bore no relations

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to our life or activities. Most artists had no problems of their own but merely adopted the problems proposed by western painters. This set me thinking and I couldn't do anything for a year except a few collages using South Indian calendars and prints of gods and goddesses. But then it came to my mind that I should begin with my intimate world and associations, with what comes from my mind. The technique isn't important, I thought, it could be anything. This led me to the ink and pastel works.

S : These works were not only intimate but also internalised.

J : It was a meditative type of activity.

S : Your works from this period, almost all of them, were titled *Reminiscences of a Dream*, that makes them doubly inward-looking.

J : Snakes, creepers, cloth, fish, many of the motifs were what I could remember from my childhood, they gave me a strong elemental feeling. In a sense they were also psychologically very disturbing. They were fantasies of a young man, alone and away from family and friends.

S : This was your first group of works in ink and pastel. In the next group you gradually moved from the internal to the external world. The images shed their symbolic ambiguity and became more readable and locatable in the social space.

J : My work was at an earlier stage connected with society .. refugees and all that .. then there was a gap. Madras was a quiet city with a small population at that time. I had the chance to be alone and to have a meditative sort of atmosphere. I used to listen to music and read the books I bought and carried from Calcutta. On the side, I should also tell you, I had a religious orientation. I used to read Ramakrishna, that helped me. While in Madras I also read some Aurobindo. It was not really connected with the sort of painting I do but it is a part of my psychological context. I feel there is a quietness in my work from this period.

In my drawings the lines became more pulsating and the spacing began to suggest the tension between forms, and I felt inclined to introduce a sense of fantasy into my work.

Towards the end of 1970 I got married, my life-pattern changed and with it my work. Motifs like the tea-cup, hands and lotus entered my work, probably as a reflection of the new situation.

S : These works, as you have written some where, occupy a space half-way between fantasy and the consciously poetic.

J : Fantasy has a place in my work. During my Calcutta days I used to see films by leading directors like Bergman and Fellini. Bergman's use of the hand motif in *Magician* haunted me for sometime and probably the hands of my painting *Reminiscences*

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of a Dream 18 owe something to this experience. Possibly Bergmn was also an influence on other contemporary Calcutta artists like Bikash Bhattacharjee.

S : Although there is no direct reference, except for the jacquard in one of two paintings, did the experience of being a designer, working with weavers, influence what you were doing as an artist?

J : Not in this group; I had just joined then. But I believe that for a figurative painter it is better to work as a designer than as a commercial artist because your figure drawing can get influenced by commercial art but this doesn't happen with design, in fact it can be helpful. So, design did not influence me directly at this stage but gradually as I began to draw using a single continuous line I drew upon my experience of doing single-line work in design.

S : There was also this other thing, I suspect ... although it couldn't have been a direct influence .. your use of criss-crossing lines to build up surfaces suggests weaving itself. And again there was the interest your mother had in embroidery and *alpona*. When we think of it there are these different relations your work-process suggests.

J : As you were saying there might have been some relation between my work and these things. Seeing cloth being woven everyday, seeing it come out of the looms, seeing it in quantity all around, it may have sub-consciously worked on me, but I was not conscious of it. I had also a tendency to do criss-crossing since my college days and the complex situation probably led to its further growth.

S : However, the expressive amorphations of your forms, their deformations, come close in sensibility to the kind of forms women have traditionally done on cloth, specially in the local *kanthas*.

J : I was not conscious of it. The criss-crossing of lines also relates to my early work as I said.

S : You mean your early drawings?

J : After I left college I did a lot of pen drawings. Probably that was the beginning and the elaboration came later, around 1969.

S : Not merely elaboration, I would think there was a whole transformation of means later. However, coming back to the works you did in Madras, as you have suggested, they fall into two groups. The first group done during 1969-70 dealt with your inner world, the works from 1971 and later deal with the more external aspects of your personal life. This outward progression continues, and in the mid-70s we see paintings that do not deal with our personal world, or even with internal experiences in general. And most of these I think you did in Delhi.



J : I was in Madras from February 1968 to February or March 1973. I came to Delhi a month or two later. It is amazing that though I was so fond of figures in Madras I made no portrait or face. For three or four years there were no figures in my work except as fragments. In Delhi my interaction with friends and people grew. In Madras though I had friends I think I was not able to express myself in the way I was doing in Calcutta. I wonder if it was a matter of cultural difference. In Delhi I also found a more active art-scene.

The intimate world no more had a major part in my mental life. It was receding from my work and I did a few satirical images of domestic life like the floating pillow, and then gradually the outside world started coming in.

But this change really began with the few works on Bangladesh I did in 1971. They came from my heart. I also wrote a long poem on Bangladesh. And then came *Ganesha*. The first of these I did in Madras, and then the more satirical images like the large closely framed *lingam*-shaped pumpkin I titled *Intellectual*. It was a take-off from an image I found in Ajit Mukherjee's book on Tantric Art.

S : Satire was crucial for this outward journey?

J : In a sense, yes. There are the many heads and figures of leaders and politicians where this is true but there is also *Nati Binodini* which was immediately occasioned by a production of the play by Nandikar which I saw performed at Kala Badi in Delhi, but there is also a related earlier drawing. *The Man on Sofa* also goes back to an early painting but it is transformed, the technique has changed it.

S : By this time your hatched surfaces have more material sensuousness.

J : It is the material sensuousness of the form and the textural quality that is important, not of the man alone but of the composite image, which is often sculptural. I often left the background black and without details, it is interesting that way. It stresses the physicality, dimension and structure of the objects and also brings out the personal feelings. So it is not really realistic.

S : But doesn't it become more realistic as the outward progression continues? Before the Eighties you hardly did paintings with more than one figure, but now you often do groups, people interacting. You have even titled some of them *Situation*. These read like life-situations enacted in a more physically defined space.

J : I used to do a single figure and bring into it all the associated things. The individual figure often stood for a group, through an individual I projected the story of a social type.

S : Yes, of course; but they also are an intervention between your earlier work, which presented the emotions events evoked in you, and your recent work which

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presents the situations as they are enacted by the characters. Also the element of eroticism which had a veiled expression in your earlier work is now expressed more directly in these figures.

J : Earlier I was interested in particular figures and particular postures. You go on working in a certain way and then a time comes when you don't feel like doing the same thing. Now I react more to the drama in life, to the relations between people and situations which are not straight but complex. We sometimes lead double lives, one outward and public, the other inward and intimate. Outwardly any inwardly we live different lives, their success and failures are not symmetrical. The inner life where we are by ourselves plays a dominant role in the drama of individual lives and in our interpersonal relations for which we can't find any explanation. This gives me a jerk sometimes, and when that comes out in my work I do not want to suppress it with something I am really not.

S : So what you didn't give expression to in your early work is now coming out.

J : Right. May be after I paint some of these things I may not be able to continue, they may lose their strength and I may move on to something else. It is always like that.

S : Just as sensuous physicality is vibrantly presented, so is colour used in full strength for the first time. By choosing to work in oils after a very long gap there is also the change in medium and, with it, of size.

J : Colour has been gradually gaining ground in the pastels. The depressing situation that led to the use of a dark palette does not exist like before. When our circumstances change they also change our psychology. Probably it is also due to the change of place, new involvements, and the young students I interact with at Kala Bhavan.

S : But has colour changed the basic thrust, are you not using it to express more or less the same thing?

J : Although I now use colour I still believe that there is a negative area in my work, the depression still continues, though the cause is no more economic insecurity. Earlier I used colour sparingly in harmonious subservience to greys and black, now colour has its own role to play.

S : And size?

J : I have always wanted to do large paintings but my previous jobs did not leave me enough time and I did not have that kind of studio space. Yet, considering my medium and work-process, I had done some really large works. So I had the mental preparation to do something large and some of these images came to me as in a vision and I recognised that they would be well expressed in a large format. The

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smaller paintings are conceived differently.

I have my own ways of imagining and realising, I think it is important to follow my mind rather than to muscle into the act others are putting together, however stylistically and thematically contemporary they may be. And a lot of things are happening at this stage, the temptation to consciously adopt them and to appear modern has to be resisted.

S : So the new internationalism that is being talked about is, I presume, some thing that doesn't interest you, you would prefer your work to relate more to your immediate experience and background.

J : There will always be some sort of internationalism. We can always do something around what is going on, but if we can think originally will it not be recognised? The question is one of creativity, what is creative will be accepted but not its shadows. Look at the later day Russian and American Impressionists or the later day Cubists. It is no use becoming a shadow painter. All the contemporary movements are the creations of western artists. India was not really associated with them, so there must be something different. Mani-da's (K.G. Subramanyan's) work is a good example, he is a significant artist without belonging to any movement. The figuration he has developed, for instance, has a relation with traditional miniatures, and in their animation to traditional toys or puppets but it is also a contemporary figuration within Indian art. Compared to this many other figurative painters, including some sensitive ones, use figurations that are direct offshoots of western idioms. This is not to suggest that Mani-da's work is not informed of modern western art. We can notice reference to Matisse and Picasso in his figures, but also to Japanese prints, traditional scroll paintings, Kalighat *patas*, Tanjore paintings and of course to his Santiniketan background. They are eclectic without being derivative. His work has also benefited greatly from his involvement with design. His achievement is significant and it is something those following the international trends haven't achieved. The world may be becoming a smaller place but I think it is a mistake to think that internationalism should mean following the work done in America or Europe. A tree growing in our ground can also be international. Of course art needs to be creative.

S : So, that the artists are becoming more informed of what is happening the world over, need not, and even should not, lead to a growth of homogeneity?

J : We can take anything we need from anywhere but without selling our souls out to them. Breakthroughs come when we oppose accepted practices, so it is important that as Indian artists we should develop a resistance where necessary. Even while we are open to influences we should reject what does not go with our social circum-

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stances or psyche. It will be wiser to recognise our differences and to turn to the local, not to be ethnic but to be creative in new ways that are specially available to us. I am not interested in becoming ethnic but I am also not interested in getting stuck to alien novelties. And today in certain respects Europe is exhausted and the Indian sub-continent is more vibrant. It is therefore important that we look around.

S : In this context how do you respond to a new form like installation, considering that installation is often discussed in Asia with reference to both older local traditions and recent western practices?

J : The fact that technological innovations are constantly bringing the world closer is often used as a plea for a common culture, for doing similar things. It is like asking one to give up one's language for another which is more widely understood and accepted as avant-grade. Young artists might respond to this, and this is natural. Obviously installation is not going to replace the traditional forms : painting, sculpture and the rest of it will continue. Much of what is happening today is often traced back to Duchamp, but it should be remembered that great modern paintings, including some of the finest Picassos, were done later. There will be artists who will be doing installations but also returning to painting or whatever. Vivan (Vivan Sundaram) for instance told me that he might still do paintings.

S : So you don't see it as posing a challenge to painting?

J : For me painting is an essential art expression, it is more intimate, straight and direct. Just as developments in communication technology do not stop us from sitting and talking to each other when we meet, painting will continue to be done. There are many who think that painting has no future, but I don't believe that. Installation is just another art form, it will continue to stay but so will painting and sculpture. Moreover the gallery and patronage systems will continue to support the more permanent traditional mediums for obvious reasons. But finally it is the artist's quest and his sensibility that will determine his medium or form.

S : But in recent international exhibitions installation has been the favoured form.

J : It may be so but I don't think that installation will satisfy all our aesthetic or psychological needs or give expression to all that an artist's mind can conceive. Further it is not an altogether new invention. In every society, including ours, there have been antecedents both of sensibility and form, but they were not consciously considered art as it is done today. Its compositeness is also not new; dance, drama, film and traditional rituals too have composite forms. It is also an art that works well in the slick urban environment of developed societies due to its visual and structural forms. Of course it opens a new avenue for creativity. And an artist having no tradi-

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tional artistic skills can also use this form to express himself.

S : Can you say a little more about the exploration of local antecedents in your most recent works?

J : I find great potential in the Bengal *patas*. These have influenced earlier artists like Jamini Roy and Nandalal Bose, and perhaps also Manida. And I still find them interesting. It is not their linear quality that attracts me but the distortions, the suggestion of physical appearance and three-dimensional qualities. Their rendering of clothes have some fantastic movement which is clearly not realistic, but that attracts me and I have done something comparable in some of my recent paintings like *Lotus Lover and Couple*. I am also attracted by the frozen quality and ornamentation of dolls, like the ones we see in Krishnagar. And I am drawn to the folk theatre of Bengal called *jatra*, its mixture of real and unreal situations, and its theatrical ornamentalism interests me since it goes with my themes and mode of expression. All these formal and technical aspects are there but the process starts with the social and thematic issues. They spring from the complex situations and my personal experiences, but my paintings are not narrative in the usual sense. I would prefer to leave their mystery intact.

You might say I am amazed by the complexity of life and our living, and I enjoy expressing the same through my work.

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