

Reverie and Reality curated by Ranjit Hoskoté was held at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity from September to December 2019



by Raj Punj

For an enduring period of his life, eminent Indian artist Jogen Chowdhury has been inspired by the company of others – watching over and then willing himself to record by rendering in pen and ink the very ordinary and often anonymous faces and figures that inhabit the streets of a city. Such is the lack of consideration and care for the individual in a country polluted by its population. In Chowdhury's lifetime the fallout and fatalities of the subcontinent's political unrest, and of the unceremonious movement of individuals as immigrants, residents becoming refugees, is buried deep in the artist's psyche, just as the people of poverty and political instability are the cradle of his work. What we flee from is where Chowdhury is likely to locate himself and his art, for his greater understanding of humanity. To have stopped and knelt down to their level and evidenced the plight of thousands of displaced people, was for the artist to feel something of their situation.

Impregnated in his works is evidence of the isolation and abandon of a whole swathe of people caught up in the upheaval of populations. People who suddenly found themselves in a wrong identity, the wrong place. Noticeably East Pakistan, originally carved up by the English India and Pakistan that was further contested in the early 1970s between Pakistani governmental forces and the Bangladesh Liberation War.

For Chowdhury, the collateral damage was plain to see with, as he explains, his closest railway station being taken over as a makeshift shelter for many of the destitute and deprived. Remarkably, the tenderness and texture of the innocent, as Chowdhury saw them, bears testament to one man's intention to acknowledge the world as less giving and more unforgiving. That, along with the conflict in Kashmir, demonstrates the uneasy relevance Chowdhury's work has for us today – and as it has to those rooted to the railway station, without papers or a passage back home. And in spite of his celebration of contemporary art, citing the significance of artists like Yves Klein and Damien Hirst, Chowdhury's consideration for the human being, in a whole range of media, appears fundamentally more important than the materialist/consumerist driven art of the New Age.

The line of control that originally divided up India, the contest for control of East Pakistan, becoming Bangladesh, and the charcoal and pencil line that Chowdhury has

JOGEN CHOWDHURY THE LINE OF CONTROL



Jogen Chowdhury at Reverie and Reality exhibition in Kolkata

always employed to render people real, epitomises the torment and tension that hangs over even the simplest of his works. His drawings, lithographs, and prints all appear to draw breath from the people he has encountered and come to know in his life. He sees it as fitting to concentrate on the everyday, in an epoch of devalued lives.

India in Chowdhury's work is about its people, of the countless men and women who carve out a living from the land, whilst devoted to their innumerable deities. To see a work of Jogen Chowdhury is to come face-to-face with one's self, stripped of class and clothing, portraying a panorama of people, living and dying, as we all succumb to the canon of reincarnation.

In September last year, Ranjit Hoskoté curated an exhibition of the artist's works at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, Reverie and Reality. He sees Chowdhury's work as a fantastic fusion of fabulism (or

storytelling), the fruits of life, and of the fatalism that determines our individual destinies. Explaining that 'Chowdhury depicts an interplay between opposites in his work: between ripeness and decay, fertility and poisoned abundance, vitality and morality. He explores the similarities among objects and individuals otherwise separated by identity and membership of different realms of creation'. And it is as if by delving into the raw range of emotions, love, loathing, longing and lust, that Chowdhury encapsulates a godliness that is his own. Visualising the essence of these emotions whilst we busy ourselves with the rudimentary actions of living, Chowdhury goes on to stress that he is not a believer in a specific god, but in the existence of a power that presides over us all, which gives rise to the drama of his works.

He went on to say, 'I have known Jogen and his work for possibly 30 years. So for me thinking about his



Couple (1984), ink and pastel on paper, 28 x 39 inches

work also involving thinking back over the different phases of his activity. The departures, the lacuna, and that is what interests me. For me, an exhibition like this is an expanded portrait of the artist, of the practice anyway. So that was one of my starting points, to actively question that there was a "Kolkata period", there was a "Paris period", and a "Chennai period". If you look at the details, I do not think Jogen painted more than 15 paintings in all of his time in Paris. What I find much



Miss India Uncrowned (2013), oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, in the exhibition Reverie and Reality

more interesting about the Paris period is not the Beaux-Arts education at all, but the fact that he spent time with (William) Heyter, at Atelier 17'. Continuing, 'Heyter at the time was considered as an incredible printmaker. An American who lived in Paris for much of his life, and quite a pivotal figure for several generations of printmakers. Indian artists sought out his work. So the Heyter moment was the interesting thing. I am interested in the printmaker like strategies that inform so much of Jogen's work. Because like a lot of Indian artists he is not interested in oil painting, it is the watercolour, drawing and mixed media work, all of that bears the mark of his attitude and approach. It is very much the engraver, the lithographer – those are the reflexes that play out in his work.

'What I also wanted was to allow for many different stories to emerge from the practice of his work. What is it to think of Jogen Chowdhury as a storyteller, or a fabulist? What is it like to think through the pedagogy that he was trained in? That gave him his technical basis, at the Art and Craft College in Calcutta (as it was then), and later the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, and then as I said the 'Heyter' moment. So that part of the exhibition acts as the chronological axis, and then I open it up to different kinds of things. 'Focal points', 'the couple', for instance, or how does Jogen meditate on the surface of things, in a way that human skin, the skin of a vegetable and fruit, and the surface of a stone, rock or a pebble, that there is some kind of unifying substance that extends across all of these forms. So what does a technical option like that

tell us about his understanding of how all things are interrelated'.

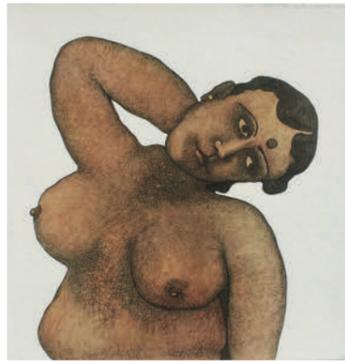
Jogen Chowdhury was interviewed further and spoke to the Asian Art Newspaper in the interview below.

Asian Art Newspaper: Can you explain your understanding of the exhibition, and of how the works appears to you? Do you see them as understandable and reflective of who you are, and of what you were doing at key points in your life?

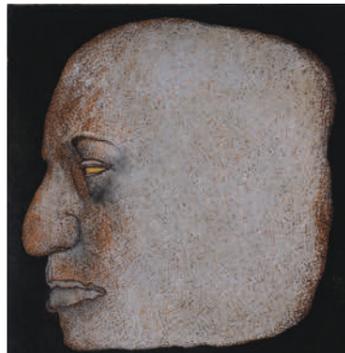
Jogen Chowdhury: What Ranjit has done in the exhibition is to connect to how an individual has his own way of looking at the world. So he looks from a particular perspective that is his own. The curator works in a way that is intended to best represent an artist as an exhibition, which may differ from the artist's original intention, and that tension and the intention of the artist will always be there. We will never entirely know what fills an artist's mind when making a work – that is impossible to capture. Since the critics (if not the curator) can make and break an artist. Artists can appear and disappear from history, in America I can recall so many artists coming to the fore in my lifetime, but after two or three decades of interest and activity, many of them have since disappeared entirely from the art scene, no longer artists. And in Paris, when I was there in the 1960s, I saw so many younger artists appear in galleries and so on, and during the time they are alive and existed, there were critics, there were galleries, there were museum people and – for a moment – there was a connection between all of them, so they collectively dominate the art scene. Then a particular phase passes and artists drop or disappear from the scene.

AAN: So what we see now is a version of events, the curator's version of your life?

JC: I have my own understanding that derives from my confidence since I have my own ideas of what is important, but of course what is crucial to me may not be what matters to generations to come. I can remember the salon in Paris; there were one or two dozen artists that people were buying and were considered as being very important and crucial to the modern art scene. And, as I said, 30 years on none of them have any influence, or any involvement, in the art world. This is often evident in contemporary art, because as I see it there is no life in the work and, of course, the work is – if you put everything else aside – the most important thing. It is not necessarily the technical things, or the scheme that is important for me. You see (Abanindranath) Tagore had no scheme in his work, but then there are schematic artists, for example, if you look to the Bengal School, who did so much work with miniatures and for the most part got nowhere until Tagore appeared. For me, without a schematic approach, he was a stronger person and a much stronger artist. So we can judge if we are personally related to people, because that has an influence. If I like someone I am inclined to write positively about him, or her. I know a critic in Kolkata who did a similar thing. Creativity will always be there. Each phrase of humanity and each moment of artistic change comes because there will be a group of people instigating such change, but not everyone will be involved. This has to be considered, it has to be



Amar harano shundori (1975), pen, ink and mixed media on paper, 21.2 x 21.2 inches, New Delhi



Portrait of a retired civil servant (1978), ink, pastel, mix media on paper, 11.1 x 10.8 inches, New Delhi



recognised. I also think that certain qualities are important for an artist.

The reclining nude (2004), dry pastel drawing on canvas, 35.5 x 48 inches

AAN: Ranjit Hoskote has articulately explained the possible approaches to looking at your work and your influences in, and outside, India. You have explained how the artist is at the mercy of the curator/critic and how you have become so involved with so many different mediums, including printmaking, drawing, lithography, watercolour, and charcoal. Considering all these approaches, what mattered most to you? Was it always about one particular choice of material as a reflection of one particular moment in time?

JC: That idea of one medium at one moment is not entirely true of my practice, the works as you see them in this Kolkata exhibition were not done together. What you see is a collection of works that draw attention to many media, but that was not necessarily how I worked. Everything is related, when I am drawing, they appear as you see them, if I am using watercolour, it always has a relationship to the original drawing.

AAN: What should we understand of your work, as image-maker and observer?

JC: I am devoted to the way I work. I am here, I exist, and my work, if it is valid, will stay, if it is not valid it will dissolve, or disappear from the public gaze. This is my way of looking at it. I do not wait for any kind of judgement or remark, I do not have an interest in another's validation of my work, and this is my personal understanding of my existence. When I was hungry nobody came, when I was starving nobody helped me. So why should I wait for others to approve or disapprove of my work now? People do not come to help each other. They survive by their own will and wit. My work is a statement to that.

Insights

Thinking about subscribing?



Print edition

A good, old-fashioned, time-out read – delivered to your door every month

Digital edition

When you are on the move and want access to your issues in an instant

Print and digital edition

It's the best of both worlds

Subscribe to our free newsletter

To keep up to date

Search our archives

Find a wealth of published articles on Asian and Islamic World art on our website



ASIAN ART
asianartnewspaper.com/subscribe



#AsianArtPaper



asianartnewspaper



asianartnewspaper