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Exhibition of Jogen Chowdhury's works sheds light on his early life as refugee, maps his artistic evolution

Living Arshia Dhar Nov 04, 2019 08:34:24 IST

The works of Jogen Chowdhury are on display at a retrospective-scale exhibition at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, Emami Art Gallery.

Titled Reverie and Reality, the exhibition has been curated by poet and art critic Ranjit Hoskote, who's put together 175 of Chowdhury's artworks across various media, spanning the length of his six-decade-long career.

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In my first interaction with Jogen Chowdhury, I learn that he is preparing to leave for Shantiniketan soon, and can only spare a short while for the interview. "I am on my way to catch the Shantiniketan Express, you see," he informs me. The 80-year-old artist retired as a professor at Kala Bhavan 15 years ago, after having started there in 1987. He, however, continues to call Kolkata home. "I don't think I 'learnt' a lot from Kala Bhavan; my thoughts, actions, and worldview are all influenced by Kolkata," says the artist, whose works are on display at a retrospective-scale exhibition at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity's Emami Art Gallery. Titled 'Reverie and Reality', the exhibition has been curated by poet and art critic Ranjit Hoskote, who has put together 175 of Chowdhury's artworks across various media, spanning the length of his six-decade-long career. The three-month-long solo exhibition opened on 20 September.

The gallery walls are meticulously sectioned to document Chowdhury's oeuvre starting in the year 1955 — when the artist enrolled in the Government College of Art — and builds up to the present day, thereby charting the evolution in his style and subjects. The frames are brimming with life, either in towering figure studies, or through familiar depictions of urban realities, predominantly of refugees. A few of them are signed "J N Chowdhury, Roll - 38".

"...I found myself most strongly drawn to a series of drawings he made as a student in the 1950s. I have long known these works — which are portraits of refugees from East Bengal, expelled from home and homeland by the Partition, and sheltering in and around Sealdah railway station. These deeply

tragic works resonate powerfully for us today, at a fraught historical moment when a brutal politics of divisiveness has cast aside the grim lessons of the Partition," Hoskote says. For the artist, his paintings are almost journalistic in nature, transporting him back to the moment in which they were conceived.

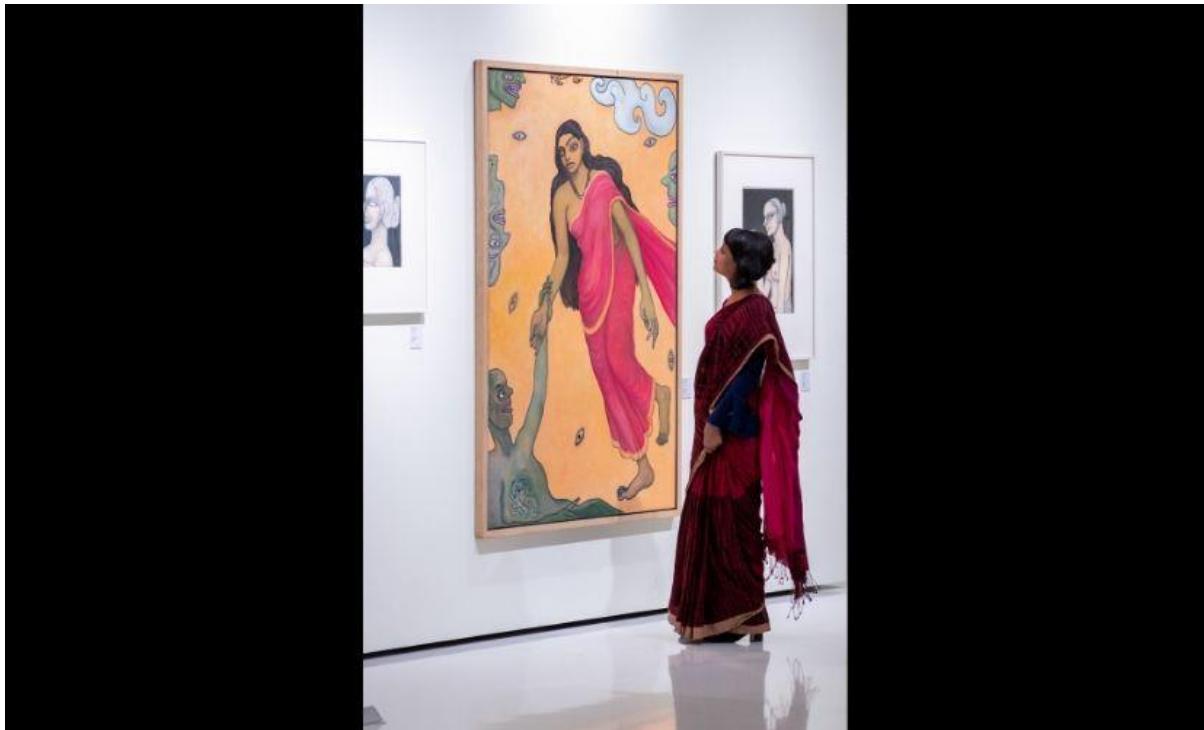


Jogen Chowdhury at 'Reverie and Reality', curated by Ranjit Hoskote. Image courtesy: Emami Art.

"I don't think any artist today will understand the conditions we lived in back when we came and settled in Kolkata around '48, from Faridpur (in erstwhile East Bengal). There was social, political, and economic despair all around. To a stranger, it might look like mere paintings of leaves and animals and houses, but to me, I can still feel and touch the reality of the times when the paintings were made, every time I look at them," Chowdhury says, adding that there's "intense nostalgia" surrounding his earliest works. This nostalgia, however, is not rose-tinted.

The once land-owning family had been moved to refugee quarters in the south side of town almost overnight, as uncertainty loomed large on the horizon. There are bucolic musings as well, images the artist committed to memory from better days of childhood — scenes from a village carnival here, a peaceful, indolent afternoon there — all painted in bright watercolours, as opposed to his sharp lines in ink that paint a picture of despair. "The sketches I made during my college years were done using crosshatching. I gravitated to this technique very naturally for some reason. It was, as I've mentioned earlier, a dark, depressing phase of our lives. I think this technique helped me emphasise on that

darkness, as you might observe in my paintings from that time. The use of crosshatch and black helped me attain a kind of intimacy that I haven't achieved with any other style," he says. Some may even read the crisscrossing lines, signature to his oeuvre, as vestiges of a past spent in the shadows cast by hurricane lamps. Growing up in abject scarcity, electricity was a luxury the Chowdhurys could seldom afford.



Jogen Chowdhury's 'Miss India Uncrowned' (2013) at 'Reverie and Reality', Kolkata. Image courtesy: Emami Art. "My works try and tap into the space between our daydreams and our realities. Sometimes, the line dividing the two gets extremely blurred — what you've dreamt of might not be your reality, while what's real may often feel unreal. That's why we decided on the title 'Reverie and Reality' for the exhibition," says 'The Master of Unbroken Lines', a moniker he's not necessarily proud of. However, undeniably, his ingenuity at seamlessly blending clashing emotions doesn't merely facilitate a personal idiom — it betrays a collective consciousness of its times.

"The artist's exploration of the human condition has been parsed, at all points, through his awareness of the contest between the visceral-carnal self and the intellectual-spiritual self within every individual. The earlier, as well as the later works, engage with the interplay between fleshly mortality and the desire to survive into an afterlife, the tension between a voracity for worldly experience and a retreat into silence and solitude," Hoskote says, adding that politically, he believes

"Jogen-da" shuttles between the opposite worlds of philanthropy and misanthropy. And it is this constant back-and-forth that "imparts a rich and unpredictable texture to Jogen-da's figuration, his evocation of humankind and its possible fate," — one that was prophetically depicted in Chowdhury's sketches of the Sealdah Station refugees, according to the curator. "We are once again busy dividing and polarising people, turning them against one another, stripping people of their citizenship under the ill-advised NRC regulations, driving them into detention centres that are in fact concentration camps," he says.

At the inception, Hoskote's curation marks the retrospective narrative with a montage of Chowdhury's self-portraits on the first floor walls. But as the arc progresses, it soon breaks out of its own mould by clustering together artworks from various decades. "The most difficult aspect of conceiving and curating this exhibition was the challenge of choosing enough works to do justice to the six-decade-long journey of this distinguished artist, and his kaleidoscopic explorations, while not cramming the exhibition space with so many works that viewers are dazed into a state of vertigo! Through the exhibition design – which offers viewers multiple points of entry and exit, and routes of circulation – I think we've managed to balance the two imperative," Hoskote says.



Jogen Chowdhury with Ranjit Hoskote. Image courtesy: Emami Art.

Arguably, Chowdhury came into his own as an artist on his return from Paris, where he spent two years as an art scholar (1965-67). His brief stint in Europe taught him what not to paint, lending him a style that consciously steered clear of the dominant Bengal and European schools. His use of pastel, ink and watercolour find culmination in his trademark crosshatching, which 'explores the soft curves and angularities of contorted bodies'. His truncated figures are contained within a tangle of thick lines, rounded off with a smidgen of dry pastel colour, perhaps in a nod to his favourite painter Kathe Kollwitz, the German Expressionist.

In 1968, when Chowdhury joined the Handloom Board in Madras as a textile designer, he spent an appreciable amount of time reflecting on where his career was headed. This resulted in a 100-page personal manifesto on his musings on art, later published in 1994 in the Bengali magazine, Desh.

"My works are political, as I depict people and human relationships. My works also show violence and revolt. Sometimes, they contain lyrical and satirical traits," Chowdhury says. The word 'satire' almost immediately evokes the memory of his painting 'Tiger in the Moonlight', a sardonic metaphor criticising the Indira Gandhi government-imposed Emergency. The artwork shows a prostrate figure being attacked by a tiger in a moonlit landscape.

It was also under Gandhi's watch that he assumed the role of curator at the Rashtrapati Bhavan's art gallery in 1972, observing the who's-who of Indian politics at close quarters for the next 15 years. It is also here that he boasted of his most palatial workstation — the Ghantaghar, or the Clock Tower.

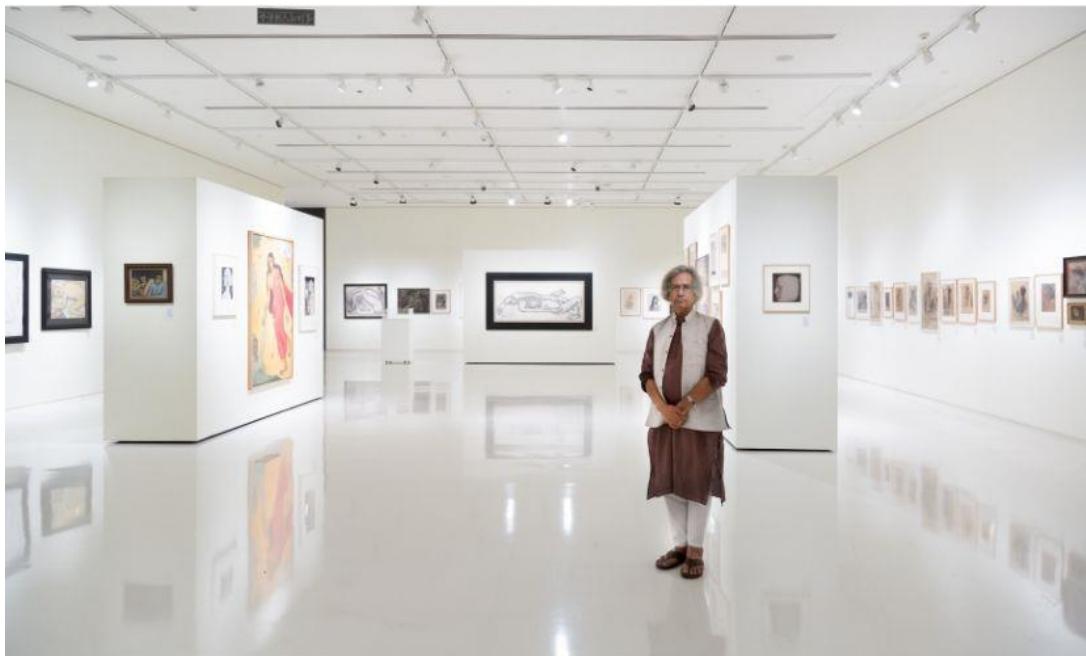


*A young Jogen Chowdhury posing next to 'Tiger in the Moonlight'. Image courtesy:
jogenchowdhury.net.*

"I derive all my inspiration from what surrounds me. I can't predict what I am going to create tomorrow," says the sitting Rajya Sabha MP for Trinamool Congress, whose tenure expires in April 2020. Chowdhury is visibly excited at the prospect of spending more time at his workshop, away from the political corridors in the capital. "Every year, we would end up spending a minimum of four months at the Parliament. I think I'd like to now dedicate that time to my art, and take my leave," he informs, but not before publishing a collection of his doodles and sketches from the Parliament.

The man is a keen observer of things, wearing his childlike curiosity on his sleeve. Expectedly, his hands would almost instinctively trace what his surroundings had to offer on bits of paper, as fellow parliamentarians went about their political shindig. "Observing these figures first hand — people who take all the important decisions for our country — in the Parliament, would be my favourite thing to do. What I also observed during my time there is that every person suffers from some form of insecurity or feeling of incompleteness, no matter the amount of success they achieve," the artist says. "Someone might be a great orator, but that doesn't make him perfect. Most of us can see that facade from a distance, but through certain experiences I've had, I have realised how no one, no matter how important, is beyond criticism."

Today, the octogenarian has his hands full, having inaugurated Charubasona: The Jogen Chowdhury Centre for Arts in Kolkata earlier this year. The five-storeyed establishment — a repository of his works along with those of his contemporaries — also houses a library, a conference room and guest rooms, and publishes a monthly journal named Art East.



"Rabindranath [Tagore] has been a major influence in my life, and has been so much before I joined Visva Bharati [University] as a teacher. Much like him, the nature around me started to inspire me a little more once I came to Shantiniketan," Chowdhury says, informing me that his time at Kala Bhavan encouraged him to pursue smaller projects, like painting miniatures and cards. "It's a tradition started by Nandalal Bose. So every year, for the Nandan Mela, I make at least 100-150 of these small paintings," the artist says.

Hoskote can vouch for the man's perpetual state of restlessness, even at this age. It is perhaps his long association with Jogen Chowdhury — one spanning over three decades — that afforded him the luxury of telescoping his artistic mettle into a four-walled exhibition. Understandably, at such proximity, surprises become a rarity. However, that barely keeps the curator from admiring the artist's "generosity of spirit", even after so many years. "I believe that it is most productive to locate the work that artists are doing at any point in their careers within their rich, unfolding trajectories — that allows us to map the continuities, ruptures, breakthroughs, and leaps in their imaginative journeys," he tells me.

Hoskote's efforts give us a glimpse into the fluid world of Chowdhury, which is marked with a need to break and unlearn what's taught. From nearly perfect figuration to deliberate distortion of the same, Chowdhury's art bears a palpable vulnerability, one that's hardly afforded by academic realism.

"For me, what comes through in my paintings and the forms that I create is the tension and the energies of the politics and society around me, even though the subjects are personal," he explains, as my eyes fixate on a pen-and-ink sketch of a woman with her back towards us, wearing a wilting flower in her bun.



Jogen Chowdhury's 'Life II', pen and ink on paper (1976). Image courtesy: jogenchowdhury.net

Perched on the edge of her bed, she seems unnervingly alive, with the folds of her skin bleeding into the ripples on her sheet. She's naked, but not sexualised — a rather delicate balance struck by an artist who's known vulnerability all too well, and perhaps for a little too long.

Link: <https://www.firstpost.com/living/exhibition-of-jogen-chowdhurys-works-sheds-light-on-his-early-life-as-refugee-maps-his-artistic-evolution-7589681.html>