



'Representative From Hell', oil on canvas, 1965

Drawn from the theatre of life

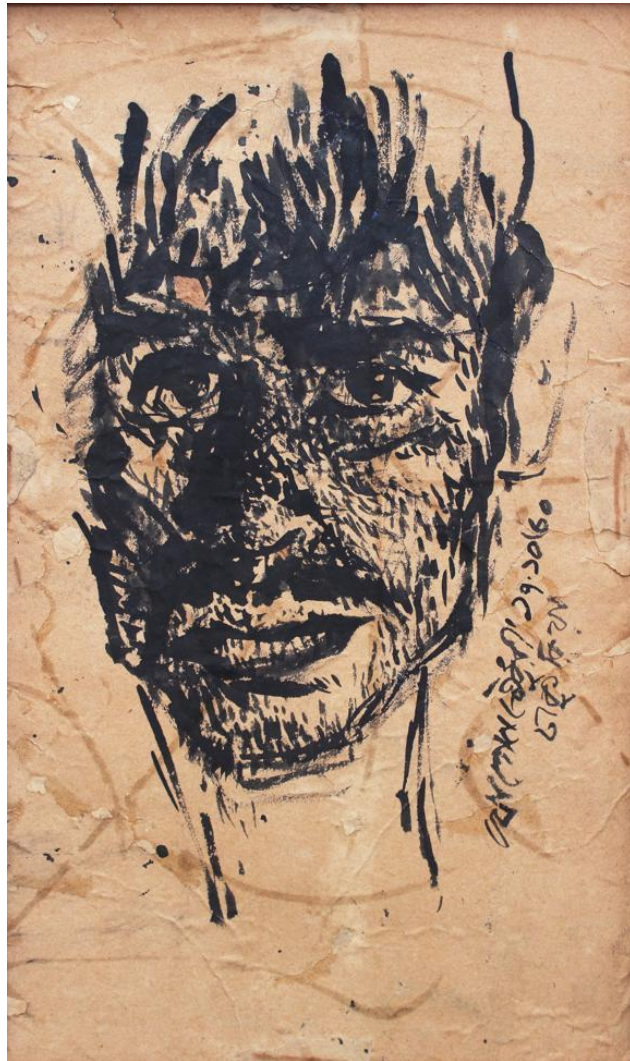
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Avantika Bhuyan

- A new exhibition, curated by Ranjit Hoskote, will look at the play of texture and form in Jogen Chowdhury's pictorial universe
- In the clusters of nearly 150 works on display, one will get to see the range and depth of the artist's oeuvre

Early 150 of Jogen Chowdhury's works are in the process of being assembled at Emami Art, located within the Kolkata Centre for Creativity. One can see the range and depth of the artist's oeuvre from the clusters on display, whether it is his early botanical and architectural drawings, moving studies of refugees pouring into the Sealdah station in the 1950s, or the textured, almost three-dimensional renditions of men, women, flora and fauna inhabiting his pictorial universe.

As art historian R. Siva Kumar writes in his 2013 essay, published on the Critical Collective website, "Jogen's paintings present an intimate theatre—of forms melting, of forms disintegrating, forms kneaded into soft tactility, forms slumping like soft sculptures or inflated into tumescent shapes, forms tantalizingly enigmatic, of forms buoyant enough to levitate or rest weightlessly...."



*The forthcoming exhibition, **Reverie And Reality**, curated by Ranjit Hoskote, presents these varied arcs of expression, which are arranged in clusters of themes. In a phone interview, Hoskote discusses the curation and Chowdhury's practice with Lounge. Edited excerpts:*

It's not every day that one comes across early works by Chowdhury. How does the show present different facets of his practice?

Jogen's work is very well known. But through this show we wanted people to be able to view it from different and more nuanced perspectives. I have always been fascinated by the early phase of his work,

from 1955-65. It marks a cusp between an autobiographical drive and a preparatory practice as an art student. I am thinking of the drawings of East Bengal refugees, living in and around Sealdah railway station, that he and his friend (also a fellow student) Sunil Das would make. As you know, Jogen's own

family had to move to Kolkata from Faridpur after the Partition. So, he felt a deep empathy for his subjects there, and yet brought artistic distance to bear on the representation. Jogen's early work captured the trauma of the Partition that Bengal, especially Kolkata's urban fabric, has never really recovered from.

What makes these early works relevant even today?

The Partition narrative in India tends to be heavily focused on the north-west. The Bengal narrative tends to be eclipsed. But, even then, you will find it present in some way in literature, art and cinema, particularly in Ritwik Ghatak's films. The havoc wreaked by the Partition in East and West Bengal, Tripura and Assam resonates at a time when we are about to recreate a similar human crisis in India—a postcolonial, independent, sovereign nation is all set to make millions of people stateless and homeless once again. It is not a trauma that goes away. It is for these reasons that it is important to look at this body of art, not only as evidence of work done in the late 1950s by a young art student but also why it remains powerfully relevant.

When talking about the influence of historic moments and Bengali folk idiom on his work, Chowdhury has often told interviewers that his background is relevant. How does this inform his visual vocabulary? Where Jogen comes from has a strong influence on his work as he engaged with local points of reference such as Pattachitra and toy-making. However, his education at The École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, also gave him a 360-degree awareness of global modernisms, in the plural. Having known Jogen for 30 years, having travelled with him and spent a fair amount of time in conversation with him, I have come to admire his imagination and cultural vision, which is so capacious. The influence of the toy-making tradition, the Durga icon images, or his version of the prana-pratishtha rituals, he integrates all these into a language which is decisively modern, ironic, playful, satirical and compassionate by turns.

In his work, one never sees a complete portrait. Chowdhury focuses on one aspect of the face or a part of the posture, thereby creating a dramatic effect. Could you describe his use of this cinematic trope?

Yes, he sometimes shows an individual or a couple in mid-ground, or in close-up, and at times further away. He is actually able to move across a range of focal points when approaching the figure. If you see the close-ups, they are incredibly textured. There was a particular phase during the 1990s when

the skin of his subjects could have belonged to a fruit, vegetable or human. Some artists suggest unity with nature in a mystical or transcendental way. But Jogen humanizes nature and material—whether it's mineral, vegetal, animal or human. His great achievement is often overlooked. If you look closely

at the very material rendering, whether through ink, pastel or pigment, the surface of the body indicates that everything in nature is one—complex and mutable, but unified by predicaments, potentialities and destinies .

Reverie And Reality can be viewed at Emami Art, Kolkata, from 20 September-7 December.

<https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/drawn-from-the-theatre-of-life-1568474943798.html>