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Paintings of his dreams

By [Reema Gehi](#), Mumbai Mirror | Feb 5, 2020, 12.30 AM IST

Masanori Fukuoka and Jogen Chowdhury

Artist Jogen Chowdhury on defying trends and looking within to create his body of work.

The selection of veteran artist Jogen Chowdhury's paintings from Japan's Glenbarra Art Museum, currently exhibited at the Pundole Art Gallery in Ballard Estate, is a rather powerful body of work. The show has 40 works from 1965 to 2005 on display, and in a way encapsulates the octogenarian's 40-year-old-long artistic journey. Yet, the Kolkatabased artist considers these works from art patron Masanori Fukuoka's collection to be only a drop in the ocean of his vast oeuvre. Incidentally, in Fukuoka words, "Most of these works have never been shown in India." At the opening of the show last month, the artist adds, "This is, in fact, part of a large body of work, which are now placed all over the world."

Chowdhury, who received his formal training at Kolkata's Government College of Art and Craft, taught in the late 1980s at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan as professor of painting. He urged his students to develop their "own distinct style". "My own work has been constantly evolving and changing," says the artist, whose earlier works revolved around Ganesh, the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Partition (the struggles of refugees which he witnessed first hand) and the Food Movement of 1959. "So many aspects — sociopolitical situations, and our own personal problems — shape us and our work. In that, we try to create something," he says. "But it's critical for any artist to understand why (s)he creates work. I, for one, don't want to do anything, which I don't know about, or find superficial."



Chowdhury's 'Mona Lisa'

Pointing at the centre piece of the show, 'Her Silver Throne' — created in ink with dry and oil pastel on paper in 2000 — he shares: "To me, this woman seated on the silver throne is a symbol of power. Now, in my opinion, power always has a negative force or influence behind it and I wanted to show that — thus, the crocodile. To me, it's both a satire and criticism of our perception of power."

Like several artists world over, Chowdhury has recreated Leonardo da Vinci's iconic painting of Mona Lisa, too. But Chowdhury's 'Mona Lisa' (ink and pastel on paper, 1977) wears sindoor. She is, as he calls her, "the Mona Lisa of my dreams". In 1966, Chowdhury was awarded the prestigious Prix le France de la Jeune Peinture in Paris, and he stayed on in the French capital for over two years. "And I would keep going back to view the Mona Lisa. So, I was inspired to recreate my version of it," he says. "I do what I like. Various things inspire me, but it's my observation that matters. My work has several dramatised elements everywhere."



Masanori Fukuoka and Jogen Chowdhury pose with ‘Couple Life 2’

To illustrate his thought, he draws our attention to ‘Couple Life 2’ (ink and pastel on paper, 1976), a sensual work — the painting portrays the back of a naked buxom woman, seated on the bed, and shows a man peeping from the corner of the cot. “Though it does have a naughty element, my intention was to create a painting that was more sculptural in approach,” he explains.

The artist has always defied trends, “or certain aspects that are popular,” he says. “When I got out of art school, I didn’t want to follow the academic style. Way back in the 1960s, many Indian artists were trying to explore abstract, I moved towards the figurative works,” he says. But an aspect that has remained a constant is how he has always tied the traditional Bengali imagery to contemporary painting. “And although it looks at everyday life and concerns — unlike Sudhir Patwardhan’s paintings, for instance — my work is more introverted, and one that always looks within,” he says.

Jogen Chowdhury: Select Works from the Glenbarra Art Museum is on view until February 7, at Pundole’s, Hamilton House, Ballard Estate. Call: 61146405