

# JOGEN CHOWDHURY

Select works from the

グレンバラ美術館

GLENBARRA ART MUSEUM  
JAPAN



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## KOLKATA

7 – 27 November, 2019

Nandalal Bose Gallery  
Rabindranath Tagore Centre  
9A Ho Chi Minh Sarani, Kolkata 700071  
Presented by Chitrakoot Art Gallery

## MUMBAI

9 January – 7 February, 2020

Pundole Art Gallery  
Hamilton House  
8 J.N. Heredia Marg, Ballard Estate  
Mumbai 400038

## NEW DELHI

20 February – 4 March, 2020

Bikaner House  
Pandara Road, India Gate  
New Delhi 110011  
Presented by Vadehra Art Gallery

Glenbarra Art Museum  
120 Choda Himeji, 671-2217 Japan  
+81 79 2608720 | [www.glenbarra.com](http://www.glenbarra.com)



Masanori Fukuoka's passion for contemporary Indian art eventually led him to open the Glenbarra Art Museum in Himeji, Japan in 1990. For him, this was a passion he wished to share with his fellow countrymen. In the early years, the collection was displayed in an extension Fukuoka designed on land adjoining his food-processing factory.

In 1998, the National Gallery of Modern Art, India, invited him to exhibit highlights from the Glenbarra Collection in New Delhi and Mumbai. The show, *Image beyond Image*, further travelled to Kolkata and Bengaluru. This landmark exhibition marked the first time a major international collection of Modern and Contemporary Indian art was displayed in India.

Though the Collection started out with a fairly wide range of artists, the group gradually got distilled over the years, reflecting the Collector's own evolution and journey. Earlier this year, the Collection was shifted to a newly designed, modern exhibition space that allows for the Collector's curatorial and collecting vision to be fully realised.

To celebrate this occasion, the Glenbarra Museum is pleased to present a selected group of forty works by Jogen Chowdhury from its collection, as a travelling exhibition to Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi.



*Face and Flower*, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 51.3 × 51.7 cm.

## AN ARTIST'S THOUGHTS

Jogen Chowdhury

### 1

When we joined the Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata, we were not yet quite aware of how paintings were actually painted. That is something we learnt in class. Before we completed our course we had acquired a fairly clear impression of trends in the arts in Kolkata and India in the beginning of the 1960s. We would step out of our college to visit Artistry House almost next door, and watch paintings. We had access to a wide range of art books. Yet the total view remained hazy. We had just begun to outgrow the academic mode. There were already raging battles over the academic style. In other words, we were yet to confront the problems of art as artists ourselves. I have a feeling that artists carry with them some fundamental notions about painting that they derive from their early lessons in college such as their primary notions of form, colour, lines. But for an artist to grow in the proper manner, what he needs most is to develop his own character. One recognises a writer primarily from the manner in which he lives, from the way in which he perceives life and from the way in which he understands it, and one begins to recognise an artist with the same signs. What a student acquires at an art college is mainly in formal terms. He carries away with himself only a general impression of things. No college or academic institution can produce a writer. Literature comes into being out of his way of life, his personal experiences and his perception of life. I am convinced that it is the same factors that are so powerfully at work in the making of an artist.

Those were the concerns that moved us when we began to study the works of art produced in our own country or abroad. Speaking more particularly for myself, I recall having belonged to a setting where we would have frequent literary gatherings, where we discussed poetry and read a wide range of literature from Rabindranath Tagore to Gorky to Manik Bandyopadhyay – a random assortment from whatever came our way. This is how,

I am convinced, issues are defined to develop into a sense of values, a process that should affect the artist all the more. The artist who would eventually assume a creative personality is naturally endowed with a greater than average capacity to receive and imbibe. He has an inherent capacity to be absorbed in himself, a capacity spontaneously tied to his personality. We did not know at the time, but came to discover only later that an artist has a natural endowment of this sensitivity, and this is what enables him to draw from his environment to enrich and forge his creative power. The artistic genius is a composition of technical skill and the artist's individual sensibility and ability to think. There is a necessary distinction between the particular capacity of a writer and the artistic sensibility of an artist. The artist develops with a sense of the distinctive character of his medium and there is an entire backdrop casting its shadow on him. This is how the world of art in Bengal, or more specifically in West Bengal, in the 1960s began to assume form for me, not in sharp clarity maybe, but in the manner of a first acquaintance. We went to see a Nirode Mazumdar exhibition at the gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts. The catalogue carried his valuable observations on Indianness. There were quotations, too, from a French gentleman. All these, as we visited exhibition after exhibition, affected and changed our way of thinking. Then at some point of time, we read Abanindranath Tagore's *Bageshwari Lectures* on art or Rabindranath Tagore's *Meaning of Art*. That is how we gathered our resources to reach into a deeper realisation. Without such sustenance, there is always the danger of an artist beginning to rule himself slowly.

The problem at the art colleges in Kolkata is that art teaching begins with the conventional modules of life study, still life composition and so on, with no scope for the art student to reach out to a level of thinking that can raise him to a higher plane of creativity. As a consequence, he does not acquire a real curiosity about art. He has to fall back entirely upon himself, and find out by himself and for himself how far he can develop as a human being and the spaces he has to explore to develop as an artist. That is the need that drove us to study Western paintings. There was a lot that we did not know then and had not read about. But we saw a lot of exhibitions and from time to time read writings on art. We would, for example, read up a piece on Jamini Roy, or Roy's own piece on the art of the *pat*, or a long article on the art of Rabindranath Tagore in *Parichay*, or maybe some of Ahibhusan Malik's small pieces. There were too few articles on art those days anyway. Yet reading all these writings gave me a sense of art along with a few, at least indirect, clues as to what I could do and what I could become. Combined with a sense of one's own commitment, it was enough to give me a view of what the future held for me. This is how everyone starts – with a learning activity involved in the process.

A boy in a rural setting does not grow up in this manner. In other words, if he is left in the village, cut off from this whole current of urban life, he may never develop an artistic personality in the modern sense. There may be a flute player living in a village with a highly developed sense of tune and rhythms. But to develop as an 'artist', it is essential that he is transplanted from his rural setting and resettled either in a developed urban environment or in a cultural centre. Ramkinkar Baij is a case in point. He had drawn a lot back in his own village, which proves that he had the spirit or fire within him. But we



Untitled, 1965, ink and pastel on paper, 49 × 64 cm.



Untitled, 1966, dry pastel on paper, 99 × 66 cm.

*I have always been fond of human figures and forms, which grow and take shape very organically. In Paris, in the 1960s, as a student I continued to draw human figures in a large size. I painted with dry or oil pastels, distorting forms and volumes in a very spontaneous manner. I was still in the formative stage – finding my own language. But I enjoyed doing such works, which I felt was an expression of my psyche as a creative person in the midst of the prevailing art environment in Paris.*

would not have been able to see him in the urban perspective, in which we see him today, if he had not relocated himself to this setting. In other words, he needed to act and re-act with the urban self-consciousness that is our frame of reference now for his works. Ramkinkar Baij's later works carry traces of his association with Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. I am convinced that it was his association with Rabindranath Tagore that allowed him to break free of conventions. We experienced the same scheme of interactions when we left our art college to find ourselves in a larger cultural setting. There was also a new problem which confronted us with the realisation that art had a history and a chronological development of its own, and that art was not a matter only of choosing a few colours, or of casting a form, or of having a subject. The making of a painting became more problematic once we realised that every work of art needed a kind of historicity to give it the significance that raised it to the level of art.

The other factor that we realised at that early point of time was the need for integrity, i.e. sincerity and honesty. We were genuinely concerned with whether we really worked with sincerity. Secondly, consciousness developed along yet another trajectory, that of art's connection with life. There was no way to reach that integrity or develop that connection with life by force. It had to grow primarily from within – where we could feel the hidden presence of a strain of integrity.

When I look back now at my works from the beginning of the 1960s, I can see traces of a kind of realism in the sense of naturalism. Then, at a point of time, it turned towards a sort of expressionism. These are the two major modes of self-expression in art. At a later phase there is abstraction. There is, of course, also the extremely important area of formal or constructional aspects; in other words, the ways in which the picture can be broken technically, ways that have to be explored in terms of all three – on the basis of real form (realistic, naturalistic form), charged with the inner expression of one's self (expressionistic form) and abstract ideas or form (abstraction). Beyond these there is yet another mode based on the surreal or fantasy. Every artist more or less moves among these modes in terms of their own individual temperaments. These elemental territories or fields, expressed in realistic form, expressionistic form, structural form, abstraction and surreal ideas are so strongly impregnated in man – that there is no way one can pass them by. There are several more impermanent phases in the history of art, eg pop art, or op art, or optical art, or cubism, or Dadaism, or impressionism; but these are bye-lanes or diversions from the elemental territories that do not return in exactly the same form or manner. Pop art may not return in its original form, but expressionistic form is so inextricably

intertwined with life that one unknowingly drifts into it. The same is true of abstraction. Art students, it has been noticed, tend to begin with realism and are drawn to expressionism. But there may be exceptions and all the minor elements of culture and art will always play a role in the future of the artwork.

Expressionistic form has been the central idiom for the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore, who came to art as an established and major poet or creator. Hence, it was easier for him to probe that elemental tract. But expressionistic form remained the strongest element in his work, just as it was in the works of Ramkinkar Baij who had a number of vital forces at work within him. These territories of artistic expression go through continuous changes. Realistic art, for example, is not the same as it was, say, 400 years ago. For, with the transformation of man and his environment, his means of production and tools have changed in such a manner that the older style of realistic art as well as expressionistic art, cannot stage a return. It is the elemental impulse that survives, but with the transformations wrought on by time they change their physical manifestations. An artist imbibes this realisation, and it is only the artists who have this realisation that can create for themselves the possibility of moving freely in all the significant territories of art. Those who fail to imbibe this are doomed to grovel in the relatively insignificant territories of art.

Take the case of Ganesh Pyne, who moves in what we would call a significant territory of art, in the manner in which he nurtures his art with his personality choosing and determining how much he should draw from traditional art. What he finds useful and how it comes to terms with his imagination and fantasy, is all based on his sensibility, his way of thinking and his experience in art. All these choices and decisions add up to give an artist his artistic personality. In contemporary art, it is for the artist to decide what he finds acceptable out of all the tensions in ideas between Western, indigenous and other elements.

Not so much in literature, but in art to a considerable extent, in our time we know of a phase when Western art stuck like a transparency to all new works in Indian art. Paintings, which are like objects, allow for a terrible imitativeness. An object can be reproduced faithfully. Literatures are separated and distinguished by languages and cannot be replicated to that extent. But colours and lines are international, and forms made of these can be replicated without much effort. This influence persisted in Indian art throughout the country for a considerable length of time. It had its obvious danger.



*Reminiscences of a Dream 13*, 1969, ink and pastel on paper, 45 × 60 cm.

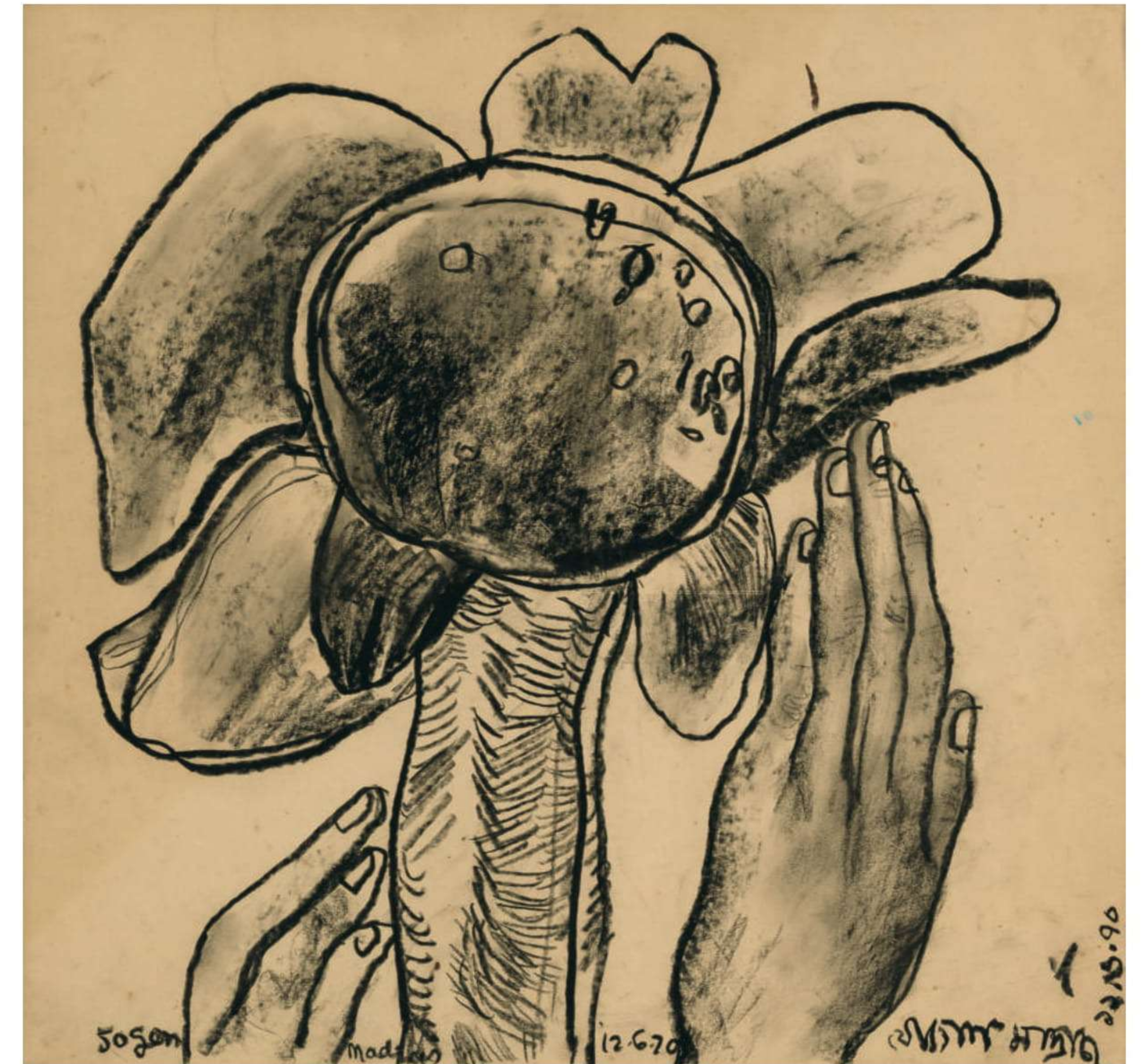
Though now, we have managed to come out of it, at least to an extent. The endeavour to rise above this phase began a long time ago, when it became extremely important to express a different way of thinking.

Our social condition, a daily existence in a state of utter confusion and privation, had affected us strongly, and came out in our writing. I wrote poetry that carried the same sense of plight and I wanted to paint more works in the same manner. I was strongly critical of society then. I dreamt of painting a work showing all those boys who were queuing up for cinema tickets without a thought about society or about themselves. But I never painted it. I thought of painting a refugee family – an image of utter destitution – with a burning passion and with a sense of things coming to an end. Though I never painted that as well. But the desire to paint about the state of the refugee persisted for a long time. Some of these strange desires still tug at me. I had even done a layout of a big painting and prepared a 10 x 6 feet canvas. I would draw from what stared at me in the face – life in Kolkata at the time, refugees living for days on the platforms of Sealdah Station, the pathetic living conditions of a refugee colony, the food agitation, strikes, politics. I was not into politics like my elder brother and sister-in-law; I was differently inclined. I wanted to assess everything for myself. I read voraciously, and even delved into different theologies. I found out what Tagore, Ramkrishna and Vivekananda had said about different things. And I read Marxist writings too. Tolstoy at times. I saw films whenever I had a chance. Different kinds of films. That is how we began.

2

I was greatly disturbed by the general state of despair around me. In my schooldays, I even had the experience of going without food for days. The colours and lines that marked my paintings of the time demonstrate how the social situation and one's actual way of life determined the elements and materials of one's painting. Let me tell you how the predominance of black and the criss-crossing of lines came to be a part of my work. We did not have electricity in our house, and I had to read by the hurricane lantern. I had to fall back on black and white because we did not have enough light, and it helped to draw in black, when you had the hurricane lantern for your source of light. This was one reason, and the reason why I continued to use black throughout my college days, and why even later black has had such a strong presence in my works. There are other reasons too. We had a miserable state of living when we came to Kolkata as refugees. Our plight, both physical and mental, must have also affected my use of colours. The criss-crossing

*You have to sow the seeds before you can reap  
the harvest. New seasons demand new seeds.*



*Untitled, 1970, oil pastel on paper, 35 × 37 cm.*



lines, too, may be carrying traces of the environmental and mental complications of that time. When I made independent studies there would be more of a flourish of colours. A still life or a portrait would not naturally be entirely black, but would still tend to be blackish, making my art teacher complain that I made my pictures too black!

This was not peculiar to my pictures alone, for it was the state of things and it must have driven several artists of the time to an obsession with grey or black. While there was more colourfulness in works produced in Delhi or Mumbai, Kolkata offered almost nothing of the kind.

It was exactly at this point of time that I was awarded a scholarship that enabled me to leave for foreign shores. It hurt me to leave. I would later feel that there is something specious about a foreign jaunt on a scholarship. Initially, I found it quite discomfiting and difficult to paint. As a matter of fact, I was quite troubled. I was there for two years, the first of which I could not put too much use beyond shooting off some drawings at random. The next year, in a fit of restlessness, I produced some work and then I came back.

I have my doubts about such scholarships, as to whether anything is gained at all by sending someone to a foreign country. There has to be a provision for higher education in any educational system, but I am convinced that by sending an artist or a writer, when he is at a growing stage, to a foreign country only serves to complicate things within him. At least, that is what happened to me. In the foreign land, I was in a state of suspension for a while. I could not paint at all; flung all of a sudden into a society so different from what I had known in the 'colony' life of Kolkata. I was an utterly bewildered young man in a state of shock. What I object is to travel to a foreign country when one is still in the phase of self-development. At a later stage, when the artist has come into his own and found his direction and has essentially found himself, he could, of course, go abroad. I feel quite sharply that my travel abroad at that point of time impeded the natural course of my artistic development and did not let me complete the large project I had conceived to portray the entirety of refugee life.

What I did gain was the opportunity to see within a short span of time all those centres of art spread over the world, to have a feel of the artistic atmosphere and to learn about the relative standing of the artists in the world. I saw a lot of exhibitions. My exposure at that level also highlighted to me exactly where our differences lay. I could also acquire through hard work insights into several technical aspects of art.



*Reminiscences of a Dream 34, 1972, ink and pastel on paper, 56 × 56 cm.*

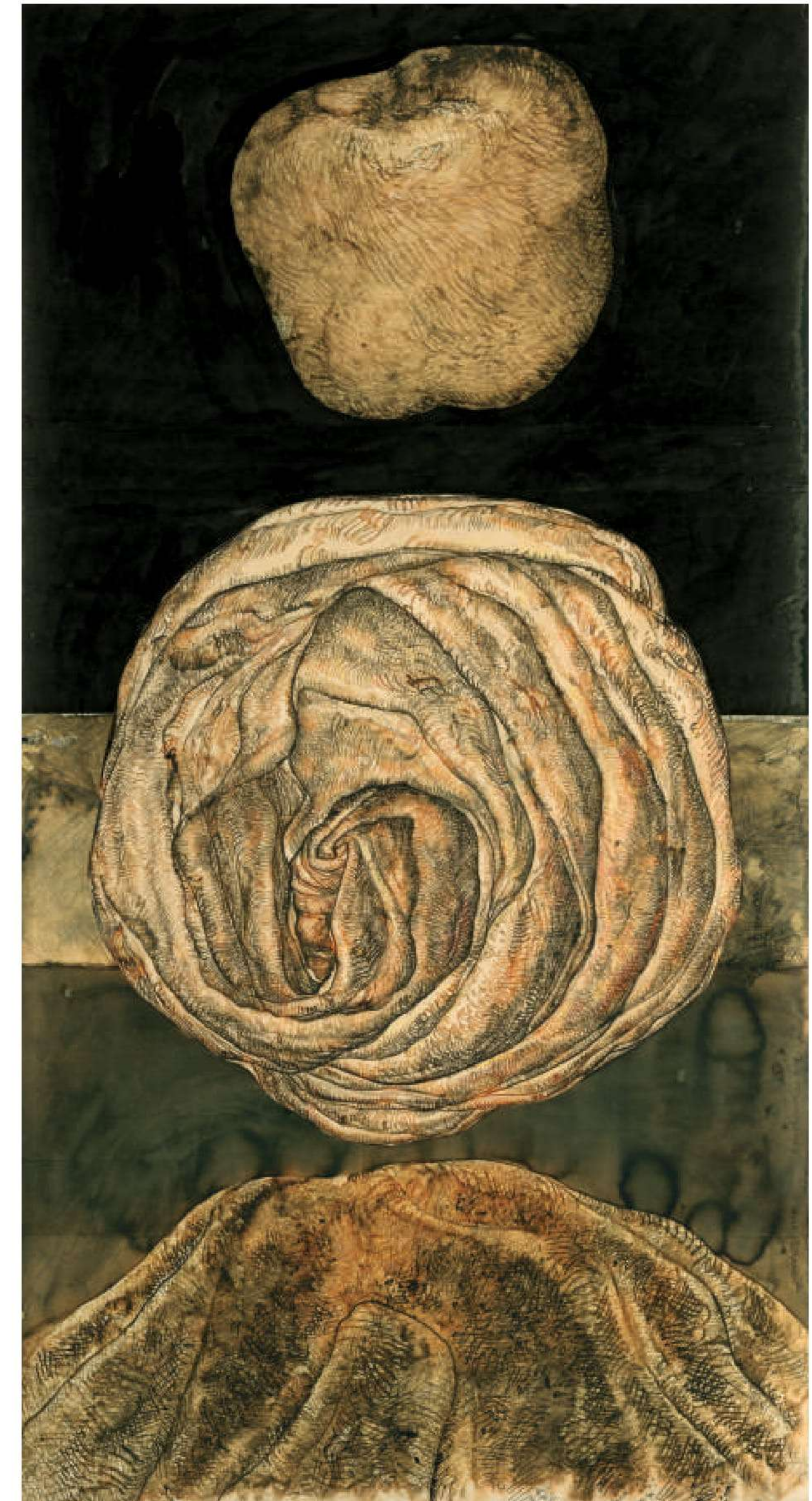
*Meaningless*

*Meaningless sounds, meaningless faces, meaningless.  
Over and over, again and again,  
Meaningless sights and sounds. Seeing  
Sobbing everyday, hunching over,  
Stooping lower  
The last breath clawing its way out into the open air.  
The drops of blood, turning black at the edges.  
The horses racing, galloping through courses of blood,  
At the foot of the monument, a list of martyrs.  
Meaningless.*

*And yet, you,  
Over and over, again and again,  
The same face. Bury it deep at the bottom of the dustbin.  
Your arms, stretching out from every song I hear  
In every film I watch  
Uncertain.  
Seeking answers from humiliation  
Looking at the emptiness of soul  
Waiting for another step, another slip,  
Another footfall toward hell.*

*And you,  
Over and over, again and again,  
Speaking of this eternal loss of blood.*

*Infinite Reminiscences of a Dream, 1973, ink and mixed media on paper, 106 × 55.5 cm.*



There was, of course, a lot to be gained at the personal level from encounters with a wide range of people. All these constitute the positive features of a sojourn abroad. But when I come to think more specifically of my own field of work, I do not find these factors deserving of much importance. There were of course all those lighter features like the funny experience of discovering that none of my art college colleagues had heard of Rabindranath Tagore. They were quite surprised when I told them that a lot of poetry was written in Bengali. One has to go there to know how they look at us. I would always acknowledge the need for such a give-and-take between cultures.

I did not paint for almost a year after my return from France. By then some idiosyncratic lines of thinking had overcome me. For one whole year I made 'notes' on painting, recording all that came to my mind about art, as to what I should paint, how and for whom, and what I should take as my tradition. We had started thinking about tradition in our college days, from our knowledge of what Abanindranath Tagore had to say on the issue. But the question that I needed to confront afresh at this point of time was: What should I paint? It was not enough to build a reputation on the basis of big exhibitions, good press reviews, etc. The questions that troubled me were: What would I like to paint, in the given context of Bengal or India? Where should I locate myself between my indigenous setting and the foreign influences that had come our way? The 'note' that I wrote in 1968 was 100 handwritten pages. I had been abroad for almost three years, including living six months in London on my way back from Paris. As I continued with this long 'note' – that I later entitled "Problems and Responsibilities of Young Artists in Contemporary Art", and a part of which appeared in a little magazine published by the poet Tushar Roy – things slowly fell into place. I tried in this 'note' to pass off my own problems as those of all young artists. I began with questions like: How does one define an artist's personality? Where does the importance of a painting lie? How does one begin a painting? How can painting serve the needs of society? What is the role of tradition? What use can an Indian artist make of the tradition of European painting? My main purpose was to explore and discover for myself what I should paint or how I should work.

We go on painting. So many of us are at it. I split the theme up into a number of sections. This is how it developed. The first premise: Painting has to grow out of its own space; one has to be honest in one's painting in the first place. Then one has to determine how far it is new. Then one asks for its significance. Any honest artist, with an authentic aesthetic perception and an adequate sense of the artistic values and technical aspects of painting,





*In Search of a Dream*, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 51.8 × 51.5 cm.

*I love to mix realistic figures and forms with the decorative and ornamental ones in order to create visual tension and beauty.*

will be on the right track as an artist anyway. If he works honestly, his colours, shapes and lines will be artistically expressive. And only when that is accomplished, will there be the other consideration, which is whether it is creative and new. Then comes the third condition: It must be significant. A work of art becomes significant only when it is historically meaningful either in its social or in its artistic context. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was not merely 'new', but significant in the way that Eisenstein would influence succeeding generations through this film, a new direction was charted out for later film-makers.

### 3

That is how I analysed the problems of a painter. Things became clearer to me in the process. When a painter sets out to paint, he must have a clear notion of his own goal. Like all artists, I had a feeling at this point of time that I was at the centre of things. As a matter of fact, every person is at the centre of all things. He always thinks that wherever anyone else in the world may be, he is right at the centre of the world. That is what I decided too. All around me lay my tradition and Western art, my way of life; my home, people, friends, my experiences, my love, my joys and my sorrows. I had my locus at the centre of all this. What could I paint from this position?

There are some people who insist upon tradition to dictate how a painting should be. Once they are able to present an authentically old Indian picture, they think they have made an 'Indian' painting. This was problem for us, too. We were then brooding on what Indianness amounted to. There are people who think that Indianness lies in miniatures or in paintings in the manner of Ajanta. That is how Indian art is still defined and taught in our art colleges. The so-called Bengal School of Art in Indian painting was formed on that

very notion. That is the point on which I asked myself: Now what should we really do? I thought that is not how pictures should come to us. I did not want to replicate old pictures and there was no sense in making exact copies of Western art either. It was important for me to make up my mind as to what would come from here and what I could draw from there. We had to sort out for ourselves once and for all what we considered Indianness to be. No particular style of the miniature or our ancient artistic tradition could constitute Indianness per se.

It is the individual artist's understanding alone that ultimately matters. But the individual artist's understanding, too, can change over time, as it is bound to evolve continually in terms of his own personality and capabilities. Such changes come in the process of an artist's thinking through and with his entire personality, his uniqueness, his labour. What do we understand by Indianness? We should be able to assume this Indianness not merely in artistic terms, but totally, so that it can encompass at the same time things like our classical music, our sculpture, etc, which in turn could serve as sources of influence and inspiration. There could be an essence at the core of all these experiences, or there may not be. This has ultimately to do with the artist's own line of thinking and individual choice. Rightly enough, there are artists who find the experiences of Western art more relevant to their own negotiations and their own problems. There are others who may choose to go along with Indian art and culture. The artist will draw or accept only in terms of his own line of thinking, and only to the extent that he can naturally connect to it. He will face his particular problems only when he sets out to paint and it is only then that he will start thinking.

When we learnt to understand Western art, there was something pedagogic about it; for as we studied Klee, Picasso, Matisse and others, we could derive several artistic techniques from them – a reception that is historically essential to modern art. There was also the question of the development of modernism in Indian art. This was an awareness that appeared quite early.

More recently, the Calcutta Group thought that an art movement in India could grow primarily on the basis of the developments charted out by Western artists; though it would not be quite right to say that artists of the group had given no thought to their own life and society. But what we felt afresh was: Why should it be only Western art? Why should we not give more prominence to our own way of life or environment or to whatever lay around us?

International art has reached a point where at times Western artists seem to be in a state of utter destitution, with art stuck primarily at a formal point. There has been a terrible contraction in the way of living of Western man in terms of his scope for variety and difference. This is what we have learnt from conversations with several foreign artists and critics. The Indian way of life, on the contrary, still retains the widest possible range of elements and possibilities and that applies not to the traditional arts alone – for there are any numbers of possibilities that could be gathered and studied to serve gathered and studied to serve as inspiration for an artist who lives in this country.

I find our Indian life and environment unique in this respect. It is the inequalities evident in the flora, the crumbling small towns, the ways of life in a city and a village – with the rich adding to their luxuries while the peasants in their villages live in unbearable poverty – that define the Indian experience that moves me so strongly. Our struggle in the midst of all this, the drama of our existence and our human relationships constitute for me a source of wonder and fascination. European life appears quite banal beside all this, without any of this variety around it. For us, everything seems to assume an extreme form. We have the liberty to move into any territory that we may choose. We have around us simultaneously the traditional crafts and handicrafts, the sheer extremity of poverty and a fashionable art practice. There is practically nothing that India does not have. This is the context in which we have to identify our tradition. Indianness cannot be just a play with the images of Radha and Krishna. Once I could recognise this – that Indian tradition is a conglomerate of the problems of life that allows for twists and turns and dreams alike – I could sense the freedom to move wherever I wanted to.

To paint my pictures I did not need to be like Picasso or Matisse. I did not need any model at all. In fact, it did not even matter whether I chose to be an artist or not. I need not be anything. The artist should move only from the desire and felt obligation to accomplish what he realised. I could have been a writer. Whatever I paint or write begins at the same point, from the same personality, with the same passion or restlessness, from the same commitment. With that realisation, I knew that I was not obliged in any way to go on painting under compulsion.

In other words, I realised that I had the freedom to assert that I could paint in a manner that I chose for myself. I felt that I could paint small pictures in the privacy of my home, but that I could also feel a desire for solidarity and the feeling that drives one to exhibit. The urge grew within me. I thought about techniques too. Just as a poet needs to

concern himself with the quest for the right word and persist in it, so it would be only too natural for me to be involved as an artist with form and technique. That was when I had actually started thinking on these issues. That was when I asked myself: What is it that I consider my most intimate possession? Is it my point of view? If there has been something in my painting that is charged with urgency, how did it come to be there? Can I think of anything new, in terms of idiom and technique or in terms of a line of thinking? It is not a question of what Picasso or Matisse had done, or even of what our own Indian Rabindranath Tagore had done. What I had to look for was the sense of a need from within.

4

It is in this context that I can talk of my own works. My works always had a particular style or a character, or a dimension, but it was only at this point of time that I became particularly aware of it. I recognised a three-dimensionality, with a weight or a fall always in motion in my works in terms of line below. I had a sense for the first time of the human body in its completeness and something of a sculptor's perception of it. There was also an awareness of the process of organic or vital growth, the way a tree grows.

That was also the time when old memories came hurtling back, intensely personal frustrations and pains, some of which could even be interpreted in Freudian terms. For example, I started drawing snakes ceaselessly, obviously thrown up by some strong feeling; but at the same time relying on conceptions of composition in association with my other aesthetic concerns.

About a year later, immediately after my marriage, the subjects strangely began to change. This is perhaps how it happens. When an artist is immersed in his work, his pictures change in response to changes in his life. This has been only too obvious in my work. I was at a point when romantic, domestic images like a pair of hands or an apple or a garland of flowers or a teacup became my subjects. The technical and formal aspects, too, were accomplished with ease. That was perhaps the beginning of my significant phase. My ideas as they formed in this period that I have just described have been real roots providing me with my personal style. Every artist has a personality with which he is born, but one which goes on changing under the impact of external forces. This is the foundation on which the artist develops. All that we make out of our intelligence or learn, imbibe and understand need not spoil our natural endowment of passion or inspiration.



*The Grey Vase*, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 50 × 50 cm.



*Apple*, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 51.5 × 51.6 cm.

There are people who think that once one understands better, one destroys one's artistry. I do not go by any such notion.

I am convinced that it is rather the other way round. Understanding draws the genuine artist to a more significant plane. There may be good artists from birth – good inhabitants of the primary territory of the artistic impulse – who somehow never become significant because of their lack of consciousness. There are cases where the consciousness comes from within and shows no external sign. In other cases, one can make it denser by recourse to self-education. A sense of historical perspective cannot come naturally, it needs to be based on an accumulation of factual information, which should be the artist's own concern. The chance that brought Ramkinkar Baij to Santiniketan brought him into contact with Rabindranath Tagore. This gave him the opportunity to listen to Rabindranath Tagore and discuss points with his colleague Binode Behari Mukherjee, and occasionally to read books. If this had not happened and Ramkinkar had stayed back in his village, could his art have attained the great heights that his works command? It is only too likely that he might have got stuck in a groove. One can even ask if he might not have become an even more different kind of artist, had he been 'educated' in the manner of Cezanne or Rabindranath Tagore or Klee. He was an artist of such creative power that he deserved a place with the best on the international scene. It is true at the same time that he was not involved in any way with the international art movement in the manner that Western artists usually are; as a matter of fact, it was not possible for him in any way. Yet, without a trace of doubt, he remains a great artist.

Both as sculptor and a painter Ramkinkar Baij was tremendously powerful and a child of nature. There are few painters of his eminence. When we criticise him even mildly, we never compare ourselves to him, for we consider him to be far superior to us. But we cannot brush aside the questions of self-consciousness, of the need for definite knowledge of art history and in the same context the question of Indianness. A creative is ultimately measured in terms of the extent to which he can relate to these issues significantly, for it is this problem of relating that is of foremost importance. The achievements of Ramkinkar Baij or Binode Behari Mukherjee or several others of their time, set within the limitations of their knowledge and perspective, serve as guideposts for succeeding generations.

Or take the case of Jamini Roy. Jamini Roy needed considerable courage in his time to learn Western art and then reject it and set out in a different direction altogether. He made



*Reminiscences of a Dream*, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 35 × 36 cm.

his choice out of profound sense of self-confidence. He could achieve this because of understanding of art. Several artists have accepted his work, but he has his critics too. I hold a position somewhere between the two. It is my conviction that every artist offers aspects that one finds acceptable and areas that are open to criticism. Jamini Roy has aspects that anyone would accept. No artist paints like another. He works from out of his own ideas. A garden will have different trees, all loaded with fruits and flowers, but each of them different from the rest. Jamini Roy could never be Nandalal Bose, Nandalal never turned into Abanindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore was never like anyone else. So that is how one has to accept persons.

But if one seeks to make valuations, one will have to say that one artist is superior to the other in a certain respect. One can even go to the length of considering one's aesthetic philosophy of a superior order, or one who is better as a teacher, or privilege one's point of view over another's, or the other's technique over that of the former. But I do not find these problems present as such in our country, where neither art appreciation nor art criticism has matured to a considerable point. We can barely put our opinions across. When we began painting, we began with a few fixed notions of our feelings and in our subconscious, about Jamini Roy, in whose works we recognised the two-dimensional space that he derived from the *pat* and explored, and about Binode Behari Mukherjee, who gave us such a lot of food for thought. Such notions sometimes come to artists directly, sometimes in a mediated form.

Once in a while there is a later realisation of where we had initially gone wrong. A lot of important truths are discovered only later. New ideas come into being in the process of negotiating with problems in the course of one's own creative work. If this constitutes one side of it, on the other side there is the personal vision of the artist which is no less influential. Ganesh Pyne's paintings, for example, hold within themselves his fairy tales, his fantasies, the tensions of his individual life and a deeper attachment. What his paintings manifest is a space of despair seen through the façade of a fairy tale. He often says, "I live within a fairy tale." But he knows at the same time that an unknown set of circumstances unfold themselves behind it. An artist comes to his work carrying with himself the totality of his time, with a form made of his entire practice and point of view lying before him. The form is a product of an inner orientation combining and coalescing a multitude of elements under the watchful eye of the artist's individual character. We can judge the works of all our contemporaries engaged in significant work in the same manner, through the perception of a distinctive character at work.

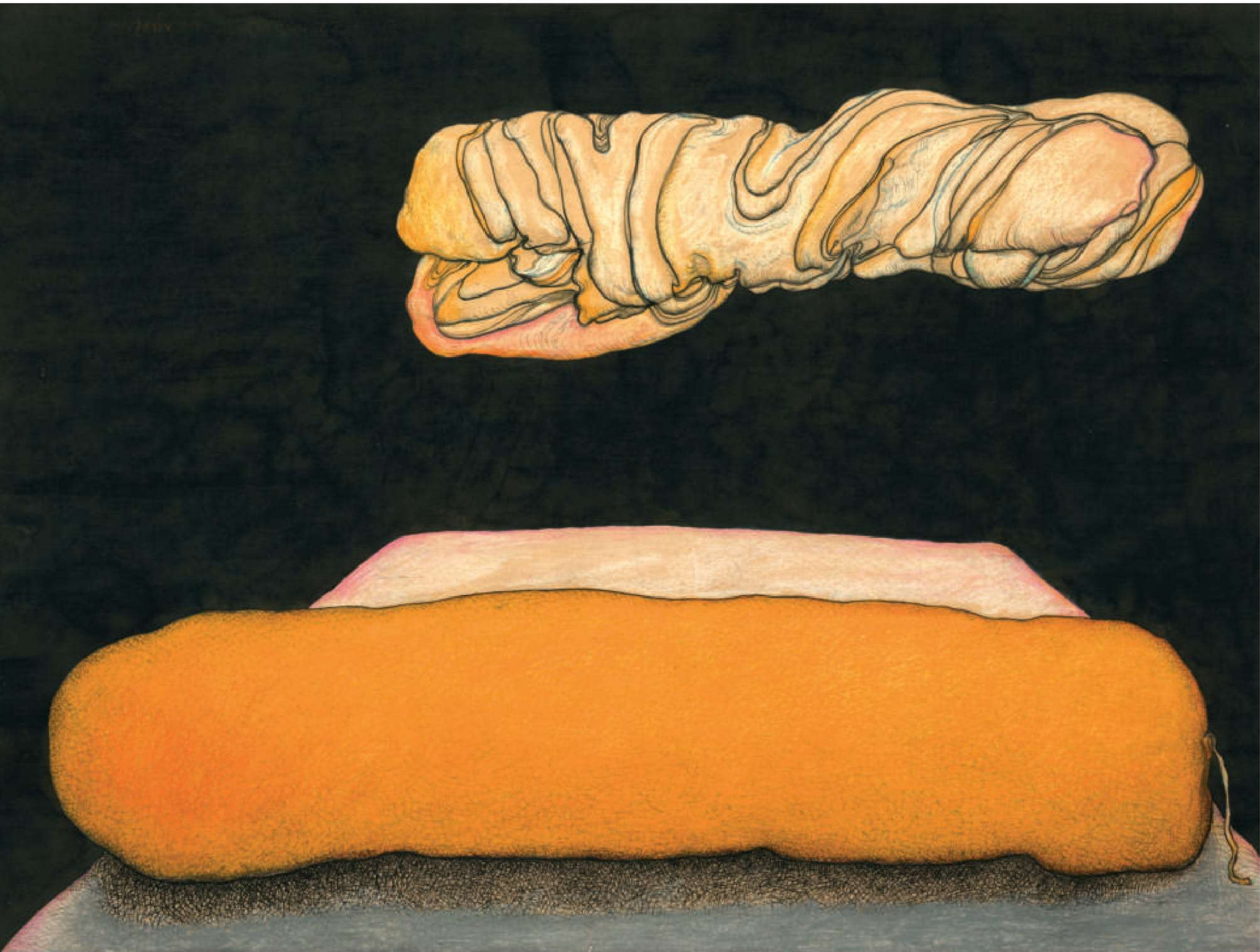


## *Spring*

*Everything lies there. Tired. For a long time now.  
Spring stays away  
As does the wind, gusts,  
Stirred up by the hooves of the restless stallions.  
No leaves bud.  
The air across the face of the sky  
Is still.  
For a long time now.  
Splitting wood, swallowing layers of iron,  
Tearing away the sickly veil of the spleen from around  
the liver –  
You lie there –  
In the ocean's every grain of sand.*



*Untitled, 1976, gouache, pastel and ink on paper, 55 × 55 cm.*



*In my Dream*, 1977, ink and pastel on paper, 56 × 75 cm.

## 5

My paintings showed signs of change after I had made the shift to Delhi. Every place casts its spell on paintings. Chennai, too, had cast its spell. Besides the geographical distance, there were differences in the natural atmosphere between Chennai and Delhi, the latter being more restless and unsettled in comparison. I stayed in Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President's residence in Delhi, as the curator of its collection and had the opportunity to meet a lot of new people and experience a different life at close quarters, transforming the very perspective of my work. I had married a few years earlier and domesticity is bound to leave its impress on paintings.

In Delhi, for a while before we moved into my quarters, we rented a small flat. Let me tell you how a subject came about. We had to pile our bedclothes in the room. They included a side pillow. I recall sketching the pile one day, and an idea slowly grew out of it which was developed eventually into a large painting, which still had the side pillow as part of the pile for its subject, but the painting itself grew far beyond its simple domesticity. The clue had come quite mysteriously – that is the point I am trying to make. Environment and situation can draw forth reactions in two different ways, either as an immediate response or as a total experience that accumulates in the brain and is sent back to it re-charged by the painting. Both the ways can be active simultaneously, the way it had happened with me too.

Media publicity has become such a powerful tool now, that often several artists are thrust forward at random; but it is the test of time that dissolves undeserving reputations to valorise the truly deserving. Hence, it is only the best of the Bengal School that have survived, though there were so many painters at the time. For the rest, one has to plod through the pages of periodicals like *Bharatbarsha*, *Prabasi* and *Modern Review* to track them down. Contemporary publicity failed to prop them up.

To come back to my own story, I did quite a few large works during my stay in Delhi. There was sufficient workspace at the place where I stayed. And there was, also a change that had come to my work. I had done some paintings centring around romantic themes immediately after my marriage, along with some fantasies and some satire – satirising domesticity! I painted a piece called *Love*, with a pillow marked 'Love' flying away. There were a few others, too, bearing reactions from direct personal experience. But then I moved away from this personal space to enter an impersonal space. As a matter of fact,

from my very beginning to this point of time, my paintings had remained confined to the personal. In the snakes that I have referred to, I was expressing individual sensuality and individual despair. I was under the direct influence of my home, my family life and my immediate environment.

But at this point of time my social perspective underwent a transformation. I had been thinking of society earlier too, and I continue to do so now. But when I paint, the inner compulsion is too strong to allow any imposition from above. In Delhi I began a series of portraits. I was moving out of my own space or the experiences of my own home and reaching out towards other subjects. In my large painting of Ganesha, for instance, there are marks of departures in my thinking, particularly in terms of suggestions as to my notions of religion. I have never had any faith in the adoration of idols, though I had grown up with the images of gods and goddesses. That is how our society binds us in. Only when we grow older and have a chance to think for ourselves, do we resolve that there is no basis for faith in something like that, even as we know deep within in the manner of Einstein that there is a force in nature that we have to acknowledge. Whether we call that force God or not is a different matter altogether, but scientific thinking will lead us to recognise it as the force in whose circuit we are born and die.

In other words, ultimately we have to submit to nature. That is a state of being that we have to adopt for ourselves. That is how I define my position. I have no faith or interest in religion in the sense that one speaks of the Hindu religion or of Islam or any other denomination. I am convinced that all those human aspects contained in religion, those that humanity needs for sustenance, or those that facilitate human progress can be acquired directly, as and when required, from the scientific or humanist attitude. I would claim for culture the place of the true religion of man. In other words, no religion can bring us as close to humanity or bring people together as can literature and the arts. Hence, to me, art appears as the greatest religion today.

Yet the image of Ganesha has always aroused my curiosity, with its strange comicality. Bengalis have through a host of real and historical factors, a negative notion of the Marwari community. I have nothing against any community as such. There is no truth in any such assessment. But I, too, have expressed a critical attitude towards the Marwaris as a typical Kolkata business community. Though, I was not making a target of the Rajasthanis or the Marwaris as a community, when I painted a naked Ganesha as a satiric representation of a business community. There were obviously two motives at play

– to belittle him as a representative of businessmen and to revel in pure fun. I had, of course, turned my back on the supposed valorisation of faith in the icon. I was thus taking a social position beyond my private space. Then I painted *The Intellectual* as a pumpkin, which I designed to follow the methods of a stone *lingam*. Tantric art divides its background in a manner that makes it a matter of curiosity. I used the idea, drawing upon the technical division that I picked up from Tantric art. It may not have come from deliberate scheming, but it was there in the subconscious. The pumpkin came from more familiar everyday experiences, with traces of memories from life in an Eastern Bengal village. I sought to create a symbol with the pumpkin at the centre, even as I hoped to retain the tension between form and space. I entitled it *The Intellectual*, satirising in the image the indolence of our intellectuals, alienated from common mankind and their own folks alike.

I painted *Man on Sofa*, with a character of the same kind. It showed a seated man – useless, spineless, inactive – a kind of sequel to that other businessman that I portrayed in *Representative from Hell*. The same body of reactions was evident in this work too, which made some technical improvisation in its projection of the bodily plenteousness of a man as an interactive composite of texture, form and feeling. As part of the lifestyle of the affluent class, the sofa represented a class that was unproductive, that polluted the atmosphere of society, that exploited it and hence, was bent double under the burden of its wealth. Yet another work of the same period, *The Couple*, represented a human drama, with a seated woman, treated with fun and in terms of composition and volume.

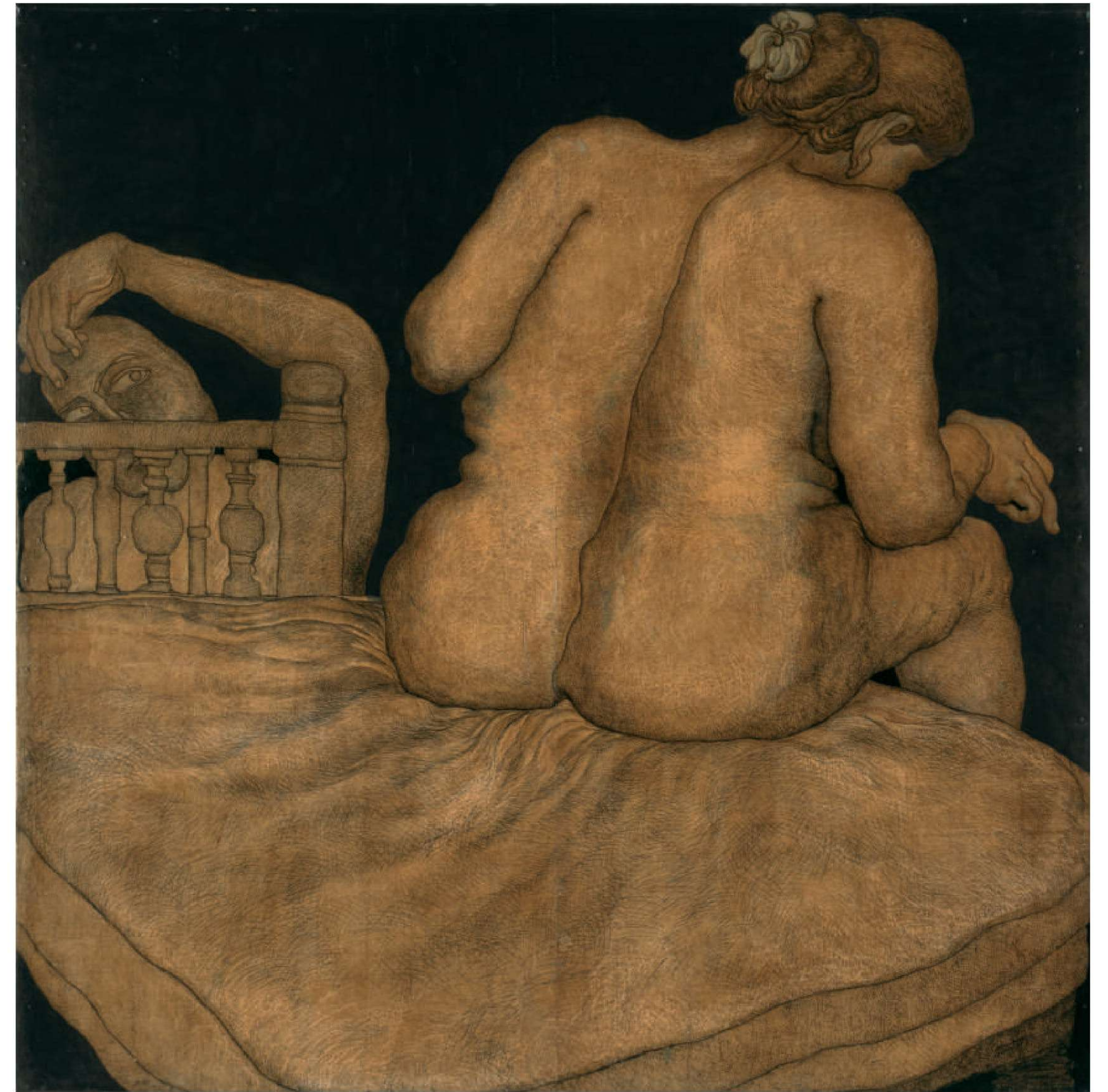
I did not confine my paintings to a single limited space. I refused to succumb to any exclusive obligation to make any social comment. I have accepted for my subject whatever I have liked. I have always sought to move forward, to remain open to ideas. I have chosen still lifes, human faces, forms of divinities, as they came to me through a general system and through demands of form, so that they could develop into a series.

*Noti Binodini*, which had its beginning around 1970, is a case in point. I had initially made an imaginary drawing of a woman. Then I saw the *Noti Binodini* play performed at the Kalibari in Delhi. After I had seen the play I started working on the basis of the drawing. It was only then – after a span of time – that I felt it was shaping into the actress, Binodini. Then I entitled it *Noti Binodini*. It is a painting playing with the characteristics of several types. The character of Noti Binodini, or the actress Binodini, had moved me intensely as that of a talented, intelligent woman, born in lowly circumstances, seeking to rise beyond

*Favourite*

*The heart was empty  
Unfettered, unbound, time –  
That too was there.  
Noon – yet to come  
Rolling across the horizon.  
The church bells still to toll.  
Jesus yet to die.  
Awaiting his death  
For so long, there was hope.  
A throat slaked with thirst,  
And in my eyes, love.  
That too was there.  
In the afternoon,  
A fistful of blood from my heart  
To touch your unsullied soul.  
You died, you see. With fear,  
With doubts  
With so much love  
I love you. With dreams  
In dreams, I love you.  
For so long. Perhaps.  
If it permits. A life.*

*Couple Life 2, 1976, ink and pastel on paper, 154 × 152 cm.*





her circumstances, but failing eventually. I felt a strong surge of sympathy for this character. As a matter of fact, whenever I have portrayed women, I have been moved by the same surge of sympathy. Not in this painting alone, but nowhere in my works have I been able to distort a woman's features or figure. It is only with my men that I have made the most horrible distortions. When there is some external distortion of a woman, the sympathy will still be evident in the features of expression. *Sundari* is, of course, marked by distortion, but the grace is unmistakable in its associations with the Bengal *pat* and the graceful charm of the terracotta sculpture.

This reverence and sympathy for women is not peculiar to my work, it is perhaps a common trend in Bengal. And it must have been there, secretly planted within myself. In the time under review I had painted a seated woman, with a lotus above her head, a dark patch of a shadow on her face, her clothes scattered around her. It carried some of those feelings of mystery that I bore within myself in my college days, when I wrote poetry. It was quite natural. The experiences that I am gathering now may come back through my paintings five or 10 years hence. That is how they come. That is how it is in all fields and in all modes of creativity, including writing.

Sometime later, while still in Delhi, I did a series on politicians – about 20 small portraits at one go – with boys and girls, political leaders, statesmen and ministers' faces for subjects.

*Many artists in their own works have used the image of Mona Lisa. I was also fascinated by it and tried to reconstruct the image in my own way, adding of course, some wit*

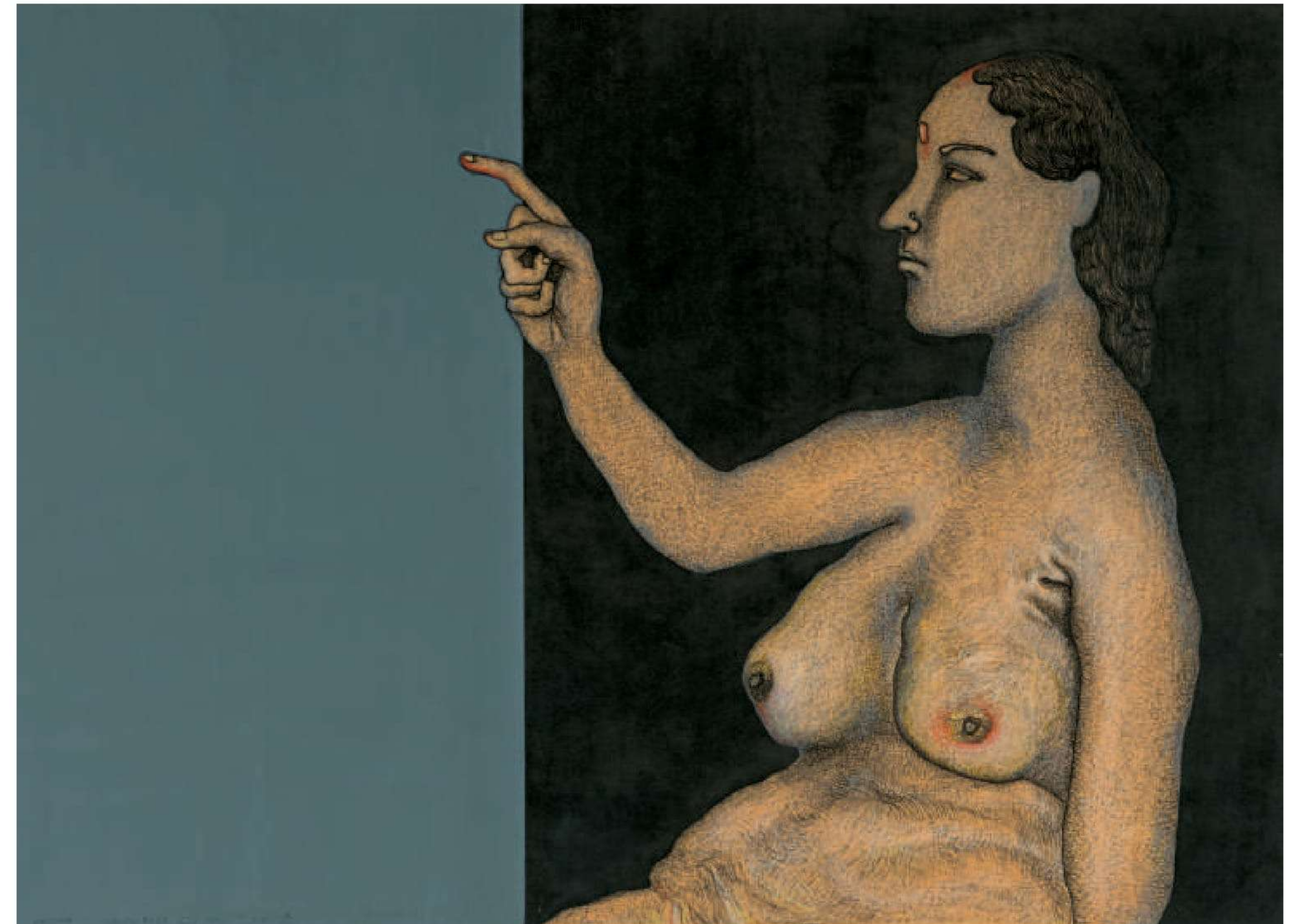
*Mona Lisa in my Dream, 1977, ink and pastel on paper, 50 × 50 cm.*

In *Kneeling Face*, I showed a minister of that period with his head bent downwards. In real life, he expected all visitors to touch his feet in salutation. But every time I saw him, I had the impression that he was bending low at someone's feet. When I painted the small work *Lollypop Bridegroom*, I recalled those decked up boys with powdered faces who often stood waiting at the Gariahat crossing. A flash of a memory of the scene gave me an urge to paint a character. I painted the character of a film star, with long red nails. I found their characters quite strange. In real life, they may not be sinister, but in my painting their faces, lips and nails are all tinged in red.

I have never done direct portraits. I do not paint the actual image of a man in his immediate presence as a character. I have to wait till the image sinks into my mind before I can capture that element in my painting, and the painting acquires the impress of an existence stretching over 10 to 20 long years all at once. When I seek to portray the total character of a political leader, I cast the lines and gestures of his face within the frame of the picture strictly according to the needs of the image, so that the face takes shape precisely in terms of the lines that the face requires. Then, of course, his character has to be bodied forth. As they are both juxtaposed, space and form are expressed simultaneously.

There was yet another change of direction in my work in 1980-1981. In my earlier works, it was the sloppy, flabby figure that carried my attitude. But then I became aware of something else. I had the idea that if I were portraying an Indian man, I should be conscious of the fact that we Indians sit in a manner quite different from that of a European. Our bodily forms, movements and looks are very different, I sought to study this difference and bring it to my painting. This was something new in my work. I had never thought on these lines when I had done my portraits or painted the image of Ganesha. This was a new point of interest for me, as a revelation of the reality of Indian form. The way artists abroad break a form in a painting as related to human gesture. A figure in a Western painting follows the structure, the expression, the seating position of a Western man. The features, jaws and hard bone structure of the skull of a man in a Russian or European painting has nothing in common with those of one of our men, who have different features and different positions for sitting and standing. When we sit, we hold our arms back and bend forward. I felt a new curiosity in these matters, and started a series of works on the basis of my new observations that are evident in those works of mine of 1980-1981 – with their mockery, satire and the discriminations in characterisation, as in those faces with one side twisted and the other straight.

*Images in my paintings are normally imaginary, but sometimes they resemble people that I know intimately.*



*The Woman*, 1979, mixed media on paper, 55 × 75.5 cm.

Now these features have become part of my creative habit, but they called for a series when I had discovered them for the first time. I painted three works to portray three social strata – *Man Sitting on a Sofa*, *Man Sitting on a Mat* and *Man Sitting on the Floor* – followed by several small works illustrating the different sitting positions of different kinds of people titled *Man I*, *Man II*, *Man III*, *Man IV* as a group.



*Boy*, 1980, ink and pastel on paper, 26 × 25 cm.



*Man Sitting on a Mat*, 1980, ink and pastel on paper, 51 × 51 cm.



*Man with a Chaddar*, 1980, ink and pastel on paper, 51 × 51 cm.



*Man Lying*, 1980, ink and pastel on paper, 51 × 51 cm.



Once I moved out of this phase, I painted a few large works such as *Tiger in the Moonlit Night*, *Preacher*, etc. Then came a series of couples. The dramas of domestic life have always been an area of interest to me. I find it amusing to observe relationships between man and man, between husband and wife, between children. Behind the public image of a national leader, or a teacher, or a writer is an impression, though it is the intimate private life which ultimately controls him. It is all these observations that have surfaced in my works.



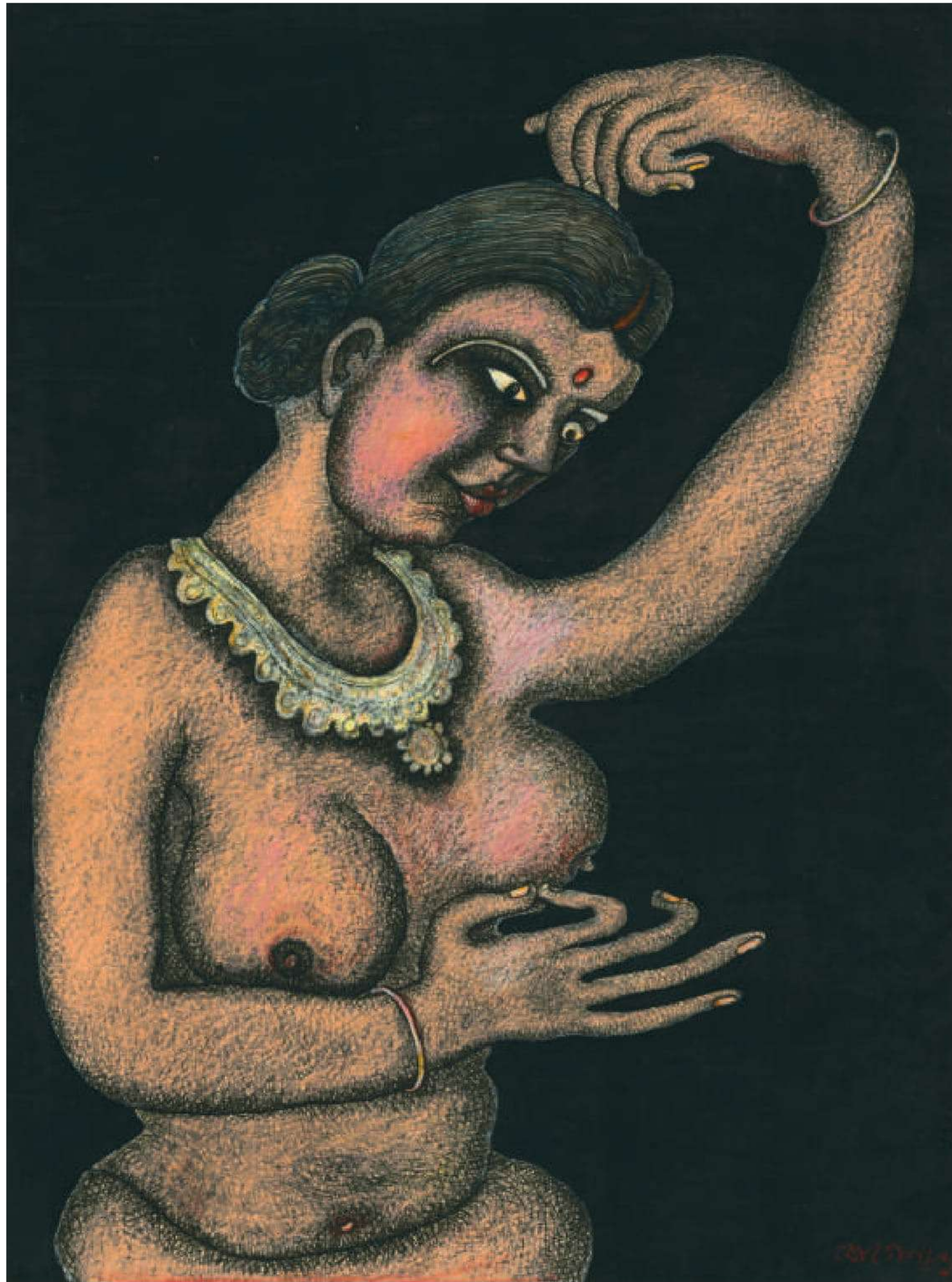
*Nude from Behind*, 1984, oil pastel on paper, 54.5 × 71.5 cm.

## 6

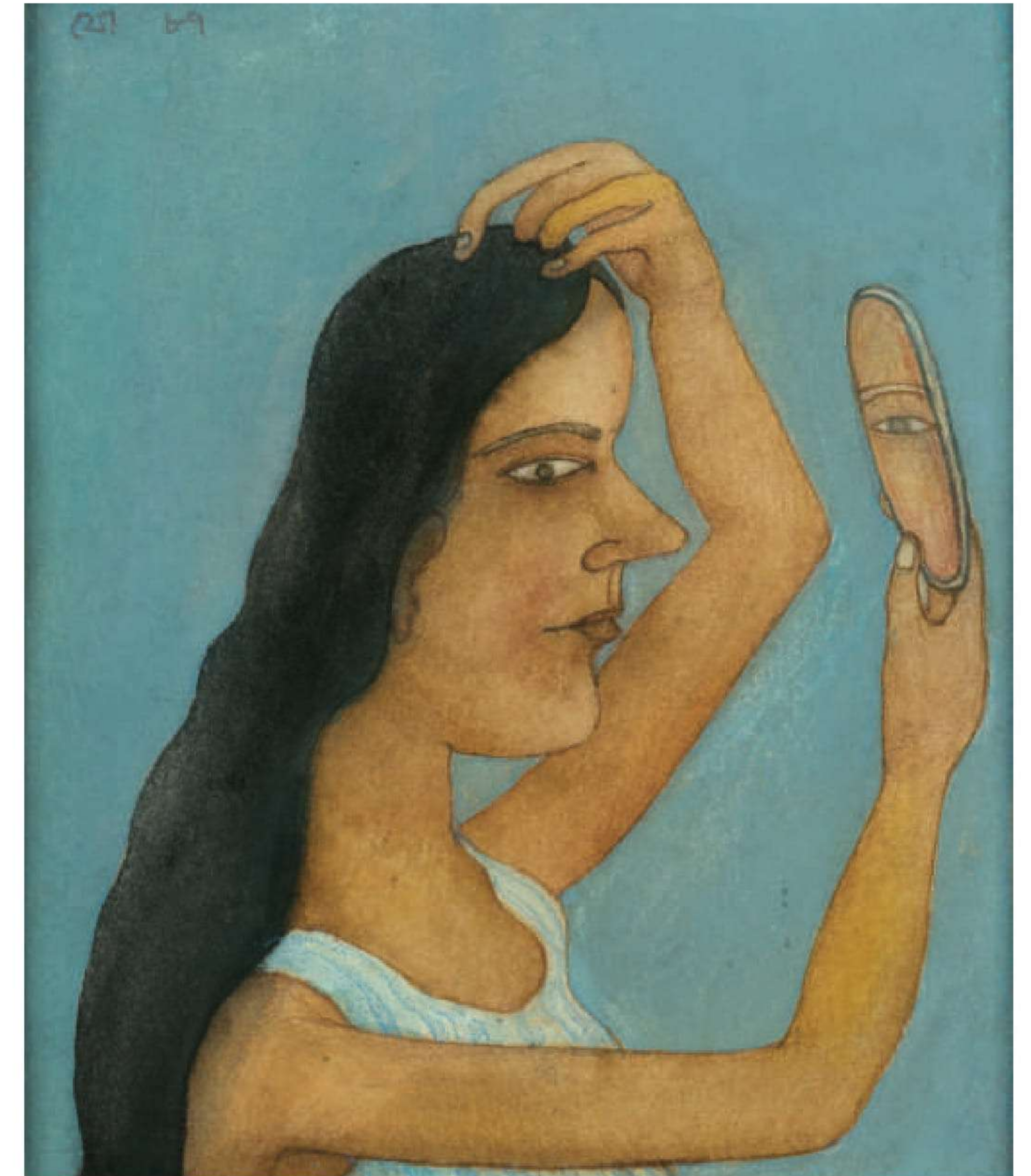
There is yet another amazing thing. The more one's personal tendencies take over in the practice of art, the less there is of sophistication, at least initially. Then, as stylisation comes into play, the idiom defines itself in terms of a style. Ganesh Pyne has evolved a style from his idiom. When the artist would like to send a message across, he develops it and comes up with a style of his own – as a product of great creative labour. People may ask: Why are you doing this? Why don't you drop that? But can one drop something just like that? Something gets dropped only when it drops itself like a snake shedding its skin. Every change comes of its own accord. There is, however, a sense of rhythm at work in this process. A sense of form or that of space develops along certain directions. For myself, for example, I find new considerations of space coming to my work. There is another element that has been part of my work right from the beginning – my observation of the movements, positions and gestures of common people. I have sought to bring to my paintings at the same time a gesture that would be uniquely mine, something never thought of. This is how a man pushes himself to the veritable point. That is how it happens with writers too. One cannot perhaps say anything more about one's own paintings.

An artist at work is not necessarily self-conscious. An artist trains himself from within his own social situation. He starts painting because he finds he can. But starting to paint and then getting immersed in painting are experiences that are poles apart. The art colleges draw several students, some of whom are very competent, though few stick it out. Those who come to a learning system in an art college after many years already spent in painting, may still lack a system of imagination within themselves, and in many cases may not even know what they are after. But once they take the plunge, a closer familiarity brings them up against their own peculiar problems and the larger problems of art. And then they get slowly sucked into it. It is, of course, only those who carry within themselves the seeds of an involvement in art that eventually get involved. It has been seen that nearly 90 to 95 per cent of those who join an art college or any art training institution at some stage eventually give up painting. A few of them may somehow persist, but it is only a very few who really immerse themselves in art. It is only an inherent possibility that slowly shapes itself.

When a painter begins to paint, it is not always clear why he makes his entry. It is only as he moves deeper that he confronts the challenge and comes to realise why he paints. This realisation comes differently to different people. When I have asked students this question



*The Dancer*, 1986, ink and pastel on paper, 38 × 28 cm.



*Young Lady with a Mirror*, 1987, tempera on paper, 16.5 × 14 cm.

at Kala Bhavan, some of them say that they are looking for joy, while others say that they would like to make a successful business proposition of it. There are others who aspire to create something big or strikingly creative. These are some of the many approaches to painting.



*Man Resting*, 1987, tempera and pencil on paper, 19.5 × 24.5 cm.

But, the one thing that must come to a creative artist is to find joy in his creative experience itself, to be able to work out of that inner urge. There is no other way one can stick to it for a long time. Without that single motivation one would drift into a proposition with financial prospects. There are many of these available in our society anyway. One looks at the way an artist like Somnath Hore remains immersed in his painting and sculpture, and one knows that he must be drawing his joy and inspiration from his own art and creativity. And that is the only reason that he persists in his work and that is why he would always want to send a message across. He has found a space from where he can speak on his perception of life.

Artists, given a choice, would prefer to inhabit a space like this. For they know that this is what they can best make use of, as they are able to express themselves through it, and

*Satire on the corrupt Indian political personality is one of my favourite subjects.*



*Leader on a Rainbow Sofa*, 1988, ink and pastel on paper, 28 × 38 cm.

find joy as a reward. When a painting sells and offers monetary gain, it is an additional gain. An artist, who earns quite substantially these days, will still stay involved in art from a commitment to art rather than anything else. Though he may not be creating something worthwhile or genuinely first-rate all the time, for the artist can find his joy even out of creating something relatively mediocre. For the genuine artist, considerations of contacts and connections and social status have no ultimate value. Ramkinkar Baij, for one, found them worthless. What people said or did not say about his works did not matter to him in the least. He would be totally immersed in his work. We know for certain that Rabindranath Tagore painted for the sheer joy of painting. All the major artists that we have seen, have been involved in art in much the same manner.

Now I would like to come to the more problematic area of what a painting really is, or when a painting becomes art. We go to exhibitions and find things painted on pieces of paper of various shapes and sizes or on a canvas. We find colours, lines, space and form and take them to be paintings. Some of these we even like. But recognising an individual artist on his own terms is what really matters. Just as the artist himself has his individual perspective, so also there has to be a perspective to recognise the artist in his distinctiveness. An artist studying a painting and a viewer studying one relate to the painting in different ways. A painter paints, and so when he looks at a painting he falls back on his perspective born of practice, and his understanding of the painting on display will be different from that of the mere viewer. We often find the same painting assessed as good by some, and not good by others. There is no way we can steer clear of looking for norms to evaluate paintings.

We can assume a technical approach, judging paintings in terms of colours, line and forms as the elements of a painting. We sometimes appreciate a composition, or the coloration; or find a painting beautiful, because it is symmetrical and one can see the rhythm about it; or we like the 'expression' of a painting. These are some of the ways in which we describe a painting and try to understand it. But at the same time we would like to go beyond these and reach another place where the lines or colours or form ultimately draw us along into a deeper plane. That is what they must accomplish. Why are there so many elements in a painting after all? All these contribute to give a painting a spirit or a *rasa* or a tension of its own, which is the painter's achievement. We cannot describe this aesthetic tension in direct, literal terms. It is something to be felt and experienced like a good classical piece in music, where the tune, the words and the sound contribute to making something that transmits the tension, a tension made of the highs and lows of

the notes. For that is what strikes us in the brain. For it is actually in the brain that we listen, though we speak of listening through the mind.

The recognition or understanding of a painting is dependent on the individual capacity of a painter or a viewer. Even in the act of painting, the artist has to understand, recognise, accept and then allow for a release at the point where he feels that this is what he wants at that point. The artist can call his work good, only when, after all this has been done, he has the satisfaction that it has shaped out to be just as he had desired it to be. If the viewer can appreciate it at that level, he too can have the same satisfaction. With paintings, it is the same as when one listens to Kumar Gandharva or Mallikarjun Mansur or Ali Akbar, and then breaks into a spontaneous "Wah! I like it so much!"

If I find the red in a painting beautiful, and set out to analyse it, I would come to the presence of red all around us, the red of the rose, the red I see when I bring the flower close to myself. But when I bring it still closer, I reach a point of abstraction where the red around the petals gives a strange, subtle feel. If I further try to analyse that feel, there would be yet another level of abstraction. There is the same thing about music too. Once you break up a tune, you touch those planes of abstraction. But to reach that plane, one needs a particular frame of mind or the necessary mental capacity.

The viewers must undergo the necessary preparation to share with the artist his philosophical quest. Common viewers, too, often remain confined to the externals, oblivious of the formal aspects of art. Poetry, too, has its formal aspect, an aspect that remains intertwined with its natural and human aspects, which of course can be distinguished and isolated. Just as a word from older use and a modern word juxtaposed in a poem can create a new idea and a new sound along with it, through the act of friction, so too can it happen in a painting. What we see at first sight is a familiar visual world. In a painting, in the man or the tree in it, we look for similitude. Paintings allow for similitude, but similitude is not the main thing about painting. For through the similitude we actually reach out towards the abstract. We must contain within ourselves the capacity to recognise and read abstraction. It is something that turns up again and again in the works of the major writers and painters, who seek to relate to the universe by means of their creativity. A sense of the infinite and the perennial is always at work within an artist. It is that sense that ultimately comes to express itself in a painting, coming in from behind with the primary roots in view on the surface. Rabindranath Tagore would describe it as the formless in the form, or the infinite in the finite. The endless continuity behind natural

beauty, and the strange mystery or magic about it carry it to a point where the balance appears in a dissymmetric form or as an apparent imbalance. However beautiful a symmetric form may appear, a little break or a twist can always create a dissymmetry that will arrest you. You may not be able to put your finger on what it is that draws you towards it, but you will feel the tug nonetheless. We cannot quite understand these mysterious pulls – the little beam of light on a spring day, or the thrill that shakes you all over as you look at a tree. It is the sensitivity that Jibanananda Das described as “yet another desperate wonder playing in us, in the blood within” that animates the artist’s mind.

Whenever a creative artist is at work, he does not calculate all his steps. That is a fact we tend to miss when we view paintings, and once we miss it, the mystery of the work remains closed to us. We misread a painting when we fail to identify with the artist’s point of view or sensibility. It is the artist’s individual predilection or temperament that determines to what extent his work will be representational or not. There are artists who are more dependent on realism, there are others who are less so. There are painters like Rabindranath Tagore who have greater element of mysticism or mysteriousness about their works; there are others who allow more scope to naturalism. And of course, there can be any number of territories between the two. A lover of art brings to his viewing of painting his own stock of knowledge, his own temperament, his own level of understanding. At the same time one has to recognise the fact that the sensitivity of the common man is of no mean order, for he too has the capacity to think, and can pursue his approach to a considerable distance.

Rural folk, who may not be educated in the conventional sense, are capable of carrying their reasoning to a fairly sophisticated level. They are perhaps even capable of passing over several stages. Many of them can understand paintings despite their lack of so-called education; while the supposedly educated, with all their education, often fail to have a clue. If a painting is really good, then the viewer is bound to get something out of it. If an artist succeeds in investing his work with all the qualities it is capable of, it is only to be expected that more people will appreciate it. All artists are not capable of achieving this. There can be no possible objection to the artist pursuing in his work his own predilections, and even delimiting in the process the sphere of his viewership. Just as there are artists of various kinds, so are there viewers of different kinds. The artist has the freedom to work according to his conscience. The viewer, too, has the freedom to draw his conclusions. What we can do is to carry on a colloquy on what a painting really is, or when a painting really becomes a painting aimed at developing a viewership, which will



*Untitled, 1988, ink and pastel on paper, 28 × 28 cm.*

grow up eventually. One has to leave something of it to time. There was little discussion about paintings in the past. There is much more of it now. There is no alternative to viewing paintings continuously, for the difficulty of appreciating paintings can be eliminated only through the sheer practice of viewing them.

But what is more important than paintings, when it comes to the question of establishing contact with art, is the transmission of art into the objects of daily use: The way, for example, in which a fine picture on a book cover reaches so many people is something that art can rarely accomplish in terms of nurturing an artistic sensibility among people, for a painting does not normally reach such a large audience. People can have access to art if art is transmitted to and made to be a part of domestic furniture and objects of daily use. There was a time when a delicate artistic sensitivity was evident in the hookah, the cane stools, clothes, bedcovers, pincers. Little of that survives. There may be something of this among the tribals. But once, all those objects had drawn life and art into a togetherness, for all those objects bore the unmistakable mark of an artistic attitude. There was perhaps no life alienated from art. In our contemporary life, art has considerably moved away from life. We make paintings sundered from life. Distances have opened up between art and the place where we live or the furniture that we use. To bring them together again would be a major obligation today, not in one's capacity as an artist alone, but also as a social man. In other words, to develop a real country, it is essential to develop its social environment. And artists need to contribute to it. This is an awareness that is now coming to some people. But there are more people who lack it. It is an awareness common among the Japanese. There is an artistic dimension to the way the Japanese would sit or then stand up. This is something we learnt from Rabindranath Tagore's *Japanjatri (Traveller to Japan)*. It is important to develop an awareness in this respect.

## 7

The fact that art is related to every aspect of life and that it affects more men than anything else is of great importance to me. We are generally indifferent to the villages, the homes and the landscape that go to make a seamless environment. Just as we see a picture of things in the interior of our houses, we should be able to see an equally captivating scene in the exterior, when we set our feet beyond the threshold of our home. That is yet another area about which there should be more awareness. While there is some awareness about the environment and architecture in Kolkata, there is little of it outside the bounds of the city. The economic situation of people is responsible for this. Still, it would be a serious



*Peacock Comes to the Home of Two Lonely Men*, 1988, ink and pastel on paper, 28 × 38 cm.

mistake to rush into an initiative in awareness-building only when our economic situation changes. The orientation should begin right now, and it can begin in a condition of poverty, as the tribal community has demonstrated. All of them share certain sensitivity to beauty with the necessary differences of individual capacities. We are prepared to strain after a lot of comforts and luxuries. We could accomplish a lot only if we added art to that purpose. Financial constraints are not the only constraints, nor are they absolute. There is the tale of the artist who always said that he would have a studio of his own when he became rich. Once he became rich, he neither had the studio nor the urge to paint!



*Old Man and the Lady*, 1989, ink and pastel on paper, 28 × 38 cm.

When one comes to think of the folk arts, one begins with the fact that 60 to 70 per cent of the present population of India live in the villages. We can categorise the larger part of their artistic practice as folk art or tribal art. Beside the academic artistic practice developed in urban life and the contemporary art derived from it, one will notice a parallel practice in the villages, small towns, market towns and small places, where people make toys and dolls or the *sara*, or paint *pats*. There is a whole range of handicrafts including the hand-woven sari, woodcrafts and different objects made from different materials, spread all over India. There is nothing to match it in Europe today. We should ask ourselves: How do we categorise these products?

While a large number of people find their artistic self-expression in the making of these objects, there are differences between the mainstream of the folk arts on the one hand, and contemporary art on the other. While the folk artists stick to an old tradition, the urban painters are related to their works as distinct individuals, as they bring to their paintings their own temperaments, ideas, ideology and subjects. The subject in folk art is determined in terms of the direction of the tradition, but at times it incorporates new elements both as subject and technique. Contemporary subjects have been assimilated into the Baluchari saris, the *kantha* and even the *pat* painting. With the arrival of the British in India, the Baluchari sari accommodated several foreign elements that soon found their place in the works of the *patuas*, in the scroll *pats* and the Kalighat *pats* alike. In other words, short of any impetuous technical departure, the folk artists were open to innovations in subject matter, which in their turn would document the process of history.

The role of folk art has a special importance in the way it reflects and conveys the artistic direction of a large community. The folk artists themselves were changing in the process and recording in their works the totality of contemporary life. Yet another aspect of their work lies in the close association it demonstrates with their way of life (though this is an aspect fast losing ground). This is an aspect that does not surface in urban civilisation or in the works of urban artists, or even when it does, it appears to be too tenuous. For the urban artist in most cases treats art apart from life, whereas in folk art, art is inextricably integrated with the artist's way of life. The folk artist's aesthetic sensibility affects the totality of his way of life, and gives him joy, as it is evident in Madhubani art, a tradition in which hordes of people participate in the act of painting, enthusing an entire village in the process. Or one can notice among the tribals, all those small elements, beside their pictures, that contribute to making life beautiful such as the care that goes into their making of a comb or an object of domestic use.



One of the subjects that has repeatedly occurred in my paintings is the man-woman relationship and the various facets of it. I am fascinated with the complexity, the sensitivity and the dramatic element in it. Such relationships embrace a prime area of our life existence and I enjoy focusing on these relationships.



Man and Woman, 1989, ink and pastel on paper, 28 x 38 cm.



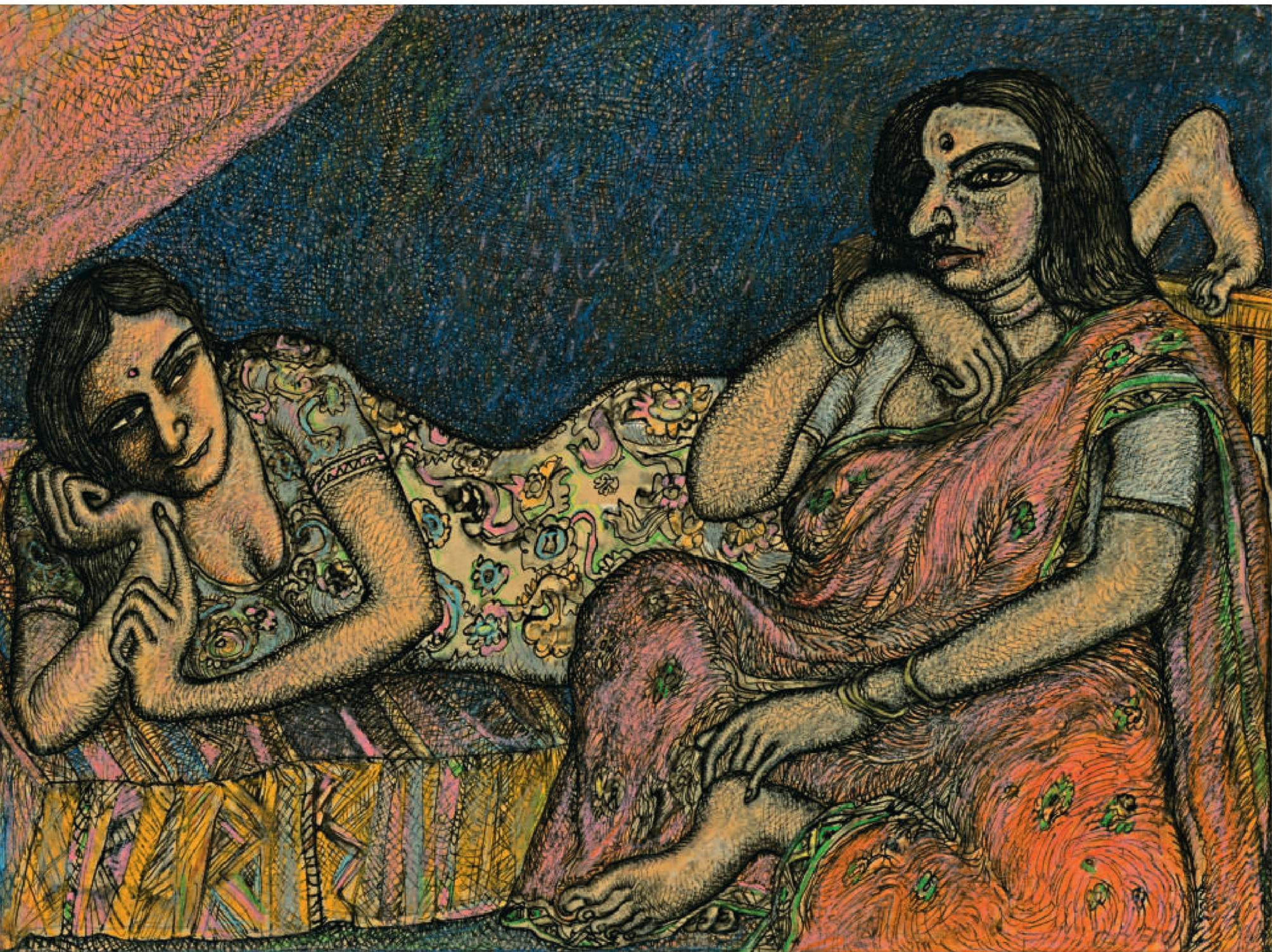
The question is how to relate art that is being produced in the cities to folk art in the context of our immediate time. We produce art in a certain manner in the cities while folk artists produce in their own distinctive manner in the villages. There are cases now where they are reluctant to carry on in the folk mode. Whatever be the reasons behind such turning away, there is no denying the fact that their works are not selling any longer. One could survive on a smaller income earlier, but the complications of modern living have raised economic pressures to a point that has driven folk artists to give up their art and seek jobs in the city. The government has stepped into the scene with financial and other kinds of assistance to help the folk artists cope with this crisis, creating new problems in the process. The folk artists are provided with fixed designs that they are expected to copy and then market, leading in many cases to fundamental changes in the folk arts. The spontaneous and natural styles of folk art are getting straitjacketed into rigid matrices. Folk art is thus fast turning commercial. The social setting in which a particular folk art had initially emerged is no longer in existence; nor can it be exactly revived.

The urban upper classes have developed a culture of collecting folk and tribal art which are also being exported. It is the opening of prospects of a world market that has contributed in its turn to a concern for the preservation of the folk arts. Rural culture will retain its natural styles and creativity only as long as it retains its original character. But the character of its folk art will undergo a transformation with an improvement in the living standards of the villages. In the changed circumstances folk art will turn into a well-planned industry and in its new manifestations it will lack the intimate touch of the folk artist's working fingers. The intense concentration of the man in the village sitting in his cottage making a *sara* or a wooden doll all by himself will no longer be there. In the *dhokra* work being done in Gushkara, as a planned industry, there is no sign of the intimate handiwork and sensitivity that earlier went into the making of *dhokra* craft. Hence, the *dhokra* art of Gushkara is nothing more than a commercial production. The same is true of Madhubani art today. The traditional wall paintings of Madhubani are now being done on paper, allowing for wider dissemination that ensures better economic standards for the artists; but Madhubani painting has lost its essential character in the process. There is, of course, no denying the fact that without the economic stability that it has achieved in this way, Madhubani painting might have receded into oblivion. Wall painting survives – though on paper. Maybe that is how things will shape up in every case. But there will always be the distinction between the bad artist and the good artist.

*Colour is not red plus blue plus yellow, or green plus green plus red or yellow. Colour is when red or green is matched with spirit or bathed in spirit. It can be even grey or black.*



*Plants, 1989, oil pastel on paper, 56 × 76 cm.*



*The Inner Chamber*, 1990, ink and pastel on paper, 38 × 52 cm.

How can contemporary artists make use of the folk arts in their own practice? Jamini Roy has shown us how contemporary artists can draw material from the folk tradition to enrich their own work. Meera Mukherjee has drawn on the manner of *dhokra* work to add a new dimension to her sculpture, but in the way in which she makes it a vehicle for self-expression and conveys her own ideas through it, she transcends it, and proves once and for all that folk art, coming into contact with an urban sensibility, can enrich art itself in an original manner. At the same time, a modern artist can draw from her own setting along with what she derives from Western sources.

The same tendency has been evident in the West, where Picasso drew on African art to enrich his work, Van Gogh and Gauguin derived influences from Eastern art, and even Klee imbibed several influences from abroad. This can be of use to us in many ways. Art does not necessarily derive from art alone, but can enrich itself by drawing from other sources, or by being inspired by other things. There are several elements that can inspire us to open up to different directions in modern art. I am convinced that many such territories still remain unexplored.

In an international perspective, the history of modern Western art has a much longer span than that of modern Indian art. One can legitimately ask: Where does Indian art stand today in the context of the long history of world art or Western art? What role can it assume in the arena of world art? These are issues that come up in conversation among artists, with different artists taking different positions. For some, Indian artists are required to run the race in the track of Western art, so that they can completely absorb the long history of Western art and win for themselves international recognition as contemporary artists.

But that cannot be the direction for all of us. We have to settle on a different locus for ourselves based on the recognition that India is a distinct country, and that though initially it was Western art that prepared that ground for our modern art, we relate to art on different terms altogether, in a different environment, in a different culture, with a different sensibility and with our own joys and sorrows.

The main direction of modern living has been defined in the West. Hence, whenever we come to consider art, we fall back on an urge to come to terms with the West. We shall never make any headway by copying or repeating what is being done in the West. There is a lot we can learn or understand from the practice of the West, but we should not direct



*The Flower*, 1990, ink and pastel on paper, 56 × 114 cm.



*Three Women*, 1992, ink and pastel on paper, 56 × 71 cm.

ourselves in terms of contrast or comparison with their practice. We produce our works out of our joys and sorrows and thoughts.

In the last 30 to 40 years we have developed a whole, original aesthetic matrix as the basis of our own art, while making allowance for occasional inroads of influence from Western sources as well as from different environments. We already have a space of our own where our artists can concentrate on creating something out of the manners which are essentially ours as a nation or as a country, and there may be many more such spaces in the future. Hence there is no sense in working as competitors to or on the terms laid down by the West.

8

If we can grow and nurture a tree in our own territory, in our own soil, artists in Europe will be compelled to take notice of it. I find the prospect of such a development more promising now than ever before. We have a space of our own at last and there is a lively exchange of ideas taking place within it.

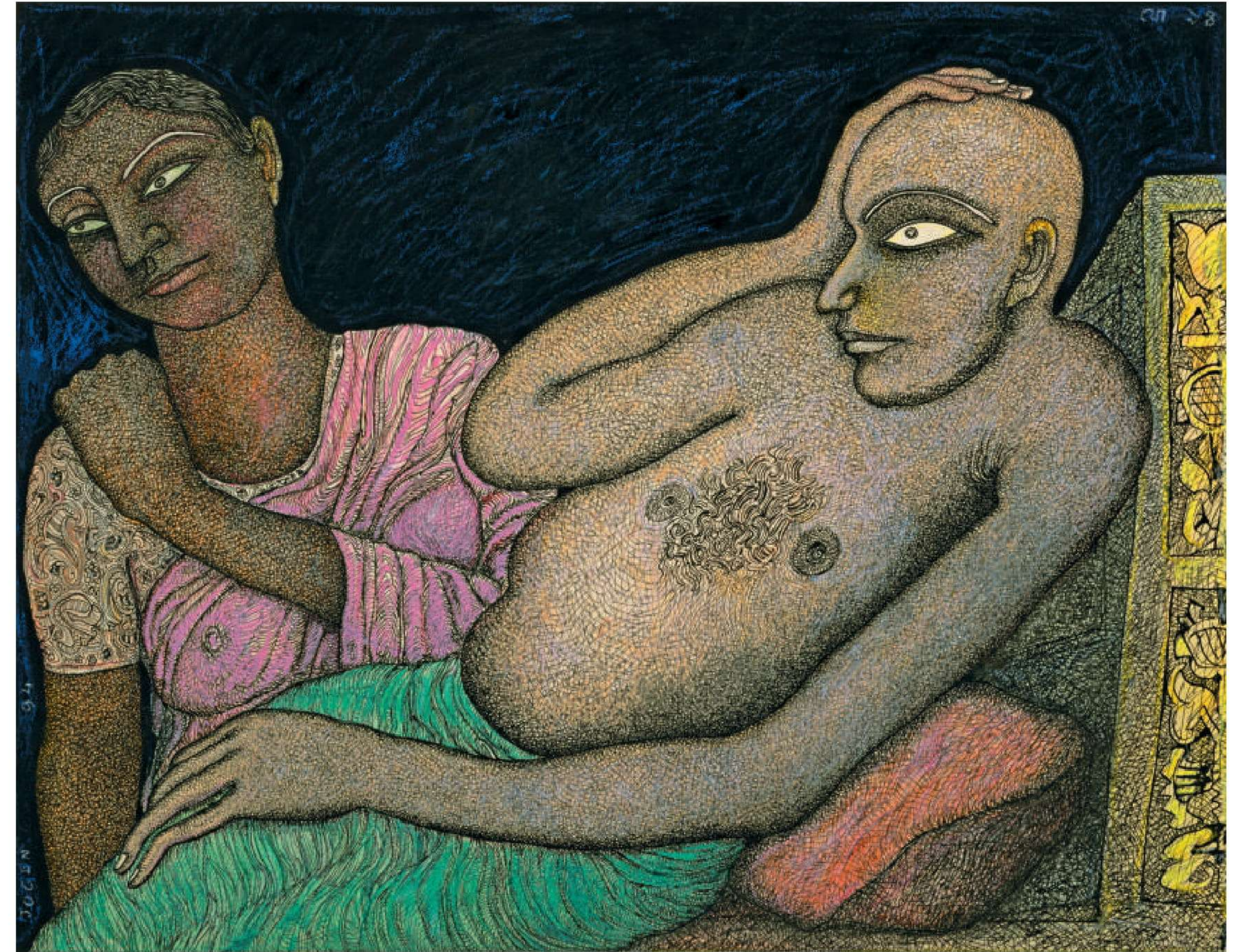
In Asia, India stands at the forefront of art today, and seems to have an edge over Japan, too. In the all-India art scene, as it has shaped itself with inputs from Bengal, Mumbai and Delhi, painting has come into its own. Comparatively speaking, sculpture perhaps still lags behind. Japan is, of course, far ahead of us in environmentalist sculpture or architecture. But in painting, India has a position of its own, distinct from others. It is time for the whole world to recognise the achievements of India. In the past we had Rabindranath Tagore, Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, Sailoz Mukherjee. Now there are many more painters – at least 20 to 25 – spread throughout the country that are producing work of a quality that would go to enrich world art. What we have to take into consideration is not whether our names are being mentioned in the international scene or not, but whether we are doing the right kind of work. When a group of people try to speak their own minds in their own manners, it acquires a natural authenticity. What matters above everything else is that we are trying to speak for ourselves on our own terms and from our own positions.

What is happening in Europe now is that businessmen have entered the scene with a well-laid out plan to patronise and market art simultaneously, with art galleries and museums promoting artists of their own choice, a choice that is being determined by the

artist's commercial prospects. In other words, the businessmen begin with their estimate of how much they can make out of a particular artist; then they go on to publicise him and sell his works, raising the price of his paintings as they proceed. A gallery owner makes his profit from the sale of paintings. In France, there was a huge build-up of painters like Klein and Buffet, through the publication of massive books on them, followed by grand exhibitions of their works, to raise their stock at a time when the generation of the great French masters was dying out, with artists like Picasso, Matisse, Chagall and Miro growing older and with not many more years of work before them. With newer American artists appearing on the scene, and nobody in view in France, the businessmen felt the need all the more urgently to set up an equally reputed new generation. What they were concerned about was the enormous amount of foreign exchange earnings they stood to make from American purchases of French paintings, and the risk they faced of losing that market unless a new generation of equal standing was being offered to the market.

This is a strategy at work all over the world. In Paris, they publish big, fat catalogues for new painters barely in their 20s or 30s, on display at museums and galleries. They are packaged and released into the market. Commercialisation has spread to such an extent that it often takes years to get to the real works of a painter. An Indian artist today can expect little in such a situation. There have been cases where they have been deliberately shunted aside. The late Francis Souza, the artist from Goa, demonstrated in his essay, *Imperialism in Culture* how these countries hold on to their cultural dominance, by using their superior money power to control and determine the contents of encyclopaedias and general books on art, and thus keep the world of art and culture under their control.

*It is not only 'speed' which creates tension, but also 'stillness'. From it an even greater tension can be created in a work of art. A form of speed represented physically in an artwork may not create a successful tension in it. Aesthetic tension in an artwork is very different from an expression of speed. Speed is not necessarily important for a painting, or an art form, but tension is important.*



*Situation 3, 1994, ink and pastel on paper, 56 × 71 cm.*

There is a new interest in India, however, with even the cognoscenti recognising that significant developments have taken place in Indian art. Our art has received a lot of useful publicity from the exhibitions organised in connection with the many Festivals of India. Works by several of our modern artists are now well-recognised abroad and have found a market. The recent exhibitions in Japan of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings had a tremendous impact, with people queuing up to see the exhibition. A really good catalogue was published on the occasion.

Indian art is now comparatively self-reliant, with the growth of a large local clientele. The art trade has made considerable inroads in our part of the world, too. World art does not produce masterpieces all the time, though there are several significant artists on the scene. But the artists promoted and blown up are not necessarily the major artists; though I would never go to the point of saying that they have no significant artists at all. France has a population of 90 million. India has a population of 800 million! Poverty need not inhibit an artistic sensibility – at least there is no scientific rationale for it. If we lag behind, it is only because we do not have enough scope to practice. With their greater opportunities, the Western artists can practice much more, and through practice they reach heights of achievement.

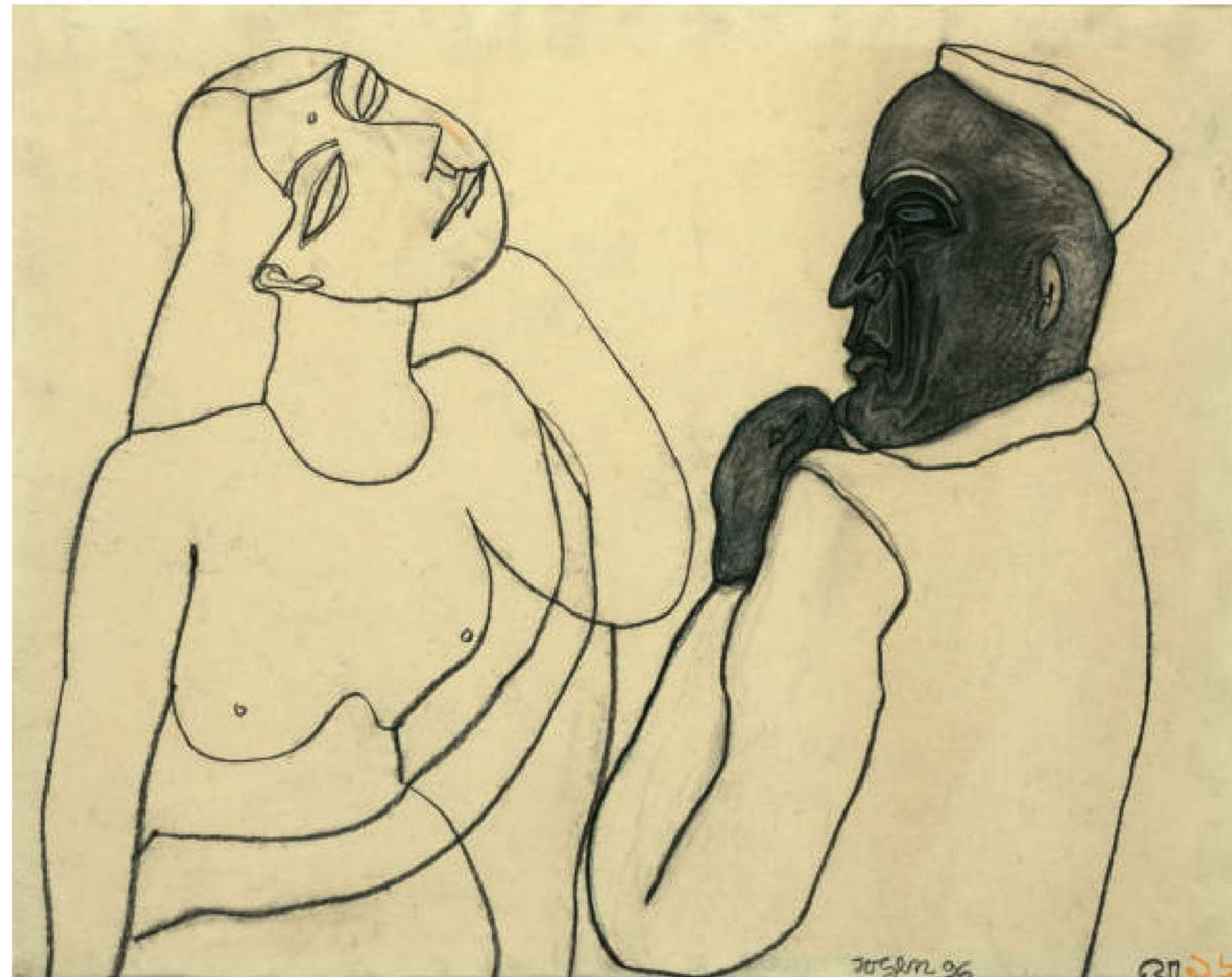
There are many Europeans visiting India now, gathering information on various subjects. They are experiencing a sense of crisis in their own way of life, as they find their own problems so banal, boring and stagnant. Out of that sense of crisis they are being drawn afresh to our past and the sheer range of our philosophic thought. British sculptors have camped in Chennai and have drawn on various experiences in India to carve objects and paint, and have gone back and exhibited in Britain. They are gathering new elements for creative use in India. The West Europeans deserve credit for the intensity and concentration with which they study and explore whatever they are interested in, and then put to use. That degree of concentration is what we lack. We have a rich field of possibilities lying open before us, for our artists to work with. The setting for our artistic activity has changed considerably in the last 15 to 20 years. Artists are generally better off economically. There was a time when artists in India painted, but did not hope to sell. New galleries have come up in Kolkata. Mumbai and Delhi have quite a few already. It is not just the Indian businessman, but the rich and the upper middle classes too who have started buying paintings. There could be two reasons. Firstly, there is greater publicity now

*Moonstruck*, 1995, ink and pastel on paper, 101 × 99 cm.



about painters and paintings. Secondly, there is a notion making the rounds that paintings are a good investment. India, too, has seen a spate of art auctions and the consequent upward movement of prices of paintings. Businessmen, particularly, have woken up to the investment potential of paintings.

But there are also people who appreciate paintings with a genuine involvement. When they buy a painting, it is bought with a real sense of its artistic worth. In other words, art is in fashion right now in India, as it once was in Europe and that is how it should be – for true appreciation tends to grow out of a fashion at some point of time.



Lovers, 1996, pastel on paper, 56 × 71 cm.

There is the problem, however, of the attitude that an artist should adopt in such a situation. His paintings may be selling well, and there may be pressure building up on him as the gallery owners may be pressing him to produce more. The artist may be even producing more to satisfy the demand. But if this urge grows stronger there is the danger of the painting itself suffering in quality. It is something, of course, that depends on the artistic temperament of the artist concerned. There is no way one can make predictions in the matter. I am convinced that the true artist will not budge from his ground. He will carry on serving his own conscience alone. He will spurn the art trade and devote himself entirely to his creative pursuit.

There is often an insistence and even a demand on the artist on the point that artists should paint for social change, as they are obliged to contribute to a changing society. The point is how the artist should respond to such a demand. An artist is an individual, and it is for him to determine what role he will play as a social being. If an artist – as a social being – is convinced that changing society rather than painting is his primary obligation, he should paint from a commitment to social change, and should make no exception whatsoever. But there may be an artist who is convinced that art primarily has to be art. There are several paintings by Matisse or Picasso that are primarily works of art. The Matisse painting may be speaking of life, may even be representing life, but if we look at it from what we consider to be the political view, the artist has not accomplished anything at all. That would be true of several artists. And again there are several artists whose paintings call up social reactions. In other words, art can of course carry a message, but when an artist is emotionally and intellectually charged with a message, he can create greater art out of it, as has been evident in various arts, such as the films of Charles Chaplin and Sergei Eisenstein or a novel like Gorky's *Mother* or in the works of several other writers. Pablo Neruda's poems, on the other hand, contain a lot of other elements. I find this presence of 'other things' more natural. The same man can play the flute and fight a battle when that is what is called for. There is no way one can be certain that the fighter will never play the flute in his life.

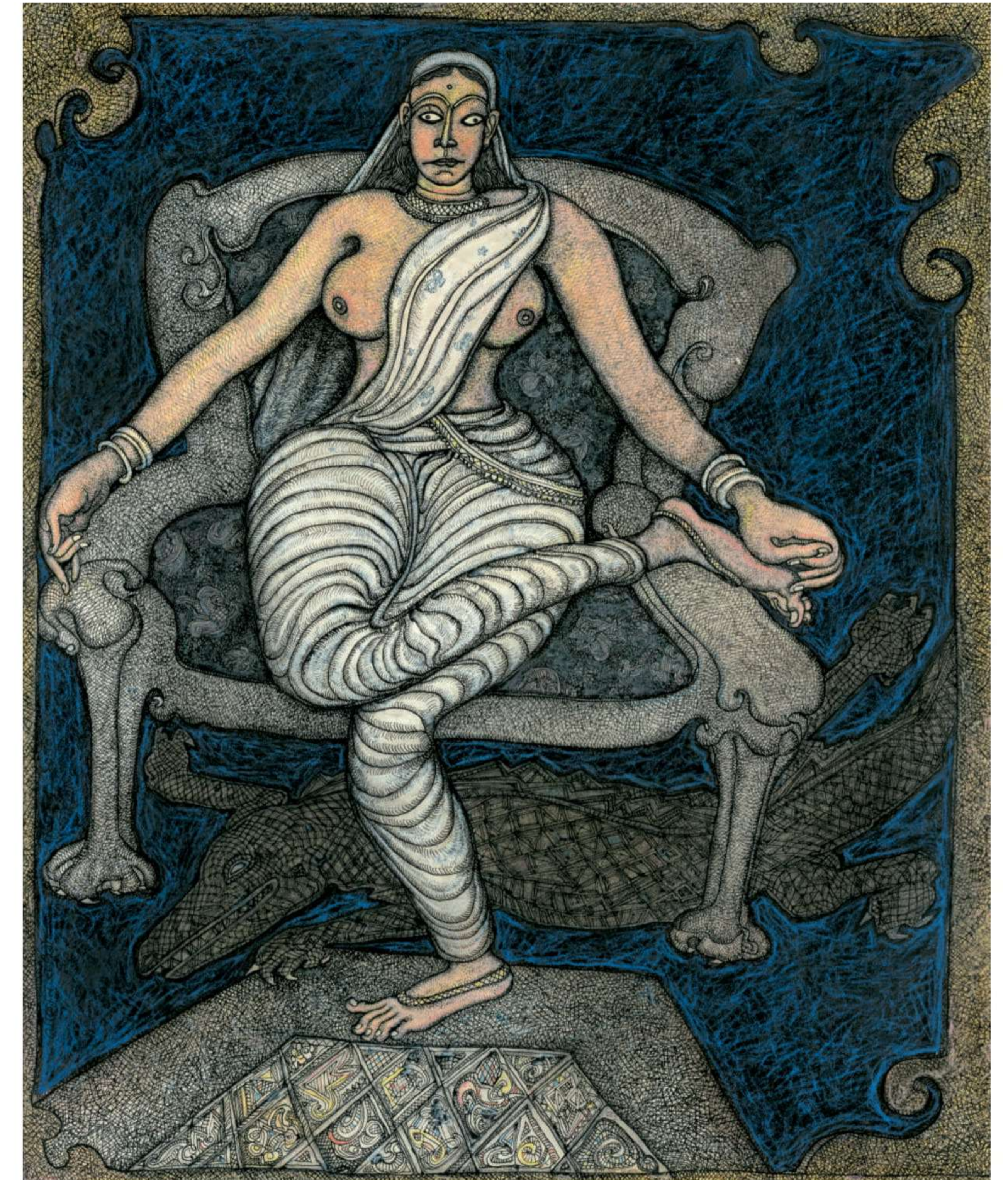
Art is ultimately for man, in the sense that it extends the territory of man's being. All the art that is being created every day in the world goes to enlarge society, and extend its qualitative limits.

Santiniketan, 1989

Somewhere

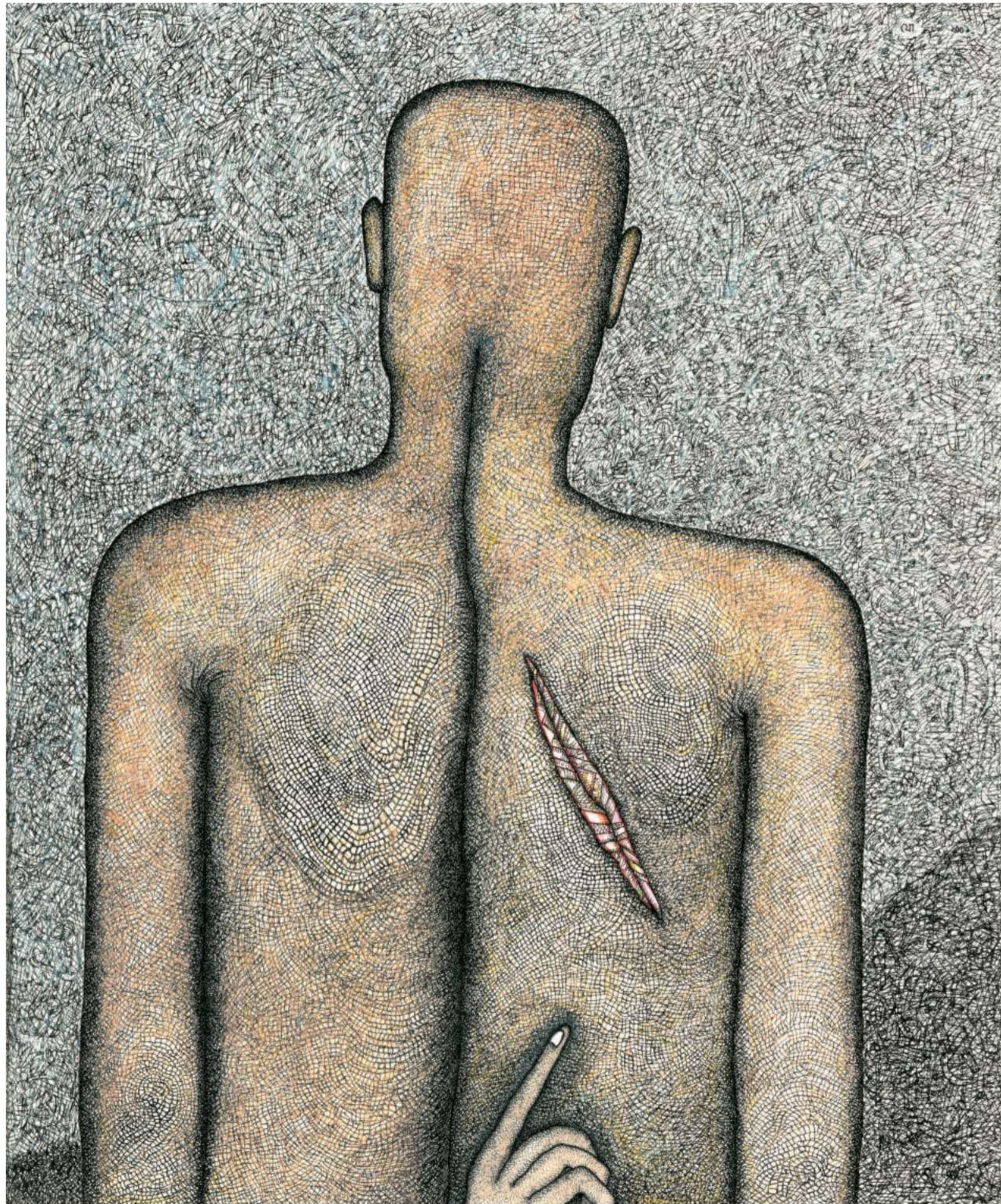
*My heart is out there, somewhere  
Somewhere, only a little out of sight  
Just on the other side of my fence,  
And hence.  
The breaking down. The tossing away. The crossing over.  
Another string ties us together.  
Another bond chafes against the skin.  
Another religion rears its ugly head.  
On its branches, all those leaves, all those drops of blood.  
And all those times of blood, storms, floods.*

*This religion has no god.  
This religion is dead, lying face down  
In the storm,  
In the blood,  
In the water.*



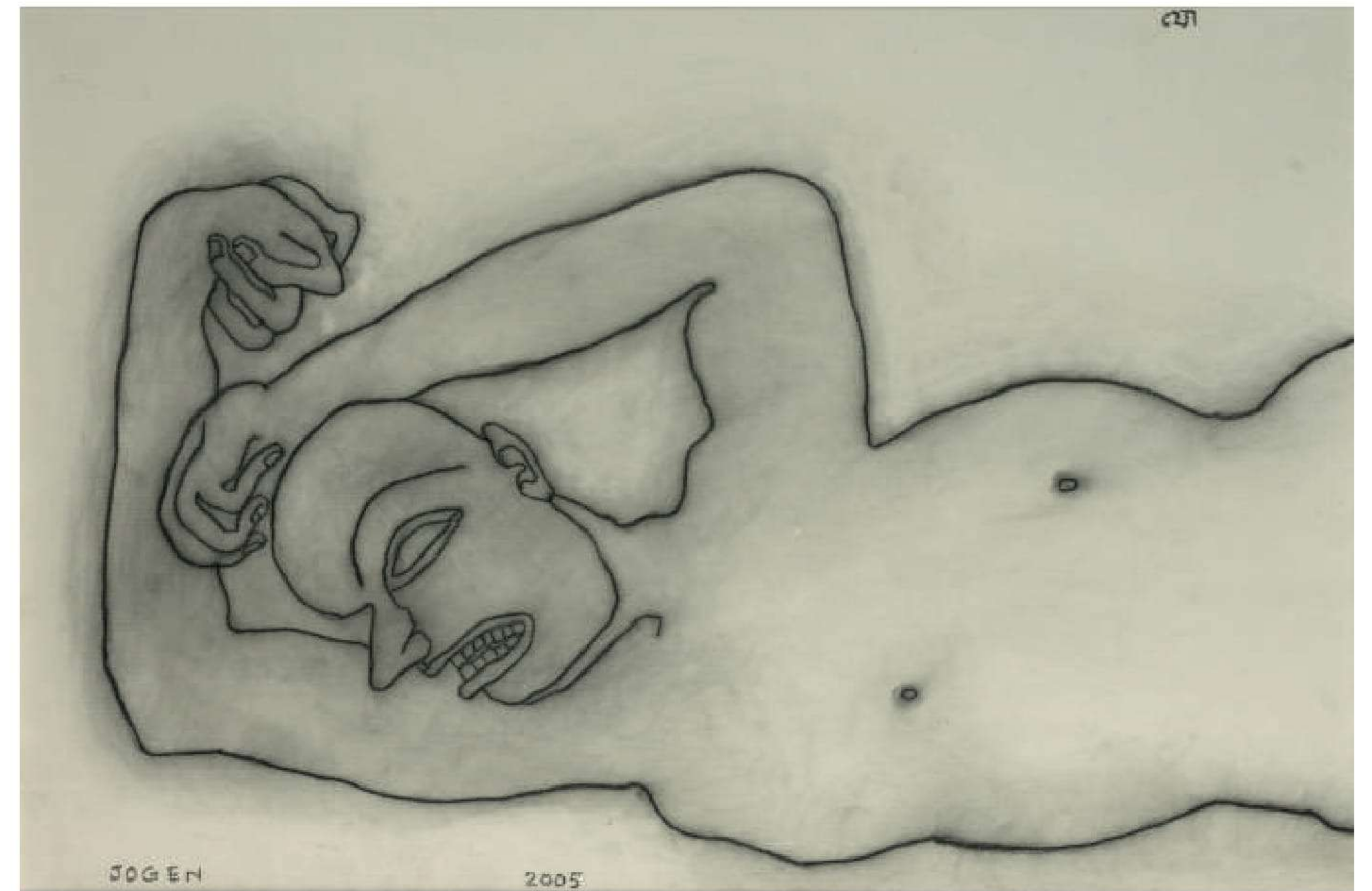
*Her Silver Throne, 2000, ink with dry and oil pastel on paper, 91 × 75 cm.*





*The Wound*, 2001, ink and pastel on paper, 90 × 75 cm.

*Art is ultimately connected with the manner of living. Hence, art cannot manifest itself in its totality until the question of living has been clearly defined on the personal plane and the larger social plane. As long as that is not accomplished, all that we can have are fragmented, undefined expressions.*



*Untitled*, 2005, pastel on paper, 59 × 89 cm.



*The Memorial*, 2001, ink and mixed media on paper, 56 × 71 cm.

### *Starward*

*I shall walk across my pictures  
Once, twice, more times than numbers.  
No trains nor any soft, grassy paths.  
For I have stars, millions and millions  
After a day, after a year, after time itself has run out  
I shall walk away, walk across  
To where her company, her friendship welcomes me.*

*The heat dazzles, the nebula blinds with its brightness  
The place I seek, the direction I turn to,  
Lie that way, lie ahead  
As though I am their child –  
The tenderness of cloud and water envelop me thus.*

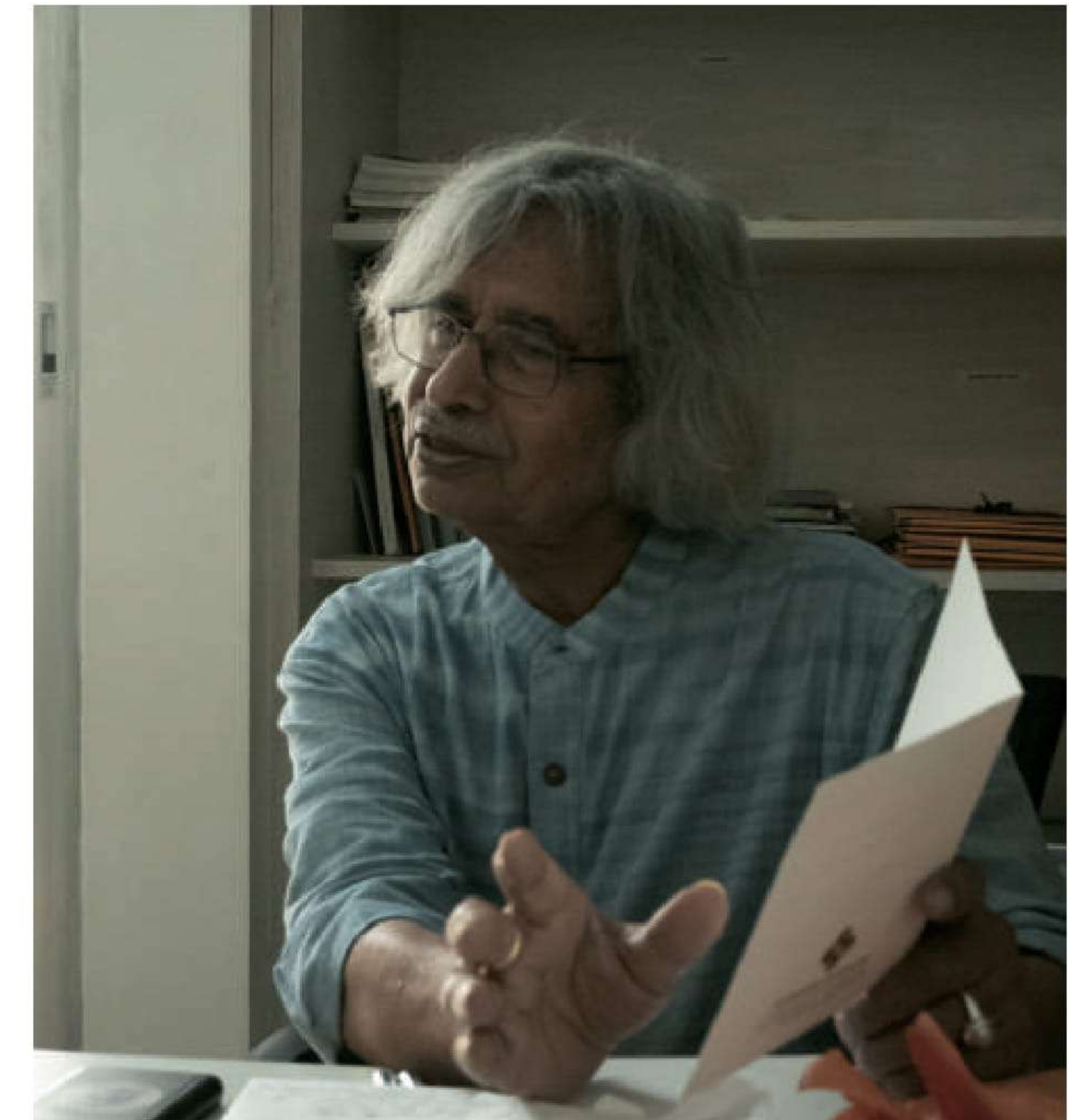
*My star, I shall cross your ocean  
After the day, after the year,  
After time has come full circle.*

Jogen Chowdhury belongs to a generation of artists for whom the partition of India had a significant impact on their lives. Born in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh, in 1939, the family migrated to Kolkata in 1948. Jogen still has vivid memories of refugees like him and his family, arriving at Sealdah train station from then East Pakistan well into the mid 1950s. As a teenager, he would frequent the station and capture the plight of these refugees with pencil or ink on paper. There was no looking back post his graduation from the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata in 1960. He received a French Government scholarship to further his studies at l'École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts and Atelier 17 in 1965.

On his return from Paris, Chowdhury joined the Weaver's Service Centre as a textile designer based in Chennai. Between 1972-1987, he was the Keeper of Art at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi. The same year, he joined Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan as a teacher and finally finished as Principal in 1999. He still remains Professor Emeritus at the University.

Jogen Chowdhury has held several solo exhibitions, starting with an exhibition of drawings and paintings at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata in 1963. He has participated in numerous international Biennales and Triennales, as well as group exhibitions in India and abroad. He has also been the recipient of several national and international awards.

Jogen Chowdhury was nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha in 2014 and now divides his time between New Delhi, Kolkata and Santiniketan.



*Jogen Chowdhury, Kolkata 2019*

© Glenbarra Art Museum and Jogen Chowdhury

Translation (from original writings in Bengali)  
*Poems by Jogen Chowdhury: Sunandini Banerjee*  
*An Artist's Thoughts: Samik Bandyopadhyay and Sudeshna Banerjee*



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