

Songs of the Land | An exhibition of the works of artists from Bangladesh

Melbourne | Sydney | Canberra

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Artists : Qayyum Chowdhury, Tahera Khanam, Rafiqun Nabi, Monirul Islam, Abdus Shakoor Shah

Farida Zaman, Ranjit Das, Rokeya Sultana, Kanak Chanpa Chakma and Mohammad Iqbal

Modern art in Bengal has always maintained a meaningful dialogue with tradition while accommodating western trends and interpretations. The works of the early exponents of modernism are informed with a sensibility that respects tradition while it promotes innovation. In that sense modern art in Bangladesh has never severed its bonds with tradition—even when abstraction became the preferred expressive mode with some painters in the 1960s—as the artists' outlook on life, their use of materials, their strong commitment to society, culture and politics of their time continuously provided the frames of reference for their art.

Going back to the beginnings of modern art in Bangladesh in 1940s, it can be seen that the artists drew their themes and indeed their representational ethics were from the life around them. It has the prevailing social contingencies that inclined them towards realism and real life studies. When Zainul Abedin presented his album of famine sketches in 1943, it signaled the triumph of realism. It also showed that an artist's commitment to life could help him create significant forms. Zainul's search for a meaning of life led him to further explorations of the Bengalee psyche, and he entered the rich world of folk forms and folk imagination and aesthetics. Quamrul Hassan, Safiuddin Ahmed, Anwarul Huq and others who had migrated to Dhaka from Calcutta after the partition of India in 1947, joined him in this journey. Zainul and his colleagues set up an Art Institute in Dhaka in 1948, which gave a huge boost to their efforts to initiate a modern art movement in Bangladesh. Indeed, the setting up of the Art College inaugurated the most formative chapter in our art history.

Throughout the nineteen fifties and sixties, there were frenzied activities in the art scene. Leading artists went to Europe for further training and after their return initiated a cult of modernism that expropriated most of the western techniques, including cubism and abstract expressionism. Geometric configuration was dominant, color became a means of exploration of hidden meanings, and space became a thing to invest with structures of feeling. Experimentation, in other words, was a distinguishing preoccupation of these artists.

But even when abstraction held the sway, the presence of folk forms and folk imagination was unmistakable. S M Sultan and Quamrul Hassan were obvious exponents of the genre that sought

interpretative strength in folk forms, but there were others who combined a sharply western sensibility with the timeless folk imagination.

The second generation of artists who followed Zainul Abedin and his colleagues at the Art Institutes, took a keen interest in the modern art movement in the western world, but indulged more in the individualistic abstract expressionism than follow any particular school or style. With the emergence of Hamidur Rahman, Aminul Islam, Mohammad Kibria, Murtaja Baseer, Rashid Chowdhury and Abdur Razzaque who received training in Europe and America in advanced techniques and media, a revolutionary change was noticed in the form and style of art in the 1960s.

The war of independence and the eventual emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign country in 1971 had a tremendous impact on our creative imagination. For a time images of the cataclysmic events of the war year had an overpowering presence in our art, but gradually these were placed at a more symbolic and metaphorical level, where they helped shape a new sensibility. The reappearance of semi-abstract and half-figurative works in the seventies was one outcome of that accommodation.

Many of those who were active in the seventies had actually started earlier, in the early or late sixties. Their work strove to achieve a distinctive expression and style that reflected their enthusiasm. Those who worked in abstraction were trying to accommodate the divisive nature of time and reality within the frame of familiar experiences. Folk forms and half-figurative or figurative style became attractive for those who tried to balance their innate lyricism with demands of reality. The art of the time saw wide diversity of mediums used. Graphic art received a new impetus and sculptural art became a field to explore. Among important artists of the time were Qayyum Chowdhury, Nitun Kundu, Abu Taher, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Hashem Khan, Rafiqun Nabi, Monirul Islam, Mahmudul Haque, Abdus Shakoore, Chandra Shekhar Dey, Hashi Chakraborty, Monsur Ul Karim, Hamiduzzaman Khan, Kazi Ghiyasuddin, Biren Shome, K M A Qayyum, Shahabuddin, Nazlee Laila Mansur and Alak Roy.

The seventies and eighties were a time of expansion of art institutes, art galleries, and an increase of exhibitions. Art sales also picked up. Our contact with international art communities grew. Dhaka hosted the first Asian Art Biennale in 1981, and, despite political and other problems, the event has been held regularly, with participation even from some African and Pacific Rim countries. There were also bilateral exchanges of exhibitions with other countries, which resulted in artistic formations that could appeal to wider audiences elsewhere. The cultivation of a postmodern sensibility in the eighties was somehow related to that imaginative expansion. The term postmodern should not create any misunderstanding here; for, in the spirit of playfulness that many artists employed at the time, in going against seriousness and valorizing levity and the sense of the absurd, the artists were truly interpreting our life and experience with a new insight. They no longer felt inhibited in giving due importance to the grotesque, the ludicrous and the absurd, and defying conventions of serious interpretations. Among the artists whose works deserve special mention are Farida Zaman, Ranjit Das, Mohammad Eunos, Rokeya Sultana, Nasreen Begum, Kazi Rakib, Tarun Ghosh, Naima Haque, G S Kabir, Dhali Al Mamun, Dilara Begum Jolly, Khalid Mahmud Mithu, Sheikh Afzal, Kanak Chanpa Chakma, Shishir Bhattacharjee, Wakilur Rahman, Niloofar Chaman, Mahbubur Rahman and Mohammad Iqbal.

Once, in the sixties, the leading tendency was towards abstraction. Today, semi-abstraction (figures for personalized expression) and figurative work (figures for whatever potentials they symbolize, in whatever innovative ways they offer themselves) are the principal norms, although abstraction is still very much pursued. The use of color has a striking range and depth, the exploitation of the potentials of different media is exhaustive, and the artists' understanding of their means and their medium is often of a very high level. What all this means is that, contemporary art in Bangladesh has developed to an extent that it can claim its own niche in the world of art.

For the artists of the eighties the time was one of both loss and gain. They lost the earlier exuberance and sense of confidence in the destiny of a new nation, but they gained a deeper insight into their time, history and reality. What they lost in terms of passion, they gained in terms of intellectuality. The artists of the seventies also felt passionately about the liberation of our country, about its newfound identity and its prospects, but the events of the mid-decade disillusioned them. Their younger contemporaries inherited that disillusionment, but struggled to come out of it. They too, went to tradition, to rural Bangladesh and to myths and legends. But their search went deeper than the surface images, motifs and impressions. Their intellectual probing enabled them to understand the historical inevitabilities that shaped our life. They learnt to take them in stride, arming them with the wisdom of the common people. Some pursued a style that blended elements of satire, social commentary, myth and a personal interpretation of time and history that was apparently a reflection of a rising postmodernist attitude to art in the eighties everywhere. There are indeed enough postmodernist elements in their works to describe them as such; but their satire, self-reflexivity, incongruities, caricature and fun are ultimately a contribution of our traditional art and creative practices.

What the artists pursuing a somewhat postmodernist style found in our folk traditions were not only a series of surface images/motifs that presented alternate versions of reality, but also the capacity to laugh and make fun of even the most unsettling social and political events. This is also true of the art of the present, more or less.

2. The exhibition of ten Bangladeshi artists brings together the works of selected painters and printmakers spanning nearly three to four generations. While Qayyum Chowdhury represents the 1950s, Mohammad Iqbal belongs to the new generation of artists who, faced with an overwhelming dominance of visual culture are forced to develop and cultivate new sensibilities. The new generation of artists is engaged in overhauling both the aesthetic and formal aspects of our art, revising, in the process its engagement with reality, history and time. Qayyum Choudhury has distinguished himself with evocative and inspirational representations of the imagination, identity and the checkered history of the Bengalees, focusing mainly on their folk manifestations. He draws his forms from folk art, but blends into its frame contemporary themes, such as our war of independence or people's struggle for social emancipation. He uses strong colours and various design elements in his work which lend them an air of celebration. Tahera Khanam has been a reticent artist, who prefers to work in isolation within the privacy of her studio. There have been very few exhibitions of her work, which are mostly studies of nature and everyday life. Her delicate colours, her meticulous execution of form and texture make her works stand out.

Refiqun Nabi is an accomplished and versatile artist of the 1960s generation who is equally conversant in oil, watercolour and etching. He is indeed one of our finest graphic artists who is also a cartoonist of a national following, having created a loveable street urchin character, Tokai, who speaks for all underprivileged Bangladeshis through his witty, often unsettling and incisive comments on everyday reality. Monirul Islam, who lives in Madrid and Dhaka, is a celebrated name in our brief history of modern art. After a promising start in the 1960s, he left for Spain for higher studies in art where he found a favourable ground to pursue his passion for etching, and graphic art in general. His work is distinguished by magical figuration and a luminous geometry which exude feelings and warmth. His use of colour, which shows a predilection for body colours and soft and warm hues, transforms even his abstractions into vibrant land, body and mindscapes.

In any exhibition, Abdus Shakoor Shah's work immediately draws the audience's attention for its masterful execution of folk themes and folk imagination. Shah began pretty much in the modernist tradition, using contemporary themes and techniques, but soon moved into the tradition of folk art and began to draw his energy from and sharpen his sensibilities in the context of folk art. He picked up his characters from Mymensingh Geetika, a collection of songs and lyrics from several centuries back. He adds design elements, also drawn from folk art to highlight his figures.

Farida Zaman is known for her wonderful paintings where nature and everyday life undergo a magical transformation, evoking memory, feelings (of both joy and sadness) and nostalgia, which, in the contemporary context, is often tinged with regret. Farida has created a character, a girl named Sufia, who represents the fragile and the vulnerable in the society, but who also inspires one to dream. Zaman uses a range of motifs associated with the river Meghna on whose banks she was raised – fish, fishing nets, boats – as well as reed grasses and trees that collectively show both the vitality of the land and the people and its gritty existence in the face of present dangers.

Ranjit Das has a modernist sensibility which easily identifies with and picks up the elements of alienation, fracture and angst prevalent in our time. He uses geometric forms as well as bars and square divisions in his composition and sombre colours to express these feelings and conditions of our existence.

Rokeya Sultana pursues figurative representation as well as abstraction with equal ease. There is a strong narrative content in her figurative work which is mostly about the life of struggle that women have to live in our society. One strong presence in her paintings is that of the archetypal madona, who, along with her child, a girl, faces life with a mixture of confusion, anxiety and equanimity. Rokeya's paintings attempt to show the ruptures of our time but also point at a possible regeneration.

Kanak Chanpa Chakma comes from an ethnic community in Chittagong Hill Tracts which, along with several others, finds itself more and more on the defensive, trying to protect their land, lifestyle and culture in the face of large scale settlement of Bengalees in the Hill Tracts. Kanak Chanpa draws on ethnic life, culture and history to fill her canvas. Her paintings are more like intimate snapshots of life lived in simplicity and aesthetic richness.

Mohammad Iqbal, who is the youngest of the ten artists has painted experimental works, using a wide range of techniques. He uses a mixture of abstraction and figuration, and varies his perspectives to emphasize certain aspects of our existence – such as alienation and the desire to belong. Childhood is a favourite theme with him, and children occupy a significant place in his symbolic scheme of themes. He often works on large canvas which amplifies his main ideas and gives them a heightened symbolic import.

The exhibition will provide an opportunity to the viewers to have a first hand experience of Bangladeshi art, its informing vision, the diversity of its style and the range and scope of its preoccupations.