

FREEDOM: FROM DESPAIR TO DREAM

(On the occasion of 75 years of Indian Independence)

Curated by Mrinal Ghosh



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Freedom: From Despair to Dream

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An Introduction:

What is Freedom?

The concept of Freedom is very enigmatic. Maxim Gorky once told: 'Freedom is the five minutes in which I was born to cry naked, nameless without sin, without direction and without grudge. Five minutes after birth they will decide your name, nationality, religion and cast and you will spend your life fighting and stupidly defending things you don't choose.' This means that there is nothing as absolute freedom. Absolute freedom is anarchy, Yet we speak of freedom, strive for it. So what is actually meant by freedom?

Oxford Advanced Dictionary defines it as right to do or say what you want without anything stopping you. The state of being able to do what you want, etc. Wikipedia expounds it as 'Freedom is understood as having the ability to act or change without constraint or to possess the power and resources to fulfil one's purposes unhindered'.

Freedom in the context of our country:

But when we come to the idea of freedom as a citizen of a country like India, it is something different. It includes some aspects of the above definitions, no doubt, but it has some different connotations. After a few centuries of subjugation by alien powers and last about 190 years of colonisation by British imperialists India achieved its independence on 15 August 1947 at the cost of severe humiliations like bifurcation of the country and consequent lots of sufferings, communal hatred and killings etc. The British rulers left our country by presenting us with plenty of perennial problems that even after 75 years we have not been able to sort out. Kashmir is one of them. From the beginning this was a kind of 'fractured freedom'. Apart from the above problems it was also due to the fact that the gap between the standard of living of upper streams population and that of the margins has constantly been enhanced.

India achieved this freedom after about six decades of gradual struggle. In one stage it was not 'just a battle against imperialism. It was a bitter contestation about the kind of nation India should be when it was reborn to freedom', as Harsh Mandar marked in his book *Fractured Freedom*. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Thakur and some other political and social thinkers struggled all through their life to define the notion of ideal liberation. Rabindranath defined the concept of universal humanism. Mahatma Gandhi's Swaraj was an ideal space derived out of refined tradition based on love and unification of rural and urban values. But all these were considered to be utopia and our power-greedy leaders accepted this 'fractured freedom' just out of their self interest.

During 1970-s the historian and social activist Hiteshranjan Sanyal made a survey among the freedom fighters of village Bengal about their views on their struggle and their dreams. In an interview he asked a freedom fighter Nagen Pratihari of Bankura, 'What is freedom? What did you think would happen when we got freedom?' Pratihari replied, 'Freedom means we would all be equal, that we would do everything together, and that we would not have to listen to others'. Here is the actual definition of freedom in the national context. But could we achieve this? It was the reason for despair among the freedom fighters, who lived in free India. This is also the root of despair among most of the ordinary persons, who are not attached to the power, who want to live their life unhindered. They have their dreams about what our independent nation should have been like.

This is the concept behind the present exhibition. Apart from this the artists, through their works, have appraised the various other aspects of freedom.

Democracy and secularism in free India:

Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister after independence till his demise in 1964, 27 May. The stability of Nehru Govt was based on four principles: Democracy, Secularism, Socialism and non-alignment. The first two principles were conceptualised by the designers of our Constitution. These were the elements that could act as bondage among the apparently diversified and disparate cluster of people that has often been termed as 'baffling heterogeneity'. This democracy is till now the enlightened aspect of our freedom. The renowned social scientist and historian Partha Chatterjee wrote about the possible reason for success of democracy like this: 'It is often said, not unjustifiably, that the reason why liberal democratic institutions have performed more creditably in India than many other parts of the formally colonial world is the strength of its civil social institutions that are relatively independent of the political domain of the state'. (*Wages of Freedom*. Ed. Partha Chatterjee, Oxford, 1998, P-13.)

This was written during the celebration of 50 years of independence. But in the course of the next twenty-five years, when corruption and deterioration of moral values have engulfed the most part of the nation in a severe way the independence of 'social institutions' from political domain are gradually been tearing away affecting the process of free franchise, thus affecting the quality of democracy and freedom. The first blow on democracy came down with the declaration of emergency in 1975 by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The third principle 'socialism' has gradually been withered away with the spread of economic globalisation during the decade of 1990-s and dominance of capitalism in controlling the social and economic system. Since 1990-s we are under control of another kind of domination by the economic and business strategies of the first-world countries

that may be termed as 'Post-colonial colonialism'. With the failure of socialist experiments in USSR, the concept of non-alignment has also been shattered.

From the beginning there was a strong current of sentiments against secularism, which led to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, 30 January. That sentiment gradually rose into a strong force against the religious minorities. The destruction of Babri mosque in 1992, December was its landmark example. In the course of the 21st century the idea of secularism has gradually been waned with the rise of right wing Hindu chauvinism, resulting in severe crumbling of values of freedom.

No doubt, during these 75 years after independence our country has progressed in various fields, social, scientific and cultural. But all these brighter aspects have been engulfed by the dark shadows of fundamentalism, terrorism, incredible imbalance in the standard of living between upper and lower strata of society.

Freedom and Art:

Now let us come to the field of art. In art through creativity a person propounds his/her freedom. According to existential philosophy existence precedes essence. There are numerous shackles within and around our existence. An exponent of existential philosophy says, 'We have absolute freedom because we begin as nothing and can make ourselves into anything we want'. In the moments, when a person creates, he/she can get rid of those shackles and creates his/her own freedom albeit temporarily. Here art is closely linked to freedom. Marxism professes that bondage in society is the result of conflict between the classes. Freedom will depend on the withering away of class distinction. In that free society work for livelihood will merge with the creativity during the leisure. It is unknown when the world can reach that utopia.

The primary intention of art is to create unique form, the form that is free from natural reality. Art creates its own reality. Artistic form creates emancipation from the natural reality. This may be towards transcendence or towards a kind of critique. In both cases, as Albert Camus proclaimed, art is a rebellion. Through rebellion art puts forward some sort of intrinsic freedom.

The Present Exhibition:

In the present exhibition our intention is to introduce a small segment of our artistic community to sort out how these artists contemplate about the condition of freedom or lack of freedom in general and also in Independent India. There are twelve painters and seven sculptors taking part in the show. All of them are socio-temporally conscious and very much concerned about the national and global realities.

The two paintings of Partha Pratim Deb (b.1943) titled *Brighter Side* and *Darker Side* express two opposing aspects of existential reality that independence has bestowed on us.

The love between *Mother and Child* is the ideal of freedom in broad sense as exemplified in P.R. Narvekar's (1950 – 2021) paintings, also his *Musician*.

The untitled painting, acrylic on canvas, by Chittrovanu Mazumdar (b.1956) is a large format (dimensions 7 ft. High x 4 ft. Wide) representation of life itself as it is in reality. A bare-bodied man appears to be carved out of grey stone, stands with existential melancholy. But only a part of his torso, from below the throat and above the waist, is visible. His face, his head, his expressions are out of sight. These are covered by a square format dark space that rests above his body. Human being is cut off from his existential and expressive freedom by the dark reality. Within the square format dark zone, towards the top a patch of red is visible that maybe imagined to be a wild beast. The bestial darkness of reality has sealed the freedom of humanity.

Out of two untitled mixed media paintings of Samir Aich (b.1957) (one on mount board, the other on paper) the first one, executed mostly in line, projects a distorted and dilapidated human figure thrown within an uncanny void indicating how freedom is mutilated to postulate unredeemable suffering. In the second one, a dejected person sits, may be bank of a nocturnal river, projecting her reptile like elongated tongue towards a boat. What does she strives for? Does she want to retrieve her lost freedom?

The title of K. Muralidharan's (b.1954) mixed-media painting is '*Harmony*'. The images are mythical in nature. There are various fields of divinity from myths of various phases practised in our country. Myth is generated from freedom. Divinity and spirituality grows from some sort of existential liberty. Yet there is a contrast here. In the lower left portion of the picture-space we find life in its reality. The cluster of figures delineated is from the real life, where there is pain and problems of existence, which turns to an obstacle to evoke unconditional freedom. This contradiction is the essence of this painting.

Jaya Ganguly (b.1958) uses primitive expressionist form to bring out grotesque intrinsic and extrinsic psychic turmoil of existence. The three pieces presented in this exhibition show human faces transformed into masks. The person is alienated from his/her being. All expressive outlets have been sealed. All kinds of freedoms are frozen, as happens and has happened during fascist regimes. The identity is annihilated. What else remains of freedom?

Chandra Bhattacharya's (b.1961) two water colours are inscribed with two statements. In one the inscription is '*This path, A chronicle of those who walked never to return*'. In the other: '*A broken cage, but always there lurking, ineffable*'. In both the paintings 16.5x11.7 inch in size

there is dark shade through the pictorial space. In the first one a white path flows from end to end. In the second one there is a broken cage within the similar kind of dark space. The inscriptions reveal the concepts, which need no further explanation.

Chhatrapati Dutta's (b.1964) two paintings are very subtle indirect critique on the state of our colonial past. Both the works are figurative and fantasy-oriented. The larger one (5x4 ft.) titled '*An Attempt at Unravelling the past*' tries to unveil the colonial distress. The second one '*The shedding of one Tree into Three and Ensuing Saga*' is a fantasy-oriented critique on disintegration of our country.

Debraj Goswami's (b.1973) two paintings titled '*Hide and seek*' and '*Multiple Choice*' are narrative and metaphorical indicating very subtly, yet critically, the condition of democracy and freedom in our country after seventy-five years of independence. It is not necessary to describe. The spectator may interpret in her/his own way.

Both the paintings of Samindranath Majumdar (b.1966) are apparently abstract. In the first one titled '*The Path Not taken*' (69x69 inch) he hints at the abandoned path that would have been ideal for our development of freedom. The second one titled '*The Forgotten Martyrs*' is the chronicle of the martyrs (7x3 ft) who sacrificed their life for freedom, but whose dreams have not been realised.

Bholanath Rudra's (b.1984) exquisite water colour '*Image of an Image*' depicts a forlorn hilly terrain submerged in a strange nocturnal light. On the top a hill Mahatma Gandhi stands alone with his long stick. The melancholy of lone Mahatma indicates the void that freedom has given rise to. In another of his water colours '*Enlightenment - I*' there is a sense of celebration, but the celebration is within a pathetic forlorn space indicating a strange void.

Pankaj Panwar's (b.1961) paintings from his series '*Lock-down Diaries*' are examples of how an artist extracts freedom from extreme unfreedom.

Krishen Khanna's (b.1925) metal sculpture featuring a band party man playing trumpet shows the struggle between freedom and unfreedom.

In all the three jocular ceramic sculptures Subrata Biswas (b.1972) elevates primitive and popular forms towards modernist expressions. In two of these a bird is seen seated on the top of an elevated column. We may be tempted to imagine the column as the symbol of human aspirations and the bird as an emblem of freedom. The third one reveals an encounter of a man with a beast. Both offer flowers to each other. Out of contemporary existential complexity the artist posits a kind of dream, where ultimately love will turn to be victorious.

Out of the two bronzes by Akhil Chandra Das (b.1968) '*The winged man with flying birds on the wings*' is an example of freedom as dream, the second one, the '*Headless*' man holding the separated heads on the sword held over his head is an example of unfreedom or despair of freedom.

The two figurative bronzes by Bimal Kundu (b.1954) suggest a kind of existential despair, an opposite face of freedom.

Debanjan Roy's (b.1975) sculpture deals with the making of Gandhi. He says, in the process of Gandhi's enlightenment his wife Kasturba had immense contribution. In his work Gandhi is seen walking, shadow of Kasturba is at his backside. Gandhi earned his personal freedom from the sacrifice of Kasturba.

The three bronzes by Mrinal Kanti Gayen (b.1971) exemplify the glory of freedom as contained in nature and in the relation of love between the nature and the village children. This is the dream, very difficult to attain.

Tapas Biswas's (b.1972) bronze featuring '*Banaras Ghat*' explores religious enchantment, which is kind of freedom for the time being.

End note:

If any spectator goes through all the exhibits of this show she/he may detect how to our artists freedom appears both as despair and dream. The despair emerges from the reality. Whether 'dream' will turn to be utopia is an enigma.

Mrinal Ghosh (Curator)

AKHIL CHANDRA DAS

(b.1968)



Ref No. : C1196

Shelter
Bronze
22 x 18 x 8 in
2022



Ref No. : C1206

Headless
Bronze

34 x 22 x 8.5 in
2021

BHOLANATH RUDRA

(b.1984)



Ref No. : C1211

Image of an Image
Watercolour on Paper
30 x 39 in I 2022



Ref No. : C1212

Enlightenment
Watercolour on Paper
32.5 x 44 in I 2022



Ref No. : C1210

Still Life
Watercolour on Paper
45.5 x 90 in I 2022

BIMAL KUNDU

(b.1954)



Ref No. : C0295

Discord

Bronze

25 x 16 x 10 in



Ref No. : C0300

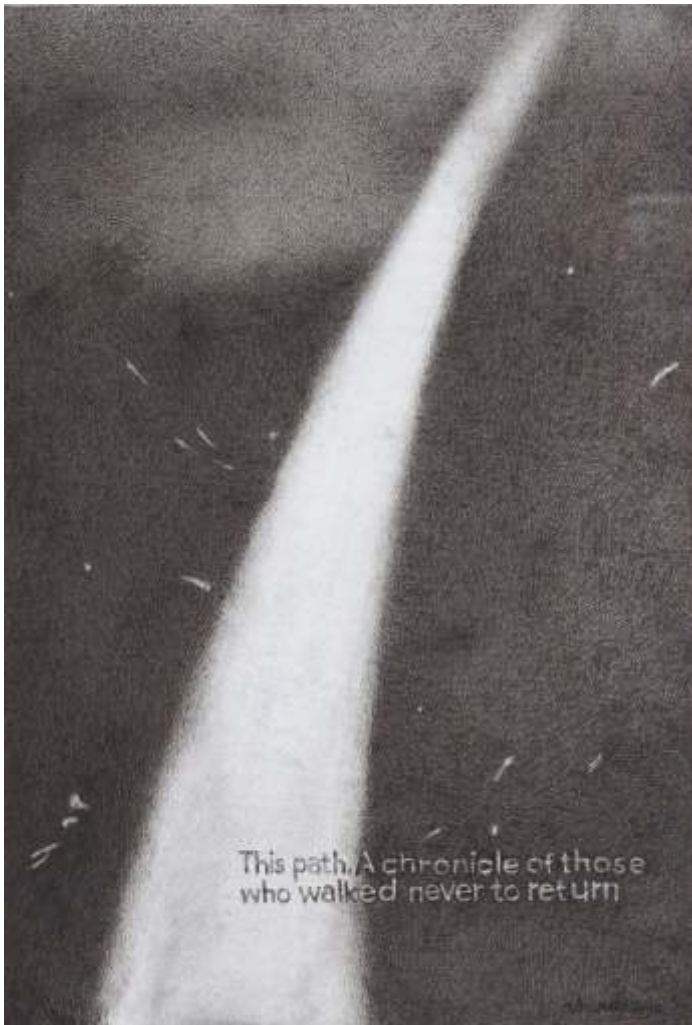
Thinker

Bronze

24 x 11 x 8.5 in

CHANDRA BHATTACHARJEE

(b.1961)



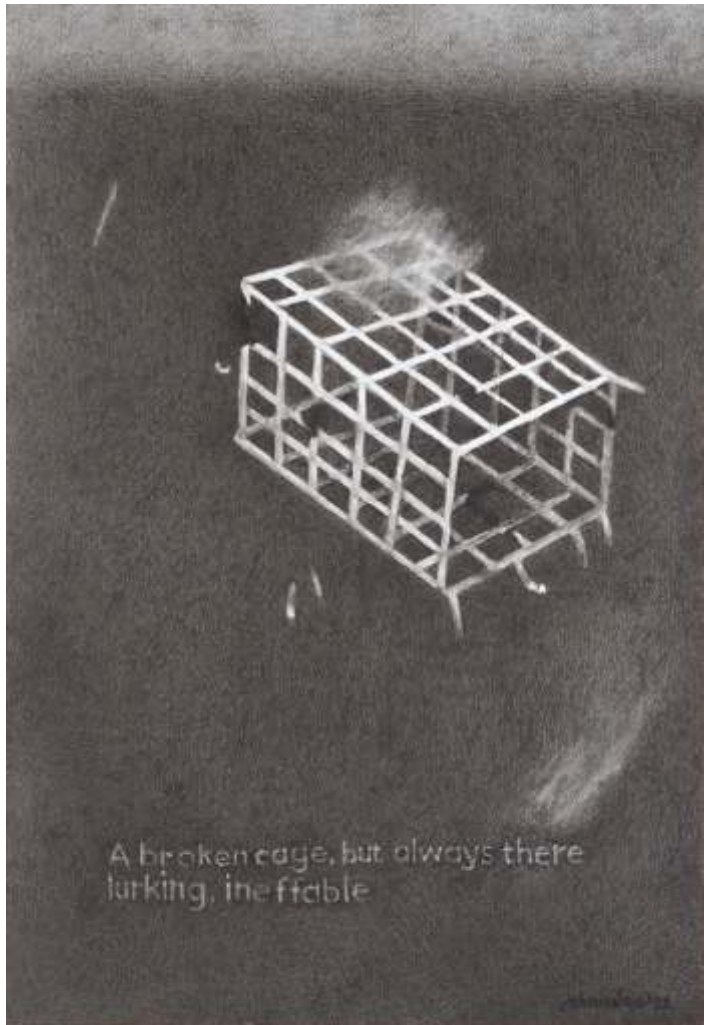
This path, A chronicle of those
who walked never to return

Ref No. : C1222

Watercolour on 300 gsm
Canson Paper
16.5 x 11.7 in I 2022

Ref No. : C1223

Watercolour on 300 gsm
Canson Paper
16.5 x 11.7 in I 2022



CHHATRAPATI DUTTA

(b.1964)

Ref No. : C1237

The Shedding of one tree into three and the ensuing saga

Watercolour & Charcoal on fabriano paper

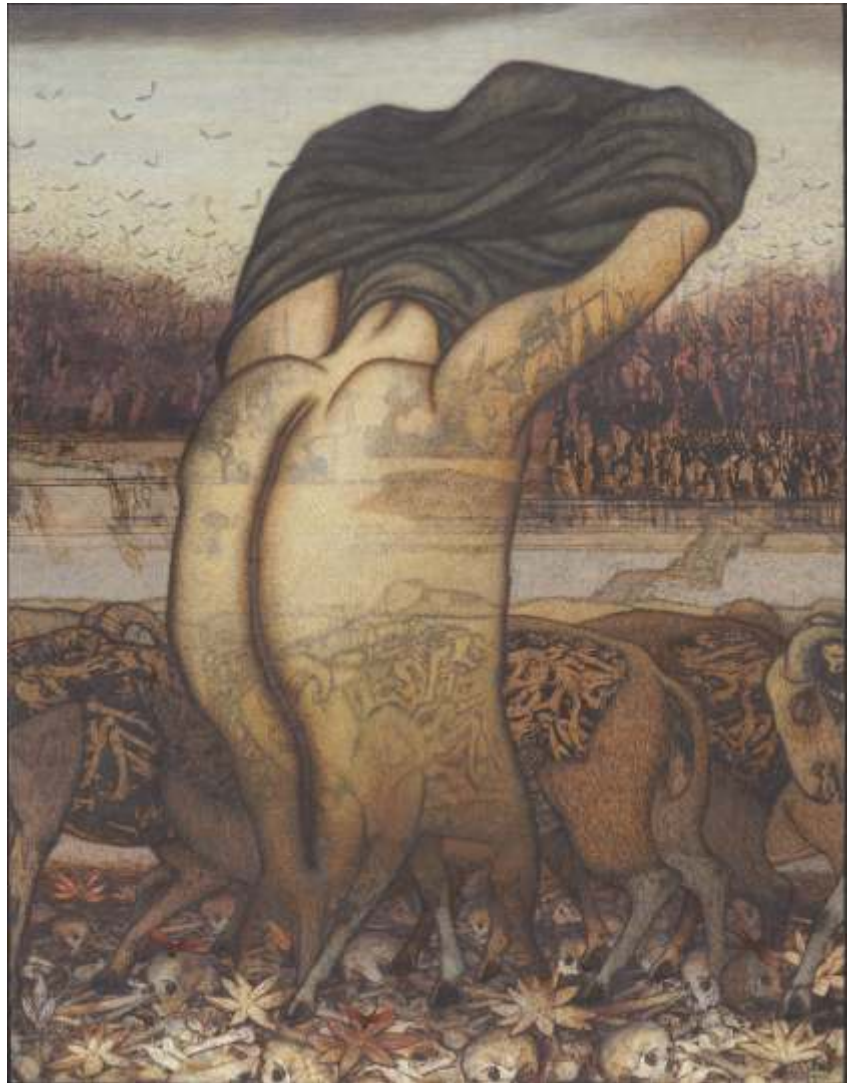
19.5 x 15 in I 2022



Ref No. : C1236

An Attempt at Unravelling the Past
Transfer & Mixed Media on Board

60 x 48 in I 2022



CHITTROVANU MAJUMDAR

(b.1956)



Ref No. : C1214

Acrylic on Canvas
48 x 84 in | 2022

DEBANJAN ROY
(b.1975)

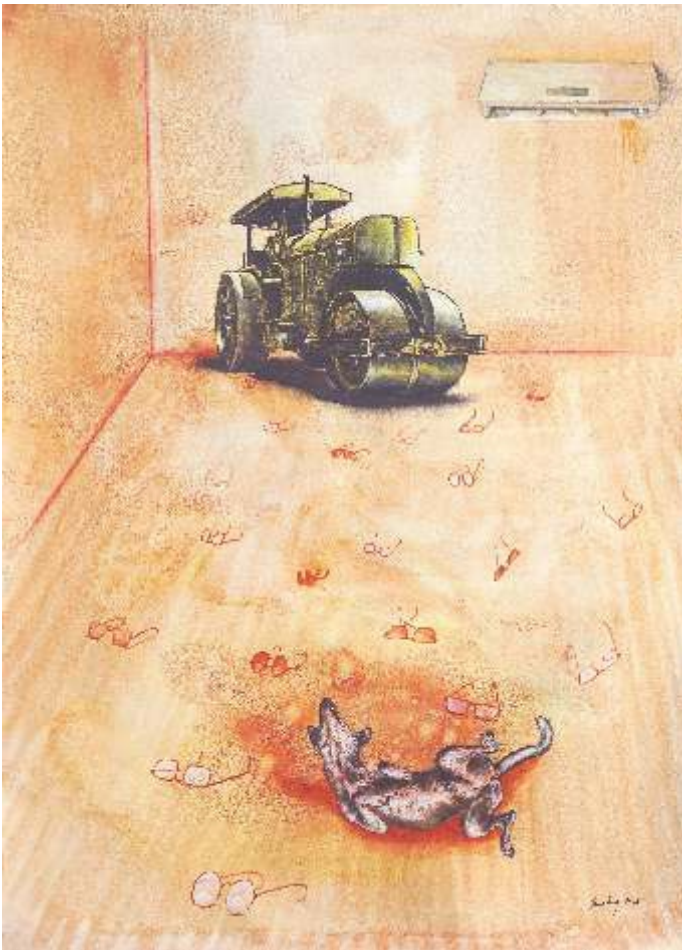


Ref No. : C1239

The Men with her shadow
Painted Fiber Glass
18 x 24 x 30 in | 2022

DEBRAJ GOSWAMI

(b.1973)



Ref No. : C1216

Multiple Choice
Acrylic & Charcoal on
Canson Paper
30 x 22 in | 2022

Ref No. : C1215

Hide & Seek
Acrylic & Charcoal on
Canson Paper
30 x 22 in | 2022



JAYA GANGULY

(b.1958)

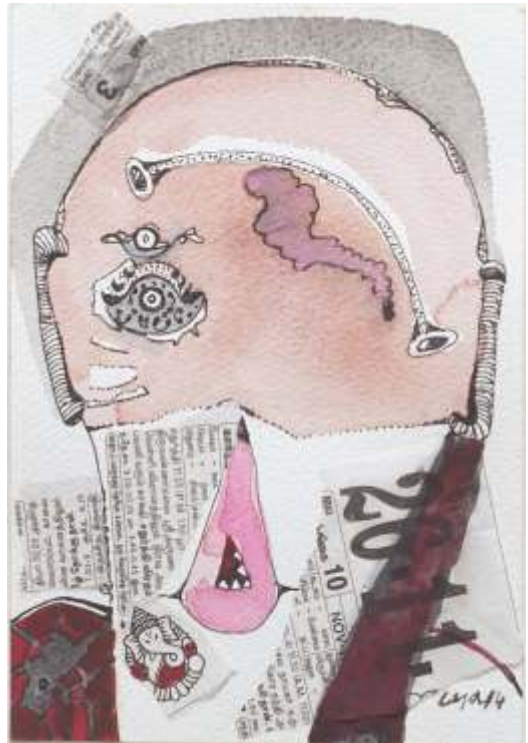
Ref No. : C1225

Mixed Media
9 x 6 in | 2014



Ref No. : C1226

Mixed Media
9 x 6 in | 2014



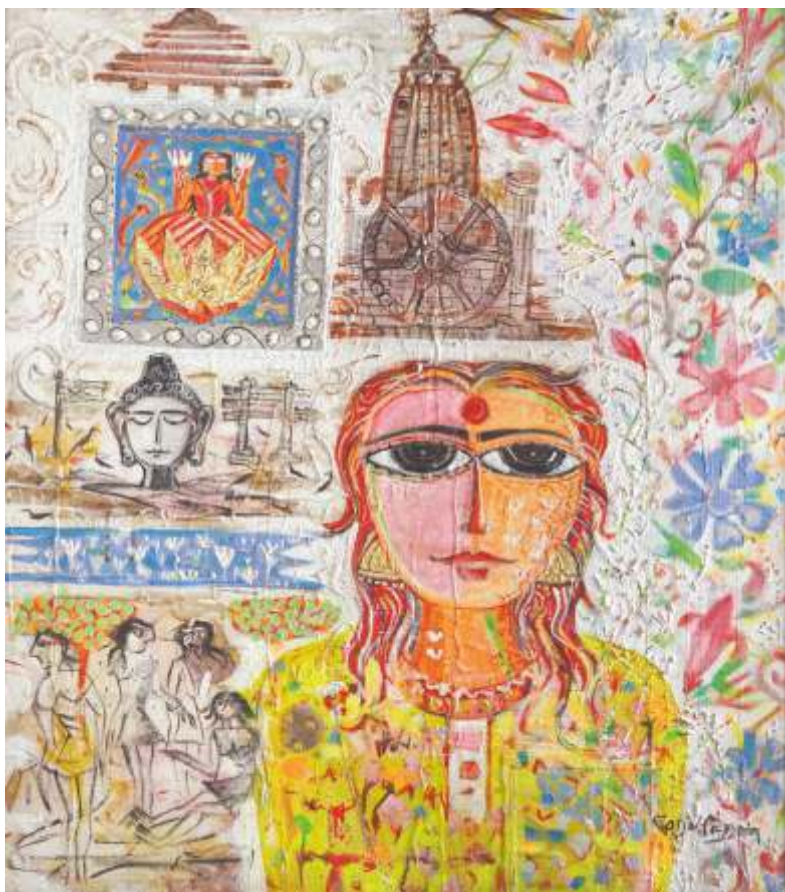
Ref No. : C1227

Mixed Media
9 x 6 in I 2014



K. MURALIDHARAN

(b.1954)



Ref No. : C1217

Harmony
Mixed Media on Canvas
40 x 36 in
2022

KRISHEN KHANNA

(b.1925)



Ref No. : 5420

The Tuba Master

Bronze

24 x 14 x 14 in

Edition - 7/9

MRINAL KANTI GAYEN

(b.1971)



Ref No. : C1221

Rhythm - III

Bronze

14 x 23 x 17 in | 2022



Ref No. : C1220

Rhythm - II

Bronze

9.5 x 20 x 20 in | 2022

Ref No. : C1219

Rhythm - I

Bronze

22 x 17 x 15 in 2022



P.R. NARVEKAR

(1950-2021)



Ref No. : 5475

Musician

Charcoal on Paper
23 x 19 in 2003



Ref No. : 5377

Mother & Child
Oil on Canvas
48 x 36 in I2008

PANKAJ PANWAR

(b.1961)



Ref No. : C1233

From Lockdown Diary Series
Mixed Media on Paper
5.25 x 8.5 in | 2020



Ref No. : C1234

From Lockdown Diary Series
Mixed Media on Paper
8 x 11 in | 2021

Ref No. : C1231

From Lockdown Diary Series
Mixed Media on Paper
7 x 7 in I 2020



Ref No. : C1232

From Lockdown Diary Series
Mixed Media on Paper
6 x 6 in I 2022



Ref No. : C1235

From Lockdown Diary Series
Mixed Media on Paper
7 x 7 in



PARTHA PRATIM DEB

(b.1943)



Ref No. : C1182

Darker Side
Acrylic on Canvas
36 x 24 in I 2021



Ref No. : C1181

Brighter Side
Acrylic on Canvas
36 x 24 in I 2022

SAMINDRANATH MAJUMDAR

(b.1966)



Ref No. : C1229

The Road Not Taken
Acrylic on Canvas
69 x 69 in | 2022



Ref No. : C1230

West Land (Forgotten Martyrs)
Acrylic and Silver Foil on Canvas
36 x 84 in I 2022

SAMIR AICH

(b.1957)

Ref No. : C1218

Mixed Media on Mount Board
10 x 21 in | 2021



Ref No. : C0981

Pen & Ink, Conte & Dry Pastel on Paper
21 x 30 in I 2021



SUBRATA BISWAS

(b.1972)



Ref No. : C1228

*Man is born free
...but everywhere he is in chain*

Ceramic
22.5 x 22.5 x 3 in
2022



Ref No. : C1224

Signature of civilization

Ceramic

50 x 20 x 23 in

2022

TAPAS BISWAS

(b.1972)

Ref No. : C0920

Banaras

Bronze

13.5 x 41 x 16 in





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