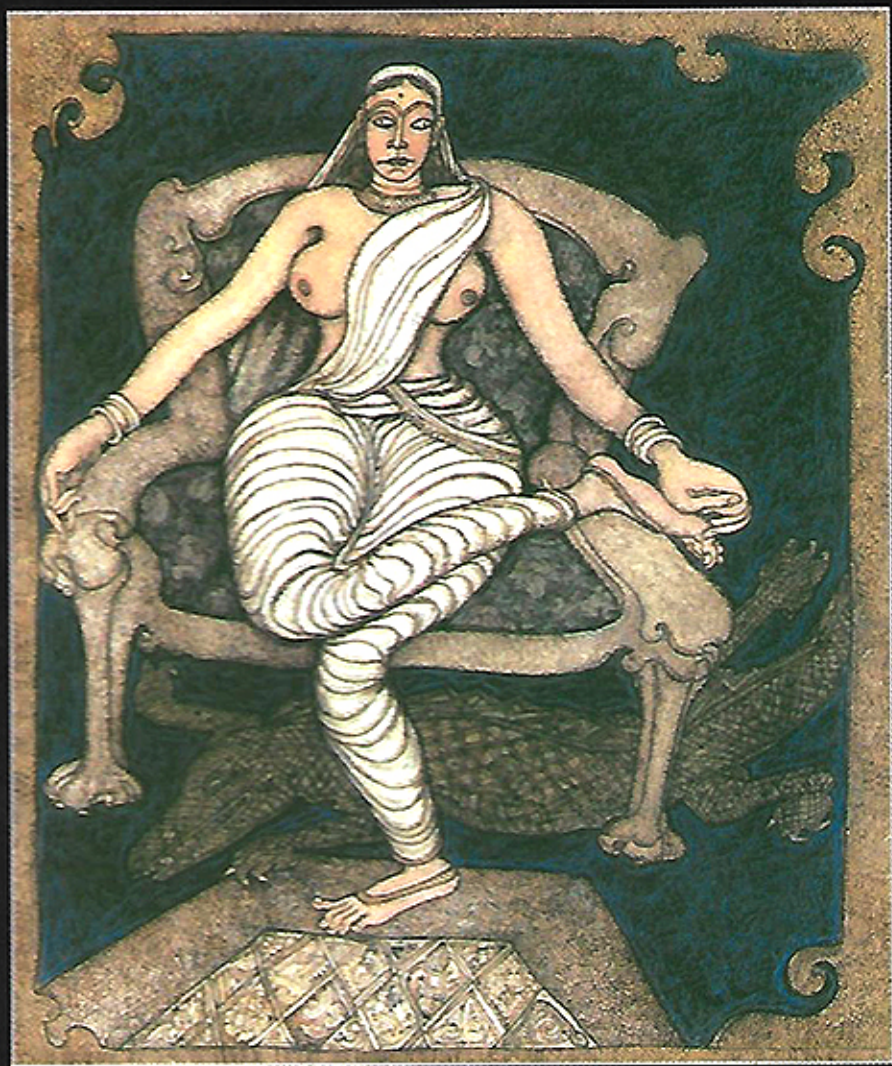
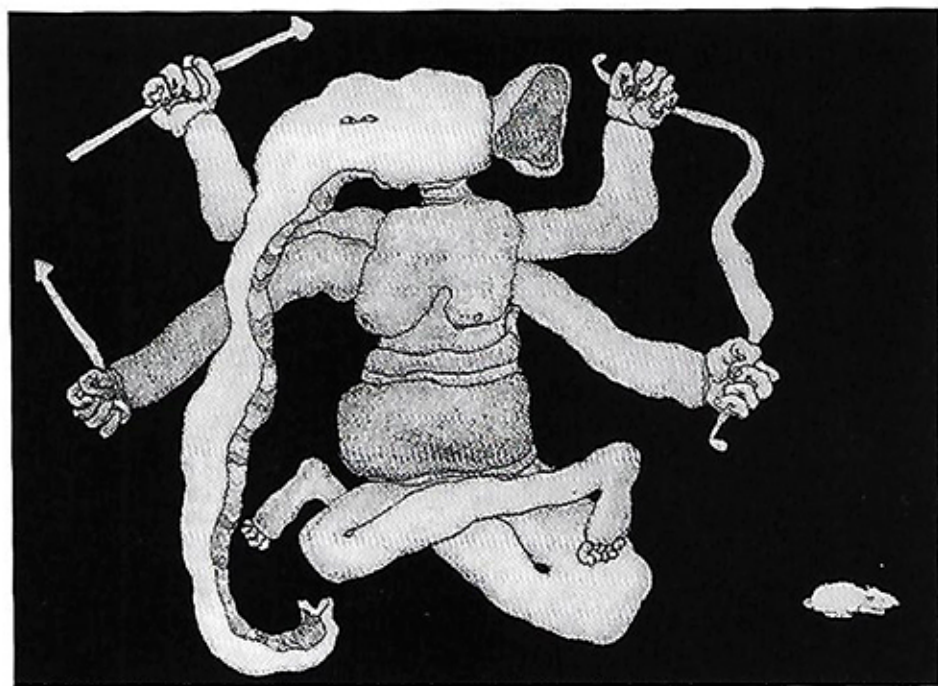


JOGEN CHOWDHURY



Contemporary Monograph Series

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Fighter Ganapati, 1977

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JOGEN CHOWDHURY

Text : Sandip SARKAR

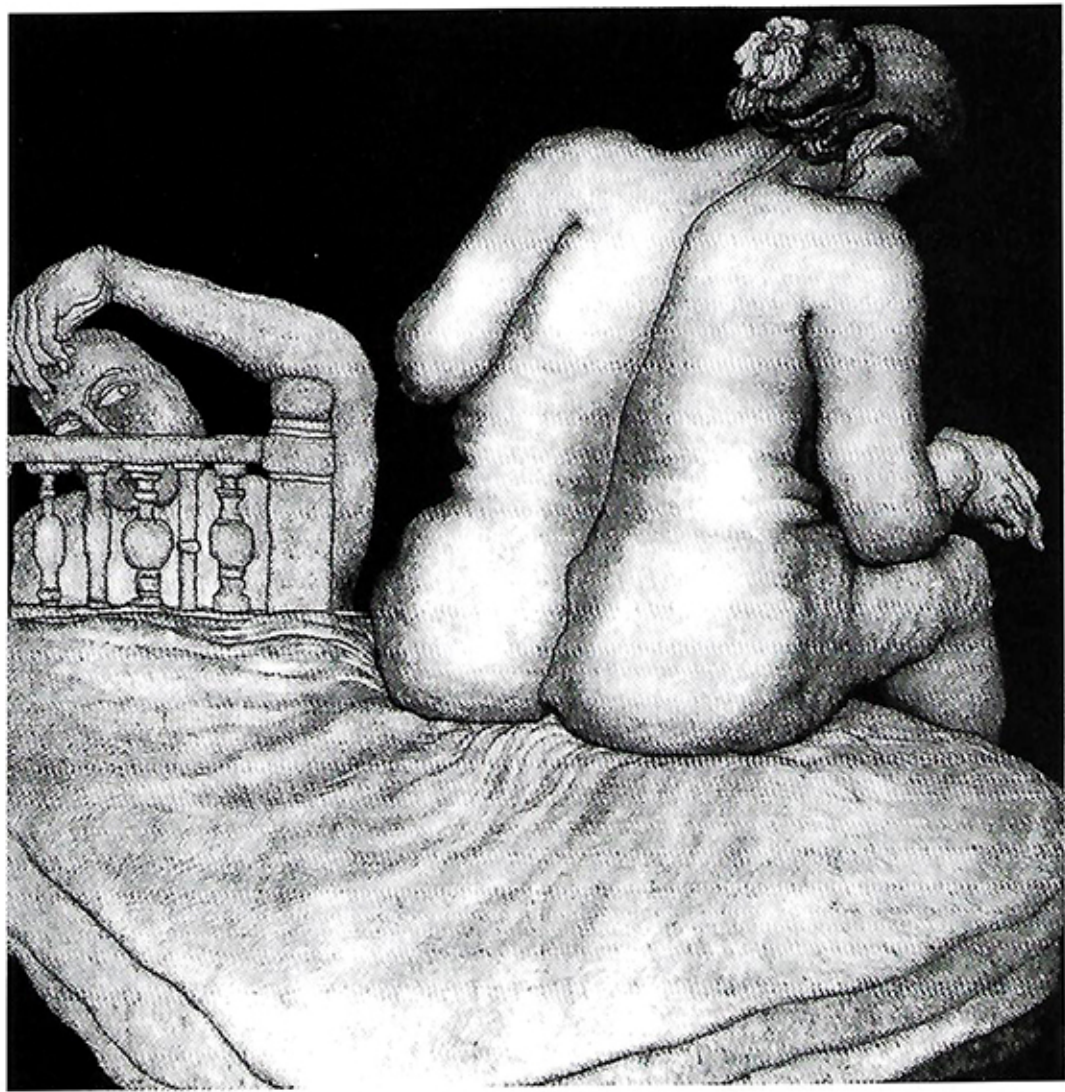
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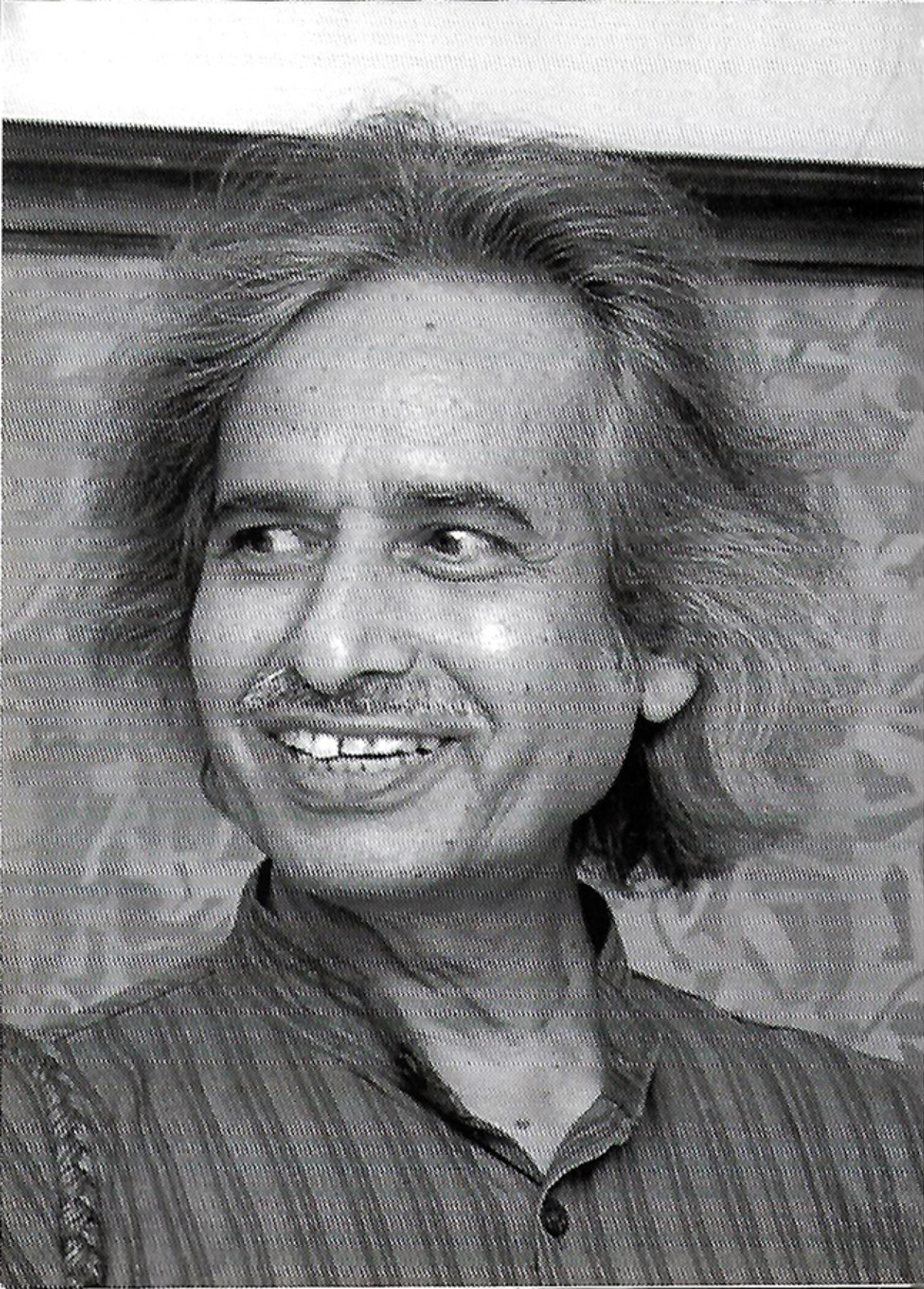
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Cover : Her silver throne, 2000





Jogen Chowdhury the Superrealistic Painter



Jogen Chowdhury was born on 16th February, 1939 in Doharpara village, Kotalipara region of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in undivided India. He belongs to the Vedic Brahmin clan who had migrated from North India during the medieval period after the decline of Vajrayan Buddhism. By then the invading Muslim rules had begun to settle down in Bengal and encourage regional culture. The Vedic's started the process of Sanskritization again to offset the influence of Buddhism that had percolated to the grassroot level in Eastern India during the Pala period. The clan became famous for establishing Sanskrit Schools-Tolas-that taught sanskrit grammar, linguistic, poetry,



The refugee girl (Sealdah station), 1960

poetics, the vedas and philosophy. The members of the clan conducted the priestly functions for the deity also. The greatest figure to emerge from the clan was the Vaishnava saint Shree Chaitanya who with his egalitarian philosophy of bhakti (devotion) spread the message of love and peace through kirtana (devotional hymns), dance (Gauria Nritya) and drama (Jatra). His movement helped in developing and spreading standard spoken Bengali throughout the entire region. Before Rabindranath Tagore no one had equaled Shree Chaitanya's total influence on the life and culture of this vast area.

Apart from the educational and priestly duties Jogen's forefathers gradually started to acquire landed property and soon were able to move into the folds of the landlord gentry class. They were given the aristocratic 'Chowdhury' title. Incidentally painter Bijan is Jogen's cousin. The family has produced a poet like Namita, a sitarist like the late Pandit Deepak and a stage actors like Tarit.

In the 20th century the vedics were able to yield a host of first rate painters and sculptors. They have also contributed to the mainstream of Indian modern art as Jogen and Bijan. The names of Madhav Bhattacharya in sculpture, Bikash Bhattacharya and Shuvaprasanna in painting come to mind.

From 1939 to 1947 Jogen spent his childhood in the rural atmosphere of peace and tranquility. Suddenly the politics of violence stormed into his world of play and dream. The family was uprooted and driven out. Jogen can never forget the journey by a overcrowded steamer and train from Faridpur to Sealdah station, Kolkata. The first few days of living on the platform was like spending a season in hell. The jostling crowds of passengers

getting on and off the trains at all hours were like a herd of wild elephant trampling with utter disregard to the displaced persons self-respect and privacy. An uncle came and rescued the family and took them to his police quarters. In 1951 Jogen's family moved into a refugee colony in Dhakuria, South Kolkata. Here they went through great hardship. In the family of six there was only one earning member. With utmost difficulty Jogen finished his studies, passed School Final and entered Government College of Art, Kolkata.

From a nightmarish existence his life mellowed down to a beautiful dream. After passing out with flying colours from the College, he worked as an art teacher in Howrah Government School. After a brief stint he joined the Weaver's Service Centre as a textile designer. In 1965 he received the French Government Scholarship for higher studies in Ecole Des Beaux Arts and William Hayters Atelier 17 in Paris. During his stay in France, he toured Western Europe and Egypt. In 1966 he was awarded the Prix-le France de la Jeune Peinture Paris, one of ten among 500 competitors. After his return he continued with Weavers Service Centre Kolkata. He was later transferred to Madras. From there in 1972 he joined the staff of President of India as the curator of Art Treasures in the Palace. In 1987 he joined Visva Bharati University as Professor of painting in Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan and moved on to becoming its Principal before retiring. He is one of the most widely travelled artist who has toured within and outside the country as participant artist or jury member of National and International art exhibitions.

His Paintings

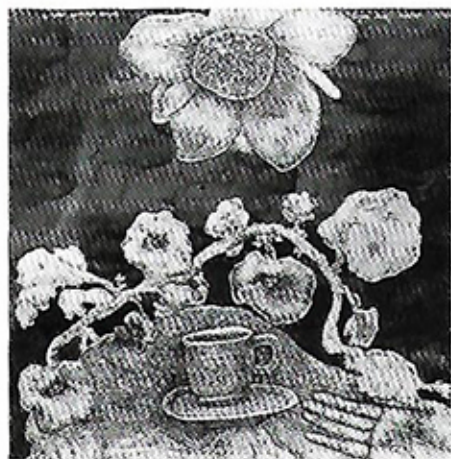
Jogen joined the Government College of



Art & Craft, Calcutta when the rift between nationalistic art and westernized art was a thing of the past. With Jamini Roy's successful conceptualize action, modernity in the Indian context had been spelt out, by not only by Roy but Rabindranath Tagore as well. Since 1940s artists of the 'Calcutta Group' (founded 1943) and PAG, Bombay (established 1946) tried to predict trends in modernity in a post colonial situation. After independence many members of the two groups traveled to the West and started a search for a significant form in the Indian context. The debate about the Indianess of Indian art died down among serious artists, but it was chronic disease in major art institutions.

In premiere art colleges in the three metropolitan port cities, the tradition of Naturalistic academic art was imparted with strictness and grace. Jogen learnt the tricks and nuances of Academic Naturalistic art. He excelled in black and white drawing, transparent watercolours and the techniques of oil paintings portrait, nude study, still life - the whole shooting match. Yet he felt like a caged bird with pruned wings yearning for the sky. There were the vivid memories of his childhood and the total disruption that happened during his boyhood and early youth. The experience of violent upheaval on the personal level was being magnified continually in Korea, Congo, Cuba, Vietnam, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and still later spreading like wild fire in West Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The total global face of

terror worries him. His problem from his student days had been to find ways and means of making valid pictorial statements of the total situation. This would then project his sensibility and feeling in pure visual terms. The East Bengal refugees who lived on the Sealdah station platform for two decades before being re-settled,



Reminiscence of a dream, 1970

attracted Jogen, he identified with them. During his college days he would go there and draw them. The sense of at-one-ment was in a way his atonement for escaping from their shared plight.



Couple III, 1984

Throughout the country the search significant personal style and form was taking rapid strides and meaningful discoveries were continuously being made. He contributed his share of achievements. Jogen's has whole heartedly tried to negate Naturalistic Academic art from his work. He has elongated and distorted images and imagery long held with almost sacred awe and re-arranged them completely in his own way. He has always favoured figurative work. A strange thing happened when he was in Paris. He had lived in France from the end of 1965 to the beginning of 1968, the very period when American Abstract Expression had ushered in a sunami of non-figurative abstract paintings. He saw what was happening and was overwhelmed and benumbed. He had revolted against Academic Naturalism but this chaos was too much and left him traumatized. For a couple of months he could not work. He recovered and painted some paintings without any figures. He only brought back one such painting of red and yellow 'gong tormented sea'. This work imparted the feeling of a shipwrecked/sailor who knows his hour is drawing to a close.

In 1972 he invited me to spend a weekend with him. He was stationed with his wife in a house in the President's sprawling compound that had the clock tower. Every half hour the clock would strike the time loudly and leave an invited fresher a bit nervous. Imagine looking at one wall that had an abstract work on one wall and on the other a pen and black ink drawing of an eagle preying on the breast of beautiful woman. The composition is done from a bird's eye view. This emphasizes the violence in the work and decreases the erotic suggestion to the minimum. This



A portrait in smile, 1980

drawing was his vehement reaction against the atrocities done during the Bangladesh war and perhaps subdued remembrance of the bloody riots that uprooted millions during the partition of India.

Jogen's life is a success story a pauper to prince comedy that has tragic episodes. The family lived in a hut has been transformed into a large building with

separate apartments for each brother and sister. He has now a large bungalow in Santiniketan and an apartment in Delhi. The small hut was the place where an insulted and humiliated boy dreamt of becoming a painter. His talent was recognized early and doors seemed to open all around. The artistic streak in the family made it easier for Jogen to face the stark realities of poverty. In his case creativity, there has been a defence reaction of psychological pressure.

I remember a conversation I had with him recorded in August 1, 1975. He told me: "The most acute problem that an artist faces today is not being able to identify with society. In Europe I felt that this was the problem that made the artist restless. Of course there he is an accepted outsider which is not the case. For here art is not a vital necessity. Society is stratified in such a fashion that an artist can only serve a section of the people. A city-bred artist serves the neo-rich. Today an artist is only interested in the superficial aspects of art and sooner speak of colour and form but hardly ever of life."

The patterns of our life is changing due to urbanization and technological innovations. As much of this comes from the West, we tend to be apologetic and feel inferior. As a result of change in social organization individuals go through a traumatic experience and find it difficult to adjust their lives and values accordingly. The elite feel the urge to copy not western technology but European

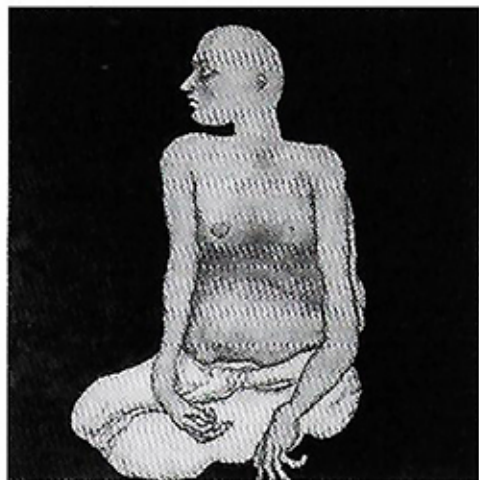
manners and customs. So you have a semi-feudal society based on agriculture. You also have an society trying to approximate western affluence. Both these parts are acting as catalytic agents for each other. In the rural sector the role of the traditional artisan-craftsman survives in a rather distorted fashion. In the urban sector the artist is at best an entertainer or what he fashions is more applied art than not. It is in the context of colonial and post-colonial history that the achievements of artists from Abanindranath to Ramkinkar should be judged. Our failures are due to the inherent crisis of the period. Trees reach out to the sky but have their roots in the soil. Unfortunately our internationalism is like hot-house plants. Our movements in art is totally unconnected with life. Modern Indian art, but for the rare exceptions like Jamini Roy, has not produced anything that is significant.'

In the formative period Jogen was an iconoclast who was determined to bypass Academic Naturalism. He was not even interested in the various movements that started with Neo-classicism of David and Ingres and continues this day in forms of post modernism. He has given his students unlimited freedom to experiment with form, new material and medium. He had experimented with very personal imageries and form that would genuinely express his experience. Very early in his life he began to distance himself from easel and oil paintings. Jamini Roy went through the same process. Roy's paintings have either a muralesque quality or are akin to Byzantine mosaics but Jogen has steered clear even such straits. He has continually searched for strange image, imagery and indeed genuine form that would express his experience in an unique way.

In his early works Jogen drew people sleeping on footpaths or huddled together on railway platforms. These drawings,



Portrait of a retired civil servant, 1977



Man sitting on the floor, 1981

sometimes done with pen and ink or sometimes with colour were realistic portrayals of the refugee influx. There was a strange atmosphere of holocaust and black ink, pastel or charcoal intensified a sense of horror. At home Jogen had to delineate these drawings and paintings using a kerosene lantern even at daytime so these works seem cramped and dimly visible. The linear

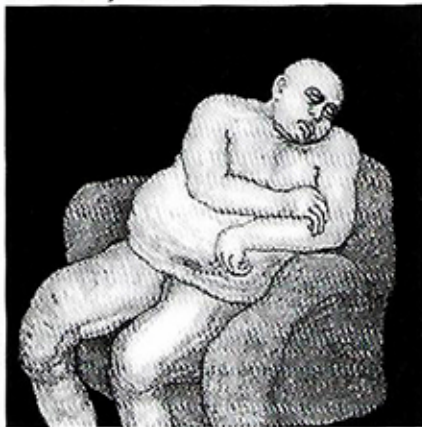
contours are taut bundles of bitterness. The faces of these men and women are overshadowed with depression and unbearable suffering has turned some into depraved maniacs. The merciless fashion in which Jogen pursued his theme, points to a sadistic streak that seemed to recur. He tries to hide it but without much success. This series led him to paint grim individuals who are unwilling to endure the pain that life inflicts. This fatalistic trend crosses the danger level in his studies of prostitutes, here the will to survive falters.

Later everything that Jogen did took on a deep symbolic tone. He is a superb oil painter as is evident by his self-portrait at the "Youngman" show. The drawing, the brush strokes and distribution of colours in contrast are perfect. Of late he has tried his hand in oils but these paintings have not risen to earlier heights. The paintings of the earlier period are full of nervous energy. He had tried to understand whether the passion of Christ has any meaningful semblance to all human suffering.

Then came the Parisian interlude. According to his own testimony he was too young and too confused to be able to adjust. The culture was too great and the non-figurative painting style too outlandish and bewildering. He groped about in the ruins and the creative urge left him. After a time his brush brought the formless void within the great depth of the primordial matter, the dam seemed to burst. He abandoned himself to the onrushing flow.

The few existing paintings of this period tell the story of this struggle. Jogen seems almost clubbed to numbness, but he gathers up remnants of a battered army to make one last effort and the courage paid.

In Paris and other Western cities he visited to see galleries and museums. It then dawned upon him that modern and contemporary meant two different things. Contemporary implied the striving to capture the present before it receded into the past. Modern on the other hand was more inclusive. It indicated an attitude that severed ties with the immediate past but kept the doors open so the fresh air from the relevant past could be adopted without hindrance. This was done not by relegating the present or the future into dark corners. Modernity meant a perfect blend of all meaningful stuff, he had a feeling the poets, writers, artists and composers who made up the modern movement were fast becoming a part of history. Gide, D.H.Lawrence Picasso and Braque were moderns, but they belonged to a different generation and time. He had felt the idea of the post-modern being born even within himself. Later he woke from the trance and entered into the world of figurative painting.



Man of sofa, 1989

In Jogen's painting there are typically Indian faces, he used coloured ink, pastel, black fountain pen ink that he washed to get a golden hue. Living in the Rastrapati Bhavan gave him the opportunity of meeting politicians who wielded power. The encounters included not only Indian leaders but also foreign dignitaries. They were all old men and women, most were obese and some were infirm.

Once he was commissioned to do a portrait of one such corapulant man. He arrived in Jogen's studio at a certain time and

sat for two hours regularly. One day Jogen found something wrong with the face. Suddenly the bigwig whispered something to his valet who ran and fetched the person's dentures in a glass full of water. He has depicted these characters fully clad with Gandhi cap on the head. Sometimes there are suggestion of a face. One of them may be found recoiling like a snake with a rounded pillow in bed attended by a kneeling woman. The follies and foibles of the fat 'Bibis' and 'Babus' feature in many of his works. They appear individually or as couples nude or fully dressed, obese, ravaged by time, old and infirm, they are caged in by their old age. Jogen is prone to use ink, pastel, charcoal and sketch pens to get the desired effect. In one of his masterpieces 'Tiger in a moonlit Night' he has used black fountain pen ink and washed it to get the effect of gold. The nude body underneath has her face turned towards the ground and the reclining tiger watching from the top has a decrepit body. He loves to draw men and women who have wasted and enfeebled bodies worn out with age and infirmities. One can almost hear the footsteps of approaching death. He has done slightly distorted portraits of Bengali faces and bodies that are typical, weathered, eroded and senile, they are living in a sort of vegetative existence. There is a morbid tone in these studies of degeneration. We see a bemused state of people who accept everything even death and defeat with resignation. The treacherous lines on opaque tones of the background trace a sinister but convincing pattern.

He often changes his style abruptly and retreats to the world of fantasy. He thinks of things spiritual and goes back to the innocent world of his childhood. He mellows, as it were, in poetical and pictorial imageries. He refuses to be bracketed with the Indian surrealistic school by not letting his imagination run riot. He consciously chooses his imagery to speak about death



Man & two women, 1989

and decay. There are sick flowers and dead butterflies the usual still-life depicted in a different way, they are thereby invested with symbolical content. He searches for formal harmony that would compensate for spiritual crisis. There is a tendency to move away from the tensions that a fragmented society imposes. Erotic symbols abound, flying pillows with the word



Ganapati, 1976

'Bhalobasa' (Love) written in bold letters, a sausage-like round pillow that reminds one of the phallus, a not so young woman opening her blouse to expose her breasts, a breast turned upward, three fish with a snake on top, apples, flowers and serpents, there is a longing for lost innocence.

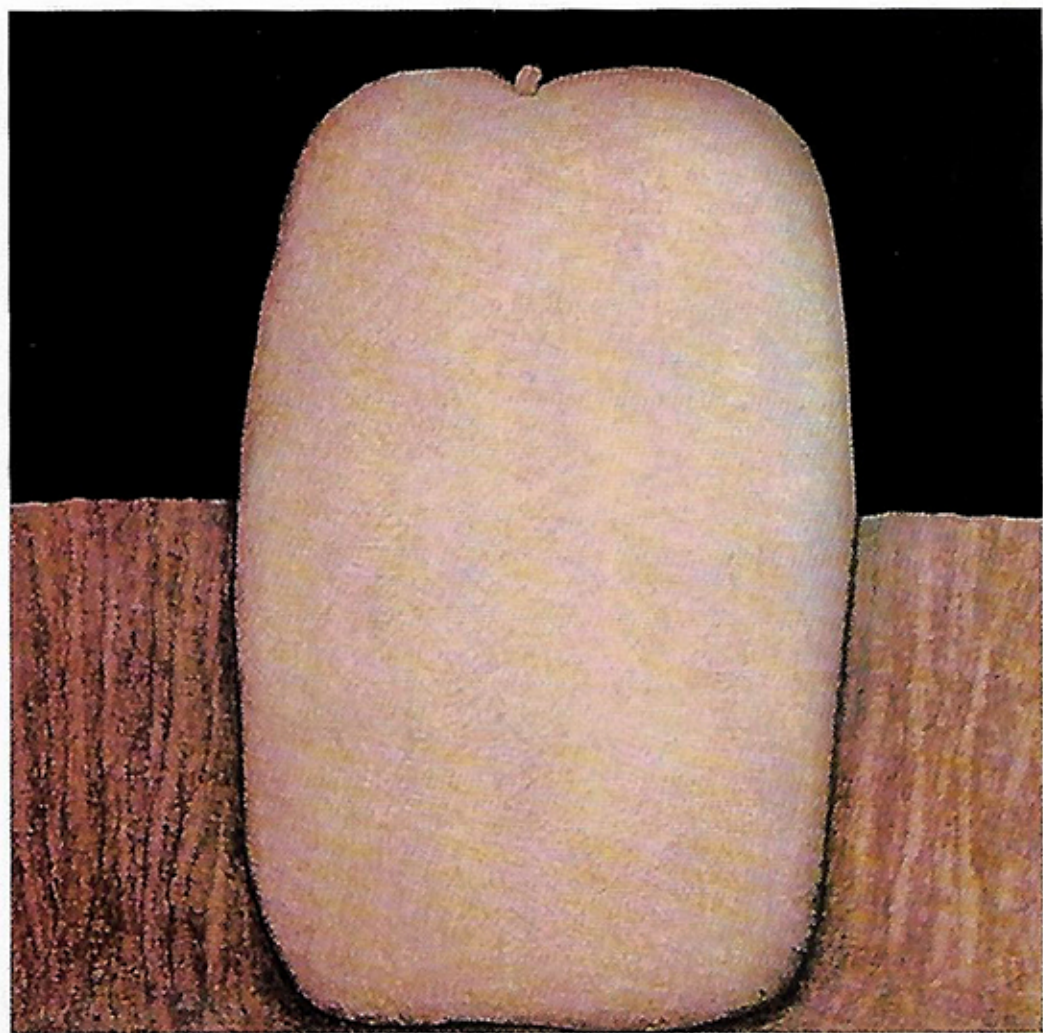
Jogen's work shows that he is imaginative, unconventional and an out and out iconoclast. His pen and ink and mixed media techniques are his own. His three quarter face self-portrait tells us what his self image is like, there is sadness in his eyes, an awareness of the existential situation. He is a serious artists who gives the impression of being a dandy and aesthete.

His 'Ganesha' is almost a masterpiece, done in pen and ink and watercolout. This Ganesh is an hermaphrodite with flesh womanly breast and a pronounced male organ. The outline is done in thin wiry lines that are curly. There is dig at the sensuality and vulgarity of the Indian business community. Because Jogen escapes from the horrors of reality, his fantasy world has a hidden irrationality, he wants to avoid the strain and anxiety and this sometimes pushes off to a child's world of day dreaming. He once told me 'I wonder whether I have taken the right diversion'.

There in lies his greatness.



Sitting lady (nude), 2005

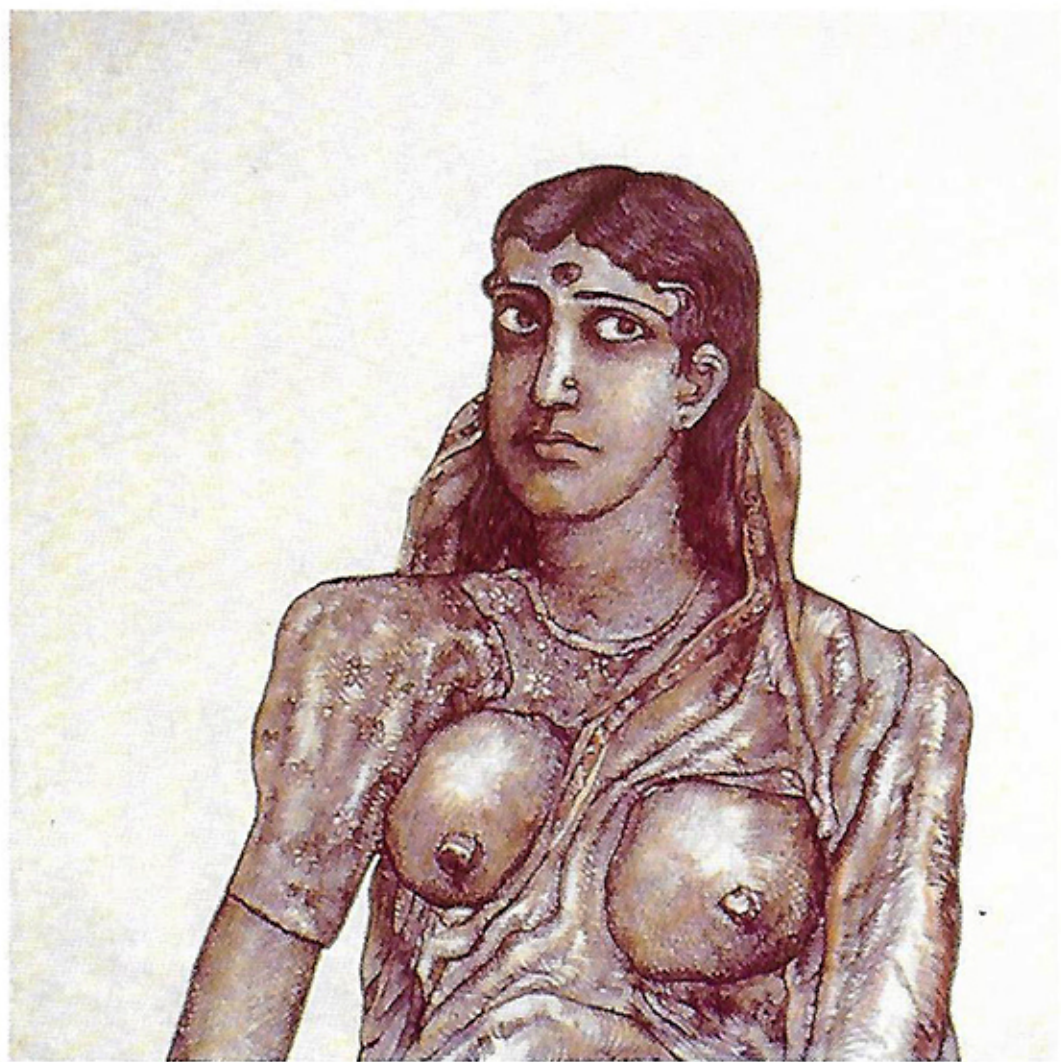




Sunderi, 1977

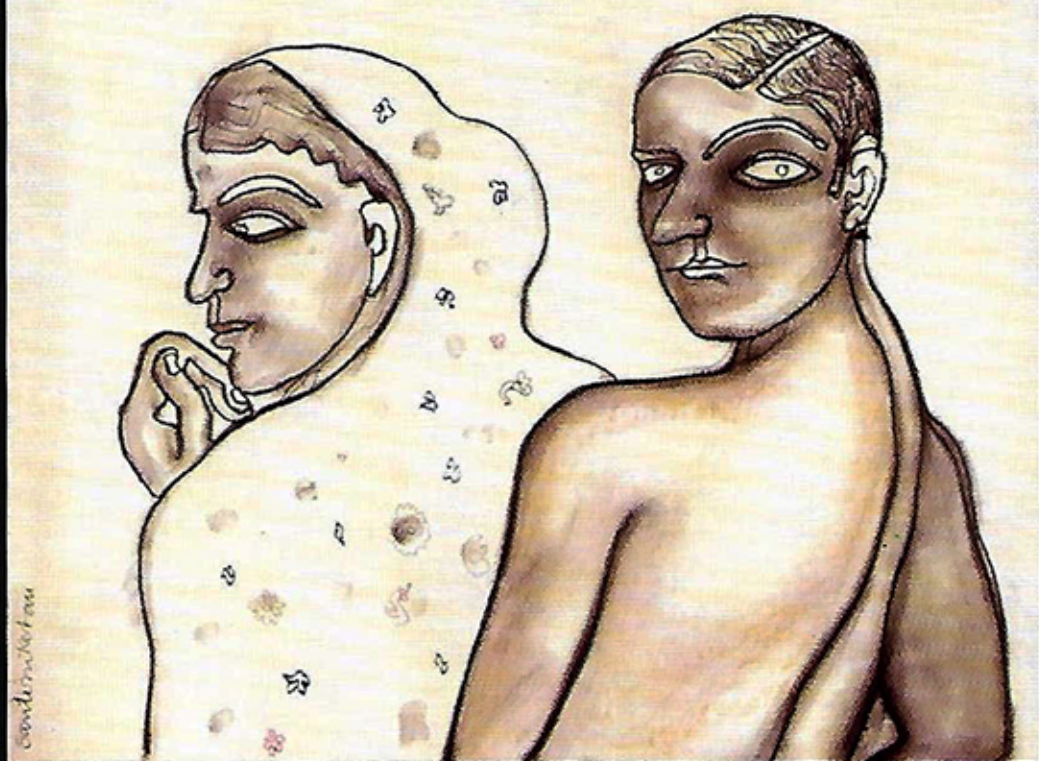
Pigeons, 1961





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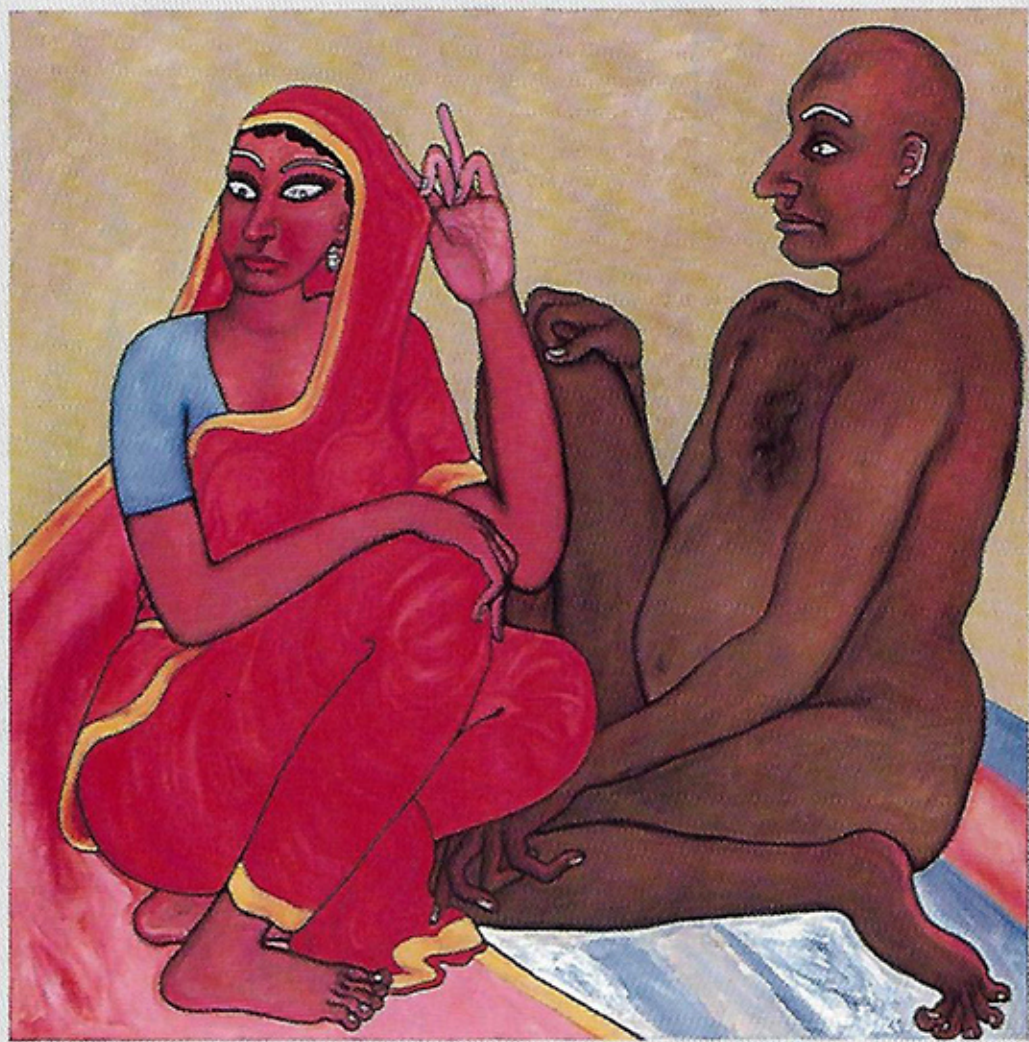
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Couple, 1996



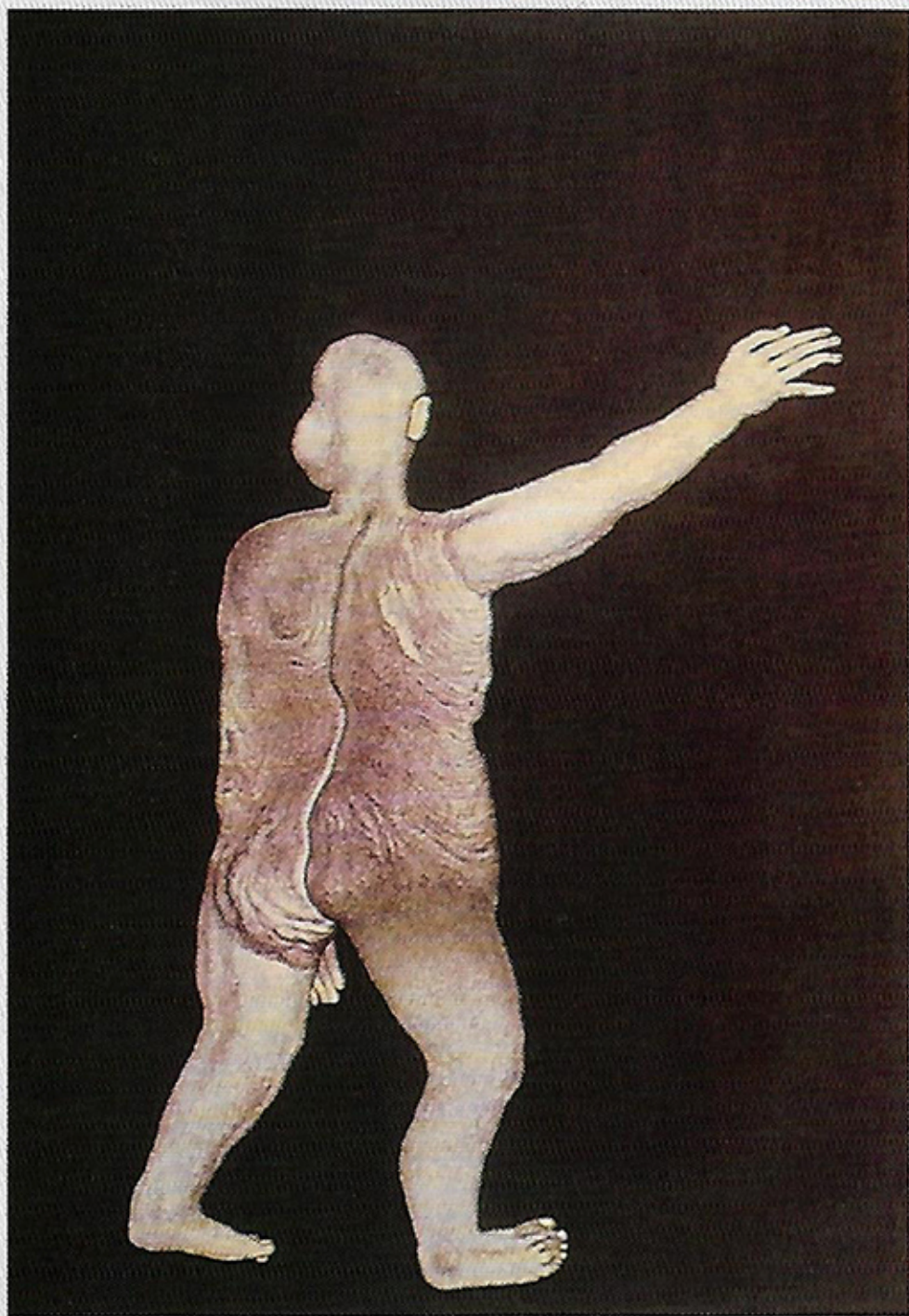
Portrait, 2002



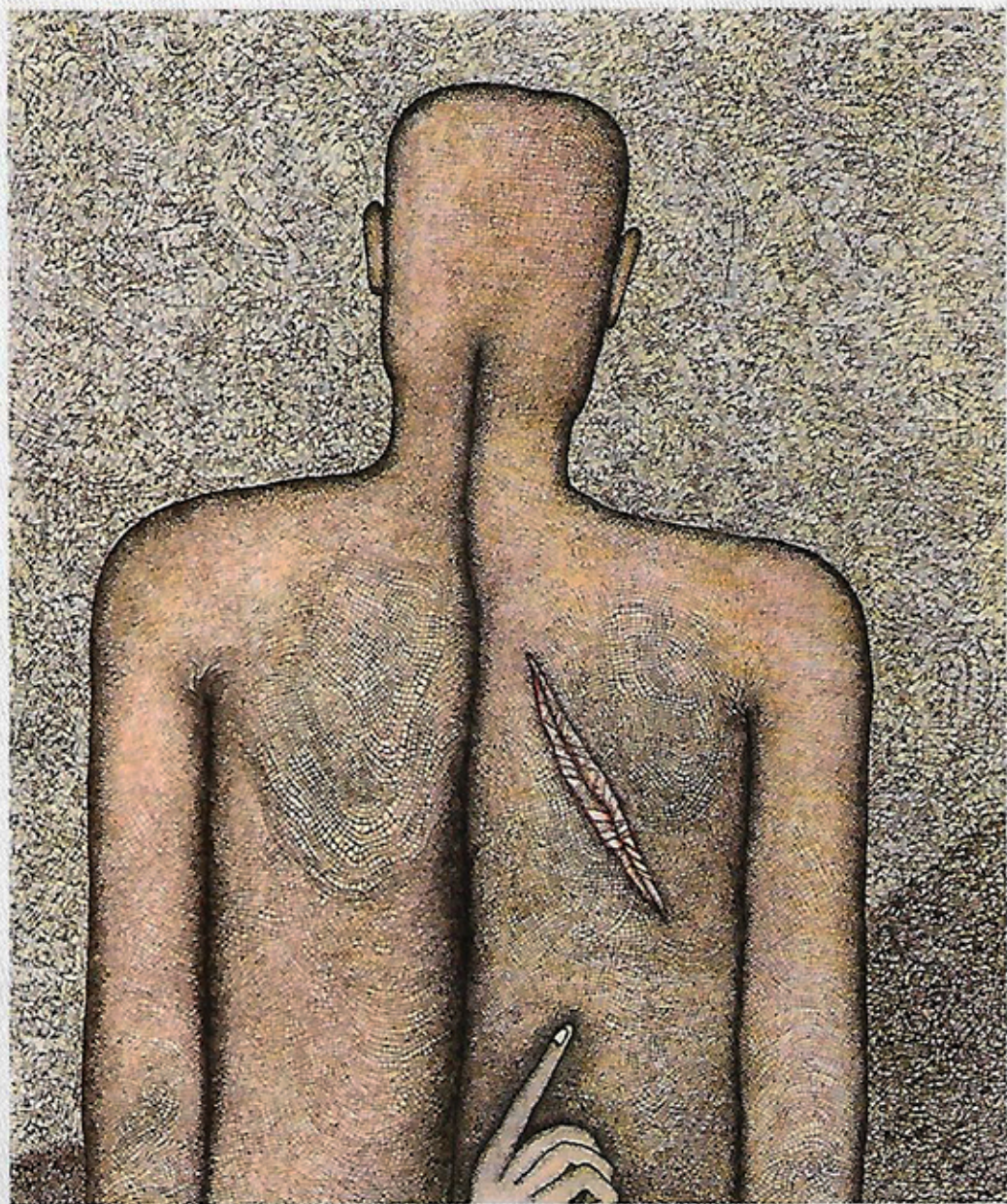


Couple in blue, 1994

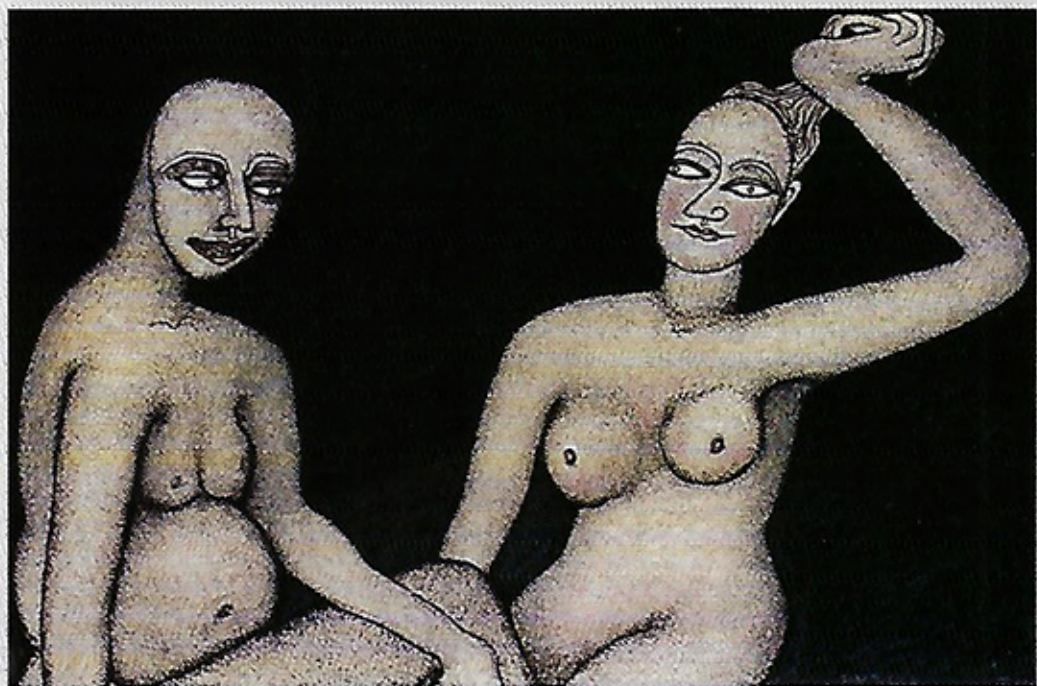


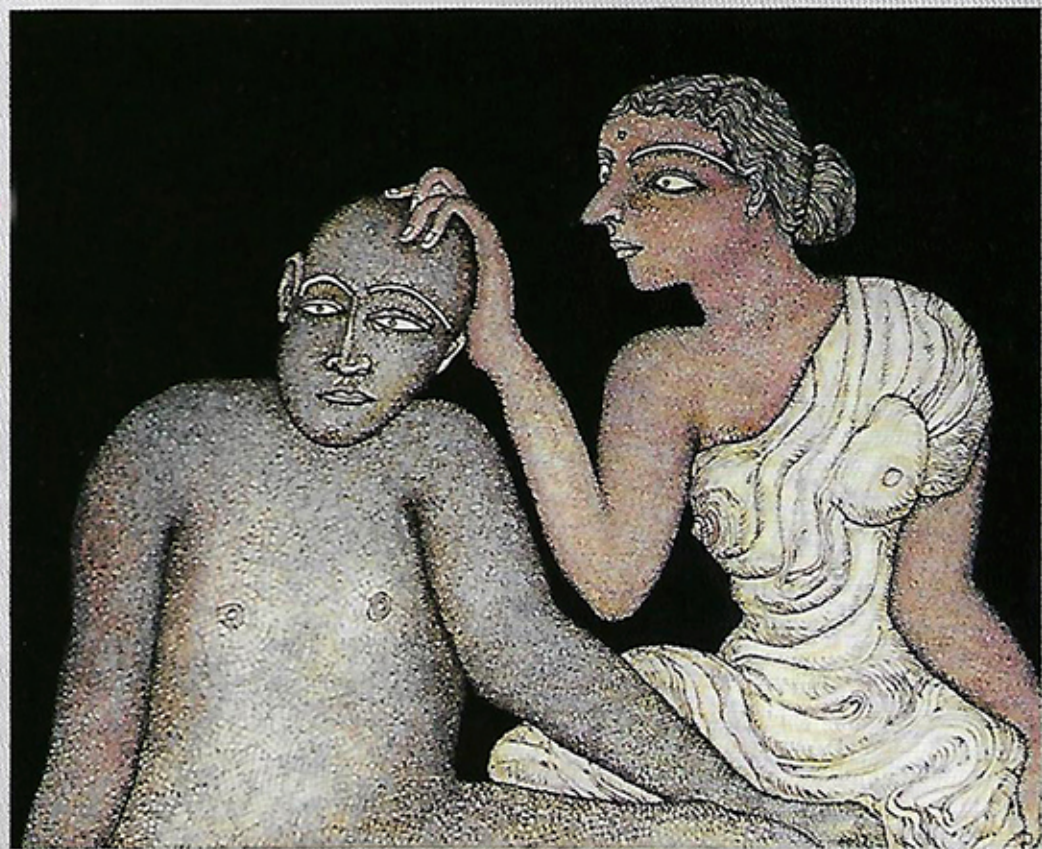


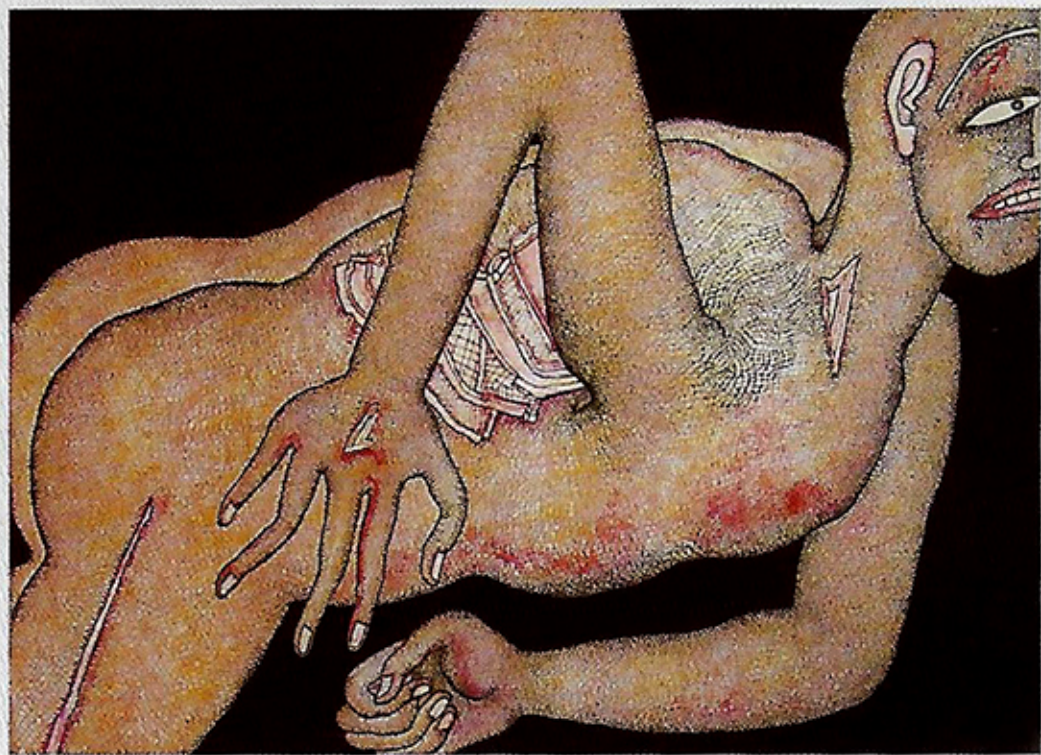
Man (and the black sky), 1980



My wound, 2001

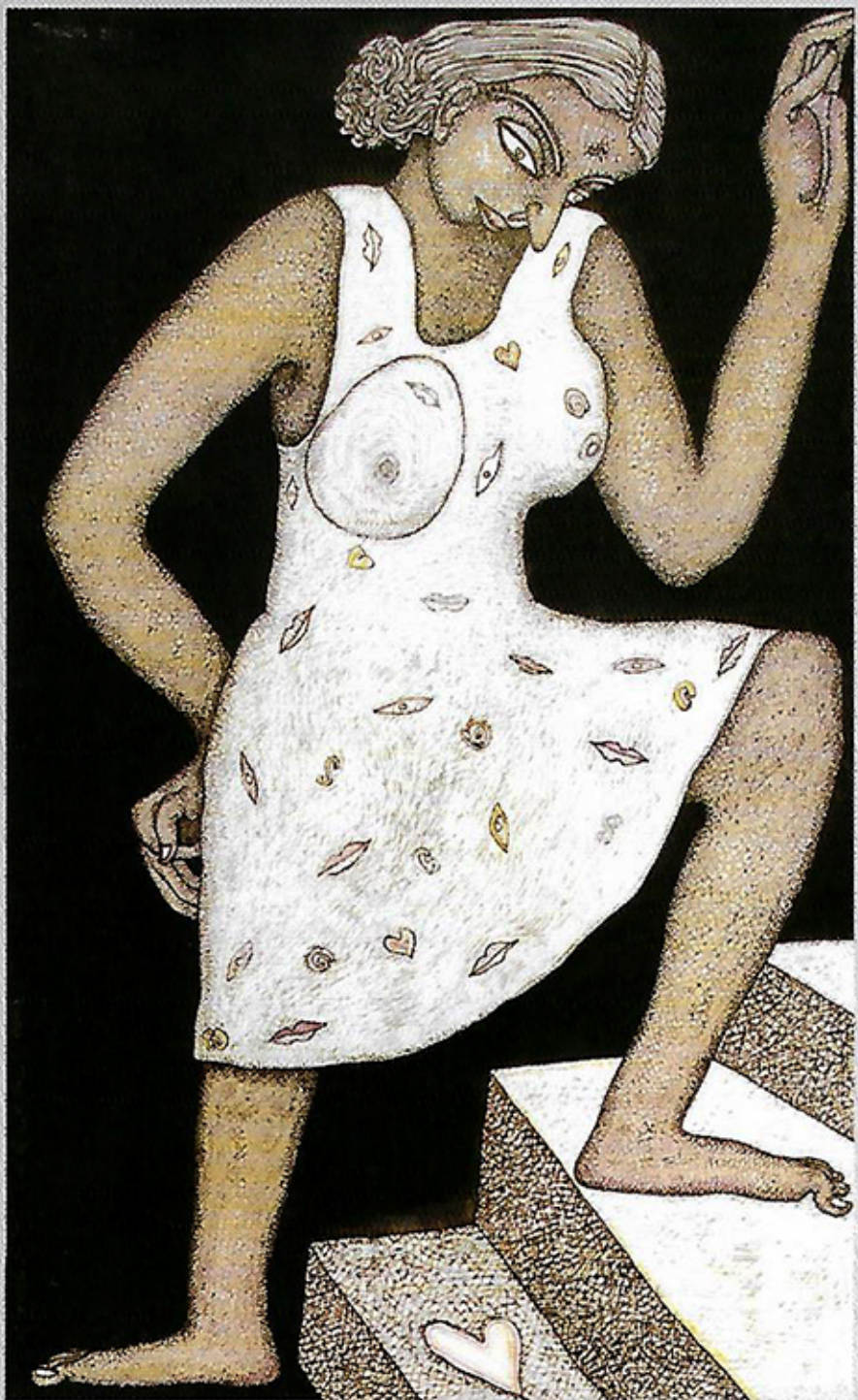








Tiger in moonlit night, 1978



Girl (in love), 2002



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