



SHUVAPRASANNA

EXPRESSION 1971 – 1986

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Asok Mitra
Ralf Oestreich
Sunil Das
Avijit Mazumdar
Mrs Gierlich
Birla Academy of Art and Culture

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Cover : Amphibious. oil on canvas, 23 X 23 cm. 1985



Wrapped 1981. Pencil Drawing, 29 X 45 cm. (p 1)

SHUVAPRASANNA
ASOK MITRA

The conversation eventually settled on the Ray films and finally on Satyajit's *Asani Sanket*. There was praise for its excellences and particularly for Ray's fascination with colour. Someone said toward the end that the fact that the film ended with a statistical statement of how many people the 1943 Famine had killed off was but proof that it had only partly

succeeded in delivering its message in its own language. He had a point.

Painting with its physical limitations as a creative medium has vastly fewer means at its disposal than film. A piece of paper or canvas is expected to deliver its message in all its completeness at one go, with no before or after even to denote the passage of time. (Shuvaprasanna has circumvented this limitation by painting a series on a theme.) What is more, it is

expected to reflect the world of the mind through the world of things seen or mentally visualized and that too on a flat surface. The technical mastery is but the mechanics of entry to that intangible world. It is the mind that must be in command.

That message again must not be didactic or obviously allegorical or allusive or employ recondite and private symbols or images, however pregnant with meaning they may be to painter himself. It must have a certain explicitness and sharing of visual experience to be able to please. The picture must assist in intuitive comprehension of phenomenon and the idea behind it. It must assist to connect different universes, not only of discourse, but of sensory apprehension: the means of which are such components as drawing and form, composition and design, and chief of all colour. Colour could well be the metaphysical key to the whole message, for colour determines the mood of contemplation of the picture itself.

Then again, as in all other forms of creation, there is no point in trying to reproduce what has already been done to perfection. Any such attempt, as we have seen in efforts to 'resuscitate' the Indian tradition like Ajanta or Bagh or Basholi—becomes sterile and academic. On the other hand it is human nature to resist an entirely new experience, for it demands readjustment of established values or a known order of things, whereas part of the worth of a new and good pictorial creation lies in enabling the viewer to see thing in a manner never quite seen before. Seldom is a new creation, even

though it is obviously an 'extension' of tradition, unequivocally and instantly acclaimed. The common instinct is to call it savage or *faux* until it becomes respectable through long wear.

No wonder therefore that epithets like 'beautiful' or 'pretty' have become dirty words in art criticism. The merely 'beautiful' or 'pretty' fails to satisfy. It has been done to perfection before. If the 'beauty' or 'prettiness' should be there it is there more by accident than by design, not certainly as the artist's central quest.

These thoughts, intended more for myself than the reader, I have tried to bear in mind in going over Shuvaprasanna's work such as I have been enabled to see. For, it so happens and indeed as things should be, much of his work is no longer in Calcutta nor even in India, and I am left merely to imagine what they may be like from what little I have seen.

Let me put my cards on the table straightaway. I consider Shuvaprasanna a significant and serious artist, a thoughtful person in search of a vision that unites phenomenon and makes a unity of it, and not dilettante or a painter who paints compliant to his patron's room decor or hops from one current mode or mood to another or likes to be mentioned as affecting this European master or the other. He is in serious business and not the fashion trade, grappling to put on canvas what his mind comprehends as the reality of his existence.

Few persons have moulded the thinking

and sensibility of my generation more profoundly than T.S. Eliot with his poetry and prose. I shall content myself with three short quotations which seem to me of cardinal relevance to Shuvaprasanna's oeuvre.

The first is from Eliot's essay on the *Metaphysical Poets* (1921).

Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think: but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences always forming new wholes.

The second is from his essay on *Hamlet* (1919):

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion ...

The third is again from *the Metaphysical Poets*.

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility,

must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.



Illusion. 1983. Oil on canvas, 38 X 35 cm. (p 2)

The first time I visited Shuvaprasanna at his house I was led into a small enclosed room giving on the staircase. There was an assortment of his and his wife Sipra's work but two large canvases held my eye. One was a portrait of Sipra in the nude, the point about which was that there was nothing that was merely 'pretty' or obviously 'beautiful' about it (although Sipra herself is a very beautiful person). The other was of a Spanish toro, strong, arched and massive, caught in a stance of about to charge, tense and quivering, at its invisible toreador. A tribute to Picasso, I thought; and, sure enough I was gratified to be told, it was. Something that I thought answered rather directly and perhaps a trifle too explicitly to Eliot's 'objective correlative', even as Somnath Hore's miniature sculptures of his animals in travail are but a direct reflection of the

human condition and its travail. In short, an 'exact equivalence'.

In a recent exhibition organized by the Ladies' Study Group of Calcutta we saw what may be called student exercises by such eminent artists. They gave the viewer the right introduction into the process of their transition from competent academic draughtsmanship to individual talent and a personal philosophy. In Shuvaprasanna's case I have not seen any of his student exercises but stumbled straight on to 1971 when he was about 24 and, if one might use the phrase, already arrived at a uniquely personal idiom in his Lament series. These were slides which Shuvaprasanna was good enough to project on the wall. Slides which were more a journey through hell than purgatory and I could see why Mrinal Sen, in mortal grips with his own commitment in film, had chosen a particular canvas of perpendicular horror and agony for his film *Calcutta 71*, because as Sen wrote in 1972 "I almost felt it was made for me". The series of five 1970-71 slides that I saw had nothing pretty about them; rather they were grim and perhaps given to a little overstatement even as, if I may say so, Mrinal Sen's own *Calcutta 71* was. But they leave little doubt in the viewer's mind that the painter felt committed 'in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning'. He was pursuing the processes of his mind. He was then 24 and perhaps for that reason a trifle strident and didactic in the subjects chosen even for the troublous times of the Bangladesh strife of 1971. But he had made his point and that in pictorial form

and not literary statements.

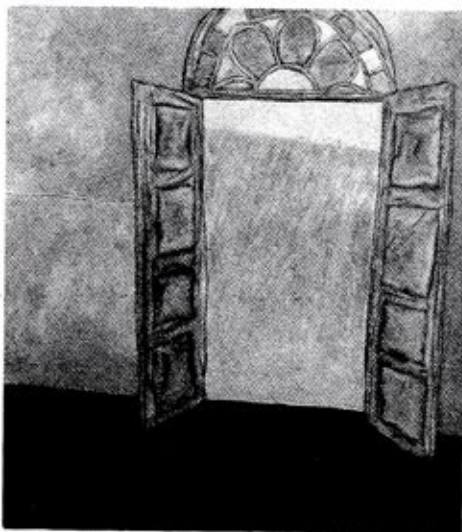
I suppose he needed to extricate himself from his own agony and engaged on the Touch series thereafter in which he sought to come back to rejuvenating life, of hands that touch and soothe, faces, heads, still-lives, flowers, butterflies, through the use of colours like mauve and violet that knit the canvases into a certain reassurance and serenity.

He evidently could not stay in Touch for very long and gravitated to the Illusions series in which he produced several important canvases, the more significant of which for me are his Caravaggio-like feet, foreshortened, on the operation table; the one with the hands at the top, the eel-serpent in the middle ground and the delectable flower at the bottom; the wheel with its contoured load on top. The most moving of all is the graphic, predominantly in blue, with the minatory spreadeagled bird at the top, the fish in its skeleton and the flower again at the bottom. It is this picture, par excellence, which reminds me of Eliot's statement about the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet I have quoted above. It is in this picture that Shuvaprasanna, I believe, felt his thought as immediately as the odour of a rose and achieved marvellous fusion. This fusion is apt to be a tricky business. Even the painter cannot tell when exactly his didacticism, literary allegory or symbol or image, the fruits of his thought, conscious or unconscious, ceases to be irrelevant and stands transformed in the legitimate and self-sufficient language of painting. Cezanne wanted his apples to be

infinitely heavy and earthy, the essential apple, but often they tended to roll out of the canvas as hollow, painted spheres. If this happened to Cezanne it can happen to Shuvaprasanna as well.

This to my mind, applies to some of his Time or Clock series, which are a little too didactic and allegorical, in a moralizing way, for my taste for painting, Durer notwithstanding. The same reservation applies to the Wrapped series, although the red on one of them is arresting and makes you almost feel it. I think he made great success out of a number of his Abode series in which street children painted in half-child half-contemplative poses against tumbling, leaning-askew, multistoreyed abodes somehow reflect to me the human situation in this unreal and ferocious city.

But the most significant by far of his series to me are his Bird series which he calls Amphibia and a whole astonishing set of his Black-and-White series of headless upwardly stretching human groups acquired by Mr. Abhijit Mazumdar, whose discernment I envy. These two series hold the key to a very new experience of painting for me which makes me both think and feel through the forms, the designs, the colours. They have revealed the sequence of Shuvaprasanna's progression from 1971 to 1986. It has certainly been a worthwhile journey.



The Door 1980. Oil on canvas, 90 X 90 cm. (p 3)

"THE KUNST" OF
SHUVAPRASANNA
RALF OESTREICH

In German language art is called 'Kunst'. The noun 'Kunst' is derived from the verb 'koennen', which means 'to be able' or 'to be capable'. For Shuvaprasanna artistic faculty is quite evident. A sound academic training is, therefore, for him an absolute prerequisite for artistic creation.

Shuvaprasanna follows this discernment not only as Principal of the 'College of Visual Arts', but also preeminently in his own artistic work. He does it in many techniques, over all of which he has an academically perfect command: first of all on oil-paintings, but also on charcoal and pencil sketches, etchings and woodcuts.

As universal is his technical range of application, so universal is his artistic approach. The artist, for him, is a 'citizen of the world', because the problem of the people are not precisely 'Indian' or 'European', but universal. Their treatment by the artist must accordingly pursue also a universal assessment.

The forlornness of the people in the universe is, for example, an important theme in Shuvaprasanna's pictures. The presentation of such fundamental human problems is for Shuvaprasanna more important than matters concerning momentary incidents of everyday politics. Art as a form of political agitation has certainly all along a tradition in West Bengal; however for Shuvaprasanna this is not his 'cup of tea'. Nevertheless,

Shuvaprasanna's art appeals to us. It constrains the spectator to an intellectual argument or discussion. However, it happens in a calm, subtle form.

One can hardly find a personal 'countenance' in Shuvaprasanna's paintings. In addition, the countenance is frequently depersonalized through an eyeband. The single countenance does not reckon. It is important in which way the man exists in relation to his surroundings (and their symbols).

As it is stated: Shuvaprasanna does not portray an idyll. By close watching an apparently immaculate flower shows spots, symbol of transitoriness.

The paintings of the 'Amphibious'-series (1984/85) do not display any happy or joyous beings of the air. The birds in their expressive posture express characters which have a menacing effect on us. They are difficult to classify, these 'Amphibious' which are likewise at home in the water, on the earth and in the air (p 20, 21, 22)

Also the houses of the 'Abode'-series (1979/80) affects everything else but our attraction. They do not invite for living. They are tottering and scoffs at the precepts of statics. They are—the transparent way of painting indicates it—rather ideas, conceptions of dwellings. Gesture and expression of the adjoined figures manifest uneasiness and anxiety for the architectural 'misconstruction'. They feel like drifting away from the dwellings (p 16). Joy or pleasure—there is no query for Shuvaprasanna—is an

illusion. Reality is the suffering, the forlornness.

A critic has reproached Shuvaprasanna for lack of spontaneity. Certainly, the vehemence of stroke is lacking in his paintings. For a painter, for whom thematic painting is essential, spontaneous paintings, is, however, not possible. So on the contrary the controlled conception of painting is an artistic strength of Shuvaprasanna.

In Shuvaprasanna's paintings nothing is unplanned. No effect is incidental. All effects of colour are the result of thorough preparative study.

The 'grammar of painting', as Shuvaprasanna calls it, depends on the theme. Thematic painting lies therefore also in the special texture of the picture.

Shuvaprasanna does not shun from giving up the brilliant transparency of his colour if the cohesion of the picture necessitates it. If, for example, the flooring of 'The Door' (p 3) were not opaque and unnuanced in colour, the picture would be 'unsteady', it would fall asunder.

To Shuvaprasanna complete abstraction is too artificial, too 'lifeless', too wide away from the direct approach of human relations in a city like Calcutta.

On the other hand, he is naturally not a photographer who portrays the reality. But Shuvaprasanna reduces; he therefore abstracts gradually.

His presentation of reality often has dream-like elements in it. But does not the dream often show a deeper view of reality? In any case Shuvaprasanna perceives like this.



Drawing, 1975. 46 X 31 cm.

A 'painter of the death', as once a critic wrote, is Shuvaprasanna certainly not. So, as his colours of glowing transparency are, however, discreet and subtle (only recently, in some yet nameless series, Shuvaprasanna's colour becomes more aggressive), so the total impression of the pictures does not alarm or frighten the spectator, they stir him. Shuvaprasanna and his generation of contemporary artists do not any more live under the tension of the 'old' and the 'new', of the 'oriental' and the 'occidental'. They are free from it. Nevertheless and in spite of all universality of the assessment

Shuvaprasanna is not simply 'westernized'. Just on the contrary: he is an Indian by conviction, a Bengalee by passion and a Calcuttan out of his love for the city!

And how could it be otherwise: references to India emerge frequently in his work.

The 'Abode'-series could actually originate only in Calcutta. Where are there such unbelievable variety of most imposing and wretched dwellings close to each other?

Or:

Shuvaprasanna's early paintings reveal view about poverty in India 'Lament' (p4). How could a time like the Naxalite-time remain 'unnoticed' by a young artist? The "J'accuse" of a complete generation of Bengalee intelligentsia is also extant in Shuvaprasanna's early work.

The most recent oil-paintings, as also the graphic arts of 1985 show an increasing sharpness in presentation of colour, texture and theme.

Is the feeling of forlornness of the modern human being becoming more intense?

Is the thought on hope becoming more feeble?

Do they despair the humanist Shuvaprasanna?

The language of Shuvaprasanna's latest paintings appears to hint at it.

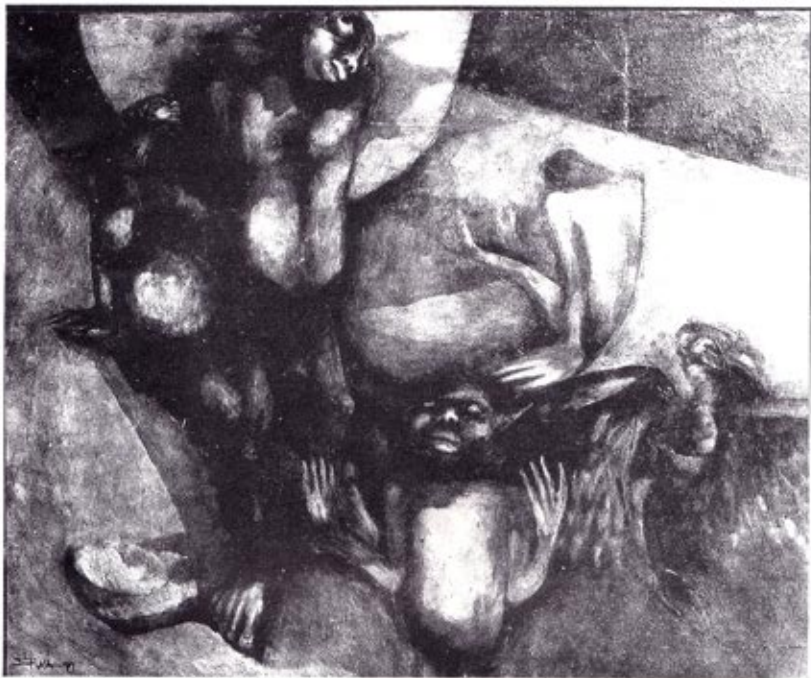
On the other side:

there must be hope for the artist Shuvaprasanna when one sees how untrilingly he is working thereby to realize

his 'Arts Acre', his artists' village project! The living conditions in Calcutta may worsen, the 'spirit of the city' will, however, last.

The 'dying city' is very much alive, as before and now. Particularly in the domain of culture!

Artists like Shuvaprasanna are the guarantors for it!



Lament 1971. Oil on canvas, 132 X 102 cm. (p 4)

Illusion 1973. Oil on paper, 61 X 43 cm. (p 5) «

Illusion 1973. Intaglio 46 X 31 cm. (p 6) »



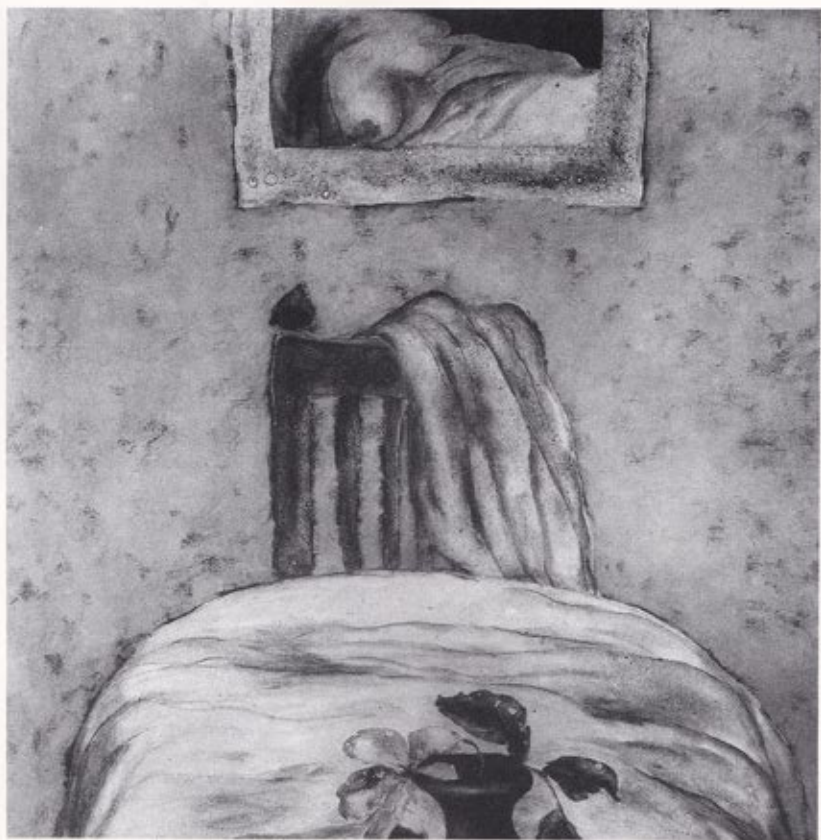




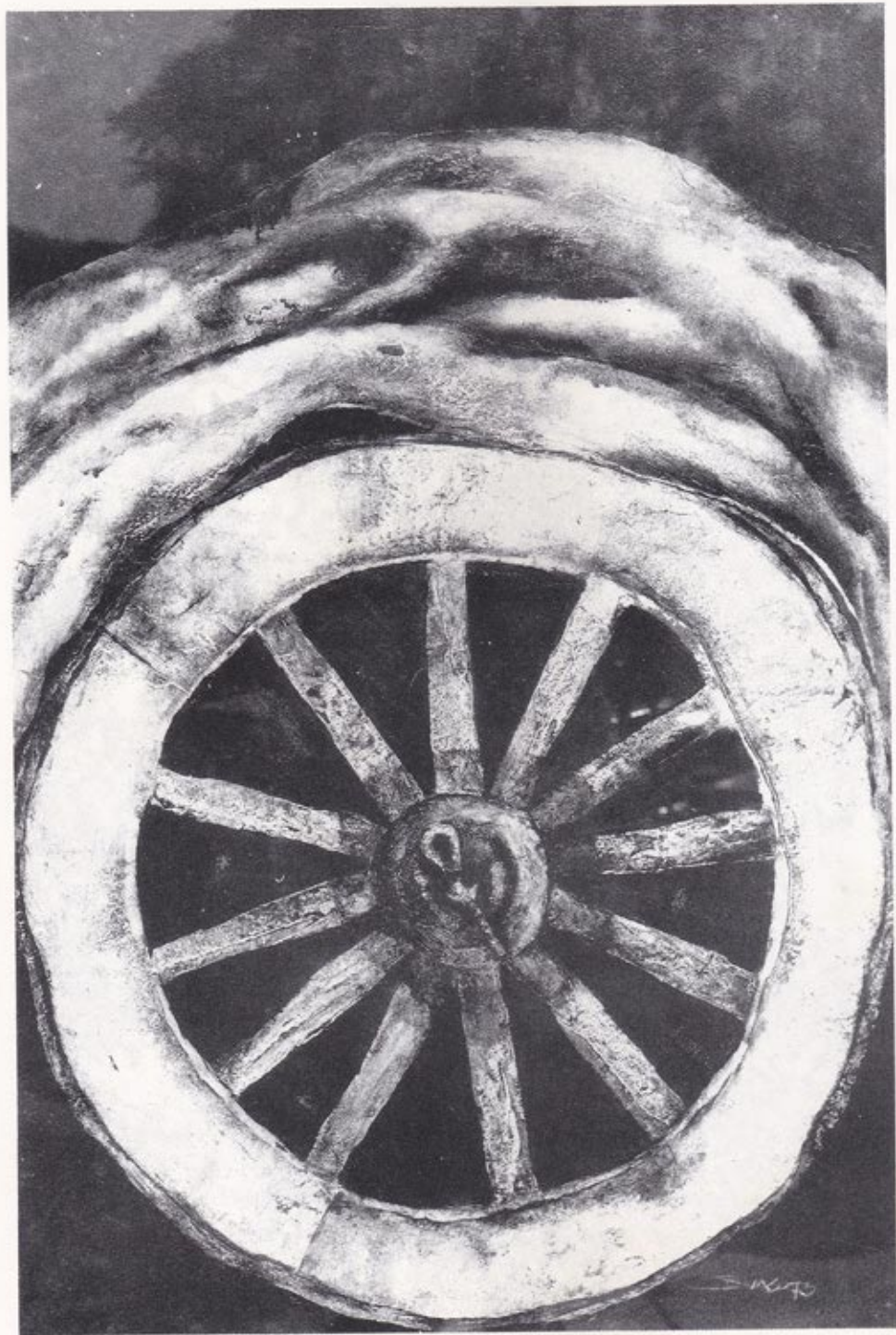
Illusion 1973. Oil on paper, 44 X 58 cm.
Collection, private, W. Germany. (p 8)



Illusion 1974. Oil on canvas, 86 X 86 cm.
Collection, Dr P. Kegrival. (p 9)

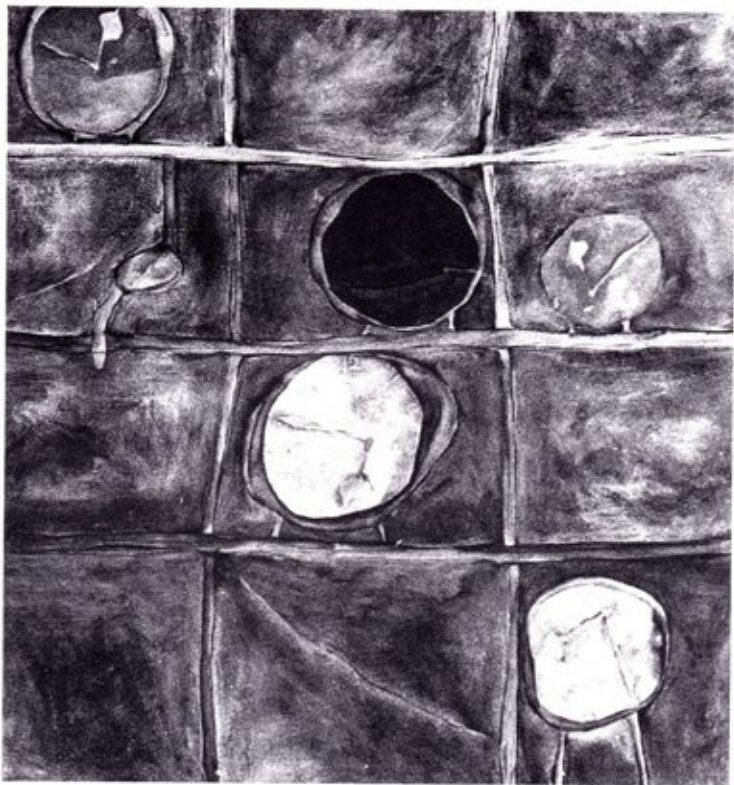


Illusion 1976. Oil on canvas, 90 X 90 cm. Collection, Mr Rimal Poddar. (p 10)

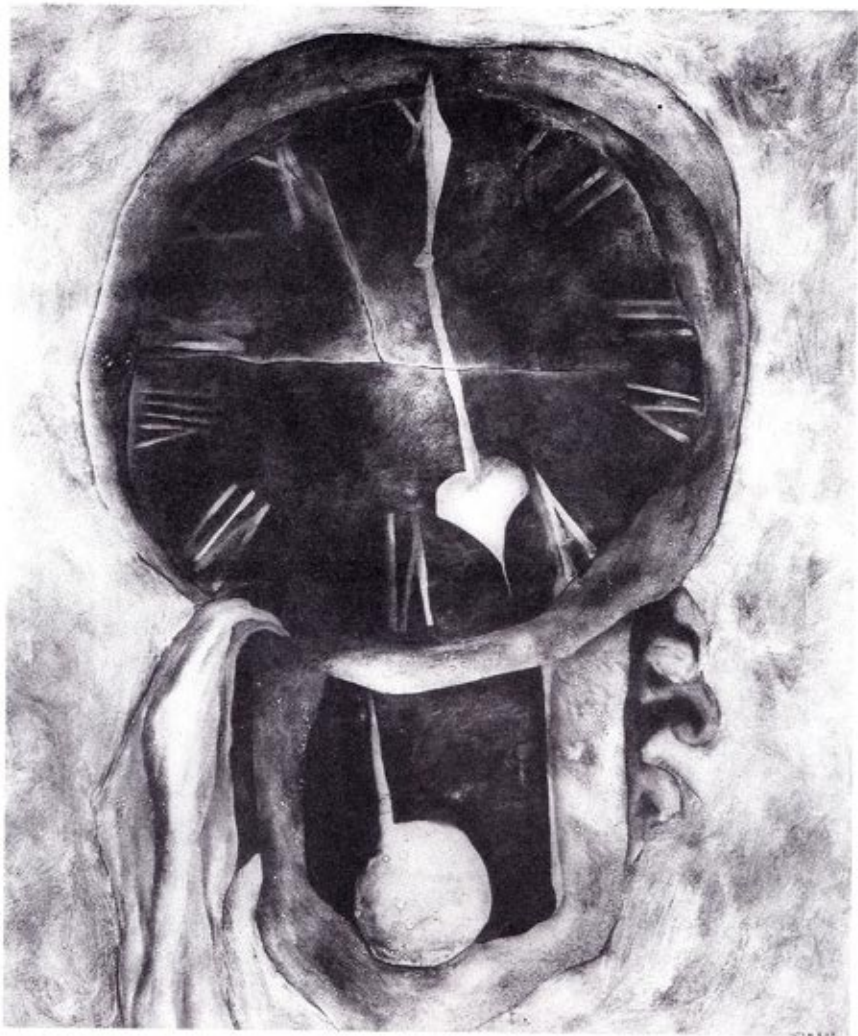




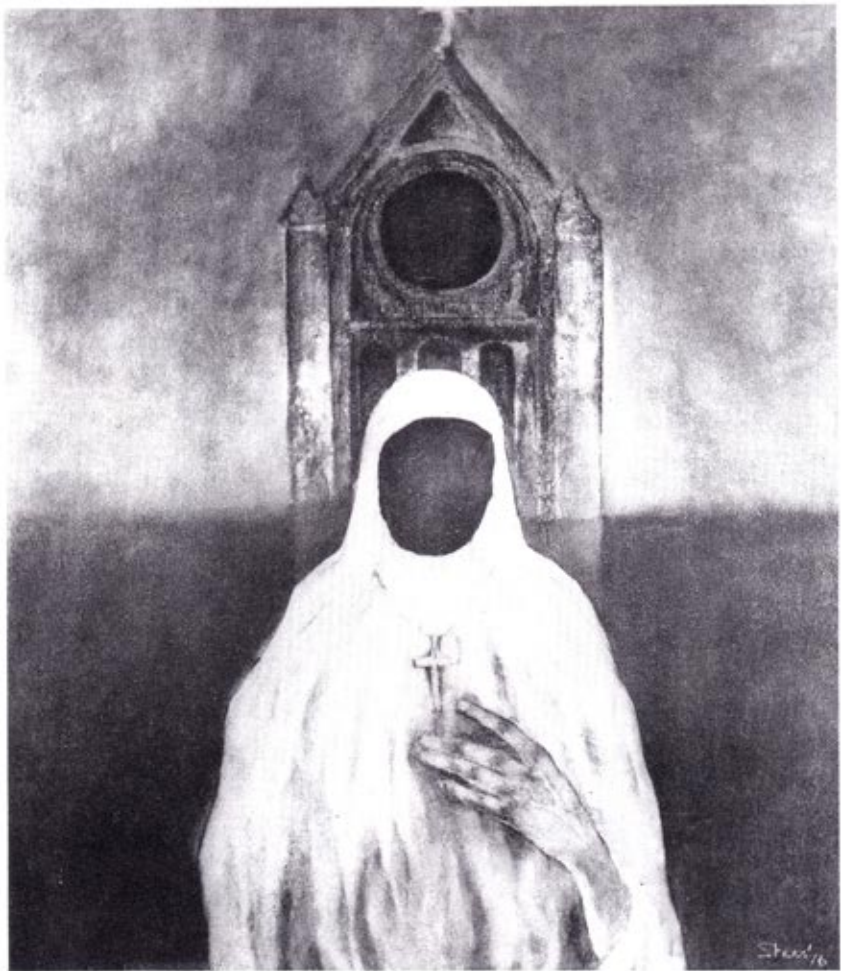
Time 1978. Oil on canvas, 180 X 130 cm. (p 12)



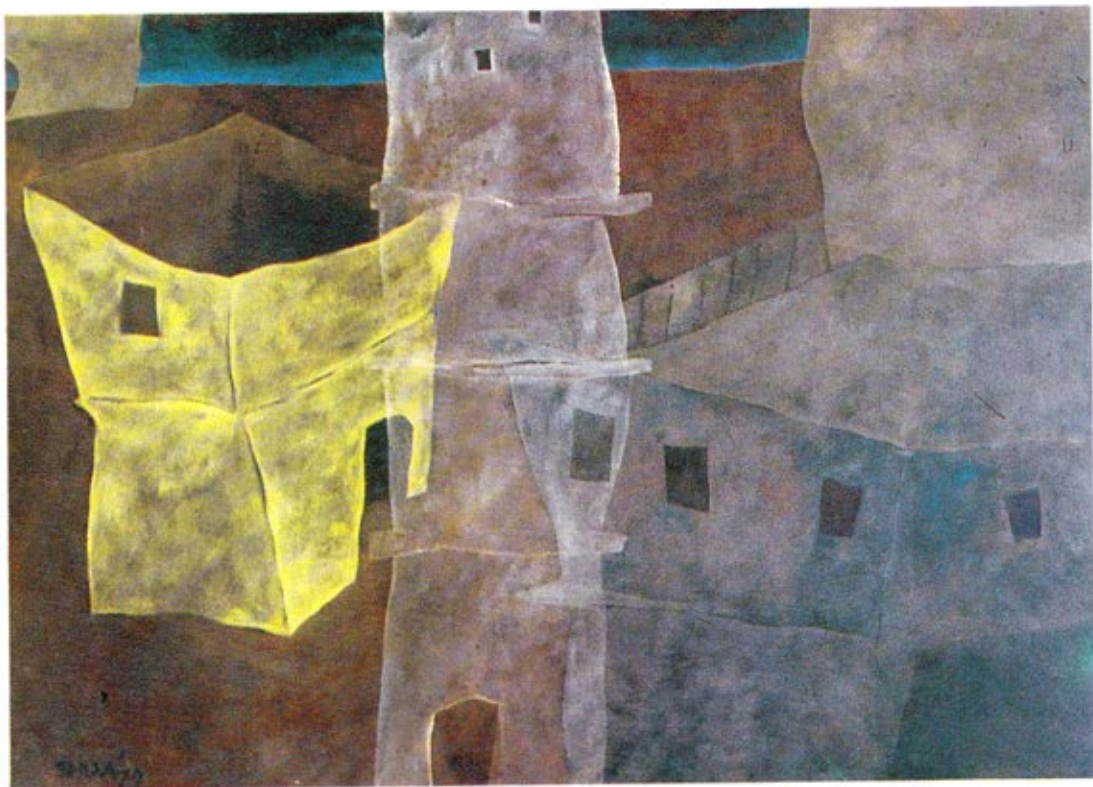
Time 1977. Oil on canvas, 90 X 90 cm. Collection, Mr Bimal Poddar. (p 13)



Time 1978. Oil on canvas, 90 X 101 cm. Collection, Iliias. (p 14)



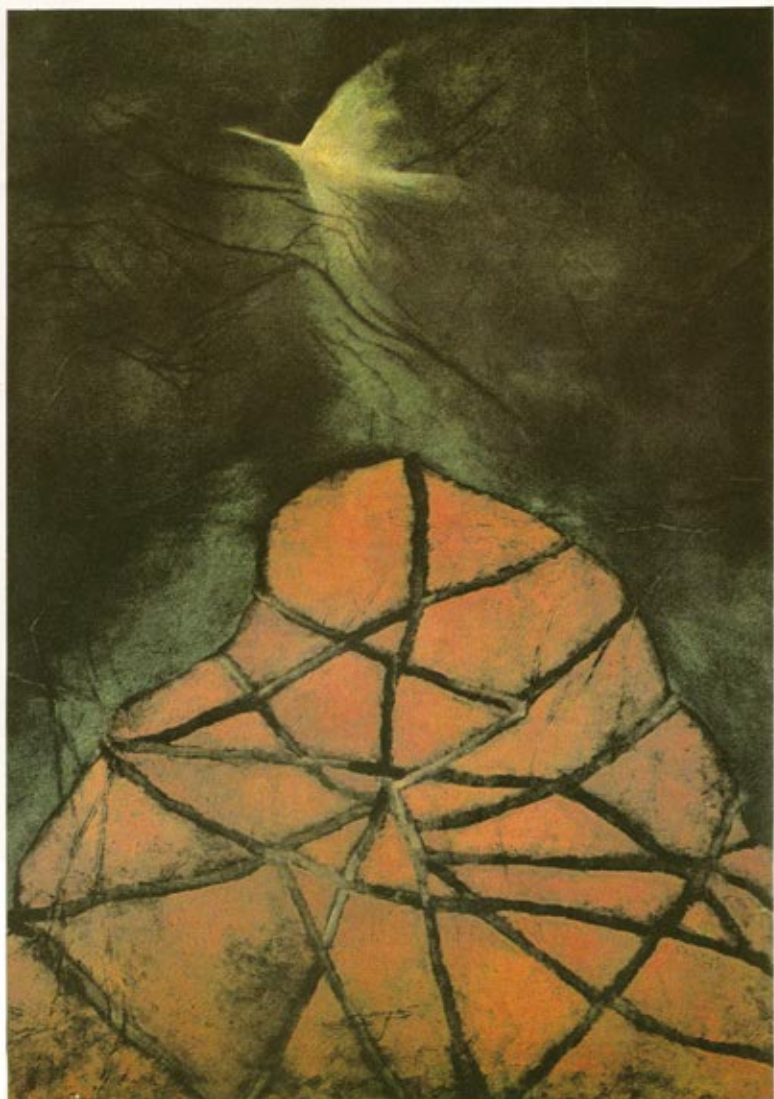
She and the church. 1976. Oil on canvas, 86 X 86 cm. Collection Birla Academy Calcutta. (p 15)



Abode. 1979. Oil on canvas, 121 X 87 cm. (p 16)



Childish 1979. Oil on canvas, 59 X 67 cm. (p 17)

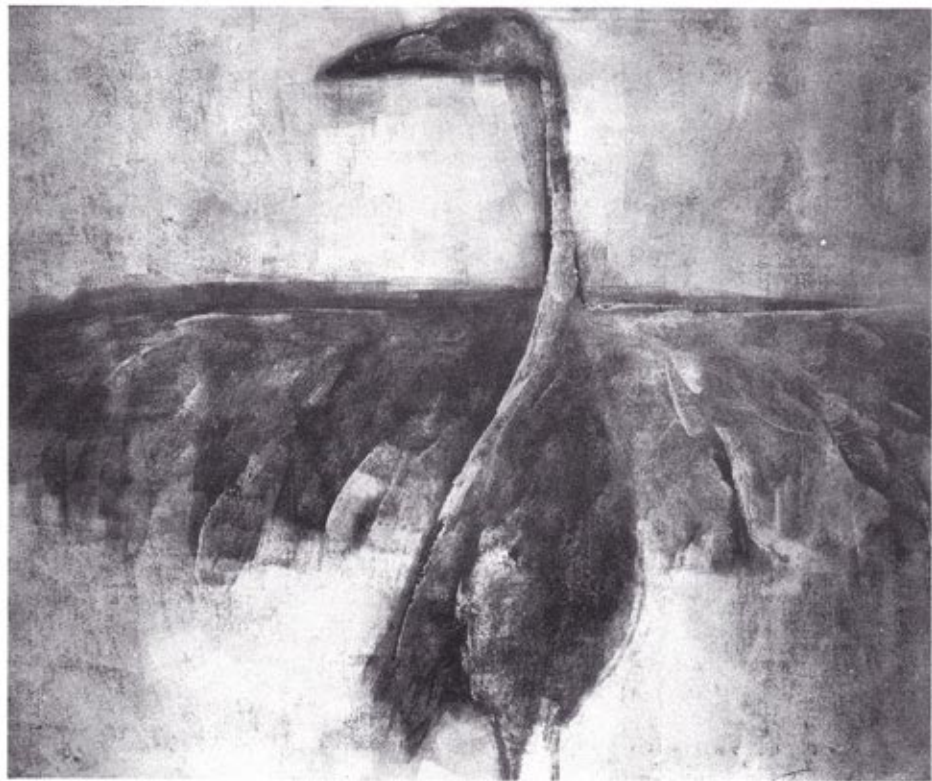
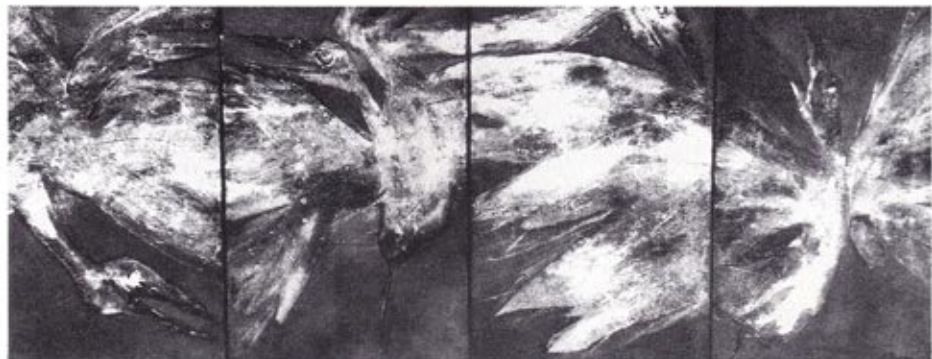






Amphibious 1981. Oil on canvas, 90 X 86 cm. Collection. Mr. and Mrs. Gierlich. (p 20)

◀ Wrapped 1981. Oil on board, 88 X 63 cm. (p 19)



Amphibious 1985 oil on canvas 94 X 39 cm. (p 22)

△ Amphibious 1983. Oil on canvas, 56 X 67 cm. (p 21).

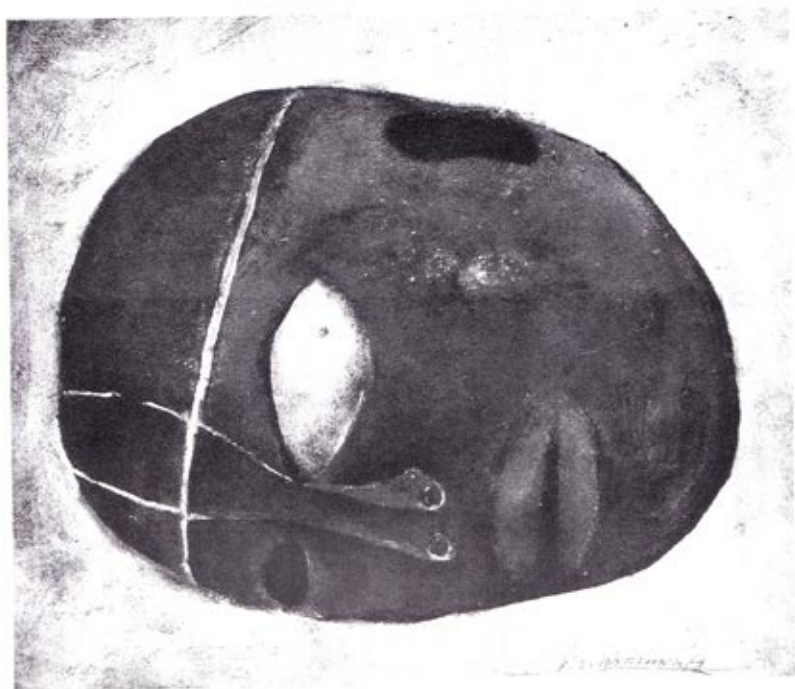
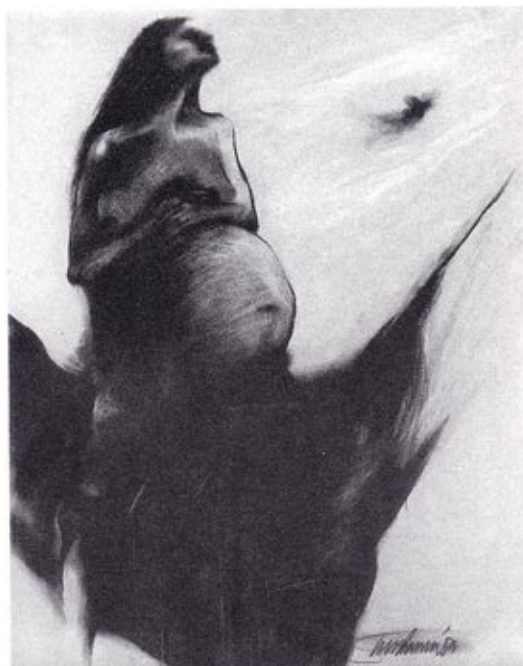
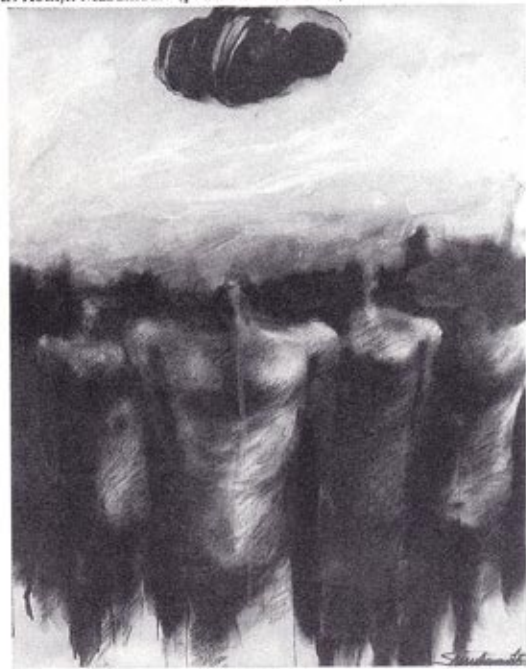


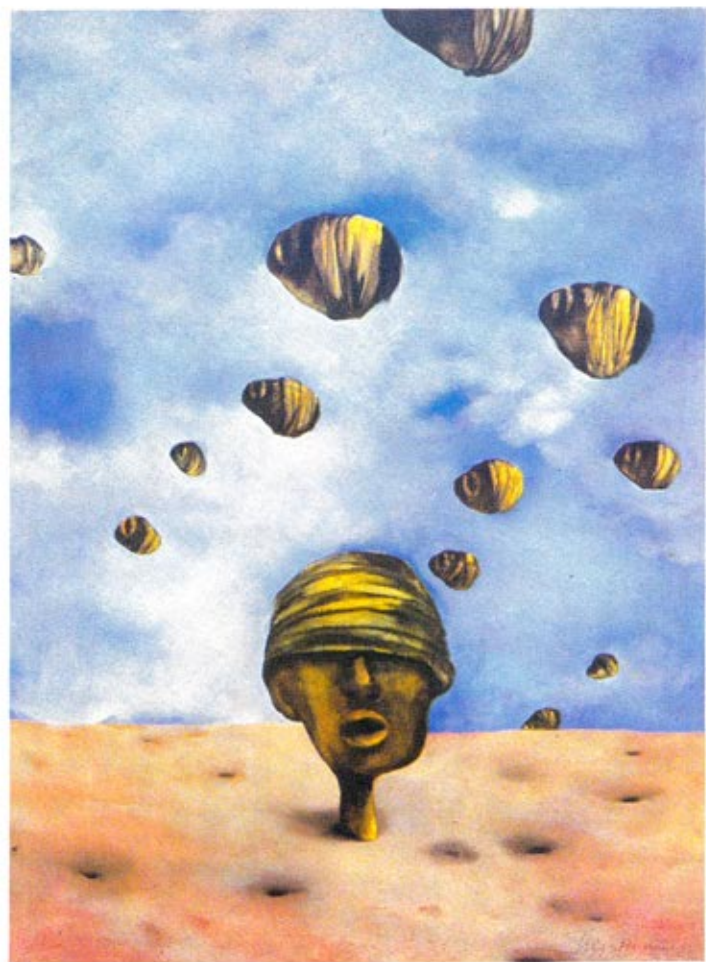
Image 1982. Oil on canvas, 38 X 35 cm. (p 23)

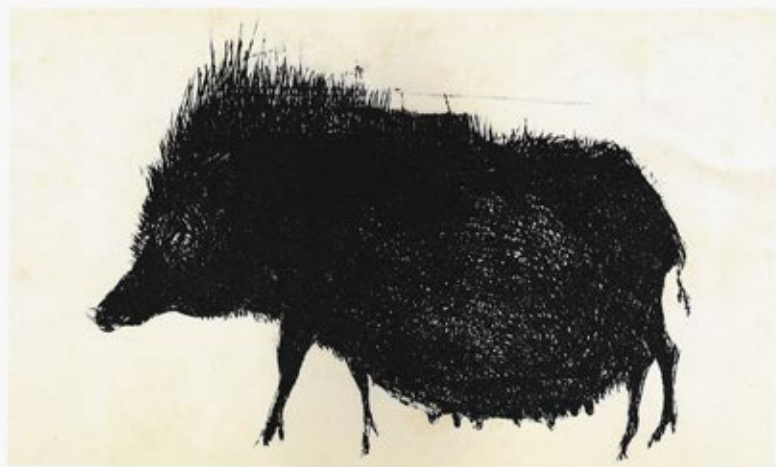


Black and White 1985. Charcoal Drawing, 71 X 56 cm. Collection Mr. Abhijit Mazumdar. (p 24 25 26 27)



Floating. 1986. Oil on canvas, 105 X 79 cm. (p 28) >





The Hog, 1983. Colour Etching, 25 X 29 cm. (p 29)

SHUVAPRASANNA

- 1947 Born in Calcutta.
- 1969 Graduated from Indian College of Art, (R. B. University Calcutta) Group Exhibition with "Arts and Artists" Calcutta.
- 1970 Joined "Calcutta Painters", Group show in Calcutta.
- 1971 Group shows in Bombay and Calcutta. Awarded by AIFACS New Delhi. Participated in Epar Bangla Opar Bangla Exhibition in Birla Academy, Calcutta.
- 1972 One man show in Birla Academy Calcutta, Jt. Secretary "Calcutta Art Fair"
- 1973 One man show in Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi.
- 1974 One man show in Gallery "Les Hirondelles" Geneve, Member "CIRCA" Geneva. One man show in Gallery "Atlantis" Ex-En-Provence, France.
- 1975 Group show in Gallery Kunsthau Stuttgart, W. Germany. One man show in Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, Participated in inaugural Exhibition of "Decor Art Gallery", Calcutta.
- 1976 Founded College of Visual Arts, Calcutta. One man show in "Gallery Den Berg", Geneve. Edited with Shakti Chattopadhyaya "Anarchy and The Blue".
- 1977 Awarded by Birla Academy Calcutta. Participated in the Exhibition of "Gallery 26" New Delhi. One man show in Decor Art

Gallery, Calcutta. Published "Artist" a collection of woodcut Prints.

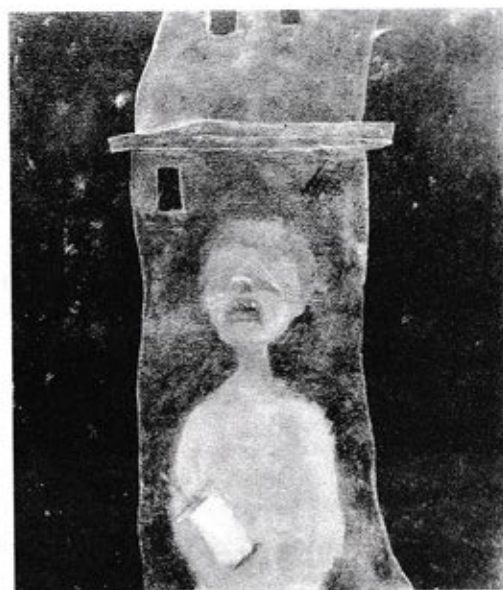
- 1978 One man show in Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. Awarded by State Lalit Kala Akademi, W.B.
- 1979 One man show in "Walburgisschule" Werl, W. Germany. One man show in Max Mueller Bhavan, Calcutta. Participated in Exhibition of South Asian Festival of Culture.
- 1980 One man show in "National Museum Singapore", and in Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. Participated in Silver Jubilee Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1981 One man show in Max Mueller Bhavan, Calcutta and Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. Edited with Jogen Choudhuri Journal on contemporary Indian Art called "ART-TODAY"
- 1982 Participated in Poster Workshop in British Council.
- 1983 One man show in Calcutta Art Gallery, Calcutta, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay, "Kreisspar-kasse" Ludwigsburg and "Volkshochschule" Essen, W. Germany. Edited Portfolio "The Eyes of Time". Participated in All India Painting Workshop at Max Mueller Bhavan, Calcutta.
- 1984 Founded "Arts Acre" an artists, Village in Calcutta.

1985 One man show in "Artists Home Gallery" Calcutta. Participated in 3rd Asian Art Biennale, Bangladesh, and in Graphic Art in India since 1950

1986 Participated in IInd International Biennale Havane, Cuba.

Permanent collections:

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, Govt. College of Arts New Delhi, U.P. State Lalit Kala Akademi, W.B. State Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh Museum, NCERT New Delhi, Birla Academy Calcutta, Air India, Times of India, W.H.O. Geneve, Kratel SA, Stuttgart.



Childish 1979. Oil on canvas, 59 X 67 cm.
Collection, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. (p 30)

