



EXPLORING THE EPIC
MAHABHARAT

ADITYA BASAK | CHANDRA BHATTACHARJEE
JAYA GANGULY | SAMIR AICH

Curator
JYOTIRMOY BHATTACHARYA



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CHANDRA BHATTACHARJEE
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Unrivalled Accumulation of Collective Knowledge

Soumitra Chatterjee

As far I can remember the first time I took up Mahabharat I must have been all of five years. It was Upendrakishore's (Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury) Mahabharat for the kids. That was the usual entry of Bangali kids into Mahabharat in those days. Of course, we did not have scores and scores of books like kids have these days; but we all got to know a great number of Mahabharat stories from our elders. Mahabharat was mostly told and enjoyed immensely by listening.

In my childhood days all the heroes of Mahabharat were my heroes. Bhim and Arjun, the all-time heroes, weren't very especial. It's only when I grew up into an adult my admiration for Bhim stood out. I still remember people describing Bhim as a bloodthirsty demon of sorts and what not, but it didn't in any way diminish the heroic stature of Bhim in my understanding of heroes. The fact is, what appealed to me of Bhim was his exquisite simplicity. A simplicity one does not observe in Arjun too. Bhim doesn't have an ego even, all he has, which is generously pardonable, is his simple estimation of himself as an unconquerable *pehelwan*— in Bangla it would be *paloan*. Well, it was also Arjun's pride in himself as the unbeatable warrior of the times. Bhim's great attraction to me, however, was as a protector of the family. He is the chief, perhaps the only, protector of Draupadi, the heroine of the epic. There is that episode of Bhim's slaying Kichak for dishonouring Draupadi while the Pandavas took shelter with king Virat. Who did Draupadi go to complain about her insult? Obviously Bhim, who did his duty of slaughtering the villain that very night. It is pretty normal to consider Bhim as the protector of the family and this was a duty he of himself took up, not waiting to be assigned. Isn't Mahabharat, the epic, an extended study of responsibilities taken up by certain characters on their own?

There is no question that Mahabharat is much beyond a collection of a great number of stories. The stories radiate philosophy— and what philosophy! Mahabharat is for education of the masses, it is also an unrivalled accumulation of collective knowledge.

Take for instance the story of Yaksha in the form of a heron and Yudhisthir. When Yudhisthir agreed to answer the questions of Yaksha who had by then killed all his four brothers. Yaksha's first question is, “Who causes the Sun to rise? Who makes the Sun set in the horizon?”

Yudhisthir replies, “The Supreme makes the Sun to rise and it is the Sun's duty to set.” Yaksha questions, “Wherein lies the truth?” Yudhisthir answers, “It is captured in the Vedas.” Among such questions is a beautiful query, and the answer is absolutely amazing and thrilling. The question: “What is faster than the wind?” The answer: “The mind.” And there of course the great philosophical question, “What is the most wondrous thing about the world?” And the answer is the unique philosophy, “The fact that everyday creatures die, yet everyone lives life as if immortal.”

But the great drama and beauty is at the end— when Yaksha says, “I shall let one of your brothers live. Choose!” “Nakul,” said Yudhisthir, without hesitation. “Why him? He shares none of your blood,” Yaksha wanted to know.

“Kunti and Madri are my father's two wives. I, a son born of Kunti, am alive; one born of Madri should be too,” answers Yudhisthir. Can there be a greater sense of *nyaya* or justice? This is what makes Mahabharat so unique. And it also explains why Yudhisthir has been considered, in spite of his human frailties, like a passion for gambling, the hero of the epic. What great passion not merely for gambling but knowledge— superior knowledge— this man harbours in himself!

Mahabharat of course is a huge display of the transcendental knowledge of Krishna, who even is not totally devoid of shortcomings. Mahabharat spares none. Not even Krishna. And that is the utter beauty of this hundred thousand-shloka epic. It is full of stories and abounds in deep introspection. It is truly Mahabharat, or in other words, Great India.

Mahabharat I do not take as a religious piece, because there was no religion as such during that time. Religion as an institution did not exist. What was understood to be religion was *nyaya* or justice.

Now, to get back to the first question I raised at the beginning. Who's my favourite hero of the Mahabharat? Despite all his failings and foibles it will be Karna. And then of course Arjun. All the war and all the struggles of Mahabharat are between Karna and Arjun— the two rival extremes. Without whom Mahabharat cannot be. And then of course Bhishma, the man of justice and wisdom, and the man of ultimate commitment, *pratigya*. The man who never fails in his words. And were I to choose one heroine from the entire epic there is none to rival Draupadi. The ultimate heroine.

I am happy that an exhibition of modern-day paintings by four very gifted artists is being presented with Mahabharat as their core idea. This paintings are not simple illustrations but exercises in thought and imagination. The executions are admirable and the effort behind it all is laudable. Mahabharat does not get out of time, it is always contemporary. The more we look around we discover the timelessness of the epic. I am happy to be associated with this venture. I wish it all success and offer my blessings.

(As told to Sankarlal Bhattacharjee by Soumitra Chatterjee)



Bharat Katha

Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya

The Mahabharat never ceases to astonish me. There is a popular Bengali adage, '*Ja nei Mahabharatey, ta nei Bharatey*', which approximately translates as, 'There's nothing in Bharat, that's not there in The Mahabharat'. I grew up listening to tales from the epic related by family elders. In my youth, books and television productions on the subject fed my curiosity. Fascinated, I sought to delve into the nuances of the tome. As my interest deepened, I started seeing myself in different characters at different times. I found events and characters depicted on that colossal stage cropping up in the small world around me. The Mahabharat's relevance in the 21st century is tangible, unchallenged.

I started collecting vintage wood engravings. The detailed chronicles depicted in the 19th century engravings injected fluid life into scenes from The Mahabharat. Soon I was compulsively looking into varied interpretations, analyses of the epic and its characters. My fresh insights underscored my early, instinctive awareness that this epochal work has always showed the way. Somewhere between those conversations and discourses, critiques and versions, I zeroed in on the idea of this exhibition.

Indian art is rich with depictions of The Mahabharat. We see a stunning variety of interpretations, from the descriptive sculptures of antiquity and the gloriously detailed miniatures, down to more contemporary readings. Artists like Raja Ravi Verma, Bama Pada Banerjee, Gaganendranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose have portrayed it in their unique styles. Folk art has generously borrowed from it. Modern stalwarts like MF Husain, Ganesh Pyne, Paritosh Sen and A. Ramachandran, among others, have left behind exemplary works, adding crisp dimension to the ancient text. The Mahabharat, in fact, stretches across too vast a canvas of Indian art to be boiled down to a few words.

The driving challenge behind this show was to set aside this opulent history and focus on representing The Mahabharat vis-à-vis the current reality. After considerable deliberation, I invited Aditya Basak, Chandra Bhattacharjee, Jaya Ganguly and Samir Aich to be a part of this journey. I have gotten to know them well over the years. While being close friends, the four are different from one another in terms of artistic style and sensibility. Importantly, the idea behind



the show caught their imagination almost instantly. It was a robust experience to brainstorm with them, both collectively and individually. While Jaya Ganguly built her paintings around her construal of incidents in the epic, Samir Aich saw himself as a strident warrior in Kurukshetra. For Aditya Basak, The Mahabharat was the world's most egregious genocide. Chandra Bhattacharjee's empathy was with the inevitable loneliness of the epic heroes.

I realized that the idiom and style of each artist would play a critical role in the composition of this exhibition. Their perceptive response to our shifting universe is evident in their oeuvres. Their feeling essays on the human condition have, over the years, carved out elevated spaces. This show celebrates the singular style of each artist in interpreting an epic we all share as Indians. These paintings are not straightforward narratives of events. The artists freely explore the epic's contemporary orientation without losing sight of its classic soul. While they are not illustrative, viewers may still find all 18 episodes of The Mahabharat condensed in each work. In a world where the lines between good and bad are obscure, these works highlight the natural human aspiration for justice. Dare I say, through this exhibition Vyasa revisits his Mahabharat through the eyes of four sterling artists in the post-millennial context.

ADITYA BASAK

IN CONVERSATION



with

Sankarlal Bhattacharjee

We are here with artist Aditya Basak. His place where we are now for the conversation has its own special history. More than this house the *para* holds real good history.

We came down to this place by the Chitpur tram route. Aditya has an exclusive body of work on Chitpur. Whenever I come across those pictures I get the feeling that Aditya has not quite grown out of this area. His paintings are literally strewn with images and sound waves of this part of Kolkata. Besides he has a fine body of work on mythology, to which we will return at some point.

We are here today because he has taken over Mahabharat as his theme in a selection of work. He had earlier worked on scenes from the World War II. One would really want to know if this Mahabharat takes inputs from those dark histories.

Yes. Actually I had a mind to get involved with Mahabharat for a pretty long time. But I was always in two minds over how to go about it. The sheer expanse and breadth of the subject appeared too forbidding. There was a sort of inspiration within, but the question always was about how to handle Mahabharat. How to begin, then how to look at it and, eventually, how to tackle myths.

Then I started to think about how the epic has been handled earlier on. How do we perceive the images of the Ajanta caves? How do we consider the narratives of the Jatakas, when artists have painted the stories absolutely in their own terms? What were the terms? The constructions? The compositions? The artists have used their own imagination and perspectives to narrate. All this was executed after a period of one thousand years. But Mahabharat takes us about two and half thousand years back. What then would be my criterion of judgment of the time and manners and all that passes for history? It is then that Bharat's *Natya Shastra* came to my mind. I considered how the rasas are described in the *Natya Shastra*— the shringar, the karun, the shanta,

etc. I figured out that if I went by the rasas I could depict the episodes thereby.

The subjects for the four paintings you have done for this project were...

I did not go by what I was told because I had to witness Mahabharat on my own terms. Jyotirmoy had given me fine episodes of course, but I wasn't sure if I could do justice to them. Well, the world knows how Nandalal Bose or the Bengal School have dealt with the myths of Mahabharat. But those are not the ways one would want to see it now. Ganesh Pyne too had worked on Mahabharat which I don't like much. I have more or less watched all the paintings that have been executed on the Mahabharat; but what has most appealed to me are the sculptures of Kamrup, situated 200 ft. above the ground. To be frank, those panels had literally shaken me. And thinking over those sculptures and the dresses that those characters have been made to wear got me thinking further. The way we consider the apparels the characters are made to wear on stage. If you consider the costumes worn in our Indian theatrical presentations you will find absolutely no points of reference. Because we do not maintain the history of costumes or armours.

There are written descriptions, though to erect images from written descriptions is difficult.

Arenas are held out but without proper description.

Well, you have painted Gandhari in your own style. Gandhari sitting near a huge pile of skulls of her hundred and one slaughtered children. The burning ghat is being circled by modern-day military aircraft. You almost liken the war waged by the five Pandavs against the Kauravs to scenes of the World War II.

It is because I have always felt if I couldn't bring my own time into the Mahabharat script then the picture is incomplete. Even Mahabharat has changed every single time it has been retold, whenever newly painted it has come out with a different story.

This is why this exhibition based on Mahabharat is appealing to me. I'm very strongly drawn to your depictions of the burning ghat. It's a horror image, not sheer illustration.

That is the biggest challenge when dealing with an epic throbbing with stories— to lean towards illustration. My principal effort from the very beginning was to avoid a narrative, to produce connections, connectivity.



There is a haunting quality in your image of the lonely Gandhari observing the piles of skulls of her own children. It is like a commentary on the vanishing clan of the Kauravs. Almost like the Greek chorus on the fall of families. The way you have shown her sitting all by herself in the burning ghat pictures her like one telling the story of the tragedy.

I've also conceived of this image as a story of the ultimate diminishing of the human kind. Those who fall in battles are the ones who have been assigned to fight. Those who order are in safer zones. This too is also a part of the pathos inherent in tragedies.

The other woman in the scene I suppose is Kunti.

It is Draupadi.

Of course Draupadi, because Draupadi meets Gandhari at the funeral ceremony.

It is to indicate the fire within her heart that I have used the image of fire.

The two utterly tragic moments in the life of Draupadi are: (a) her disrobing at the court, and (b) her appearance at the burning ghat after Aswatthama had annihilated her children. Isn't this a commentary on the Mahabharat?

It is all the more piercing because these women are not waging the wars. Yet they are the ones who live their lives after the family is finished. Therefore situating these two ladies in front of the fire stands out as symbolic. It is more tragic than fighting and dying in wars.

Were you to paint a parallel Mahabharat could you do it on the basis of the experiences of the women characters of the epic?

You are quite right there. Initially I had a sort of doubt whether I would be able to execute the job. But now it appears I could go on painting Mahabharat on and on and on. I would need loads of canvases and keep on working till God knows when! It is again for this that I have used the image of fire in a couple of places.

It seems you are chiefly drawn to the end episodes of Mahabharat.

Yes. It is because I had to limit specific episodes into limited spaces. Well, I'm not getting the whole gallery space of Birla Academy to mount my Mahabharat episodes. So I have to concentrate on focus areas. If you look at the three canvases you will realise it takes up a whole wall to put them side by side. The measure is almost 12 ft. After all I'm not working with nearly a





battle but a series of battles running over eighteen days.

You have not seen the Mahabharat war as a battle spread over eighteen days. To you the battle is a metaphor.

Absolutely. It's a story of man's battle against man over ages. Mahabharat war has been described as a *dharmayuddha* or a war of justice. Yet how much justice is observed?

Which is why man's history has been described as history of wars.

This is absolutely what I feel from my heart. It also reminds me of a painting I had done years ago. Which shows whenever you touch the ground you find blood. The whole of history is rooted in blood.

In your movements of war you have shown movements of South Indian dances. Actually there are dances in South India which portray episodes of battle.

Yes indeed. I've made every effort to understand and interpret how dance and theatre forms have been applied to create images of battle.

In one of your paintings we perceive something like an atomic explosion. You have made an effort to connect wars of different phases through images of weaponry.

War has always been to me application of technology and science. Arms that are produced to secure peace are actually instruments to annihilate human kind. Look at it from whichever angle you may. Even Sri Krishna who wields his weapon for the sake of peace, who reveals to Arjun the Truth of the world through the Gita has also to take part actively in the war, even if only as a charioteer.

Why, even Draupadi had wanted war. She had inspired Bhim to secure revenge Dusshasan who had dishonoured her. She gets her revenge, suffers the pain of war and the death of five male children.

If you were to paint Krishna of the Mahabharat which Krishna would you choose to depict?

Krishna has a great many roles in the epic. But to do justice to this marvellous character I would have to choose Krishna, the philosopher, who recites the Bhagavad Gita and lifts the epic to its highest of high peaks. Mahabharat in itself is huge and great. And within it the Gita is a marvellous core—the Song of God.



End of War, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas

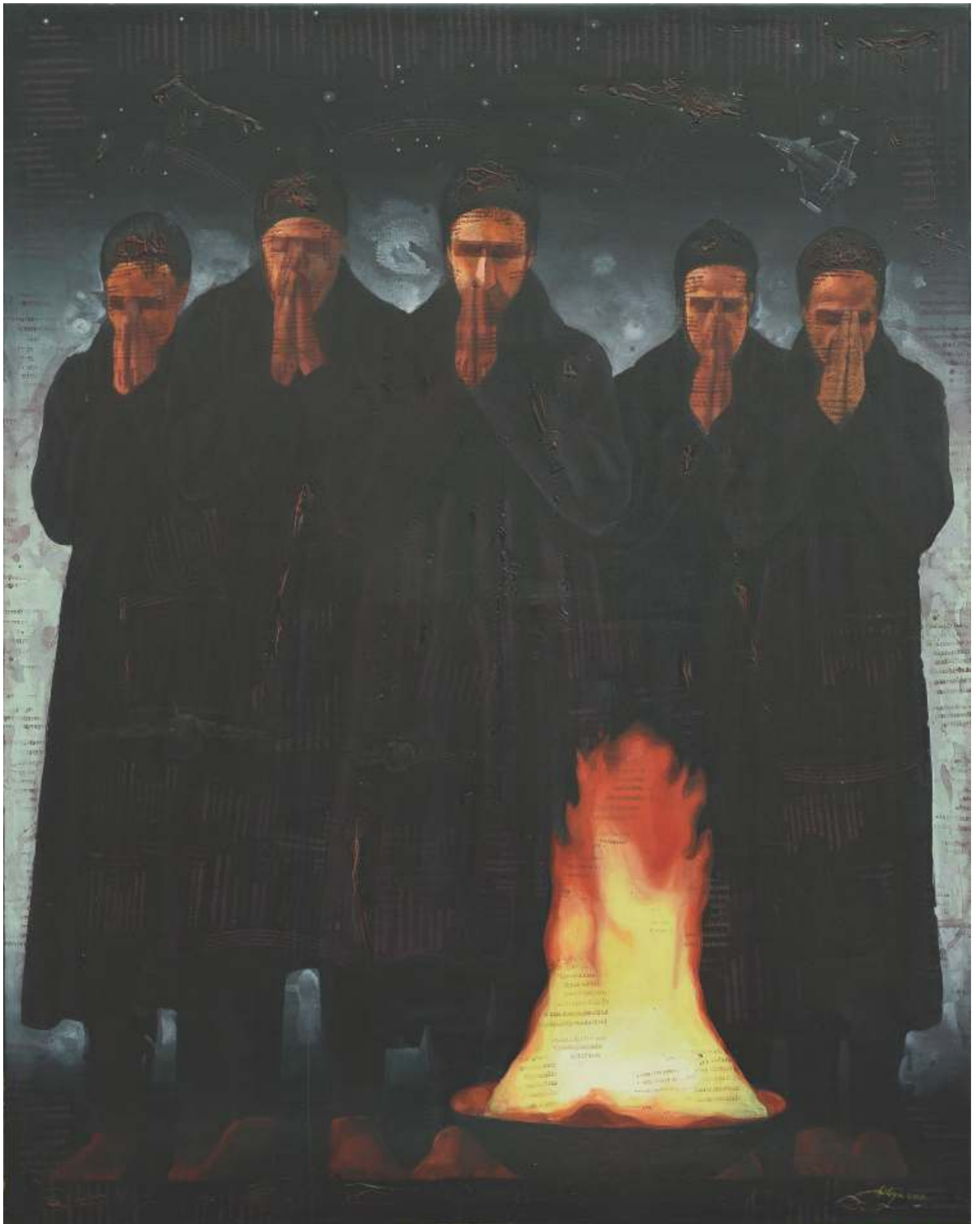


Queen - I, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas





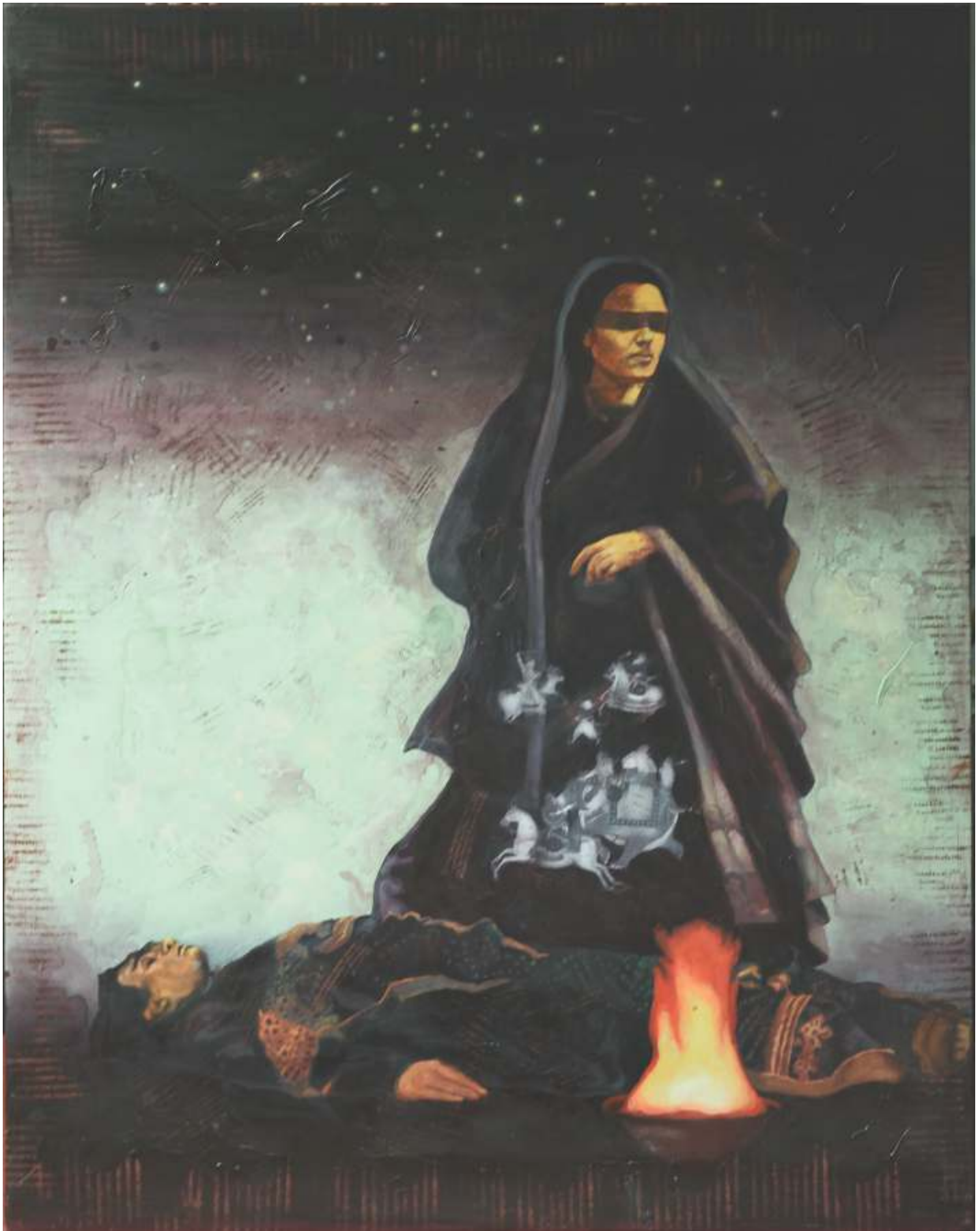
Warrior - I, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas



Oath, 60" x 47", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas



Warrior - II, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas



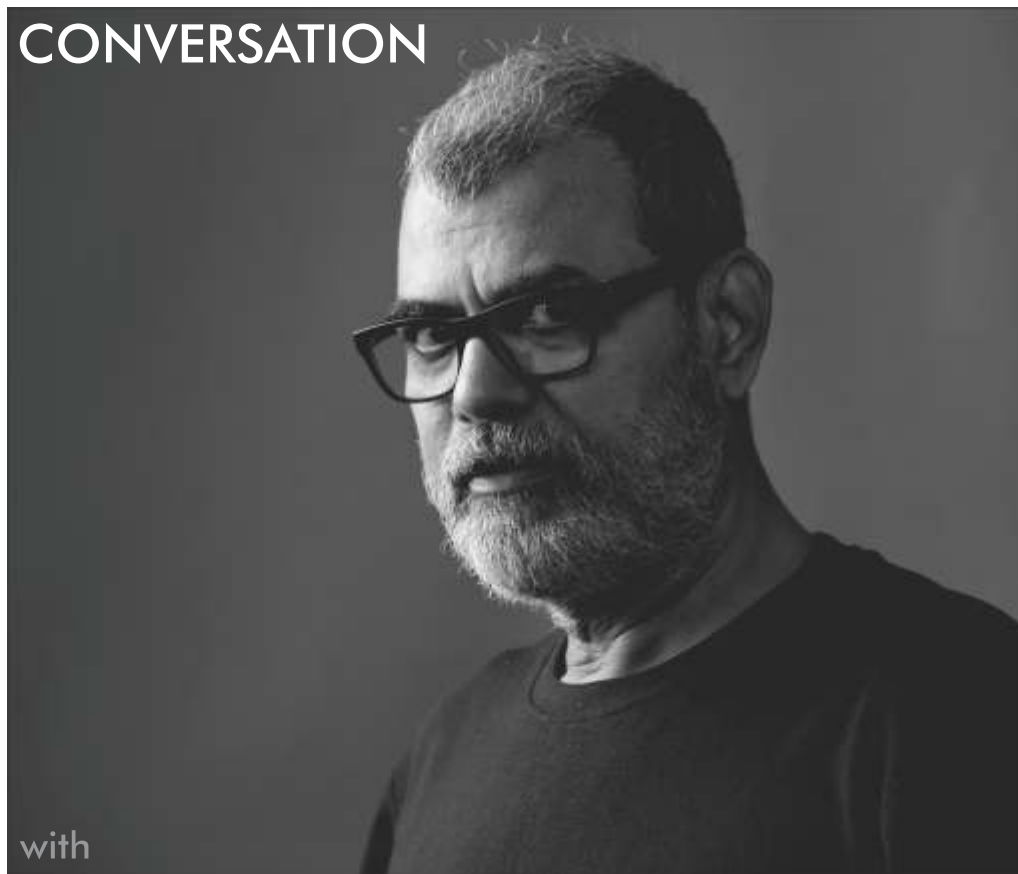
Queen - II, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas



Queen - III, 60" x 44", Acrylic, tempera & silk screen on canvas

CHANDRA BHATTACHARJEE

IN CONVERSATION



with

Sankarlal Bhattacharjee

It for quite some time that I've been watching with due care Chandra Bhattacharjee's work. He has a very different and exclusive approach to painting. About which I've always nursed a set of questions. But today I'd like to begin with a question that I've also asked the other painters in this Mahabharat project. Were these episodes your own selection?

I knew four of us were going to handle the project. Jyotirmoy had prepared a choice for all of us. But I guess we did not stick to the sets he had in mind. Which is why some of our choices have overlapped.

A persistent theme of your painting over years has been security, or more correctly, the lack of it. Which is plaguing the minds of modern day men and women.

Actually I've grown up in very open spaces. In that kind of surroundings a feeling of insecurity is just quite natural.

Where was that place?

In a small village called Patuli in Bardhaman. Our house was in the middle of a seemingly endless expanse of green paddy field. The nearest house to our place was at least a quarter mile away. If per chance dacoits fell upon our house there was none to take notice of it, for the clamour of the raid, noises struck by the attack, wouldn't reach anywhere. So when I came to study at college in Kolkata the individual premises that I got to see— complete with doors, windows, fences etc.— gave an impression of jails where light and winds were not allowed in as, it were. All of this introduced me to a new world. Everything secured by grills from which we ourselves even couldn't escape. Just to think that our conversations with next-door neighbours are held from within grilled spaces. In the outer world, sort of, we

come across other sets of grills. Like in the bank we are interacting across grilled counters. Or perhaps when we are purchasing drinks from across grilled counters at liquor shops. Grills, then, are nearly everywhere at jewellery showrooms. Which again are duly guarded by armed personnel. All these images of secured spaces gave me, somehow, curious feelings of insecurity. A feeling of claustrophobia as well.

In the four paintings you have worked on the Mahabharat weapons are a common factor. There is not a scene where bow and arrows or some such weapon is not shown.

When I decided to go into the episodes of the epic I decided also not to repeat scenes that I've seen on TV serials or films or illustrations in books and what not. My chief concern all the time was that my canvas will not be illustrative. Since I grew up studying Santhals going deep into the village I knew pretty well that my characters of the epic will emerge from those drawings and studies. Through Santhals I could visualise physical struggle. They indeed, in form and physique, inhabit my study of the epic. In other words, in my portrayal of Mahabharat I was trying to create connectivity between the timeless and the contemporary.

Even the episode dealing with Arjun's travels in different places of the huge country inspired me to depict him as a hunter like the Santhals. There is a picture where he is shown with his bow and arrows and looking almost like a female. The image there of Arjun nearly resembles the female forms that I have drawn elsewhere. But the struggle however is the same.

The four paintings that we get in this selection don't offer close-ups of faces which is very characteristic of your style.

Indeed. There are no close-ups of the characters.

Whereas the psychological nature of your paintings are broadly based on close-ups, probing into faces, lines and looks. Your faces keep us thinking.

I perhaps need to tell you that the long years I've been working with figures I've also gone about using my camera to catch features of faces, expressions and temperamental curves. The photographs to me were diaries in which were located psychologies of faces, the close-





ups of moods and mentalities. But in those pictures there are no hints or suggestions of the surroundings. The faces and characters themselves provide a roadmap to where they are situated. I reach the circumstances through the stories told by the faces.

Also, mind you, I'm also drawn to landscapes. My camera took me to huge, sprawling landscapes. And this art of visualising faces and spaces have gone into my portrayal of the lonely Arjun out in the dark, studying stars and planets and wondering on the future of the Pandavs in the years to come.

You have painted Bhishma. Where exactly have you located him? And wherefrom have you drawn him from the epic?

Principally it came from my figuration practice and study of landscapes. The small bits of news that circulate our daily lives— for instance, the suicide of a farmer strung by loans, it pains me so much that it also creeps into my picture of a grand, extended death of Bhishma. Yes, of course, I had to put him inside a landscape where there is a sunset or a rising of the moon, and then a perspective of how the world goes by when you are counting moments to death. All the arrows are broken and fallen, time seems to have stopped still, and Bhishma observes the long long years of his life pass like cinema across his memory. That extended time of his death on the bed of arrows I have kind of extended even further in my painting. Bhishma is witnessing the movie of Mahabharat in his mind's eye. That revelation of Mahabharat, that understanding of the epic I've held as my subject in my painting.

Well, you have painted Draupadi. Is it at the court where she is disrobed?

Yes. Because I've taken it symbolically. The blue hand, arguably that of Sri Krishna, appears to be protecting her from the dishonour.

The famous Mahabharat scholar Johann Jakob Meyer in his esteemed and authoritative book *Sexual Life in Ancient India* has clearly stated that Draupadi was virtually standing naked in the court of the Kauravs. Latter day interpolations have inserted the Krishna segment to dress the depressing situation of the heroine. Well, you, as a modern painter, had the liberty to use the nude.

I do not believe in the fantasies actually. But I couldn't accept that public humiliation of

Draupadi. My criticism of the whole episode lurks behind the scene in the form of a shadow— that of Shakuni. You can probably identify the shadow of shakun or vulture. It is the use of the shadow which creates the source of interpretation.

Have you symbolised Krishna with the flute?

No. These are several dices that have caused the tragedy. The dices are burning and I have held them in a close-up.

The posture of the nearly naked Draupadi... is it surrender?

Almost surrender. The complete helplessness of a lady amidst a courtful of Kaurav seniors who are also helplessly watching the shameful act. This is a feature of our contemporary times. How many numberless crimes have we to watch helplessly? The court of the dice game is very much around here today. And that brings back my theme of insecurity. Besides this poignant humiliation of the heroine Mahabharat is replete with malicious politics and adharm or injustice. Mahabharat is considered to be dharmayuddh or war of justice. But through and through it is a story of injustice, foul play, lies and deception. It immaculately resembles our time. Abhimanyu's death is modern day mob lynching. One does not need to know rocket science to see the parallels.

This picturisation of Draupadi... is it your criticism to dharm?

Absolutely. This is to me most excruciatingly painful moment of the epic. Then there is the burning of the house of the Pandavs. I've held it at an angle to show it larger than life. And then of course that beautiful moment of Brihannala i.e. Arjun observing the mysterious skies...it also poses my concern for security. She is by appearance a woman, covering a male character. But she has in this frame a noble manly attitude. Arjun and Brihannala are two faces but the same psychology. Which brings the theme into my domain of style and portraiture. Which is question, question and further question. Mahabharat like all great literature poses more questions than answers. Which is why we deal with it over years and years and years. Or, probably, the answer is within the questions.





Untitled - I, 48" x 72", Acrylic on canvas



Untitled - II, 84" x 60", Acrylic on canvas



Brihannala, Acrylic on canvas, 72 in X 48 2022



Untitled - IV, 84" x 60", Acrylic on canvas

JAYA GANGULY

IN CONVERSATION



Sankarlal Bhattacharjee

My guest today is Jaya Ganguly or, to be precise, I'm the guest at her studio. She is, as the art world knows, a very precious and gifted artist, with a very distinct style of her own. So starkly different from anything you get to see these days that at a glimpse you identify a Jaya piece.

My question to Jaya is— Is it the first time you are working with something from the *Mahabharat*?

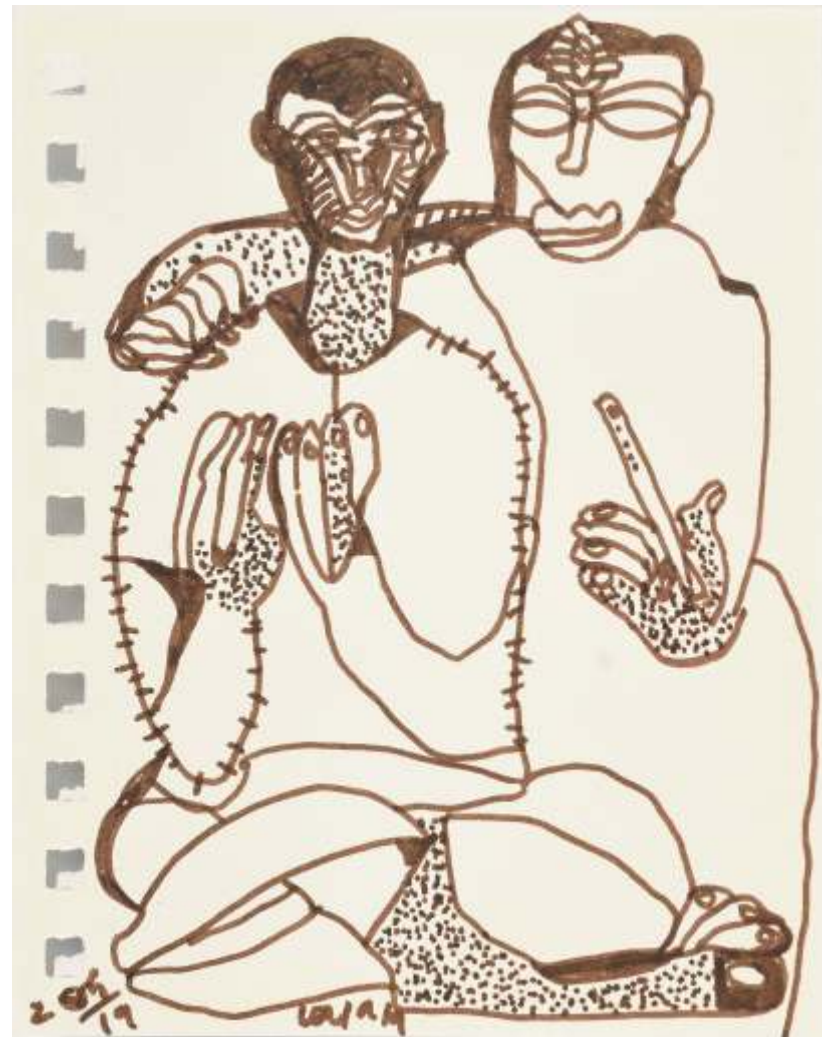
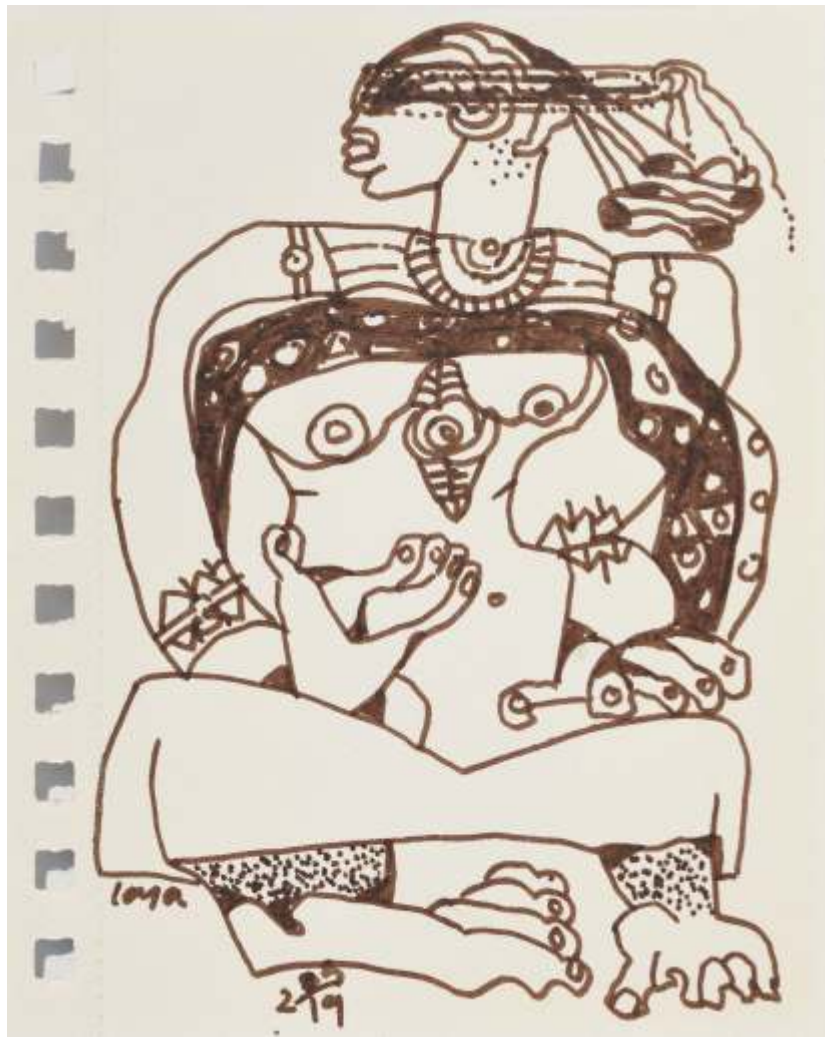
Absolutely. This is my first encounter with the epic. The day Jyotirmoy came with the proposal that he was curating contemporary works on the *Mahabharat* and asked me to be a part of it I couldn't resist.

You then chose your topics from the epic?

Yes. One or two I suppose. Like I suggested Bhisma's lying on the bed of arrows and also an episode where Gandhari occurs. Both the episodes I nearly screamed to declare as my own. And then I decided to work on the game of dice. Even today don't we witness games of dice all around?— Whether in politics or in statecraft, our daily lives, and where not? As a matter of fact we are continuously turning and turning round an enormous wheel of dice. This is an everlasting story, and I decided to use the episode to bring out that narrative.

You mean taking the game as a form of plunder?

And that too involving all forms of chicanery. Like in our times you are all set to win everything if you had the power of money. In the time of the epic you had the arch and archetypal cheat in the form of Shakuni. It is to balance this deception and imposter that the saintly character of Krishna had to be introduced. So basically it becomes not merely a battle of greed and strength but of two moralities.



Before I come to your painting I would like to point out the one great failing of Yudhishthir— his unbounded passion for gambling. And it is very clear too that he knew about Shakuni's immense craftiness in dice.

Oh yes yes.

But it was his pride in his gambling that drew him not once but twice to the fateful game of dice.

I did realise while working on the epic that Yudhishthir was a victim of his ego. He almost crossed the red line when having lost everything he owned he went on to put a bet on his wife Draupadi. Not merely ego, I consider this as suicidal pride. He had literally lost the game before he had sat down to play. It is also a form of domination. He even ignores the advice of Vidur who constantly opposes the game of challenge. When I look around today I see many such blunders being perpetrated by people falling victim to their egos.

Now to your painting. What is the tragedy you have tried to explore in this painting?

Look here— this is a sweet, puzzling game that Krishna plays with the Kauravs. He has committed to go with the party who falls in his line of vision when he wakes from sleep. It is his *kapatnidra* or fake nap. The Kauravs in their great ego settles near his head so that on waking he finds them first. The Pandavs, actually Arjun, sit at his feet. And as luck would have it, Krishna when he opens his eyes he looks to the feet and notices Arjun. This whole game, however, is pre-planned by Krishna. Because he wants to take sides with the Pandavs.

Eventually what is the dominant emotion of your *Mahabharat* package? The fall of pride or the struggle for *nyaya* or justice?

I would say both. In the personality of Duryodhan I identify pride of power, in the form of Yudhishthir the acute suffering he and his brothers go through to secure justice.

Don't we see a sharp censoring of Yudhishthir in this portrayal?

I do harbour some anger towards Yudhishthir because of his exerting influence over his brothers

at the game of dice. Duryodhan, however, is built on ego and pride, and he exercises this spirit throughout. He is totally responsible for whatever he does including the curse he brings on his family and clan. But the ultimate deception is that of Shakuni who enters the scene with his hidden agenda of destroying his sister Gandhari's clan, the Kauravs. He knows that the Pandavs are the chief weapon to be hurled at the Kauravs. So we know who's who and why. This is my understanding of the *Mababharat*. The whole epic is based on cruel, hidden games of dice.

Your placing the dice-board at the base of the picture has a certain suggestion. That the dice draws the players to a baser level. Right?

Absolutely. That is the message behind the placement of the board. You do not rise with this kind of games of charades. They only draw you down and down and leave you to vanish beneath the ground.

Well, you are a girl from Kalighat. . .

No, I'm not from Kalighat, I'm a girl from Bhowanipore. I've decided to live at Kalighat.

You lived at Kalighat and Kali has been your subject.

Kali is still my subject.

When Kali is your subject, why such a late entry into *Mababharat*?

Actually the opportunity never came. I have been working on a definite plan and craft over years. If you study my older works you will notice that most of it is built on my own life. All the experiences that I have been through. In other words, I've transferred myself into my works.

The female gender is your subject. Isn't so?

Indeed. Because it is me that I'm always watching and observing. This me I distort and break in my work. When you look at my paintings you see that woman— me behind me behind me.

Why don't you observe this woman in her beauty and good looks? You break her, distort her to create some ugliness, if one may say so.

Not really. Ugliness is also part of our beautification. Sheer beautiful has no meaning. There's a lot of beauty in ugliness too.

You think this to be reality?

Yes, I take it as reality. What I see I draw.

You have a natural attraction towards horrifying images. Do you infer those horrors from what you see or you imagine them of your own?

Since I cannot write I cannot communicate these horrors through description by words. They inhabit my painting, because that is what I can do.

Your paintings are replete with images of women. Do they signify any position vis-à-vis the male kind? Do you consider female to be anti-male?

Oh no no no! Not in the least. Since I grew up in a very conservative family, where there was always a wall between male and female, my world was constricted into a very feminine one. I have only been able to mix with men when I came out of the family. It was almost a discovery. And men did not figure in my world as antagonistic to the female kind.

When you were offered a free choice of episodes from *Mababharat* how is it you did not choose the disrobing of Draupadi as a moment to project on canvas?

Actually we were given choice of four episodes. Of those four options I had two automatic choices. Draupadi and Gandhari. Gandhari chooses to bind her eyes to block vision since her

husband is blind. I have always found this an utterly unnecessary gesture. Would Dhritarastra, her husband, have done the same if she were blind? Probably he wouldn't have married her even, leave alone blinding himself.

You have a special attraction to the character and personality of Krishna. Does his Vrindavan attract you also?

Yes, it does. But then again his leaving Vrindavan and all the *gopinis* of the place hurts me also, being a woman myself. His departure from the place and from the life of Radha hurts me. It's pathetic.

Now we come to a very poignant and philosophical moment of *Mahabharat*. Bhishma, whose death is self-willed is lying on a bed of arrows. What is your take on this scene?

The rival armies sit down to listen to his advice and exhortation.

How do you look at this?

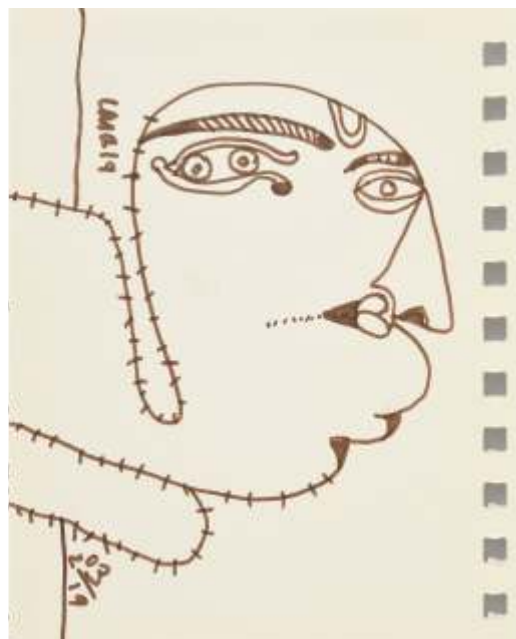
Bhishma is a character much after my heart. A sage of a man he holds the entire Kauravs and Pandavs together. After Bhishma the character I like most is Karna.

Don't some of Karna's actions put you off?

Oh of course. I've been hurt and very miserably hurt. Such a brave warrior at times stoops so low as to dishonour Draupadi— it could be appalling. But of course Karna has his greatnesses too. But Bhishma overall is an ideal man. I feel for him when I see him sitting helplessly at the court when Draupadi is insulted.

So you see it as a tragedy— the scene where he lies on the bed of arrows waiting for death as also witnessing the vanishing of his clan?

Yes of course. His death is self-willed, so it is not entirely tragic. I have not portrayed him as they did in the television serial on *Mahabharat* where he is shown with a huge pile of grey hair and beard. Do wise men have to have grey hair and beard? But I have kept his crown intact. In my depiction I have tried to extract pathos and poignance. Isn't his life a continuous story of sacrifices? I have not even shown red blood on his body. And nowhere there is any facial expression of pain. There is a certain satisfaction in him that eventually justice has won. The Pandavs are victorious.

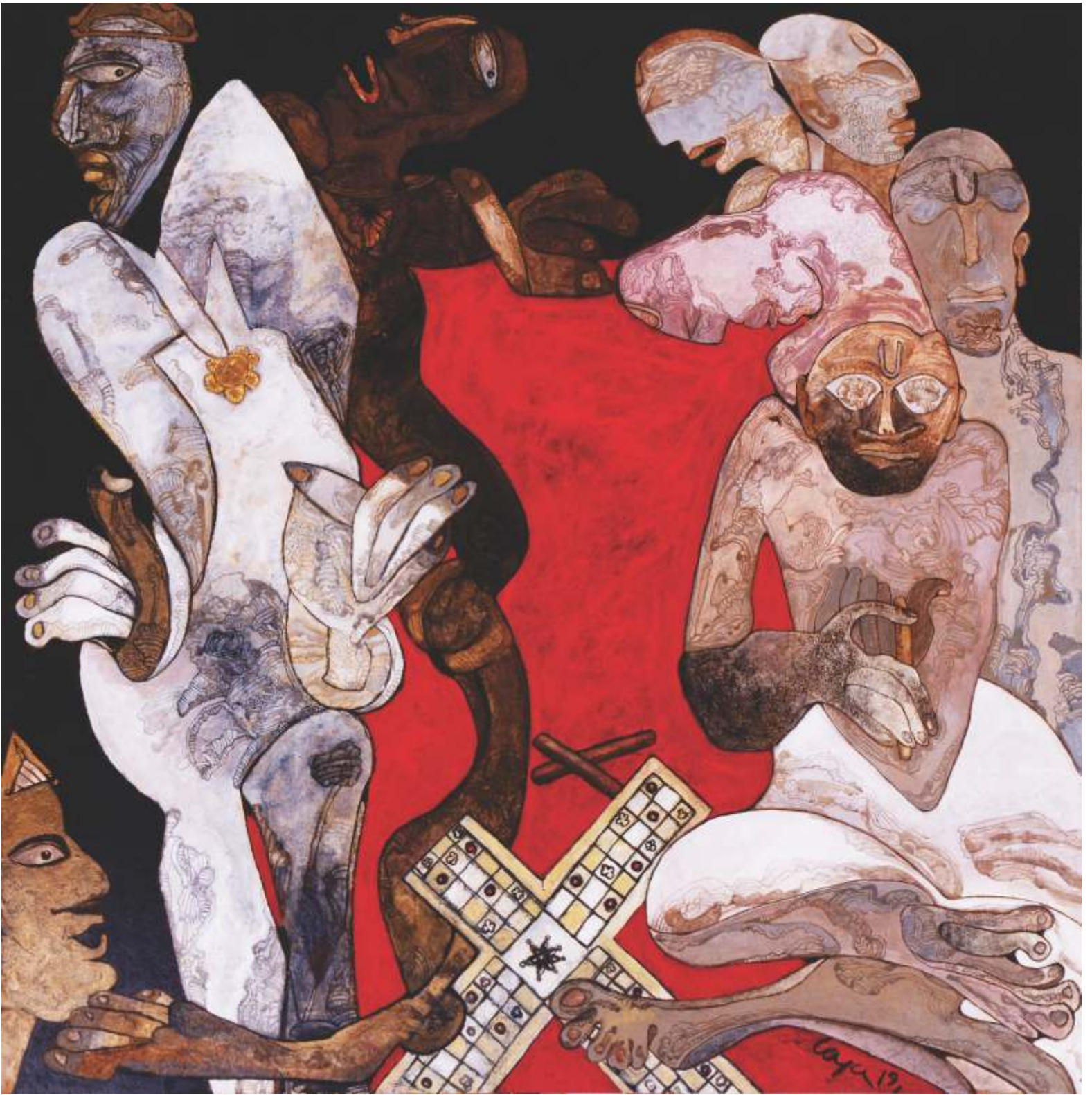




Gandhari, 60" x 36", Acrylic, conte & rice paper on canvas



The Determinant, 48" x 72", Acrylic, conte & rice paper on canvas



The Game, 60" x 60", Acrylic, conte & rice paper on canvas



Pitamaha, 60" x 60", Acrylic, conte & rice paper on canvas

SAMIR AICH

IN CONVERSATION



Sankarlal Bhattacharjee

Today we are face to face with a quite remarkable artist of our time, Samir Aich, whose works, one hopes, would be remembered for a pretty long time. We are here in connection with the *Mahabharat* project of which he is a part. The question to begin with is: Do you see a lot of *Mahabharat* in our own time? This painting of yours could be taken as a tribute to Picasso's *Guernica*. Right?

I've always asked myself, 'Is there anything new in the world?' There are a lot of things, the sun for example, at which we have been looking for an eternity, or the oppression of people, another pressing factor over eternity. Picasso interpreted it in his own way and we, artists all around the world, are doing so our own ways whenever occasion rose. When I started work on *Mahabharat*— I have never worked with *Mahabharat* or any epic for that matter, it was only when Jyotirmoy came with a proposal that I started to consider how to go about it. I had seen a great number of illustrations of *Mahabharat* as a kid, and they still hang on my mind. So the first question that came to my mind was how to get out of all this? And what should be my form of interpreting?

Mahabharat probably is the only epic which corresponds with our daily life today— our act of survival. Even to survive is a battle, and our societies are so many Kurukshetras. Beginning to work with *Mahabharat* I realised my feet were on the ground and I was only capturing my own period. So, as you suggested, similarities with Picasso's *Guernica* may be seen.

No, I'm not talking about similarities, but your kind of tribute— the cries of the horse and the people falling, etc.

Consider for instance Abhimanyu who is collapsing, whose groans can't be seen, but his

screams are perceptible through the horse. I captured the screaming of the horse on which he was riding.

Is it to accentuate the pain that you have used such highly contrasted colours, when you principally work with light and shade?

Because the slaughter of Abhimanyu was cruel. A young warrior is killed in an unfair way, and shown no respect.

Do you see red as blood?

Not just as blood; there are two things— the twilight and the atmosphere of the war field—the red capturing the excitement.

The cruel laughter after the slaughter of the boy is an unsurpassed brutal scene of the epic. Were you told to work on this scene or did you make the selection yourself?

I was told, and I am happy with that. I still see the same happening all around me in society when such brutalities are perpetrated for reasons political or religious. And the scoundrels are living the life comfortably and laughing their ways back home.

I think there is a hint of mob lynching here.

Of course, of course. Many of the lynchings are not merely at the heat of the moment—but cautiously preplanned and organized. Many of the victims of such lynchings are children. Not merely in our country but all around the world. Think of the Middle East. Abhimanyu stands out here as a metaphor.

So you observe a cyclical pattern in the bloodbath of *Mahabharata*?

At one point we are all involved in cycles.

So this is your panoramic view of Kurukshetra?

While working on this I had a curious feeling that if someone assigned me to do this work



on a 100×15 ft. canvas I would have found more peace. Because this moment is so vast.

Well, this is a scene where the end moment is captured. Right? The war is drawing to an end, the heroes are fallen, and there is a celebration of death through the songs— the cries, the shouts, etc. Almost a carnival of death. A play of light and shadow can be observed.

Yes, yes, playing with this light and shadow was fun. The picture is basically two dimensional. But don't we create three dimensional illusions in two dimensional spaces? I basically use lines— there is a priority of lines; and there are countless tones. These tones are volume tones, in connection with the lines apart from producing light and shade they also introduce sound. I have tried to capture the sound without disturbing the lines.

The bits of white highlights that we get to see in this picture— are these imposed or



extracted from the canvas?

Yes, I have kept them there from the beginning. Immediately it appears like a two dimensional picture, but it's not. It has at least 8—10 layers underneath. If you care to look inside, there are numerous drawings. And if you look at the painting from a certain distance it would seem that this white is not just white.

Quite right. And it also has a textile finish. There's a lot of stories strewn in drapery.

Yes, the reason for this is the under layering, under texturing, under picturisation. This is such a big war loaded with uncountable events, happenings that have not much logic. So I have used dots to create sound. The painting is apparently black and white, but I have used colour lines in many places almost converting it into a colour canvas. Coloured lines within black and white spaces are layers.

You have kept a pair of broken glasses at the bottom of the painting.

The glasses are there for a reason. There are also mobiles, as there are revolvers. They indicate our daily struggle, which are not outside of the *Mahabharat*. The glasses are for signifying our times and our ordinary lines. They are broken in this war of life.

Seeing these glasses reminds me of another picture of yours. A painting you kept untitled. It had a man's head from behind and a pair of glasses lying far away. It seemed like Gandhi to me. A man lying on the ground and we see a little blood at a distance.

The semblance of Gandhi was not intended. I don't usually do such work. But this was a very sensitive work. It was done for a solo exhibition of mine at CIMA. So the background of these glasses and those glasses are different.

What was the background of that picture?

Everyday life. Loneliness, detachment and age.

Modigliani had a painting with glasses lying on a table and the glasses were meant to be a metaphor.

Of course. We artists use visuals for metaphors.

Whose killing in *Mahabharat* did you think of while creating this painting?

The slaughter of Dusshasan. When Bhim killed him and drank his blood. This scene of blood-drinking would have been very gruesome for a painting of today. So I broke it into a different category. I took a contemporary form and used the colours to make it seem like



the Pandavs are ecstatic over the cruelty of the slaying.

And the excitement on the face of Bhim because he has kept his promise.

The exultation has been captured.

Draupadi had said, “Until Bhim drinks his blood and I drench my hair in it, I will not bind my hair, I will keep it loose.” In this picture the impact is caused by the moment— Bhim had torn the body and blood has spread around.

That is it. I made the blood a bit faded because we have to think how much crudity we can take. I'm not showing violence, I'm showing revenge.

Your painting can also be taken as a criticism of war.

To be honest, ultimately nobody is a winner in a war. In fact, we actually kill our own selves.

In *Mababharat* there's a beautiful saying. Yaksha is asking Yudhishthir, “What is wonder?” Yudhishthir answers, “That people are dying day after day, but those who are alive go about life as if they are immortal.”

Shall I go to the next picture? We come to a painting once more where there is a mysterious play of light and dark.

Because the content is such. When Janamejay decided he would destroy all the snakes and started *yajna*, namely *sarpayajna*. Were I to capture the *yajna* I could not do it without chiaroscuro. Although it is a two dimensional work the light and shadow is used to capture the multiple levels of the scene.

And in the midst of all this there is a hint of darkness, as to what will gradually emerge? What emerges eventually is a long narration which is the *Mababharat*.

Yes. There is a lot of it in your work.

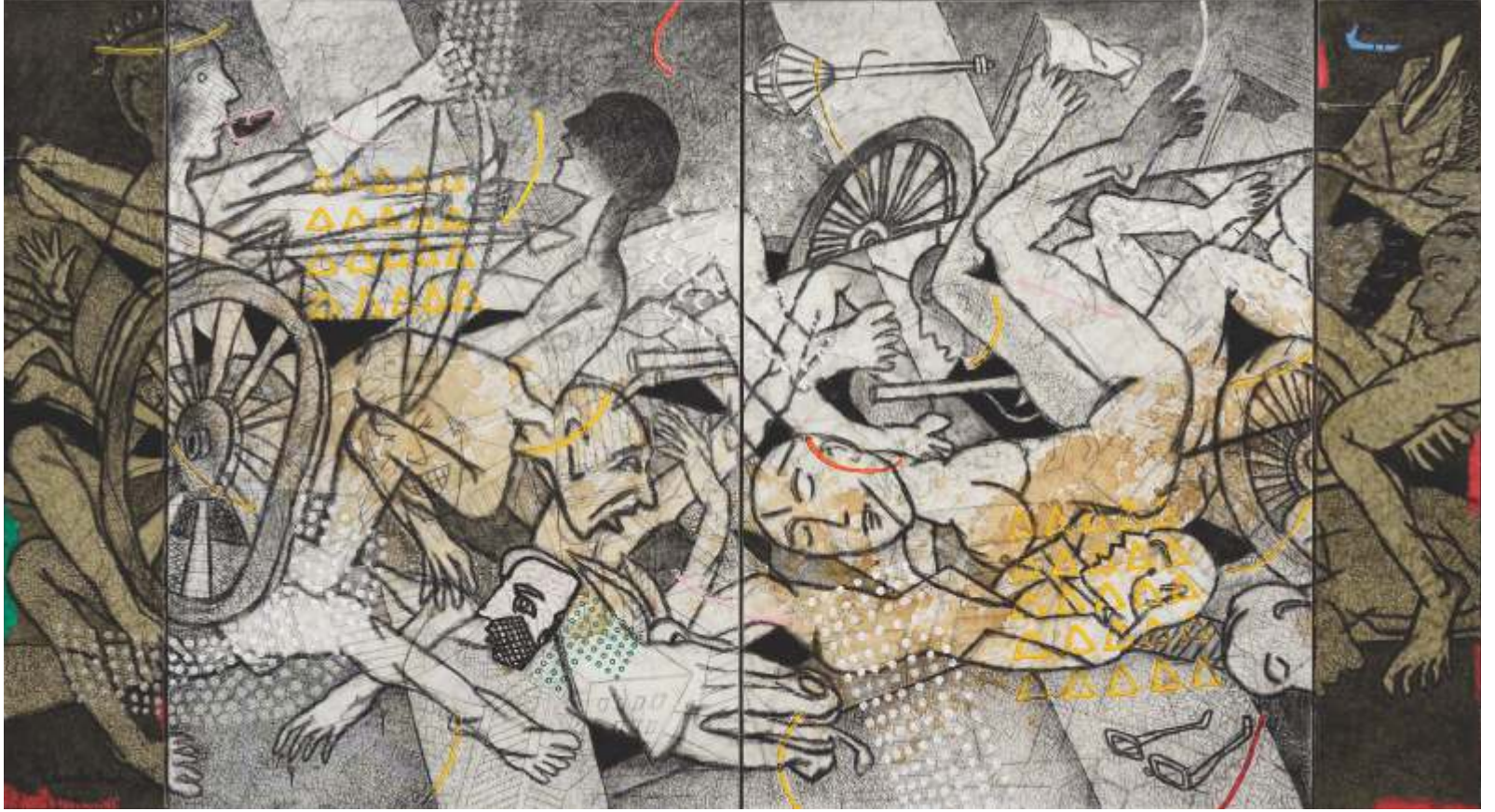
Do you identify these snakes as terrorists of today?

I could. This is in a neutral space. Painters also have to keep a space which is neutral, allowing people to think their own way. Some artists do it consciously while some leave it unconsciously.





72" x 66", Acrylic, conte on canvas



Kurukshetra, 58" x 108", Acrylic, conte on canvas



The beginning, 60" x 60", Acrylic, conte on canvas



The promise, 60" x 84", Acrylic, conte on canvas



Aditya Basak (b. 1953) received his art degree from the Govt. College of Art and Craft, Calcutta in 1977. A winner of scores of awards in India and abroad he has already being a part of 100 group shows. He has participated in Bharat Bhavan Biennale, in the Icon Art Gallery, New York exhibition and Indian triennial of World Art celebrating 50 years of Indian Independence. He has exhibited in Toronto, Berlin, Munich, Singapore, London, Hong Kong and Bangladesh.

He video work 'Death foretold' was screened at the Indo- British Film Festival organised by British council in 2001. His other works 'Chronicle' was screened at the first short film festival of CSFF at Nandan, Kolkata 2004.

His works are in collections of Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, NGMA - Delhi, Birla Academy, Tata Steel, SBI and in private collections all around the world.



Chandra Bhattacharjee (b.1960) graduated from the Indian College of Art and Draughtsmanship with a first class in 1986. He received a gold medal from Rabindra Bharati University in 1986 for excellence in fine arts. He received the Taj Gaurav award in 2008. He had started his career as a billboard artist.

He has held multiple solo shows all around the country and abroad. He has exhibited his work The Gallery in Cork Street, London, in collaboration with Threshold Art. His works have also featured at Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi; Sumukha Art Gallery, Bangalore; Gallery Beyond, Mumbai; Art Heritage, New Delhi, Gallery 88, Kolkata and Gallery Veda, Chennai .

Chandra's works are imbued with his environment, the changes, his emotion, his response. Discomfiting undercurrents belie the apparent calmness of his canvas. His medium is entirely visual, his language eloquently unspoken.



Jaya Ganguly (b. 1958) graduated from the Indian College of Arts, Kolkata in 1980. Figure, forms, object, masks, landscapes in violent dislocation, all in the whirl of movement, constitute Jaya's universe with blots and blocks of colour. From her debut solo exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata she has held several gallery and museum exhibition, including Womanhood Through The Eyes of Indian Modern and Contemporary Art at Tao Art gallery. She was invited to participate in the Festival of India, Sweden in 1987. Her major collections are in the NGMA Delhi, the Consulate of the Netherlands, New Delhi and many private national and international organisations.



Samir Aich (b. 1957) graduated from the Govt. College of Art and Craft, Calcutta in 1978. He has been painting almost for three decades now. He started out as a neo-realist and gradually moved into semi-abstract figurative themes. Since the turn of the last century, he has been constantly experimenting with new pictorial concepts and ideas. His sculptures and installations are complimentary to his painted expression. He has exhibited in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Cehnnai. he has been participating in group shows in India and abroad since 1984.



Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya has emerged recently as an art curator of note. He has been curating major shows around the country and abroad. He started out with his exhibition 'Insignia' in Bangalore in 2009. In 2010 he offered a unique curation titled 'Bengal Drawings' at Time & Space Gallery of Bangalore. In 2011 he mounted 'Tribute to Tagore' at Alliance Francaises, Bangalore. Jyotirmoy organised a national art workshop at Santiniketan where the eminence grises of modern Indian art world were all brought together. K G Subramanian, Anjolie Ela Menon, Manu Parekh, Prabhakar Kolte and Jogen Chowdhury were among the participants there. He has also conducted an art tour in southern China with eminent artists of India. He has been curating the permanent collection of the State Bank of India for the past four years and has been invited as an art curator to the NABC 2015 & 2016 in USA. A few of his notable projects are retrospective exhibition of Jogen Chowdhury at NGMA, Bangalore; Sculpture of Lalu Prasad Shaw and Illustrations of Mahabharat :19th century wood engravings.



Sankarlal Bhattacharjee is literally a midnight's child being born on the 15th of August, 1947. A writer and journalist he has more than 50 books to his name. He has co-authored the memoirs of Pundit Ravi Shankar, Usted Vilayat Khan and Hemanta Mukhopadhyay. He ranked first in MA (English) from Calcutta University and later studied journalism on an EEC scholarship in Paris. Sankarlal's novels include 'Pateswari', 'Vatsayan O Brindabani', 'Cabaret' and 'Ei ami eka anya'. His short stories are included in titles like 'Gandhir Atayee', 'Muhurta Katha', 'Anglo Chand' and 'No 10 Minto Lane'. His collections of essay number more than 30. Notable among which are 'Darshaniker Mrityu', 'Priya Gadya' and 'Sahityer Swad'. He is known for his extremely attractive and haunting prose.