

Interview

When conceptualization is the key word

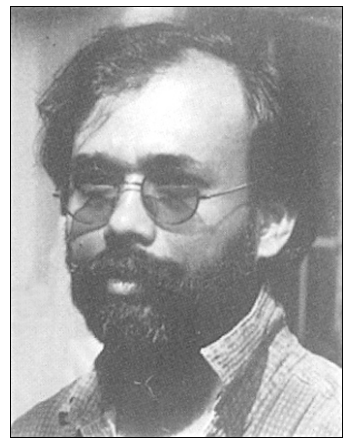
Wakilur Rahman, from Berlin talks of his works, sitting at "Chitrak"

FAYZA HAQ

WAKILUR Rahman, who has been in Berlin for over a decade now, and recently held his exhibition at Gallery "Chitrak", asked why he preferred to stay in Germany, whether it was to learn more or exhibit with ease, said, "I'm in Germany basically due to my family circumstances, as my wife Utha Steinart is an art historian there and I have my two children by her, who are leading a fairly comfortable life there. Professionally, I'm

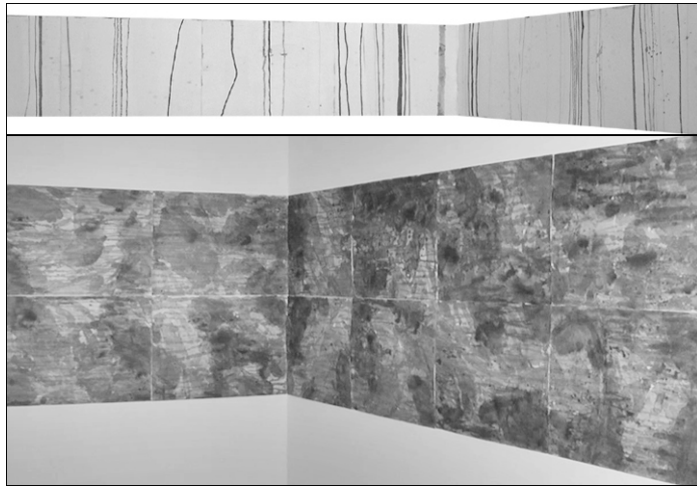
specially from Russia, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Spain and France come here to exhibit their works as Berlin is an experimental city specially geared to works of artists. Frankfurt is the city with business but nevertheless this is the heart of culture in Germany. However, I try my best, but according to the trade union in Berlin, it is only six or seven per cent of the artists living in Berlin can easily sell their art and the rest have to do something besides their art work in order to make a living. I myself I work in the galleries to arrange the exhibits as the exhibit designing is a different and prestigious profession in Europe. I try to get some job connected with art such as graphic workshops, for children and adults, when I get the offers."

Talking about how he had gone far into the world of abstraction so that an average viewer in Bangladesh would require some footnotes in order to appreciate his works, whether he was influenced by the bleak weather in Germany or whether abstraction is now the demand of the day, or whether it was the manner he can now best express himself, Wakilur Rahman said, "I studied in China and before 1992, I always did figurative work in the socio-political context with some symbolism in them. In Bangladesh, at that time, we had the 'Somai' with my colleagues like Shishir Bhattacharya, Dhali Al Mamun and Nisar Hossain. They do that type of work even today. My experience in China and after my moving to Europe, I had some distance with my own country, and suddenly I realized that the space in which I had been working was somewhat narrow. My changing of places and travel influenced my work. I don't think that the ultimate in painting or printing is abstraction. I feel that whether a painting is to be realistic or abstract is not a subject for a debate. The important thing is the idea of the artist and what the artist wants to do.



Wakilur Rahman

working there in peace and I'm certainly learning a lot staying in Berlin. There are 450 exhibitions going on at the same time in Berlin ranging from art galleries, museums and doctors' chambers there so that there is plenty of possibilities to see and learn. I exchange views of a lot of artist friends and this also helps me with my work. Again, I get opportunities to see a lot of exhibitions in Europe as the visa system is simpler now and you can travel with ease ranging from Paris to London. I went to USA too once in 1988, when I went for a project at Los Angeles, but restrict myself to Europe most of the times. However, it is not easier to sell in Germany as there are many competing artists as Berlin is in the middle of the east and west of Europe and European artists,



Samples of work by Wakilur Rahman

"For living we need food, but it is also true that we need oxygen: both are important, as without any of them we cannot live. Yet oxygen is abstract. Both food and oxygen are also necessary for the socio-political survival. I feel that realistic paintings or conceptual works are things which I enjoy myself if they are aesthetic and communicative. The minimal work is a view of the artist's aesthetic view and art history tells you that in different periods people have different type of aesthetic sense as regards art, architecture and other aesthetic designs. If you even look at the architecture around you, you will see that minimalism plays a great role. We understand that as humans we are only a small part of the nature around us. In order to survive we have to be conscious of life, wastage and the necessity for minimizing. I feel that minimal art is a condition of our present sensibility."

Dwelling on the techniques of print-making, Wakilur Rahman said, "I studied oil painting in Bangladesh before coming to Germany in 1988. Before that I began print making as I was interested in it as I have a small home, with a small studio and there is the only solution is print on paper, which I can store in cupboards. I

want to participate in various exhibitions and this is possible for me only through the print media where I can send my work through the post. Again, it is relatively easier to sell a print even though it is not cheap. Surprisingly, prints are cheaper in Europe than in Bangladesh, as they have a different tradition of prints. When I came to a different country, I tried new techniques. First I tried lithography which is printing with stone, but I found that this did not go with my character and so I tried printing on aluminium, which has the same technique as etching on stone: it is the further development of offset printing, and I use my hands. I wasn't satisfied with that and so I moved on to etching on zinc or copper plates. As I enjoyed that I continued in that medium. It was in Germany that I went into etching: I hadn't done it before, I had learnt the etching in Berlin Art College. As a guest student I went there to work and as I had a degree each from Bangladesh and China, I didn't have to study there but worked at will. However, I learnt from the professors, and so my art work progressed."

Asked to talk about the possible problems that he faced as a young immigrant artist who went to Germany, to compete with so many

other artists, Wakilur Rahman said, "It's true that I faced problems as the city is big and there is a lot of competition there; economically and politically Bangladesh does not play a big role in Europe; even culturally our neighbouring country India plays a much bigger role and people in Berlin didn't even sometimes know of the importance of art work from Bangladesh. To introduce oneself as an artist from Bangladesh, with its four or five art schools, was not easy. However, when I showed them my art work they took me seriously. In our global existence I showed them that we too were progressing in the same manner. However, to get the media interested in my works and to sell them was difficult."

Asked if it had not helped that his wife was already known in the art world in Berlin, Wakilur Rahman said, "My wife gave me moral support; she helped me criticize and analyze my work; her subject is Chinese and Japanese art and as I'd studied in China, mentally we were not far apart aesthetically or philosophically. Economically too she supported me and still does so as she has a steady job whereas my works sometimes sell and sometimes don't. She works in the Far Eastern museum in Berlin as a curator and art historian. Even now, as a free-lance artist, what I earn is enough for my studio to operate as the earning is irregular."

Touching on how different his present work now is as compared to that what he did while he was in Bangladesh, Wakilur Rahman said, "I spent a lot of time with print making: I am now older and wiser; I've seen a lot of things and have changed my residence from time to time, have travelled and seen a lot; I have contact with new artists who have generated new ideas in my own mind as a consequence. Politically and philosophically the world changed and my ideology too changed and these are the basic reasons for the change in my style and medium."

Asked to compare his success with the other well-known Bangladeshi artists, who are now residing and working overseas, like Monirul Islam, Shahabuddin, Shahid Kabir, Maruf Ahmed and Kajol, Wakilur Rahman said, "I know all of them: they are all successful artists, but up till now, what they showed in Bangladesh do not carry new ideas. They are doing the same work as they were doing before and are holding shows here in Bangladesh. They have won prizes but there is nothing new in their concepts. What I've shown in the last four years in Bangladesh is more conceptual by which I mean that I have a single thought behind the complete exhibition. It is not only the subject that I'm showing that concerns me but the space in the entire gallery, the walls and any installations that go with the exhibit. There should be a relation between the paintings and every bit of the exhibit hall. I see objects in reference to the context. There is not one way to see the works of art. Any object put in different context will have different meanings. A cigarette packet seen in the dustbin will have a certain meaning while offered on a table will have another connotation. Now, for me, the context, has vital importance."

Talking about how his work is appraised in Berlin, Wakilur Rahman said, "I have possibilities in different galleries. I took the gallery plan for the present exhibition at 'Chitrak' by e-mail and thought for three months as how I would use this space for my subjects. When I hold my shows in Berlin, I study the character of the gallery, the space, type, the gallery owner etc. sometimes I show just my graphics works and at times I include installations, which are my own such as the exhibition in 1988 that I had at the 'Mukti Jodha Jadughar'; the project had been called 'Sharok Naama' (in name of memories). I had worked for two years for this exhibitions, collecting items relating to the exhibit from Bengali newspapers in Berlin. These were small bits of

news connected with the freedom fighting. These memories are not that of heroes but that of simple people who never saw the war themselves but had links with them such as when their female members of their families at home were sexually abused and they realized this when they returned home, years back. I made books out of these news items and suspended them from the top in the museum: all these books, developed from newspaper cuttings, had black covers and people could read them as they moved along. I wanted to show that the war is over but after thirty years memories of the genocide and other misdeeds and echoes linger on. I wanted to collect and present the impact of the war."

Concluding his conversation, dwelling on his recent exhibition, "Counterspace" at "Chitrak", Wakilur Rahman said, "I worked with acrylic to create some paintings; there is also ink-work and mixed media. There are four sections in all containing a number of pieces each. In my work is a conversation with the gallery. When I paint I create space in my studio but when I bring it to the gallery the space is different. When I create the new space, I can react to my works and so can the viewers. I'm not happy with the way the paintings are exhibited in Bangladesh even by the Shilpakala Academy: pictures and installations are jammed together: there isn't much space for one to concentrate on each exhibit. There should be a design even in the presentation of the paintings, sculpture pieces and the installations. Here they tend to pile up things and somehow cover the given space in a harum-scarum, pell-mell manner with little thought to aestheticism of the final display. I saw, for instance, when I was in Dhaka once before, Mohammed Kibria's work hanging in the Shilpakala Academy in a condition so poor that it was an outrage. I showed in my way the importance of gallery designing of displays."

TV GUIDE

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