

Portraits of Self by a Master of Drawing

by Wahedul Haque



MURTAJA Baseer is one of our eminent painters. He has been so for decades. And of the proverbially eccentric lot — which disrepute has stood the community in an enviable stead from time immemorial — Baseer (what a nasty and unlettered way he writes his name) has also been the most ego-centric of them all. And desist or rather cringe from calling his predilections as narcissistic, for he is too worldly awake to take on that disease. But two things have always saved him from becoming a type character. He has, from the very start in early fifties, been on the threshold of becoming a true artist, something that the painters and musicians and architects aspire for but hardly ever reach excepting in far between cases, and continues to be tantalisingly so even at the start of the seventh decade of his life.

The second great redeeming feature has been the very purity — its utter, almost absurd, innocence — of his putting himself at the centre of the universe. This has possibly something to do with the kind of painting he has been doing over the last forty years. Almost primitive, although coming in very many variations of presentation and even perhaps style, — and never indeed contrived. Not even when he sets himself to contriving visuals without the least pretension to art — like his so-called Islamic paintings. Although the evergreenness of his personality is yet undiminished, his ego-centrism of six decades

Art exhibitions are not as rare a happening as it used to be in this city now preparing for a grand Asian show. Besides the Art Institute and the Shilpakala Academy, who are specialised bodies having paintings as almost a preserve exclusive to them — galleries like the persevering La Galerie and the grand Shilpangon have of late been turning in a very good job of bringing the works of our painters to regular public exposure. It is very much a measure of their success that several other galleries have opened in the city in the recent months — and to date all of them have been able to draw goodly crowds. Jojon is one such that calls itself a gallery of contemporary art. It has scored rapid gains first through a daring for choosing a most unlikely place for its situation — a tortuous and stenchful lane presumptuously called the Central Road. And pulling a crowd from a social profile not so far suspected of having any predisposition for things that only the hugely moneyed pretentious lot coveted. Their second big score has been to hold, on the occasion of the painter hitting 61, a retrospective of 30 self-portraits by Murtaja Baseer.



now wears old and heavy on him much as a worn cliché. Not his painting. How is that saved?

Is he much much of a colourist? Not really, in spite



of his interesting works on the gem-like stones in colours melting into each other. He is far from an intellectual painter — thanks for sparing us that abomination. He is very intrin-



sically, and instinctively, a visual man. A drawing and composition man. That being his forte, he can afford venturing forth, with the least to-epidation, into forms and for-



ms, very innovative to be sure, but unconventional too. He had been good academically but has outgrown it in good time to produce some very original numbers not easily to be categorised by pundits into genres.

In the Jojon exhibit of his self-portraits is a fitting celebration of both his person and his painting. There is portrait of Baseer himself drawn in pen on newspaper sheets by Aminul Islam that brings out the essence of Baseer more truly than Baseer's own well-crafted good likenesses of himself. And there is a pen portrait of Debidas Chakrabarty by Baseer. That is a better work than many of Baseer's self-portraits on the Jojon show. What then is there in these that must not be missed?

Baseer is also a writer of no mean achievement. He is indeed two men. And we would be grossly misled to read anything of the writer and poet Baseer in the painter rebel-scholar. The show was there to help us have a peek into how Baseer saw himself decade after decade. Very assuringly — and very refreshingly indeed — for us all, the self-portraits, all thirty of them, show us the painter Baseer saw Baseer the visage as a painterly take-off point, and nothing more. His power as a master of drawing tempts one into hoping that some day Baseer would also dabble into visual pranks after his — and his whole generation's — mentor — Pablo Picasso.

A Medley of Themes and Styles

by Fayza Haq

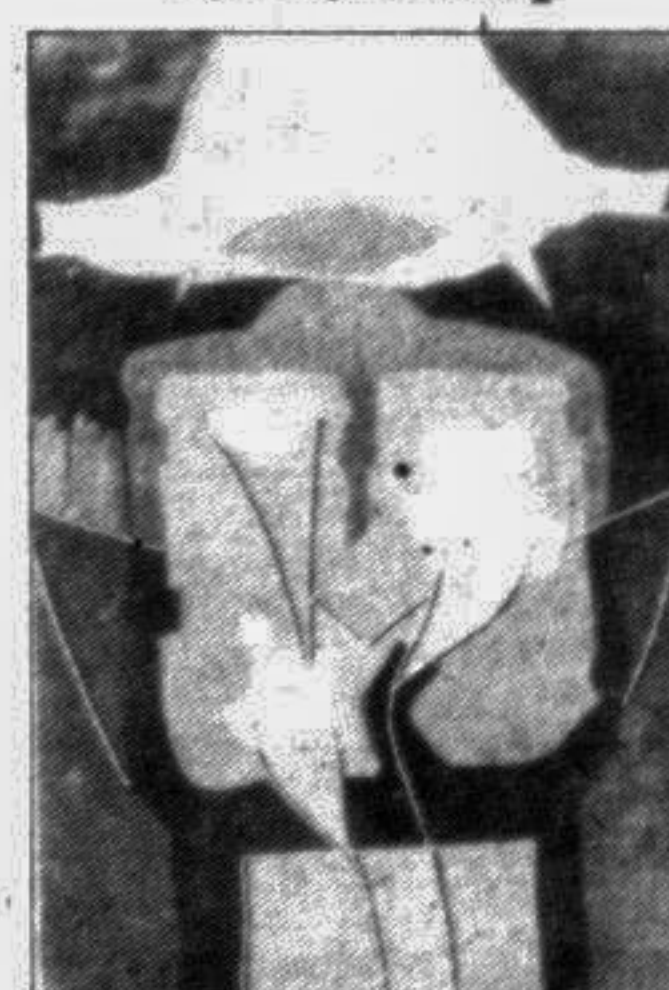
SHILPACHARCHA Kendra's exhibition at 'Gallery Tone' brought together various styles, themes and techniques of 14 artists of various age groups with outlook.

Hamiduzzaman's 'Form and Shape — I' was a model for outdoor sculpture. The lines were more lyrical than many of his earlier sculpture pieces and they were somewhat oriental. Two forms were put together by a line and the entry was navy blue and white. 'Form and Shape — II' had similarly soft and rhythmic edges, and in it two pieces of sheets with jagged edges had been put together. 'Form and Shape — III' had put together three human forms. This simplified composition represented a family, while the figures had been cut out of a single sheet. Hamiduzzaman's 'Installation' had a spiral line formed with 28 black boots. One found discipline and yet disorder due to the bent shapes of the varied boots. The artist believed that sculpture was not just figurative and that now sculptors were getting a lot more freedom than before.

Sayed Talukdar had done a decoration piece, which was a chime. This ceramic pieces consisted of rectangles and abstract figures. Talukdar had done a beautiful grey and blue ceramic fruit dish. This stone-ware had delicate patterns carved into it to allow the air to pass. 'Distorted Columns' had seven twisted columns in ash and beige. They symbolised the stress of present civilization.

Jamal Ahmed's 'Colour of Earth' and 'The Earth' were abstractions with the moon and kite vaguely apparent in a grey sky. The artist's play with texture was subtle, combining grey with white and orange.

Bulbon Osman's 'Broken Bengal' included nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian architectural forms. These were done in yellow and black against a backdrop of blue and



Inner Existence/oil on canvas/ Marlon Kaiser

red. The artist believed that under the colonial times there had been a lot of peace and harmony. In many ways. In 'Broken Bengal' one found the influence of cubism. The artist had shown socialist West Bengal in pink and Bangladesh as being a sovereign state and so was depicted as an upright yellow form. To balance the composition, Osman had brought in brownish and bluish squares. 'Eternal Bengal' brought in nostalgia for the development under the British. Since Bengal was one under the British, it was the artist's ideal concept of a homeland. Night time had been brought in for the romantic association.

Mamun Kaiser's 'Conflict' showed problems in the form of contrast between the black and white faces and the different sexes. The artist meant to bring in the various conflicts that exist in the world. The two faces were depicted against a background of blue and green. A red crucifix was intertwined into the painting of oil and pastel to reinforce the element of pain and sacrifice. 'In Mind' dealt with the problems of the inner self. An inverted crescent moon was in-

cluded in the composition to represent dreams. The red and yellow used was to denote inner tension in the abstract piece. 'Inner Existence' had impressions of flowers and hearts. An enormous eye was placed on top. The painting gave you the impression of a human form only when you stretched your imagination, and the artist elaborated on his work. Kaiser had used white chord to add to the variety of the texture to clarify the symbols.

Molub Ali's 'Peace Unidentified' was based on the break up of the Soviet Union. People were depicted as panicking at what they thought was the beginning of complete ruin, while a dove hovered in the forefront, symbolising the hope for peace. The artist's 'Life-5' and 'Life-4' depicted birds and clouds. The subjects represented the urge to struggle and live on.

Rafiqul Alam's 'The Floating World' — 1, 2, and 3 took colour and form from landscapes. Land, sky and river had been depicted in semi abstract forms.

In 'The Power' Badal Chakrabarty meant to depict modern communication in his sculpture piece, comprising parts of cycles, motor-cars and radio. Parts taken from machines once again symbolised the progress of science and technology in 'The Missile'. Meanwhile, 'The Expression' was an abstract presentation of a woman's twisted torso in wood.

Zamirul Islam had created abstract images with spray, poster colour and a play of textures on squares of yellow and grey. Salma Kaniz Chowdhury had brought in soft and lyrical presentation of peaceful nature in her landscapes and seascapes.

While the exhibition was pleasant enough, one, however, failed to find a unifying theme in the works of the various artists.

Gandhian Spirit Alive in South African Struggle

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land, and 20% of the population own and use 80% of the land. Fifty thousand white farmers have access to 12 times as much land for cultivation and grazing as the 14 million rural blacks.

This system produced a cheap supply of migrant labour for mines and factories because land in the homelands could not support them, but they were forbidden to bring families to the towns. Even today, black labour lives in hostels, while the women and children survive in the homelands. If Africans lived on the white-owned land, they had to work for the land owner.

South Africa's policies of racial segregation were further deepened with the establishment of Apartheid during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1951, the white minority National Party established 'Bantu authorities' for homelands headed by government-appointed chiefs. The apartheid state also designated specific urban areas for occupation by particular racial groups under the Group Areas Act of 1950.

The Group Areas Act was used to remove hundreds of thousands of black people from their homes and businesses to black townships like Soweto, which have no water, no electricity and no social amenities. Forced removals and evictions also affected rural communities where black homes of black workers on white farms were declared 'black spots' which had been removed to homelands or black townships.

In February 1991, the land act and area act were repealed. In March 1991, the white minority government prepared a paper on land reform but recommended the market as a means of redistribution of resources.

This was reiterated by the Environment Minister at the conference on 'What it means to be green in South Africa'. He said, 'There is no inequality anymore. Anyone can buy land anywhere in South Africa'. However, erasing certain apartheid laws from the books has not removed its imprint of resource distribution.

While it is true that the legal bar that forced blacks to live in certain areas marked for them has been removed, the historical dispossession of black ancestral lands and wealth does not get undone. Nor can blacks dispossessed of all resources, living in congested slums and home-lands, use the market to undo the barriers of apartheid. They do not have the income or purchasing power to create land rights through the market.

Land reform is therefore an imperative. To be green in South Africa involves being red.

However, nationalisation is no longer treated as an alternative. The African National Congress (ANC)'s word for redistribution of resources is 'democratisation' of land rights. The Pan African Congress's word for it is 'socialisation'.

Apartheid's legacy of inequality of land holdings by colour makes for unsustainable land use. Eighty-seven per cent of the rural areas is owned by white farmers who use chemicals and water intensively. Overcrowding in the 'homelands' and the negative patterns of large-scale white agriculture are opposite sides of the same coin. Given the low rainfall conditions of South Africa, and the current drought, water-intensive agriculture is destroying the productivity of land.

The inequality of water use by the blacks and whites is dramatically captured in the fact that the biggest cause of infant deaths in black communities is water scarcity and water-borne diseases, while the biggest cause of deaths of white children is by drowning in swimming pools.

The homelands and black settlements are not sustainable because they have no resources. As Mama Tsebo, an elderly black woman, said, 'We have been victims of painful dispossession designed by "betterment schemes". Our donkeys and goats which provided us sustenance were forcefully taken away, and compensated for at 20 cents per head. Agricultural extension workers have destroyed our ancestral legacy so that relocation could take place with minimum resistance.'

The betterment schemes have been the best strategy by Pretoria to push us into the depth of poverty. This has accelerated the migration of men to towns, women and children have been left in the homelands to survive without access to resources.'

Ethnic Violence: Pretoria's Divide-and-Rule Policy

However, even more significant than the inequalities is the violence that has been a product of apartheid. The worst example is the recent shooting of 28 people at Bisko, the capital of Ciskei, when the ANC marched peacefully to demand an end to the homeland system, a product not of African traditions but of

apartheid. The next march is planned to Ulundi, the capital of KwaZulu, the homeland run by Chief Buthelezi who heads the Inkatha Freedom Party.

The word 'homelands' for these islands of black settlements is a total misnomer, because they were artificially carved out by the apartheid regime as 'reservations' for blacks. They symbolise refugee camps more than homelands.

However, the puppet chiefs of the white regime like Cuzo of Ciskei and Buthelezi of KwaZulu invoke 'tradition' to maintain their control on the populations of the homelands. Ironically, since the homeland governments are actually controlled by Pretoria disloyalty is not loyalty to whites, but loyalty to the ANC.

The blacks are thus fighting blacks, just as Indians were pitted against Indians when the British realised they could not rule the Indian subcontinent any longer. The divide-and-rule policy is again at work in South Africa.

Apartheid's legacy has not merely created poverty, dispossession and disease, it has also created the legacy of politicised ethnic identities, like that manipulated, engineered and used by Buthelezi. In the 1950s this identity was loose, and overlapped with the ANC-led national identity of the blacks.

In 1955 Inkatha was formed as an exclusively Zulu movement. The police and the society used by Inkatha is financed by the white regime to put down popular resistance. The Chief of Police of KwaZulu, Jac Buchner, is in fact from the national government. Between 1987 and 1989, 3,000 people had been killed in the Natal/KwaZulu region as a result of politicised ethnic violence unleashed by Inkatha.

The civil servants, the schools and the police are all forced to commit allegiance to Inkatha and Buthelezi. Those who don't lose their jobs, or are killed.

Buthelezi practises and preaches violence against dissidents in KwaZulu. He has warned that once the 'political rift-rail' had been identified, 'We will shake them and drive (them) out of (our) midst, and if they are not careful they find that they run risks in what they do, one of which may be having their skulls cracked, as none of us can predict what form the anger they raise takes.'

The violence unleashed by an ethnic politics manipulated and used by the white regime has also destroyed the Ashram at Phoenix that Gandhi had set up. Gandhiji's granddaughter

Ela took me to visit the Phoenix settlement where she had grown up.

The house that he lived in has been razed to the ground. The physical structures that Gandhi built to experiment with Satyagrah against racism and the violence of the state have been destroyed.

But the spirit to fight for justice and peace is strong in South Africa as progressives of all colours join the democratic movement led by the ANC, the

Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions to give shape to a new South Africa where blacks and whites have equal rights, and red and green mix to provide the guiding principles of justice and sustainability to build a post-apartheid society. —Third World Network Features

Vandana Shiva is a leading environmental scientist in India.

New Multi-art Form Takes the Stage

Alan Jenkins writes from Dundee, Scotland

Music, painting, dance, voice and video were all combined in a unique event just staged in Scotland by an Indian-born artist, his Canadian wife and other artists. The aim is to reach multi-national and multi-racial audiences of all ages. It is also hoped that a video showing the development of the unique project will reach schools.

THE scene is a studio on an upper floor of an old jute mill in the Scottish east coast city of Dundee. Four young dancers gather round one of artist Edmund Caswell's ten-foot high canvases. Their T-shirts shout the legend: MUSSOROSKY.

The name is the key to a unique project that brings together music, painting, dance, voice and video in a new interpretation of Pictures from an Exhibition, which has just had its premiere in the Bonar Hall, Dundee.

It came about as the result of a meeting between the artist and concert pianist Norman Beedie, piano professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, who was born in Dundee.

Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky's orchestral piece, written in 1874, has for many years fascinated the pianist. Ravel's orchestration is a favourite with concertgoers worldwide. The original piano score, never published in the composer's lifetime, was a tribute to his friend, the artist Victor Hartmann, who died aged 39 in 1873.

The following year the artist was honoured by a retrospective exhibition in St Petersburg. It inspired Mussorgsky to write the music which he first called simply Hartmann, then Pictures



THE GNOME One of Caswell's ten-foot high canvases

from an Exhibition.

For a long time Beedie has speculated on how Hartmann himself would have reacted to the music and how an artist might have illustrated it. A meeting in London with Caswell in 1990 gave him the opportunity to find out.

Caswell's giant mural of Peter Pan at the Great Ormond

Composition/oil on canvas/Abu Taher

Drawing/ink/Abdus Shakoor

Manchester, Salford and Dundee, where she and her husband now live.

The event began with a performance by the New Zealand soprano Diana Stuart, wife of the pianist, who accompanied her in songs by three composers who could have influenced the young Mussorgsky — Scarlatti, Bellini and Liszt — and three who were influenced by him: Debussy, Strauss and Rachmaninov.

Diana Stuart gave her first operatic performances with the New Zealand Opera Company and after studying with Tito Gobbi in Italy has appeared as a soloist in the United States and many parts of Europe. The production will be available on video and Henry King sees the presentation as an opportunity to reach a multinational and multi-racial audience of all ages.

She says: 'The video will trace the development of the project, looking at the relation between the music and the paintings and exploring the different methods and techniques of the interpretive and creative artists.'

'We believe it has both cultural and educational value, and apart from making the video available for worldwide TV distribution, we are making teaching materials and programme available for schools.'

'We intend to arrange further live performances in Britain and we believe this project is particularly suitable for cultural exchanges. There is no language problem and other countries can provide dancers.'

'In particular, we are interested in a collaboration with Russia because of the origin of the music.' — GEMINI NEWS

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