

Shahabuddin

Born in Dhaka, in 1950. In 1971 he participated in the war for liberation of Bangladesh (Freedom fighter, Platoon commander). After acquiring a degree of Bachelor of Arts from Bangladesh, his painting career started in earnest. He went to France on a scholarship to study Art. Since then he has never looked back, and has emerged as one of the 50 masters of contemporary art in the world today. He has exhibited his works in some of the most prestigious galleries of the world.

Focusing on Emotions behind Images

An Interview by Fayza Haq

"FROM morning till evening I do nothing else but paint in Paris, where I have been since I got the scholarship in '74 at the Ecole Supérieure de Beaux Arts," said Shahabuddin, sitting on a rattan arm chair, in the back lounging room of "Shilpangan", surrounded by many young admirers, during his recent solo exhibition in Dhaka. The forty-five year old Paris-based artist has certainly carved out a remarkable career for himself with 38 solo exhibitions in 20 years.

"In my work, you see, society plays a strong role. I feel I am serving Bangladesh even though I am living abroad, because being in Europe I get more opportunities for exhibiting my works overseas. For instance, if I had not been staying in Paris I would never have had the chance to be included in the 50 masters of contemporary art in the world today," he added.

Asked if he felt that the standard of paintings in Bangladesh was improving as time went by, he said, "This is so, definitely since the independence. The Bangladeshis are going abroad more often and getting exposed to novel and foreign ideas. Artists from outside are also coming more frequently to Bangladesh, specially during the Biennales. This has resulted in a definite impact on the Bangladeshi painters. The local painters are less confined in their outlook. This is obvious in the works of our artists. The outside influences are also marked."

Speaking about his own works Shahabuddin admitted, "I have been strongly influenced by the works of Francis Bacon and by Zainul Abedin at home — specially the way he used lines to bring in action in

his works. Critics have claimed him to be also clearly affected by the images of the Renaissance and Hellenic masters, apart from Vladimir Velkovich. "I myself do oils. As a variation I do charcoal and Chinese ink drawings. I prefer oil, on the whole, as it is a classical tradition and one can best express oneself in oil. I believe. The rich effect of oil is not found in any other medium. Also, oil painting is something that is enjoyed by artists all over the world. Chinese ink, meanwhile, is something which is very sensitive. Once the line has been put you cannot retouch it. I admire and enjoy sculpture work too but after painting I have no time for this. I work five to eight hours while in Paris, and here in Bangladesh and India there has been no time limit to my hours at the canvas. Sometimes I am not satisfied with the number of attempts to delineate the same theme so I might end up doing my work again and again. Time is limited as well as the artist's energy and so one must cope with one's shortcomings," Shahabuddin elaborated.

Asked if he was conscious about being strongly nationalistic Shahabuddin said, "I believe every good artist in any country is fiercely dedicated to his country. My own father was a politician and I was consequently influenced by his thinking pattern."

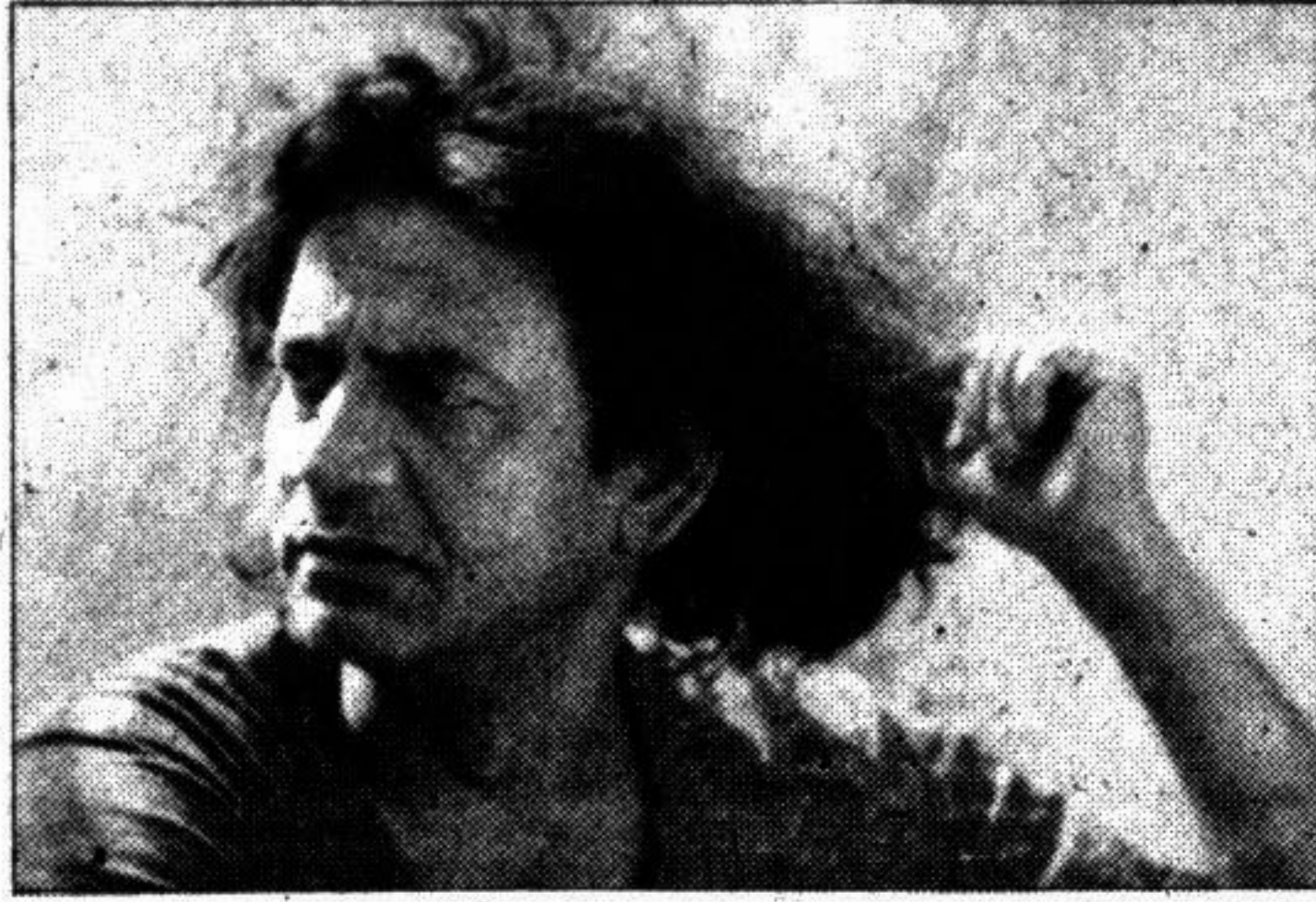
One could well measure his confidence in his own ability by his remark, "I have exhibited in almost all of Europe. Where have I not exhibited? Perhaps only in Russia and Italy. My works have been displayed in places such as Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Spain, UK as well as in Taiwan, South Korea and Senegal. Talking about the latest fad

in the art world in Europe the artist said, "I greatly admire 'installation' art that is now in vogue in Europe, in which objects are simply put together. In this type of art items which are conventionally ignored like a dustbin can become the subject of contemplation. Something experimental like this can be a success only in a place like Europe. Since the Gulf War there has been a dip in the graph of living the world over. The age-old forms of art appear to be dying off for the moment and 'industrial' type art is coming in. I feel this will continue for a decade. The sincere pitch of the artist is now often absent."

Dwelling on folk and oriental art the painter remarked, "Oriental art is something typical of our country and cannot be undermined. As for folk art, a place such as Bangladesh would do well to patronise this as there is such a wealth of beauty in our rural parts. For one reason or another folk art in a place like Bangladesh has been ignored although for political and economic reasons this should have received importance."

Asked if he will teach if he comes back to Bangladesh, he said, "No, I cannot. Teaching is a difficult job. I have tried it before in Bangladesh but it has not worked. However, I do intend to leave an indelible impact of my existence in Bangladesh."

The powerful imaginative works of the artist which verge on surrealism quite often, bring in massive figures, seen in action, done in mysterious white and earthy colours. The artist does not focus on the images alone but mostly concentrates on the emotions behind the images.



It is not obligatory to evoke Proust to justify the recuperation of one's past. Besides, there are enough grueling experiences in life to mark the content of a work lastingly. Not that the artist should eternally immolate himself for memory or out of nostalgia, but whether he desires it or not his itinerary ceaselessly reflects the most significant traces of his personal history.

Shahabuddin has rooted his approach in his memory and his memory in his history, which is also that of his people. He has therefore not had the need to awaken his aching conscience to convert in painting the emotional charge which has been present in him since childhood. And his voluntary exile, which he exalts in memory after his rejection of the political climate instituted by military order at the time, has bolstered his need to glorify his country from afar.

However, it is not on the level of an observation with denunciatory accents, nor through the bias of a serial iconography, worthy as the cause may be, or else through the medium of sensibility, that the acknowledges his intimate wounds and the anxiety of our age, but through the behavioral unsettling of typology shaken in its very foundations. As a consequence, his dislocated and fractured creatures, caught in their initial elan, catapulted by an irrepressible inner force, merge in an innervated treatise on dramatic art in the eruptive magma of the paint and the colors. In this elliptic reality where the appearances are never denied, the morphological outrages which affect the status of the destabilised bodies only reinforces the psychological truth of the models and the acuity of their expressive powers. In this way echoing Herman Melville's assertion: Truth expressed without compromise always has frayed edges. Gerard Xuriguera French Art Critic

A Force that Amazes with Infiniteness

A Review by Ziaul Karim

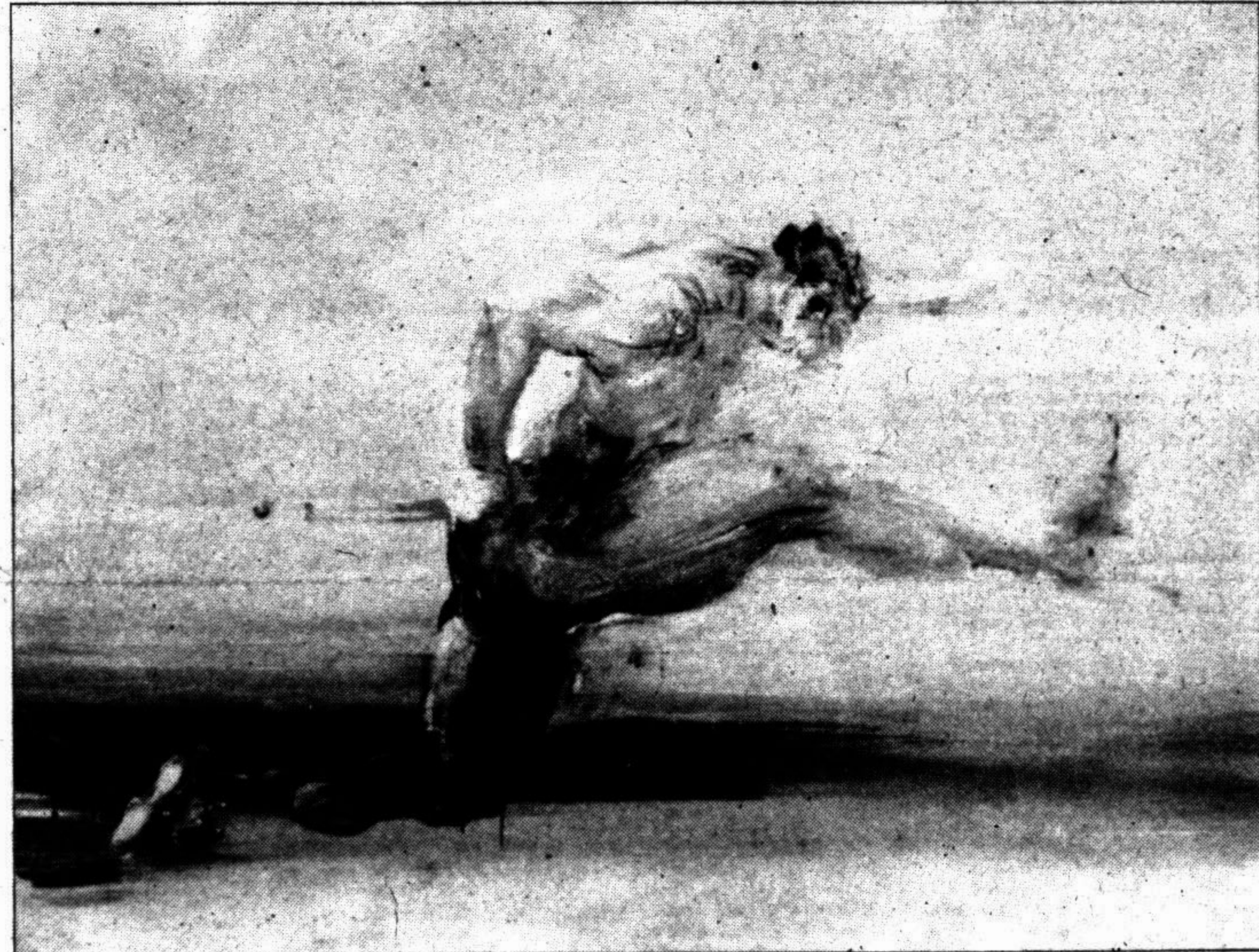
SHAHABUDDIN writes the grammar of his text or work in terms of composition rather than colour. For him colour, the most important single element in a painter's repertoire (Paul Klee after visiting Tunisia wrote: "Colour and I are one. I am a painter"), comes third after composition and drawing. This hierarchical strategy together with dramatic space, tension in balance and an unfinished narrative are the most conspicuous features from a language that could be termed Shahabuddinesque. The compositional rhetoric he has developed can best be understood through Marx's famous architectural metaphor: Base (composition) that provides foundation for superstructure (drawing, colour). A close reading of the *Advance-1* would reveal the mastery of this compositional wizard. We will see in the course of our quest that the mastery and the deepest poetry of the work lies in its geometrical balance. The precision with which this balance is achieved suggests to the painter's calculated handling of his emotion that appears on the canvas unbridled. Shahabuddin perfects this art of concealing the planned warfare. Here one might be tempted to compare him with poet WB Yeats or Jibanananda Das who succeeded in veiling their efforts under apparent spontaneity. In the words of James Joyce: "Ideally, the artist, like the God of Creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined, out of existence, indifferent, purging his fingernails... Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It is bad in this alone, that it reveals the author's hands and feet."

The work, no doubt, is of a particular interest in its geometry since analysis would show that it creates a tension in the balance and despite of conveying a transparent meaning it raises questions after questions rather than answers. The position of the lone racing figure to have been almost divided at the centre point of the canvas who is about to cross a hurdle leaves us without a suggestion from where the race takes its flight or a slightest indication of a touch-line. Reason might say if there is a race there should be an end but the question is: why this obscurity? Does it try to say something more about the point reached at the race rather than goal? By placing the figure a bit away from the centre, is he suggesting that only half of the race is won? The most positive side of the work is that it can be questioned infinitely. As one encounters *Advance-1* it gives a disturbed reading. In it the

With the pronouncement of the name Shahabuddin, the image that comes into one's mind is of a man dressed almost shabbily, a face unshaven for days with a mane of black hair. Dionysiac or what Schiller says sentimentalisch in spirit, Shahabuddin has already established himself with his athletic brush as a creator of a formidable number of significant works, to use the term of Joyce, *polywholyover* in essence. A collection of some 40 recent creations by this master painter recently went into display at the city's Shilpangan gallery. Choosing a single work, the *Advance-1*, from the body of the collection the present piece tries to give a close reading of the complex visual experience it offers.

figure and at another moment feels dissociated or simply an onlooker.

The very nature of the composition does not allow us to hold on to a solid ground and meaning becomes too slippery and whenever we form an interpretation, it tends to collapse. The background or no ground or to be



Speaking must have speakers, but not merely in the same way as an effect must have a cause. —Murtin Heidegger

signifying codes — figure, colour — were set in a restless motion. We are not allowed here with the privilege of a single transparent meaning. It is open to meaning, to use a deconstructionist term, an 'open text'. In other words, it demands strenuous reading. All these are happening due to its compositional tension. The experience of the work imposes a state of loss, discomfort and unsettles the viewer's historical and psychological assumptions. The strength of the work is that it compels one to question and that leads the viewer to create and recreate the work endlessly. Meaning here, from a deconstructionist point of view, cannot find a secure meta-position beyond the text by which to stabilise itself. The vast blue space against which he puts his lonesome figure in motion, there colour hardly evokes any

mood or a symbol as we have seen in Munch or Rossetti. Colour here acts as a complement to the speed and almost goes unnoticed, that is to say, the hue has no connotation but to sacrifice to the speed and becomes a subject to a perpetually changing context. As one can see, colour here is in a process of breaking and collapsing condemned to a condition of unrest.

French theorist Roland Barthes in his shattering analytical book *S/Z* identifies two types of texts — text that tries to discourage the reader with a closed and limited meaning, and the other that encourages the reader to produce meaning. The first type he calls *readable (lisible)* the second *writerly (scriptible)*.

The *Advance-1* for its plurality of meaning is a writerly text in the Barthesian sense of the term as a *tour de force*. It

does not render the viewer idle or redundant and does not condemn him to a production-consumer situation of the bourgeois world. Looking at the work is not becoming a symbol of impotent rather it invites as self-consciously to read it, to join in and become aware of the interrelationship of the process of creativity and the process of understanding and which accordingly offers us something of a joy of co-authorship.

Distorting the face of his protagonist, the artist destroys the fixed meaning and undermines the single identity and thereby evokes an infinite possibility of identities that virtually opens an infinite play where a viewer at a moment identifies himself with the

precise — a void is the space where the race is taking place.

And we see the sprinter about to cross a hurdle has nothing in front of him that might suggest a possible end. The question is why he captures this perpetual run. Is Adam whose birth we have seen in Michelangelo separating from the centre, the God, is in a crisis — the crisis of identification? Does his power in guise present a problem of an outsider who expresses himself in Existentialist terms? Is his figure fighting against an enemy he does not know — his self? Or is he with all his energy looking for what Nietzsche calls *Uberschance* (Superman) or his dreams who — Bangabandhu — has been assassinated?



Victor-2. Oil on Canvas (above) and Chitra-Charja. Oil on Canvas (right).



I M P GROUP EXHIBITIONS:	
1968: Received the "President's Gold Medal" as the best child artist of Pakistan.	1989: Exhibition of contemporary painters of Bangladesh in China.
1973: Annual Exhibition of the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka; Received "Prime Minister's Gold Medal".	1989: Museum of Contemporary Art, Taishung, Taiwan. Colour of life, helping for the Child Hospital Museum, Paris; Saloon the Art Contemporaria, Bourg-en-Bresse, Paris; Gallery Contraste, Brussels, Belgium; Gallery Puriels, Deauville, France; Space Belleville Art Contemporaria painting exhibition, Paris.
1974: Silver Jubilee Exhibition, Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka; Received "The Bangla Academy Award".	1990: Gallery Samagra, Paris; Gallery Atelier 80 Bordeaux, France.
1975: Received first prize in "International Art Students Exhibition F 9 A P", Paris, France.	1991: Olympiad of the Arts, Barcelona, Spain.
1976: Exhibition in Cite De Arts, Paris.	1992: Among "50 Master Painters of Contemporary Art".
1979: Exhibition held by the Sorbonne University, Paris, 1980: Unesco Exhibition, Paris; White Chapel Art Gallery, London.	1992: African Biennial, Dakar, Senegal.
1981: First Prize awarded by Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh.	
1982: "Honourable Award" Young Painters Exhibition, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh.	
1983: Second Asian Art Biennial, Dhaka, Bangladesh.	
1986: "Honourable Mention" for 3rd Asian Art Biennial, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh.	
1988: Olympiad of the Arts, Seoul, South Korea.	
	MEDALS
	1968: President gold medal as the best child artist of Pakistan.
	1973: Prime Minister Gold Medal as the best painter of the Inst. of Fine Arts, Dhaka University, Bangladesh.
	1975: Silver Medal in Salon Des Artistes Francais, Paris.
	1976: Gold Medal Salon De Printemps, Paris.

DRAWINGS

MUCH of the energy of the classic modern art starting from Gauguin to Miro, including Picasso, was spent to capture the primitive or undiluted force and originality of mankind. Disgusted with the declining rotten bourgeois ideal they turned to unspoiled beauty of Tahitian life, African art and, naive spirit of children painting.

Amidst this tradition Shahabuddin takes his pen to the classical power-house of Da Vinci or Michelangelo to give shape to his drawing. But unlike Vinci or Angelo, Shahabuddin injects what one would like to call dynamic lyricism to physiological studies of his predecessors and there perhaps he stands alone.

The Gallery Tone is now holding a show of drawings by Shahabuddin that provides viewers an opportunity to encounter this dynamic lyricism.

— Ziaul Karim

