

PEOPLE AND PLACES

St Martin's

A Virgin Coral Island Invites Mainlanders

As a crow flies the St Martin's is just over 8km from Badar Mukam — the nearest mainland point...

by Dr. Reza Khan

St Martin's — an offshore island formed on a saucer-shaped Pleistocene rock-slab, hardly 8km away from the mainland, in the Bay of Bengal is still virgin for the divers and snorkelers as none has dived in its clear blue water looking for the hidden wealth underneath.

The St. Martin's island, locally called *Narikel Jnjira*, is the only coral island within the jurisdiction of Bangladesh. It is being encircled by living coral formations, vast expanses of non-utilized sandy beach and limestone, sandstone and base rocks. The red fiddler crab and other species form a mat over the beach when there is nobody around. There are in-

the coral gardens, rocks and boulders is no doubt fascinating even if we forget thousands of gulls, terns and waders that line the beach and fish landing station.

As a crow flies the St Martin's is just over 8km from Badar Mukam — the nearest mainland point that is also the narrowest southernmost tip of the country. The mainland of Chittagong hilly area approaches the southern border through the seaside tourist resort of Cox's Bazar and in the process gets sandwiched between the Bay of Bengal and the river Naaf, that borders Myanmar (Burma). The river

east from this island.

During ebb the island is about 8sq km that gets reduced to 5sq km in total area during the tide. The St Martin's island consists of four separate islands, of which three smaller ones are situated at the southern most part of the main island. These three combinedly may measure hardly one square kilometre at ebb. These get connected with each other and the main island by a narrow strip of land during the ebb. At tide they look separated from each other.

The main island is in north-south direction of dumbbell-shape, the northern part called

is too rough for fishing activities. The women folk remain busy tending the domestic stock like the goat, poultry, duckery and also do kitchen gardening, besides household chores. There is one each of primary, secondary school and madrasa, post-office, police and border security force posts, cyclone warning centre and shelter as well as an electric generator. There is no dearth of grocery shops and tea stalls. The tea-stalls do also serve rice with sea fish, lentil and local vegetables, although the preferred curry-dish for the islanders appears to be chicken and beef and fish is usually considered as a secondary item. Interestingly, a lone tailor and a barber meet the needs of the islanders.

Other than coconut, paddy is also considered the cash crop. The green chilly, onion and water melon are being grown in monsoon when vegetables of different kinds are cultivated in both monsoon and winter. Some collect



St Martin's: Southwest coast with dune vegetation and dead coral skeletons



Kashem Master (second from right) taking a boat to Teknaf.

numerable variety of colourful shells, cowries, edible oyster, sea cucumber, sea urchin, sepia, loligo and even one may find an octopus near the shore. The swimming of most beautifully coloured fishes through the pools and puddles amongst

ends at Akyab Channel and the St. Martin's stands between the Naaf estuary and the open expanse of the Bay — what a situation!

The Akyab city in Myanmar is 60km south-east when Cox's Bazaar is about 75km north-

Uttar Para is about 3sq km and majority of 5500 strong islanders live here. This portion of the island bustles with life. The islanders are all Muslims and basically fishermen. Some practice agriculture only during the monsoon when the sea



Angelfish not uncommon around St Martin's.

shells to make curio articles. There is a lone family that collects sandstone for making flat spice grinder, occasionally the Mogh tribe from Myanmar (Burma) use to visit the island to fetch eggs of marine turtles. Now the barber — a non-Mus-

lim — goes on turtle-egg hunting.

The winter is the peak fishing season, that starts in October. The fishermen from the neighbouring areas bring in their catch on to the main is-

and Bombay duck fetch good price. The fishing boats also anchor here to facilitate the boatmen gather their ration of daily necessities.

The Uttar Para runs for about two kilometres in

est part at the southern end. There are two lagoons and both are regularly served by fresh sea water during the tides. So, we get a good growth of mangrove forest in these parts of the island. Of course

ered by the screw pine *Pandanus odoratissimus*, *Nishindha vitex nigunda* and beach creeper *Ipomoea pes-caprae*. These stop the tidal waves from hard hitting the island. So far, no cyclonic storm has lashed the island so severely nor was there such a tidal upsurge that could have washed the whole islanders and their domestic stock. Nevertheless a strong storm during April 1994 uprooted most of the half-century old trees planted by the islanders and the electric poles. There was, however, very little damage to the dwelling houses.

It is a general belief that about a century back a dozen or so conscripts from the mainland of Chittagong district took shelter on the island. They went there by country boat called 'sampan'. Later on their families joined them too. Over the years some people from the mainland, Rohingya Muslims from the Akiab coast and Pakistan repatriates settled there. Almost the entire area of the island belongs to these people who got the settlements from the British as well as the subsequent governments.

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ART

He Paints Music: Ascending to Finer Heights

The formulation invented to describe and explain immigrant writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Hanif Kureishi and others might inspire one to describe him as a Japanese artist of Bangladeshi origin. Over twenty years of his stay in Japan has made him what Shamsur Rahman once in an interesting turn of phrase called 'an exile in one's motherland'. Kazi Ghiyasuddin — the first Bangladeshi who has been awarded a doctorate by the Tokyo Geidei, the most prestigious Japanese institution — has not only found famous galleries in Japan, Seibu Takanawa for example, and in Europe to display his oeuvre, but also sells well. Favourite among the internationally-famed art-dealers, a 10"x6" Ghiyas-creation fetches as much as 2000 dollars and a series of three paintings that adorn the Osaka's Omeda metro station garnered in 20 million yen. Regarded as a difficult man and mostly misunderstood, Ghiyas — whose visits to his birthplace go usually unnoticed — is never particularly fond of media attention. The following piece is a reading of a work of an artist whose lineage is traceable to Klee, Miro, Kandinsky, and who shares a somewhat common intellectual interest with his illustrious contemporary Cy Twombly. And who has developed a musical sensibility with his colours and the simplest visual stimuli, that is, his forms, which give both a sense of movement and tangible depths and eventually take one to a spiritual world.

by Ziaul Karim

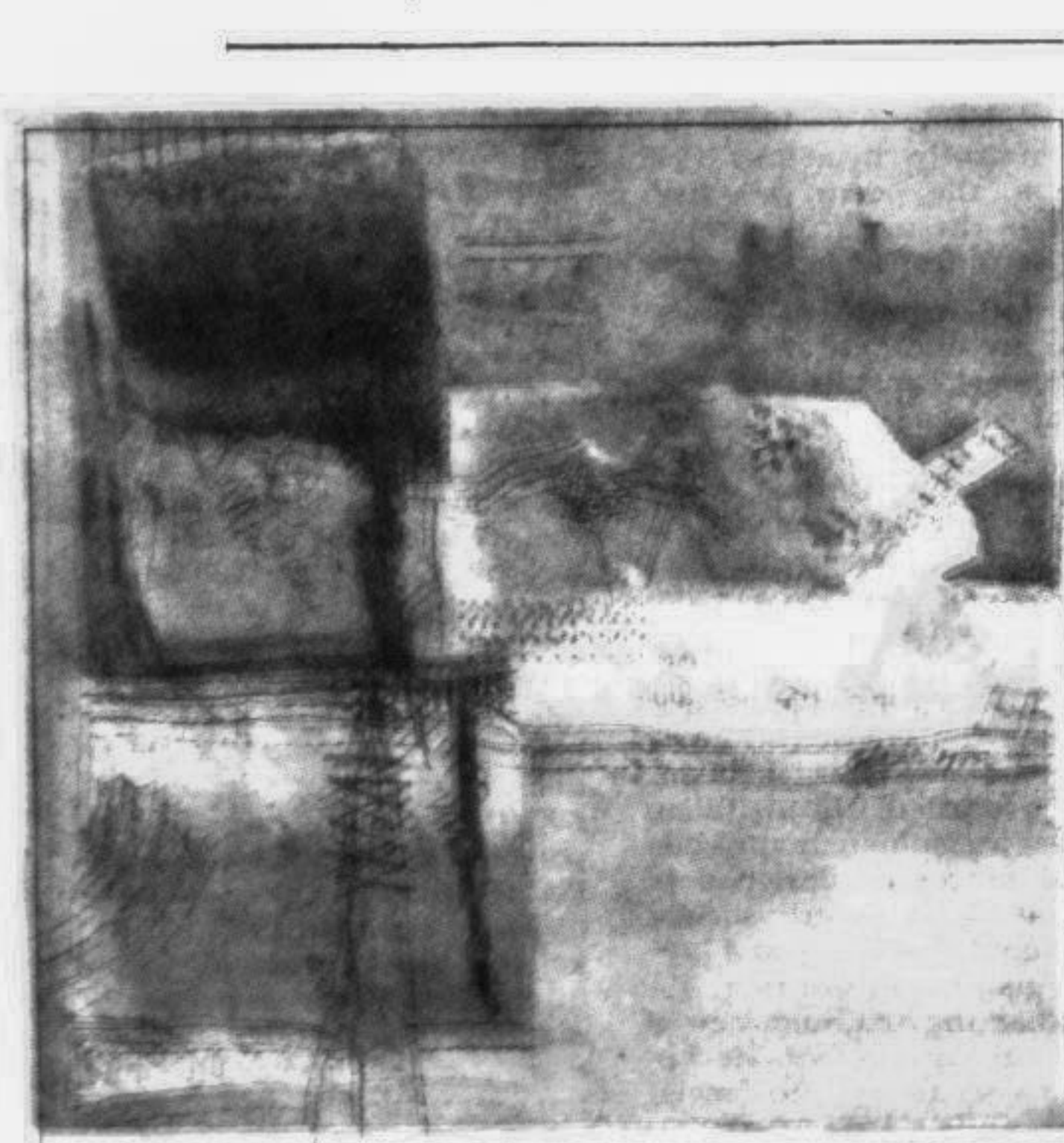


Sound of Nature-2, watercolour, 1993

To listen to Ghiyas' visual music one needs to read the smallest units of Ghiyasque composition — pitch, scales, intervals, tones, and semitones tempo, rhythm, chords and their progressions; or to use an architectural metaphor — the bricks of his musical structure and how the units take the shape of a building that can be called a sonata and the process of its adaption for full

orchestra, symphony.

Now for the purpose of a visual listening, the best way would be to take a single piece or a 'microtext', that will serve as a key to the Ghiyasque 'macrotext'. Here we choose 'Sound of Nature-2', a watercolour painting to encounter an audible landscape where musical elements are painted and set in an intense play to give the shape of a melodic equilibrium. But be-



Where did I See, watercolour, 1990

fore decoding the tune encoded in the rhetorical strategies or the personal idioms of Ghiyas and the way the strategies are worked out against the influence of his precursors which Bloom calls 'the anxiety of the influence', we prefer to look into the process of reading involved to the understanding of a poetic work as presented by a French semiotician and how the process, described by him, leads us to a better understanding of 'Nature-2'. To be more precise, we want to look at our selected work taking help from Riffaterre's reading process.

In detailing the semiotic process that takes place in reader's mind Michael Riffaterre distinguishes two 'levels or stages of reading' in his brilliant book 'Semiotics of Poetry'. Albeit the stages have been identified by Riffaterre in the course of his reading poetry, the observations are equally true and immensely rewarding to the understanding of visual arts. According to Riffaterre's well-crafted exposition the stages of reading are heuristic and retroactive.

The first reading stage is also the level where the first interpretation takes place. It is at this stage the reader reads



Harmony in Green, watercolour, 1986

the text from beginning to the end from top to bottom of the page, and 'follows the syntagmatic unfolding'. During this stage one reading the meaning of poetry is apprehended. Riffaterre does not take the word 'meaning' in traditional sense. He reserves the term 'for the information conveyed by the text at the mimetic level'. The position of meaning is further clarified thus: 'From the standpoint of meaning the text is a string of successive information units.' But a text is one unit from the standpoint of significance and Riffaterre says 'significance is a manifestation of semiosis'.

The reader's input, at the first stage, 'is his linguistic competence, which includes

an assumption that language is referential — and ... words do indeed seem to relate first of all to things.' But the comprehension also includes literary competence. This competence is the 'reader's familiarity with the descriptive systems, with themes, with his society's mythologies, and above all with other texts'.

The maximal effect of retroactive reading, Riffaterre's second, comes at the end of the poem that is, when the reader is able to grasp the whole text and can compare backwards. Reading of the 'Nature-2' sets both the process at work simultaneously. What Riffaterre wants to say is when we read a poem first we get the meaning as something

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1979 Master of Arts Education, Tokyo National University of Liberal Arts, Japan.

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One-man Exhibitions:

1970 East Pakistan Arts Council, Dhaka. 1977

Mochizuki Gallery, Tokyo. 1979 Mitake Gallery, Tokyo.

1980 American Club, Tokyo. 1981 Mitake Gallery, Tokyo.

1982 Marunouchi Gallery, Tokyo. 1983 Marunouchi Gallery, Tokyo.

1984 Marunouchi Gallery, Tokyo. 1985 Marunouchi Gallery, Tokyo.

1986 Marunouchi Gallery, Tokyo. 1987 Shinsendo Hatanaka Gallery, Tokyo.

1988 Seibu Takanawa Art Gallery, Tokyo. 1989 Kyobi Gallery, Tokyo.

1990 Seibu Takanawa Art Gallery, Tokyo. 1991 Dove and Love Gallery, Tokyo.

1992 Kyobi Gallery, Tokyo. 1993 Hanshin Gallery, Osaka.

Public Collection:

Bangladesh National Gallery, Dhaka. Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Fukuoka City Art Museum, Japan. Gyuhama Build, Tokyo. Hanshin Department Store, Osaka.

like paraphrasing but after the initial stage, that is from the second, we begin to understand the significance of the poem. At this stage the whole poem is a single unit. But in first reading a poem is a series of informations or images or symbols. In painting we have the whole work before us and like poem we do not have to read it from beginning to end. So we can move freely and can enjoy painting from any distance or from any angle.

Let us see how the stages work for the reading of 'Sound of Nature-2' in particular and visual arts as such. With the watercolour, reading goes on not only in a leaner or horizontal way but here the reading goes and returns from every possible way and continues to form a circular movement. What actually happens here is Riffaterre's two stages of reading becomes one or acts together from the very first experience. From the standpoint of movement visual arts give more flexibility and open the text to approach from any and every side. Abstract art takes this openness to the point of infinity. And as the work con-

tinues to open it destroys the possibility of fixed meaning and in the process becomes resistant to interpretation. This resistance demands the reader's inputs as suggested by Riffaterre.

Back to the musicological aspect, the circularity of 'Nature's' reading contributes to the melodic equilibrium. Now a journey into the work following through the network of relations, subject to a personal grammar of Ghiyas not valid beyond the compass of the given work, would reveal the musicality of the work. At first sight, the 'Nature-2' is nothing but short-winded ambiguous scribbles or child-like doodles or a blackboard half-erased, or half-marked signifying nothing. With almost insignificant doodles and lines, broken circles, dots on the verge of disappearance, Ghiyas creates a balance close to Beethoven's sonata in C minor. Very much like the classical sonata form, 'Nature-2' can be divided into three parts: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The development of the composition from

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