

exhibition Gallery 21 Comes to Town, and Gleams

by Ekram Kabir

At the beginning, Shameem Subrana thought it would be an arduous task, but later when she received happy and friendly responses from artists, especially the painters, working in diverse media and techniques whom she knew very well and worked with their cordially-solicited inspiration, her dream to set up a new showroom for displaying artworks came true. She was overwhelmed, for Subrana mentioned seventy-five artists in her invitation letter; and unexpectedly, she could accumulate artworks (there are 133 pieces of works) of as many as 'eighty-five' artists at her newly-established gallery located at the Dhanmondi residential area's convenient corner.

Along with her gallery's journey that started on October 31 last, the inaugural exhibition of "Gallery 21" which concludes today (November 15), it is apparent that Bangladesh's era of Pop Art is over. The period of experimenting with ideas of 'modernism' and 'post-modernism' is now almost a library of the past. The mist of pure oriental and occidental trends no longer, in essence, hangs over Bangladesh painters' psyche. Although majority of these celebrities, whose works have found

place on the walls of Gallery 21, have experiences of learning the craft more from abroad, yet the avalanche of cultural history and heritage of Bangladesh have had wiped away the tendency to follow others. This should come as a wonderful news to those who believe in the country's cultural wealth.

Starting from Late SM Sultan, Quiyum Chowdhury, Mohammad Kibria to their predecessors of different ages and sex, every one of the practitioners in this field appears to have acquired distinct features of their own; they are making their presence felt in their respective avenues — medium, theme etc. And these aesthetics are brimming with enthusiasm to let the people know that "the art-stretch of Dhaka is thriving"; and they need more space to exhibit their toiling lessons they have been exercising over the years.

Passed out from the Charukala Institute of Dhaka with a degree in Fine Arts in 1990, Subrana has organised a couple of house shows at her residence (the same place where the gallery is in its full shape) which were acclaimed by others: her contemporary co-artists, friends of the arena and finally, her well-wishing teachers. Even as a student, she was an excellent initiator of house shows.



Delegates of the Asian Biennial at Gallery 21

"Their eulogy-like words made me confident that it's time I go for a well-equipped gallery; and today, what you see is my guided effort of many years", says the mother of three wards Subrana, adding: "I was not just toying with the idea to set up a gallery, but I was seriously contemplating on it; and among others, I am specially obliged to the collector-gentleman who gave two of SM Sultan's works in trust."

Again, for her feat in establishing a gallery which she believes will further promote Bangladeshi art and take them into the next century, she is highly indebted to all her well-wishers who immensely inspired her in accomplishing this pursuit.

Says Subrana: "The confidence they injected in me and the helping hands they rendered by letting their pieces put on as exhibits are really costly to me — so costly that I can hardly express those in words." And indeed, her efforts — endorsed by many progressive-minded people — did convince the onlookers in a positive manner about the future of painting, and for that matter Art, in this country.

The visit of artists who came to attend the ongoing Asian Biennial is worth mentioning here, for "they" seemed to have conceived a lot about the

root of Bangladeshi art and its intricacies that have been taking shape in this part of the world. Running a parallel display was not at all an obstacle in attracting viewers to Gallery 21; rather it was other way round.

"Art-lovers and artists were prying to explore whether there was any more art-elements to comprehend in the city; and to their delight, they found their way in here, and commented, interacted and took notes on this expo," says Shameem Subrana. In fact, Subrana, as she has some future plans to promoting the artists — new, promising and celebrated — of Bangladesh, mapped out beforehand that the launching time of Gallery 21 should coincide with the Asian Biennial.

By instituting the new gallery in town, Shameem Subrana sounds quite satisfied as she quotes from Andre Malraux's *The Voice of Silence*: "The art museum invites criticism of each of the expressions of the world it brings together, and a query as to what they have in common. To the 'delight of the eye' there has been added — owing to the sequence of conflicting styles and seemingly antagonistic schools — an awareness of art's impassioned quest, its age-old struggle to remould the scheme of things. Indeed, an art gallery is one of the places which show man at his noblest."

art Oriental Modernity : Should We have a Different View?

by Badhan Das

It might not be possible to clarify all the facets of the given subject as I wish to talk about it in this short span of time given. I beg your pardon for it. With a few thoughts and questions in mind, let me begin this discussion.

Before we talk about Modernity's limitations, let us examine what Modernity means to us. These days we frequently identify a particularly recent slice in time as modern, by which we mean the time in which we live and act on the face of earth. Also when we say contemporary, we almost mean the very same demarcation of time. To do it, is a conscious decision of ours. And to qualify or justify this kind of Modernity's definition which almost equates it with anything contemporary, we have brought forward a kind of rationalism or quasi-rationalism. This is a partial idea of our time and I can't say if everybody thinks in the same way about it. If this is a correct notion then would it mean that our predecessors in previous contemporary times had no claims over Modernity or were completely indifferent about it? I tend to think that the opposite is correct!

In all the ages the very idea of Modernism was acutely ingrained within a section of society. In turn those modern people never hesitated calling others old-fashioned or conservative. So, at any point in a given time the modern and the orthodox live side by side, though historically speaking, they might not be carrying all the qualities of their time about them and might be quite unrelated to each other, in spite of their contemporaneity. Looking this way, it would be found that these two have different characters as well as intentions. The contemporary merely provides a neutral commentary about the complex relation that gradually builds up between different elements, such as modern and the orthodox and stops at that. Whereas the modern interacts with the orthodox, the dogmatic and thus finds and lays certain special paths for evolution — and I mean just not the natural Darwinian one — to roll through. This is probably the basic character of Modernity. There might be more to it but it restricts us from discussing it further. Still I think I can sum up and say that Modernity is almost certainly, the element that acts as fuel for evolution to work. And that it

has existed from the far pre-historic times to any given period, in any culture having exactly the same sets of values and quality. For example, the modern Buddha or the modern Einstein in their contemporary times. Seen in this perspective, Modernity is a boundless energy forever in motion, forever at work.

There are, perhaps a few gaps in what I said till now. For instance, could we call every of those elements modern whoever lays a path for anything new to usher in? I think from this very place starts the crisis that springs from an over-simplification of Modern's definition. In certain cases the question may naturally arise as to whose interest and what change are these elements working for. From this very point emerges two different trends viewing Modernity separately and drastically differently. For instance, in recent times, we have allowed ourselves to indulge in slogan-raising activities in the name of modern so much that it has time to time suppressed all the instruments for social progress, even Art. As a result we saw happenings like artists from the Bauhaus group being driven out of their homeland after being called barbaric, anti-progress and such.

Funnily the current idea that Modernity is an uniform process round the globe is strangely similar to certain ideas nurtured by those so-called moderns who drove these artists out of their homeland. And these very kind of people, through acts barbaric enough to put any barbarian into shame, started off the terrifying World War that involved or affected people worldwide, directly or indirectly. I think since then, we have allowed ourselves to remain in a trance of this power-cult in one form or other. This power-cult has always attempted to eclipse the spirit of Modernity and to spread the philosophy or culture of aggression and has used discourses, itself derived from Modernity, to do so. It has always tried to defeat and kill any form of humanism based on empathy. As a weapon a kind of pseudo-rationalism has been brought forward that poses to be absolute and beyond question. Another side of this pseudo-rationalism is to decide and comment upon intellect or wisdom through victory or defeat. Finer human feelings get a backseat here.

Are we not again seeing this kind of power-logic gaining ground worldwide? The next part of the discussion is about the state of Asian Art at the end of

this century, that is now. Before we begin let's ask ourselves about what should we think to be modern and how in terms of it should we judge contemporary Asian Art. I say this because till now we have looked at, commented or passed judgement about art of the whole world using a particular set of ideas, a particular yardstick and a way of seeing. Asian Art has not been excluded from all that. So should we, the Asians, not redefine what constitutes the modern first and only then look at our own art? That new definition should provide us with such a vision which should enable us to more spontaneously examine and appreciate and therefore easily understand the art of different Asian communities. It is my request to all of you present to think if we could embark upon a search of this kind. A search that would end in our having a way to more sympathetically understand the many local art-cultures of Asia, that would create an anti-liner way to see where different notions of beauty will create a new aesthetics and determine the cultural ethics and not vice-versa. Otherwise does post-colonial Asian Art not face the danger of losing its identity and does that not make any discussion

about today's Asian Art sterile, merely a bland commentary? I think it will be wise on our part to begin this search first, more so, because the standard established monopolistic way of seeing as opposed to the parallel way we are suggesting here has hardly ever taken into account the different cultural parameters involving the unique creative dynamism present in a multifarious Asian population. It should also help us to create bridges between other non-Asian groups by letting us look at each other art with respectful understanding. Could we, perhaps, call this new way of seeing Oriental Modernism?

It is matter of great pleasure that a part of today's Asia with its limited ability is putting a lot of effort to find out such a way of seeing. Who knows if this Biennale would give birth to it. Just as this very land showed me my very first sunrise.

This paper was presented at the seminar entitled *Limits of Modernity: The End-of-the-Century Perceptions of Asian Art* organised in connection with the 8th Asian Art Biennale on Nov 7 and 8.

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Limits of Modernity: Case of Postwar Japan

by Tsutomu Mizusawa

JAPAN'S modernization started with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Belatedly emerging as an imperialist power, it strayed into perverted militarism. The end result of that ill-chosen path was that the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one of the greatest tragedies in human history. The bombings destroyed the two cities instantly, indiscriminately killing thousands of civilians. The ultimate weapon was actually used twice in 1945 — and not a deterrent — a historical fact that should never be forgotten.

Japanese culture of the postwar period is founded, therefore, upon the unconditional surrender of the nation, brought to its knees by the atomic bombings. Of course, our traditions had not been severed or lost. Many important historical cultural properties remain in Nara and Kyoto, the ancient capitals that were spared destruction during the war. As these historical remains vividly show, the Japanese archipelago, located as it is at the eastern edge of Asia, is a hybrid culture. It proved ideal soil for the cultivation of a diverse and intricate mixture of cultures over a very long period of time.

However, in its haste to westernize and gain acceptance among the world powers, Japan launched a what can only be called a crazy policy of colonial expansion. It was a policy launched in the name of modernity, or rather under the guise of official rejection of what the West called "modern". But Japan emerged as a threat to its neighbors in Asia even greater than the Western powers themselves. For Japan, "moder-

nity" was required only to the extent that allowed it to become a militarist state, and this clumsy "modernity" led to the cultural invasion of other parts of Asia.

The principle of modernity as it came into being in Western society was a style of culture rich and profound to the point of self-denial. But though Japan tried its best to look well in the borrowed garment of Western modernity, in fact it was ill-fitting, absurd and contradictory, exposed for all to see. The contradictions ultimately led to the atomic bombings, the most cruel ending in the memory of humanity.

Postwar Japan started out as a "peace-oriented" nation protected under the nuclear umbrella of the United States. With rapid economic growth beginning in the 1960s, Japan's economy recovered with what was called "miraculous" speed, and in the 1980s it became a giant in the world. However, peace achieved using nuclear arms as a deterrent is not real peace; it is a peace without substance. Not all Japanese people approve of the way peace was made. Criticisms and objections have been voiced over and over, and movements mounted calling for attainment of genuine peace.

Democratic means have failed to decisively reverse the country's course. Japan plunged head-on down the path of the advanced capitalistic society, giving top priority to the economy. Against this background numerous art museums have been founded, even in small remote towns throughout Japan over the past ten years or so. Many Japanese museums are products of the overheated "bubble" economy. My own work is in a museum. Whether muse-

ums can adequately serve the function of institutions vigilant about and critical of the status quo will certainly depend on what they do from now on.

Thanks to the peace that was bestowed upon it, Japan single mindedly pursued the illusion of "limitless modernity" in the realm of the economy. This privileged, special condition brought into being in Japan modernistic spaces, most notably in Tokyo, where money and other resources are concentrated, spaces even more modern than the West as Susan Sontag has observed.

In the realm of culture, one may well ask, what has this situation given rise to? I would like to suggest some clues to the answers to this question by looking at some recent examples of art.

Murakami was born in 1962. Wakabayashi is much older, born in 1936. Whereas Wakabayashi is a leading contemporary Japanese sculptor who experienced both wartime and postwar Japan, Murakami is a typical postwar-generation artist. Both works shown here are still in process. Murakami's "ko² chan" is the model of an animation-like character that will ultimately be mass-produced as a plastic model for assembly.

Wakabayashi's work "The Green Constellation of the Unicorn" is an actual garden, a small garden being built within a wood in the Tokyo suburbs. Except the area immediately surrounding this garden, the wood has been almost completely destroyed to construct a waste-processing plant. This garden is being made as part of a local movement opposing the construction of the waste-processing plant.

"Ko² chan" is the three-dimensionalization of an originally two-dimensional animation character. So the work is the manifestation of the ambition harbored by the animation maniac. Although there is no such thing as a three-dimensional animation character, or rather because such a character does not exist, Murakami successfully exaggerates the typical cartoon features. The exceedingly childish face of indeterminate nationality with its extra large eyes and blond hair clings by the scantiest margin to the Japanese animation mold, telling us clearly that it is a "made-in-Japan" image. The incongruousness of the cherub-like face and the over-developed breasts, and between childish manner and clothing that exposes a sensuous body is typical of the now-common contrasts employed in erotic, mass-market animation works in Japan. The exaggerations are such that they are possible precisely because of their two-dimensionality. To attempt to express such characters three dimensionally would require an extremely high technical coordination. The amount of effort that would be required is almost nonsensical, but by pouring limitless energy into such nonsense it is possible to repeatedly arouse and objectify the urge to engage in "costume play", the game of identification with animation or computer game-characters by putting on costumes and makeup to closely resemble them.

Female artist Mariko Mori, (born in 1967), who is even younger than Murakami, uses her own body and computer graphics to enhance the level of identification through photographs and three-dimensional images.

Enthusiasm for animation and computer games has had an enormous in-

fluence on aesthetic sense of artists of Murakami's generation and younger. Only those who confirm each other's absorption in such a shared world can communicate among themselves, maintaining a certain distance so as not to offend one another. This state of affairs is called in Japanese, "otaku", a word that is now gaining international currency. If the "otaku culture" really exists, we have to say it is a non-modern, closed society created by modern means, an ultimate form of modernity achieved through the pursuit of the illusion of "limitless modernity" as in the postwar Japanese economy.

I recall the French film director Jean Jack Benex, who did a documentary of contemporary Japanese culture, saying in an interview that the Japanese "otaku" is not a generational affair but a feature of Japanese culture as a whole. He added that in France he was the equivalent of a "film otaku."

While pursuing the conveniences of "modern" life, we have ceased to exercise hard self-criticism and forgotten what the modern self should be. Despite the flood of information being exchanged seemingly very freely and openly, [young Japanese] have retrogressed into a world where they reject close contact with each other. Because it is not necessarily pre-modern, this retrogressive non-modernity is quite complex. (To call it "post-modern" won't explain anything.) I should note that both postwar-generation artists Murakami and Mori engage in creative work only after having clearly recognized that it is this "non-modern" world that they live in.

Wakabayashi's "The Green Constellation of the Unicorn" seems to be to-

tally unrelated to the reality to which Murakami and Mori belong. It is a tiny garden consisting of rock terraces, bridge [s], desks and chairs. It calls for restudy of the potential of human sensibilities and ideas by going back not to as recent as premodern times but to the memories of much earlier, ancient times. This work, which has been ordered by the authorities to be moved elsewhere, is almost completely powerless before authority.

The extraordinary mass-consuming behemoth city of Tokyo will eventually destroy and bury Wakabayashi's small garden under a mountain of urban waste. Wakabayashi himself is ready to go to court to sue the authorities for destroying his work. It seems to me that for this artist, the meaning of the work goes beyond politics; what matters more is how to find a way to return to nature. The most important element in this search is "contact", or "touch". It seems to me that in this expressly critical work Wakabayashi is searching for a world that will be opened up by being "in touch." The search for "touch" will ultimately render pointless the distinction between what is the wasteproduct of modern conveniences and what is not. Murakami and Mori see as real the digital and plastic world in which touch is rejected. Looking more closely at their works, however, we may say that they are actively searching for "touch" in terms of their commitment to completion.

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