

art

## Syed Jahangir: His Work, His Vision

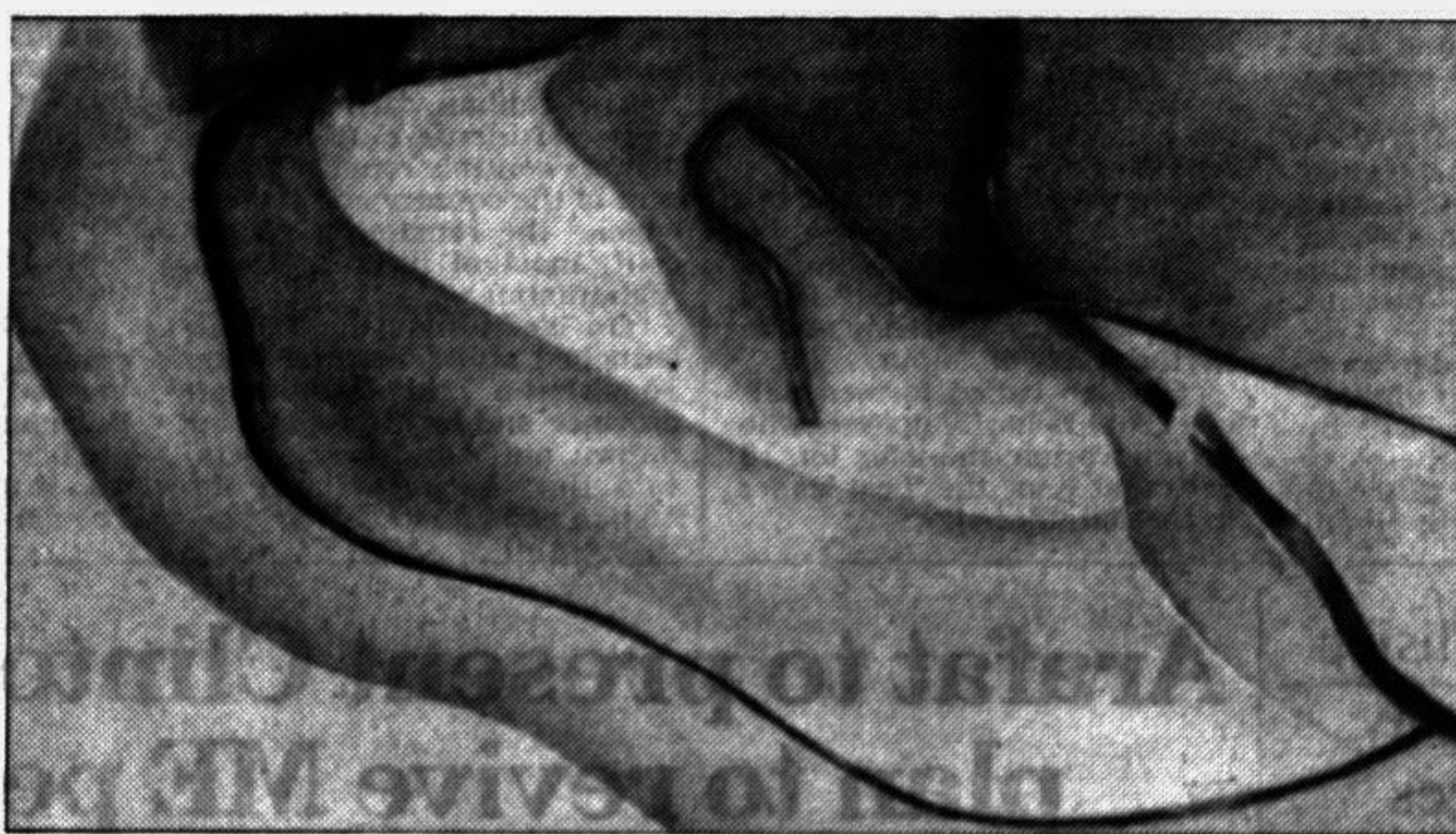
by Syed Manzoorul Islam

**T**HE decade of the fifties was, by all accounts, an eventful one in the history of Bangladeshi art. Not only was modernism established as a concept that engaged the artist's mind, a search for meaning was also begun that rejected common symbolism while interpreting tradition in a newer light. The search led artists to their individual destinations — if any felt that destinations had been arrived at that is. For Syed Jahangir, the search opened up interior spaces — spaces that are vast, silent, primordial, but nevertheless inviting. Over the years, Jahangir has preoccupied himself with an exploration and a reconstruction of that space; but just as the basically formless expanse of that space defies any attempts to formulate it in recognizable patterns, Jahangir's canvas also keep evolving from shape to shape, expression to newer expressions. From cubist and surrealist compositions of his post-graduation days (1955-57) to the subtly mystical, calligraphy-prone patterns of his most recent works, Jahangir has been making and remarking himself. This constant urge to experiment, to create something new is his strength — this is what makes him the formidable artist that he is.

Syed Jahangir was one of the initiators of modernism in our country, an early ground-breaker, who has given the concept his own distinctive treatment. Modernism, for Jahangir, has meant a questioning and exploring attitude, an awareness of time, place and history that implies not so much rejection as transcendence. He is an artist whose roots are firmly spread in his community, but who feels the community's aesthetic identity needs an overhauling. Among Jahangir's favourite motifs are cubes and diamonds that cluster to dominate the canvas (he usually presents them in bright colours) during the late fifties and early sixties. For us, these shapes represent both the multi-dimensionality of our life (the community always has many dimensions) as well as a search for perfection. Jahangir's modernism is a statement

on time, place and history achieved through form, space and colour. Syed Jahangir has also been distinguished by his use of colour. He started with strong colour, and continued till the early seventies. But eventually, after the liberation of Bangladesh, Jahangir began exploring a new theme, driven by the traumatic events that marked the nine month period of the liberation war. In 1974 — if we can put a date to it — he moved on to a newer palette, choosing blue, green, yellow and some red, depicting the socio-economic as well as the emotional states of the country at the time. He has since worked on several serial expositions of particular themes, such as *Rejuvenation of a Soul, Ecstasy, Vibration, In Quest of the Unknown, Nature is Rhythm, Inner Structures* and finally, the mystical calligraphy-prone series of patterns that constitute his most recent works. He still keeps a swirling space around the edges of his canvas, imparts intense dynamism to his forms. Sometimes they seem to interlock, or disintegrate into newer forms or simply keep swimming in the space. But what they accomplish is engage the viewer's attention in a manner that recalls children's fascination with Kaleidoscopic images. Jahangir's Kaleidoscopes are images of our memory, fantasy and desire, as well as our potentials that lie deep inside the locked up psyche. It can be said with all fairness about Jahangir's work; we are never easy in front of them. They have a life that pulsates and vibrates the hidden strings of our being. We get involved in their life — intellectually, and emotionally.

In a sense, Jahangir's journey into the interior space took a recognizable shape when he was confronted with reality's darker challenges. Jahangir has been a pioneer professional artist — for 22 years, until he took up a position as the Director of Fine Arts with Bangladesh Academy of Fine and Performing Arts in 1977, he lived on his work. He therefore became more involved with his work, spending his days and nights thinking about the execution of a thought, of ways to register the most fleeting of thoughts. Strangely, how-



In Quest of the Unknown-1

Oil on Canvas, 90x60 cm-1984

ever, this involvement did not lead to any premeditated expression, in the sense that the individual canvas was not pre-conceived or sketched over before paint was applied to it — as is the practice with some artists — although the theme was very much in his mind. His premeditation was largely related to the ontology and essence of the work,

and not its definite expressions. When Jahangir paints, his mind groups for a shape, then grapples with the nuances and the shades, while his hand busily traces the lineaments; the essence, so to say, transforming into existence.

When Syed Jahangir went to USA in 1958, he came across another kind of space — the vast emptiness of a New

Mexico desert, or the Grand Canyon for example. To this experience was added his understanding of how other artists viewed space, and executed their ideas in line, form and colour. Jahangir visited numerous art galleries and museums in the USA to see exhibitions of modern art. His watercolours of the time — superb examples of versatility and control — record visions of that unlimited space. Jahangir's watercolours were accentuated by a fast moving brush, but their distribution was always a matter of an internal arrangement. Their rich transparency was ensured by this dynamic arrangement.

Perhaps this interrelationship of colour made Jahangir aware of other possibilities. For, when he worked in oil, he often subsumed one colour under another, or allowed one to ride over another. Thus they became not simply representations, but statements of a mood, or a thought or an emotion. His sixties treatment of Innocence, Love or Happiness has such power as to take our imagination to an actual contemplation of these emotions and feelings. Towards 1968, Syed Jahangir found another means of executing his dynamic vision: he perfected a mosaic-like composition where an inner layer of paint was exposed in different areas when he removed patches of the outer layer with a spatula. The result was an inner-outer dialectic that expressed his ideas on time, or existence in a dynamic manner.

Syed Jahangir's art displays a consistency that escapes a casual viewer. A long exposure to his work can only reveal the inner bonds that tie his different phases, the various shreds of his apparently unrelated themes. The outburst of vibrant energy that characterises his early canvas has become mellowed and more organized into rhythmic expositions of the inner life of nature, for example, in his 1994 pieces *Inner Structure I* and *Inner Structure II*. Some traits remain constant, however, like bold outlines, sharply painted areas that stand out as bearers of some important meaning despite overlappings the bold colours —

swirling and dancing; the dynamic interlocking patterns, the poignant empty areas around the edges — wherever they occur, for example. The artist in Jahangir has accomplished a lot but it is never satisfied: may be the man inside keeps driving the artist to ever new areas.

Syed Jahangir's latest phase is indicative of an intense involvement with form and design; colour and line particularly in the use of pigment — from plain tonal surface to broken lines, reminiscent of Van Gogh's brush strokes; essence and experience, as before; but his time he has brought his search to a newer region where possibilities are infinite. To describe this area only as mystical or transcendental will be seriously delimiting his creativity. Let us call this a region of the infinite, where finite man discovers all the elements of transcendence. But the evolving chemistry of this transcendence is something only the artist knows, since he is both at the centre of this encounter and at its periphery at the same time.

The present exhibition brings together a number of paintings that have kept Jahangir busy for the last couple of years.

In a way they point to a shift towards a more mystical understanding of life, and experience. As the finite man's attempt to relate to the infinite and the eternal begins to take shape, the emotions that well up inside him grope for symbolism, for a tangible support that would work as a bulwark against dissolution or erasure. The calligraphic images are both symbols of knowledge that man has been handed over through generations, as well as personal revelations that convey his epiphany and wonder. Jahangir has used luminous colours and vibrant lines to suggest the epiphanic nature of the revelations; and strong lines and interlocking patterns to root that experience in tradition.

The paintings consequently have profound depth and movement, and are almost cosmic in their dimension. They prove that the artist in Jahangir finds his release in continual search into the unknown.



Landscape: New Mexico

Water Colour: 36x55 cm-1958

### poems

#### My Golden Bengal

— 1997

by Gonoful

My golden Bengal, who will love thee when your skies are filled with black smoke, and your wind burns the nose and the breath's melody is an endless cough.

Oh mother, when did the spring become so dirty and restless the noise and traffic insane

Oh mother, who will love you when your rivers are choked your fish diseased or imported and the rice has no taste nor the soil any richness and your water fills with toxins

Oh mother, your trees are cut and burned with coal as brick fields foul village air and grime masks your honeyed smiles with relentless labours and pittance pay

What happens to your students as the poor wither in jammed city spaces and Dhaka grows like a malignant cancer where "daal" is an opiate and prostitutes toil at 10 and 20 taka a play

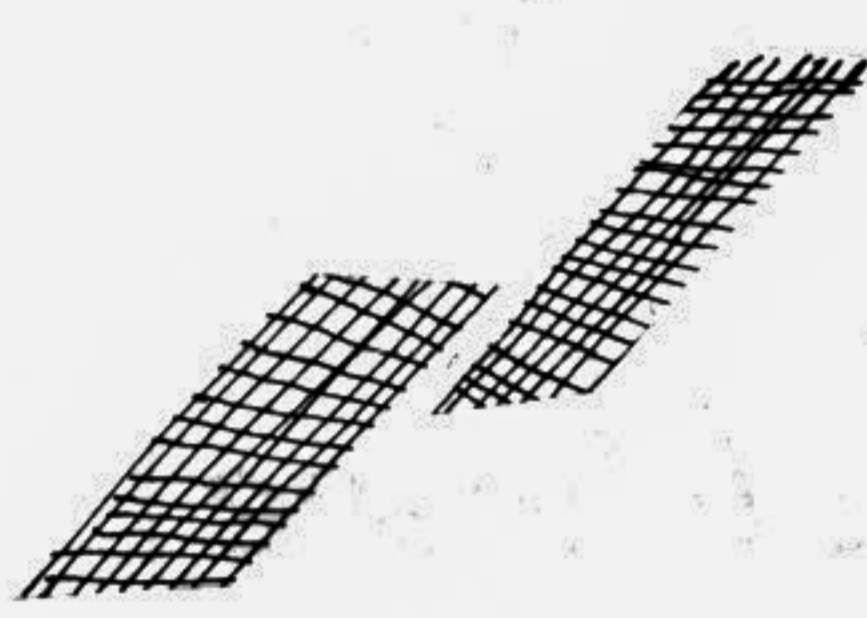
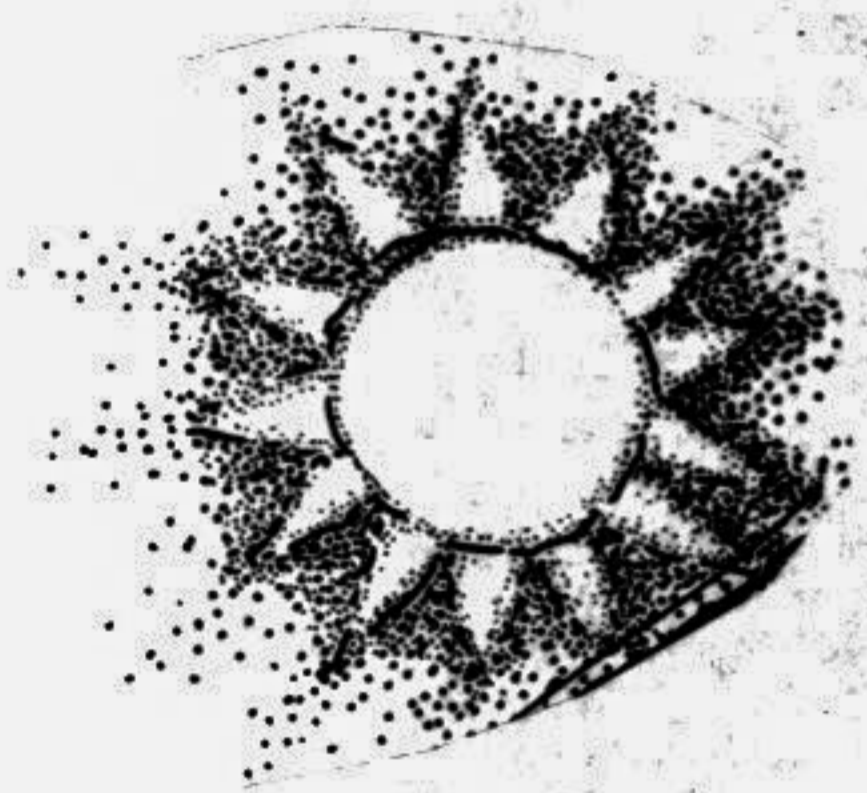
Where is your husking sound dhaki, dhaki as the fruits of the harvest are leached by medical costs, legal cases, jails, tolls and dowries and your hard working women and men struggle to find a livelihood at the lowest wages beyond your shores

Oh mother, how shall be love you show us the way.

#### Accept Charge, Woman

By Farhad Mazhar

I kneel again before you, woman No, not in love, not in remorse, but asking to be forgiven Praying to have my heart washed by your kindness I have whipped the man inside me into submission



I have asked him to kneel down before you I want to be forgiven, have mercy on me Not on me alone Forgive all men I ask you forgiveness today on behalf of all men.

Once again before you Man is on his knees Have mercy on him.

Men have used you as if you were a domesticated beast Pressing down you knees as in a sugarcane factory They have bred children As if into a television box they have stuffed inside you Their world Burning like a bluish flame everyday You go on transmitting it — Your existence is as inanimate as electronic equipment As lifeless as a plastic doll.

You could have been called charcoal You could have been called hammer You could have been called sewing-machine You could have been called bitch Apemen have called you woman in mockery Knowing all this in front of you I stand with head bent, woman

I am a man Forgive me.

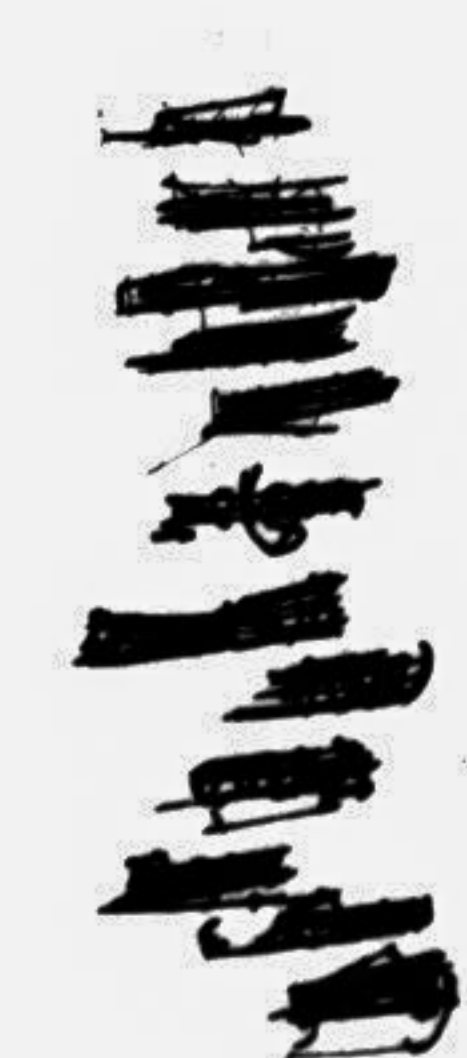
Everyday some one husband beats his wife to death Everyday some one in bestial lust Throws acid on your face Everyday an 11-year old child Is raped by 11 men You are on sale As if you are vegetable or groceries lamb or mutton

They measure your breasts with tape They measure your thighs with tape They weigh you on hanging scales They test your teeth your hair your nails and fix your price

You could have been called butterbread You could have been called Japanese Honda You could have been called Dunhill cigarettes You could have been called pussycat Half-cultured people have named you better half Knowing all this in front of you I stand with head bent, woman

I am a man Forgive me.

You are a mother machine so you are called mother Your body can be fondled so you are called female As horses in stables and dogs in kennels you live in the ladies room So you are called lady You shine like furniture in every house So you are called housewife



In accents of equal meaning as the word man I want to name you, woman But I cannot In infirm shame in front of you I stand like a culprit

I am a man Forgive me. I have come to tell you today The word man means in-charge And it is time for you to accept charge, woman Accept him.

Tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

#### Borkha

Farhad Mazhar

My girl-friend doesn't wear borkha, and she says The pure ones never look at woman's body With mischievous glance, but with Allah's noble gaze; Only the lecherous raise the excuse of borkha. Let Allah blind black cloth on the sight Of these impure men.

What do you think? Look, the weavers and tailors wait, They too are anxious for you to optme They have a living to earn, in scissor and cloth Their sewing machines will run at your behest.

Lord, look, not bad; nicely dressed, there's — There's cap, but a black band on his eyes, the idiot walks. No borkha in sight, And people know quick who's pure and who's a lout.

Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

#### To What is Mine

By Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Both — beginning to experience loss — and terminating the temptation to reduce possessions into marks Proclaiming which herd I belong to... are like orange peels scraped off the fruit Deliberate, surgical and delicate. The squeaks of juice bursting out of moist tangerine flesh are sudden and teasing: Like possessions — when were dreams or memories truly our own?