

Invincible. That is the word that came to my mind when I met Murtaza Baseer in his house.

When I looked for him amongst the piles of books and heaps of canvases, I found the 86-year-old maestro sitting with a smile. He had an easel on one side, and an oxygen concentrator on the other.

"Gearing up for my next exhibition," says the man with a smile while removing the oxygen pipe. "My art keeps me alive."

"I am an artist by chance," he says. "It was never my childhood dream to be an artist."

Son to renowned scholar Dr Muhammed Shahidullah and Marguba Khatun, as a child Baseer would be found engrossed in the pictures and illustrated figures in his father's library which would be overflowing with valuable Bengali and English books and journals.

In 1947, when he was a student of class nine, he became an active member of the student wing of the Communist Party. As he was truly moved by the philosophy of Marx, Engels and Lenin, he thought to himself, why not sketch their portraits? The following year, a communist leader came to Bogra, who inspired Baseer with his autograph.

Baseer believes that his lifelong dedication to important causes and affinity for figurative paintings stemmed from his role and participation in the Left ideology.

Baseer's paintings convey far more than the mere appearance of the subject; instead, he always tries to capture the struggle of the people around him. That is why he made sure to retain his love for realism even in his art - portraying detailed and unembellished forms of life in his paintings, even when he decided to delve into the abstract form. He took both the styles and created his own to respond to the modernist's trend of abstraction. He then coined the term abstract realism.

An interesting aspect of Baseer's work is the range of self-portraits that he has made. Other than their unquestionable value, these works are interesting because of their sheer number and time-span. Baseer draws himself at least once, if not more, every year.

"You know what I learnt from my life?" he asks before taking a pause. "No one is

your true friend. No one else but your inner self is the only entity that you can totally depend on, you can trust your deepest secrets with. I am my own friend. I often feel lonely, and then I always look at my reflection. I stand in front of the mirror and ask the reflection, who am I?"

When he realises the answer to that question, he portrays it on paper, using his pen.

"I draw myself not for the most obvious reason that I am the subject I know best," he continues. "In fact, every time I finish yet another self-portrait, the man inside the art, seems somewhat unknown to me. I feel like there is still so much to explore and express. I love to chronicle myself, in my sickness and distress, in my happiness and laughter. When I had my cataract operation, and one of my eyes were shut close with bandages, I was in pain. But I drew myself."

When Baseer was born, his mother suffered some health complications. While growing up, he always had this impression that he was probably not wanted. He has always felt as if he were an alien from a distant world. "I feel like a loner even in the hustle and bustle of crowds. I always knew that I have to get used to being my own friend and I became exactly that."

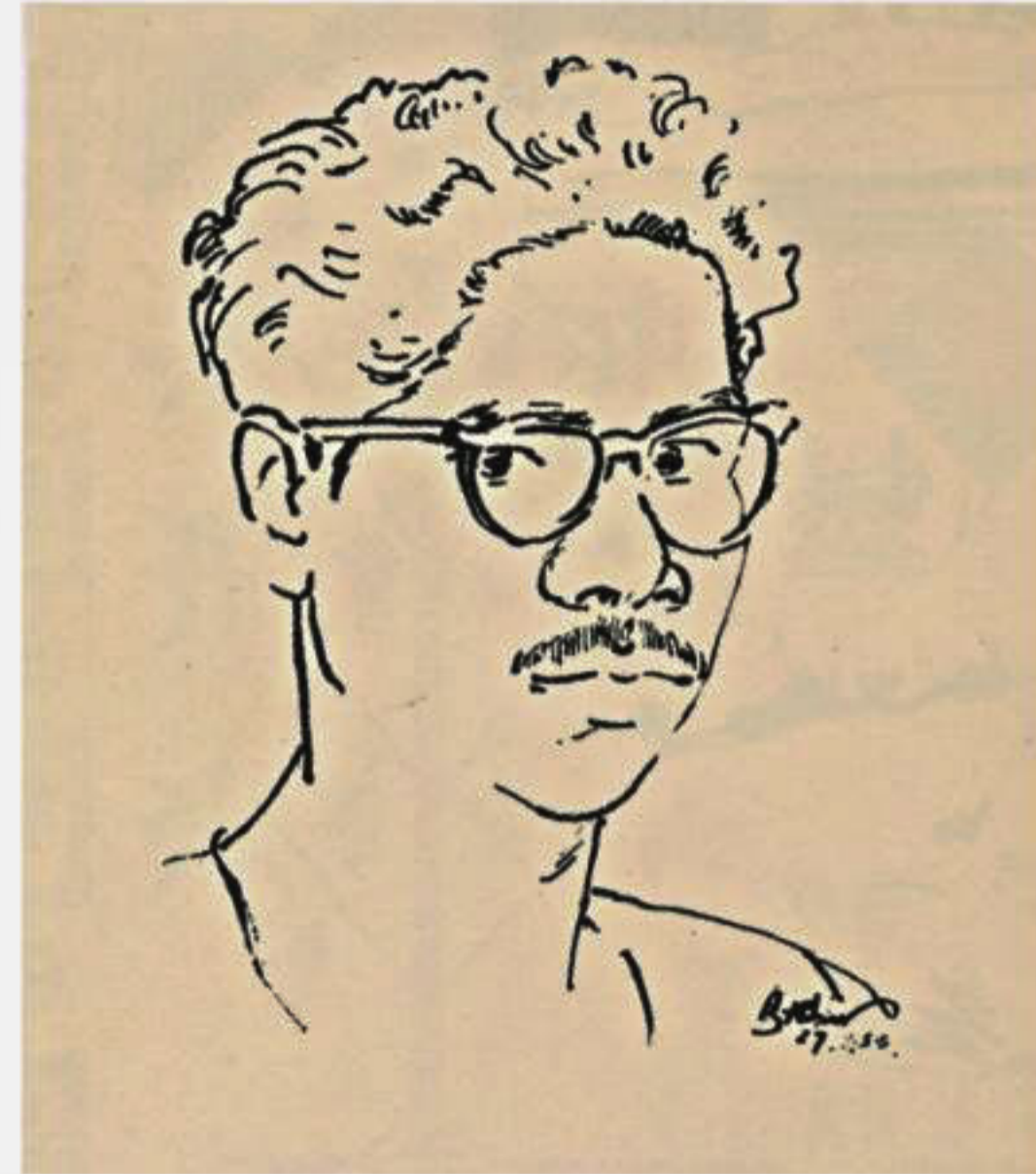
Being his own friend, Baseer says, is a way for him to get through feelings of loneliness and instability of his own life - a life so versatile and eventful, that one conversation is not enough to learn all about it.

Six decades of his career, spanning from 1954 to 2016, surely occupies a unique place in Bangladeshi modern art history, but what makes this prolific artist stand out even more is his continuous attempt to learn, grow and evolve.

As an art student, he joined the Dacca Government Institute of Art in 1949 and kept exploring his artistic talent. He received higher studies at the Accademia del Belli Arti in Florence during 1956-58 and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris during 1971-73.

Throughout his long illustrated life, he often derived inspiration from the minimalist style of Paritosh Sen's work, and his distinctive manner of painting with a palette-knife. He learnt the technique of

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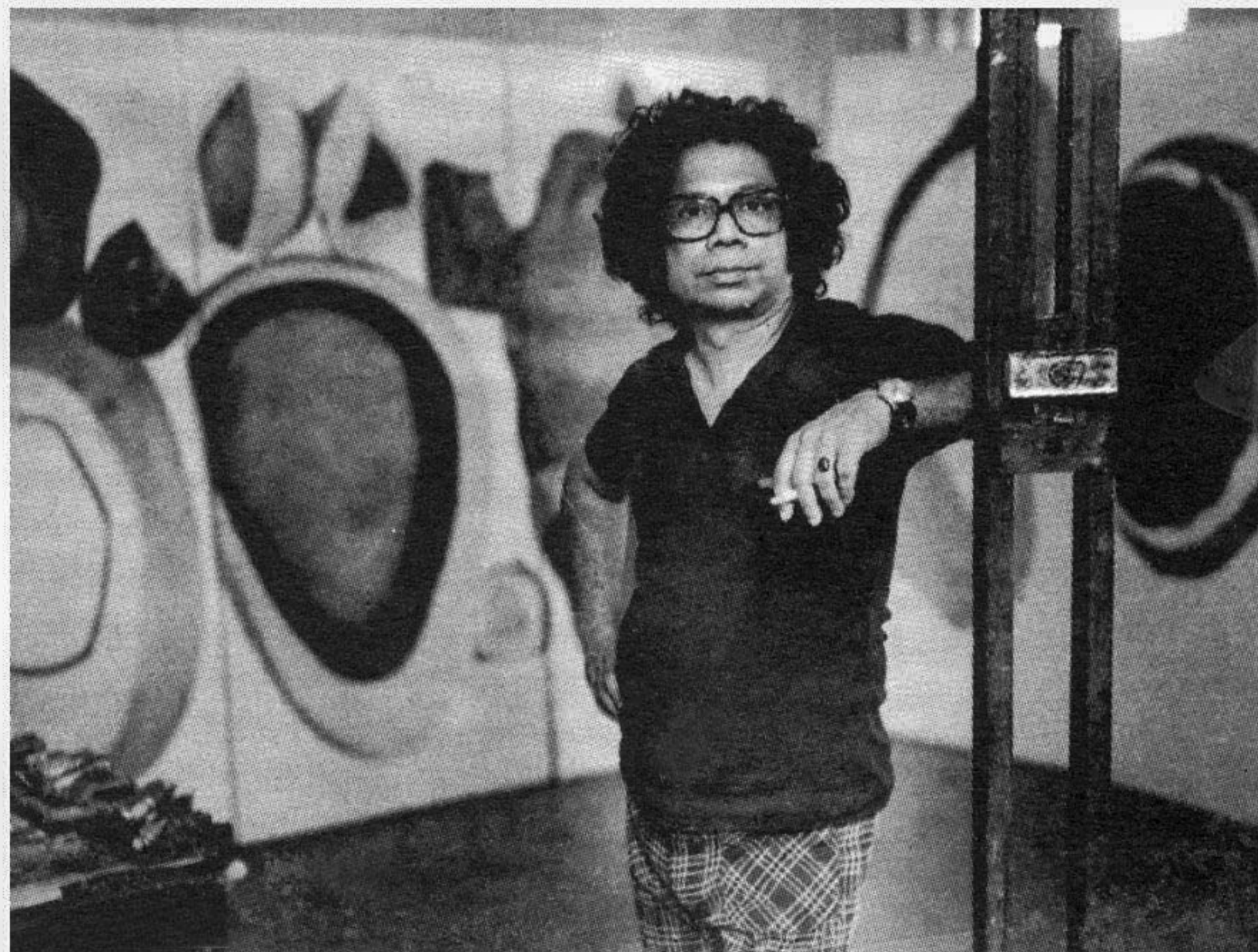


Self-portrait, pen and ink, 25x18cm, 1950.

Right
The Wall 30, oil on canvas, 153x89cm, 1967.



During Nine Painters Exhibition, (L-R) Debdas Chakraborty, Qayyum Chowdhury, Qazi Abul Baset, Abdur Razzaque, Murtaja Baseer, Md Kibria and Nitun Kundu, 1993.



Murtaja Baseer in 1976.

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The Kalima Tayeba 37, oil on canvas, 46x76cm, 2002.

mixing water colours from the famous painter Dillip Das Gupta. He appreciated Ramkinkar Baij for his inclination toward people and his bohemian lifestyle. He was attracted to Cubism and was greatly inspired by Picasso who remains his idol to this day. During his stay in Florence, he sought comfort and inspiration in the work of the pre-Renaissance painters, including Giotto, Cimabue, Duccio, Simone Martini and Fra Angelico. Baseer has always believed in evolution and transformation - be it coming out of his comfort zone by using the style of transpercism that he had used for many years, or exploring new art media and forms and going beyond monotonous repetitions.

All his paintings show his artistic mastery through the use of different types of media, including drawing pens, oil pastel, etching, acquatints, liocuts and collage on board. Other than being a painter, he has also penned a few novels, short stories and poems. In 1964, he wrote the screenplay for the film version of Humayun Kabir's novel Nodi O Nari. He acted as the film's art director and the main assistant to the director. A history enthusiast, Baseer has studied and interpreted coins of the Bengal Sultan period with the scholarly commitment of a historian. An avid autograph collector, he has always loved

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archiving stamps, match boxes and classic literature.

"In March 1967, my career saw a new turn with my painting series "Wall", he says. "I have always been a realist artist and have always wanted to remain so, despite the temptation of following the current trends. The paintings of my series are abstract in every sense; the forms that I had used are non-figurative. The paintings look abstract, but actually they are not. In fact they are the segment of the walls in Old Dhaka, which inspired me to do the series. These paintings are a part of the reality that I depicted on canvas, using the realistic colours and textures that were the original features of the walls."

In Bangladesh, only a handful of artists have been represented in such a large number of exhibitions at home and abroad and over as long a period as Baseer. From Florence to Dhaka to Lahore, his paintings have travelled different exhibitions all over the world and he hopes to continue that.

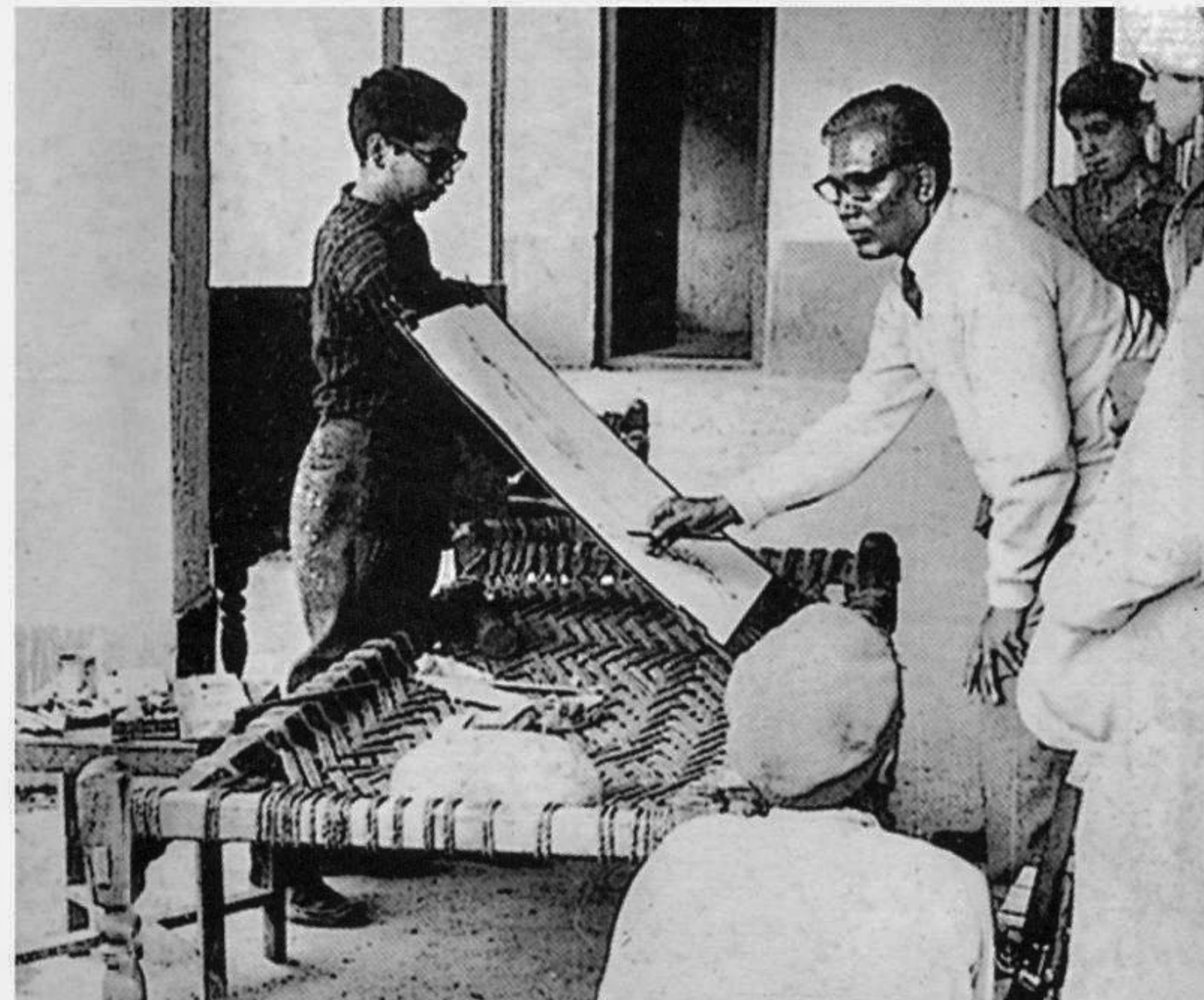
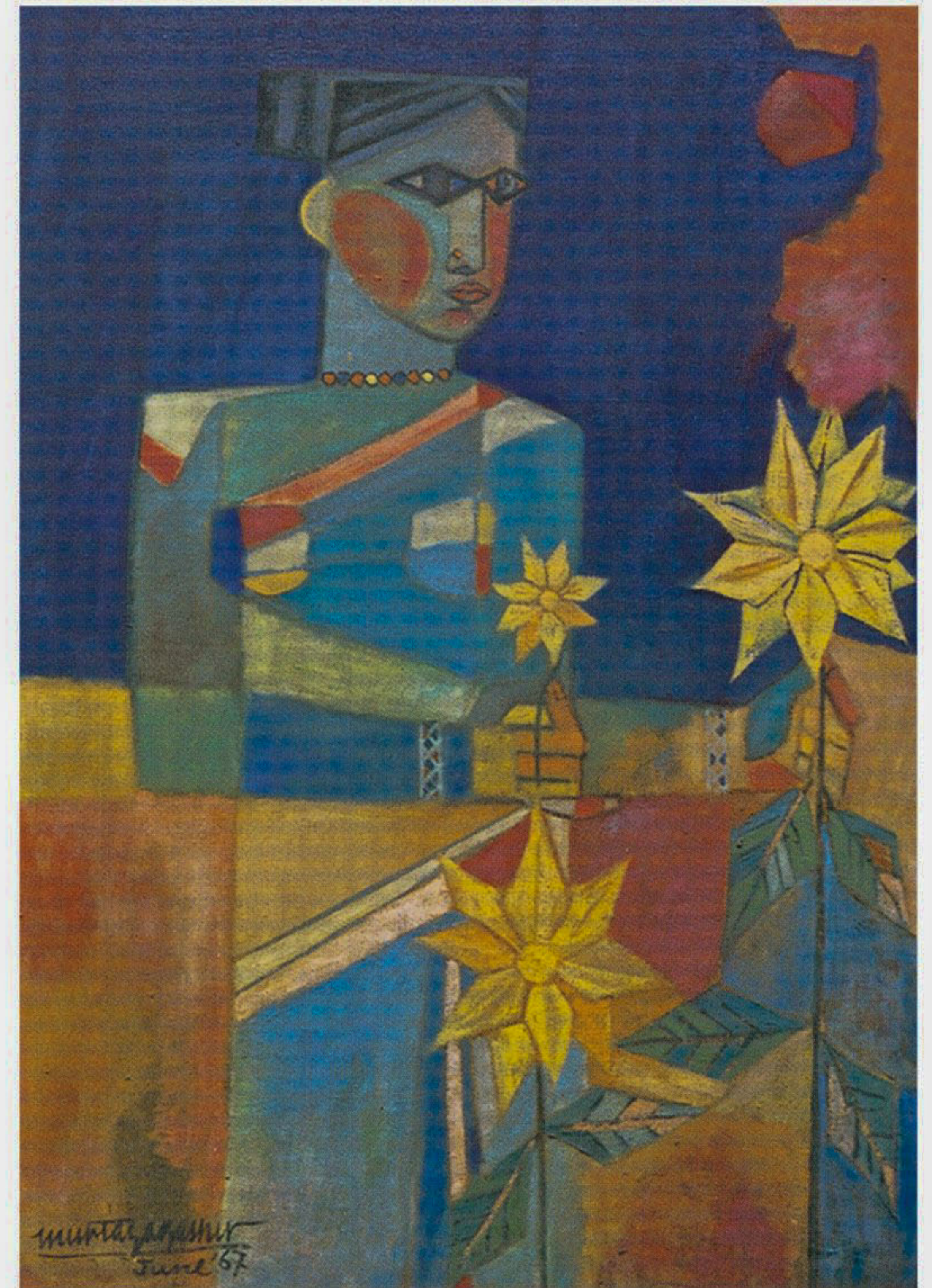
"Recently when I fell ill, the doctors almost gave up. I did not. I believed that I have to survive because I have things to do. I have to survive because life is actually beautiful and I have the job of depicting that. When I stood near death - exhausted, weak and unshaven - I stood before the mirror again. And I drew.

Because for me, that is the ultimate source of comfort and I will keep doing it."



The Wing 14, oil on canvas, 92x92cm, 1998.

Below: Sunflower, oil on canvas, 87x61cm, 1967.



With Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin during work, 1962.



With artist SM Sultan, 1992.