

Tariq* was repeatedly molested by an uncle over three years since he was five. The uncle used to bribe him with chocolate and ask him nicely to not tell anyone about their “playtime”. As a child not understanding what happened to him, Tariq never spoke about it to anyone, but became a very distant and antisocial child, prone to sudden tantrums and angry outbursts. When he was 16, in midst of an argument, he finally broke down and told his mother about it. Mortified about such allegations against her cousin, his mother told him he must have misunderstood and asked him not to mention this to anyone. Now in his 20s, Tariq still sees his uncle at family functions who jokes around with him, as if nothing ever happened.

Children who experience sexual abuse tend to keep silent about their experiences because of feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion. Stigma around the issue and examples of muzzling conversations set by adults also discourage children from expressing their feelings out of fear of not being believed. It is this shroud of secrecy and denial that we need to shake ourselves out of, and one way of doing that is by openly communicating with children about it.

The positive impact of this open communication is demonstrated by the work of a student-led project called Nishu (Nirapod Shoishober Uddeshe) initiated by a group called Ground Zero. In December 2016, Ground Zero won the BYLC Youth Leadership Prize, a grant of

through the use of cartoons, poems and posters, were able to make them aware of their personal space and private parts, which are forbidden to others, understand how to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate touching, and what to do if someone did anything that made them uncomfortable.

Ground Zero's main intention was to reach children with the right information before they experienced sexual abuse. Through their intervention, they found that many children had experienced abuse at home by people they trust, but hadn't spoken about it either because

Zero's initiative demonstrates that an act as simple as speaking to children on their level can have a far-reaching impact on their lives.

A lot needs to be done to address child sexual abuse. We need to find out the root causes of why it happens, we need to establish better processes for legal recourse and punishing perpetrators, and we need better counselling services for those who experience abuse and trauma. But these sorts of initiatives are often left for government services, hospitals, or NGOs to manage. A small but effective measure



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

they couldn't comprehend what was happening to them, or couldn't articulate their feelings of discomfort. Having someone speak openly to them about it helped them to understand their experience and speak to their parents. Several parents called the group afterwards, admitting shock that this had happened to their children right under their noses. In one instance, where a girl was being molested by her father, the child spoke to her mother after attending one of these workshops. Upon learning this, the mother moved away with the child and filed a police report. Ground

that each of us can take at home is to create channels for open communication and talk to the children in our lives about it. It doesn't have to be an uncomfortable, detailed, explicit discussion, but enough so that they are aware, able to protect themselves, and seek help if something happens. Hopefully then, we will have all played an active part in creating a society where no child has to suffer in silence as Tariq did.

*Names have been changed to protect identity
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TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

SHAVEENA ANAM

I learned of Tariq's story not from him but from his tearful older sister who learned about the incident by chance. She is worried about how Tariq has extremely low self-esteem and has isolated himself from his family. She said the matter was never brought up again and their parents never acknowledged it happened. She is full of resentment against her parents but doesn't have the courage to confront them or talk to her brother about it.

Tariq's story illustrates three things about us as a society:

One, we don't respect the agency and experiences of children. When they challenge us with something distressing, we try to convince them, and ourselves, that they either imagined it or are lying. And whatever the case may be, they will forget about it over time.

Two, we are so uncomfortable about talking about issues related to sex and abuse that we are willing to push them under the rug and ignore them out of fear—fear of dealing with the truth and fear of what other people might say. In this case, it was particularly difficult for their mother to deal with the idea that her son had been molested, and by a man no less.

Three, we are so in denial of the idea that those close to us can also engage in abusive behaviour, that we are completely unwilling to confront the crime so as to not create rifts in the family or attract undue attention.

But we need to get over ourselves. Enough newspapers reports and anecdotal evidence has shown us that sexual abuse of children is rampant across all strata of society, but our silence around the issue is deafening.

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BDT 750,000 from Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) with support from UKAID. With help from other child rights groups, including Breaking the Silence, they created a child-friendly module for students reading between classes three and five, that disseminated accessible information on the threat of sexual abuse.

A baseline survey with 480 students from five different schools found that around 70 percent of the children were not aware that they had private parts, which were not supposed to be touched by anyone else. They held sessions with 1,200 students from various schools and,

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ART

Through his more-than-six-year journey as a professional artist, Zahangir Alom has ever-refined his innate capacity to translate heartfelt observations of the natural world into artistic compositions infused with insight. The result, a rare unity of physical geographies, thought, emotion and interaction, can be witnessed in the mainly watercolour wash collection of “The Uncaged,” his latest solo exhibition, at La Galerie in Dhanmondi's Alliance Française de Dhaka.

An artist who habitually draws from the wellspring of his experience of Nature's sights, sounds, textures, tastes and smells, Zahangir routinely connects with the innermost recesses of the Soul of the earth, water and forest. He delights in embodying its music and patterns in his works.

In several of his paintings, the cloud-like shapes of feminine figures are expressed through colour interplay. No effort is made to award them definitive shape; rather the focus is on the essence of flesh and blood within the physical world. Through long practice Zahangir has mastered his ability to produce such an effect, aided by close study of the Oriental heavyweights. Importantly, while not deviating from institutional principle and discipline, it is here that he has developed his novel combination of Oriental wash and Occidental tertiary colour splotch.

Recurrently his works rely on the primary colours of the Bengali landscape: blue and green. The rainy season, the smell of earth drenched by rain, the gentle breeze and music's tune: all intermingle in his paintings.

TO COMMUNE WITH THE ETERNAL SOUL, AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY

MALAY BALA

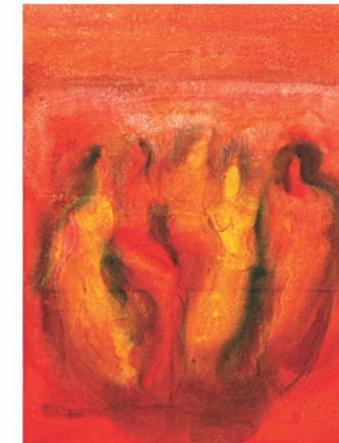
TRANSLATED BY
M A HYE MILTON AND ANDREW EAGLE

When a human being is imbued with intellect and exuberance, delights in Nature's fullness of life and revels in Nature's diversity, their creative output indeed becomes as one with the creative self of the Universe. This truth lies at the heart of the inability to detach Zahangir's artworks from his life philosophies and vision, which are not less creative than the paintings.

The nature-lover and avid traveller employs his boundless curiosity and memory of familiar and foreign landscapes too, although with intuition as chief guide Zahangir can as easily find himself illuminating the buoyancy of a folksong as a Himalayan twilight.

A further source of muse, if any were needed, arises from his work as a critic. In the course of penning reviews of music, dance, drama and of course the visual arts, Zahangir interacts with other artists. Therein arise moments of exhilaration and clarity of just the sort he might later transform with a brush into shapes, figures and colours.

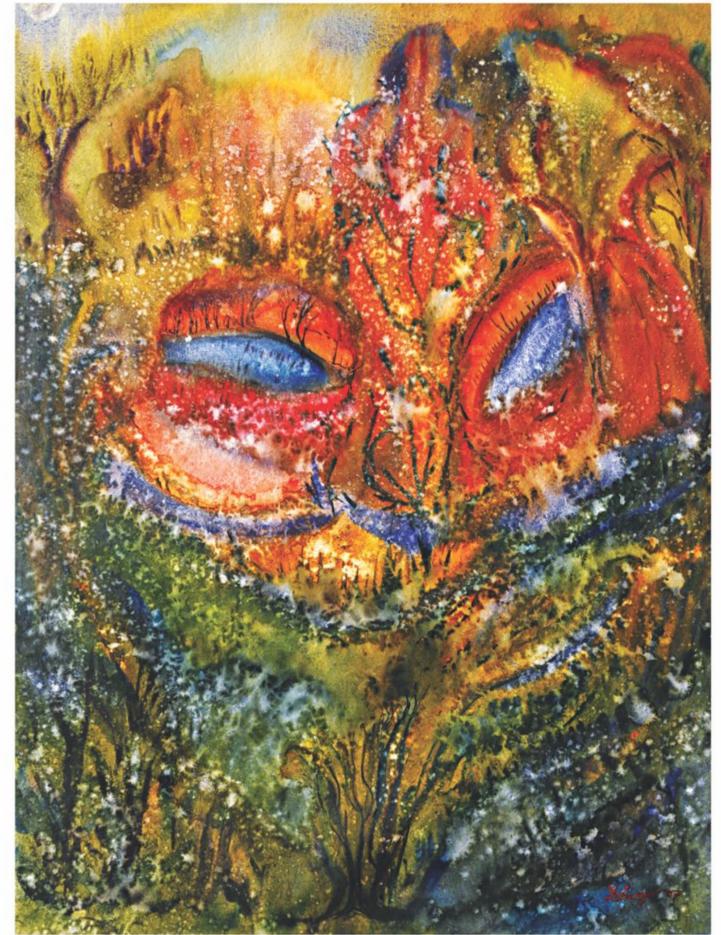
At the same time in the artist is a preoccupation with themes, forms and techniques. The company of fellow painters as well as art admirers, not least during previous exhibitions at home and abroad, has left him with no meagre understanding of such matters. Although his painting is primarily a creature of impulse, the addition of solid methodology has led to his developing a distinctive language within watercolour wash technique.



Dance of the Divine

In a nod to the artists of the New Bengal School, mythological heroines including Radha, Lalita, Bishakha and Behula frequently appear, in Shongkirtan style. The presence of the Eternal Soul can be felt in particular in a series representing Raasleela on a moonlit Dolpurnima night. Here, the impressive unity between the natural world and artistic expression that Zahangir skilfully preserves is developed further into a new world where Nature's beauties are observed with great passion, virtues extolled beyond inhibition.

In my experience working alongside Zahangir in the same studio, I not only learnt a new life philosophy but discovered his artistic maturity in his confidence in creatively mixing colours to a degree that impressed time and again. Some of his works are semi-abstract, which also reflects this mature understanding.



The Power of Femininity

Another characteristic to impress is the selflessness of Zahangir's devotion to art. Even should he return to the studio late at night with an idea he will commence a new painting at once to be completed and uploaded on Facebook by dawn.

Among his themes it is unsurprising that a visual artist enamoured of music will incorporate melody, poetic rhythm and the playful gestures of damsels dancing. Such references include *Gaudiya* dance as well as *Desh, Bageshree, Khamaj* or *Malkauns* Raga, with a highlight being the depiction of the late-autumn twilight where, according to mythological narrative, Bengali women gather and dally.

Another early series from this artist, “Celestial View of the Earth from Space” is represented, which offers a distinctive style of thick dots to depict a bird's eye view, in recognition of the overarching beauty of river, field and forest. This series demonstrates the breadth of the artist's imagination.

In the series “Mystique Romance of the Woods,” Zahangir documents Nature's soulful silence. Paintings here include surreal floral and arboreal imagery, clouds and water, almost as a range of characters from a novel, with colour enlisted to convey beauty's allure. A theme that harks back to the artist's wanderlust and strong communion with nature, these paintings are so moving as

to offer the viewer the chance to communicate independently with each character.

The series “*Sorachitra* of Bengal” alludes to folk art in a new language, while a further series “Post-mortem of Post-modern Painting” delves into an imaginative chemistry of flowers, trees and female physique. An outstanding painting, “Song of Silence” meanwhile offers an expanse of trees with sparks of light filling apertures from some distance, a light-and-shade combination formed of nostalgia for childhood.

The task of selecting works for “The Uncaged” from the hundreds of images that comprise Zahangir's catalogue was arduous; but the result is an exhibition that tantalises in its representation of the artist's breadth of skill and purposeful progression.

The exhibition at La Galerie, at Alliance Française in Dhanmondi, is open from Monday to Thursday, 3 pm to 9 pm and on Friday and Saturday from 9 am to 12 noon and 5 pm to 8 pm until December 15. On the final evening there will be a closing ceremony featuring music and dance.

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