



**Shakuntala with Friends, 207 and 208, Watercolour on Paper, by Malay Bala.**

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# This week at Alliance Francaise Dhaka, art is born out of friendship

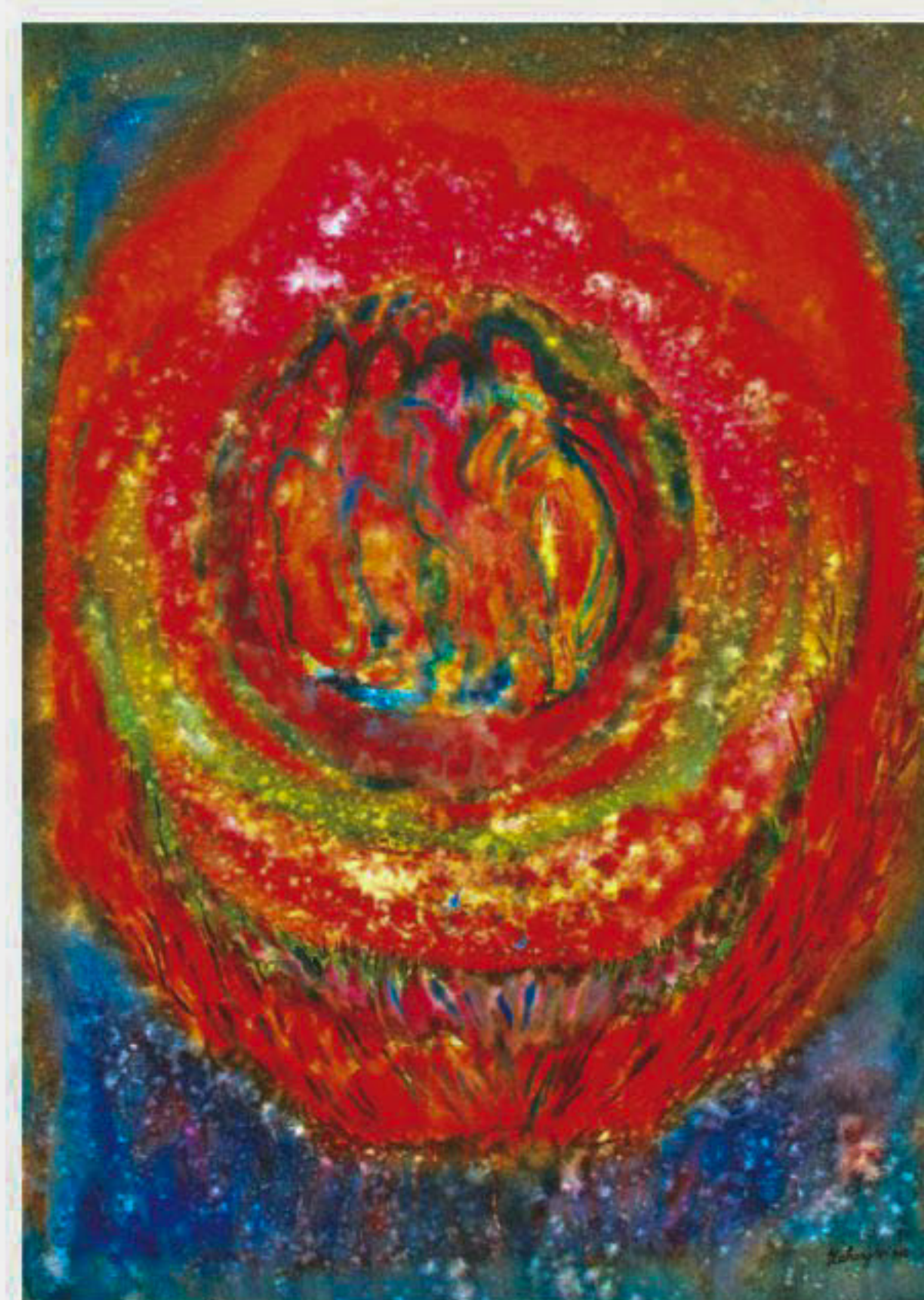
From the title of the exhibition to the ambience that hits you upon entering the gallery, one is struck by the presence of alliance, of the fun borne of creative collaboration in the project. Jointly organised by visual artists Malay Bala, associate professor at the Department of Oriental Art at the University of Dhaka, Amit Nandi, lecturer at the same department, and Zahangir Alom, journalist at *The Daily Star*, "Preceptor-Disciple: Disciple-Preceptor" is a group painting exhibition on display at the Alliance Francaise Dhaka, Dhanmondi from January 18 to February 1. The paintings depict scenes from the Mahabharata, portraying in particular Shakuntala, Radha-Krishna, and other political facets of the saga, as well as the Buddha, Rabindranath Tagore, and other abstract renditions of Bengal's nature in motion. The media used range from pencil sketches to water colours and acrylic on paper.

I spoke of creative collaboration because of the way that myths and contemporaneity, and personal styles and fascinations coexist among the canvases displayed at the exhibition. In a series of water colour paintings, Amit Nandi uses Mughal miniature motifs and inspiration from Raga Kedar as a foundation for personal interpretation. The images contain expanses of blank space and the scenes are painted in dainty strokes of technicolour that seem almost to be

fading away—a reminder that the art's influence stems from a remembrance of past myths, but that its rendition uses colours and techniques of the here and now. Malay Bala's fascination lies with the tales of Shakuntala, particularly the time she spends with her friends and animals in the forest. The artist expresses her bond with the wild by showing her dancing and resting at various times of the day symbolised by turns by greens, yellows, and reddish browns. Each painting may represent a different episode, a different time, but the figures are in all instances wrapped up entirely in tree branches and blades of grass, intertwined entirely with the forest. The same style is visible in his renditions of Tagore "in Creation", as art pours forth from his fingers and fills up the space around him. Zahangir Alom, meanwhile, focuses on scenes of nature that incorporate oriental myths—the dance of Raasleela in moonlight, flowers and dancers drenched in monsoon, figures conversing amidst the dark blues and purples of winter. "A lot of Zahangir's work is influenced by the ragas created from different times in nature," Professor Bala says as he walks me through the paintings. "He listens to classical music

of teacher and disciple in art. "I believe that art is heavily influenced by the role of the preceptor," shares Professor Bala as we stand appraising his image of Tagore. "The three of us run an Oriental painting study group that has so far put up eight exhibitions, and now we're hoping to be able to nurture the practice of a preceptor-disciple relationship. Training students, fostering their creativity, sending them around the world for art exhibitions, holding musical nights and addas. But before we can successfully expand on these activities, we wanted to showcase our own work as a sort of foundation." The preferred nature of such a mentor-disciple relationship is evident both in the exhibition's title and the artist's treatment of the history influencing them. While the paintings borrow the myths, the motifs, and the cultural giants of the subcontinent as a sort of stepping stone for more inventive and contemporary representation, the title "Preceptor-Disciple: Disciple-Preceptor" places the two parties on an equal footing, joined together by the hyphen and the colon. Both can teach, and learn from, each other.

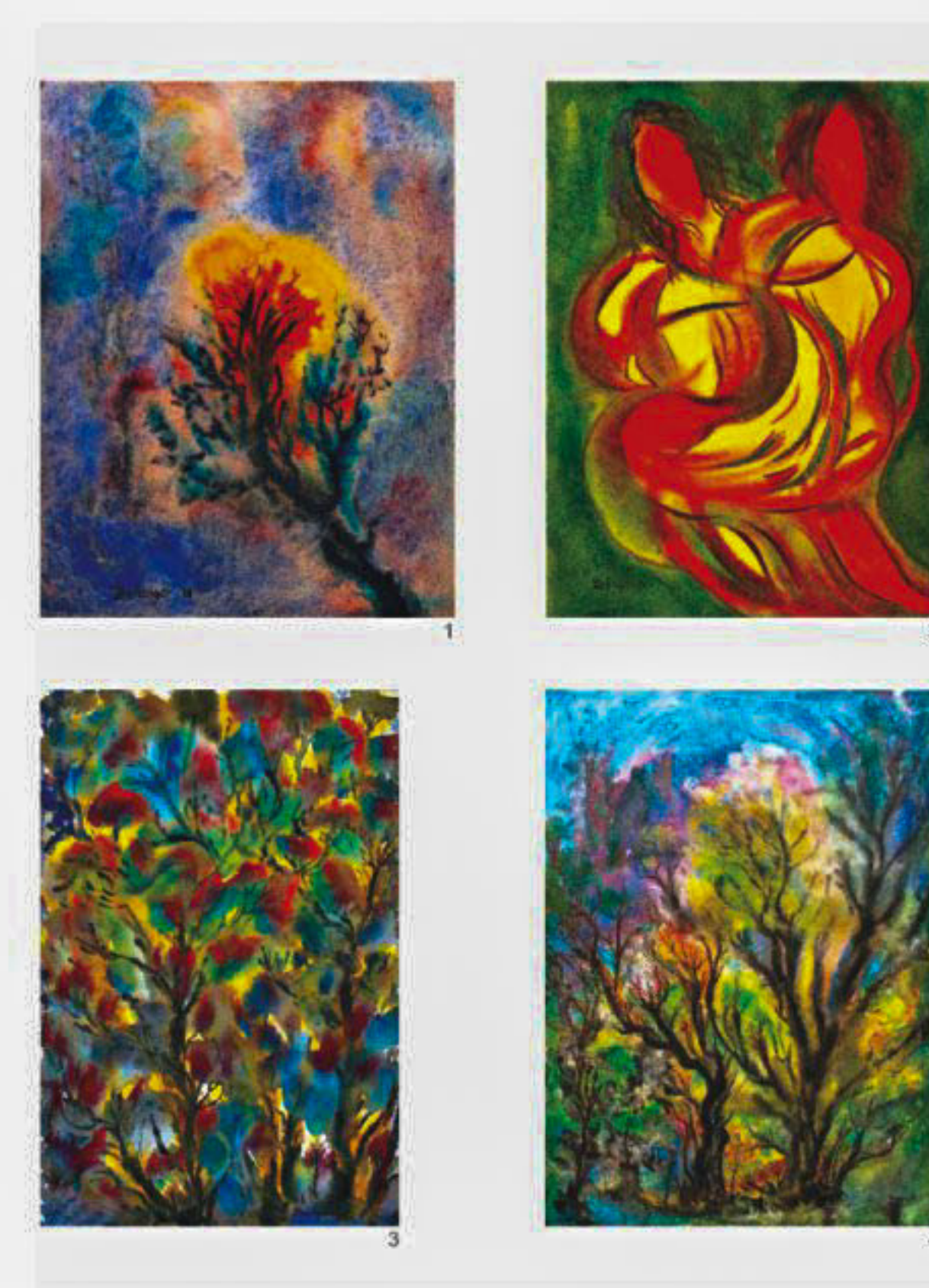
As I near the end of the display, the



**Zahangir Alom paints scenes of nature and love in watercolour on paper.**

while he paints."

Further highlighting the import of teamwork in the project, each of the artists chime in to comment on the other's area of forte. Malay Bala is the "master of wash", Amit Nandi is adept at sketches, and Zahangir Alom has a way with colour combinations. While they have worked mostly on their individual projects, the underlying concept uniting the entire display is to highlight the role



spread of 18 water colour plates at the centre of the gallery draws my attention to a more practical application of the artwork. The images, 50 in total, depict scenes from the Mahabharata and will be used as illustration for a book to be released at this year's Ekushey Book Fair in February. Discussing this next project allows Professor Bala to explain the main goal behind their efforts with Oriental art at their studio. "We dream of setting up an individual character for Bangladeshi art. When you enter a gallery today, you can point out which one is a Surrealistic painting, which is influenced by European schooling, etc. But we want to be able to identify Bangladeshi art, touched by our subcontinental myths and histories, but incorporating at the same time our contemporary social crises. We want audiences from around the world to be able to visit Bangladesh and appraise not Western art, but art that they can recognise as Bangladeshi."

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**Amit Nandi uses Mughal motifs as inspiration for a contemporary rendition in watercolour.**