

# Sanjoy Chakraborty's journey with red

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Laal Kono Rong Noy ('Red is Not a Colour'), curated by Mustafa Zaman, is displaying the works of artist Sanjoy Chakraborty from July 12 to 25 at Dwip Gallery, Lalmaia. Sanjoy Chakraborty studied History of Art at Rabindra Bharati University, India and has participated in exhibitions across Bangladesh, India, Italy, and Serbia. He is currently an assistant professor at the art history department, University of Dhaka. Star Weekend spoke to him about his intrigue with red and identity politics, and the role art plays in our socio-political landscape.

How and when did you start working on this series?

The exhibition comprises my work from the past 10 years. My instructor at Rabindra Bharati University, the famous artist Partha Pratim Deb, used to tell us that we need to produce work for at least 10 years. Then we can see if we can survive in the art world.

I took this on as a challenge. So the pieces displayed in this series were created between



**Life**, watercolour on paper, 2018



**History Must Die**, watercolour and ink on paper, 2012

2009, when I completed my Masters, and 2019. Some of them were published at home and abroad separately, but I believe that a compiled display of an artist's work allows one to notice the evolution of their oeuvre.

My intrigue with red has another story. Living in Chittagong, I was forced to experience some of the micro-aggressions that minorities face in our society. I was often called by the derogatory term 'dandi' which, at that young age, really hurt me. But when I was leaving to study in India, I thought I would fit right in in the country of 'dandis'. But there they started calling me "the Bangal". This was shortly after the bomb blast in Bombay in 2008, so many classmates also referred to me in jest as "the terrorist from Bangladesh". Throughout my undergraduate years, my friends in India thought of me as a Muslim simply because I was from Bangladesh. These experiences forced me to think about how borders are established in society and about identity politics in a local, national, and global context. I started rereading the story of our subcontinent, particularly since Partition, as well as the identity politics between blacks and whites in the West, among the Chinese, Korean and Japanese in Asia, the races and castes that try to coexist in India. I realised that languages, cultures, food habits, even the colour of skin can be different among people, but what remains the same is the colour of our blood. Hence, I started painting with red. Until now, almost all of my work has been in red. It tells a story of unity and equality.

I couldn't help but notice this, how interconnected everything is—the human body with the trees, the cityscape, the outline of the country's map, in your pieces. Why this focus on connectivity?

You'll notice that none of the paintings portray the urban landscape in a positive light. It is portrayed as a suffocating space, like a noose around my neck, like a blockage in my veins. This cityscape isn't made to

look beautiful in the images—it comprises buildings all crowded and huddled over one another. I've positioned nature in contrast to the city in these images. In two of the portraits, for instance, the cityscape rests on top of my face like a stifling force, and the village landscape rests beneath my face. Through these works, I seek to escape the city life I am forced to live in and the nature that I miss, which crops up in the form of leaves and flowers sprouting out of my body parts.

One of the other pieces titled *Art, Politics and Me* shows my body parts in fragments. It represents the way the entity is in constant flux every day. We behave a certain way with our friends, another way entirely with our colleagues and clients. We change ourselves randomly, sometimes behaving differently on different occasions with the same person. We live multiple realities each day. Cities are made up of such stories. The series explores this idea of fabricated reality.

**What role can art play in bridging this imbalance between nature and the urban landscape?**

We tend to seek art and nature in order to escape the suffocation of city life. By art, I mean paintings, music, theatre, literature, all of it. I think the cultural centres and museums in Dhaka offer us some comfort in the absence of natural spaces. We need even more galleries and cultural spaces in which people can spend quality time with art, not just by looking at paintings but by analysing them, by meeting people, engaging in discussions, forming relationships.

**To return to the title of your exhibition—'Red is Not a Colour'—how does your work deal with the relationship between colour and identity politics? In a multi-colour image, the selection and placement of each colour is decided by what the image demands. It is often an aesthetic decision.**

