

Chandra Bhattacharjee

Artist Interview

How would you describe the start of your career as a painter? Any comments on the choice of your subject?

As a child, in a village called Patuli in Bardhaman, (West Bengal) I would often dabble with clay to make tiny images, with paper to make kites or even little bags. That's probably going right back to the very beginning of my 'career' as an artist. In the more conventional sense, I guess it began when I came to Kolkata to study art in the Indian College of Art. I had after completing my 12th grade, enrolled for commerce classes in a college in Nabadwip. However, I left it midway when I realised that I wanted to be an artist. Once in Kolkata, I was on my own and more importantly had to support myself besides attending my art classes. So it was as a hoarding painter that I plunged into the world of synthetic enamel and linseed oil, brushes and larger-than-life figures.

Simultaneously, I was also doing night classes in art.

So by day, I was standing high on scaffoldings under a cruel sky and by night I was focused on my canvases in a cramped corridor, which I shared, with my fellow hoarding painters. Finally the space got seriously cramped and I decided to take a shot at the Lalit Kala studios in Kolkata. However, my job prevented me from being regular, so I had to leave that as well. Finally, I rented a small flat, where I had my own space and was my own boss, at least in that limited sphere. There I worked for my first exhibition, a group show at the Academy of Fine Arts, in 1992. This was my debut in the world of professional art. Meanwhile, I had won respite from billboards and scaffoldings by getting a job as a graphic designer with The Economic Times, (which I left a few months back. Now I'm a full-time artist). My life had become a stressful affair with work on one hand and art on the other. In a desperate quest for some breathing space I would escape into the heartland of West Bengal three or four times a year. In the tribal entrails of the state, where the Santhals lived, my soul inhaled the fresh rural air. Incidentally, I also got to closely study the rugged Santhals, who mainly worked as stone crushers, their earthen homes, the paintings on their walls, the earth colors, I imbibed the intimate feel of the earth. The smooth and glistening black bodies of those heroic men and women, who worked as hard as they played made a deep impact on me and immediately, naturally became my subjects. Initially, I would depict them on my canvas as they were, in an identifiably rural milieu, with dashes of my imagination. However, over time these sturdy figures have morphed and have become more universal, less rural, while retaining the qualities of power, forbearance, stoicism and an iron will not to be done in by adverse circumstances, which attracted me to the tribal psyche in the first place.

You are essentially a figurative artist but the ways the figures are placed do not seem so simple and direct. Like your paintings reveal and/hide a story. Could you elaborate on your thought process while executing your paintings?

For me space itself is an endless subject, the totality of space. Mostly I do not feel the need to manacle the acres of vast tracts with a horizon, a tree or an object to suggest the

circumference. I don't want to give my place a name because it's everywhere. It's going against my grain to impose limits on myself, and by extension to my subjects or their habitat. My canvas is therefore a reflection of my own and my subjects' continuous craving to look ahead, rise against odds, not to be hemmed in. You'll notice that most of my characters aren't looking directly at the viewers. Often they have their back to them. This should not be misunderstood as a negative vibration. They are actually looking far ahead beyond anything that can be physically painted but instead can be implied by the ruse of suggestion. The rugged earth, the falling leaves and flowers are symbols of a temporal world amid which my figures and their far-reaching yearnings are constants. My canvases are often the setting for the drama of human relationships, which may or may not have societal approval. I try to project this frequently unbearable tension by the positioning of my figures, use of light and the division of the space at my disposal. Often there may be just one figure on the canvas - but he/she is actually driven by a second character, not physically present on the main stage, that is my canvas, but there somewhere in the wings. This unspoken but what is referred to as 'palpable' tension is a situation, which is extremely absorbing as far as I'm concerned.

Your medium is academic as you mostly use oil on canvas... have you ever experimented with different media, where/when?

There's an acute misconception here. For some reason, everyone seems to think that my medium is oil. I would like to unequivocally state that it is NOT. I may have used oil as a medium for a sum total of one year in the entire span of my career as an artist but the works by which most people know me now are done with acrylic. More accurately, it's mixed media and involves conte charcoal and dry pastel besides acrylic. In fact, my technique of applying color is the fruit of many years of experimentation and is by no means something, which I was taught by anyone in art school. I like acrylic because it helps me give the solid-weave tight-knit texture to my paintings and for its subdued matte look. It's a flexible medium.

How do you feel art in Kolkata differs from other regions and how do you feel that your work is different?

You are looking for a generalisation and like all generalisations this is both right and wrong, if you know what I mean. So here goes: The identity of a creative person, whether a painter, musician or author, is akin to where he belongs and his roots. So the abundance of green in Bengal's landscape, the moist air, the fertile earth, all these are factored into the artist's self and often find expression on his/her canvas. Bengal's artists also prefer figure-based compositions to abstractions and have an extremely solid grounding in figure drawing. The really serious artists marry tradition with experimentation without compromising either.

Coming to the second part of your question - leaving aside the blind copyists, I feel every serious painter has his/her own convictions and individual style. Regarding myself, I feel that the texture of my works, the dark, muted shades I use stand out. My themes and characters also belong to a world which is very much my own and very different from anyone else's. The rest is for people to judge and understand.

Could you describe the changes you have undergone from the start of your career?

Plenty - both with regard to content and style. Earlier, I used lots of pastel and pen and ink to achieve the kind of texture I was looking for. I have graduated after much trial and error to my current style, which involves conte, dry pastel and acrylic. At one point of my career I had also painted near-photo-realistic figures in recognisable circumstances, both rural and urban. I feel that I've traveled far away from that. Now my figures are universal and can exist comfortably anywhere and at anytime. I like to call them Everyman and Everywoman. It's more their innerscape being reflected on their faces and attitudes rather than the external postures for the sake of externalities. And the feelings of those who people my canvases are not limited to a particular space or race.

The figures in your painting seem to have a strong individuality. Who are the models and subjects in your paintings? Could you also describe the technical process of your work.

I think I've answered the first part of the question already. I do not have any definite model/models. The tribals and santhals, who were my models in my art scroll/hoarding painting days have now transfigured into an imaginary figure with several definite traits - he/she is strong, no-nonsense and resilient and refuses to be defeated by circumstances and can look ahead and beyond the present milieu or dilemma. Their mental strength is reflected in their physical stature and once again to depict that I have borrowed heavily from the muscular, dark-complexioned, lean, rugged, big-boned looks of the tribals, who are my civilised savages.

As for my technique, I use conte charcoal to make the basic line drawing and then I cover the canvas with a layer of dry pastel and water. After that I apply the several layers of extremely diluted acrylic paint. The dry pastel absorbs the superficial gloss of the acrylic and the effect is matte and well-knit.