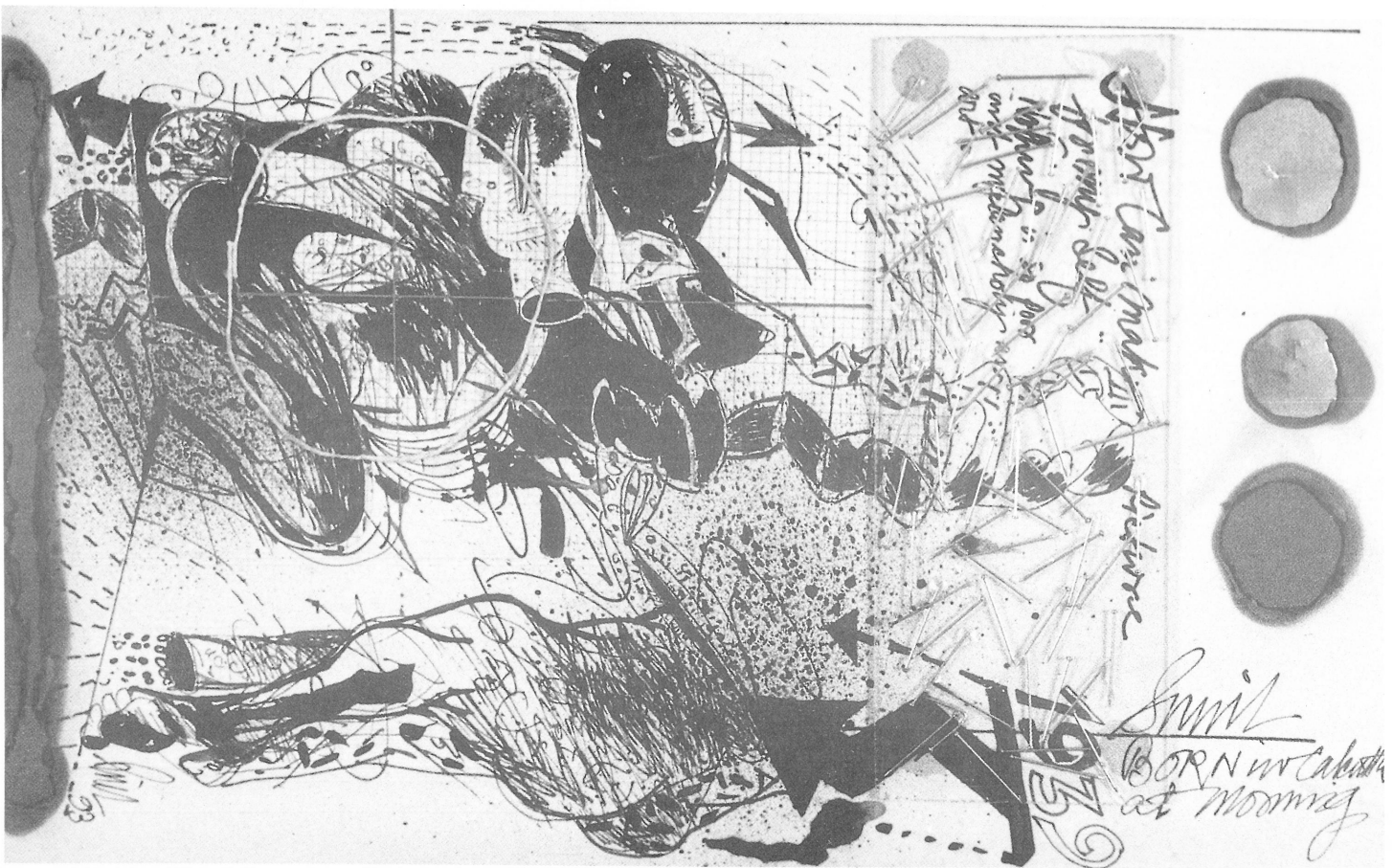


This, Too, Is Art
This, Too, Is Art
This, Too, Is Art
This, Too, Is Art
I fear that the human race
may with tall walls
wall me, with strong
drugs dope me
with wise lies
on black racks
in blood-baths
am i SHIVA

Swing Down

Drawing Installations
by Sunil Das
The Village Gallery
October 14–November 14, 1995



Mixed Media,
38 x 23 cms,
1993

You are driving a car. You come to a yawning crater in the middle of the road. You would turn about, take a new route. I may tear the paper I have drawn on, to show there has been a break in the flow. Perhaps I said something I should not have. I expect you to halt there, at the jagged edge of the paper and turn away.

I write a lot on and around my drawings. While I work, unusual forms come to my mind, stray thoughts flit against the backdrop. I capture them then and there. The forms may be erotic, shapely feminine legs, organs of sex. They, too, make up life, but must be expressed with some restraint. So I might diffuse a part of my canvases. Bandage it with gauze, lock it away with lac. To create a subdued effect. There are things too intimate to reveal.

I work with my whole body, all my senses. Just the way Zakir Husain plays the tabla. You can feel the rhythm vibrating through his limbs, his eyes, his hair. Perhaps that's why I have been called a contemporary. I use any medium that appeals to me: thread, lac, gauze, nails. Burnt plastic, vegetable dye. I am unorthodox. I wish to break barriers. I ask people to be brave, to give something new to the world. Artists today are running towards security, lapping up whatever the Establishment dictates. Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime and departing leave behind us arseprints on the sands of time.

Generations have lived off Rabindranath Tagore and his works. I think it is time we locked him away in a cupboard. One does not need to disrespect elders, but one must try and supersede them. If you talk all the time about the greats who had been, when will you find time to talk about who you are? It is easy to copy, and copy beautifully. But to hold air that has no form, you need to make a balloon first. To give shape to one's personal, emotional content — that's difficult. No one wishes to work that hard.

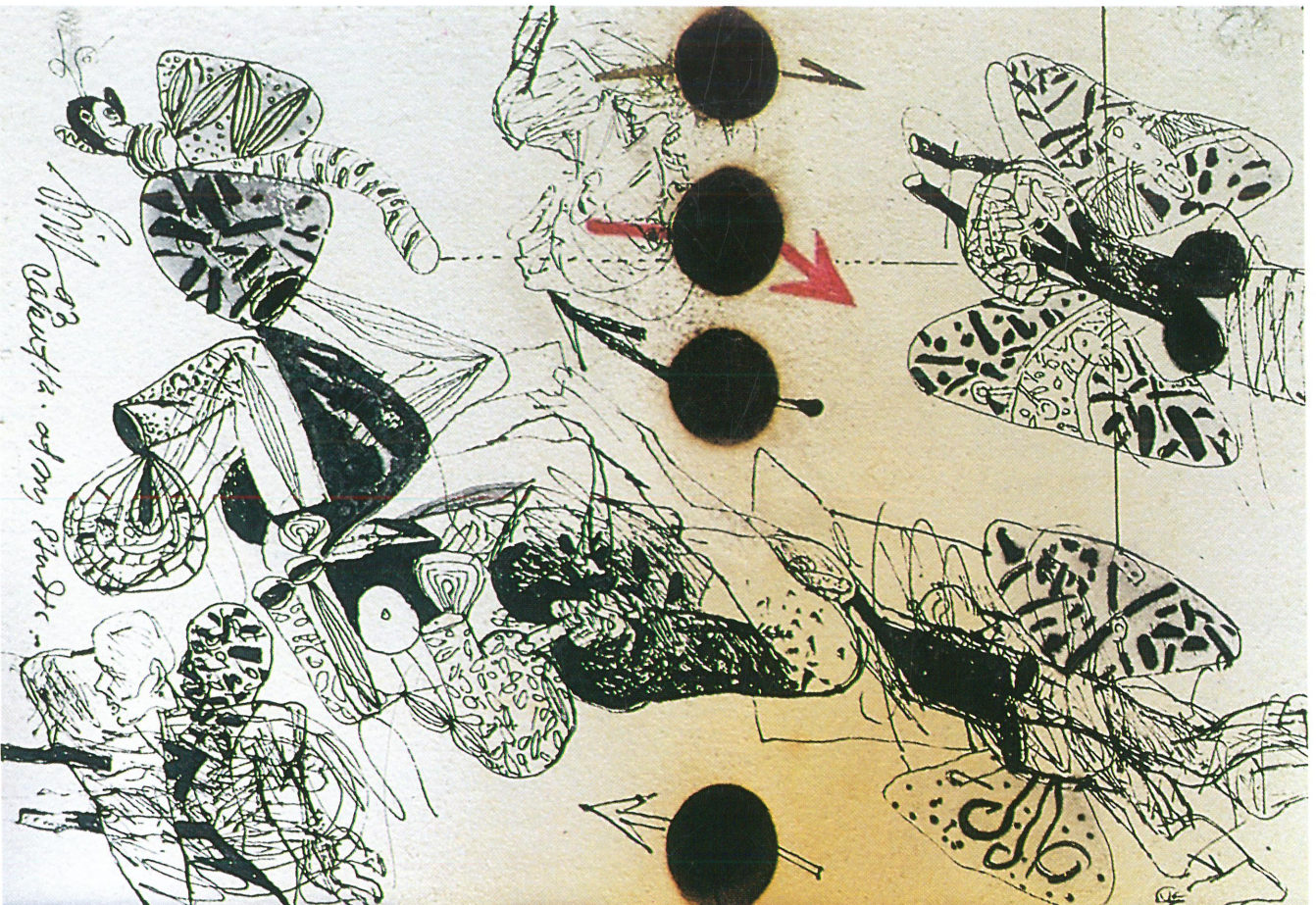
I do not call myself Calcuttan or an Indian. You cannot tie me down to one country. I feel one needs to travel, go abroad. It expands your mind, you get to see a lot of life. Meet different people, different attitudes. And the experiences that you gather will return in your art some day, enrich it. I have trotted all over the world, practically. I am a man of the globe. Any man from any part of the world can be my brother. It is the mental relationship that is important.

However, I am proud of my soil, my roots. And if one is true to his work, his roots are bound show in all that he does. In college, we had to draw human models. The models would, of course, be Indian. There was a foreign student with us. She would draw fairly well, but when it came to the model's nose, she always drew an upward tilt to it, actually a feature that characterised the people of her country. That was where her roots revealed themselves. Then there was this foreign viewer who came to one of my exhibitions at Bombay and identified me as a Calcuttan. He said he found traces of the Naxalite movement in my works.

Everything in life has a discipline. You fly a kite. It soars away until it is a speck in the sky your eyes strain to see. But the line in your hands is taut, pulsating with the energy of that flight. That is discipline. There is a rhythm in things. However high a wave towers during a cyclone, its rhythm is retained. Back when I was just another youth aspiring to be an artist, I would draw horses. I had drawn thousands of horses. Spent days at the stables, shared the syces' meals. To perfect my drawing skills. Horses have a dynamism about them, a restlessness so different from the monochromatic life all around. Capturing a stallion on paper was difficult, for it never stood still. I do not draw horses any more, I have conquered them. But



Mixed Media,
46 x 35 cms,
1993



Mixed Media,
52 x 35 cms,
1993

my current drawings retain that energy, the confidence I had in myself. The rhythm of my lines, the discipline.

I draw for myself. All may not understand my work. I do not expect them to. It would be enough if I could just make the viewers feel that this, too, is art.

For these works, I have used three main colours: black, red and gold. Black signifies darkness. It has always been associated with evil and fearsome things. Ghosts and spirits. Even war is a form of darkness descending over the world. Black seems a bad omen to me. Perhaps I was taught that as a child.

By blood we live, the hot, the cold, to ravage and redeem the world: There is no bloodless myth that will hold.

I use red, for it is the colour of blood. Blood that circulates throughout me. It stands for warmth. Like the *sindoor* on a woman's forehead. I feel red best expresses the turmoil within, a colour that has been there since the beginning of creation.

Gold, on the other hand, expresses a purity of soul that cannot be tarnished, despite the mire of evil that surrounds it. For, after the darkest possible night comes the brightest dawn.

My golden arrow guides you to that glory of being.
And the phoenix rises from its ashes.

Sunil Das, as told to Sohini Sen

PORTRAITS OF SELF IMAGE

One proof of gregariousness of human beings is the interest people take in the biographies of others. Historically, this interest precedes the artistic preoccupation with autobiography. Idiosyncrasies of self-love notwithstanding, readers, viewers, and listeners do lap-up self-projections of creative artists eagerly. An abnormal interest in narcissism (of others, of course) as a psycho-pathological state or a pathological interest in being reassured of one's own normalcy as juxtaposed against a psycho-path, cannot be reason enough for sustained interest in the autobiography of others. Till the advent of photography, it could be said that the painters' and the sculptors' self-portraits functioned as documents of physical semblances of the artists concerned, in the same manner as did the portraits, artists made of third parties.

Not to speak of the artists' self-portraits, painted after the advent of photography, it is doubtful if the photography artists' self-portraits were appreciated only for their documentary value. The *raison d'être* of viewers' interest in artists' self-portraits are to be found in the interest people take in the autobiography of others.

This interest in autobiography stems from the human curiosity in knowing about how others respond to the worldly travails. This interest takes precedence over the techniques of formal representation of the travails and individual responses. It must, however, be admitted that the viewer-perceptible authenticity of the travails and responses depend upon formal and technical representation of these in the concerned art. It is through

technically efficient formal representation that an artist's perception of travails and his individual response to them become generally perceptible. And in the course of thirty-seven years of his life in art, Sunil Das has time and again proved how skillful he has been in manipulating the building blocks of painterly constructions.

Yet, looking back at the enormity and variety of this fifty-six year old painter's worldly successful life in art, one is apt to ask one's own self as to how one should assess this volatile painter who has so often been enigmatically shifting his ground and yet playing around with supreme ease on every ground of his choice.

Fortunately, for the viewers who have never failed to wonder at Sunil's virtuosity, without being able to comprehend his creative personality, Sunil has provided a clue to understanding of the phenomenon that Sunil Das is, in his latest series of self-projections, he calls self-portraits. This series could as well have been called self explanations. In a sense the series is quintessential of what Sunil has been and his artistic concerns so far.

At some juncture modern art's initial concern about objectification of the individual gaze around the world got transformed into a concern for the engagement of the worldly gaze towards the self of the artist. With this shift artist's self-projection took precedence over objectification of artist's perception of the phenomenal world.

With such a shift in 'artistic gaze', art not only became autobiographical, it developed a claim to be cognized in terms of a signature. The development of western avant-garde modernism from the early humanist phase of European expressionism to American abstract expressionism and from early photomorphic imagist phase of surrealism to the later abstract surrealist emphasis on automatism bear ample testimony to the change. Sunil, the professional painter that he always aspired to be, has always had a proclivity to be inspired more by artistic milieu than by phenomenal reality. As it were ever since his return from a two-and-a-half year post-graduation educational stint in France, in 1964, Sunil in his work has exhibited a strong predilection for the stylistics both of the later expressionism and late surrealist automatism. Consequently,

building up of the painting surface as space for reception of marks and gestures became his prime preoccupation.

Henceforth, marks in his paintings would function as signs and the gesticulating flourishes of his flamboyant brush or line would, at the same time, express the restless anguish of a lost soul in search of an ever elusive home and function as the signature of the lost but proud soul. The promise of home lured Sunil now to the western *avant garde* modernist art, now to the traditional ritual mark makings of his native culture, now to the psycho-pathology of societal existence and now to the archaic ritual practises. His restless wonderings made him an eclectic artist.

However, shifts and wonderings, eclecticism and flamboyance notwithstanding, Sunil Das' self-centrism and skill transform whatever he does to his self-expression. Sunil Das' life-long tryst with self and projection of the self as a painter belonging to the fast moving world of artistic concerns finds its fruition in this latest series of self-projections, he calls self-portraits. This series is an invaluable document of self-image of a modernist artist of a cultural zone where 'Modernism' has been an inorganic imposition.

Pranabranjan Ray
15th, August, 1995

SUNIL DAS CHRONOLOGY



Born: 1939

Studied: Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris; Research in fresco and mosaic with Monsieur Shapple Midge and Aujum, Paris; Graphic Art with William, Hayter and Krishna Reddy, Paris; Research in Painting, Atelier Julien, Paris; Atelier 17, Paris

Solo Exhibitions: 1964-66 Dhoomimal Art Gallery, Kunika Chemould and All India Fine Arts and Craft Society, New Delhi; Gallery Arts and Prints, Priyadarshini and Chemould, Calcutta; Chemould Art Gallery, Bombay; Open-air Art Exhibition, New Delhi; Retrospective, Calcutta

1967-69 Max Mueller Bhavan at Birla Academy of Art and Culture and USIS, Calcutta; Retrospective, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta

1971 Heidelberg, Germany

1974-75 Max Mueller Bhavan, Sarla Art Gallery, Madras, Ploker Gallery, Hamilton, New York

1976-78 Retrospective, Calcutta; Exhibitions: Basle, Zurich, Dusseldorf, Hamburg, New York, London, New Delhi, Calcutta

1979-81 Retrospective, Kuala Lumpur, Basle, New York

1984-86 Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi; Trend in Bengal Art, Tata Centre, Calcutta

1990-93 Center Art Gallery, Calcutta

Participations: 1958-68 AIFACS, New Delhi

1959-80 Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi

1961 International Art Exhibition, Poland

1961-63 Paris at-Gallery Tedesco, Maison de Paris at

Ministere des Affaires Etrangères, Salon de la Jeune Peinture, Biennale de Prix, Prix de Dome, Exposition Prix des Peintures Etrangères, La Gallery Foyer des Art, Club de Outer Vents, Gallery Dean la-Found, Gallery Maison des Beaux Arts

1964-66 Young Painters of India, New Delhi; Indian Contemporaries, Chemould Art Gallery, Bombay; National Exhibition, All India Fine Arts and Craft Society, New Delhi

1967-69 Progressive Painters Association, Madras, International Inter-fauna Art Exhibition, Dusseldorf, Germany; Indian Painters '69, Calcutta

1970-72 II International Triennale, New Delhi; Indische Kunst der Gegenwart, Gallery Coray, Zurich, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Teheran, Zurich, Brussels, Dusseldorf; Man and his World, organised by Lalit Kala Akademi, at Montreal, Canada.

1973-75 Everson Museum, New York, Switzerland; Bangladesh, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta; The Francophile Painters, Calcutta, Frankfurt; Hilton Gallery, Frankfurt; Lalit Kala Akademi, Lucknow

1976-78 Society of Contemporary Artists, Calcutta, New Delhi; Canada

1979-81 Contemporary Indian Art in 1980, Hyderabad; Touring Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi; Contemporary Indian Painting, Kala Yatra, Madras; Trade Fair Exhibition and Miniature Format, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi

1981-83 Dialogue, Bombay; Four Indian Artists, Stockholm

1984-86 Confrontation, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay; Society of Contemporary Artists, Calcutta; Biennale, Tokyo

1985 Group show by Government of India and Development Commissioners (Handloom), New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras; Equus, Madras

1986 Zeitgenössische Indische Malerei, Germany

1987-89 Self-Portraits, The Village Gallery, New Delhi; Drawings, Sakshi Gallery, Madras

1987 Contemporary Art, Centre for Culture and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad; Genesis Gallery, Calcutta; Early Drawings (1956-62), Chittrakoot Art Gallery, Calcutta; CRY, Calcutta; III Biennale, Havana; XX Sao Paolo International Biennale, Brazil; Nehru and Environment, New Delhi

1990-93 Bengal Art Today, Galerie 88, Calcutta; Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay; Tribute to Vincent Van Gogh, Vadhara Art Gallery, New Delhi; Art Mosaic, Calcutta; Award Winners (1955-1990), Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi; Calcutta 300

Through the Eyes of Painters, Calcutta; Contemporary Paintings from India, Veridan Art Gallery, New York; Contemporary Art of India, Glenbarra Art Museum, Japan; Image of Joy and Despair; Joshua Art Gallery at the National Museum, Singapore; Brushstroke by Contemporary Bengal Artists, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi

1990-93 East Meets West, Oxford Gallery, New York;

Contemporary Art of Indian Artists, Calcutta; Calcutta Art Foundation, Calcutta; Society of Contemporary Artists; Calcutta; Madras; Bengal Art Today, Varnik Art Gallery, Hyderabad; The Oberoi, New Delhi; Journey Within Landscape, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay; Contemporary Art, Calcutta; Dream of Calcutta, Alliance Francaise, Calcutta; Contemporary Indian Painters, New Delhi; Husain ki Sarai, New Delhi; Contemporary Artists of India, Gallery Art and Data, Germany, Poland; Gallery Karayun, Calcutta; Late Masters and Contemporary Arts, Calcutta; Wounds, CIMA, Calcutta and National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; Sovereign of France, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi; Sunil and Robert Max, The Central Gallery of Fine Arts, New York; Reflection and Image, Bombay; Contemporary Indian Art, Vadhara Art Gallery, New Delhi

Art Camps: 1974 Max Mueller Bhavan, Madras

1979 Tamil Nadu State Akademi, Madras

1981 Central Lalit Kala Akademi, Rajasthan

1982 Karnataka State Akademi, Gulbarga, Bangalore

1985 East West Encounter, Bombay

1989 Lalit Kala Akademi, Lucknow; Bombay Art Society, Centenary, Bombay

1992 Confluence, Alliance Francaise, Calcutta

1993 Bangladesh Mission, Calcutta

Collections: National Gallery of Modern Art, Lalit Kala Akademi, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi; Chandigarh Museum, Chandigarh; Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company Limited, Janshedpur; Madhavan Nayyar Foundation, Cochin; Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Tractors India Limited, Calcutta; Museum of Andhra Pradesh, Galerie Rene Breteint, Galerie Marcel Adler, Paris; American Express Bank, New York; Glenbarra Art Museum, Japan; Joshua Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Shenn's Fine Art, National Museum, Singapore; Ludwig Museum, Gallery Art and Data, Germany

Awards: 1959/78 National Award

1960 Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta; Hyderabad Art Society, Hyderabad; Academy of Fine Art, Calcutta; Gold Medal, Calcutta University; Bombay Art Society

1960/67 All India Fine Arts and Craft Society, New Delhi

1991 Shriomoni Purashkar



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