

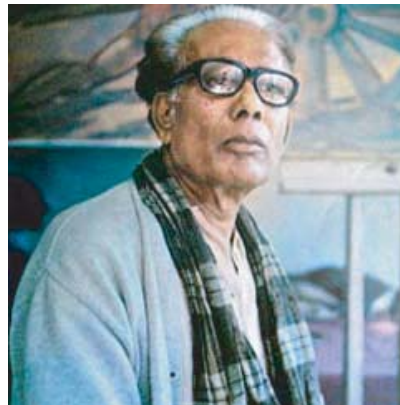
Editorial

It is undeniable that modern Bangladeshi art would never come this far without Zainul Abedin who left the Calcutta government art school in 1947 after the partition to lead the establishment of a fine arts institute in Dhaka. Since then, this institute has played the major role in administering modern art education and practices in the country. Zainul Abedin wanted to do more than just build an institute; he wanted art to permeate all lives in Bangladesh. It is to pay homage to the maestro on his death anniversary on May 28 that this issue of *Art of Bangladesh* presents a feature on him.

Everyone in the art world of Bangladesh is conversant with the name of Kazi Rakib and Masuda Kazi, who Farida Yasmin Ratna interviewed for this issue's "From the Artist's Studio". In addition, "Art Events" and "Jolrong News" remain as regular sections in this 4th issue.

Warm wishes to all.

Shawon Akand
Editor



Left: Zainul Abedin (Photo: Nawazesh Ahmed), Right: Zainul's artwork 'Goon Tana', Gouache, 1955

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin: The Avatar of Modern Art in Bangladesh

Silvia Nazneen

Zainul Abedin (1914 - 1976) is unquestionably the pioneer in the history of modern Bangladeshi art. Even if we consider artists worldwide, there is only a handful who would match him in his devotion to humanity, and the way he depicted it in his art.

Zainul Abedin, born in a lower-middle class family in 1914 in Kishoreganj, displayed an interest in art since early childhood. Eventually, as a result of many turns in events, he succeeded in getting enrolled at Calcutta Government Art School early in the 30s.



Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, 2009

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During the 30s when Zainul was emerging as a rising star, the Calcutta based art scene was divided into two dominant schools of practice. On one hand there were Hemendranath Majumdar, Jamini Prakash Gangopadhyay, Atul Basu, and the like who followed the west's academic forms of realism; on the other hand there were Abanindranath Tagore and his followers who dominated the Bengal school - a newly developed and decisively elite set of art practices. Naturally then, there was a great divide between the perspectives and the skills of the artists of the

two schools. The Calcutta Government Art School, despite being considered a stronghold of the academic practices of those times, was where Zainul's talents were nurtured because Mukulchandra Dey, the school's principal, allowed students the freedom to experiment with different styles and various media.

Around 1920, Rabindranath Tagore established Kalabhawan in Santiniketan. Here, with Rabindranath's prompting and Nandalal's leadership, styles from the east and the west found a perfect framework to mesh in, and thus a third school of art practices evolved. Actually a deep connection with Rabindranath's thoughts and detachment from Abanindranath Tagore's visual world made a strong impression on Nandalal's artistic thoughts. Not the usual glorious tales from history or religious philosophies, but Santiniketan boasted of art practices that celebrated nature and life. Following Rabindranath and Nandalal, Mukul Dey of the Calcutta Government Art School attempted to fuse the west and the east in his institution. This, no doubt, inspired the young Zainul Abedin.

Initially, Zainul's idea was to enter an art school to master the academic styles and the know how of the west. The silts of the Brahmaputra ran in his veins and gave him his passion for art and human life. And this gets reflected in his earlier works where apart from displaying a mastery of academic styles, Zainul also reveals a benevolent gaze and keen sense of observation. The rural Bengal that is seen in his works is thus not just a romantic vision but the feelings of his visual world, and the minimized expressions of the self-made thoughts and the inner visions of human beings.



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Art delineates a nation's history and culture, and each individual creative expression depends on elements from a people's heritage. Art can be thus said to create a history of a people. Examples of this are plenty - in the works of Homer or Hemingway; in Praxiteles' sculptures or in Picasso's Guernica; in the social satires of Gauguin or Gaganendranath Tagore. Zainul's works also render Bengal's history and heritage timeless as they capture the Bengal of that time.

Zainul's occupation with romantic styles lasted from 1938 to 1942



Zainul Abedin's *Harvest*, oil on canvas, 1934

Zainul's occupation with romantic styles lasted from 1938 to 1942, and the radical shift he undertook after that was not unexpected; the famine of '43 gave him reasons for this revolutionary shift in style. This famine was perhaps the worst in the history of humanity, with around 50 thousand people dying under the British colonial rule. Not that there was any lack of food, just that the inhuman rulers held back distributions letting the population suffer and perish. At that time, Zainul Abedin sketched heart-breaking scenes of the trauma and the abuse that people were subjected to, revealing that perhaps it is only possible for humans to inflict such pain on other living beings. In his sketches we see realities like a mother-daughter duo begging, hunger-stricken people violently fighting for food with dogs and crows around a dustbin, and dead and half-dead bodies strewn on the sidewalks. The famine came alive in those pictures without the artist needing to employ symbolic metaphors or a complex style. Thus, Zainul's famine sketches became a record of a portion of Bengal's painful history seen through his keen, agonized eyes and a no nonsense style of presentation.

In the famine series, the way Zainul dealt with space and composition gave each subject its own sovereignty and focus. The use of bold strokes of just black and white lent the sketches a profoundness that was new to his works, due possibly to what he, as an artist and a sensitive human being, felt when he witnessed the wanton deaths around him. The long, haggard, dying skeletal figures emerged out of his sharp yet simple lines. Overall, the sketches gave off a tautness that was the result of deftly arranged lines and colors and the deathly poses of their subjects. This was a new kind of aesthetics, not concocted out of theoretical verbiage; rather out of the hard-hitting realizations of lives torn apart by hunger and misery. And the artist sketched solid, sharp and unflinching pictures to deal a blow to the viewers and to lay bare the cruelty that brought on such a famine and such a reality to the people of Bengal.



Zainul's famine sketches became a record of a portion of Bengal's painful history

Zainul's Famine sketch-15, ink and brush, 1943

Zainul's works create a unique and unforgettable impression on the viewer through a blend of form and content that fold in eastern and western styles. It is in fact impossible to think of presenting the famine in a different and more effective way than the way he did in his sketches. In the way that these works contrasted sharply with his softer and more soothing earlier works, Zainul succeeded in breaking free from the then prevalent academic prescriptions and founding an individual style.

At the time of Bengal's extensive urbanization during the nineteenth century, the Hindu faction of the society was seen to be more involved in the process compared to the Muslims; especially they were seen at the forefront in adopting modern education practices in the country. There are even accounts that qualified people were often unavailable to fill the 20 percent job quota allotted for Muslims. Also, Muslims, especially those belonging to east Bengal, rarely took up art because of religious restriction for art in Islam. Thus, in such a scenario, Zainul stood out quite prominently.

After the partition of 1947, many of the Muslim artists educated at the Calcutta Government Art School moved to Dhaka, the then East Pakistan's capital. Afterwards in 1948, when these artists decided to set up an art school in Dhaka, Zainul Abedin, helped by Quamrul Hassan, Anwarul Haque, Safiuddin Ahmed, etc., provided the direction that finally led to the establishment of the Government Institute of Arts. This institute was initially run from two rooms within the National Medical College at old Dhaka's Johnson Road. Eventually, it got relocated to the University of Dhaka campus as the Faculty of Fine Arts, and has since then acted as the nerve center of modern art in Bangladesh.

the way Zainul dealt with space and composition gave each subject its own sovereignty and focus



Zainul's Famine sketch-9, ink and brush, 1943

Zainul's decision to found this art institute in Dhaka arose out of his commitment to the society to engage the entire nation in the practice of art. "What gives me more joy than creating my own artworks is seeing art being nurtured in the society...art should therefore be turned into an all - pervasive everyday practice", the artist was once heard stating.

The reason that academic practices of fine art in Bangladesh have gained strength and have thrived is the dedicated endeavors of this master artist. Zainul was not an artist who was merely contented with producing artworks; all his life he strived to make people embrace art. To him, this was fulfillment. Besides his other enterprises that helped the growth of art in the country, he also arranged many folk exhibitions in Dhaka and founded a folk art museum in Sonargaon. Zainul Abedin will thus always be proudly remembered and revered as an artist who created art not for personal gains, but as one who did so for the developing his society.



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From the artist's studio



Kazi Rakib



Masuda Kazi



Creating a painting



Paintings in the studio

Kazi Rakib

Kazi Rakib (born February 5, 1955 in Chittagong) is an artist who still hasn't lost the wide-eyed wonder of a child and simply pines to find a moment that will take him back to the carefree days of his childhood. His dream of becoming an artist dates back to his childhood, and he reminisces: 'As a child, I had once sketched a picture of Nazrul and everyone had liked it. And that's when I knew that I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to work with water colors back then.' Recently, some of us from Jolrong.com visited Kazi Rakib's studio at Uttara. Here are some excerpts of that tête-à-tête with the artist.

'I spend all my free time in my (our) studio. We consider this studio as our place of worship, an entire cosmos where we can lose ourselves in our passion for art. There's a wicker bed on one side of the studio, and sometimes when I'm taking a break from work, I lie down on this and drown myself in words - poetry or prose.'

'Although I prefer to work with water colors, I also like working with different materials and I don't have any one specific signature medium. I did woodcutting for a long time, and in '74 I did works in black and white. For sometime I used oil colors but am now experimenting with glass. I have even worked with tea liquor using the techniques of water colors.'

'I believe that a picture must carry a message. What is actually present on the canvas is me - the joy, the pain or the smile inside me, and that's the message of my works. I come alive in my works.'

'I feel that as an artist I have a responsibility towards the society, outside which I am nothing. I have to exist within a society's frameworks and so as a part of it, I am the creator of a time, a space, a surface on my canvases. This I must do due to my social responsibility as an artist.'

'If you ask me to tell you about art in Bangladesh, I have to tell you that I feel we're all too worried about what's happening around the world. We're judging art by the actions of the artists; and we're deciding things based on mere cursory observations and not on critical perspectives. This is unhealthy for art. We're hung up on two-dimensional aspects and are not ready to move ahead into innovations. We need a change, I expect a change.'

'Glass or mirror is a serious medium for me. It's not my vision; to me it's just a material. Light is what forms my vision. I play around with it.'



'I never work exclusively for the purpose of exhibitions, and especially at this time, I'm not thinking about exhibiting anything. Even the concept of working in a studio is new. I just want to go on working right now. For now, I want to fill up my Aaina Mahal (hall of mirrors; what he endearingly calls his studio) with new and unique works.'

Masuda Kazi

Another absorbed artist frequenting Kazi Rakib's Aaina Mahal is Masuda Kazi (born March 18, 1958 in Rajshahi), who together with Kazi has slowly built the studio from scratch. This is where their art resides and finds momentum and beauty. Here are excerpts from our conversation with this artist:

'I completed B.F.A from Rajshahi Art College in 1984. After that, the wish to create 'something new' made me take up papier-mâché as my medium. I am still experimenting and working with this and with time I'm discovering how durable and yet pliable this medium is.'

'But at times when I'm in the mood, I do water colors and sketches too. I'm making less realistic pictures now.'

'I've always been careful about colors and according to me, painting acts as a therapy. So my pictures are simple in meaning. I don't use colors that disturb me because I believe that what is difficult for me view is also difficult for my audience to absorb.'

'I thirst for beauty and paint to achieve peace and calm. My biggest joy comes from painting for my audience.'

'I've had two solo exhibitions in 2001 which brought me great positive response from the viewers. This appreciation motivates me to go on working.'

'I'm working. First I want to be satisfied with my own work, and then I'll think about exhibitions.'

With this, we ended the heart-to-heart conversation with Kazi Rakib and Masuda Kazi, hoping that their vision to change art and their devotion to it brings us more fine artworks in the coming times.

Interviewed by: Farida Yasmin Ratna

Photography: Polash Chowdhury

Art Events

Atia Islam Annie's Solo Exhibition



She expresses her overwhelmed self when she portrays the many faces of oppression

Atia Islam Annie's *Still Life-11*, 2009

Atia Islam Annie's paintings invoke the agonized spirit of a restless world. There is hatred, there is wrath, there is mockery, and there is resistance against the present social order, wherein the woman is tormented by deprivation. In the way that many of Annie's works throw light on acid burn victims, Annie herself is revealed as a humanist and an activist spirit.

Atia Islam Annie stands out as a strong wind against those who do not perceive the world as critically as she does. She expresses her overwhelmed self when she portrays the many faces of oppression. In these portrayals also Annie reveals herself as one who paints to resist.

From June 12 to 23, 2009, Dhaka's Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts hosted Atia Islam Annie's *Kalbela* (Inauspicious Times), unveiling 30 of her works.

Sharbari Roy Chowdhury's Sculpture Exhibition



he reveals his solidarity with modernity

Sharbari Roy Chowdhury's sculpture *Female Torso*

With support from Kolkata's Akar Prakar Gallery, Dhaka's Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts hosted a sculpture exhibition of one of the renowned Indian artists of this time. Sharbari Roy Chowdhury's *Onubhuti Murtayan* (Sensibility Objectified), a solo, was exhibited between June 26 and 30, 2009.

One of the finest sculptor in India, Chowdhury was born in 1933, in the then East Bengal's Oulpur (now in Gopalganj, Bangladesh). His art has reached this pinnacle because in his expressions of them, he reveals his solidarity with modernity. When such artistic expressions combine with a master's modern touches, what results is a saga of controlled dedication and hard-earned expertise. Sharbari Roy Chowdhury's works thus achieve a greatness that is rare. Sharbari is an aficionado of Indian classical music. Classical music literally reflects off his lifestyle as well his art. And so, when he makes sculpture of *Bade*

Ghulam Ali, Ali Akbar, Siddheshwary Devi or Kesarbai, he spins a story of their worlds - their personalities, their ingenuity, their silences and their music.

Mustafa Zaman's Solo Exhibition



Regaining self-consciousness while butchering meat

The irrational may help us regain access to our lost sensory domain

"Regaining unconsciousness". Thus was named an art exhibition by Mustafa Zaman, held between May 24 to June 11, 2009, at Alliance Française le Gallery.

If consciousness is an extension of the body, its absence leads to an inversion of that process of extension. The person inverted is the person who willingly subordinates her/his self to a greater self - the collective force manifested in the language of philosophy, religion, art, music and literature.

Real as well as unreal, or one might say, dream like experiences fill us with a whole new world, about which we are able to say little. But if otherwise, we feel that we are on a different plane than that of the reality and even the dream, we feel that we have found the fountain source of all experiences.

Once severed from its consciousness / unconsciousness, or reality / dream dialectics, the body is only a horror story told in meticulous details through certain kinds of art, scientific experiments and philosophical deduction of the 'modernized' west.

So, as our senses remain overwhelmed by diagnosis and dissection, fervently allowing all discourses to center perpetually on the mind - body dichotomy, our sense of the self becomes more and more fragmentary. And the irrational deserves its due recognition. The irrational may help us regain access to our lost sensory domain and take us through a different route to knowing.

Perhaps by excavating the primal elements that lie deep inside of our being we will be able to salvage a portion of it. And that may be enough for us to reoccupy a space in the psychic terrain from where we are able to see all matter in its true spiritual dimension.

"Regaining unconsciousness" was about the gaze that seeks to place perception before understanding, absence before meaning. It was also about critiquing the monosyllabic human existence precipitated by an overly financial concept of modernity and the highly regimented world order it has so far unleashed.

A Group Artwork Exhibition at Shilpangan Gallery



Jamal Ahmed's artwork

Shilpangan in May arranged a fifteen-day group art exhibition titled "Appointment 2009".

The participating artists were: Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Hamiduzzaman Khan, Chandra Shekhar Dey, Nisar Hossain, Jamal Ahmed, Mohammad Eunus, Alakesh Ghosh, Ranjit Das, Rokeya Sultana, Kanak Chanpa Chakma, Khalid Mahmood Mithu, Mustaque Ahmed, Gulshan Hossain, Iffat Ara Dewan, Wakilur Rahman, Maksudul Ahsan, Rafi Haque, Javed Jalil and Anukul Majumder.



Samarjit Roy Chowdhury's artwork

Folklore, childhood memories, romanticism, various socio-economic issues, tranquility and aesthetics reflected off the artworks in the show. Abstract forms and compositions, silence and mystery were the highlights of the exhibit. Suggestive lines, diverse forms, vibrant pigments and contemplative themes such as kites, fishes, flowers and foliage emerged on the canvases.

Jolrong News



ORCHESTRA catalog

• Talking about this month's activities at Jolrong.com, the executive director happily added his contented comment citing Erich Maria Remarque's blockbuster: "All is quiet on the Jolrong.com front". True, peace prevails in the office as the preparations for Jolrong.com's upcoming mega exhibition ORCHESTRA are done, and done well. ORCHESTRA, an exhibition of 14 contemporary Jolrong.com artists, is to be held everyday from 10 a.m to 7 p.m. between August 2 to 10, 2009 at the National Gallery, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Being inaugurated by Prof. Abdullah Abu Sayeed, Chairman of Bishwa Sahitya Kendra, this exhibition captures '14 solos in a single frame' to

celebrate art not as a mere inheritance of styles and trends but as a process of evolution - of the self as much as the society at large.



● For the last couple of weeks, the Jolrong.com office has been swarming with young faces - young artists/students gathering to share ideas about art and art writing. The *Art of Bangladesh* team is inviting young aspiring writers, from different areas of work and study, to come forward and get involved in art. They are invited to share their ideas and interests with the AOB team about the different ways in which the newsletter can move forward with its vision of seeing itself among the best literature on art in the country. The AOB team is overwhelmed by the volume of response from youngsters, and it is now clear that there are many like them who have just been waiting for an opportunity like this but never found the platform until now. After a few round of meetings and brainstorming, some of these enthusiasts have already begun writing. Jolrong.com hopes that through such interactions with young minds, more and more people will intervene in art practices, by writing about them, and thereby evolve answers to some basic questions related to art - What is art? What is its social significance? How does one contribute to art?



Young writers' meeting



Young writers' meeting

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