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A Magic world of Creativity: The post-2000 Paintings of Ashok Bhowmik

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Abstract

Born in early 50s Kolkata, Ashok Bhowmik belongs to the generation of artists with an exceptional concern in creating visuals which originate a magical creative world of their own. Since early twenty-first century, Ashok is maturely changing his ways of expression and he is possibly engaged in rediscovering a new path of visualization. Despite the fact of his unique abilities and achievements, his later works are seemingly not getting the attention they deserve. In this paper I would attempt to discuss his art works on canvas¹ in the post millennium era, their possibilities and their reception in the art public.

Melody and harmony are like lines and colors in pictures. A simple linear picture may be completely beautiful; the introduction of color may make it vague and insignificant. Yet color may, by combination with lines, create great pictures, so long as it does not smother and destroy their value.

Rabindranath Tagore, 1930.

The flat background and the large size canvas with formative figure(s) in the foreground of the *Untitled* series of paintings have two most striking characteristics in their composure – the composition is resolutely dominating, self-possessed, and full of repose (fig. 2,3,4 & 5). The artist—Ashok Bhowmik, the avant-garde Bengali painter from the ‘Hungry-generation’ who firmly positions himself at the cosmopolitan helm of late twentieth century Indian art – was in fact seemingly narrating tales of his own imagined visual world. In his paintings, the invented “Indian-ness” takes the form of the flat background which housed the central figures, but it is also projected through the bold and firm lines of the figure and the earthly colours, that mark simplicity as the absence of cheap academic realism. The ‘stylized forms’ maintain a particular ‘complex simplicity’ and the ‘solid background’ pushes the imaginations to cover the gaps (Mehta 2006). I felt a moment of dazzlement on the first encounter with these painting and the bemused sets of inquiries they mutely raised. Professor Bhowmik’s painting,

¹ In this text, I am not including his art works in other mediums such as drawings/graphics on supports like paper, clay-pot and/or his sculptures produced in this time span. My chief focus of this text will solely be on his large painted canvases.

especially the post millennium creative oeuvre was frequently ignored by the contemporary art-scholars despite the fact that they truly deserve to be in the forefront of contemporary Indian art. In this text, I shall attempt to intimately study Prof. Ashok Bhowmik's paintings of this era.

Ashok Bhowmik was born in 1953 in a second generation *Bangal* immigrant family from *Noakhali* (currently in Bangladesh), the place infamous for its genocide in 1946-1947². He spent his childhood at *Jabbalpur* and later at north Kolkata as his father was an accountant at the Indian ordinance factory and their family infrequently transferred from one place to another. As elder son of an 'old-school' joint family headed by his father Ashutosh Bhowmik, young Ashok showed inclination towards drawing and paintings at an early age. As a young boy he was different from his siblings and local kids. Soon he found his place at one of the most renowned institute of art education – the *Govt. College of Art & Crafts, Kolkata*. The five years at one of Bengal greatest art academies³, changed his life forever. The art-college was something that Ashok was craving for ages; here he met doyens of Indian modern art such as Gopal Ghosh, Bikash Bhattacharya, Chinatmoni Kar⁴ and many more; their proximity provided a rare opportunity for the boy for a *Udbastu Colony*⁵ of north Kolkata, who only dreamt of becoming a world famous painter. In 1975, Ashok successfully graduated from *Govt. Art-College*, majoring in Oil Painting he secured first class first position in the university awarded with the *Governor's Gold Medal*. Within the next few years, Ashok went through a various creative jobs ranging from creative designing to working as a commercial artist but most notably were his stint as the Assistant Director of Art and Design at *Handloom Development Corporation* (Govt. of West Bengal) from 1976 – 1977 and then from 1978- 1985 as the Art Designer at the *All India Handloom Board (Weavers Service Centre, Kolkata)*: both of these jobs were challenging and at the same time awarding for a young virtuoso. But his creative mind was demanding for much bigger arena to express its vital energy into where it can mingle with congenial audiences. Soon in 1985, his quest took him to his alma mater *Govt. College of Art & Crafts* where he joined as a full time faculty (Assistant Professor) at the Oil Painting Department and continued till 2003.

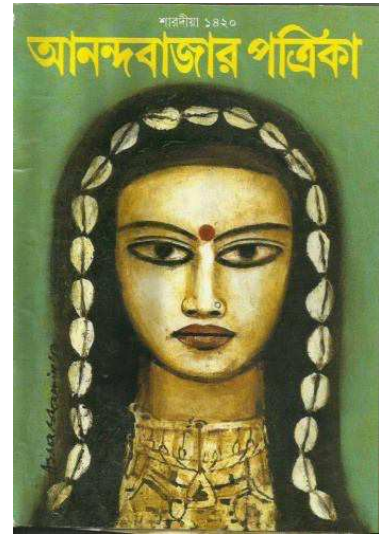
² The infamous *Noakhali Genocide* was related to the blood-soaked partition history of Bengal, for information regarding this see Sinha, Dinesh Chandra, and Ashok Dasgupta (2011). *1946: The Great Calcutta Killings and Noakhali Genocide: A historical Study*. Tuhina Prakasani.

³ *Govt. College of Art & Crafts, Kolkata* aka *Govt. Art-College* was one of India's oldest art institutions. To learn more about the *Govt. Art-College*, see my earlier article – Bhowmik, Ritwij. (2015). 150 years of Calcutta's heritage art-college: A comprehensive study of its present declining situation. *European Academic Research, Volume 3* (Issue 2): 1428-1444.

⁴ They were the legendary teachers of this art college who also made their name into the Indian art history for their contributions. See *Ibid*.

⁵ 'Udbastu Colony' in Bengali language means 'Refugee Shelter/colony'. In the post-Independence Kolkata, there were many such colonies in the suburban areas of the city to shelter the incoming refugees affected by communal violence in East-Bengal, then East-Pakistan. For more about these colonies and their struggle see Chakrabarti, Prafulla K. (1999) *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Naya Udyog.

During his eighteen years long tenor at the *Govt. College of Art & Crafts*, Ashok dexterously trained and inspired some of the finest artists of the contemporary Indian art scenario, the list includes names such as Paresh Maity, Atin Basak, Chatrapati Dutta, Dilip Mitra, Bhatosh Sutar, Sanatan Dinda, Kaji Nasir, and many more. But Ashok's outstanding artistic pursuit isn't contented within the compendious periphery of Kolkata based art-college. He wanted to touch the substantial azimuth of the artistic accomplishment and his dissatisfaction or precisely to say inclination enabled him to leave *Govt. Art College* and join the Mecca of Bengali art-education – the Kala-Bhavana (at Santiniketan) as the Professor of painting. The shift from a metropolitan city to Tagore's (rural) *Abode of Peace*⁶ was certainly not a simple decision for a city-dweller like Ashok and that too in the mid of his rising career as a professional artist. But he accepted the challenge and moved to Santiniketan in 2003 to write a new chapter in his life. He is currently serving as the Professor of Design at the Kala-Bhavana. Prof. Bhowmik has also served as the Principal of this institute from 2009 to 2013. However, he wasn't the only *Govt. Art College* alumnus who joined Kala-Bhavana as a faculty– as a matter of fact Prof. Bhowmik was exclusively following the archaic heritage.⁷ His later art-works, the topic of this present text, were comprehensively influenced by this unanticipated change and thus began a more mature era of individual creativity.



The art of Ashok Bhowmik's work is predominantly figurative. His early art works ranging from late 70s till late 90s, had a close proximity with the social and political situation in the state of West Bengal. His vibrating 'politically aware' art works were regularly featured as the front cover of a leading Bengali literary-cultural magazine *Desh*⁸. His works placed him separate from the other

⁶ Rabindranath Tagore's *Santiniketan* literally means *Abode of Peace* and the place was originally conceived to be like that only. It *Santiniketan* is situated roughly 165 kilometers from Kolkata and it's established within the rural Bengali environment of Birbhum district (in West Bengal). *Santiniketan* houses the great *Visva Bharati University*, also founded by the Nobel laureate poet. *Visva Bharati* literally means the 'communion of the world with India' and *Kala-Bhavana* is the Institute of Fine-Arts of this University.

⁷ The founding father of Kala-Bhavana, Nandalal Bose (1882 –1966) was a student of *Govt. Art College* (Then *Govt. Art School*). In 1922, he became the first principal of the Kala Bhavana. Through the past century a long list of artist from *Govt. Art College* have joined faculty positions of Kala-Bhavana and Prof. Bhowmik was one of the recent names to follow this traditions; see Bhowmik, Ritwij. (2015). 150 years of Calcutta's heritage art-college: A comprehensive study of its present declining situation. *European Academic Research, Volume 3* (Issue 2): 1428-1444.

⁸ The picture given here (Fig. 1) is the recent cover of *Sharodiya Anandabazar Patrika* (a sister concern of *Desh*) published by Anandabazar Patrika Pvt. Ltd. painted by Ashok Bhowmik. It was published in 2013.

contemporary Bengali artists. Prof. Bhowmik believes in freedom of expression but the expression must be artistic. While talking about his own paintings, he declared that “Art is an autonomous language and I am pretty comfortable with that but the moment I am compelling to talk about it I feel that art leaving its own sovereign linguistic domain and it is losing its own nuances.”⁹ – That signals his intended emphasis on the visual narration that he creates on canvas. In a way, his art speaks for the artist.

Prof. Bhowmik’s paintings ostensibly show attributes from Indian traditional miniature paintings. However his early training in methodical western academic painting and then his stint as the designer for two of India’s leading design centers matured his artistic expression. Through the years Ashok slowly abolished the painstakingly academic training and formal vocabularies to facilitate his return to Indian roots by imbibing the traditional designs of this sub-continent. Even so, he was aware as he was creating an altogether different direction, according to renowned art curator Arun Ghose, “Ashok has chosen a similar path of creating visual shock but without super realism of the imitative kind.”¹⁰ Ashok’s post millennium paintings can undeniably be categorized as, borrowing Ghose’s appellative, “Symbolic Expression” (2006). Apart from the Indian resources, which is certainly the primary afflatus of Ashok’s art, the influence of folklores, myths and the magical material world of Gunter Grass, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Franz Kafka and Orhan Pamuk are also evident – these inspirations enable him to onset in a fecund dialogue with his contemporary time and space. Kanchi Mehta wrote that Ashok Bhowmik has filled the gap between the past and present as well as the modern and the ancient¹¹.

Almost all paintings of this era are enigmatically named by the artist as ‘Untitled’ without even any serial number for proper identification; thus it creates the decade long series called *Untitled*. Ashok is very clear about this ‘title’. He explains,

Whether everyone knows meaning of their name and if he/she does, whether they carries that meaning all the time! Titles of works of art are like identities which do not necessarily have a great connotation as far as the meaning is considered. In fact I do not think particular meaning exist as such! – Ashok Bhowmik (emphasis added)¹².

Untitled, according to dictionary, literally means something that is ‘having no right or claim’. The allusion clearly states that the artist never wants to identify with inane ‘names’ to reject the otiose rhetoric. Art is universal and can cross the barrier

⁹ Excerpts from his recent Exhibition catalogue, emphasis mine. See Bhowmik, Ashok. (2012). *Sacred White & She*. Privately Published Solo Exhibition Catalogue.

¹⁰ See Ghose, Arun. (2006). *Symbolic Expression, Multiple Charade*.

¹¹ See Mehta, Kanchi. (2006). *Prologue*. Privately Published Solo Exhibition Catalogue.

¹² Bhowmik, Ashok. (2012). *Sacred White & She*. Privately Published Solo Exhibition Catalogue.

of geographical and lingual boundary to sustain its existence. His creations speak in a 'dialect' of a curious world (Mehta 2006).

Ashok uses a very precise method to execute these paintings and unlike most of his contemporaries, he is rooted into the conventional methods of creation. Generally from the art-work information, we get to know that they are all made in either acrylic or oil with acrylic on canvas. However, by observing the artist in work, one can ascertain the rigorous process that he follows to bring in the desired effect on the final painted layer.



Fig 2: Untitled, 5 x 5ft, Acrylic on canvas



Fig 3: Untitled, 5 x 5ft, Acrylic on canvas



Fig 4: Untitled, 5 x 5ft, Acrylic on canvas



Fig 5: Untitled, 5 x 5ft, Acrylic on canvas

The two basic diacritic features of Ashok's painting are his medium handling and the creative manipulation in the executed figures, both of which deviate from the realism in a new sphere. An extraordinary sense of taciturnity is the aggregated impact of his paintings that fascinate the viewers. A subtle dexterity in the treatment of the pictorial plane and at the same time an individual style can be felt

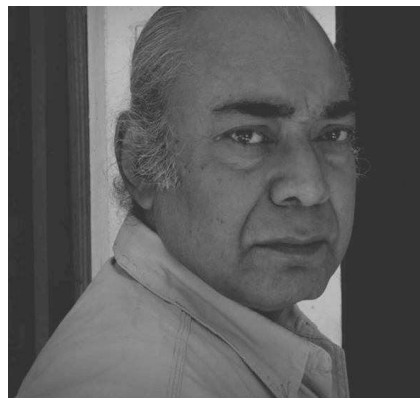
through his figuration as well. But it is the amazingly beautiful drawing that can be said as the soul of the painting. It is also binding the painting together and makes it vibrant.

Ashok's *Untitled Series* has scarcely been mentioned in the growing art scholarly circle that confirms his rightful status in contemporary Indian art, but the paintings speak in powerful ways to a number of contemporary intellectual concerns: the profound and intractable artistic contemplations, the cross-cultural currents of the late twentieth century, the avant-garde's treatment of the painted surface, and the achievement of a mid-career painter who compiled and offered this statement through his art at this post-modern age. It is indeed infrequent to encounter within the history of contemporary art so inquiring an espousal with the composition of the art from such profoundness within its historical course of creation. However the artist doesn't think of that his art is potential to change the mindset of people, he said,

In my younger days I earnestly believed that art can change the world. I thought art, by virtue of its magic touch, can redress the misery of society. Later on I had to rethink over it when I realized that the actual reach of fine arts to the larger section of the society is pathetically weak. Especially when one compares it with the reach of other mediums like music, film and literature, the art society is very small world. So I was not able to believe in the world-changing of art anymore. (Ashok Bhowmik)¹³

This was a candid confession from an artist whose experience taught him to believe in language of art than its power to perpetuate social transformation. Perhaps the post millennium ordeal was the basis of this cogitation. From a viewer, one can certainly attempt to enquire whether the artist wasn't able to deliver competent veritable art works.

In 2013, Prof. Bhowmik (inset picture, Fig 6) has been awarded '**Shilpi Samman**' for his lifelong contribution to the field of fine-arts, from the Government of West Bengal. In his over forty long years of artistic as well as academic career, he has received many prestigious honors and awards, but he is still one of the most anti-publicity artist; which is a perilous thing for any artist of twenty-first century. By going far from the maddening city life at Santiniketan, Prof. Bhowmik is living a life of meditation in pursuit of true language of art.



It is most likely that his invaginate and humble lifestyle won't provide necessary 'story-byte' for the print and screen media hence their strange oblivion towards Prof. Bhowmik and his art. Apparently this was the reason for his absence in this

¹³ Ibid.

media savvy twenty-first century, when second grade artists are earning unworthy media fame by inglorious involvement in the state politics. But this undeniably largely separated his art from art lovers and impeded the incessant drift of the artistic realization.

In the conclusion, the lucid creativity of Bhowmik's paintings can well be called an act of self-realization that is immersing oneself into the infinite potential of true art, which always has an ability to yield the 'new'. This would be a fizzle for the Indian art community if it continues to remain in the obscurity of oblivion while the artist will be busy in his act of generating a 'Magic World of Creativity'.

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Trained as a visual-artist, Dr. Ritwij Bhowmik received his MFA (Painting and Art-History) from Visva-Bharati University (Santiniketan); later by obtaining the MHRD's Chinese Govt. Scholarship, he pursued Chinese Art and calligraphy from Northeast Normal University (China), where he was awarded a PG. Dip. He earned his Doctorate degree from National Chiao-Tung University (Taiwan) in Visual-Culture. He has exhibited his art-works in many national and international exhibitions. Dr. Bhowmik joined the Department of HSS, IIT Kanpur in 2013 where he currently teaches Art History, Art Appreciation and Cinema-Study and simultaneously works as a professional painter.
