

Rabin

RABIN
Mondal

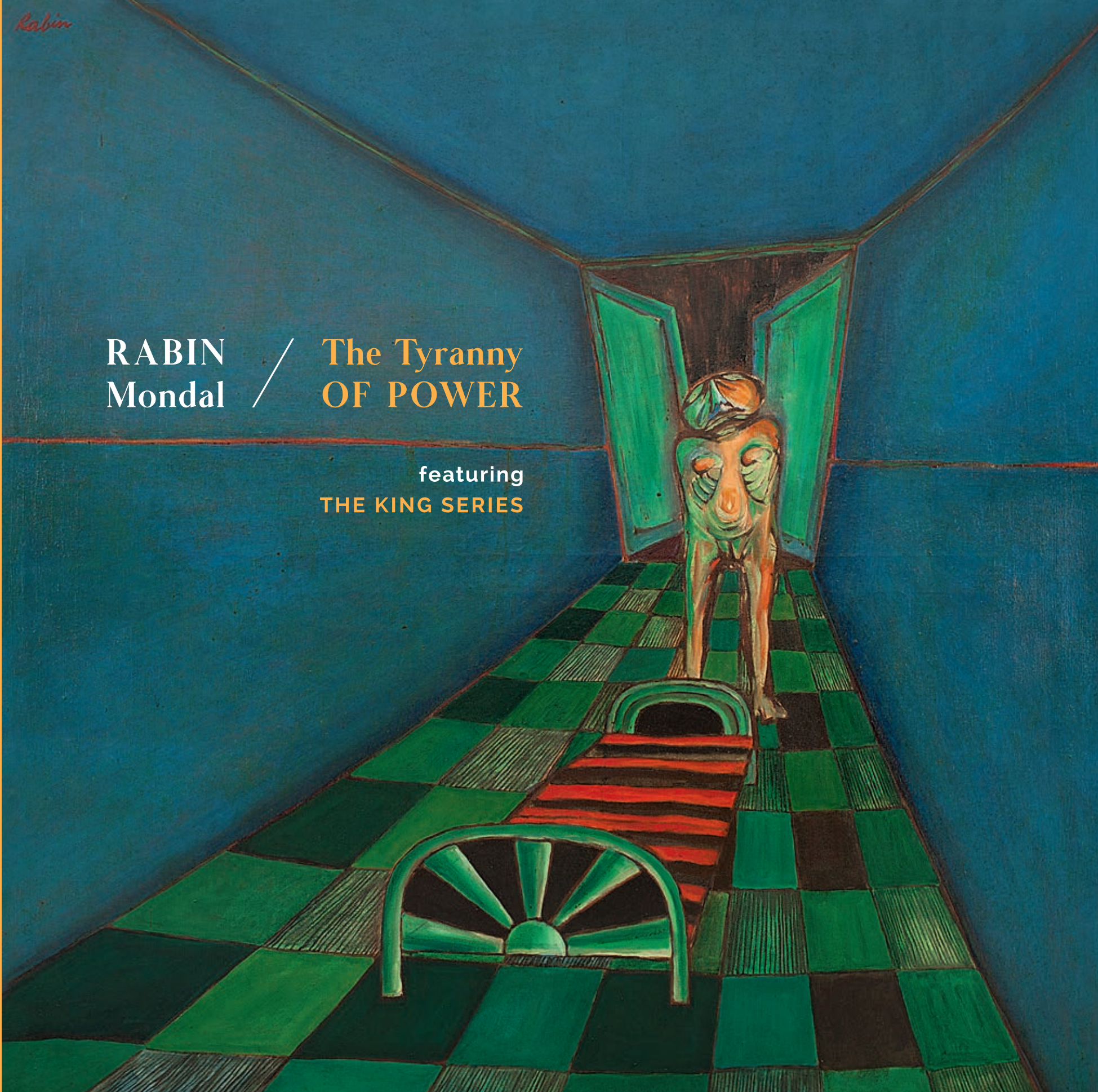
The Tyranny
OF POWER

featuring
THE KING SERIES

RABIN MONDAL / THE TYRANNY OF POWER

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DAG





RABIN / The Tyranny
Mondal / OF POWER

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Mondal** / **The Tyranny
OF POWER**

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The King Series was part of the Shanghai Biennale in 2016, presented by RAQS Media
Image courtesy: Power Station of Art

PREFACE

Ashish Anand

WHY RABIN MONDAL IS IMPORTANT: When I first met Rabin Mondal in 1998, I was still new to the world of collecting—or educating myself about art—and did not know then that I had chanced upon a truly rare phenomenon: an artist who did not care about the market. He painted with an unmistakable sincerity and searing honesty. He did not care that his work was not desirable. What interested him was being able to portray forces of social inequality and disparity without diluting their naked reality. His work was a stark critique of injustices and he saw no reason to soften his pictorial statement to suit viewers' tastes.

The couple of works I got from the artist at the time did not evoke much interest and I returned those to him after a while. But I was intrigued by the artist's reclusiveness and his resistance to conform to the demands of the market and set up a meeting at his studio in Howrah where I became familiar with a life's worth of relentless artistic pursuit. Here was a genius; why had he not been recognised?

The more I saw of his work, the more I was convinced that the world needed to know about him. That is when I knew I had to enable those connections. Even though he had been

widely exhibited, and perhaps even secretly admired, the apparent lack of collectors, or galleries endorsing his work, had done little to educate even the art world about his merits and intention.

DAG has since held two retrospectives of the artist in New Delhi, the second of which has also travelled to Mumbai and New York. I have represented his work at art fairs in India as well as around the world—whether Hong Kong, Singapore, London, or Chicago. The raw savagery of his painting has always drawn viewers and steadily a group of collectors has begun to close ranks around his work. But Mondal still remains under-appreciated. And that is the reason I believe his work must be shown around extensively before his 'discovery' and popularity takes them out of the market and in private hands where they will continue to remain out of public view. It is a reason why institutions—museums—must acquire his work so his excoriating pictorial commentaries can be a part of every art lover's viewing experience.

WHY THE KING SERIES IS EVEN MORE IMPORTANT: The *King Series* came about towards the end of the 1970s following years of doodling and sketching the helpless state of alienation he saw

figures of authority experience and undergo as part of their lived realities. He who lives by the sword dies by the sword—but Mondal's 'King' was no soldier or seeker of justice as much as he was a manipulator of office and people. Vile as this figure was, he was also vulnerable and to be pitied.

When I first saw works from this series, I was blown away. Around this same time, Mondal had worked on paintings that appeared like primeval portraits of figures he titled *King*, *Queen*, or *Deity*. They appeared like totems and were painted in his characteristic style of bold outlines, tattooed faces and bodies, and vehement brushstrokes. The *King Series*—the eight works under discussion here—are different. Perhaps there were others in the series; certainly there are some more drawings that allude to the fact, but I have personally seen no other works by the artist with the same application of flat colours in which the central figure is sequestered and lives in constant fear, unable to enjoy the trappings of his high office.

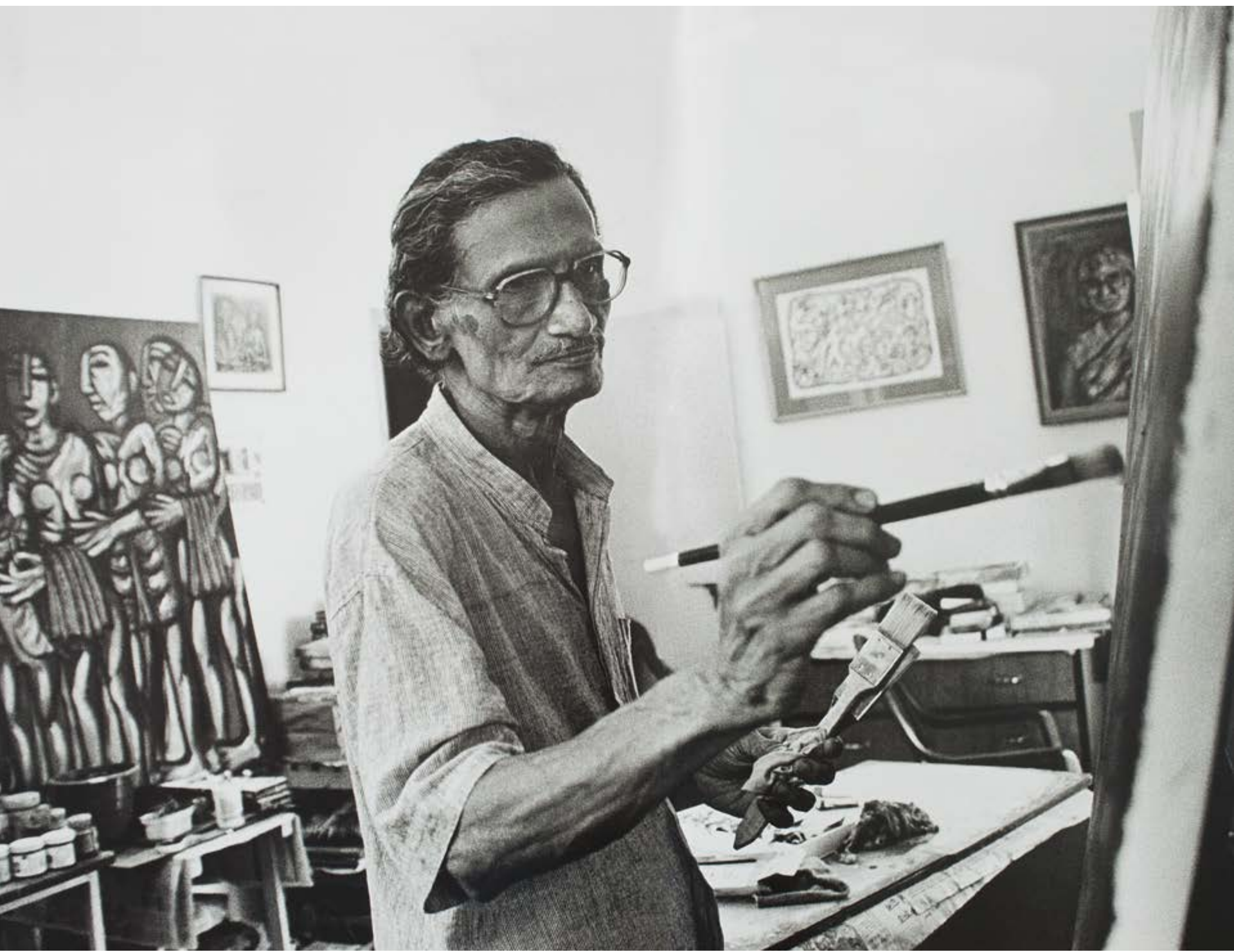
I had always believed this series to be special even given Mondal's powerful oeuvre, but got a boost when the Shanghai Biennale endorsed my belief when, in 2016, it chose the *King Series* to display at one of the most important gatherings of

the art world. By then, I had already decided that I would be criminally negligent to break up the series and allow its acquisition piecemeal by the growing body of admirers and collectors who had begun to follow Mondal's work.

The decision that the *King Series* must be allowed to remain intact is my way of showing respect for an artist who cared little about the world, even less about himself, but whose craft remained the most important thing in his life. In ensuring that this suite remains intact and viewers can see the paintings the way he intended to—as a complete set—I am ensuring that his legacy is not compromised.

Art fairs are intended to celebrate diversity, encourage collectability, and are closely linked to the marketplace. By any reckoning, showing an artist's series *as a single body of work* may appear maverick, but what is more important to me is ensuring adequate visibility for one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. These are some of the finest paintings of modern art that we have been privileged to see. Remember this moment for it is a precious one.

Ashish Anand is CEO and Managing Director of DAG



Named Rabindra Nath after the Nobel-laureate, Rabin Mondal inherited the love for drawing and painting from his father

THE TYRANNY OF POWER

Santo Datta

A PURELY AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF RABIN MONDAL'S TOTAL OEUVRE IS PERHAPS NOT POSSIBLE, NOT PERHAPS IN THE WAY WE ASSESS THE WORK OF PIET MONDRIAN OR PIERRE SOULAGE. OUR APPRECIATION OF PABLO PICASSO'S *GUERNICA* IS NECESSARILY ROOTED IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE HISTORY OF OUR TIMES. BESIDES, ITS APPEAL TO OUR SENSE OF MORAL OUTRAGE CANNOT ESCAPE US. ON THE ONE HAND, THE LAY MAN WOULD EASILY RESPOND, WITH SHOCK, TO JACQUES CALLOT, FRANCISCO DE GOYA OR GEORGE ROUAULT'S HORRIFYING VISIONS OF WAR, TO THE RAW IMAGES OF BRUTALITY. NEITHER CAN KATHE KOLLWITZ'S *DEATH* SERIES LEAVE HIM COLD.

The archaic idea of man's fall from grace, his banishment from the biblical Garden of Eden or the punishment for the seven deadly sins, are defined by a morality not limited to Christians but seen across cultures. The idea of this Fall and its aftermath, and of crime and punishment, find substantial expansion in the significant world epics, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Iliad and Odyssey, continue to be relevant in our morally ambiguous times of increased suspicion, intolerance, and violence between men. In the work of Rabin Mondal, we feel the weight of experience guiding his images of dehumanisation and pain, his awareness of declining human values and the frightened recognition of dark forces in the socio-political milieu of Bengal that he had witnessed first-hand guide the melancholia of his images.

Rabin was his parents' third child, named Rabindra Nath after the Nobel-laureate, and he inherited his father's drawing skills and interest in picture making. He was also, like him,

shy and introverted, and kept himself in the shadows as family members shined in more visible fields, such as his uncle's noted skill with the percussion instrument, *pakhawaj*. To Rabin, the beats on the *pakhawaj* sounded like the deep rumbling of thunder that sent out low whirring tremors to the glass panes of the room.

To a sensitive child growing up in these environs, the sounds of music at home had to compete with the clattering noise of the whirring, wheezing, hammering machines of the surrounding factories, as the raucous voices and shocking language coming from the brothels situated at the periphery of their genteel living quarters. The curious life of the prostitutes in the slums and their patrons intrigued him from early on, and he was shaken when he witnessed them suddenly explode into violent quarrels, abusive language and when the occasional mayhem ensued. The men and women seemed warped, their children stunted by the life they had to live. And the world of crime was never far off.

Rabin copied Zainul Abedin's drawings, his initiation into the visual language of pain and suffering—an anguished boy's response to the terrible suffering he witnessed. A long period of illness and confinement proved to be his first drawing school; he copied drawings and paintings from magazine pages, did life sketches, portraits, and painted from life. He had been teaching himself how to draw figures in proportion, show distance between two objects and how to relate one to the other. At some level, he felt his whole life already charted out in terms of brush and paint, colours and canvas.

In 1953, the Second International Contemporary Art Exhibition, sponsored by the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS), New Delhi, also travelled to Calcutta. It was a great art event for the artists of Calcutta, as besides artists from twenty-five other countries, the list of participating artists included, quite literally, the who's who of international modern art. Noted American artists Georgia O'Keefe, Lionel Feininger, Arshille Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Edward Hopper and Ben Shan participated with their works, while from France were names such as Franz Klein, Fernand Leger, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Erich Hackel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff represented Germany, and it was the artists Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore and Eduardo Paolozzi from England.

As can be imagined, an incredibly wide range of modernist ideologies and art practices were on display. In its novelty and level of exposure, the exhibition rivalled the Bauhaus one held in Calcutta in 1922, or the monumental exhibition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century European art in America held in New York in 1913. It is hard to trace any direct influence of this show on the work of Calcutta artists beyond the 1950s and mid-1960s, and yet it must have jolted them to an overnight and blinding awareness of the bewilderingly fluid international art situation. At the very least, it inspired the new generation of artists to create their own language out of the matrix of their tumultuous times.

The artists of the Calcutta Group, and Rabin Mondal's generation of artists, who after twenty years formed the Calcutta Painters, were the chief recipients of this exposure to international art. Impressed by the uninhibited use of techniques and materials in Western art, they were amazed at the unimaginable plastic potential of familiar forms. Rabin had profound respect for Nirode Majumdar, the founder-member of the Calcutta Group, whom he considered one of

the major Indian moderns, and who guided the young man. 1955, the year Rabin got a railways job, is also significant because two of his paintings were selected that year by the National Academy of Arts for the exhibition of contemporary Indian artists in Calcutta.

Rabin's paintings were shown along with acknowledged senior artists N. S. Bendre, K. K. Hebbar, Ramkinkar Baij, M. F. Husain, K. C. S. Paniker and others. With the hesitation of a self-taught artist, Rabin marked his paintings 'Not for Competition', and they received a high commendation. In a letter to this writer in 2003, Rabin wrote that he had never participated in any exhibition for competition in his entire career. He always marked his paintings 'not for competition' because he detested the idea of competing in the field of arts and literature. The judgment of the jury, he says, is often swayed by subjective stock responses, group rivalry, or parochialism—'I will go on painting and exhibiting, and that is not for awards'. After that exhibition, Rabin participated in scores of important exhibitions in India and abroad.

Rabin Mondal's entire opus, too, is filled with the reverberations of the socio-political convulsions of the years between the Second World War and Indian Independence in 1947, and of the following years that saw the cancerous commingling of crime, politics and power. The imagery created by the artists of the Calcutta Painters as seen in the 1970 book *Drawings by 14 Contemporary Artists of Bengal* that Rabin Mondal edited, the sinister implications of Bikash Bhattacharjee's Gothic imagination, or the Dark Period paintings of A. Ramachandran even as he worked in another part of the country—are all disquietingly representative of the time. Many paintings of Satish Gujral and Krishen Khanna of the post-Partition period too are grimly relevant in this context. The prominent features that characterised the cultural ambience of Calcutta

artists in the 1950s and 1960s were informed awareness of international politics and a modernist commitment to express the contemporary human situation.



VICTIM OF SOCIETY
Oil and sketch pen
on paper pasted on
plywood, 1975
44.0 x 30.5 in. /
111.8 x 77.5 cm.
Signed and dated in
English (lower right)
'Rabin / 1975'
Verso: Titled, inscribed,
dated and signed
in English



THE BLOOD ON THE CROSS
Gouache and charcoal on paper
pasted on rice paper, 1972
35.0 x 60.0 in. / 88.9 x 152.4 cm.

The first thing that comes to mind while looking at the paintings and drawings of Rabin Mondal is his alacrity in disposing off anything that might even vaguely suggest academic realism. His personal style shunned the fleshiness of academic realism that appropriated the skin tone and the body contours of a figure. His paintings titled *King, Queen, King After Coronation, King and His Assassin*, and *King's Harem* and related ones could be grouped under this category.

We are aware of the momentous events of Rabin's times and the immediate material condition in which he grew up that shaped his inner world, and which often found anguished expressions in his art. Let us reverse the process while examining his art, and attempt to 'read' in his pictorial expressions the traces of his times. Rabin's obsession with kings, queens, emperors and the semiotics of power creates images that are notionally placed at the hub of power. Yet, they appear to be extremely vulnerable, cracking up as if under the load of their own sins of transgression and abuse of power. They face exile in their own empire of darkness,

imprisoned in desolate interiors, which Rabin, with bitter irony, sometimes terms 'harems'. In the context of the Calcutta of the 1960s and '70s of the twentieth century, these images are loaded with the artist's revulsion at the prevailing human condition.

The alarming fusion of electoral politics with pointless violence, the use of private armies of musclemen recruited



KING MAKING CONFESSION

Pen and ink on paper, 1977

22.0 x 14.0 in. / 55.9 x 35.6 cm.

Signed and dated in English (lower right) 'Rabin / 1977'

Verso: Signed and dated in English

Private collection

from the underworld, growing use of money power in grabbing prime real estate at the cost of the public or their lawful owners, nepotism, graft, bribery, extortion and intimidation had all become a way of life. Long cherished political ideologies were fast losing their relevance to these emergent realities. Rabin's acutely disturbing observations of these developments in his journal remind me of the millennia-old wailings in the Old Testament:

'All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness.'

The distorted form and disquieting colours reflect Rabin's bitter response to his times, echoing the dark times chronicled in the Old Testament. One must not miss the undercurrent of pity in the 1977 work *King Making Confession* (image on the left), Rabin's most corrosive comment on the guilt-ridden men in power. In meticulous hatches and crosshatches of the pen, the artist builds up an image of the king—miserable, shorn of dignity, stark naked and seated on a hard wooden chair like an ordinary felon. But being a king, he is at the centre of the picture; his chair symbolic of his power, his throne. The masterstroke by the artist is in the way he makes the rays of light stand like a fool's cap on the king's head, reminiscent of and mocking the halos customarily painted around the heads of royalty, taken as of 'divine descent'. The king sits, as if under interrogation, his eyes turned inward. All else is submerged in darkness and semi-darkness. This is one of Rabin's boldest statements.

Facing Page:

CORONATION II

Oil on canvas, 1978

50.5 x 55.7 in. / 128.3 x 141.5 cm.

Signed in English (lower left) 'Rabin'

Verso: Signed and inscribed in English

One may draw the viewer's attention specifically to the 'pictorial space' Rabin creates for their majesties. Consider works such as *King After Coronation* (see page 29), *King's Harem* (see page 21), *Arrival of the King* (see page 34), *King Being Appeased* (see page 26), *King and His Assassin* (see

page 25), and *King Dethroned* (see page 30). Rabin's visual semiotics of these power centres is pictorially defined by the near complete spread of chequered chessboard patterned floor. The intended meaning is the bewildering complexity of violent 'moves' in the power game, at the end



of which the successful manipulator either ascends the throne or is dethroned. The king rules under the shadow of the assassin, and he seems to be going to pieces because of the agonising tensions he suffers, as in *Man Acting as King* (image on the right).

Rabin Mondal's royal figures are compelling reminders of the profound observations of the Buddha on the impermanence of power and kingship, still relevant to our times:

'For if a ruler relies on his sovereignty, which is transitory and has many enemies, he is ruined; or if he does not trust in it, what then is the happiness of a king, who is always trembling with fright.'

Rabin's attempts to successfully evoke the king's trapped, suffocating world did not end. With fragments of Renaissance techniques of illusionism, he created the suffocating interior of a coffin, as if the imperial majesties were given a posthumous extension of their evil reigns. Notice the converging lines in *King's Harem* (see page 21), which start from the four corners of the frame and end at the open door in the rear; the royal bedstead is foreshortened and given bright red stripes. Aggressively distorted forms are awkwardly squeezed into a tight confined space. The artist packs miles of desolation within the royal interior. But the most horrifying in this series is the work *King After Coronation* (see page 29). Carcasses from the butcher's hang over the king's head from the ceiling. The king stands at the end of the chessboard after long-drawn-out power-games marked with brutal suppression of dissent—note the 'head' of the sacrificed animal in the foreground. The sinister red backdrop to the hanging carcasses gives out the dark secrets behind his 'coronation'. This canvas is rare in that Rabin has given a flowing royal robe and some kind of armour to the otherwise naked king in his canvases. In the smaller canvases, his King and Queen are adorned with crowns and cheap royal costumes usually seen

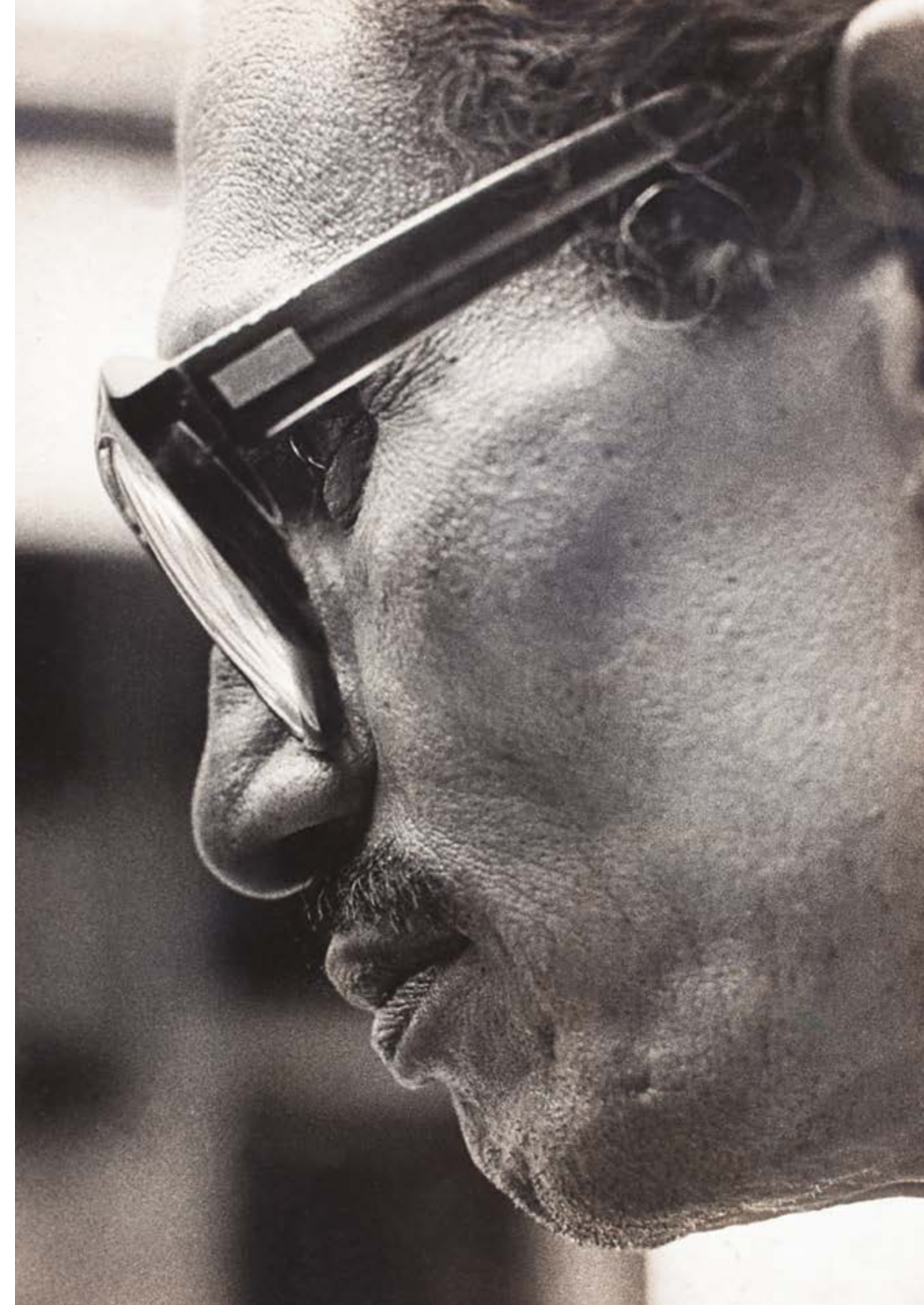


MAN ACTING AS KING
Oil on canvas, 1982
32.0 x 33.0 in. / 81.3 x 83.8 cm.
Signed and dated in English (lower right)
'Rabin / 1982'
Verso: Titled in English

on the popular stage or folk theatre of *jatra* in rural Bengal. The artist's pictorial accent is on his subjects as performers in vaudeville: 'That struts and frets his [her] hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more.' (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V)

The royal crowns have a baffling ambivalence, for though they are meant to look like real crowns, instead they recall a crown of thorns. In other semi-abstract paintings of royal couples, Rabin has gone back to the iconic austerity of form, drastically reduced to their basics as those in tribal art or frozen outlines of totem poles. In the process, he accentuates the menacing 'unity' of forms seen in tribal deities.

Rabin Mondal never participated in any exhibition for competition in his entire career



THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING

Kishore Singh



UNTITLED
Watercolour, dry
pastel, brush and pen
and ink on paper, 1974
7.5 x 7.7 in. /
19.1 x 19.6 cm.
Signed and dated in
Bengali (lower right)
'Rabin / 14/5/74'



UNTITLED
Watercolour, dry
pastel, brush and pen
and ink on paper, 1974
7.5 x 7.7 in. /
19.1 x 19.6 cm.
Signed and dated in
Bengali (lower right)
'Rabin / 14/5/74'



UNTITLED
Gouache and pen
and ink on paper, 1979
8.5 x 7.7 in. /
21.6 x 19.6 cm.
Signed and dated in
English (lower right)
'Rabin / 1/7/79'



UNTITLED
Gouache and pen
and ink on paper, 1979
8.5 x 7.7 in. /
21.6 x 19.6 cm.
Signed and dated in
English (lower right)
'Rabin / 29-6-79'



UNTITLED
Gouache and pen and ink on paper, 1979
9.0 x 7.2 in. / 22.9 x 18.3 cm.
Signed and dated in English (lower right)
'Rabin / 13/7/79'

THE 1970s WAS A PERIOD OF DESPAIR FOR RABIN MONDAL, FILLED WITH A SENSE OF ACUTE HORROR AND DISMAY AT THE MANNER IN WHICH SOCIETY WAS BEING INVEIGLED BY PEOPLE IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY. THE MANIPULATION WAS NAKED, SORDID, AND MONDAL TOOK TO INTROSPECTING WITH A SERIES OF DRAWINGS THAT HE SAYS HE DID NOT CONSIDER SEQUENTIALLY, AT LEAST NOT TILL HE SAW A PATTERN EMERGE THAT HE THEN CONSIDERED CONVERTING ON TO CANVAS TO DEPICT THE VENAL ACTIONS OF THOSE IN POSITIONS OF POWER. THIS, THE *KING SERIES*, COVERS A NUMBER OF WORKS, AND ENDS WITH ONE OUTSIDE THE SUITE OF EIGHT WORKS UNDER DISCUSSION HERE: *MAN ACTING AS KING*, A PAINTING HE MADE IN THE EARLY 1980s AS A CULMINATION OF THE EIGHT WORKS FROM THIS SERIES DEPICTED HERE. THE PAINTINGS ALL HAVE THE RABIN MONDAL DISTINCTIVENESS—AN ALMOST TRIBAL SENSE OF MOTIF MAKING WITH HUMAN FEATURES THAT ARE EXAGGERATED TO APPEAR SUBHUMAN OR APE-LIKE, A DISTORTION THAT DEPICTS THE INNERMOST DEPRAVITY OF THOSE WHO ABUSE POWER, THEIR CLAWED FEET AND UNCLOTHED BODY ADDING TO THE SENSE OF GROTESQUENESS.

The exploitation of authority he alludes to is best seen in the background of these paintings which provide no hint of location, place or culture. Instead, what is most arresting is the acute sense of claustrophobia, of loneliness, almost of great anguish, that determines these characters—a mortifying exile that is entirely self-inflicted, for these are not just any people but those who have lost the moral confidence of the people they command. 'Through the ages,' Mondal explained, 'leaders have tended to misuse

authority, they have exploited society through the dint of their power—but not forever, for people have always found a way to dethrone them.’ From his rise to his fall, Mondal sees the king—‘a mere symbol to me; when they are very powerful, there are several kings in one place’—as a figure of wretchedness. ‘He is helpless. By dint of his position he may become king, but he is isolated, rejected by the people.’ The rejection is seen in his nakedness, which stands for his ruthless ambition, and the ability of the people to see through the cloak of fake humility.

Yet, however potent the content, Rabin Mondal claimed to be ‘much more interested in the visual aspect of the painting’, which, here, appears pictorially as a fear of loneliness. Mondal used the chequered floor tiles and closing walls to create a sense of being choked, recreating a sense of doom at least as potent as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Mondal’s King’s power appears tertiary and opposed to the very forces of nature that have created him, thus setting him up for his eventual fall and destruction.

Rabin Mondal painted the naked reality of his times with unmistakable sincerity, without caring for the market





THE KING SERIES

THE EXHIBITION PLATES



Preparatory drawing
 Watercolour, dry pastel, brush and
 pen and ink on paper, 1974
 8.5 x 7.5 in. / 21.6 x 19.1 cm.
 Signed and dated in Bengali (lower right)
 'Rabin / 13/5/74'

KING'S HAREM

That Rabin Mondal made preparatory drawings ahead of his important works is no surprise, that he felt the need to replicate these so closely with the painted version is. The drawing as a template became his testing ground for the success of his painting. He thought his work through in the greatest detail. The drawing was never just a hasty rendition of sketches to be converted into the painting, but potent with deliberation. In this departure from primitivism, Rabin Mondal was exceptional from other primitivist artists in the West.

In the drawing here, the king stands naked and vulnerable behind a narrow bed. Instead of the pleasure he seeks, he finds himself isolated, overwhelmed, the claustrophobia of power bearing down on him like a physical force. The encroaching walls and the use of rectangular tiles on the floor add to the loneliness and angst of the figure, as much a metaphor of our times as Edvard Munch's *The Scream* was at the end of the nineteenth century. A clever departure from the drawing is the colour of the walls and ceiling which the artist paints in the same colour, allowing the protagonist no escape or relief from the position he finds himself in.

Oil on canvas, 1975-76
 56.0 x 56.0 in. / 142.2 x 142.2 cm.
 Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'
 Verso: Titled and dated in English 'KING'S Harem /1975-76'





KING AS MANIPULATOR

Artists use the colours red and black with not a little trepidation. They are strong, with red, in particular, invested in celebratory overtones. Some artists convert that red into tones of the ominous, but no one uses it with the felicity of Rabin Mondal who suggests a raging, paranoiac world bursting into flames. He builds the background with a crimson wall, architectural elements adding a deeper tone to its hues. The king holds up a scene of such horror that even his hair stands up in shock. The scene—whether of raped women, pillage or callous deprivation—burns with the same shades, and the king’s face is entirely recreated in the same colour, building up a relentless hopelessness in the face of the situation.

Over this discord the king appoints himself as arbiter, a figure of authority in whose soul the canker of greed and power has robbed him of any ability of compassion. He is both violator and judge, and all evil rests at his door. The checkered floor that flows along the entire width of the scene he holds in his hand shows him as the final adjudicator in whose hands rests the ability to manipulate destinies. Yet, it does not leave him unscarred, making him hide as he fights his own internal demons.

Oil on canvas, 1976
 56.5 x 56.5 in. / 143.5 x 143.5 cm.
 Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'
 Verso: Dated in English '1976'



Preparatory drawing
 Watercolour, dry pastel, brush and
 pen and ink on paper, 1974
 7.2 x 7.5 in. / 18.3 x 19.1 cm.
 Signed and dated in English (lower right)
 'Rabin / 19/4/74'



Preparatory drawing

Watercolour, gouache, dry pastel and pen and ink on paper, 1974
 7.5 x 7.2 in. / 19.1 x 18.3 cm.
 Signed and dated in English (lower right)
 'Rabin / 21-4-74'

KING AND HIS ASSASSIN

The powerful evocation of this painting lies in its ability to transcend the simple narrative to articulate a complex tale of anxiety and fear. In Rabin Mondal's view, the craving for power builds a chasm of suspicion that borders on the paranoid. The chamber of authority is evoked through the presence of a carved chair or throne, with the crossed swords and shield that suggest the dominion of monarchical autocracy. Behind the wall, the lurking figure of an assassin lends a pungent dimension to the setting. Is this a hired murderer or merely the successor-in-waiting waging his claim to the *gaddi*?

The king, meanwhile, fearful for his life, occupies a parallel space shorn of all dignity of office. His naked vulnerability is visible to everyone but him. The artist's use of dark tones heightens the scale of foreboding, while his use of blue and aquamarine is almost primordial, as though of something clammy lurking from beyond the depths of time. The use of red—a difference the artist establishes between the drawing and the painting—hints at the blood that has been spilled, and will be spilled again, as man's avarice leads him to the brink of moral decadence and, ultimately, destruction.

Oil on canvas, 1976
 56.5 x 56.2 in. / 143.5 x 142.7 cm.
 Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'
 Verso: Dated in English '1976'





KING BEING APPEASED

Unusually, this painting in the series is accompanied by a black-and-white drawing rather than a colour rendition. The possibility that Rabin Mondal made more than one preparatory drawing is a beguiling one, especially since the accompanying sketch seems to be a 'negative' of the final outcome. The long lines of the floor in the drawing have a bleaker effect than the checkered floor in the painting. Some form of obstruction on that floor in the drawing finds no place in the painting. The sharp end of the floor in the drawing that resembles the bars of a window is turned into a curved path in the painting, indicating the long way the protagonists have probably travelled.

Why does the king need appeasement? In what could be a modern-day parable, the ominous figure behind could stand for corruption in society, or it might represent the masses who seek succour from the bestial reign of the authoritarian figure. Once again, the heightened sense of isolation is scored through the absence of any relief offered by the artist. There is nothing to distract either the monarch or, indeed, the viewer. This unsettling absence is a reminder of the exigencies of high office and the insurmountable gap that comes into existence between perception and reality.

Oil on canvas, 1976
 55.7 x 55.7 in. / 141.5 x 141.5 cm.
 Signed in English (lower right) 'Rabin'
 Verso: Dated in English '1976'



Preparatory drawing
 Brush and pen and ink on paper, 1973
 8.0 x 8.5 in. / 20.3 x 21.6 cm.
 Signed in Bengali and dated in English (lower right)
 'Rabin / 7/12/73'



Preparatory drawing
Watercolour, dry pastel, brush and pen and ink on paper, 1974
7.5 x 7.5 in. / 19.1 x 19.1 cm.
Signed and dated in English (lower right)
'Rabin / 20 /4 /74'

KING AFTER CORONATION

Rabin Mondal divides this painting into three planes with the help of two horizontal lines, the first to create a perception of depth, the second to suggest a horizon. This division is deliberate, something he charts out first in the accompanying drawing. There is very little visual difference between the drawing and the painting, emphasising the thinking and deliberation that marked the artist's approach to his work.

The lower panel of the work scores the trophy of the office, gained no doubt through a struggle. The deliberate use of a beast's head reminds us of similar trophies in countless palaces around the country, or it is a clever reference to the felling of the demon by Goddess Kali. The middle of the painting, unusually for this series, shows the king fully clothed in a cloak that communicates the importance of symbolism. The king's smirk, or sneer, is a rare instance of emotional betrayal, probably on account of an office won against resistance. This is underscored by the topmost panel where carcasses hang above the newly anointed king, reminiscent of unspeakable horrors. History vindicates the victor, and valourises the journey. No wonder the vanquished carcasses hang like a chandelier overhead, similar to the trophy underfoot, empty symbols of a reign of terror against mankind.

Oil on canvas, 1976
56.5 x 56.2 in. / 143.5 x 142.7 cm.
Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'





KING DETHRONED

As a drawing in this series, the black-and-white sketch is probably the least detailed of Rabin Mondal's preparatory works. It seems to capture the idea the artist wanted to place on the larger painting rather than the accurate rendition most turned out to be. Still, the proportions and the placement of the figure and stool are accurate, once again alluding to the deep thought the artist put into it before putting pen to paper, or paint to canvas.

Once again too, Rabin Mondal uses an overpowering red for this painting, black offering almost the only relief. Here, however, the shades of red create a melancholic mood, one almost of poignance, as suits his subject. The skeletal, emaciated frame of the dethroned king is hardly different from that at the peak of his power. However, his nakedness is more apparent, with no salve available that can step in as an act of concealment. His hands appear tethered at the back, as if to emphasise the nakedness further. The sense of inevitable hopelessness is the most powerful feature of the painting.

Oil on canvas, 1976
 55.7 x 55.5 in. / 141.5 x 141.0 cm.
 Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'



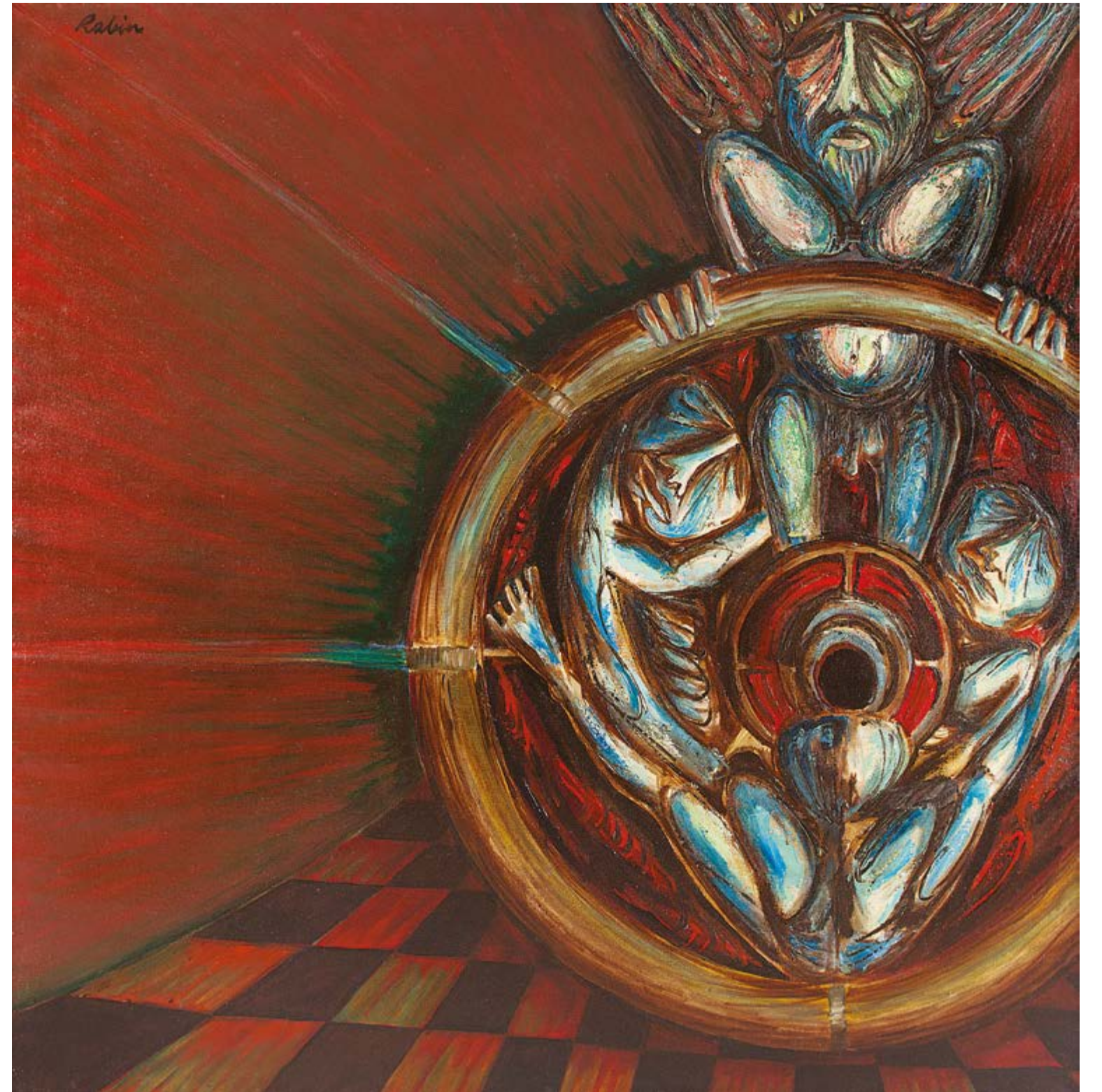
Preparatory drawing
 Brush and pen and ink on paper, 1973
 7.2 x 7.2 in. / 18.3 x 18.3 cm.
 Signed and dated in English (lower right)
 'Rabin / 8/12/73'

KING AS CHRIST

In this evocative painting, Rabin Mondal sets into motion the wheel of time itself. While a residual reference to the floor exists as a link to the other paintings, the allusion to Christ is a clever juxtaposition. For the first time, one questions the king's role in the series. Is he necessarily evil? Has the power been thrust on him? Did he have a choice in the bargain he made? Is he the sacrificial lamb instead of someone deciding on the sacrifices that are required? Is he being crucified for events not in his control? This pause, and dilemma, is unusual for Rabin Mondal who tends to cauterise the public from figures of authority. In creating a sense of motion with the wheel, he hints that this is a cyclical phenomenon eroding the superficial surface of the social mask worn by those in power.

The artist's use of red, black, green and blue here comes together powerfully. It is interesting that he uses green to depict acts of particular vileness, while red becomes almost a counter, of loneliness. The primal sense of malevolence that imbues this series finds some relief in this painting where the artist's hesitation creates a sense of dissonance instead.

Oil on canvas, 1976
55.5 x 55.5 in. / 141.0 x 14.0 cm.
Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'
Verso: Titled and dated in English





ARRIVAL OF THE KING

The arrival and anointing of a new king rarely rises above a pause in authoritarian regimes that see the handing over of batons as a result of power struggles and bloodshed. As one tainted leader succeeds another, the deeper red of Rabin Mondal's painting seems to suggest an equally deep malaise. The king sits large in the foreground, laying his claim to space, his crossed hands managing to hide his nakedness, which is an essential component of the artist's disgust with the supremacy of control. He is surrounded by courtiers who could as easily betray him.

The figure in the background, on a displaced plane, is interesting. Is it the king marking his own arrival? Or a subject raising his hands in a gesture of celebration? More likely, it is the subject surrendering to a new figure of authority, his misery unrelieved. The passing of kings provides him with no succour. In Rabin Mondal's unrelieved mindscape, the common man is always a victim, as much of circumstance as of his own making.

Oil on canvas, 1976
55.5 x 55.5 in. / 141.0 x 141.0 cm.
Signed in English (upper left) 'Rabin'
Verso: Dated in English '1976'



JOURNEYS WITH THE KING

Rabin Mondal's work has been extensively shown at exhibitions in India, and is part of the collections of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, and is part of international collections in the USA, UK, The Netherlands, Sweden, Korea, Canada, Australia, and France.



The King Series on display in New Delhi, 2014, with the artist present at the retrospective



The specially created room at DAG Mumbai in 2015 where a retrospective of Rabin Mondal was held



ABOUT RABIN MONDAL

1929-2019

THE SON OF A MECHANICAL DRAUGHTSMAN, RABIN MONDAL TOOK TO DRAWING AND PAINTING AT THE AGE OF TWELVE WHEN HE INJURED HIS KNEE AND WAS CONFINED TO BED. THE 1943 BENGAL FAMINE AND PRE-INDEPENDENCE CALCUTTA RIOTS DEEPLY IMPACTED HIS PSYCHE, ASPECTS OF WHICH MANIFESTED IN HIS ART.

Mondal's images created a deeply felt iconic appearance. The series *King*, *Queen* and *Man* represented figures that were static, totemic, tragicomic, ruthlessly shattered and ruined. Having subverted the classical canons of harmony and beauty, Mondal invented a language in paint that could express his anguish and rage towards decadence and the frequent inhumanity he saw. Even the expressionistic use of splattered colours, the bold and enormous application of black, is representative of this symptom.

Mondal's art was typically known for its inspiration from primitive and tribal art and for its potent simplifications and raw energy. Beginning his career as an art teacher, with a stint as an art director in films, Mondal was a founder member of Calcutta Painters in 1964, and from 1979-83, a general council member of the Lalit Kala Akademi.

DAG houses an exhaustive collection of the master artist's body of work, which have been showcased in dedicated retrospectives as well as part of major exhibitions in India and abroad.

ABOUT DAG

INDIA'S LARGEST, MOST PRESTIGIOUS ART COMPANY BEGAN SOMEWHAT MODESTLY WITH A SMALL GALLERY IN NEW DELHI'S HAUZ KHAS VILLAGE IN 1993, TWO YEARS AFTER ECONOMIC LIBERALISATION OPENED UP THE ENVIRONMENT FOR EXCITING NEW BUSINESSES AND ENTERPRISES. EVEN THEN, DAG (KNOWN AT THE TIME AS DELHI ART GALLERY) SET ITSELF APART FROM ITS PEERS WITH EXHIBITIONS OF ARTISTS THE CITY AT THE TIME WAS UNFAMILIAR WITH—PARTICULARLY ARTISTS FROM BENGAL.

DAG's ambitious goals were seeded with the joining of Ashish Anand who set an accelerated pace of growth for the gallery. The company began with an acquisitions programme that remains one of its key features to date—identifying renowned artists whose works had dried up in the then fledgling market, whose studios were in decline. Collections from estates of formerly wealthy *zamindars* and other elites were resurrected and conserved. This provided DAG with its primary focus of rebuilding back reputations and restoring artists to the eminent positions they had once occupied. To achieve this, the company established a curatorial and research team, built up an impressive archive, mounted historic exhibitions, and became a major producer of art books.

DAG's exhibitions have always been powered from its own inventory of twentieth century art, even though it has included artworks from earlier centuries to establish the dynamics and organic growth of modern art in South Asia. As such, several of its exhibitions have provided a sweeping overview of different genres, or periods, as well as of art movements in the country, thereby documenting and creating

an art narrative to nurture and nourish the art history of the country. Its more recent interest has enlarged to include eighteenth and nineteenth century art.

Today's DAG can claim a truly unique place for itself with new galleries in New Delhi and Mumbai, as well as in New York. It has collaborated with national institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India to establish art museums that have been popularly received by the public—Drishyakala in New Delhi's Red Fort, a UNESCO heritage monument, being a case in point. Its Ghare Baire museum in Kolkata, also with the Archaeological Survey of India, had received a similar response during the tenure for which it was set up. Other institutional collaborations have included The Wallace Collection, London, the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, The Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi, Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi, Chandigarh, Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, and Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi.

Over the years, DAG has also participated in art fairs around the world with the aim of familiarising viewers with Indian modern art. At India Art Fair in New Delhi, its booth is the one most looked forward to by visitors. Other fairs have included Art Basel Hong Kong, Armory New York, Art Dubai, Masterpiece London, Art Stage Singapore, Expo Chicago, among others. Apart from Kochi Muziris Biennale, its works have formed part of the Shanghai Biennale in China, and been included in Documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany.

To ensure that art is not limited to just the elite, DAG organises programmes and workshops for students as

well as the sight-impaired. It has organised a number of fundraiser auctions as a philanthropic effort and will continue to support worthy causes in the future.

DAG's collection has included works by India's most celebrated artists, including Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore as well as his nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, the Progressives F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, M. F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta,

and modernists Avinash Chandra, Ram Kumar, G. R. Santosh, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Chittaprosad, Altaf—an extensive list including over a thousand painters and sculptors. Among the retrospectives hosted by it, artists who have gained renown include G. R. Santosh, Chittaprosad, Laxman Pai, Sunil Das, Gogi Saroj Pal, Rabin Mondal, Madhvi Parekh among many others. It hopes to continue doing seminal exhibitions and ensuring that the legacy of Indian artists becomes known to global audiences around the world.

DAG Mumbai has relocated recently with two new galleries at the Taj Mahal Palace



