



Man Acting as King, Oil on Canvas, 32" x 33", 1982



King and his Assassin, Oil on Canvas, 56" x 56", 1976

■ REVIEW ■

Kingdom of Exile: a Rabin Mondal Retrospective

by Gayatri Tandon

'I have within me a depth of pain and melancholy that life has only increased and of which my art, if God answers my prayers, is only the rather imperfect expression and flowering.'
— Rabin Mondal

The simplicity of primitive work is generally a myth and the same is quite apparent in the mesmerizing works of post-independence artist Rabin Mondal. The retrospective exhibition hosted by the Delhi Art Gallery from 22 December -14 February 2015 in Delhi, was very successful in not only bringing out the diversity in the range of Indian modern art. Among India's most significant art institutions, Delhi Art Gallery started in 1993 and in the two decades since, it has built a reputation as India's largest private repository of twentieth century modern Indian

art. Its collection spans the spectrum of Indian modernism from its genesis to its most dynamic phase as well as high modernism and the works of modern masters whose careers have stretched to the 21st century. The gallery's large research and documentation cell where researchers and scholars work on archiving and documenting the collection, enhanced the quality of the exhibitions as well as the making of its handsomely publication release on the Rabin Mondal, which adds value to the art history of the country. A total of 109 of his works were exhibited in the show, 87 paintings of which

are in oil colours, the remaining are in water colour.

Rabin Mondal's works convey great power and strength of his line and brushstrokes and strong contrasts and play with light give his work a sense of gothic. The expressionistic artist's imagery, figuration, colours and compositions are overwhelming and permit no escape from their claustrophobic confines, terrifying and remitting hopelessness.

The protagonists in the works however appear silently writhing in their misery. Rabin Mondal grew up with the experience of Bengal Famine, debilitating childhood illness and suffering of a worn torn Calcutta from 1960's to 1970's and through his struggle as an artist. These suffering found their way to his art and stare back at the viewer. The show was curated around the greed and behavior of men in times of scarcity. The figures of Mondal are with hollow eyes, yet the stare into your face screaming of their plight, looking for some mercy and empathy from the viewer.

Their only salvation seems from the sympathy and empathy that they arouse in their audience. His works like *Man Acting as King* tryst with *Destiny* and *Victim of Society* speaks about a nation that is struggling to find its foothold. The stark difference and divide of the upper class and lower class is apparent in his works. When on the one side are the high and might of the kings and queens on the

other is the common man; one side is tracery and greed other side thirst and hunger. The checkered boards and brightly lit rooms painted by the artist for his sovereign series are in complete contrast to the blues and gloominess of the common man paintings. Many of his works depicting the common man are left untitled, probably to show the non-identity of the person or the common man.

The figures entwine in the works struggle to find a space in the work screaming for their identity, clutching to their meager mortal belongings. The queens and kings on the other hand are shown seated in royalty in the canvas with not a soul to challenge their rule.

The complete show was divided into two parts one being the king's court and the rest of the common man. The viewer as he enters into the show is led into this box room, which

is painted like the canvas of Mondal's, his works like the *King Being Appeased* depict the naked king supported by a grotesque looking man showing the vulnerability of the people in power. The complete set of works in this segment revolves around the stark nakedness of the monarch, the corruption, disquietude and nepotism.

Mondal's protagonists are depicted with a wide unsmiling mouth with blackened eyes draining all happiness for the viewer. The only cheerful elements in his works are the use of bright colours like blue, yellow, red and green. His works shows the universal anxiety of modern man. Painted with bold and strong strokes with simplified primitive and tribal forms, the garish colours of the works, the protagonist is reduced to a passive figure.

The Figures seem like



Untitled, Oil on Paper, 18" x 23", 1969

of people waiting for their answers to be heard. Each work holds a specific meaning to every viewer, moving one away from the conventional to unconventional. His works depict his preoccupation with innocent sufferers. The artist lived through some of the most difficult times like the Bengal Famine of 1943, the riots of partition in 1947 and also the wars with our China and Pakistan. The bleakness in his works is about this cut-throat competition, inequalities, famine and war.

Mondal places his figures in the center of the canvas to avoid any sort of a conflict or disturbance from the protagonist. His compositions are generally void and empty. Even the architectural setting

that he uses gives a depth to the pictures, which echoes with silence, like the dark and non-luminous eyes of his characters. His characters seem to be multiplying and struggling for their space gender inequality is apparent in the way the feminine figures are treated as objects of desire like in the untitled painting in which two predominantly male figures are shown in intense passionate struggle like the work of Giambologna's The Rape of the Sabine Woman.

His influence comes from the society that he lives in, the politics and the ambience of Kolkata are most apparent in the works. However being a self-taught artist predominantly, the totem mother goddess inspires his

figures of works like Deity II and Queen. A lot of critics have also compared this work to that of the Norwegian expressionist painter Edvard Munch, however the similarities are only that both the artist speak about the psychological impacts on their protagonist. The treatment of subject as far as Mondal is totally unique and unabashed.

The most intriguing feature of the exhibition is the video installation of his works and life that ran simultaneously with the show. The video makes one aware of the clarity and maturity with which Mondal has handled his subject, further it also make the viewer aware of the story behind the works of the artist. One surely sees the works with a different insight



Queen, Acrylic on Paper, 20" x 15", 1989



Untitled, Oil on Paper, 21.5" x 13.5", 1980



King Making Confession, Pen and Ink on Paper, 21.7" x 13.7", 1977

after watching the film.

Mondal's works on display can be read under the Melancholy Art or the darker side of the genius, as his protagonist stand in dejection and apathy of depression. However Melancholy must not be mistaken as only about sadness, despair, and loss it can engender creativity born from a deep awareness of the inevitable cycle of birth and death.

Mondal's art draws on psychoanalysis, philosophy and the intellectual history of the country. As Walter Benjamin, has rightly said in The Origin of German Tragic Drama that, 'Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them... The persistence which is expressed in the intention of mourning is born of its loyalty to the world of things.' Similarly Mondal's work is self-centered around the happening of a

dead city, the works are not just mourning the slow death of a civilization but also the death of ego of his protagonist. Just as Sigmund Freud's famous quote in Mourning and Melancholia states, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."

The experience of visual captivation leaves you feeling an uncomfortable bizarreness desolate and questioning the society as a whole. The experience is a thought churning one and you leave the gallery with a silent yet disturbed psychic. Mondal, sure doesn't paint pretty pictures, he paints sea storms of invocative statement of psychological and emotional themes, in the square. The storms are of a magnitude that wash over your being and psychic. He thread-bares your emotions and grips your heart with the icy stairs of the eye less figures. They seem to say to you that they know it all even the deepest and darkest desires of your. The works ultimately appear more as a catalyst to bring out the shallowness of society at large and oneself in particular.

Rabin Mondal's art conveys great power and strength of artist's intent, his works become a mile stone in Indian modernism due to his commitment to art during his entire career, rejecting populist and market trends to create works of great psychological and economical importance of a growing country. ■



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