

Somnath Hore: Birth of a White Rose

Somnath Hore (1921- 2006), or Somnath da as his students and appraisers admirably addressed him, was born in Barama village in Chittagong, in undivided Bengal (present Bangladesh). His life and art exemplified an artistic practice that drew from a collective ideology of existential amelioration, equality and empathy, all in tandem with Hore's own personal philosophy expressed through his writings and interviews.



The title of the exhibition drawn from one of Somanath's iconic work 'Birth of a White Rose' (which received the Lalit Kala Akademi National Award in 1962). It refers to the curatorial intention of exploring a practice which transcended fragile contours of the corporeal and the troubled geographical terrains, and touched the realm of the abstract by embracing the figural. This aspect of in-betweenness of the body and the spirit is central to the exhibition's curatorial proposition.

A subcontinental match to Oskar Kokoschka or Käthe Kollwitz in artistic spirit and aesthetic idioms, Somnath internalised the crux of socialist values and transmuted them into a visual language—lucid, tangible and comprehensible to the masses. His works from various phases in diverse mediums were markers of the volatile times that the artist lived through. Chronicling societal dynamics by observing class conflicts and the violence around, they were contemporary to a transformative cultural juncture when literature, theatre, cinema and other creative expressions in Bengal were touching crescendo. Interrelations between lands, people and ideas were undergoing phenomenal conversions prompted by the manmade Bengal Famine of 1943, the peasant unrest of the mid-1940s, the Partition in 1947 and migration from the east of Bengal, and the two-decade long Vietnam War ending in the 1970s. Radical changes in artistic language responding to these situations were seen in the works of Zainul Abedin, Chittaprosad, along with the works originating from the Calcutta Group. Distancing from the European academicism and the lyricism of Bengal and Santiniketan schools, these artists became attentive to the power of figurative representation and social realism. Somnath, a student of Abedin and friend of Chittaprosad, shaped his own visual lexicon, with time attaining a stylistic singularity. Artistic responses to these situations were seen in the works of communist artists Zainul Abedin and Chittaprosad, who were Somnath's teacher and fellow-activist respectively. While partaking in rescue operations as a communist activist in the early-1940s, Somnath tried to capture the daily struggles for survival and dignity in fast-paced documentative sketches. Some of these drawings were published in the Communist Party magazine *Janajuddha* (People's War), along with his diary entries and sketches of the Tebhaga movement in North Bengal. Rapid lines and expressive nuances of the faces with anatomical details, depicting intense moments of mass gatherings, establish his unique style from this phase. Many of these drawings were transferred to woodcut prints in the 1950s.

Eventually by the mid-1950s after estranging from active political involvement and the art of socialist realism, Somnath moved to New Delhi, and subsequently to Santiniketan. An empathetic pedagogue and convinced modernist by now, Somnath inspired generations of students and artists while heading the department of printmaking at the Delhi Polytechnic in 1958, and subsequently the department of Graphics, Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

Somnath's etchings and engravings from the 1960s such as Refugee Family, with weary sorrowful expression, reminds his personal experiences and the collective pathos of Partition of the country. The recurring question of care and compassion or perhaps the lack of the same in society propelled him to revisit the theme of 'Mother and child' time and again through various mediums, sometimes through the gleam of bronze and at others through the strong rapid lines drawn or etched.



Renditions in a wide range of mediums such as oil on canvases, drawings in watercolour and crayons, different methods and techniques of printmaking and bronze cast sculptures, the exhibition will showcase a selection of more than hundred works. Metal plates that he used for taking prints, diaries, lithographs, woodcuts and etchings will be some of the lures of the show.



Somnath is widely applauded for the unique method of printmaking that was crystallised in the well-known 'wound' series. It started as a response to the Vietnam War and the socio-political unrest in Bengal by the late-1960s and 1970s. The historical trauma was expressed as incisions on the paper-pulp surface that Somnath made himself by transferring from a clay matrix. It contained of abstract impressions on paper pulp ground, evoking lesions on bodies, animate or otherwise. He is also known for his versatile handling of a wide range of mediums such as oil on canvases,

drawings in watercolour and crayons, different methods and techniques of printmaking and bronze cast sculptures— a versatility that will be highlighted through the more than hundred works displayed at KNMA.

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