

Review

08 - Kolkata

FRAGMENTED HUMANITY: ARINDAM CHATTERJEE'S GROTESQUE MIRROR TO OUR TIMES

Soujit Das



↑ Arindam Chatterjee, Installation View, From the Series Encounter & Bare Truth, Oil, Dry Pastel, and Charcoal on Paper, 35.8 x 33.8 inches (each), 2022 & 2023. All Images Courtesy: the artist and Emami Art, Kolkata.

"Black milk of morning we drink you evenings we drink you at noon and mornings we drink you at night we drink and we drink ..." (*Todesfuge*, 1948)

These haunting words by Paul Celan kept wandering in my thoughts as I stood before the paintings of Arindam Chatterjee at his recent solo exhibition titled - 'Not a Dream, Not Peace, Not Love'. Just like Celan's words, which conjure the relentless grip of oppression and ubiquitousness of specters of death; Arindam somewhat explores analogous thoughts in his response to a dystopian society marred by violence, normlessness, political surveillance and authoritarianism. In his own confession - his artistic language finds resonance in the works of post-Tagorean Bengali literati, who challenged the romantic notions of human existence, addressing the inherent angst and restlessness, exposing the dark underbellies of modern societies.

As we collectively suffer from the ostrich syndrome, Arindam's works compel us to face the unvarnished

truths, making us uncomfortable in their presence. Eschewing from the demands of addressing quintessential aesthetics, he compulsively and unapologetically celebrates the grotesque as metonymy of our chaotic times. His concept of beauty is volatile. It seems that his figures belong to a 'liquid modern' and carceral world, who are constantly negotiating with their identity and the relationship with the world around them. The characters are faceless nobodies and amputees who suffer for no fault of their own. They search for meaning in a meaningless world that eventually leads to a confrontation with the absurd. Some of them act like a contemporary *flâneur* who observes the unfolding of the chaos around, in an incurious, emotionless state. They are alienated within the crowd and suffer from purposelessness. Although they appear convincingly feral, their vulnerability also becomes obvious. In this context, it won't be an exaggeration to draw parallel with Agamben's concept of 'bare life', where Arindam reduces his characters to

mere being. They are stripped of their autonomy and made disfranchised.

The body of works on display were mostly produced as an honest reaction to the troubling events between 2017 and 2023. As overwhelming news of suffering engulfed us, after a point people stopped reacting as they were eventually desensitized. This brings us to the question of reading the creaturely in the works. Their haunting presence is felt everywhere, even in the absence of forms. Chatterjee aptly reminds us of our present times, where political rhetoric and actions tend to marginalize entire communities, leading to a catastrophic condition of viewing others as less than human. Although, the artist in this context refrains from historical referentiality, yet we are reminded of different incidents from the recent past. Be it the ongoing Israeli genocide in Palestine or the forced exodus of migrant workers during state imposed lockdown back home. As the scapegoating continues across different corners of our world, these works acquire new quotidian meanings. What also possibly concerns him is the 'banality of evil'. His creatures, though malformed and abominable, possess a disturbingly human undertone, suggesting a mirroring of our own primal instinct. It seems that they have abandoned the 'thin veneer of civilization'.

One of the oft repeated backdrops for the actions happening in Arindam's works, is a non-defined landscape. But this landscape is a plagued site. It is an unwelcoming place. Arindam provocatively places a devastated billboard; a burned forest; a lamppost like structure; a derelict home or even skyscrapers at the horizon - as open-ended reference points for his viewers. Imaginary avian and quadruped forms coexist in the same space with Arindam's nobodies in the despondent landscapes. These foreboding forms become present in various states of aggression and surveillance. The avian forms for instance often reappear with their menacing claws, seen rushing towards the passive onlookers, creating a harrowing visual of impending doom. The avian figures are also seen devouring or perched on shrouded corpse-like forms, reminiscent of the unidentified decedents of the pandemic. As they clutch their claws to rip the corpses open, blood oozes out from the wounds. The fields turn into open morgues. Arindam comments on the predatory nature of unchecked power and social decay. Images of taming and servitude also could be seen in some of the works as we confront creatures on leash dragged by anthropoid characters. Such dynamics challenge the notion of humanity and emerge as a metaphor of control and subjugation in dystopian regimes. The presence of several emaciated, amputee figures with exposed rib cages points to the inhuman conditions of existence. Several references to immolation further hint at an anarchic state.



↓ Arindam Chatterjee, So a Silence Spoke - IV, Watercolour, Dry Pastel and Ink on Paper, 33.9 x 26.9 inches, 2023.

Arindam's painterly process emerges from a perpetual state of chaos, where his forms are governed by his rejections. As a laconic man himself, he translates his thoughts through images. His compositions operate between specifics and non-specifics, between certainties and uncertainties of image-making. Over the past decade, his content has informed his inimitable and brutal figurative style. In almost all of the works displayed in this exhibition, on closer look, one can surely understand how his choice of large scale, coarse handmade papers as his primary support, helps him mess with the recalcitrant mediums. Such non-contextual juxtaposition of mediums allows him to achieve rich tonal spaces that are purely produced by accident. He also does not consciously attempt at meaning-making; rather meanings are created through the relation of forms, as the locus keeps shifting. Arindam does not let you forget the excessiveness of much current suffering. He drags his viewers into facing the unsettling realities of contemporary existence, much like the inescapable 'black milk' of Celan's elegy.

Not a Dream, Not Peace, Not Love, Presented by Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, Kolkata, February 23 - April 30, 2024.