



**Anjan Modak**

# Anjan Modak





*The Ephemeral Shelter*  
Detail

Anjan Modak's art practice is informed by his upbringing in a working-class family of migrant labourers, living in temporary shelters – continually shifting homes. Home has never been a fixed concept for him, forever remaining ephemeral. His early encounters with the lives of labourers, immersed in strenuous physical work and precarious conditions, have left an enduring imprint on him. Almost assuming the role of an artist-ethnographer, Modak chronicles with unwavering sincerity the lives of daily-wage workers who remain at the very edge of our society despite their essential and invaluable contributions. His life experiences allow him the empathy and sensitivity to faithfully portray the lives of these workers while also often lending them a surreal touch. His artistic vocabulary is, undoubtedly, derived from construction work as his paintings are replete with images of under-construction buildings, bricks, rods and such. The harsh lifestyle can be gauged from the figures depicted with muted colours that seem inside-out with organs and limbs assuming a shape of their own and bones sticking out of the body, bordering on the horrific. The almost animalesque existence of these people on the threshold, clawing for survival, is heightened through the oft-repeated images of animals and birds like the tiger, bat and owl.



Modak has had to observe the hardships of life at close quarters. Despite being graduates, his parents suffered unemployment and moved to Delhi from Kolkata for work. The lack of financial security, however, couldn't dominate the cultural spirit of his parents. They kept perpetuating the rich Marxist-socialist culture of Bengal through regular cultural activities. Their indomitable enthusiasm formed a cultural community within the factory environment. These wide-ranging experiences helped mould Modak's later artistic voice, which he translates into a visual language where the past is ever-present in different silhouettes.

He can still remember his mother carrying him against her body while climbing significant heights at construction sites, balancing bricks on her head. The recollection of the peril and the physical prowess of the human body, simultaneously menacing and wondrous, motivated him to delve into the lives of labourers and the subaltern in his artworks such as 'Uncertain Journey,' 'Daily Observation I,' and 'Daily Observation II'. There is a sense of an honest portrayal of lives unfolding before his eyes, devoid of any attempts to evoke pity or other sentiments. His 2020 series, 'Fragmented Life', captures the confined and poignant existence of migrant labourers as they pack up their lives and move to their hometowns.



Exhibition view, *Between the Self and Silhouettes*, 2022, Emami Art, Kolkata.

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The cramped existence in motion is palpable in the three iterations of 'Fragmented Life' – 6, 7, and 10 – depicting people with bags or packed homes. Similarly, 'The Compressed Life' (2020) sheds light on the claustrophobic confines of the COVID-19 lockdown, where families found themselves confined in already cramped spaces, distorting their bodies and identities, tossed together and collected like inanimate objects in their own luggage.

Modak's works consistently expose how societal and forced circumstances dehumanise individuals, particularly those from economically weaker backgrounds. For instance, 'The Piece of Wounded Land' (2016) reveals the construction worker's repetitive acts of building someone's home. As the worker engages in the construction process – climbing, stretching, bending down, Modak observes, as he did as a child, just like a fly on the wall. His discerning gaze reveals how building dismantles the worker progressively – a posture at a time, unmaking and dehumanising him.

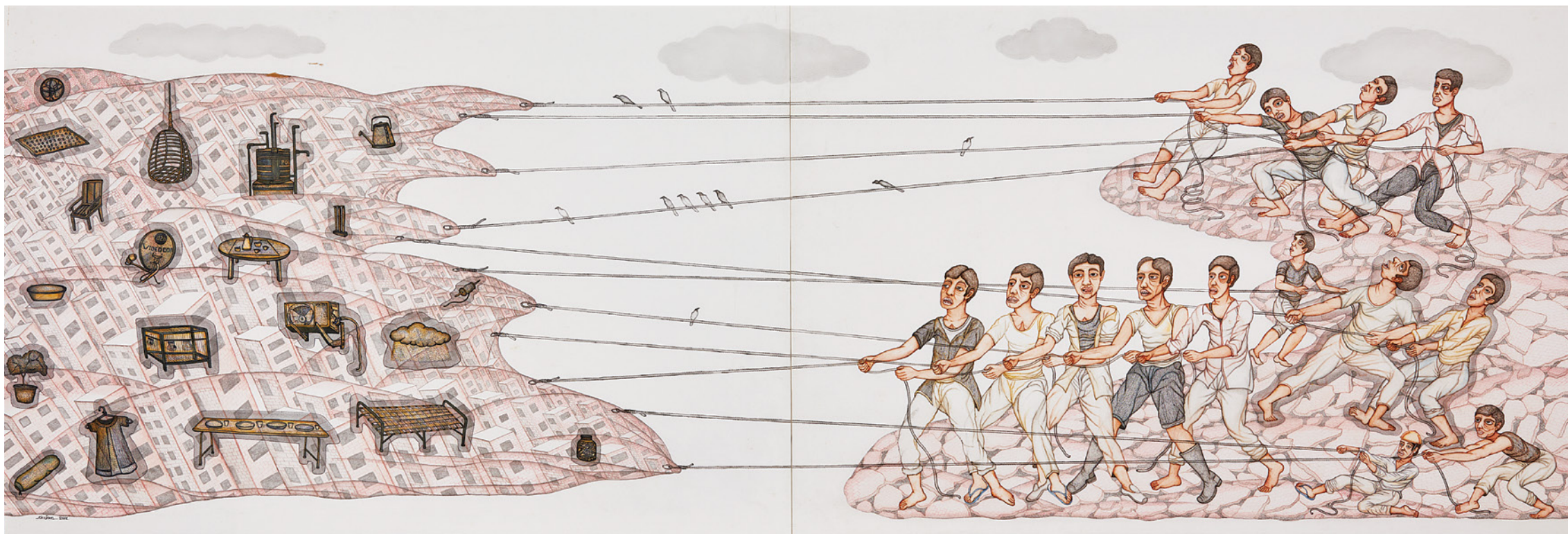
Modak is interested in depicting an experience beyond its material condition, showing it as a psychological condition and interpreting it in his works through allegories or satires. As an artist, he intends to capture and narrate the intangible, psychological experience of hardship and labour to infiltrate minds and expose them to this side of reality and human experience. ■





*The Ephemeral Shelter*  
 Watercolour and graphite on  
 acid free paper  
 29.50 x 21.80 inches  
 2020





*Canopy Over the Geography*  
 Watercolour, ink, graphite on acid free paper  
 29.50 x 86.50 inches  
 2016





*The Bed of Nightmare*  
 Watercolour and graphite on paper  
 48 X 60 inches  
 2019



*The Bed of Nightmare*  
 Detail





*Uncertain Journey*  
Watercolour and graphite on acid-free paper  
29.50 x 43 inches  
2016



*Untitled*  
Watercolour and graphite on acid-free paper  
9 x 12 inches  
2015





*See You on the Way I*  
 Acrylic, watercolour, archival ink, charcoal, and gouache on  
 Nepali paper pasted on plywood  
 40.8 x 29.2 inches  
 2023



*See You on the Way II*  
 Acrylic, watercolour, archival ink, charcoal, and gouache on  
 Nepali paper pasted on plywood  
 42 x 28.3 inches  
 2023

‘When my parents moved to Delhi from Kolkata I was a child. They worked as construction labourers. It was not the most ideal way to make a living but they worked hard to rise above their circumstances. They had street theatre and poetry sessions every evening. They created awareness about the trials of informal labour. Their friends would come to our house in the evening to practice songs of workers’ rights and that is how I learnt of the problems they faced in their homes.’

Anjan Modak

*Anjan Modak paints the psychological cosmos of migrant workers, article by Sneha Bhura in The Week, 25.08.2020*



*The Piece of Wounded Land*  
Watercolour, lead and graphite on acid-free paper  
48 x 60 inches  
2016





*The Eye Catcher*  
Watercolour and graphite on acid-free paper  
43.20 x 29.50 inches  
2018



*The Compressed Life*  
Watercolour and graphite on paper  
43.30 x 29.52 inches  
2020



*Daily Observation II*  
Archival ink on Nepali handmade paper stretched  
on wooden tambour frame  
8.5 inches (diameter of each)  
Suite of 16 works  
2023



*Daily Observation II*  
Detail



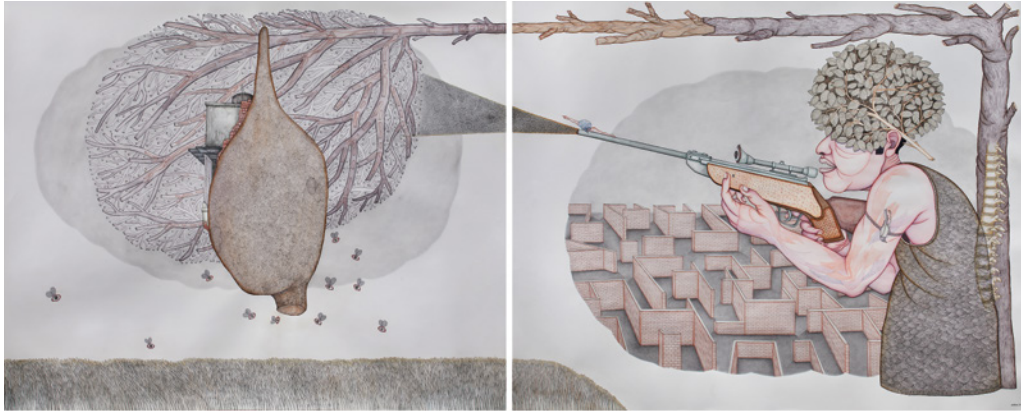


*A Wet Morning in Delhi*  
Archival ink and watercolour pencil on Nepali paper  
9.8 x 7.5 inches each  
Suite of 9 works  
2023



*A Wet Morning in Delhi*  
Detail





*Lakshya Veda*  
 Watercolour and graphite on paper  
 47.8 x 59.8 inches overall  
 Diptych  
 2021

Exhibition view, *Between the Self and Silhouettes*, 2022,  
 Emami Art, Kolkata.





‘The life of the working-class, their toils and struggles behind the making of the metropolis, the despair in their life, conflicts, love, and struggle for existence. How they face the reality. How socio-political structures shape their cultural relationships. These areas make me think and variously appear in my work.’



*Fragmented Life - 6*  
Water colour, graphite and archival ink on acid free paper  
14 inches (diameter)  
2020



Fragmented Life - 7  
Water colour, graphite and archival  
ink on acid free paper  
14 inches (diameter)  
2020



Fragmented Life - 9  
Water colour, graphite and  
archival ink on acid free paper  
14 inches (diameter)  
2020





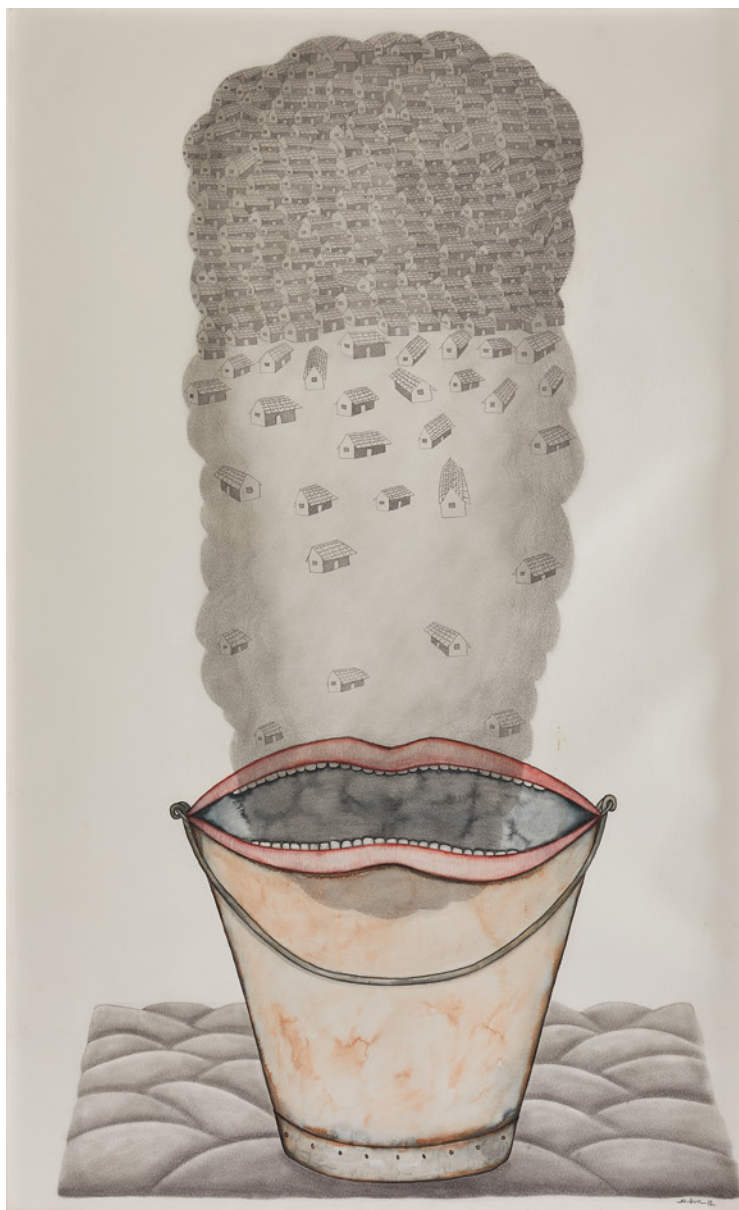
*Untitled*  
Archival ink on paper  
8.2 x 5.9 inches  
2021

Modak's work consistently explores the concept of a cluttered existence. Rather than inducing feelings of claustrophobia typically associated with confined spaces, the fatigued labourers, accustomed to cramped surroundings, find repose with their limbs entwined. The mosquito net emerges as a scarce luxury, not only to ward off mosquitoes but also to hold their fragile existence intact.



*Uncertain Journey - 2*  
Water colour, graphite on acid free paper  
16 x 11 inches  
2020





*Life in Slum*  
Watercolour and graphite on acid-free paper  
43 x 81 inches  
2015

The humble bucket, kerosene lamp, and mud stove assume profound significance in a labourer's dwelling. These elemental tools, capable of emitting distinct plumes of smoke, intertwine to mirror the subaltern experience's interconnected facets. Their shared presence symbolises resilience, embodying the challenges and endurance woven into the fabric of everyday life for those working at the centres yet living on the fringes.

Modak often depicts his thoughts in a highly metaphorical visual language, expressing dreams, despairs, and struggles. His paintings show his mastery of drawing, minimal use of colours, and dense linear texture, which give them deep, sensual feelings. His language blends realism with absurdity, the plain statement with irony and satire.

*Tiger Without Ring Master I*  
Detail

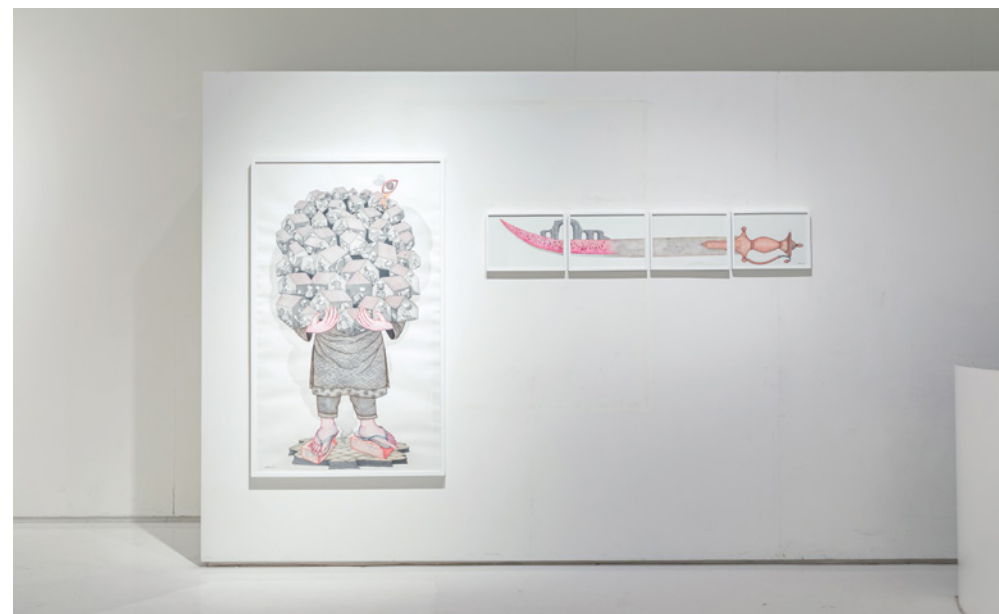


*Tiger Without Ring Master I*  
Watercolour on paper  
11.81 x 87.40 inches overall  
2021





*Exile in the City*  
Watercolour and  
graphite on paper  
60 x 36 inches  
2020



Exhibition view, *Between the Self and Silhouettes*, 2022,  
Emami Art, Kolkata.





*Daily Observation I & II*  
 Archival ink on paper  
 3.7 x 2.5 inches  
 2021



*Untitled*  
 Archival ink on paper  
 8.2 x 4.9 inches  
 2019



‘The indication of a socio-hierarchical order remains contained not only in projection of the aspirations of the protagonists, but also in a sense of scepticism intrinsic to their being. Anjan deals with the anonymity of the crowd, even when projecting the self within the frame.’



Adip Dutta  
Artist & Curator  
(*Between the Self and Silhouettes* catalogue,  
Emami Art)



*The Song of Burning Bones*  
Watercolour, ink and graphite on acid-free paper  
29.50 x 21.50 inches  
2021



Born in 1982 in West Bengal, India, **Anjan Modak** is a contemporary artist based in Kolkata. He graduated with a B.V.A. and an M.F.A. in Painting from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, in 2007 and 2009, respectively.

Modak has had two solo shows: 'Fragmented Life' at Emami Art, Kolkata in 2020 and 'Black, White and More' in 2016. His recent duo 'Between the Self and Silhouettes' was curated by artist Adip Dutta at Emami Art in 2022. 'The Common Man,' a solo project was shown by Emami Art at the India Art Fair, New Delhi in 2020.

Some of his important group exhibitions include 'Constellation', Emami Art, Kolkata 2021; 'Paint Our World', organised by Agapi 2 at ITC Sonar, Kolkata, 2018; Ahuja Art Museum, Kolkata, 2017; CIMA Awards Show, CIMA Gallery, Kolkata, 2017 and 2019; 'Fictive', Gallery Range, Kolkata, 2016; 'Assortment', Emami Chisel Art Gallery, 2015; Abanindranath Tagore Gallery, ICCR, Kolkata, 2014; 'Shublab', Gallery Matrix, Kolkata, 2014; Annual Exhibition of Rajya Charukala Parshad, Kolkata, 2014 to 2017; The 86th Annual All India Art Exhibition, New Delhi, 2013; Weavers Studio Centre for the Arts in association with Sensorium, Kolkata, 2013; Annual Exhibition of Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata, 2013 to 2016; Time & Space Gallery, Bangalore, 2011.

Modak has been shown by Emami Art in several important art fairs such as Art Mumbai 2023, India Art Fair, Delhi in 2020 and 2022; Mumbai Art Fair and Jaipur Art Fair in 2016; 'India Art Story' Kolkata in 2015 to 2017.

He was awarded the Rabindra Bharati University Present Creative Award in 2009, and his works are part of major private collections in India and abroad. He has been selected for the 2024 Alex Brown Foundation Residency Program in Des Moines, U.S.

Anjan Modak lives and works in Kolkata.



Emami Art is a leading Indian contemporary art gallery and a platform for cultural production. Established in 2017 in Kolkata, Emami Art represents emerging, mid-career and established artists and organises a dynamic programme of exhibitions and public seminars. Since its inception, the gallery has curated and hosted intimate and large-scale exhibitions and regularly participates in national and international art fairs and conferences.

With a focus on a future-forward, complex, multi-dimensional approach that echoes South Asian history, the programme explores socio-cultural and geo-political narratives in relation to visual art practices today. As part of its knowledge-sharing and archiving activities, Emami Art regularly hosts talks, seminars, panel discussions and conversations between artists, curators and audiences to create a safe space for critical engagement.

Deeply committed to promoting a regional, national and international agenda through innovative and alternative programming, the gallery places emphasis on knowledge production and socially conscious themes. Emami Art aspires to be a catalyst of change, research, innovation and inclusivity and welcomes all sections of society.

## EMAMI ART

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