



Majumdar with his work

CHITTROVANU MAJUMDAR

A Painter Possessed

Troubled times reflected in images of despair

THE worst of imaginable horrors shriek silently from the huge canvases. Gashes for mouths, phantom-like hands frozen in gestures of helplessness, dribbling red paint, omnipresent bits of rope that suggest nooses, falling embryos and those intense blacks which float out of some faraway unconscious. Yet these images of violence and despair are sensual—even erotic in some canvases.

Certainly Chittrovanu Majumdar, 37, and one of the most vibrant and original painters in the country today, is reflecting our troubled times in the exhibition of his recent works which opens at the Rabindra Bhavan in New Delhi next fortnight.

Ayodhya is not the subject of Majumdar's work. Just a trigger which made his work more violent, his gestures in paint more charged, his colours more grim. But the event and its aftermath "scarred" him deeply, as they did many other artists. But while most of them hardly got beyond sloganeering, the Calcutta-based painter has not been content to merely

play back or mirror contemporary reality. Majumdar has internalised the world around him to the extent that his works have a universality. The feelings his images evoke are detachable from specific events, or even times.

It's no surprise then that part of this mammoth exhibition of 140 works, which has been organised by The Seagull Foundation of the Arts, will end up in Paris. It was only supposed to travel to Delhi, Bombay and Madras. But when Raphael Doueb of the Parisian gallery, Le Monde de l'Art, accidentally saw his works—he had come to India because the Paris-based painter, S.H. Raza, is curating a group show for him with stalwarts like K.G. Subramanyam, Tyeb Mehta and Jogen Choudhary—he decided to have a solo exhibition for Majumdar in January. Doueb has also booked him for two more exhibitions and bought several of his works.

For Majumdar, it will be a bit like going home. The rather shy and lanky painter with a cherubic mop over his expressive face has a French mother. His father, the well-known painter,

Nirode Majumdar, studied in Paris. Painter Paritosh Sen considers Majumdar one of the brightest stars on the art scene: "Art in India in the last 15 years had reached a plateau. But here comes a fresh talent."

Like a man possessed, Majumdar has been painting furiously for the past few years. And not just canvases. He has painted on 19th century wood cuts, bromides of Kali paintings, printed fabric, wood, doors. "I don't like flat surfaces...It gives you a wider range of play, like a football ground." And it has worked like alchemy: the combination of the traditionally iconic and his near-expressionist style have produced something unique. The East and West are not merely juxtaposed, but fused, altered states, reflecting his sensibilities that have been shaped by two different cultures.

Majumdar does not title his works. Each canvas is meant to be a personal journey for the viewer. "The viewer plays an important part in this. I don't want to quantify with a name." As for his own journey, Majumdar paints as if there is no tomorrow: if he's stuck on one canvas, he just moves on to others until the inspiration returns. At times, he's worked on five or six simultaneously. The reason he doesn't stop: "Painting saves me. It is an outlet. Otherwise I would go raving mad."

—MADHU JAIN in Calcutta