

# Painter of darkness

Ganesh Pyne, who rendered dark, brooding, soulful and unsettling images, came to be known as an artist's artist, remembers

**GIRIDHAR KHASNIS**

Ganesh Pyne passed away on March 12, 2013 at a Kolkata hospital where he was admitted following a heart attack. The death of the 76-year-old Bengali master who persistently explored themes of death, alienation, pain and fear triggered an outpouring of grief in his hometown and outside.

Hailing him as one of the most influential artists of his generation, *The BBC News* recalled that Pyne was called the 'painter of darkness' for his dark and brooding imagery. Writing for *The Guardian*, Shahnaz Habib remembered how the enigmatic artist's early years had grounded his art in dark, unsettling images, drawn from mythology and dreams. "In painting after painting by Pyne, skulls, skeletons, piercing arrows and phantasms indicate a vision of the world that was, above all, tragic. Primary colours are rare in Pyne's universe. Instead, there are amber browns and ashy blues. Instead of precise blocks of colour, there are overlapping layers. Bodies often seem lit from within, as if they are burning from inside outwards."

As much for his intense and evocative art, Pyne was also known for his shyness, painfully modest ways and a perennial reluctance to come to limelight. "Life has acquired a feverish pace," he once reflected. "I am a recluse by nature and can never be a part of the rat race... I prefer the lonely road. I shy away from the crowds. I like to be by myself."

That did not prevent the ascetic artist's work from attracting widespread attention and critical acclaim. His name became well ensconced amongst leading painters of Bengal School, and his paintings were exhibited in major group shows and art events. He represented India at the Paris Biennale and Festival Internationale de la peinture, France. Among his collectors was Yehudi Menuhin, the legendary violinist who reportedly said that the Bengali artist's work helped him see the real India. Curiously, Pyne's first solo exhibition came to be organised only after he had turned 50; the much-awaited event was a major success and a total sellout.

## Early influences

Pyne's earliest influences supposedly came from listening to his grandmother's tales of fantasy, and reading literary magazines. He claimed to have come face to face with high art for the first time when his young eyes chanced upon a printed drawing by Abanindranath Tagore in a magazine. Doodling on a black slate became a magical experience for the young lad. "On its black surface appeared shapes and forms which would otherwise have remained as unseen mental images. This invisible world sometimes revealed weird manifestations." He would also make paper boats with cloth sails and inks



**DARK ARTS** 'The Puppet' by Ganesh Pyne.

smear decks, leave them floating in a bucket of water before setting them on fire. "The boats burning to ashes exuded a strange beauty. These pastimes grew into a playhouse where imagination and reality co-existed."

From a chalk-on-slate doodler to an internationally acclaimed artist, Pyne was a long and remarkable journey in the world of art. Scaling many peaks of creativity in a career that spanned more than five decades, he developed a unique style of painting and created an exceptional body of work. His images — be they portraits, landscapes or still lifes — bore the mark of meticulous draughtsmanship and delicate handling of pigment. His primary medium was tempera, which he ingeniously and painstakingly employed to create a host of multi-layered and textured images.

## Crest and trough

Pyne was not a prolific artist. He worked laboriously and produced less than a dozen paintings a year. He drew inspiration from historical events, religious texts and folktales. Apart from the works of Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Paul Klee, Rembrandt van Rijn and Frans Hals, he also drew nourishment from cinema, particularly those of Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky. He looked at nature philosophically. "Nature is so beautiful, it makes you feel sad," he would say. "It also makes you feel elevated simultaneously. This is not a contradiction. It's like the crest and trough of a wave."

The violent riots in Calcutta that he witnessed in the summer of 1946 left a deep and indelible impression on him; among the enduring images that stuck in his mind was the load of dead bodies carted openly in a street. Shaken and embittered, he painted dark scenes and gloomy scapes with eerie skeletal figures, masked creatures and inquisitive puppets — all seemingly in a condition of decay, disease, despair or death. "True darkness gives one a feeling of insecurity bordering on fear, but it also has its own charms, mystery, profundity, and a fairytale atmosphere."

Pyne's ability to create a private realm



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of time and space, and an internal universe made him stand out amongst his peers. Santiniketan scholar and historian R Siva Kumar saw Pyne "as the only significant artist of his generation who side-stepped the progressives of the forties, reconnected with the Bengal School and managed to benefit from that contact, forging a personal modernist idiom rather than slipping into non-productive traditionalism."

Critic Ella Datta believed that the artist's work came out of an intense and unique involvement with his art itself. "His life, his world, indeed his whole being is focused on this act of creation. He is most at home with his own inner world of darkness and light from which emerges the strange forms. The canvases are a reflection of this all-absorbing interior life. Here a rag doll or a toy horse has a life of its own and in combination with human figures convey with poignance the vulnerability and resurgence of the human spirit."

## For the love of art

On his part, Pyne would recall that artists of his generation painted for the love of art. "I feel one should have an unwavering affair with one's creativity. Otherwise, you are swept away by the tide. True, I am saying this in retrospect. But I have always resisted defeat in life."

Pyne's paintings that were in relatively small format were eagerly collected and made headlines in auctions. In May 2006, his painting titled *Wings* (16 3/8 x 19 3/8 inch / tempera on canvas / 1980) was estimated at \$30,000 - \$50,000, but sold for \$204,000 at Christie's auction in Dubai. In September 2011, one of his paintings (*Bir Bahadur* / 22 x 20 inch / 1989) doubled its estimate and sold for \$134,500 in New York. Last December, his untitled work (21 1/4 x 23 1/4 inch / tempera on canvas / 1979) came with an estimate of Rs 25 lakh but was lapped up for a whopping Rs 230 lakh at Christie's auction in Mumbai.

Notwithstanding all the pride, glory and extraordinary achievements, Pyne will be essentially remembered as a reclusive artist, a soft-spoken person and a very dis-inclined player at the art market.