

ART

Just before fragments of 'In Bloom' were to be carefully packed for its upcoming rendezvous at Kolkata Centre for Creativity, we met Shipra Bhattacharya and soaked in the varied aromas at her green-rich abode, Bagan, in New Town. Spread across a vast stretch of green, planned and aesthetically designed by Bhattacharya, the Bagan is her biggest canvas. While she tends to it, it offers her solace, solitude and inspiration in return. It also smooths her dialogue with her canvases, which creates layered narratives.

Under the overcast sky, her studio revealed stories of introspection, reflection, observation and fresh perspectives. Our chat, as we took a walkthrough of her idyllic abode, started on two points — the first leg of the exhibition that happened in Delhi last year, and *People*, the artwork created during lockdown, that lured us to know more about it.

Curated by her daughter Jonaki Bhattacharya, the Delhi exhibition kicked off the 50-year celebration of the Bengal-born artist whose repertoire is marked by bold figures, especially female forms. Though her daughter has deviated from the fine art ecosystem that thrives in Bhattacharya's family, her production skills have added a new dimension to the curation. Appreciating Jonaki's vision, Bhattacharya said, "Though she is not into painting like my husband and me, she totally understands my art and its language. And I was pretty surprised when she curated the Delhi show. Her placements of the artwork wove a very interesting narrative with my artworks."

WHAT'S UP WITH CALCUTTA'S ART SCENE?

We had to ask why Delhi first, and not Calcutta, her city? And if Bengal, which was known to be the epicentre of art movements, has lost its sheen? The alumni of Government College of Art and Craft and College of Visual Arts in Calcutta University, who has been exhibiting since the early 1980s, points to the growing number of art galleries in Delhi and also art connoisseurs, in comparison to Calcutta. "The interest among the people here is decreasing. Delhi has a lot of galleries. Plus, there is a commercial aspect. People are more aware of the artists and their work in Delhi than in Calcutta. I think in Bengal, art has become very niche, plus the very learned and educated people lean more towards academics and literature," reasoned Bhattacharya, who also plans to take 'In Bloom' to Chennai after Calcutta.

Organised in collaboration with Gallery Sanskriti, and scheduled to begin on July 14, the Calcutta exhibition at KCC is curated by Ambica Beri and Richa Agarwal. In Bloom: A Journey through Five Decades of Shipra Bhattacharya celebrates her five-decade-long journey and traces her layered oeuvre from her early days to her



BLOOMING TALE

Ahead of her exhibition, In Bloom, artist Shipra Bhattacharya reflects on her 50-year journey



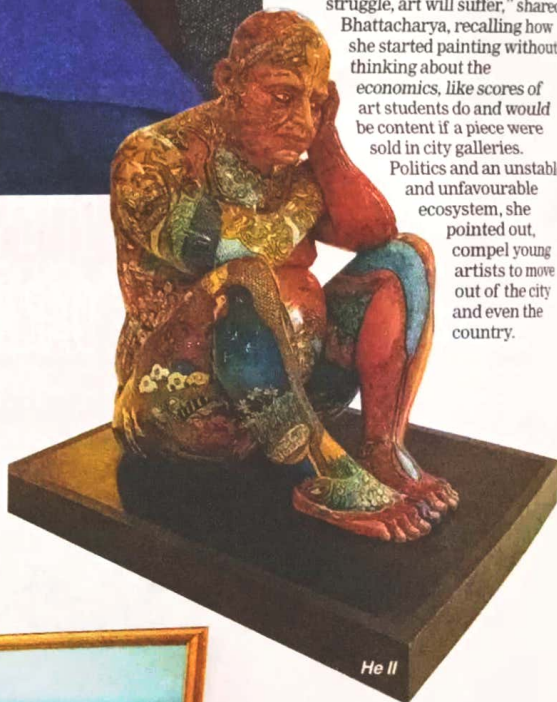
Shipra Bhattacharya poses with *He* (2023)

I NEVER STARTED PAINTING WITH ANY GOAL IN MIND. I LOVED PAINTING, AND THE PEOPLE AROUND ME WOULD BECOME MY INSPIRATION. I LIVED IN NORTH CALCUTTA, WHERE THE POPULATION WAS DENSE. IT WAS ALSO A TIME WHEN THERE WAS SO MUCH HAPPENING IN THE SOCIETY

more recent evocative works.

Continuing to reflect on the question, the sexagenarian emphasised *arthaniti* as the most important factor. "*Arthaniti*'s upon *shobkichhu nirbhor kore* (everything depends on economics). In a country where the economy is very good, everything flourishes, whether it is art or literature. But in a country where the economy is very bad, where opportunities are few and where pursuing art as a profession is a struggle, art will suffer," shared Bhattacharya, recalling how she started painting without thinking about the economics, like scores of art students do and would be content if a piece were sold in city galleries.

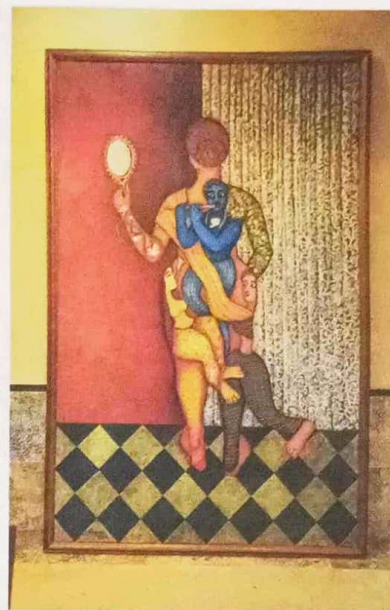
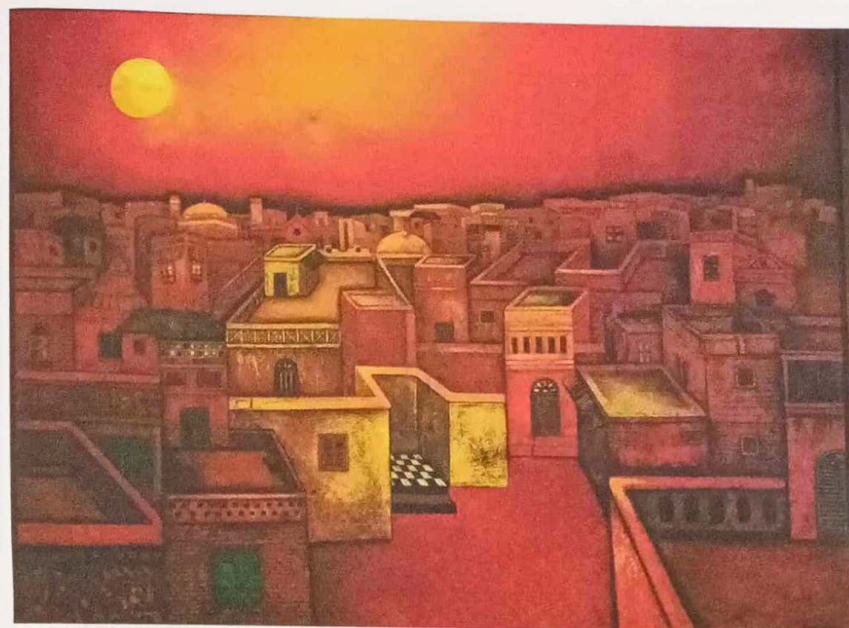
Politics and an unstable and unfavourable ecosystem, she pointed out, compel young artists to move out of the city and even the country.



He II

IN FULL BLOOM

From a reality that disappoints artists in Bengal, we moved on to her artwork *He*, which in some way would resonate with the population. While Bhattacharya explained *He* chronicles a middle-aged man, having lived a life, looking towards an imaginary island across the sea, for hope of a better life, we think it resonates with everyone, irrespective of age and experience. It connects with everyone who is looking for a better life, a brighter future. It introduced us to the dominant visual language of the artist — intense, heavily detailed, dense architecture — maximalist to the core. It also brought to the conversation the



SHAPING THE SCULPTURE

Bhattacharya has been sculpting since 2000, although they were not very significant in size. Now, her sculptures are over five feet tall. Talking about the new dimension that the sculptures bring to her oeuvre and to her body of work, she said, "Unlike canvases, which are flat, sculptures have a dimension to them. The sculpture gives a different feeling as I involve my entire hands shaping the structure. I enjoy it," shared Bhattacharya, informing that she doesn't like switching from one medium to the other quickly. She likes finishing a project before embarking on a new one.

FOCUS & HARD WORK

Having lived through six decades and expressed her thoughts for the last five decades, Bhattacharya has not just witnessed regime shifts at the political level but also cultural change as well. She acknowledges the dominance of the digital world in the field of art as well but urges the new and upcoming artists to keep their curiosity alive, which will only take them to the path of exploration. Apart from that, she strongly advocates for being focused in life and supplementing it with hard work.

— Farah Khatoon
Pictures: Koushik Saha

She (2023)

human body that acts as an additional canvas within her frame.

We met *He* again, in the main hall, out of the frame and in the form of a fibreglass sculpture. *He II*, seated in the same squatting posture, with no smile, had a different and more urgent issue to talk about. The five-and-a-half-foot structure's body spoke of the RG Kar rape incident that had shaken Bengal. *He II* also underscored the socially and politically active canvas of Bhattacharya, who had also painted in the lines of the Nandigram incident.

HITTING HALF CENTURY

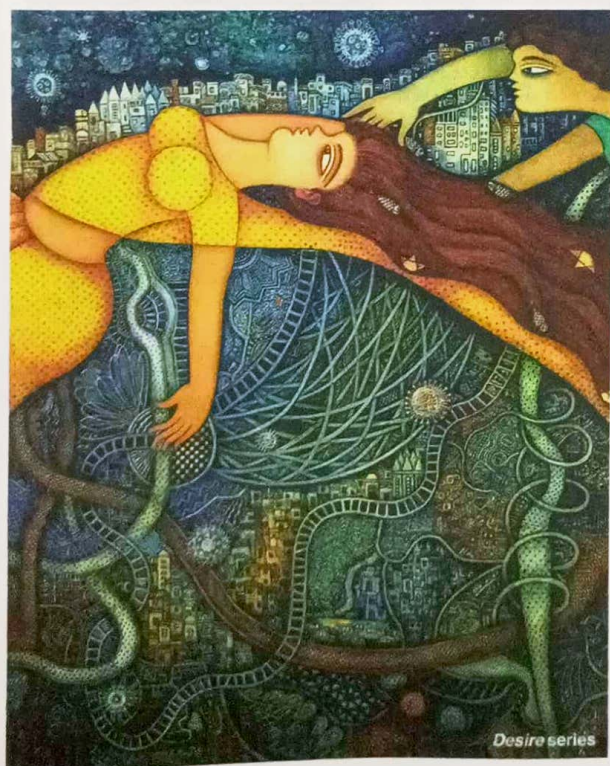
In Bloom will showcase her work from 1979 to recent ones.

Reflecting on her journey, Bhattacharya, who has held 12 solo exhibitions in India and abroad and has participated in 58 group shows and several art workshops, said, "I never started painting with any goal in mind. I loved painting, and the people around me would become my inspiration. I lived in North Calcutta, where the population was dense. It was also a time when there was so much happening in the society." It is the streets of North Calcutta and women in the old Calcutta houses that inspired her popular *Desire* series. It brought the female form into focus, which remains dominant in Bhattacharya's frames.

At Bagan, we also met a few of Bhattacharya's women —

sensual, pretty, unapologetic, full of dreams and desires. Speaking of her women who are not limited by any boundary and who hold within them multiple stories, Bhattacharya pointed at *She*. The acrylic and oil canvas, over five feet in height, features a woman holding a hand mirror, and having a silhouette of

Krishna and two other female figures on her back. Bhattacharya's women are not one-dimensional; they hold stories, memories and hope for a new world. "*She* is like a female Krishna. *She* is thinking like Krishna. There is a thought inside her," explained the nature lover.



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