

IT'S A GREAT HONOUR TO BE CHOSEN AS CURATOR FOR BENGAL BEYOND BOUNDARIES: UMA NAIR

In this interview, the noted art critic and curator Uma Nair talks about the vision behind the exhibition and how it got conceived, changing the art scene in a post-pandemic world, and her upcoming shows.



MURTAZA ALI

An exhibition showcasing the great masters of Bengal from the past and present titled 'Bengal Beyond Boundaries,' is currently being held at Bikaner House. The exhibition is on display till July 16, 2023. Curated by Uma Nair and conceptualized by Jogen Chowdhury, the show features works by renowned artists such as Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath, Abanindranath, Jamini Roy, Nandalal, Sailoz Mukherjee, Benodebehari Mukherjee, Ganesh Pyne, Ganesh Haloi, and Jogen Chowdhury. The exhibition, curated by Uma Nair and conceptualized by Jogen Chowdhury, aims to explore the evolution of Indian art through a diverse collection of artworks.

Excerpts

Q1. Tell us about the vision behind



Uma Nair

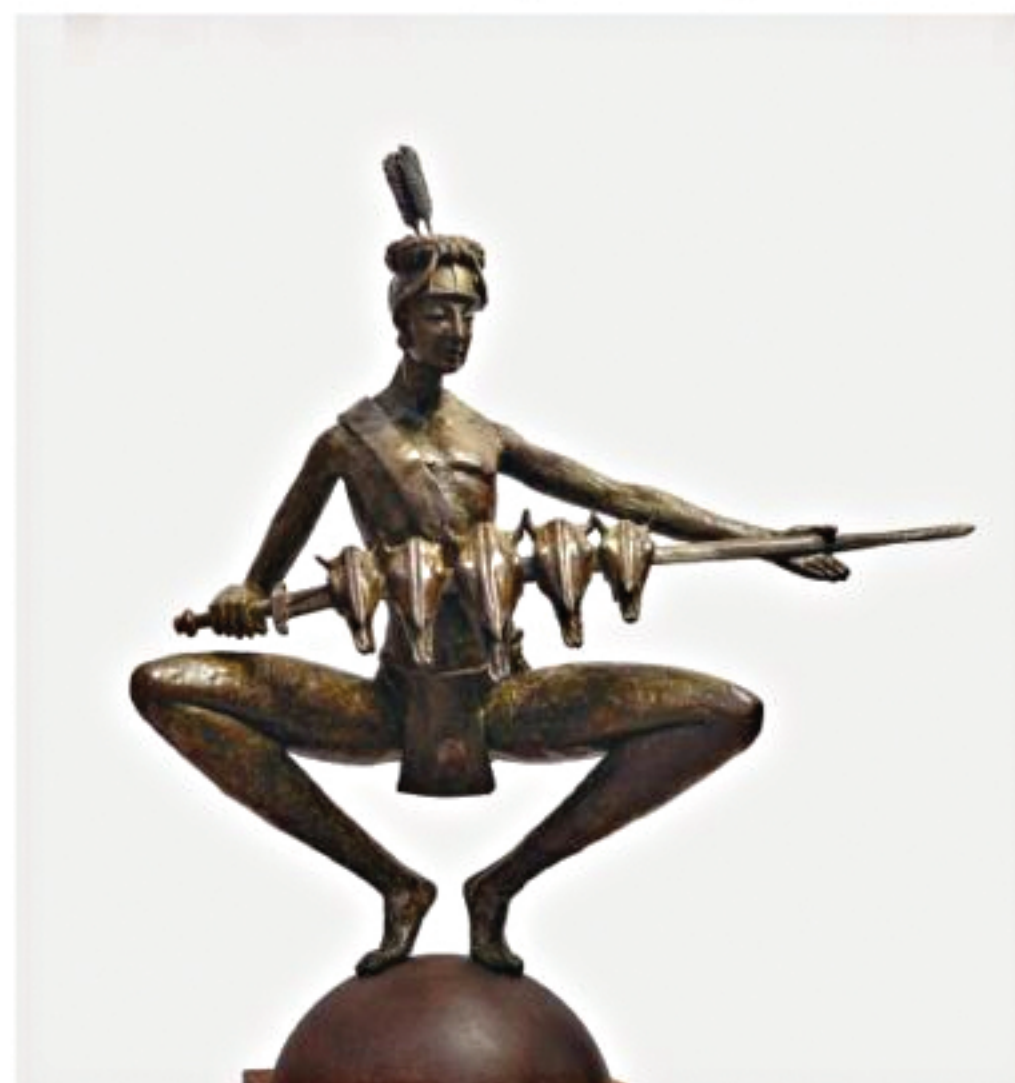
Bengal Beyond Boundaries. How was it conceived?

A. 'Bengal Beyond Boundaries' was actually conceived by collector, connoisseur and publisher Vikram Bachhawat of Aakriti Art Gallery, Kolkata along with the Bengal Master Jogen Chowdhury as advisor. They wanted a show that would span the journey from early Bengal to contemporary reality of today. According to Vikram, Bengal has many masters whom no one knows about. This exhibition

corrects that missing link and adds to the beauty of historical framework and marks the triumph of modernity from tradition.

Q2. What can we expect from the exhibition?

A. At the Bikaner House each room will be different—almost like a mini exhibition. When you walk through the collection, you will cross great spans of time in Indian art history, both artistically as well as historically. But, nevertheless, the challenge



Naga Dance Bronze

for us is how to establish continuity amid the differences. The sculptures and the drawings and the printmaking all add their own charisma of compositional clarity and explorations in mediums. Thus, the exhibition will create a mapping that looks like individual pearls on a string. It's a journey of different perspectives, of experiences, of personal and private histories that come together to create the great canvas of 'Bengal Beyond boundaries.'

Q3. How does the concept by Jogen Chowdhury correspond with your curatorial work?

A. Jogen Chowdhury wanted certain important names in the Bengal circuit of academic intellectual vision to be in the show and as a curator I found it deeply satisfying to go along and learn about great Bengal practices. Chowdhury has a deep understanding of the importance of the Bengal School and has written a special foreword in the book. Along with the entire exhibition, there

is also a supplementary brochure of Curator's Picks. This is indeed a great honour for a curator like me who has been reviewing art for 33 years.

Q4. Why specifically you chose Bikaner House for this exhibition?

A. I requested Piyali Dasgupta and the team from Bikaner House for the exhibition because it has become Delhi's premier space for important exhibitions. I had curated the Sculpture Park this February for Bikaner House, which was the brainchild of Shubhra Singh, the Chief Resident Commissioner.

It was an experience of great depth and sanctity to have a gigantic Garuda and Zen Forest by Satish Gupta, bronzes from Kolkata by Tapas Biswas and Akhil Chandra Das who are also part of this Bengal show. I feel footfall is as important as audience participation and appreciation. I also found Bikaner House was the perfect place for a mammoth retrospective of Muzaffar Ali for which we had more than 500 visitors a day; and this Bengal show is a museum quality collection because Vikram Bachhawat is a seasoned gallerist with a large clientele of elite collectors.

Q5. Also tell us about the panel discussion which is happening as part of the exhibition.

A. We have a series of speakers who speak about the different periods. It will be moderated by Chhatrapati Dutta, a brilliant artist and the principal of Govt College of Arts Kolkata that's an important educational institution in which the great Bikash Bhattacharjee taught.

Q6. How do you look at the post pandemic situation in the art world?

A. The art world has sprung back into action. As long as there is great art there will always be art lovers to see appreciate and buy. The pandemic gave artists 3 years of time to create in their own studios, bedrooms, living rooms, streets, anywhere they wanted to do so. Recently, I wrote a short essay for Grosvenor Gallery in London and Saffronart; they showcased Shibu Natesan's show of India and London landscapes. Natesan had done these landscapes while in London and in India, stellar and stirring landscapes that drew us into their beauty of the connectedness of man and nature. As a critic who writes every day, I am constantly searching for great masters to write about. I

coined the phrase 'Bengal Beyond Boundaries' in keeping with India's first international modernist Rabindranath Tagore who painted after he was well into his 60s. I used the word boundaries to state the importance of the Bengal art infrastructure and art and culture as one that made its name because of its global attention and its cultural ethos. Ultimately, Bengal is the oyster of Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore. It's a great honour for me to be chosen as curator for this show. As a curator my work with retrospectives of Gopal Ghose (2015), Jamini Roy (2016) and Prodosh Das Gupta (2020) has taught me a great deal about Bengal as a sensibility.

Q7. What's next on your itinerary?

A. A solo show of Arpitha Reddy at Bikaner House in October and a solo show of a sculptor who did her Masters from Shantiniketan and who lives in Kerala and never had a solo. Her name is Haseena Suresh.

I am going to unveil her sculptural heads and brilliant drawings at IIC when I am given the dates. After that will be a 'Tale of Two Cities' by photographer Manoj Arora next year at Bikaner House.