Ben Uri
Collection

‘Bengal: Cloud’

Gerry Judah

Wood, copper, brass, resin, wax, acrylic gesso.
120 cm x 75cm x 60 cm

Acquired March 2025 for the Ben Uri Collection

‘Bengal: Cloud’ by Gerry Judah

(www.judah.co.uk)

Essay by critic Jay Merrick, February 2020

A tiny, perfectly made metal rickshaw supports a billowing, cloud-like structure; another holds aloft a branching, spired form. Is it meant to suggest a burnt-out cathedral? No, it’s the skeleton of a coal-fired power station. Another micro-rickshaw carries an unevenly bulging, asymmetrically latticed shape that represents a rock. And the asymmetrical spiral? A portal of some kind – a Blakean door of perception?

These forms are among more than 20 pieces, and 40-odd sketches and paintings which presents most of Gerry Judah’s Bengal series of artworks. The effects of the artworks are unusual: they oscillate between seeming starkly confrontational, faintly surreal, or fugitive; and they have a subtly unsettling character akin to, say, the tripod object in Joseph Beuys’ Boothia Felix installation – something initially recognisable fraying into something unknowable and loaded in some way.

The works originate in Judah’s five Bengal artworks commissioned for the Arts Council and Christian Aid’s polemical Tipping Point show at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 2013; tipping point, as in the sharply conflicting forces of climate change and the increasing need for energy in India, where more than a third of its population of 1.3 billion people live in dire poverty.

To produce the original pieces, Judah returned to Kolkata after a 50-year gap and found the experience both riveting and traumatic. In some ways, time seemed to have stopped: “It felt exactly the same – the light, the smells. Even the paint in the bedroom of my now derelict home was the same.” He also visited villages populated by Dalits – the so-called Hindu untouchables – and the massive Kolaghat power station, next to which lived communities of the very poor who worked there but used dried cow-pats for their cooking fires.

The Bengal pieces express these concerns and memories, but never literally. The rickshaws that form the bases of the pieces carry relatively gigantic burdens signifying environmental and human destruction. But they are not one-liners; their unusual forms, and fine detail, transform faintly familiar objects into metaphors for both physical and spiritual realities. The physical realities include the blunt fact that pollution in Kolkata has made it the lung cancer capital of India, where 70 percent of inhabitants suffer from respiratory disease.

A crucial creative genome was his kaleidoscopic experience of the physical and artistic rituals that take place during religious festivals in Bengal and the neighbouring state of Odisha. For Judah, the most profoundly memorable of these were the Rathayatra chariot festivals, which relate to the worship of Hindu deities such as Jagannath; and, on an even more overwhelmingly dramatic scale, the Durga Puja celebrations, which generate tens of thousands of intricate, structurally precarious pandal pavilions containing arrays of god-figures sculpted with clay.

"Pandals are just amazing," he explains. "These edifices of clay – clay which goes back into the Ganges, where it came from. The pandals have bamboo structures, and that was the genesis of my idea." But so, too, was the clay – soft, unformed, and then formed and baked into the semblance of something, and then broken up again.

The two immediately perceived physical qualities of the Bengal pieces are their complex formal structures and, in each, their hundreds of remarkably fine, hand-wound joints and connections with materials including copper wire, strips of very thin plywood, and bamboo. Each piece takes several weeks to make; some, such as the power station, took months.

The Bengal artworks are the end-products of an artistic process which begins with scores of rough, very rapid sketches. But the sketching never concludes with a precisely delineated representation, let alone a printout or a CGI, of the piece to be made. Judah's artistic sensibility has something of the high-wire act about it: having absorbed dozens of sketched forms in his mind, he proceeds straight to the manual making of the artwork, in an act of reimagined exploration which he describes as three-dimensional freehand drawing.

This process dates back to Judah's early, post-art college work as a set - and object - maker for manynoted photographers, and equally acclaimed theatre, film, opera, and pop video directors and designers. The process still generates virtually all of his most compelling artworks, most notably his First World War memorial in the nave of St Paul's Cathedral – a pair of giant cruciforms encrusted with representations of war-shattered fragments of Middle Eastern towns made of cardboard and coated with an amalgam of hand-mixed acrylic gesso.

There are two more critically important ingredients to the Bengal 'drawings' – their temporal quality and sense of movement. The tiny rickshaws obviously imply movement in a direct way; and the passage of time, and the helter-skelter of life in Kolkata, are implicit in the time-consuming crafting of the Bengalstructures, which might be described as beautifully finessed lash-ups.

One piece in particular provides a final insight into these engrossing artworks: a head crowned with a skeletal homage to the lingam tower of the 11th century Lingaraja temple at Odisha. Thus, like the pandals of the Durga Puja festivals, Gerry Judah's Bengalartworks are ultimately quasi-mystical shrines which radiate a compelling sense of obdurate and creative survival in the face of environmental degradation.

Their remarkable potency comes from the way they have captured and distilled much greater scales of emotion, history, and geophysical change into artworks that are, ultimately, poetic. Judah clearly retains some essence of his birthplace, Calcutta, which Dr Surajit Sinha described as "a city of furious creative energy".

At some point, the Bengal series is likely to reappear in differently expressed, more monumental forms which will be important contributions to the critical role that art can play as our lives move from 12,000 years of the climate-stable Holocene period into our rampantly productive and consumerist Capitalocene age.

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