

# Restless Creativity A Retrospective

## The Art of Sunil Das

Sunil Das (1939-2015) was, among a few of his peers on the contemporary Indian art scene, who could be counted on not to go on delivering the 'same' work year after year for decades on end. His admirers always appreciated that Sunil did not rest on the laurels of his very early success and he never worked for long with the same idea and image content. Anybody familiar with the total output of his career in art will certainly endorse this view. His works, indeed, bear the unmistakable imprint of a restless creative spirit, always trying to break fresh grounds to "Make it New", (the slogan with which the British poet Ezra Pound inspired the young rebels at the beginning of the modernist movement). Sunil was also aware that 'making it new', spells what in Robert Hughes' terse summing up is "the Shock of the New."

But adventurous in spirit, Sunil rode the crest of his early success with no let up in his quest for a new horizon. He arrived in Paris with the skill he acquired in Calcutta, which stood him in good stead in his Beaux Arts days. He used this skill to a most spectacular effect in the charcoals of bulls he speedily did at the live shows of bullfight in Madrid. But of all the shows he mounted in Paris the Calcutta Sunil reappeared only once in that of the bulls and horses. In the rest of his Paris shows Sunil was seen fast evolving towards an avant garde artist, deeply soaked in the spirit of high modernism raging at the time in Western art. His susceptibilities to the new trends however simply liberated him from the mould of tradition he was cast in steeped in Calcutta. From his second solo show in Paris Sunil changed the tack. He was caught up in the latest trends of modernism as he watched the cutting-edge works of artists like Bernard Buffet, André Masson, Hans Hartung, Matta, Fautrier, Pierre Soulage and others but while working in his newly acquired Parisian spirit of the avante-garde he took care to leave a stamp of his own on his canvases.



*Memory of Spain 62, Ink on Paper, 14 x 11 inches, 2002*

For his second solo show in Paris Sunil switched to pure abstraction. His treatment of space, colour and form was spontaneously daring and entirely non-schematic, concentrated exclusively on a vibrantly interactive surface as the principal content of the canvases.

"Abstract in style but very bold in expression" commented Paritosh Sen, who recalled, in an article in *Desh*, having seen Sunil's abstract canvases in Paris.

But within the next two months Sunil shifted from pure abstraction to canvases sporting symbolic motifs. Done in oil, with a loaded brush laying relief-like heavy impastos, the images exuded something unmistakably Indian, for which the show was well-received by the French viewers.

This brief background narrative of his becoming an avant garde artist is a must read for those to know who visit the first posthumous retrospective of Sunil's works. The trajectory that began during his student days in Calcutta reached a grand finale in Paris. It stretched from the traditional values celebrated in the western old masters to the height of Modernism, the spirit of which he imbibed in every vein while living in the contemporary art world of Paris and interacting freely with the international art scenario there. It prefaces the course of his art practice for the rest of his life.

## Drawings

A multidimensional artist, Sunil was always furiously experimental and most daringly indulgent with his creative freedom. His drawings bear the full impact of that untrammelled free-wheeling of Sunil's art practice.

In one of the drawings Sunil once scrawled the words "Art Moves" as part of his textural scribbling on the undrawn space. His art indeed moved but not in a simple straight line. It often reverted to subjects and styles he had left behind years ago. His art practice often swung between figuration and abstraction and sometimes settled for a mix between them. And, of course, he knew how to charge a figurative form with expressive abstraction and to enliven abstract images with the speed and energy of his gestural scrawls and smudges. That is why his art moves with an inner dynamism of all its visual components.

A drawing of a horse with a mounted rider (1960) is a fine instance in point. It is not entirely unlike any of the early charcoal horses of Sunil. The horse is in a trotting posture but the wall of vertical lines behind and the dark smudgy shades that silhouette much of the horse and its rider exude an uncertain meaning. Is it a study for a sculpture standing still or an image of a rider about to

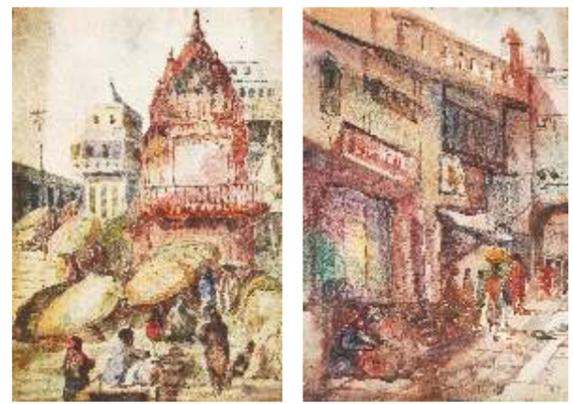


*Untitled, Ink & Charcoal on Paper, 8.5 x 7 inches, 1965, GK 101*



*Untitled, Ink, Pastel, Charcoal on Paper, 8.5 x 7 inches, 1965, GK 102*

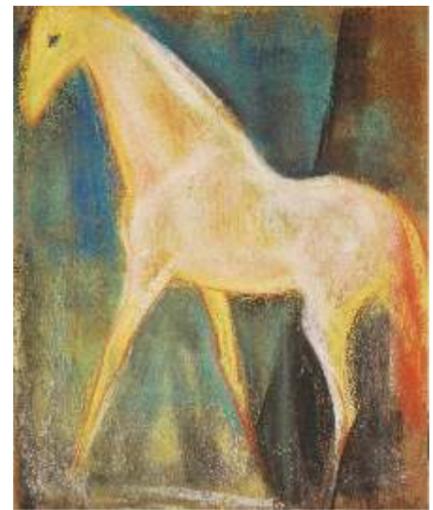
Sunil's very early works consist of water colours. Done as lesson practice when he was a student at the art college, they display his free and fluent execution in academic style painting. But soon he sprang a pleasant surprise on everybody in the college, students and teachers alike, with smart charcoal life drawings of horses. These horses were, of course, products of the young Sunil's growing mastery in academic techniques, but he charged every stroke, every smudge, of sooty black with such energy and speed that they exceeded the artist's primary brief of producing sleek and sharp realistic drawings of animals. These works of a third year student soon fetched him not only fame but awards too from all over India, including those of the Lalit Kala Academy and IFACS annual shows.



*Benaras, Watercolour on Paper, 22 x 15 inches, 1957*



*Horses, Charcoal on Paper, 29 x 19.5 inches, 1960*



*Horse, Pastel on Sand Paper, 11 x 9 inches*



*Untitled, Ink on Paper, 8.5 x 7 inches, 1960*

In the sixties Sunil's art was often seen to feature a dialogic discourse between the figurative and abstract. This is evident in each of which a mass of abstract but bristly spectral smudge in ominous black seems to attempt violation of a nude female evoked in a fairly clear figurative drawing. In both of them a menacing shadow of mysterious darkness extends its demonic hands to trap the victim in a frightful embrace.



In the mid sixties again he explored diverse cults of popular ritual for pictorial ingredients of an evocative mystic symbolism. An ink-and-wash of 1965 features a figurative image of ambiguous connotation. The motif looks like a cult image worshipped by people practising primitive religion. A squat but monumental figure, it has for each hand several reptilians snaking down from shoulder to the finger-tips, for legs a pair of beastly fore-paws and its dark oval totemic frame is inlaid with odd shapes and forms, slimy tadpoles, shells and cowries with their toothy undersides. They seem to have been set as the deity's entrails and other internal organs. This drawing is a spin-off from Sunil's paintings of the *Tantra* and *Underwater* series of the same decade.

*Under Water Series, Ink & Acrylic on Board, 23 x 16.5 inches 1965*

Around the seventies, Sunil did a lot a jottings on the printed pages of Span magazine, known as his 'Span drawings'. Done in an absolute free-wheeling manner, these jottings are of uneven character and vary from frame to frame. Sometimes they tend to be merely fragmentary in nature, filled with unrelated scribbles and scrawlings in and around solidly inked figural motifs or a full-fledged detailed drawing, abstract, semi-abstract or figurative, of no regular identity. In a 1970 Span drawing (GK013) this fragmentary nature of his pen-and-ink jottings is best evident. The page has boldly printed title words "First Fourth", and a facsimile print of the last portion of the Declaration of American Independence. The major pictorial content on the page, a fallen scarecrow puppet, pounced upon by a violent angry bird, is not only unrelated to the page's printed content but is entirely out of tune with the love lyric inscribed on the top of the page.



*Untitled, Drawing Ink on Paper, 13.75 x 10.5 inches 1973, GK 021*

*Drawn in Fine Hatching on fluent lines here the horses are battling against some dark cave-front which seems to be sucking them in and disgorging their dismembered limbs around.*

Here in this jotting and others like this, Sunil not only achieved a radical break with what he had done before but also dared to go beyond modernism. Up till 1970 Post-Modernism earned no major recognition even in the West, except for that which Irving Sandler specifies in his, *Art of Postmodern Era* (1996) as "multivalence, inclusiveness, and eclecticism". These high-sounding words, however, may simply mean what we have noticed in the above jottings of Sunil. The picture has, as we have seen, three unrelated contents – private emotion expressed in words of poetry, a historical reference to American Independence by appropriating the printed content of the Span page and finally a figurative drawing proper, probably metaphorically critiquing a situation of social violence. Its appropriation of poetry quote and printed text defies exclusiveness and autonomy of high Modernism. And what makes it eclectic is its outsourcing of multivalent content from non-pictorial arts like poetry and history. Sunil's sallies into unbeaten tracks however didn't clash with the regular pattern of his art practice marked by break and continuity. But his break and continuity often go hand in hand. It is evident not only in his handling of tradition with avant-garde gusto, fusing figuration with abstraction. He embraced modernist avant-gardism by delinking art entirely from reality beyond the pictorial frame, as is evident, in his numerous canvases, drawings and prints in which he deftly evoked images of pure abstraction. But he was too much concerned with the intractable nature of human reality to avoid figuration. If abstraction marked his breaks, his continuity was his coming back again and again to the figurative. In the seventies eighties and nineties his drawings sported human figures, male and female, without any trace of the residual humanistic optimism of the early to mid-20th century modernist art like that of Picasso and Matisse. In a drawing of 1973 (GK 021) the horses are no longer the gracefully shining and elegantly trotting animals of his early charcoals. Drawn in fine hatching and fluent lines, here they are battling against some dark cave-front which seems to be sucking them in and disgorging their dismembered limbs around.



*Untitled, Span Drawing & Jottings on Printed Page of Span Magazine, 12 x 9 inches, 1970, GK 103*



*Untitled, Drawing, Ink on Paper, 14 x 11 inches, 1977, GK 014*



*Untitled, Ink on Paper, 14 x 10 inches, 1977, GK 104 a small portion of this work has undergone restoration*



*Untitled, Mixed Media on Paper, 13.5 x 10.5 inches, 1979, GK 018*

In the images of men and women too the characters are always in the thick of conflict, entangled with the forces of darkness within or without, represented by shapes of abstract smudges or those of demonic features. The dark 'machine' seems to eject naked male or female bodies, their writhing limbs sticking out, heads and faces engulfed by darkness. Sometimes not limbs or torsos but tubular blood vessels with hollow cut-ends emerge from the pool of blacks. Obviously, much of the agony and anguish is given visual sharpness through formal distortion, smudgy patches of blacks and brisk flurries of doodles, scrawls and hatching, often in hairy lines, along with figurative elements. There is nothing cerebral or formally pleasurable about them or of pure modernist aesthetic of form-content synthesis. In two frames of 1977, GK 104 and GK 018, each showing a solid black head be it a demonic one, or a plain



*Untitled, Ink on Paper, 14 x 11 inches 1977*

human face, Sunil displays his zest for modernist formalism, especially in the latter. The former is a study for an oil with detailed notes chalking out the colour-scheme for the final painting. Even as a study, with its face of demonised humanity, it leaves nothing uncertain about its content. The face in the latter shows the typical Cubist distortion of form, lending it a double viewpoint.

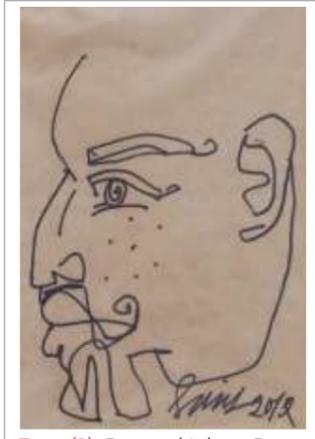
In the drawings of the nineties Sunil seems worried about a bleak future for humanity. "The day is coming" when "one could very well say mankind is not capable of living (?) without armed conflict" is inscribed in not a very legible hand on the margin of an ink-and-colour-wash dated 1992 (GK136). The pictorial space is cluttered with human

and animal limbs and torsos. Despite scattered and disintegrated figures layered with scrawls and patches of solid black it is not a battle scene but an image of the artist's anguished self, a clue to which is fairly given on top of the frame in a scrawl of inscription : "Born nine teen Thirty nine in Calcutta" (sic), the artist's own date of birth.



*Untitled, Coloured Ink, Water Colour & Acrylic on Graph Paper 18 x 12 inches, 1992, GK 136*

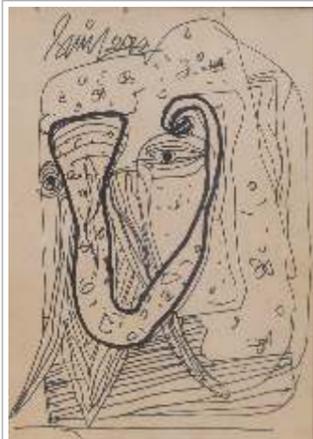
In his drawings of the seventies, eighties and nineties Sunil creates a new visual idiom fusing the abstract and the figurative, regular drawings with brisk doodles, clean lines with textural scrawls, dense hatching with smudgy patches of ink and makes a meaningfully integrated image out of fragmentary pictorial contents. In the drawings he turned out in the last decade of his life, Sunil appears partly cured of his traumatic vision of the destiny of mankind. In these drawings, done in tidy bold lines, mostly of human figures and often of erotic female nudes, the artist is concerned more about art and its formal essence than the intractable human reality.



Face (1), Pen and Ink on Paper, 9 x 7 inches, 2012



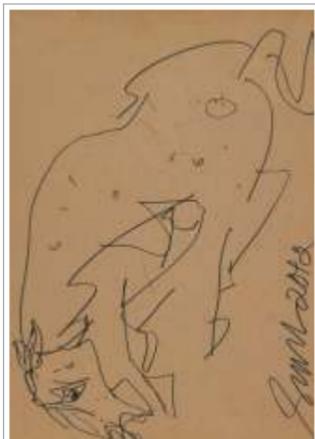
Face (2), Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2012



Ganesha, Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2012



Bull, Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2010



Horse, Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2012



Galloping Horse, Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2013



Love Pair, Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2011



Nude (1), Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2011



Nude (2), Pen Drawing, 9 x 7 inches, 2010

Figures, female torsos in frontal nudity, a crouching cow and a horse and a galloping horse, profiles of human faces, are all knocked into unlikely shapes entirely by means of free-wheeling lines as a pliant tool of delightful distortion. Distortion is delightful, often funny, no doubt, especially when it comes to the female nudes and a love-making pair (Love Pair) but not without a punch of irony critiquing the shade of ugliness in the fleshy feel in all of them. The exceptions are the faces such as the profiles of bearded men (Face 1, 2) in which the content is a mere excuse for the lines to create a pattern of untrammelled playfulness. Of course the Japanese face (Portrait) attempts a straight portrait but for the cartoonish exaggeration of the chin and cheek. It is not easy to figure out the mask-like face with a long coiling snout not unlike that of an elephant's trunk. But Sunil has added details to make it look unlike the face of the well-known animal-headed Hindu god. The other two drawings, one



Ganesha, Drawings Ink & Lithograph, 9.25 x 7.25 inches, 2012



Bull, Mixed Media on paper, 9.25 x 12 inches, 2011

evoking silhouettes of a matador and a bull and other showing an old horse are Sunil's nostalgic throw-back to the first flush of his youth. Sunil did these drawings obviously in a playful mood, even though the serious artist in him can be glimpsed in all of them. Probably the most playful work is *Three in One*, in which he probably designs an absurd but funny China clay teapot, squeezing into the pot shape, the face of a fairy tale goblin and a squatting horse.

## Paintings

Sunil did many of the drawings as preparatory studies for his paintings, but unlike his drawings his paintings have progressed series by series. While drawings are those which he did after his early charcoals more often 'loose sallies of mind', a pouring out himself directly on to paper like the smooth flow of ink from his pen, paintings are preceded by a good deal of conceptual and formal planning. Throughout his creative career Sunil has never used landscape even as minor part of an image content. As in his drawings in his paintings, too, he had a life-long engagement with inescapable reality confronting man from within or without. Hence the major motifs in his drawings and paintings are naked human bodies, male or female, or their dismembered limbs or portrait heads, bloody and battered, on an abstract backdrop. In the paintings, titled, *Confrontation* (GK133, 169), Sunil builds up this backdrop with white-upon-white paints, fretted with pencilled or brushed-in graffiti, straight lines and dashes, sometimes with arrowheads (GK 107) or a focusing circle which animate the lone, aged male or female figures. The distraught character, a tormented soul, may suggest different things to different viewers but always something of solemn existential significance. Sunil's concept of the world environment which man inhabits today embraces the totality of the human plight what he encounters within himself and in the world outside in his constant battle to cope with existential forces at all levels, spiritual and worldly, intellectual and physical as well as social and political. It is for this that Sunil was christened by a critic as, 'a philosopher with no message'.



Confrontation, Oil on Canvas, 7.5 x 7.5 inches, 1983 GK 133



Confrontation Series, Oil on Canvas, 57.5 x 65 inches, 1986, GK 169



Head I, Mixed Media on Board, 7 x 7 inches, 1986, GK 107



Head II, Mixed Media on Board, 7 x 7 inches

*Three Heads I, II, and III* from the *head series* of the eighties and nineties are imaginary faces given the most unusual visuality, morphing the common into the uncommon. One may recall Souza's Heads, especially that of 1961. But Sunil has his own mode of lending the ordinary human face the most striking contours through varied formal disorientations both ingenious and visionary. One can glimpse in these grotesque portrait heads the piquant vivacity of Sunil's vision of the world within and without, brought under his probing gaze and fleshed out in diverse faces of fun and fantasy, fear and fuss, agony and anguish, of bizarre and weird distortions. What is remarkable is that the three faces are different from one another even in their grotesqueness, though all of them have one thing in common a tensely arched bald pate, and two of them are painted gory red and the third one reddish orange. Head I is the weirdest of all. It has a cold and keen gaze in its asymmetrical eyes set in the part of the face around its bloody nose which looks peeled to bare the skull

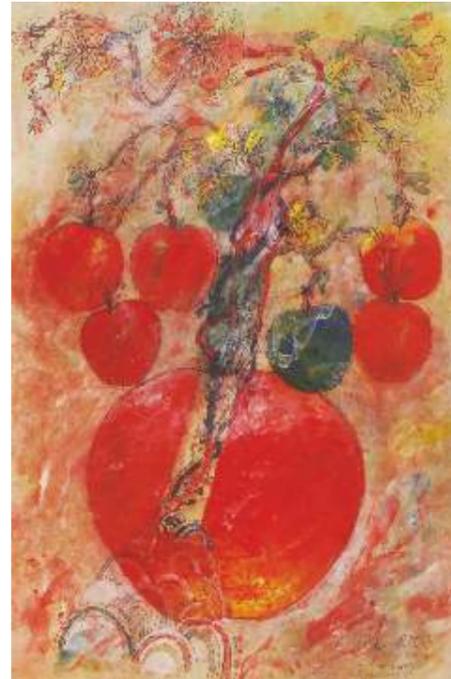
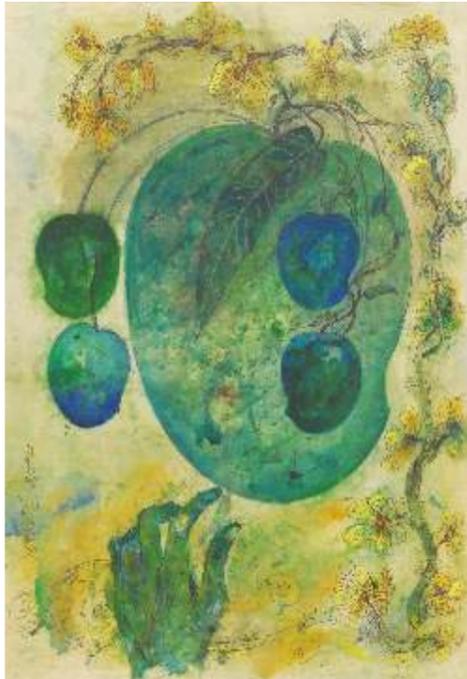


Head III, Mixed Media on Board, 10 x 8 inches, 1997

beneath the skin. The stocky, heavy-necked face in Head III, with his double barrel nose and a cigarette held between lips looking at the viewer rather relaxedly is also weird no doubt but not as much as its counter-part in Head I. The character in the water colour Head II with dilated pupils in white pouchy eyes, ashen lips, column-like thick neck and throat has an uncanny mask-like face. His is the weirdness of a de-characterized human face with no demonic distortion of the contour lines. In all the three portrait heads Sunil plumbs the depth of human unconscious to dig out from its core darkness Man's terror and trauma, his buried intent and impulses.

Two watercolours, *Mangoes* and *Apples* are two very exceptional frames in the entire oeuvre of Sunil. He never did any still-life and here he came close to the genre, or rather he gave it a new dimension by not following the convention of arranging plucked flowers and fruits in interior domestic setting. The fruits here are parts of nature, hanging ripe from the tree even though the trees are not in botanically correct delineation. A human hand is shown extending to pluck the fruit, the largest one in *Mangoes*, which itself contains a narrative structure generating a specific meaning and thereby it exceeds the brief of the genre.

*Mangoes*, Mixed Media on Paper  
20 x 30 inches, 2007



*Apples*, Mixed Media on Paper  
20 x 30 inches, 2008

## Novel Modes Of Image-Making

Sunil's creative restlessness is also instanced in his constant quest of novel modes of image-making. We have seen his use of Span magazine pages but that is not all. He used newspaper flongs of old Rotary press days and would often paste junk objects, coins etc, on the canvas to lend his abstract images a tactile dimension of concrete reality. Sometimes he would take silver or gold colour foils and scratch irregular lines and forms on the reverse side which appeared in relief on the surface. He would also burn holes in different shapes on the foils with a blow torch and paste them on canvas or paper painted black. The result is an abstraction of shining gold (Untitled 2009) through which breaks out a dark void as if to undo the surface illusion.

This burning mode he also used in his drawings and paintings in which a silhouette of head is blow-torched to burn holes in order to reveal a red glow of the colour in the base surface underneath (1994 GK 111, 112). The novelty doesn't end there. The artist fastened the picture, as a metal plate, to a plywood support with screw-bolts on four corners, as if he was working not as an artist but as an artisan.

This posthumous retrospective ideally projects Sunil as an artist with a restless creative impulse, who, rooted in tradition, reoriented his art to High Modernism and ever went on remaking himself to venture to go even beyond that.

Manasij Majumder



*Untitled*, Acrylic Relief & Mixed Media on Paper  
pasted on Foil 9.75 x 6.5 inches 2009



*Untitled*, Acrylic Foil Burn, Metal Screens,  
Acrylic Paint, Metal Wire on Board  
(Three Dimensional Work)  
6 x 6 inches, 1994, GK 111



*Untitled*, Acrylic Foil Burn, Metal Screens,  
Acrylic Paint, Metal Wire on Board  
(Three Dimensional Work),  
6 x 6 inches, 1994, GK 112

Born in 1938, Manasij Majumder, served as Reader in English literature at Sri Chaitanya College, Calcutta University, for many years. He regularly contributes articles and reviews in both English and Bengali on art and literature in the leading journals and newspapers of Kolkata. He has also authored monographs on Sakti Burman and Nirad C. Chaudhuri and is currently writing a book on Bikash Bhattacharjee.