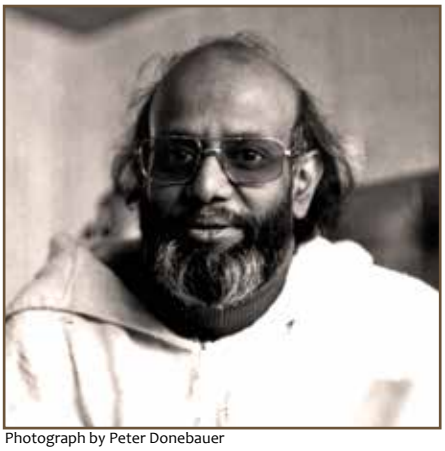
Late Paintings by Paresh Chakraborty

A Spiritual Synthesis of East & West

The eastern sacred lotus Paddo Phool (Bengali name for Nelumbo Nucifera), Photograph by Peter Donebauer

The day I depart, let these be my parting words:
What I have seen and what I have received are truly transcendental;
Amidst this ocean of divine light lie innumerable lotus flowers,
Their hidden nectar I have tasted.
And oh so grateful am I.
The day I depart, these very thoughts are what I share with you.
In this playhouse of infinite forms,
Oh how I have had my play.
It is here I have beheld His divine beauty with my eyes open wide.
He, whose divinity is beyond reach,
Has thrilled and enlightened my very being.
If the End is nigh, let it be now, for I accept it so;
The day I depart, let these be my parting words.

Rabinranath Tagore - Translated from the Bengali by Reba Mazumdar & Anita Donebauer



Photograph by Peter Donebauer

Late Paintings
by
Paresh Chakraborty

A Spiritual Synthesis of East & West

Paresh Chakraborty

Paresh represents the valuable reciprocity of the intellect of India coming to the British Isles after so many years of British rule.

Paresh brought with him - as did Ghandi before – a wealth of both hidden as well as evident wisdom. This wisdom was not necessarily in written or even spoken words but in imagery. "The imagination" was not fully appreciated until recent times in the west. Sadly it had been relegated to 'imaginings' which were not real. For Henri Corbin and Kathleen Raine of more recent times this understanding of the primacy of the imagination - essentially a visual issue – has fortunately been reversed. Paresh Chakraborty brought to us in Britain the inner meaning of abstractions of the soul. Not abstractions of the body. I felt most privileged to have been invited to Wolverhampton where he taught for years, together with Paul Marchant and an enthusiastic group of students to learn what an important figure he was. His knowledge of Sanskrit was profound and his intuition of the necessity of re-establishing the true value of abstractions of the inner soul was equally sublime. I was privately assured by him many years ago of his family's duties as protectors of the 'chakras' of the inner subtle body. He is truly a great loss to Britain and his works speak the true language of the Beauty of the Soul.

Keith Critchlow, artist, lecturer, author, professor of architecture, and co-founder of the Temenos Academy, January 2015

Photograph by David Green

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All photographs of Paresh Chakraborty's paintings by Peter Donebauer
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THE PRINCE'S SCHOOL
OF TRADITIONAL ARTS

For Paresh

how she folds
the note holds it over the implication
of time in time loosening furl
on fold an open timbre slowed
to a rhythm tone over tone successive
thresholds slip by in this her shaken
grace opens the night colours all the time
she takes for love

lampblack
ochre orpiment indigo green silver
colour for outlines the body beneath
clinging garments colloid of tin
cheap and unlike silver did not lose
its lustre after burnishing modelling
of form with darker tones applied
to a wet paper surface

marking time
of day when everything seems
to shine with its own light listen
marwa unsettling giving grace
to yaman unconditional your voice there
a long call of a sudden asking
nothing beginning to think
of home

something and
nothing where this emptiness is itself
exhausted wastes no shred remains
of emptiness fullness how much
is this visual where there is this little
very thin ribbon of light no there there
there is no horizon and there is
no colour

incised luminous a skull
doubles as a palette another one last
coat their familiar always raw
umber burnt umber raw sienna
burnt sienna yellow ochre lamp
black vine black bone black
ultramarine orange-yellow antimony
yellow

Andrew Brewerton, Principle & Chief Executive Plymouth College of Art
- Honorary Professor of Fine Art, Shanghai University, January 2015

An Appreciation of the Life & Art of Paresh Chakraborty

To generations of international artists, sculptors, art students and musicians, Paresh, with his great depth of knowledge and wisdom of the world's great spiritual and cultural traditions was a pillar of discourse and dialogue as well as a painter of great significance. Together with others and demonstrating surprising creative vitality, he constantly explored the interplay between his own eastern heritage and western artistic practice. He contemplated their inspirational, cultural, psychological and physical levels and the universal principles manifesting throughout the history of art. He encouraged his fellow artists to discover a deeper meaning in their own practice; one in which they came closer to the experience of 'Unity of Being,' the order underlying nature as the reflection of the source of all creation. He extolled them for their creative work to become an 'inclusive' rather than an 'exclusive' activity. At the same time Paresh also embraced critical appraisal of the experimentation of the masters of the early 20th century through to the latest use of media and technology in contemporary art.

With the publication of Ajit Mookerjee's books on Tantric art from the 1960's[1] and the 'Image of Man' exhibition (the Indian perception of the Universe through 2000 years of painting and sculpture)[2] at the London Hayward Gallery in 1982, the critical interest in Indian abstract painting began to encompass its deeper spiritual meaning. Paresh had long been developing imagery as interpretations of Indian religious and philosophical themes transmuted in response to the work of European artists, who from the turn of the 20th century onwards were seeking new sources of inspiration in the cultures and spiritual reflections of eastern and non-European civilizations. During a conversation on the subject of French painters he admired, Paresh related to me that in the early fifties a few years before the death of Matisse, he visited him at his studio at the Hôtel Régina, Nice-Cimiez. At that time Matisse was bed-ridden and drawing on the wall with charcoal at the end of a long stick and continuing to make paper-cuts. Paresh explained he was from Bengal in India and asked - 'what inspired the artist who people regarded as the father of modern art?' Matisse beckoned him over to open the draw in a nearby bureau and to Paresh's surprise and delight it contained many examples of Indian miniatures from Pāhari schools such as Kāngrā Valley and Basohli.

The details of Paresh's formative years are at best sketchy which accords with his early monastic outlook and his eventual 'immersion' in painting as a meditative practice. Sometime before his arrival at Tagore's Santiniketan he experienced monastic life in a Ladakh seminary in the high passes of Jammu and Kashmir, he also spent a period travelling as a wandering mendicant. At the monastery he was ordained as a priest and became an expert in yoga.

Back to the beginning, his schooling began at Dhambad Academy recognised today as a good public school not far from Kolkata and now situated in Bangladesh. After this he studied Sanskrit at Benares Hindu University and later the discipline of Tantra in the lineage of Sri Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar temple.

Radha's toilet, Kangra school miniature, 1820

Tantric paper-cut, Paresh Chakraborty, 1985

Odalisque with a Tambourine, Matisse, 1926

He arrived at Santiniketan in the late 1940's and like eminent film-maker Satyajit Ray before him (student 1941-42), developed a love for the visual arts and painting under the tutelage of Nanda Lal Bose Head of the art department. For several decades Santiniketan had served as a hub of cultural revival based on primary sources of Indian rather than foreign influences and it also promoted a open-minded approach to contemporary developments in other cultures.

After leaving Santiniketan Paresh travelled to Europe and was eventually educated in Scotland. Initially his father sent him to study mining engineering at Herriot Watt University, Edinburgh, for which he received the Colombo scholarship. However his mother's influence prevailed and Paresh was able to transfer to Edinburgh College of art in 1955 to study painting and stained glass. The latter with Sir William Wilson, the famous stained glass artist of Dean Village Studio in Edinburgh. He became an Andrew Grant scholar and later a DA postgraduate travelling scholar.

During the 50's through to the 60's Paresh had a number of work experiences: working briefly in Newbattle Colliery in Dalkeith, he worked and painted in Fife at Mr Makenzie's school in Braehead, he taught at Mr Wood's primary school and also taught at Kirkcaldy High School. As well as continuing to paint Paresh began to give lectures and after an epic session at Wolverhampton Art College was offered a job as a senior tutor by Head of Drawing and Painting, Charlie Pulsford. It was a meeting of minds as they were both compulsive painters and passionate about holistic approaches to art theory and discovering the true meaning of art education.

In 1972 Paresh facilitated the 'Krishna Colour Festival' at Himley Hall. This was part of a productive time engaging in interdisciplinary programmes between the art department and other departments of Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Paresh was also running the visiting lecturer programme bringing in the UK's most gifted and talented artists and lecturers, helping to raise the national and international profile of the art department. Keith Critchlow a prominent artist, architect and polymath brought his Slade postgraduate students David Green and myself to teach and participate in the 'Krishna Colour Festival.' Working with Wolverhampton Art College students including Tim Mara (later Head of RCA Printmaking) and Chris Appleby (who continued his friendship with Paresh into Paresh's final years), a large bamboo structure based on an early form of Hindu temple provided an environment at Himley Hall, to play 'Holi' the Hindu spring festival.

Paresh's visiting lecturer programme attracted luminaries such as Roger Cook (author of the *Tree of Life*, T&H 1974), Phillip Rawson (author of *Tantra*, T&H 1973) and a in the early 1980's, a young Anish Kapoor (who shared with Paresh an interest in the use of pure natural pigments and imaginative uses of powder colour). Paresh lectured widely throughout the top institutions in the UK including the Royal College of Art, Reading University, The Prince's Institute of Architecture and the Architectural Association; helping to make Wolverhampton one of the most prominent national centres of painting and sculpture.

Central to Paresh's work as a painter was the visual interpretation of the generative power of sound as the source of all creation, from the Logos of Biblical cosmology to the Hindu Nada Brahma and expressed in the Indian mode known as 'raga.' The concept of raga is difficult to define as it encompasses both musical and visual expression. Paresh could play the Vina (the instrument of the Hindu God Shiva) and had learned to play the sitar with Ravi Shankar (whose brother Uday taught the art of dance at Santiniketan).

In his book *THE RAGA GUIDE* (Nimbus Records and Rotterdam Conservatory of Music 1999) Joep Bor states: '.....Most importantly, a raga must evoke a particular emotion or create a particular 'mood,' which is hard to define, however. As the term raga itself implies, it should 'colour' the mind, bring delight, move the listeners and stimulate an emotional response. In other words the concept of raga, which has evolved over a period of two millennia, eludes an adequate brief definition. It is an open-minded concept in which the
association of a particular raga with a specific emotional state, a season or a time of day, though intangible is as relevant as its melodic structure.....'

Paresh often emphasised the two tendencies or 'poles' of raga in relation to visual expression, that of Dhrupad and Khyal; Dhrupad (whose lineage extends back to Miyan Tansen the great master vocalist and one of the Navaratnas (nine jewels) of Akbar's 16th century court at Fatehpur Sikri) refers to temporal expression of a pure and an almost crystalline geometric structure; Khayal (attributed to Sufi master Amir Khusrau 12th–13th century musician, poet, scholar, mystic and disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi) refers to 'imagination,' free flowing grace notes and poetic emotion. Although in his late paintings, Paresh moved on to an exciting new territory of transcendental imagery speaking to a new age, the harmony of geometry and gesture were still impoartant to these ground-breaking compositions.

Paresh had a number of favourite ragas especially the very early morning raga Bhairav, traditionally considered the first among ragas. For a Hindu Brahmin Bhairav is a deeply devotional raga best appreciated before dawn. '.....Bhairav is one of the names of Lord Shiva in his awe inspiring appearance as an ascetic with a trident, skulls and snakes, and with matted locks and a body smeared with ashes. Some musicians believe that Bhairav still represents awesome grandeur, horror and fright. Yet this solemn raga is usually found to evoke peace and devotion, with a shade of melancholy.....' (Joep Bor).

No doubt in the spiritual synthesis of east and west his later paintings, Paresh came closer both to his Hindu roots but also in the way he embraced all religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoastrianism, Sufism etc.) and philosophies as reflections of Unity. Like his great mentor Rabindranath Tagore he would find great empathy with this quote of Albert Einstein:

'.....A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a
foundation for inner security.....'
Albert Einstein - quoted in H Eves Mathematical Circles Adieu (Boston 1977).

Paul Marchant Director of Education at the PSTA, with contributions from Fay Chakraborty January 2015

Albert Einstein with Rabindranath Tagore
in the 1930

[1]THE ONE
This is Whole
That is Whole
Whole emerges from Whole
Whole subtracted from Whole results in Whole.

'…..The invisible, the cosmic consciousness, is the Whole; the visible, the phenomenal universe too, is Whole. From Whole, the Whole has come. The Whole remains the same, even after the Whole comes out of the Whole. This peace invocation of the Isha Upanishad has a modern parallel in the mathematical concept of infinity…..'
Ajit Mookerjee, YOGA ART (Thames & Hudson 1975), p.19.

[2]'…..The theme of Indian art, in essence, is the universe in all its abundance and multiplicity of life and form. Yet, within and behind the complex whole, is that omniscient, omnipotent and transcendental spirit which permeates forms and which is itself, in the last analysis without form (arūpa)…..From the primeval waters emerge stones in many shapes – ovoid pebbles and spheres with ammonites going back millions of years. They are the bāna-lingas and shālagrāmas, worshipped as self-shaped deities. The exhibition opens with a display of ammonites and pebbles from the beds of the Narmada and its tributaries. The earliest Indian writing conceives of life emerging from these rivers and oceans, and also from anda, the cosmic egg of all creation…..From the primeval waters also emerges the lotus, the most important of vegetative forms born of the waters, connected to the mythical centre of the earth through its stem, and always above the waters, blooming with the beauty and fragrance of the flower. Both physically and mythically, the lotus assumes the greatest importance in Indian cosmology, speculative thought and art. The lotus and its petals are the multiplicity of form: its centre corresponds to the centre of the universe, the navel of the earth, all is held together by the stem and the eternal waters…..'

Dr Kapila Vatsayan, Introduction to the Exhibition, IN THE IMAGE OF MAN (Weidenfeld and Nicholson London 1982), p.90.


Ikshvaku Lotus, 3rd century AD, India


Svayambhu - linga - age unknown, Bhramaputra valley, India


Buddhist temple - carved lotus - age unknown

A Shaman who never stops . . . .

"Creating a work of art is to create a world" Wassily Kandinsky

My first encounter with Paresh was back in 1979 - we met in the lift of the Wolverhampton College of Art. I have a distinct memory of the look in his eyes - and his hat! His look was one of surprise, as he did not expect to see a Frenchman heading towards the workshops of fine art. I wondered if anyone had made him aware of my arrival? Anyway, during the morning break, that day, we were formally introduced.

After our first meeting, I wondered whether any kind of relationship or friendship could possibly develop between us, since we were polar opposites from all points of view. Could some special connection arise from a fortuitous meeting in the confines of a lift? If not, maybe it was written somewhere in the ether that Paresh would sense my fear and come to my aid, easing the way for me to fit in with the customary ways and rituals of that teaching establishment. Few teachers or artists would open their door to welcome a stranger or to share their knowledge base, and Paresh did it with such grace. The first formal meeting with the professors at the faculty was courteous and impeccable. Despite being French, I was received as one of them; I was not only accepted but so were my artistic skills, thus their empathy made my ordeal less traumatic.

As I explored the streets of this town in the 'black country', moving from place to place, I saw a complex and uncompromising landscape unfold, bearing evidence of those who had lived through the birth of the industrial era mingled in with the later Indian communities, with contributions made by these contrasting communities creating an interesting cultural mix.

Within this labyrinth of cultural diversity, was a man who continued to paint whilst musing at the changing world. It was clear to all that he was elsewhere, outside the preoccupation of daily existence. Though seemingly strange, I have no doubt his attitude was in synchronicity with his cultural origins, yet here he was - an enthusiast of Henri Matisse! The ups and downs of an artistic lifestyle did not concern Paresh: he spent his time absorbing ancient history instead of labouring on his art, which he believed happened unexpectedly.

We met up frequently and our friendship developed. One day, Paresh gifted me a painting, which has an extraordinary presence and to this day upsets and frightens me. The painting is totally blue with just a blue circle in the middle - nothing else - the most amazing thing is that it captures luminosity in the night, and self-illuminates. The canvas painting feels ancient, as if it was created long before Paresh's existence. Like all great works of art, it has power to exist autonomously, without us, by itself. In comparison to recognised works of art, it has escaped being categorised simply because it has been misunderstood. The painting has a certain alluring magnetism, but what is more puzzling is that it actually says nothing, it is a void and simply exists, alive, with the blueness representing both night and day.

Over a period of time, Paresh continued to honour me with his gifts, and gave me two other paintings. These paintings have the same spatial construction, although the later ones reveal a very different concept of their presence in the world. By that I mean that these belong to some other time or era - it is as if they are emitting waves of energy - achieved by his choice of material and colour.

I remember our conversations around Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, focused on the recurring question, which kept gnawing at the painter - and even more so at the musician, Ravi Shankar, with whom he had a close relationship - concerning the reconciliation of music with painting. This thought was also very present in his home in Wolverhampton, near his wife Fay, near his great numbers of discs and tapes stored against the walls of his house. Mozart was one of Paresh's favourites, and thus this very Indian man allowed himself to set up a bridge between music and painting. He was preoccupied with creating in the silence of his painting a musicality, and as he modified a work, painting numerous elements, they clashed together with tireless movement, as we might perceive their existence in the universe.

Paresh was a man wholly committed to his work and he would embrace different threads of intellectual thought in his teachings. Paresh was erudite, yet managing to keep this at a distance; he was brimming with knowledge of world culture, without wanting to appropriate anything for himself. Remember that this is a painter who spent some years of his childhood in the monastery of Ladakh, yet was enamored by Raphael of the Italian Renaissance, who is officially buried in the Pantheon in Rome - the last temple still standing from the Roman Empire.

So you see his whole world is complex, yet paradoxically strikingly coherent. Paresh organized his world by projecting onto the canvas a telescopic view of his diverse cultural upbringing; he sought a resolution for himself, comparable to others, putting in the corner of his paintings a sign, a signature, which affiliated him with all the paintings in the world. If you look at his paintings, they are without narrative from a visual standpoint, as they tend towards spirituality, appearing to summon another dimension, and this I perceived in his conversations and his works of art. This poignant void is his humour, but this is impossible for us to grasp, as it inevitably escapes us. So what are the reasons? Well they are simple enough to understand, for humour compels us to laugh, it is the only reflex that serves us to reinvent the world, to open it, to build it or deconstruct it at will. Paresh's humour is very touching, like the smile of the Buddha – it leads us not to doubt, but to warn us that the truth of our path is made up of the stuff upon which we walk. The path on which we stand at any moment recurs endlessly.

When I met Paresh at the Musée Guimet in Paris, I remember him bursting out laughing. Smilingly, he spoke to me about a mandala - I remember that meeting in particular thanks again to his smile. Fay, was next to him, like another attentive magician, and had no doubts about Paresh's biggest preoccupation, which was to reach out to Raphael, rub shoulders with him, with his paint brush and palate, and embrace the painting of Venus of Urbino - this passion which resided in him could only resolve through Fay.

He knew how important the portraits of women painted by this young man of the Renaissance were – they had something to do with his life-long companion whose eyes were lost in those of this Indian painter, who was my dearest friend.

Patrice Alexandre, sculptor and Professor at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, January 2015

Translated from the French by Anita Donebauer

Several Circles by
Wassily Kandinsky, 1926

Paresh Chakraborty

Un passeur qui n'en finit pas de passer

« Créer une œuvre c'est créer un monde » Vassily Kandinsky
Ma première rencontre avec Paresh remonte en 1979 dans l'ascenseur de la Fine Art/Molineux de Wolverhampton. Je me souviens parfaitement de son regard et de son chapeau, de ce regard un peu étonné de voir un français se diriger vers les ateliers des arts plastiques. En fait, était-il prévenu de mon arrivée ? Quoiqu'il en soit, les présentations étaient faites le même jour lors de la pause du cours de la matinée.

Quelle sorte de rapport, quelle dimension amicale pouvait naître entre deux êtres, lesquels, à tous points de vues, avaient des parcours différents. Sinon quelles complicités très particulières pouvaient naître de cet entre deux, de cette rencontre fortuite dans la cage d'un ascenseur ? Sinon, quelques signes dans l'air, sans doute de la demande de l'un, parfaitement étranger aux coutumes de cette école, et de l'autre, comprenant par expérience, que ce français avait sans doute, besoin d'une certaine aide pour affronter les rituels en usage en ce lieu d'enseignement de l'art dans lequel l'auteur de ces lignes, était projeté. Rares sont les enseignants/artistes qui ouvrent la porte de leur lieu de partage des connaissances, et, de façon aussi généreuse. En effet, la rencontre première avec le corps professoral a été d'une courtoisie irréprochable, le français était reçu comme un des leurs, il était non seulement accepté, mais aussi attendu, comme il se doit, sur ses compétences. Il va sans dire que l'épreuve était annoncée avec empathie de la part des nouveaux collègues.

En avançant dans les rues de la capitale de la black country, de lieux en lieux, un paysage se découvrait, complexe et rugueux témoignant d'une histoire forte de ceux qui vivaient au temps de la naissance de l'ère industriel et de l'apport par la suite, des communautés d'origine indiennes. Dans ce dédale fourni de ces cultures diverses, un homme passait, peignait, écoutait le monde en mouvement, on pouvait dire qu'il était ailleurs, au dehors de la préoccupation du quotidien, sans doute par ses origines, son attitude semblait être syncrétique. Cet amateur d'Henri Matisse et son apparent décalage aux aléas d'un quotidien du monde artistique, digérait et ingurgitait toute une histoire ancienne tout en préconisant assurément, la faille qui allait mettre la place de l'art dans une situation totalement imprévue.

Puis, nous nous sommes fréquentés, et un jour, Paresh m'a fait un présent, lequel, d'un coté m'a bouleversé, mais aussi m'a effrayé par son extraordinaire présence (encore aujourd'hui). C'est une peinture bleue avec un cercle bleu au milieu. Une peinture qui capte la lumière et la nuit, qui décide de s'éclairer par elle-même. Une peinture peinte sur toile qui vient de très loin, qui semble être née bien avant la naissance de Paresh. Elle détient, tout comme les grandes œuvres, la puissance d'être autonome, d'exister sans nous, par elle-même, elle déjoue, par son apparente relation aux œuvres reconnues (du moins reconnaissables), les avis qui tenteraient de la catégoriser. Elle a certes, une puissance magnétique, mais plus encore, elle ne raconte strictement rien, elle est simplement là, bien vivante. Bleue comme la nuit, bleue comme le jour.

Au fil du temps, Paresh continuait à m'honorer de ses cadeaux, en continuant à me donner deux autres peintures, lesquelles maintenaient en évidence, la même construction spatiale, bien que ces dernières s'annonçaient très différentes dans leur conception et leur présence au monde. En effet, elles fonctionnaient sur d'autres temps, elles émettaient des ondes particulières, par la matière, par la couleur. Je me rappelle de nos conversations autour de Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, et cette éternelle question qui taraudait le peintre et plus encore le musicien qu'il avait été, proche de Ravy Shankar, au sujet du rapprochement de la musique et de la peinture. Aussi, cette pensée confiée chez lui, à Wolverhampton, près de son épouse Fay, près de ces multitudes de disques, de cassettes adossées au mur de sa maison : « Mozart is my favorite ». Alors, cet homme, d'origine indienne s'autorisait à mettre en place un pont, ou mieux, des sensations qui identifient une très grande partie de ce que nous pourrions appeler sa préoccupation consistant à créer dans le silence de la peinture une musicalité à chaque fois modifiée par la mise en forme d' éléments s'entrechoquant, tels les mouvements inlassables que nous percevons de l'univers.

Un homme engagé dans son œuvre et son enseignement dans la volonté de témoigner, à partir de fonctionnements intellectuels divers. Chargé, mais avec une distance qui l'honorait, chargé de la culture du monde sans vouloir se l'approprier pour lui-même. Rappelons-nous que ce peintre qui passa quelques temps de son enfance au monastère de Ladakh était épris de Raphaël, l'italien de la Renaissance, celui qui (officiellement) est enterré au Panthéon de Rome, dernier temple encore debout de l'empire romain.

Voilà, tout se complexifie en grande cohérence, Paresh organise son monde en déposant sur la toile le télescopage de cultures d'origines diversifiées, il cherche une paix pour lui, pour les autres, en mettant dans le coin du tableau, le signe de son appartenance à toutes les peintures du monde. Alors, le fait même que d'apparence, ses œuvres ne racontent pas, visuellement, quelque chose, mais tendent vers ce qui est commun de nommer la spiritualité, semble convoquer une autre dimension, que j'ai surpris dans ses paroles et dans ses œuvres, qui fait que, inexorablement, elles nous échappent, ce précieux décalage se nomme l'humour. Quelles en sont les raisons ? Elles sont, en fait, assez simples : l'humour qui entraine le rire, lequel est le seul réflexe qui nous sert à réinventer le monde, à l'ouvrir, à le construire, ou le déconstruire à volonté. Son humour nous atteint, tel le sourire de Bouddha qui nous conduit, non pas à douter, mais à nous avertir que la vérité de notre chemin est constituée de la matière sur laquelle nous marchons. Chemin sur lequel nous nous tenons debout dans ces instants toujours recommencés. J'ai entendu Paresh rire aux éclats. Je l'ai vu, à Paris, au musée Guimet, il me parlait, tout en souriant, d'un mandala, je me souviens de cette rencontre grâce à ce sourire. Fay, à côté de lui, autre magicienne attentive, ne se doutait sans doute pas de la grande préoccupation originelle de Paresh, celle d'accéder à Raphaël, du moins de côtoyer par la couleur et le pinceau comme outils, le peintre d'Urbino, que cette volonté qui l'habitait, passait par elle.

Il savait, à quel point les portraits de femmes du jeune homme de la Renaissance, avaient quelque chose à voir avec sa compagne de tous les jours dont les yeux se perdaient dans ceux de cet émigré indien qui était mon ami.

Patrice Alexandre
10/01/2015

An Interweaver of Worlds

Paresh was a unique figure within British painting, and I am not best qualified to assess his true place within that tradition. This is a personal reflection and appreciation.

Paresh was deeply rooted in two completely distinct and mutually exclusive established traditions - contemporary western painting and ancient Hindu religion. Whilst spanning, and in his own way synthesising, both traditions he was also open minded and eclectic within both those traditions. So he was as equally at home and knowledgeable about Indian pictorial and musical art traditions as he was about western religions and spiritual thought. He was an intellectual and artistic polymath.

Although I have worked as a moving image artist rather than as a painter, Paresh and I shared in our 35-year friendship a common artistic dilemma. Our work has largely existed outside current established art fashions or movements. Although mostly abstract in form, the strong spiritual or metaphysical dimension in our work is often an uncomfortable bedfellow with a western modern art tradition imbued with an emphasis on the individual personality.

My own roots in science, Taoism and Buddhism are different to Paresh's Hinduism but there is enough overlap to contextualise the problem. At risk of great simplification, the aim within these traditions (excepting perhaps the science) is to liberate the individual self from the illusion of experiencing life as a separate being, and to make a conscious transition to a deep experience of unity with the original source of the universe around and within us, however that is described or framed. Within this context the creation of "artworks" is part of that journey - both a means to effect it and a record of one's individual journey that can be shared with others as markers along the way. The works do not exist to glorify the individual and their creativity in the form of wealth or prestige, but to serve another purpose, one I suspect we would both conceive as a deeper purpose.

There is a primary dilemma - this is not just an internal personal spiritual journey pursued as a private activity, but a life's work which reaches out to a shared public space and audience. And there is secondary dilemma, because that western art audience that it might reasonably be trying to reach is swimming in a completely different paradigm. The majority mainstream culture is increasingly secularised and commercialised, and the majority art culture is even more so. But if a living can be earned, then these dilemmas only really involve matters of "fitting in" to social norms, and none of it stops the spiritual and artistic life from being lived to the full. And although living a modest material life, Paresh had internal riches beyond measure. It is hard to know where to begin.

Paresh was brought up in Bengal in India as the youngest son of his family. His family owned coalmines and initially his father had wanted Paresh to take part in the mining industry. He had the great privilege of being educated at Shantiniketan, the school (and later University) founded by the great Bengali cultural figure Rabindranath Tagore - winner of the Nobel prize for literature after the works were translated into English. The school's raison d'être was centred on the Upanishads, a non-violent directly experienced spiritual life based on the Vedas and embodying reason and respect for others; one section specialised in art and cultural activities. Paresh followed this by some years in a Hindu seminary where he was trained as a priest - a unique background for a western painter! There his guru recognised that he had a devotion to art and encouraged him to travel to the west to study and practice. Despite objections from his father, his mother also encouraged him to come to Edinburgh College of Art where he graduated as a painter.

During late 1940's Paresh studied the sarod with Allauddin Khan, a great master and teacher whose students also included Ravi Shankar, from whom Paresh also learned to play the sitar. According to Fay Chakraborty Paresh could also play the Vina and may have had a Hindu instructor at Shantiniketan. His father, a great connoisseur, had initiated a lifelong passion for Indian classical music. Paresh later became such a profound connoisseur of this tradition in his own right that visiting Indian classical performers, particularly from the Bengali school, made a point of trying to play in front of him on their European tours. His knowledge of this form and his private collection of recordings over a lifetime gave him an unparalleled grounding, understanding and appreciation of its riches. And beyond that, this music became his prime inspiration or window or living reminder into the spiritual soul of India. And it became the prime inspiration or framework for his visual art. He said many times that he was painting Ragas.

I will leave others to cover the full extent of Paresh's life's work as a father of three children, as an accomplished painter or as a distinguished and committed teacher and lecturer of fine art.

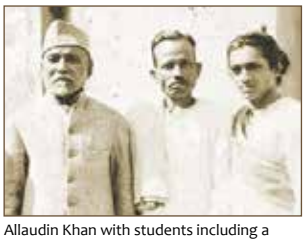
I should mention what we shared together. The core crossover has been mentioned above. Beyond that, we had a link in the belief in the power of abstract imagery, deeply envisioned, to connect us all more directly with truths that are hard to verbalise. Despite education and facility with words, we are both aware that some things can only be accessed or communicated by non-verbal means - hence a shared passion for art and music. I should confess our love for music also stretched to a mutual passion for high-end audio systems, the only area in Paresh's life where he appreciated or sought material artefacts!

Our friendship was mutually enriching. I believe he appreciated my work for its colour and energy - its often Tantric qualities - and its direct connection to the spiritual matters alluded to earlier - unusual within the western art tradition. He could "see" my work through empathetic eyes - he knew or sensed its source, and of course its strong interconnectivity of abstract image and sound was at the core of his own concerns. Some of my videos and imagery also influenced some of his paintings. He loved the video synthesiser I built back in the Seventies, and its ability to allow one to mix in real time the primary sources of white light from the primaries red, green and blue. We shared an appreciation for the connection this made to stained glass practice, which had an obvious historical connection to western religious imagery. I appreciated his prodigious breadth of knowledge, and his deep understanding of classical music, western and eastern, and of spiritual matters, again western or eastern. Being older and far better schooled than I, he became something of a mentor as well as friend. He was the bearer of precious gifts from the East, a pioneer of eclectic, multicultural understanding that seeded our post-modern world, a beacon of deep, committed values of true education, personal respect for all faiths and individual humility.

Peter Donebauer, moving image artist and media entrepreneur February 2015

Ravi Shankar in concert playing a sitar specially designed by himself

Cosmic Dance - an early raga painting by Paresh Chakraborty 1958



Allaudin Khan with students including a young Ravi Shankar on the extreme right

It should be noted that Paresh took delight in an alchemical relationship with his paint. He freely mixed pure pigments and a variety of media in the same painting and was reluctant to define the exact media in any painting. There is also the problem of his unexpected death in determining how the paintings were made and their order.

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

EPIPHANY - NEW RAGA, multiple media on canvas. 129cm x 129cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

TRANSCENDENCE - NEW RAGA, multiple media on canvas. 62cm x 46cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS I, acrylic and oil on canvas. 46cm x 36cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS II, acrylic and other media on canvas. 50.9cm x 40.9cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS III, unknown media on paper. 59cm x 32cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

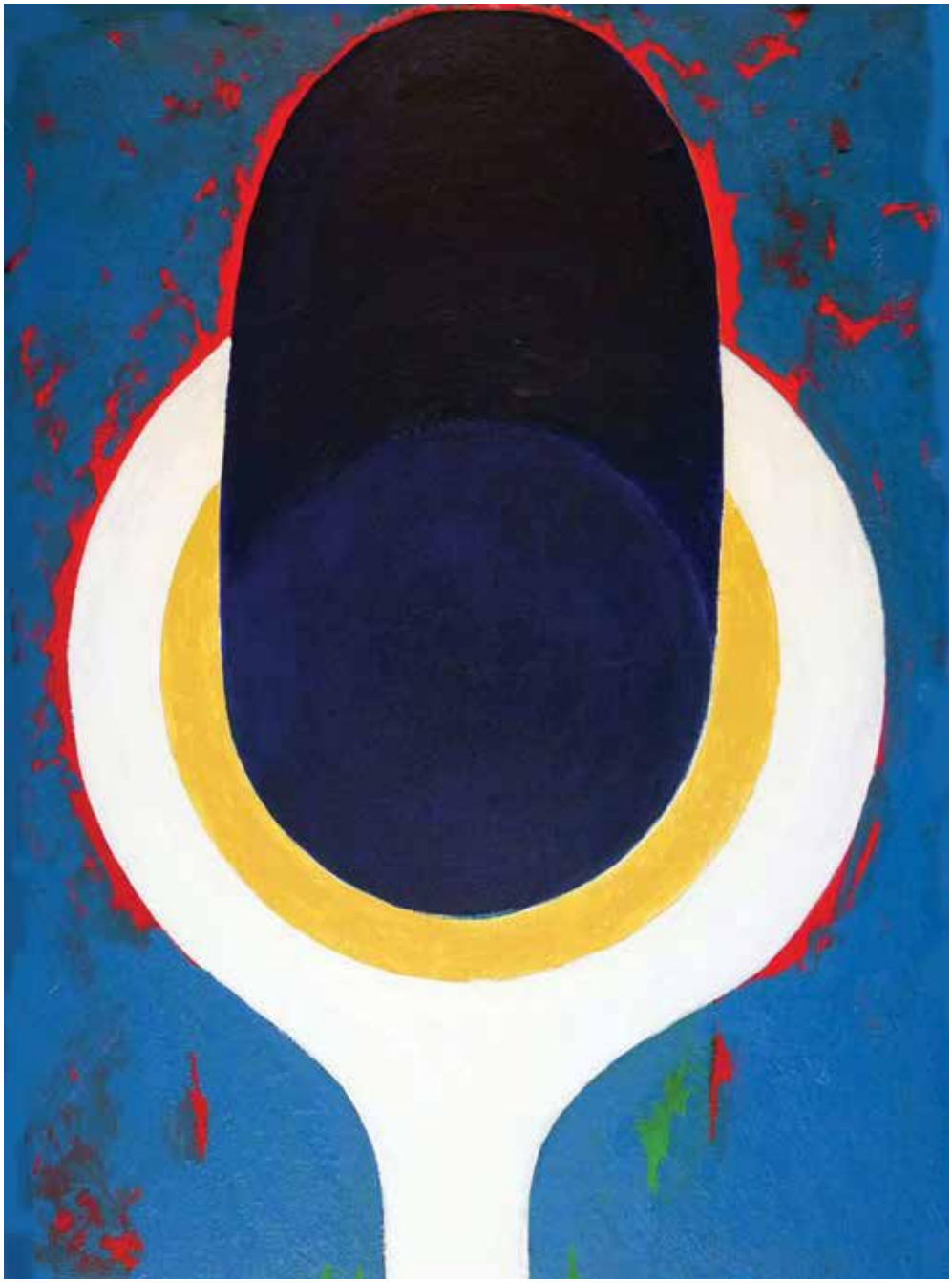
OPUS IV, acylic, ink and pigment on canvas. 67.5cm x 36cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS V, acrylic and other media on canvas . 46cm x 36cm

PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS VI, acrylic and other media on canvas . 46cm x 36cm

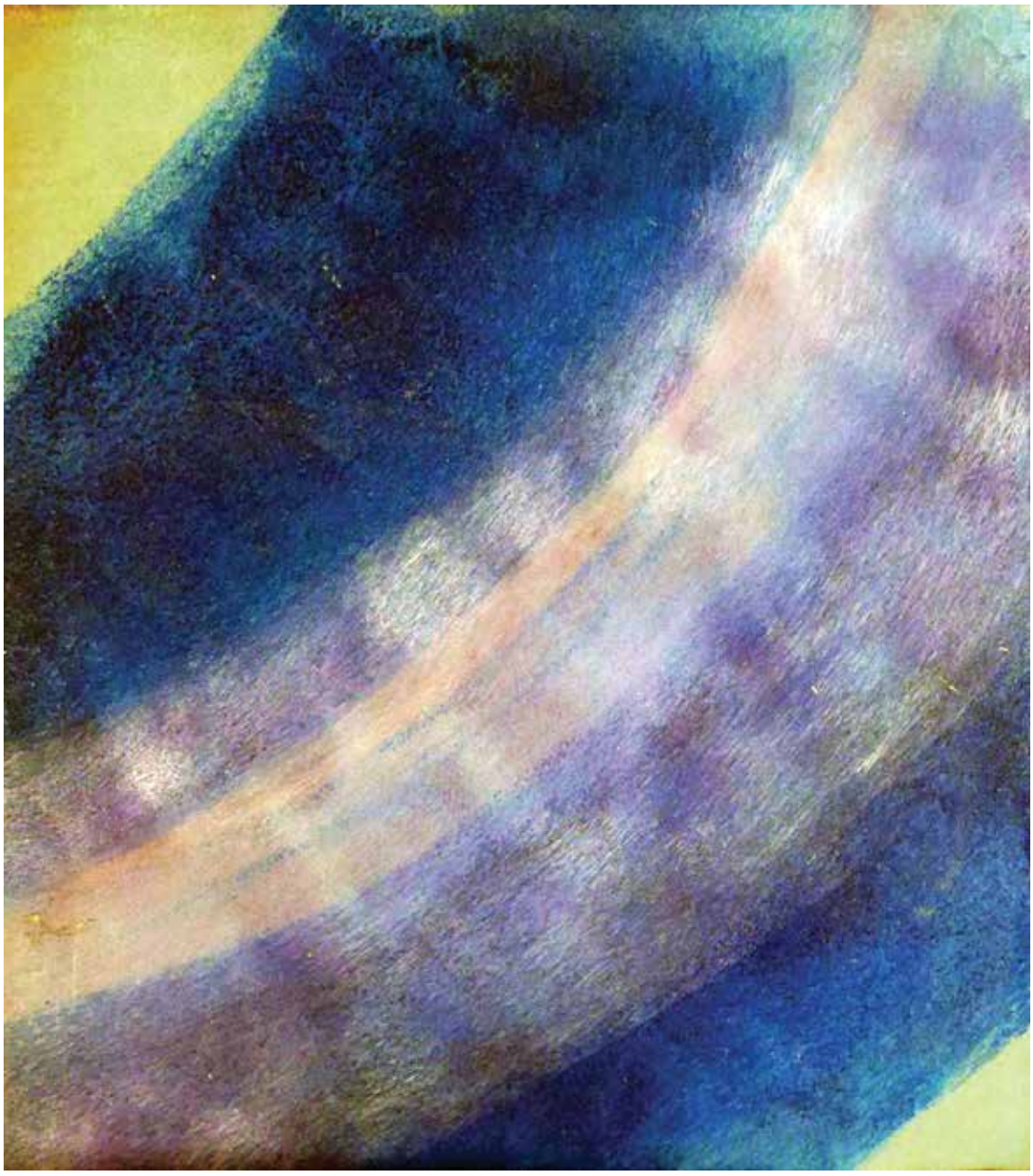


PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS VII, acrylic and other media on canvas . 46cm x 35.9cm

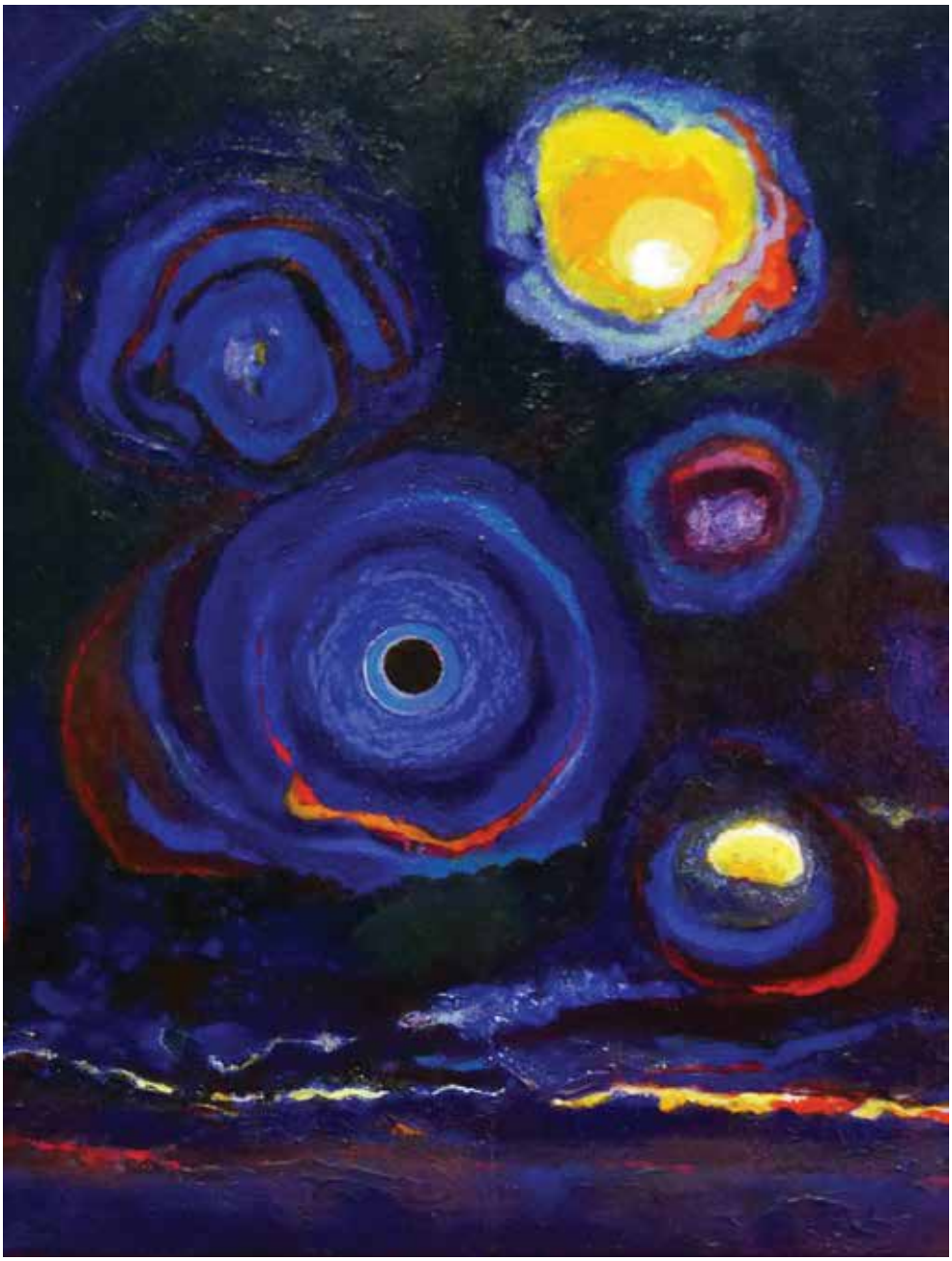
PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS VIII, acrylic and other media on canvas . 21cm x 16cm



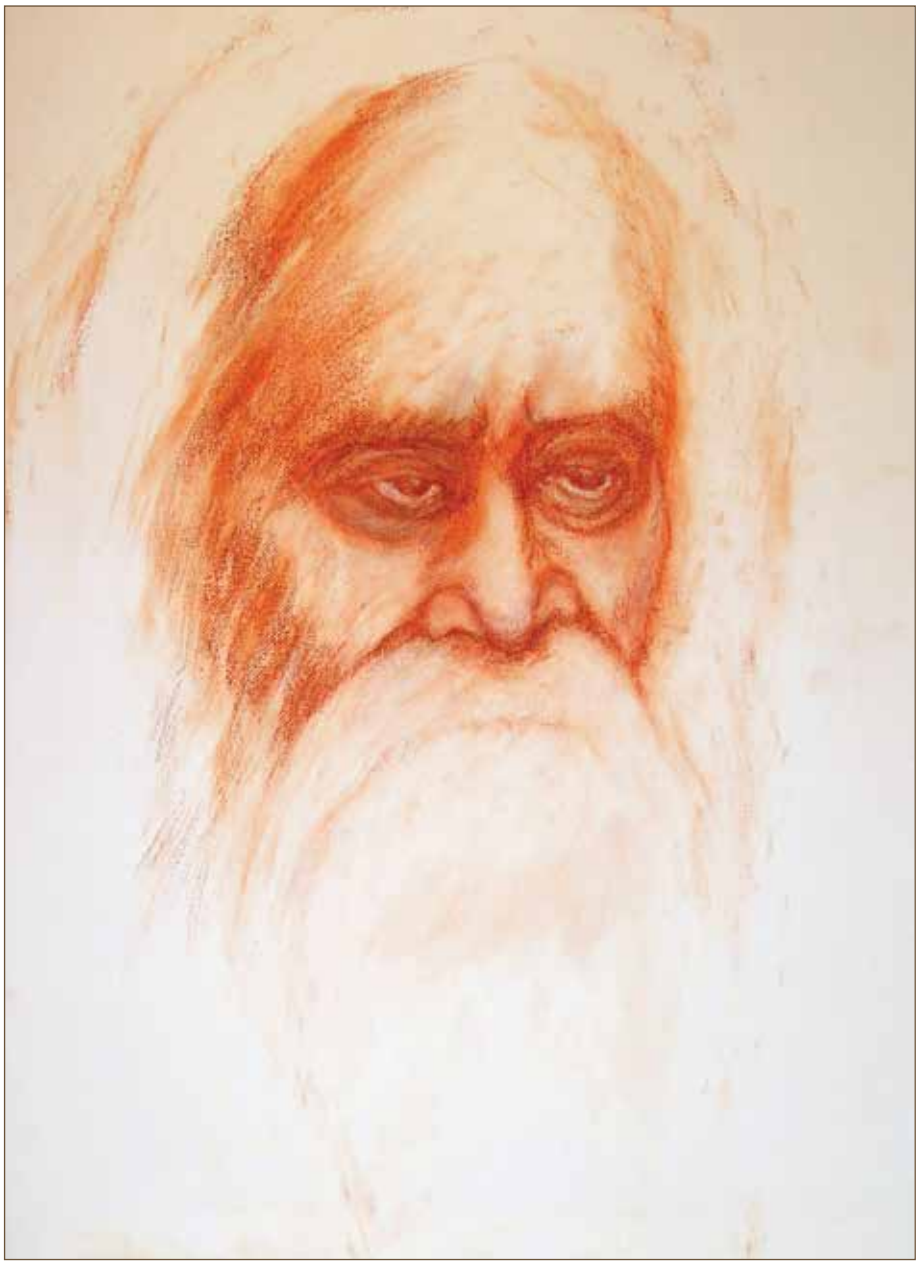
PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS IX, tempra on a tempra ground 23.5cm x 21cm



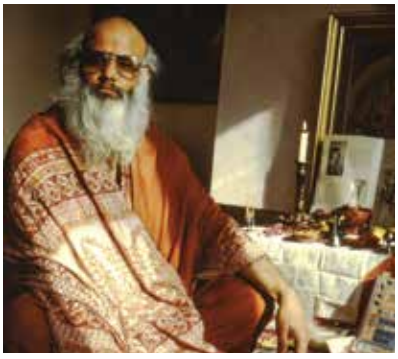
PARESH CHAKRABORTY

OPUS X, oil and other media on canvas. 49cm x 36cm



PARESH CHAKRABORTY

PORTRAIT OF TAGORE, conté on paper. 50cm x 40cm



Paresh Chakraborty

Fay Chakraborty

Puja with portrait of Sri Ramakrishna
by Paresh Chakraborty
Photographs by Paul Marchant

Krishna Colour Festival at Himley Hall near Wolverhampton - Photograph by Paul Marchant