

Maruf Ahmed, Untitled, 2003, oil on canvas, 120 x 260 cm. Collection of The Ministry Of Consumer Affairs.

The Dynamic Witness

Bangladesh has produced a number of fine artists who have taken up residence elsewhere in the world. Maruf Ahmed, 54, is one such artist. He now lives and works in Germany, and makes art that touches not only on the world in which he lives in today, but also that which formed him as a young man. Whether he is making a portrait or a single landscape or abstraction in series, Ahmed's art is a dynamic response to life and his times.

By Osman Jamal

Maruf Ahmed belongs to a small group of Bangladeshi painters living and working abroad who carry into their work the impulse of the revolutionary events of 1971. Naturally, there are differences. Shahabuddin, who participated in the 1971 War of Liberation, however briefly, celebrates the valor of the warrior. In Ahmed's case, his involvement mainly, though not exclusively, in the cultural aspect of the movement is reflected in the boldness and freedom of his experiments, as well as the energy and optimism which characterize his work. The general aesthetic character of inspiration finds its expression in abstraction, though not exclusively. As titles are traditionally related to story-telling content, Ahmed calls his abstract pictures "untitled," refusing even to number them.

Maruf Ahmed was born in 1951 into a cultured family of Mymensing, Bangladesh. He was a mere child when he acted in a Tagore play for the radio and won a prize and a citation from Viswa Bharati, the university founded by Tagore. When he was a student, he took active part in theater and, following the liberation of Bangladesh, acted in a central role in one of the most ambitious films produced on the War of Liberation. He graduated from Dhaka Art College (1973) and went to Germany on a scholarship in 1976. Between 1981 and 1987, he studied at Cologne Technical School of Art and Design under Werner Schriefers.



Maruf Ahmed, Landschaft, 1988, oil on canvas, 124 x 148 cm.

Ahmed now lives with his small family in Bonn and drives to his studio in Cologne. His paintings are bought by art collectors like Udo Lammerting. His canvases hang in the foyers of Globel Insurance Co. in Cologne, the Technology Park in Berhischgladbach, the office of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs in Bonn, and in many other location in cities throughout Germany. In 1998, in a gesture of recognition, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy held a retrospective of his work since 1976. In this connection, a book with reproductions of a wide range of his paintings with a text by Syed Manzurul Islam was published.



Maruf Ahmed, O.T., 1996, oil on canvas, 210 x 290 cm.

Nature is Maruf Ahmed's starting point. However, his treatment of nature has changed radically over the years. In a painting of the early 1980s, nature, though abstracted, is recognizable. But by the mid-1980s objective nature gave way to swirls of color on large canvases. His paintings, in time, became smaller, more concentrated, compact. They give the impression of being meticulously constructed. If action has given way to meditation, it is happening behind consciousness. "When I'm painting, I get so involved in it that, after it is finished, I'm often surprised by some passages in the picture, and I wonder, how did I do that?" If consciousness has little to do with the production of art, it would not be logical to look for philosophy in it. "We need not seek philosophy," says Ahmed. "There is no philosophy. There is nothing to understand. I want to paint a picture. I'm painting a picture. There is a compositional factor. But there is no philosophy. Art is about feeling."

Maruf Ahmed formulates how he approaches a logjam in a painting in progress—when he spots something which troubles him. "This sort of problem comes at a stage when the work seems to be developing well—in composition, color harmony, atmosphere, and so forth—and you notice that there is that area which is not quite right. I come to the studio, but I don't go straight to the work. I sit down in front of the picture, for an hour, two hours, looking at it. A time comes when I feel a certain disturbance and then I see that I have to do some work there... and there. And it all comes from the subconscious. I sometimes say, my emotion does more than my understanding." However, Maruf Ahmed does not deny the role of consciousness in painting.

In his student days in Dhaka, Ahmed was attracted to expressionism as well as to impressionism, for its concern with light and color. Color has remained his dominant passion, the one constant running through the many phases of his development. One might say that he "thinks" with color. He deploys colors as



Maruf Ahmed, Spaziergang, 1991, mixed media, 185 x 154 cm.



Maruf Ahmed, Das Paar, 1995, oil on canvas, 281 x 183 cm.

he finds them, unmixed. "To me red is red, yellow is yellow," and he applies them straight on to the canvas. "The canvas is my palette." And, to apply them to the canvas, he uses brush, spatula, and his fingers. "I want to feel the paint," he says with a gesture of his left thumb. His pictures are composed of layers of pigment, each layer in the archeological construct of a painting contributing to what finally appears on the surface.



Maruf Ahmed, **Untitled,** 1997, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

Maruf Ahmed often develops a theme into series. "When I do a particular kind of painting, I don't do just one or two. I do a large number of them." A series of this kind can be compared to the performances of an Indian classical raga. A raga is defined by a structure of notes in ascent and descent, identifiable by its core tune, called the *pakr* (of the raga). As a raga is not written down in details, a performer is free to improvise. This freedom within a structure allows the performer to produce in his different performances of a raga unpredictable depth and variety. Ragas with a degree of affinity (usually ten) belong to a system that can be seen roughly in terms of the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance.

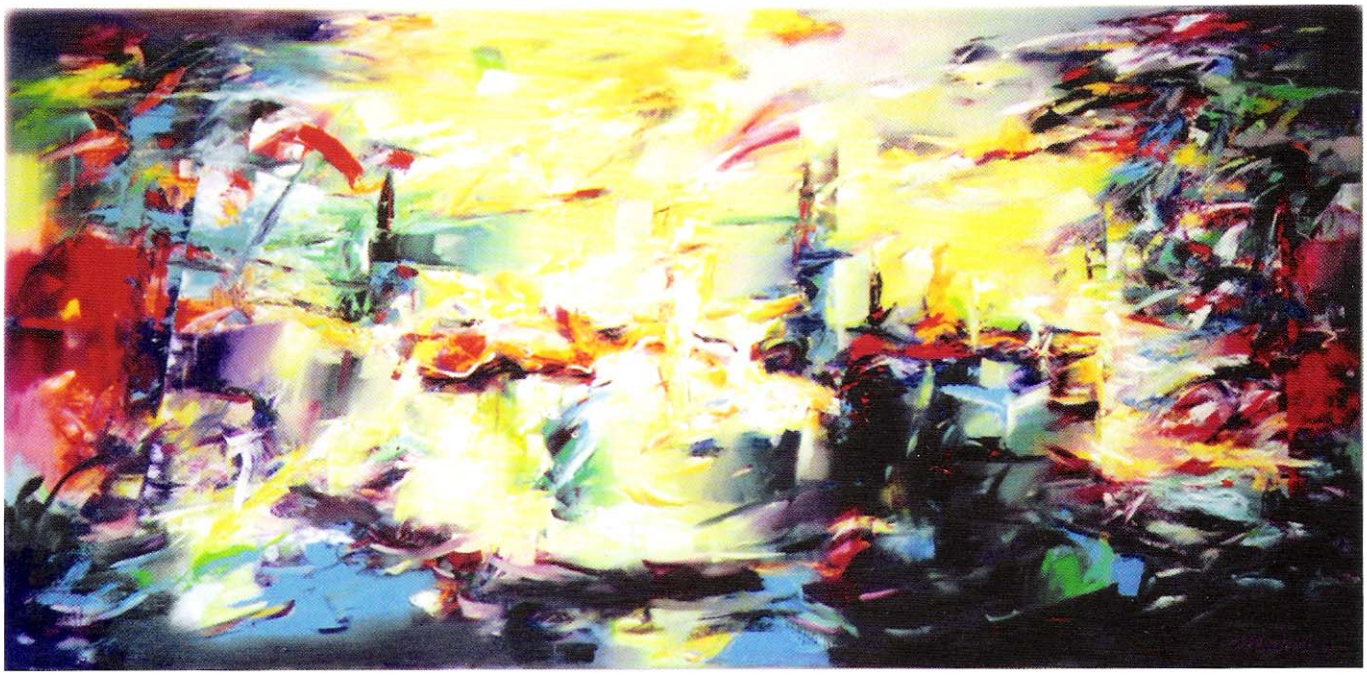
The themes in Maruf Ahmed's work seem to develop in two distinct manners: either a theme is explored in its many aspects in successive versions, though remaining unchanged in its essentials or it may evolve, in course of which the original theme may go through successive stages of development until it decays irretrievably. The first type—the elaboration of a theme—can be seen in terms of what happens to a raga in its many performances. Examples of both types may be found in Ahmed's work of 1999. While the variants of asymmetric cross, reproduced in the catalogue of his 2002 show at Shilpangan, Dhaka, fall within the first category, for the second category we can think of three paintings in the same catalogue. The first one is an architectural form composed of rectangular blocks with a solar form on top right. The second and the third, vertically arranged on another page, can be thought of as stages in progressive collapse and decay. There is only one block left in the second of the three, which then collapses and melts away in the third image, though they retain an iden-



Maruf Ahmed, **Untitled,** 2002, oil on canvas, 260 x 180 cm.



Maruf Ahmed, **Untitled,** 1999, oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm.



Maruf Ahmed, Untitled, 2003, oil on canvas, 200 x 400 cm. In the foyer of the Technology Park in Bergischgladbach. Collection of Udo Lammerting.

tity of some kind through decaying form and texture of paint.

Finally, a glance at the evolution of his work during the past decade. The first signs of what was to develop into a major theme appear in 1994 as a row of verticals on paper. Though the ovoids or humanoid figures of 1995 signal a qualitative change, the following year the verticals return on a grand scale, now entirely covered by bursts of brilliant warm colors. Initially, whether a certain angst in the brushwork or sublimated aggression in bits of random scouring with a sharp point are reflections of an existential situation or simply stylistic features, these expressive gestures generally disappear in their later manifestations. These joyous celebratory canvases continued to be produced over some years, though not exclusively. I have already mentioned the two forms which appeared in 1999. A tightly packed gem-like form in ultramarine and red, partially or entirely veiled by white cloud, appear in 2000. In 2002, we find a dramatic break in Maruf Ahmed's work.

Early in 2002, the artist was in Dhaka preparing for his February show at Shilpangan. Back in Germany later that year, he painted a series of large (260 by 180 cm) vertical (portrait) paintings with columns of yellow or white flame along the middle of the image. In one version, the head of a wooden crucifix behind the flame tilts forward to emerge through the sheet of fire. In another, a charred [?], rickety form of a crucifix is visible through the fire. There is about these crucifixes (probably representing suffering humanity) a tragic grandeur and vulnerability. In 2003, he painted a series of horizontal (landscape) canvases. What is probably the earliest of the three available versions of the series shows tree forms at two ends of the canvas pulled by a cyclone towards the center in which feathery missiles fly. In a development of the theme on larger canvases (200 by 400 cm), shards in reds and green fly in the air, as it were, after some sort of destruction. In another canvas of the series, there is a shadowy human form, its arms stretched out as of a battered crucifix, in three-quarter profile. These powerful images of what appears to be an apocalyptic vision bear witness to modernism's undiminished strength, vitality, and relevance to our time. Δ



Maruf Ahmed, Untitled, 2002, oil on canvas, 190 x 155 cm.

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