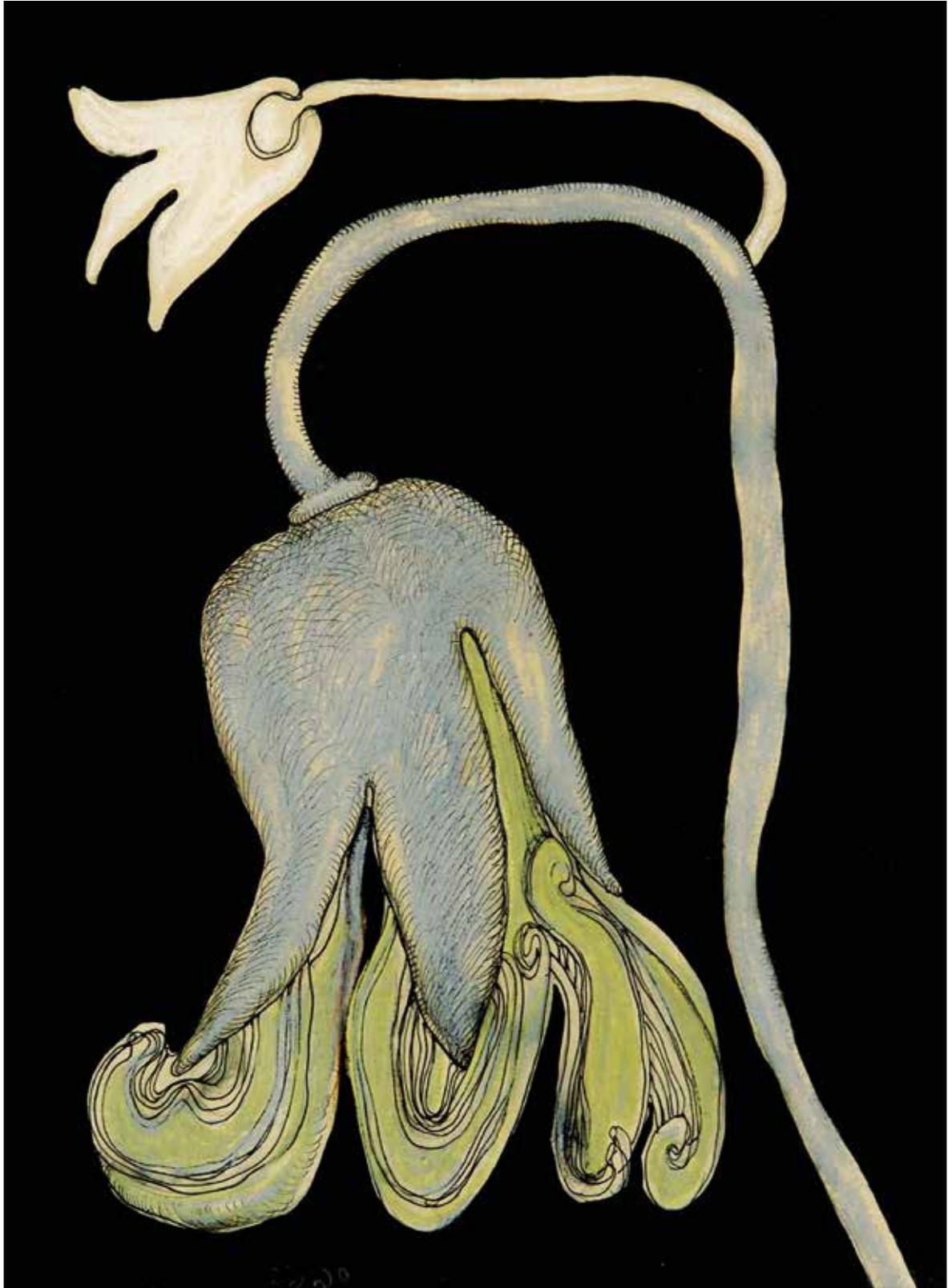


# The Afterlife of Silence



Flower in Grey, 1990

# The Afterlife of Silence

STILL LIVES OF JOGEN CHOWDHURY

ANURADHA GHOSH

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For Samindra



Creepers and the Fruit, 2016



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# INTRODUCTION

## Still Life: Regional Negotiations

An attempt to approach the series of still life paintings by one of the most celebrated Indian artists of our times is accompanied by a related peril. There would invariably be this very tempting possibility to actually overwrite, to forge connections that may be artificially historicist, even to lean much on theoretical formulations of other shores, the meaning of which may get mediated as they travel to distant and distinct cultural contexts. The problem lies in the subject itself, which owes even its very name to a European connection.<sup>1</sup> Still life, at its basics, is an artwork's subject that does not move: technically, though, no painting moves, at least on a practical, visual level—that is why all artworks are visual texts that owe their perceived animation to a number of cultural and emotional factors that are almost collaborators to both the painter and the viewer. The non-movement of still life—its stillness, as it were—is wound up with the simple fact that the subjects, as they occur in real life, are not capable of movement without external intervention. These are without organismic life as well, being objects of daily encounter that surround us, and in most cases, do not merit close attention because of their commonness and ready availability. We are hardly likely to remember the exact pattern of flowers that borders the china cup in which we take our morning tea: this is the story of the invisibility that is shared by the common, the unspectacular

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1 Stillleven, or still-leven is a Flemish term which came to be applied in the mid-17th century to paintings which treated with primal focus arrangements of objects on a flat surface. 'In the Dutch art jargon of the 17th century, *leven* (life or nature) simply meant "model" or "living model"; *still*, of course, meant "motionless". *Still-leven*, then, in contradistinction to the painting of figures or animals, was the painting of things incapable of moving.' Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 63.

and the repetitive. Still life, thus, is technically without life, without animation; even the still lifes of flowers (so significantly central to Dutch still life) need to have subjects that are cut off from their life-giving source, the plant itself. Similar, too, is the case with fruits, which are cut off primarily for consumption and are thus already facing impending deadness.

Deadness and life, thus, come together in a significant manner in any discourse concerning still life. While as independent objects, the still life forms are without life and without animation, are non-spectacular specimens usually connected with daily habit, as subjects of artwork their import is radically transformed. For one, the choice of a common, unregarded form for artistic treatment is itself indicative of a certain regard—a cup, for example, becomes *the cup*—and this calls forth important readjustments in the viewers' visual habits. In a way, thus, still life is about the initiation of the non-living object to an artistic life, a displacement from objecthood to subjecthood, from near-invisibility to exclusive focus.

Here we are dealing with a form which already has a long line of established history in the Western context and its own conceptual space has been transcribed by conventions belonging to successive ages and differing national cultures. But at the same time we are trying to understand what an Indian painter, with his postcolonial situatedness, makes of it. It would have been a pitfall of some magnitude, as often happens in certain cross-cultural studies, to have considered the form, surrounded by and embedded in all its conventions, as *a priori*, suspended in some kind of fixity in western critical space, had it not been for the particular context of Jogen Chowdhury himself. Chowdhury's interest in, and exposure to, European art history and art practice, especially the Western modernist temper and above all, his situatedness in a postcolonial culture, would go on to rescue any such historicist tendencies from the blame of inanity. We would do well to remember that the European tradition of art and its distinctive ways of engaging with the visual had entered his life early enough, with his formal training as a student in the Government College of Art. The curriculum focused almost exclusively on Western art techniques; even the study of still life, a part of the lessons in academic realism, involved patterns of composition based on traditional European still life, with objects equally predictable. The students were

required to copy, in the illusionist mode, objects like pots, vessels, jars, with some drapery as background, echoing neatly the range of items traditionally favoured as elements of still life, although their historical moorings to specifics of time and space, regionality or culture were never discussed. It was only later—during his years at Paris—that Jogen Chowdhury could closely relate to the art historical background of still life as well as its place in the Western discourse of modernism. These interfaces are of especial importance as we are primarily concerned with the 20th century still life here, and what our times have made of the form that seems to have existed forever. Still life has travelled both in time and space—and this applies to theory *and* artistic practice—and had attracted and generated multiple discourses before arriving at our times. In a sense *our* time also means a *shared* time, beyond our cultural locatedness, with the glocal inscribing our habits of thought with complex internal negotiations. *Negotiation*, thus, between cultures, between identities, becomes a significant way in which an artist reinvents himself in these times, and is an area this book would be significantly premised on.

Seen at its simplest, the twin features of deadness and non-movement that invariably latch on to the very concept of still life have proved themselves to be extremely adaptable to the discourse/s of modernity, and this is what justifies the central focus it is seen to enjoy in art practices closer to our own times. These are powerful tropes, and their inherently symbolic charge has been utilised extensively, along idiosyncratic lines, in the context of Western art. Jogen Chowdhury's still lifes deploy these in unique and enigmatic ways. As a matter of fact these bear what is at best a tenuous resemblance to their 20th century Western counterparts, yet, paradoxically, are connected by a common resonance. These are brought together by similar attempts to destructure the object in order to discover significant forms that perform as visual correlatives to the way we perceive lived life. The manner in which not only our life—but the way we look at it—has changed, holds the cue to the corresponding change in the artistic idiom as well. That is possibly why still life, as a cultural product, shaped and inscribed by the history of both the individual and the community, of the lived moment and beyond, have existed at the cross-roads of the temporal and the spatial. It is true that there is an element of unfinalisability to such change, and it is at best non-uniform

across nations and cultures. Now that we have inherited a shared universe of ideas, of experiences, much of which may not specifically be our own, the sharpness of diversity has been somewhat mellowed by several kinds of interpermeations. If we, for the sake of simplification, shed considerations of pastness now, except for historical referencing, and focus only on the present, we are left with a space inscribed by cultures which answer to the changing conditions of experience in ways which are distinct yet interconnected. This is partially evidenced by the way artistic practice had continued to distance the objects of still life from their moorings to reality, closer to our own times. Often the existence of such a mooring is at best tenuous. The object performs visual representation of a variant reality, a variant system of meaning, and unambiguously—unapologetically as well—refers to something *beyond* itself. *Culture* itself has become a contested space in our own times, with its locatedness mediated by interventions of the global, and when we are specifically referring to art and music there is always this inherent assumption of a shared universe of both origin and impact. But this structure of sharing is also inscribed by the privileging of the dominant discourse (in which the West still straddles like a patriarch) as also by the reaction to the perception of such privileging. This is precisely why it is extremely challenging to work with the paintings of an artist like Jogen Chowdhury, whose art is universally recognised to be deeply rooted to the indigenous, yet who had always been sensitive to the western artistic traditions. We know that Jogen Chowdhury is well-travelled, and is recognised for his receptivity and interest in the way contemporary art had been reinventing itself all around the world. Early in his life, in 1965, Chowdhury went to Paris on a scholarship, and during this time went on to visit certain countries in Europe, and their museums and significant galleries, and had already developed distinct preferences for the works of some artists. In an interview with R. Siva Kumar, Chowdhury fondly remembers visiting the huge Picasso Exhibition organised by Andre Malroux and talks about his enduring fascination with Picasso; he also mentions his special interest in the works of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Matisse, Rouault, Paul Klee, Rousseau and Dali.<sup>2</sup> Cezanne, the key figure in the history of the modern

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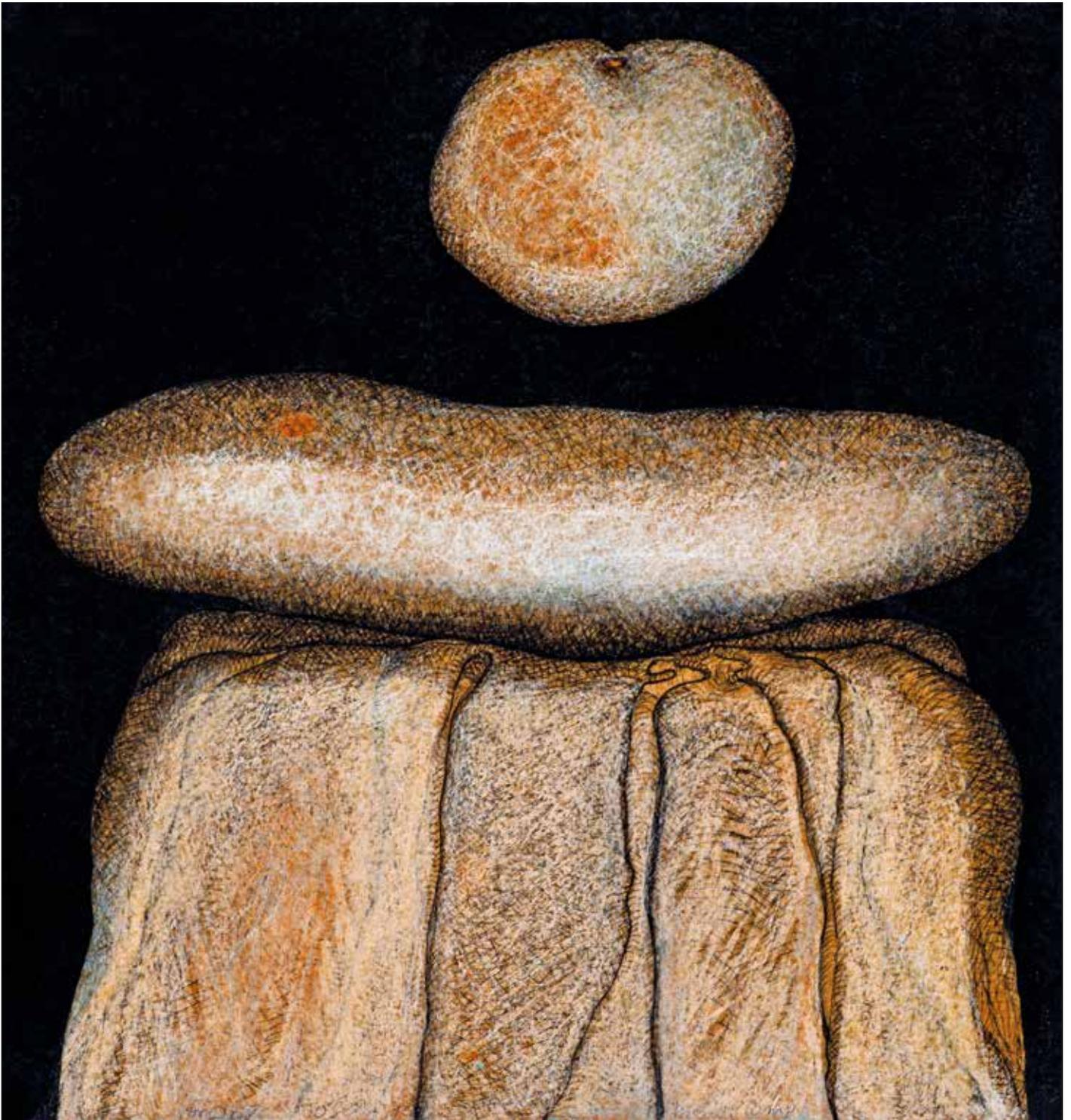
2 R. Sivakumar, 'Images of Experience: an Interview with Jogen Chowdhury' in exh. cat. of *Jogen: Oils and Drawings 1969-1996* (Kolkata: Centre of International Modern Art, 1996), p. 16.

still life, had also been a particular favourite; on numerous occasions he has referred to his love for Cezanne's works. But this is only one part of the whole story, this exposure to the artworks of the European masters, which, we may argue, could have been achieved by reproductions as well. The impact then would be on a lesser scale perhaps, minus the awe that the actual, physical closeness to any historically celebrated artwork is always programmed to produce; minus the *aura*, too, to use Benjamin's inevitable term.<sup>3</sup> A better way to understand how the West had impacted his artistic universe of ideas would be to consider the manner in which Chowdhury saw firsthand, and related to, the workings of the visual language of Western modernity, in his studio practice, his social interaction with contemporaries, and, of course, his visits to museums and galleries. It was, after all, his first interface with a shared universe of ideas that uniquely belongs to a community unified by art practice that often manages to go beyond the specifics of time and place. In fact, this was also the time when his close brush with western culture resulted in a deep sense of unrest, 'Where should I locate myself between my indigenous setting and the foreign influences that had come our way?',<sup>4</sup> which initiated his search for a unique idiom for creative self-expression that ultimately latched on to his own society, to Indian lifestyle and culture. He had, by this time, already sensed the referents that his creative impulse instinctively answered to. This phase saw, to randomly borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha, his keen preoccupation to figure out 'the location of culture' that his identity actively embodied.

The consideration of the series itself brings about a methodological complication because of its locational specificities. As we have already noted, still life has a long and continuing presence in the tradition of European art history: the European tradition of still life, premised principally upon the ways in which a society handles its material culture, is almost inextricably interskeined with the history, cultural politics, and systems of economy of several nations,

3 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art...by making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 221.

4 Jogen Chowdhury, 'About my Painting', in *Jogen Chowdhury: Enigmatic Visions* (Jihoji Himeji: Glenbarra Art Museum, 2005), p. 54.



Reminiscences of a Dream-b, 1977

during different historical periods. These diverse threads had been firmly there before the 20th century adaptations of the still life came about and shook up the fixities and conventions, recalibrating its very concept. Thus, while discussing still life in the Indian context—especially in the context of an Indian artist whose major body of work is professedly referenced to a located culture, which is both temporally and geographically distant from the timeline of the traditional European still life—there is always the imperative to negotiate with that unconscious theoretical conditioning and reformulate areas of received thought. This does not involve what we would call unlearning, though. That which is inherently diachronic can significantly aid understanding and interpretation, even if we are jumping continents. In fact this is exactly why a close look should be taken at the way the tradition comes together in history. A consideration of the very architectonics of the process through which the still life moves from being a real-life object to a referent of its times, inscribed by the sociocultural, the political, even the economic, would be an exercise in relating the semiotic and the semantic in the specific context of the non-moving object, and this is precisely the point that justifies its need. The formulations relating to still life- developed over time by the closely-related yet distinct spaces of art history and criticism also radically alter our perceptions of objecthood in the range of their representations. In this context, it is also important to remind ourselves that the perceptual value of still life as a coherent category still stands its ground. These artworks are unified as a series not only within the conceptual confines of art history and criticism, but beyond it, in the area of actual art practice, connected primarily by the somewhat unvaried nature of objects chosen for representation. The significant rhythms of variation are connected to locationality and the historical moment of production, the close study of which can only expand the semantic register of the series. The cultural charge carried by the very act of representation imposes new and transformative significations and relational patterns on the objects, thereby cancelling their pre-representational identity: it is, as if, these cease to exist outside the context of the artwork. In fact in certain cases they actually don't, in observable real-life terms: as an instance one only has to look at Dutch flower painting, immensely popular in its own times. These often represent bouquets with flowers that bloom at different seasons,



Flower Vase, 1998

therefore, in realistic terms, it is impossible for them to coexist. None of these are wild flowers—most require expert horticultural care for their sustenance and healthy blooming, not a simple pastoral one. In a way, then, these flowers refer more to culture than nature, and also to the wealth of the patron—for these were expensive commodities then, especially the rare varieties (and also certain species of tulips during the height of Dutch tulipmania). Flowers as still life are therefore displaced from the space of nature and are made to inhabit a complex social matrix referenced to both contemporary culture and economics. In a similar manner, Jogen Chowdhury's flowers are also culturally nuanced—all of these are drawn from common species of flowers in Bengal, which flourish on their own, without care or with very little care. The recognisable flowers that recur in his works are common ones such as the lotus or the datura, which bloom unattended within the space of nature, have little or no exchange value and refer to a society that is still in tune with its rural-pastoral past.

Still life, considered as a series (the term genre has been carefully avoided, for reasons that will be explored later), has thus been historically related to a broad perceptual area with its locus tentatively fixed on the objects related to man's material existence and the habitual, unremarkable tales that these generate. These are connected to what has been designated as low plane reality; 'low', often as oppositional to religious art, or to history/landscape painting. Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses*<sup>5</sup> confirmed the contention of still life's position at the very bottom of the hierarchy of genres, below portraiture and landscape, even below animal painting: the highest was, of course, history painting. This hierarchy, apparently based on the choice of subject, owes more to the construction by ideology (which often dictates, and shapes, the modes of cultural consumption). There are hardly any observable high points of drama or crests of conflict, instead, there is the often unvaried knownness of it all in the accessories necessary for the continuation of man's creatural life. As the gradedness of taste, and the consensus that justifies and fixes it, are both products of cultural ideology, any adequate reading of still life needs to relate to other worlds, other words, not necessarily invoked by its immediate

5 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1975), p. 52.

visual field. This is somewhat true for all forms, all categories of art, but is an imperative when it comes to a consideration of still lifes. This is probably why still life, as a category, has always had unstable boundaries as so much of its reach extends beyond the immediate visual field. The interface between cultural embeddedness and that deep outreach into historical space (as the unvaried nature of objects always replicates themselves—cups, plates, vases, flowers and fruits have existed forever), freed of connotation and context, creates a space of versatility that lends itself to experiments of all manner.

There is subversion, even violation, of these conventions<sup>6</sup> as we pass along the 400-odd years of history of the still life, and arrive closer to our own times, to the modern still life; yet there is an ingrained continuity as well, which is often intertextual. It is interesting to note that though the human figure is banished from the space of still life (and that is probably one of the impulses that relegated it to the lowest position in the hierarchy of considered genres, because of its implied violation of the ideological centrality of the human being in the scheme of created life), still life is almost invariably defined by the human touch, by its implicit accessibility to people close by, hovering just beyond the perceptual field of a given artwork. These are the objects that are handled on an everyday basis, inattentively and often unconsciously, and derive their significance from this element of human touch, which is habitual and undramatic. It is, as if, the narrative of these objects, regularly accessed, yet unregarded, reabsorbs the viewers of the artworks within that conceptual community of people down the ages who have done just that—used things, touched stuff, without consciously registering their presence. What connects the user and the objects are, therefore, an unconscious bond, an unconscious relationship as it were, that is unfocused and considerably free from interventions of thought or feeling. The smallness or commonness that still life concerns itself with, therefore, carries an interesting undernote

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6 Dali clearly invokes the tradition of 17th-century still-life painting in his *A Basket of Bread* of 1926, especially Francisco de Zurbaran's *Young Virgin*, alluding to the latter's depiction of a basket containing a folded white cloth, but replacing the sense of peaceful placidity in Zurbaran's work with just the opposite: a clear temper of unrest deliberately created by the arrangement of pieces of broken bread, subverting thus the seamlessly reassuring circle of religious faith and the ceremony of the holy Eucharist. See Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997), p. 106.

of contradiction. These are usually set in, and are seen to belong to, the space of the interior and the domestic that presupposes a certain sense of intimacy, an area of unremarkable and repetitive, often reassuring rhythms that often resist the dramatic rise and fall in the destinies of great men, even entire societies and nations. Yet there is no *real* intimacy between the implied human presence and the inanimate objects. In most instances these inhabit an area of easy familiarity, invisible almost, which most objects relating to habit are seen to be. It is as if the act of handling, of touch itself, instead of absorbing the elements within a space of relationship, constantly and infinitely defers intimate knowledge and the possibility of relationship. Yet it is imperative for us to note that it is the very existence of still life as a series, with its sharp focus on objects only half-observed in actual life, with its steady and often dramatic gaze, even the manners of arrangement both in domestic and studio space, and most certainly the use of light and perspective, that drives home the full force of this deferral. Representations of still life with their minutiae of objecthood alert the viewers to the fact that they had only partially seen or *known* these before, in the context of their lives. Yet these overlooked objects and their unremarkable tales of familiarity at times contain an antithetical discourse. The familiar is often transformed into the unusual and the exalted, especially when the object/s carries the tactile impress of personal and emotional history. Interestingly, this individualising process can be understood clearly enough when we refer to Jogen Chowdhury's still lifes: in his works with bedclothes, for example, a pillow is actually *the* pillow, one that is not interchangeable with any other, as it has now found its firm place not only among the artist's memorabilia, but has become a component of the artist's landscape of sensibility. It exists both as itself and as a trope, and therefore inhabits a variant dramatic space where the emotional ownership of the familiar—which is both anterior to and concurrent with the moment of representation (as both the pillow and the painted image of it are inscribed by the emotions of the artist)—rescues it from the realm of undifferentiated commonness.

It can be clearly seen, therefore, that still life (even the traditional still life, with all its illusionist apparatus) does not depict the *real* object, the one/s to which it seems to be referenced. The reality is mediated at many levels by

complex relationships between the artist as an individual carrying his own emotional history and the temper of the times and the community. Thus still life almost always implies a closed narrative system, a coded set almost, its meaning embedded deep in the interface between the artist and his times, which often carries moral or ethical undernotes.<sup>7</sup> Thus what primarily appears as *real* in still life is often an abstract vehicle of signification, which derives its meaning from thoughtful and non-arbitrary arrangement and composition within the space and context of the artwork and is empty beyond it. When Juan Sanchez Cotan, in 17th-century Spain, paints *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*<sup>8</sup> with a strict geometric rigour, he distances the vegetables from their original connotation of nourishment and connects them to a monastic space of non-desire; he is playing with our habitual responses to known forms, and is also egging us on to refocus our attention to their altered identity. And it is precisely this abiding quality—the essential abstracting of meaning of an object as it travels from its natural siting in reality to a nuanced representation within pictorial space—that has assured still life the centrality it enjoys in the context of 20th century art practice. Also, having inhabited a rather unsung area for most of the span of its history, it had not been subjected to fixities of representational rules and formulations (this is one reason for which it has been called a *series* here, instead of a *genre*). This, coupled with the fact that the objects, or the composition of objects frequently operate as signs instead of signifiers—as their relation to the notional signifieds is repeatedly mediated and renegotiated by mazes of culture and ideology—are the principal reasons behind its easy adoption within the discourse of modernity. Another point to

7 For example, in 17th-century Dutch still life, especially the famous banquet-pieces, the broad hint of abundance cannot be missed (during this period Netherlands became the richest nation in all of Europe); but the other point that is unmissable as well, is the sense of waste associated with overabundance in a number of works. It is the semantic displacement of the central motif—food—that is made to move over from its rightful and logical space of nutrition and wholesomeness to the area of uselessness and waste that generates a certain unease that is underpinned by a vague sense of the immoral. William Claesz Heda's *Breakfast Piece* is concerned more with litter and waste than with food; even apart from the ethical position regarding wastefulness that is clearly implied, the image of disorder seems to connect to a culture of consumption, which is still unsure about how to deal with its surplus.

8 For an engaging analysis of Cotan's cantarero still lifes, especially *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, see Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1990), pp. 63–70.