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In the Schools of World and Nature



Teenage Painter

Manoj Dutta belongs to the generation of artists who launched their creative career around the late 1970s. The new trends of Bengal art that had emerged in the works of the artists of the sixties continued to grow from strength to strength through the seventies and eighties. Many of the sixties' artists became well-known within India and had a major influence on the artists of the following decades. While the senior artists had no consciously set agenda, they generally avoided two pitfalls noticed in the practice of earlier generations. First, they neither consciously sought any aggressive modernist 'disorientation' of their art, nor contrived an Indian look for their modernism. Second, they took world art as their heritage and freely drew upon both indigenous and western resources to forge their

personal idiom. Many of them revitalised figurative idiom with fresh formal and expressional content, which was often rooted in their oblique personal response to the realities of their times.

The upcoming artists of the seventies and after were very close to this tenor of art practice, and Manoj was no exception. Yet, Manoj stands apart from the rest of the major names of his generation because of certain basic features exclusive to his art. His unmediated, non-intellectual approach marks his art—both in concept and practice—with a remarkable simplicity that verges on the naïve. This simplicity is neither studied nor derivative. Despite his passionate admiration for folk and tribal art—of which he has at home a sizeable collection, picked up and preserved with love and care—Manoj



Fig. 3.5

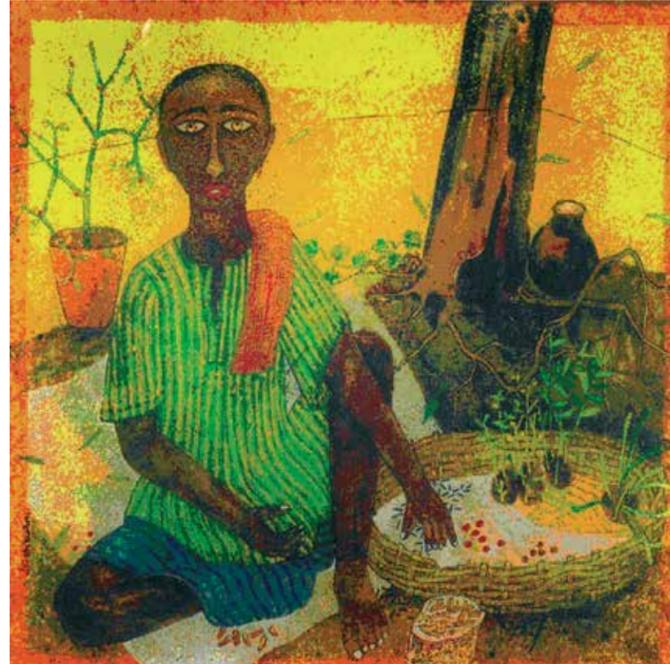


Fig. 3.6



Fig. 3.5
Locksmith
Tempera, 30" x 30", 2007
(Collection: Birla Academy, Kolkata)

Fig. 3.6
Green Seller
Tempera on Board, 36" x 36", 2007

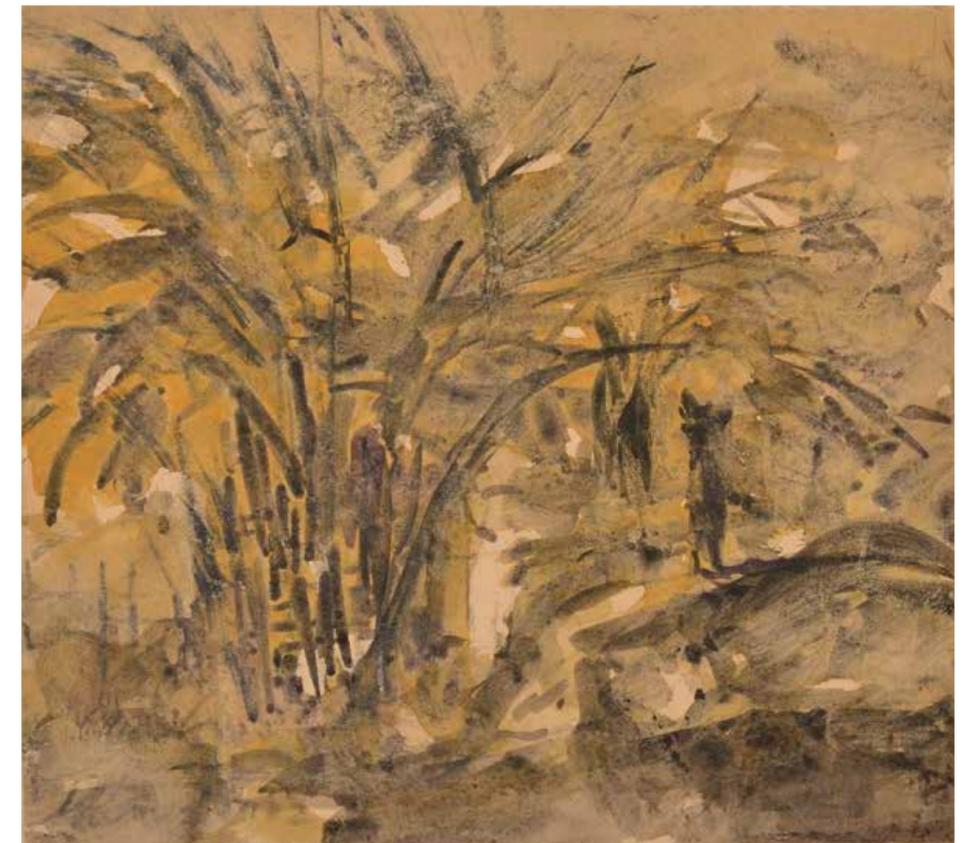
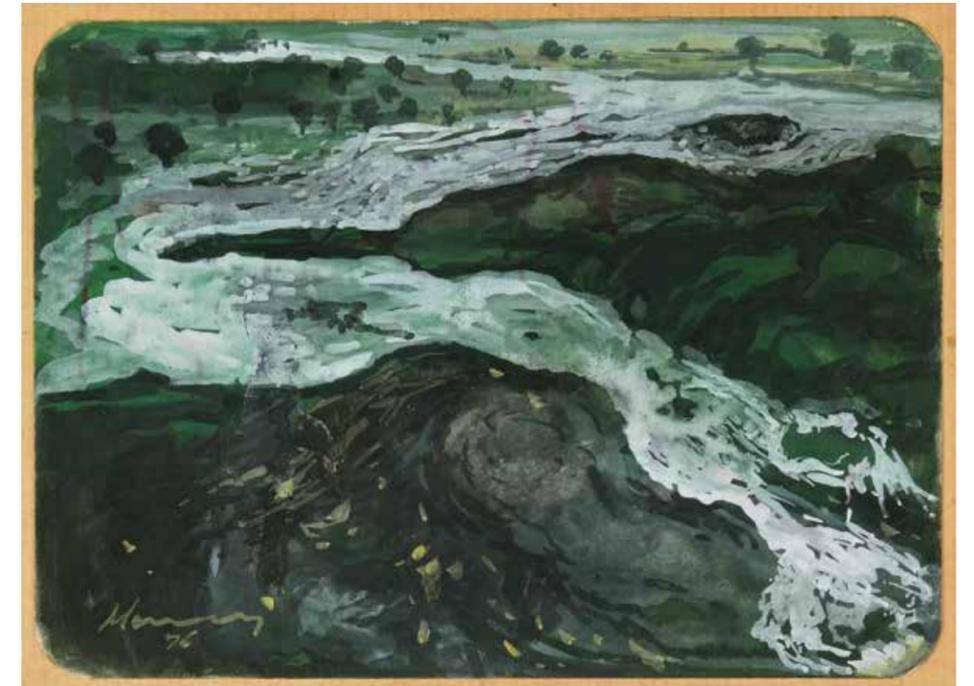
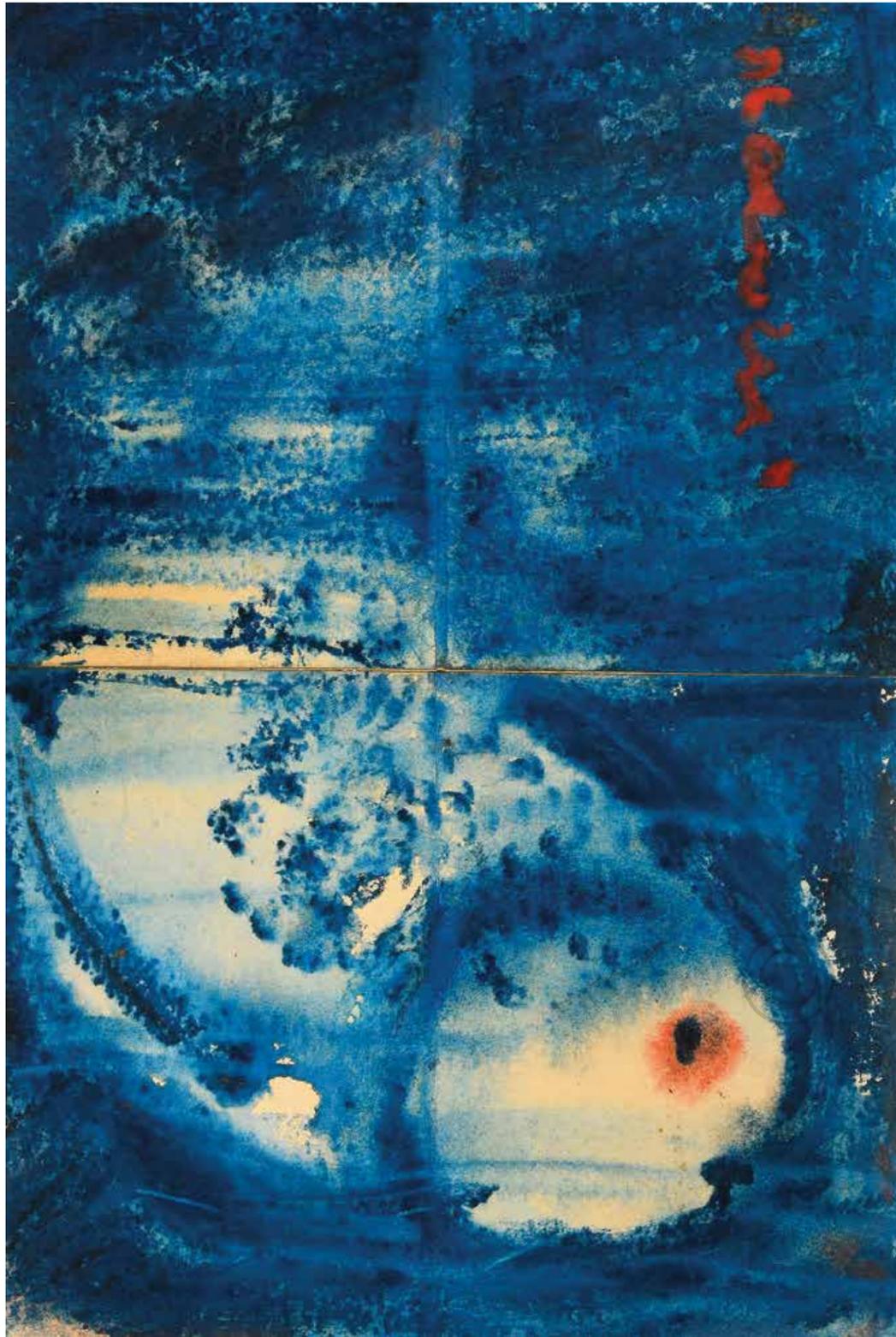
Done in dark oil pastel shades of brown, gloomy grey and Prussian blue, laid in broad, irregular textured strokes, the painting has an interesting structure comprising three rectangles one on the wall, another on the floor and a third, on which the seller sits, is placed atilt across the other two. The young man seems to belong to an abstract world of no humans; there are no takers for what he sells even though he is hopeful, energetically craning his neck in search of customers. The man who runs the evening snack-bar in *The Quayside Seller* (Fig. 3.2) is portrayed more vividly in terms of pictorial quality. The richly textured vibrant shades of warm colours, meticulous details of the seller's striped shirt, trays of neatly arranged alluring snacks, and the red gas cylinder topped with a glassed-in flame brightly lighting the place against the evening darkness—all combine to indicate a fair index to the seller's thriving trade. No less is this evident in the contours of the seller's face, a rustic air about it but brimming with self-confidence. With his animated gesture, he looks straight into the eyes of the viewer, as if ready to take orders from him. Though portrayed with graphic vividness of his rural simplicity, particularly evident in the flat large glowing eyes, the quayside seller is neither a complete storybook character nor entirely devoid of the aura of the artist's imaginative boyhood.

Two temperas, *The Locksmith* (Fig. 3.5) and *Bewildered* (Fig.3.7), illustrate the difference between the two types of character portraits by Manoj. In one, the artist looks at his subject with his boyhood eyes and imagination, a revival of how he had viewed a locksmith when he was a little boy. The other portrays a man whom he meets

now and is curious to probe into what is unknown about him.

The locksmith looks boyish and seems to enjoy his trade. He is in a festive mood as his jolly foolscap shows; he is a children's story character, a wish-fulfilling image of a boy who shuns school and studies and romanticises the life and work of underclass people. Some features in the painting make explicit its fantasy elements. The picture space is divided by a tilted horizontal line, which purportedly defines a roadside edge detailed with a tree and a milestone. The seller is located on a spread of red and yellow on the street, with the keys, locks and the tools neatly set out. To take a naturalistic view of the location, the area beyond the street edge hardly goes with the rest of the picture in terms of space and time. A half-moon close to the ground level, dimly shining through the brilliant screen of yellow mist, defies any representational definition. The void space could be the sky with a deep down horizon, if it were a 75 miles up hillside street (to go by the milestone), which is an unlikely spot for the locksmith to choose to sell his repair service. And why should he at all set up his street trade on a moonlit night? The fantasising is also evident in the piece of red brick bearing the artist's name in relief, as if it's a product of a kiln owned by him.

Most of the many seller/pedlar portraits Manoj has done in the eighties and nineties, and even after 2000, have a strong affinity with *The Locksmith* (Fig. 3.5), both in spirit and form as well as in the empathic handling of the portrayal of the subject. A close parallel to *The Locksmith* (Fig. 3.5) in composition, and pictorial and chromatic scheme



Top
The River
Watercolour on Paper, 5.1" x 6.7", 1976

Bottom
Landscape
Watercolour on paper, 8.6" x 8.2", 1972

Facing page
Under the Water
Watercolour on Paper, 7" x 10.6", 1976