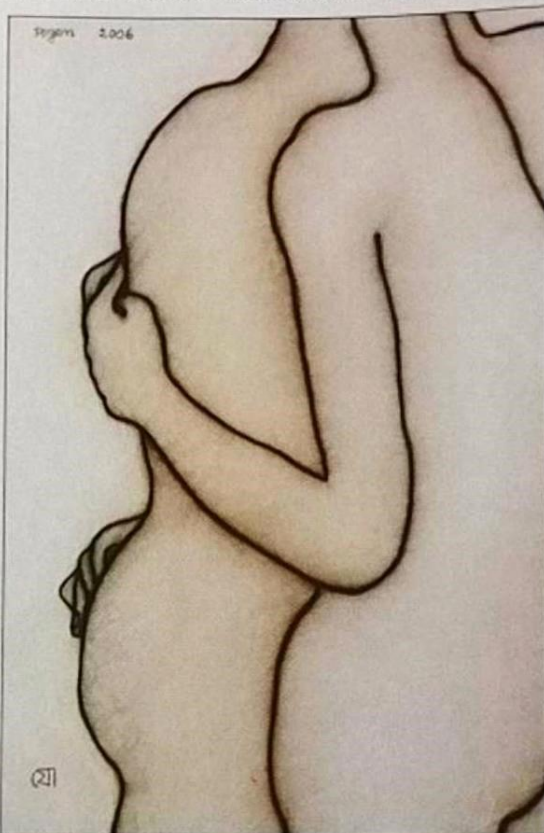
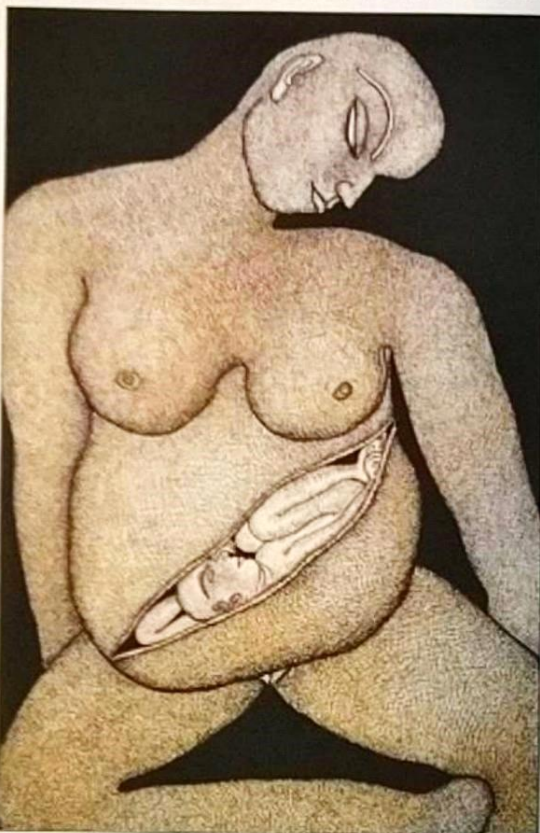


## Step across the line



Pen and ink, pastels and serigraphs flow on in these untitled works

The repetitiveness in Jogen Chowdhury's works is deceptive, says **Sonal Shah**.

Classically, drawing is thought of as a preparatory step to painting. But the question of how drawing itself comes to be classified as art is one that has persisted in Jogen Chowdhury's work for a long time. The artist's current show of recent drawings, paintings and serigraphs at Vadehra is no exception.

Aptly titled *Abahoman*, which Chowdhury translates from Bengali as "Flowing Life", the show flows from genre to genre, between media and a range of moods. All of the works take portraits, figures, plants or animals as their subject matter, but there's a lot of variation between these.

This is a good show, especially for those who may be sceptical about the sometimes repetitive line-drawings by this master from Santiniketan. In fact, he plays with that repetitiveness. Chowdhury

liberates drawing from its definition as just practice for painting that needs to be mindlessly repeated over and over. He delves into the process of drawing, enlarging it, embracing it and doing it again and again to different scales, with different media, until it becomes an independent genre. His large drawings and serigraphs on canvas are typically black-and-white, perhaps with a light buttery yellow or a dusty rose red. In terms of colour, his paintings are also simplistic – unlike the drawings, the background is black and the figures are ochre and etching-filled.

Chowdhury gets away with this monochromatism because of his incredibly strong lines and compositions. "Untitled-IV (Couple)" consists of not more than five to ten black lines, which form two torsos embracing. Yet the incomplete figures on the canvas are charged with a tender eroticism. The curved black line is irrefutably confident and present; it simply cannot be conveyed in any reproduction.

In *Enigmatic Visions*, a book about Chowdhury brought out by Glenbarra Gallery in Japan, the artist admits that there is a sense of incompleteness in drawing, but that he always returns to his "attachment to the line".

Working in tandem with the line is Chowdhury's sensitive composition and relation to his frame. What

**"Grown men sleep, cry and crawl like babies in some of these drawings."**

really makes these works compelling is the way they fit – or don't fit – within the rectangular confines of a canvas. In "Untitled-I", the male figure struggles to squeeze into the frame, his legs twisted and feet contorted as if they were made of rubber. Yet offsetting this is a thin yellow border within the canvas, which creates another, false frame, out of which the figure

extends. Another thin yellow line tentatively transgresses the bold outline of the figure.

Such figures have a fetal vulnerability to them. Grown men sleep, cry and crawl like babies in some of the drawings. However, other paintings that extend out of the borders of the canvas are less agonised. So, even though the subject in "Man - Peeping" has a startled, even shocked expression, the painting has far less tension in it because the figure is allowed to extend in vertical lines.

In contrast to the tense, uncluttered black-and-white drawings, Chowdhury's mixed medium works displayed here are riotously coloured serigraphs and drawings on other artists' invitation cards. These are crowded with blotchy lines and details; a nice way to reuse flat cards from past shows.

Everything in Chowdhury's show breathes with life. A few drawings of exuberant blossoms are reminiscent of Henri Matisse cut-outs. One vase has a third eye decorating it. "Bird", a drawing of a bird's head, looks more like a human portrait than an animal.

There's plenty here for the painting enthusiast as well. In addition to the small mixed-media works, there are a few large paintings. In particular, an untitled ink painting of a pregnant woman from his "Unborn child" series stands out. When Chowdhury paints red, open slits on his subjects' stomachs, they usually appear as painful gashes, unhealable wounds. In this painting, the slit is simply a view into the contentedly sleeping infant's world – the revelation of life flowing on – otherwise unseen.

Though sometimes criticised for drawing his figures like caricatures rather than as grounded in reality, Chowdhury still makes his art speak of social issues, touching on victims of torture, abuse and rape. The master of the flowing line lets his paintings traverse between pain and joy, bringing each emotion to life on the way. *Abahoman is on until Apr 15 at Vadehra Art Gallery. See Exhibitions.*