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DEFYING LABELS

An exhibition called 'Imprint' attempts to restore Riten Mozumdar's immense legacy

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My introduction to Riten Mozumdar was through Fabindia, New Delhi. It was a fascinating discovery. Displayed at the store were just a few of his creations as most of the collection had been sold out. It was the first time I saw calligraphy being used as prints on fabric. I did buy a bedspread, a specimen of which is included in the display, and two cushion covers. Unfortunately, none of them could be preserved.

The exhibition called "Imprint", at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, hosted by Emami Art in collaboration with Chatterjee & Lal, offers a glimpse into the dynamic world of Mozumdar. Curated by Ushmita Sahu, who has been researching on Mozumdar for several years, "Imprint" is an impeccably mounted exhibition with an exhaustive documentation of his works.

In this exhibition, Sahu has brought together a body of work that spans Mozumdar's entire career and includes photographic materials, texts, lovingly researched and accessed material from various private collections across India, calligraphic paintings on silk, clothes, rugs and much more. The narratives, accompanying the exhibits, add depth and insight into the diverse world of the artist-designer, from the choice of materials to his mastery over mediums and techniques.

A walk through the exhibition unravels the dynamism of the artist. In fact, it is difficult to bind Mozumdar and his work within any hackneyed definition, though he referred to himself as an "artist-sculptor". His experimentation with art began as a student in Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, between 1946 and 1950. Educated in painting, sculpture, design and crafts, by luminaries such as Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee, he was the product of a schooling which equally emphasised on engagement with heritage as well as art and craft being integral to an all-round education.

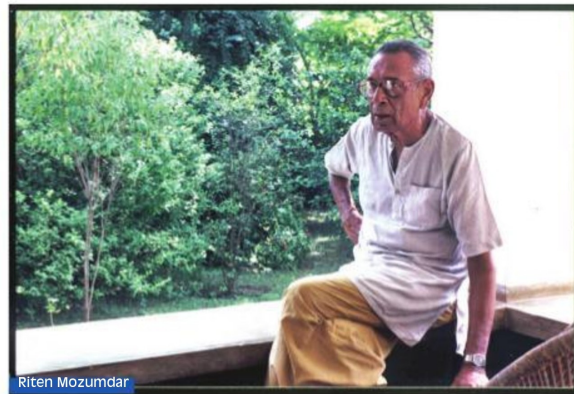
Mozumdar cherished his relationship with Mukherjee, who looked upon him as a son. It was under Mukherjee's guidance that he spent a year in Nepal, training in the traditional crafts and design with master craftsman Kulasundar Shilakarmi. There, Mozumdar developed an appreciation and knowledge of indigenous wood and stone sculpting, metal casting, sheet and beaten metal crafts, banner painting and block making for book-printing.

It was around 1951, when Mozumdar moved to Delhi and then to Mussoorie where Mukherjee had started a summer school and block printing unit. There, both the teacher and student created original block-printed materials, and exhibited several times together, other than with Leela Mukherjee and also Baij in one instance. Talking about him, K G Subramanyan said, "Between 1949 and 1957, he broke on to the Indian art scene with an impressive spate of exhibitions of paintings and sculptures singly or with others."

Reviews of his work helped Mozumdar gain a two-year scholarship to study with sculptor Boris Kalin at the Academy of Fine Arts, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. He also received a grant from Giuseppe Tucci, an Italian scholar of East Asian studies, to visit Italy. After completing his studies, he made his way to Finland and was working at Arabia, a Finnish ceramics company, when Armi Ratia, founder of Printex-Marimekko, discovered him.

Mozumdar worked as a textile designer with Marimekko for a short duration between 1956 and 1957. The designs that he created clearly show a departure in perception and process, moving away from his earlier lyricism towards a crisper, more minimal, pared-down approach.

After Finland, Mozumdar travelled through the United Kingdom and United States, studying sculpture, ceramics and silkscreen, and visiting museums before returning to India in December 1958. Back in India, his originality and distinctiveness gained tremendous appreciation and atten-



Riten Mozumdar



Butterfly dress

tion. He set up a studio, M Prints, in 1959, and within two years, expanded his workshop and employed a large number of workers.

Mozumdar adapted traditional blocks to create contemporary motifs, crafting fabrics, dress materials, furnishings, saris, household linen and much more. It was calligraphy and text that fascinated him as is seen in the numerous documented designs where he adapted Persian, Tibetan, Pali, Devanagari, Sanskrit, Bengali and other scripts.

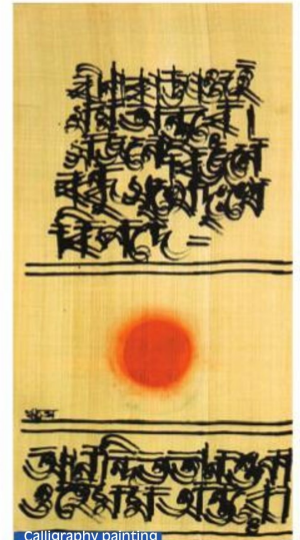
Mozumdar produced a series of designs celebrating text in its purely visual element, and also incorporated images of ancient seals and stamps. He was much ahead of his time in employing visual exegesis and creating new design perspectives. He worked extensively with regional artisans who contributed to his unique and individualistic expressions.

An important phase of Mozumdar's career was his association with Fabindia, which began in 1966 and lasted until 2000. John Bissell, Fabindia's founder, invited him to collaborate to start a line of contemporary designs. Using geometrical shapes

in bold and colourful blocks and silkscreen, he created an exclusive line of household linen that became hugely successful. Meena Chowdhury, former chairperson of Fabindia, said, "As far as Fabindia was concerned, for almost 20 years there was no stopping the kind of desire that people had for these bold statements and designs... I recall people used to wait for the collection every week."

In addition to his many accomplishments, Mozumdar designed garments for his own label, Riten, as well as others such as Design Thai, Bangkok, and predominantly for Bharati Sharma's Pallavi. They were exported to West Asia, Australia and Canada. His clothing lines were simple and striking, with dramatic geometric motifs to create a contemporary allure. Whether for export or the local market, they were made for the independent, modern woman.

In his illustrious career, Mozumdar held various posts, and collaborated with numerous organisations. He returned to Santiniketan in 1988 and was invited by Visva-Bharati to take on the role of honorary visiting professor at Kala Bhavana (1990-2002). It was the



Calligraphy painting



Bed cover

phase which marked his return to art, and his creations during that period exhibit his preoccupation with text. This series highlighted his dynamism in the amalgamation of both the arts and crafts that defied categorisation.

Mozumdar passed away in 2006. In a career spanning more than five decades, he worked and exhibited both nationally and internationally. Unfortunately, his immense legacy remains largely forgotten. "Imprint" is an attempt to redress that lacuna.

'Imprint' is available for viewing till 8 April at Emami Art, Kolkata Centre for Creativity

The writer is a Kolkata-based communication consultant