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what that meant.”

During this time, “it was my pictures that did the talking.” After taking a lot of wildlife pictures in the first year of college, he started exploring fashion photography. “I think I was experiencing a personal transition as well. I had started dressing differently. I also began growing my hair long.”

As he continued to explore the works of veteran photographers, he grew curious about the human anatomy. “I wanted to try taking pictures of people in the nude. But, nobody was ready for the experiments I had in mind.”

Mali says that the reason he took to the camera so easily was because he was never comfortable with attention. “I had stage fright, and preferred to not be noticed.

It’s why being behind the camera made more sense [to me].” But, if he wanted to make known his vision, he realised he had to start with himself. That’s how Mali began taking his own photographs.

One of the earliest set of pictures was on a college trip to Himachal Pradesh. Travelling to Chandra Taal, Rohtang Pass and Spiti, he attempted what very few would dare to, shooting in -10 degree Celsius temperatures, sometimes inside freezing lakes. Some of the pictures from the series titled, The Bare Trip, are part of the ongoing exhibition. He has even taken pictures in Satara, travelling as early as 4 am in the wilderness. “When I was in school, I would often bunk class and walk endlessly, exploring new places. At the time, it seemed like a complete waste of time. But, now with my camera in hand, these

places became my school,” he adds.

With his photographs, he hopes to push the limits of art. Sometimes a pool with a bed of autumn leaves becomes his blanket, on other occasions, a lakeside is his bedroom—a bed with white linen where he is seen lying in fetal position, and a side-table holding a camera and lamp, become props in his frame. Mali says that he doesn’t see life in binaries anymore. “I don’t believe in the idea of good and bad, wrong and right. In my head, I live in a borderless time and space. Everything is fluid, including my sexuality. I am now in a state where meaning is totally meaningless to me. I can do anything, and be anyone. I can walk naked or wear a skirt. I am totally shameless that way.”

Another nude series that he worked on, and which he has deliberately kept untitled, saw him

work with models, who reached out to him on social media. “I have never shot in public, because I don’t want to scare anyone. People are not ready for this yet.”

The COVID-19 lockdowns that confined him to his room in Pune, were hardly an impediment, he says. In one picture he is seen balancing himself upside down on a commode, with his head right in; it’s his attempt to question why people use it only to dump their own waste. There’s another image, where he sits nude on his bed, with the wash-basin beside him. “I am creating realistic images in a new and different way as a means to unlock the power of the imagination and offer a new direction for exploration. I am distancing myself from the rules set by the society. This is the struggle for freedom, equality and promotion of justice,” Mali captions it. “I was not

at all anxious about being stuck at home. I used that time to create a lot of abstract artwork that will [also] be part of the show,” he says. He has also used menstrual blood and his own poop for his canvas paintings.

Mali says that it has taken a lot of time for people to accept his work, and see it as art for art’s sake. “My family was uncomfortable in the beginning. This was new to them, and initially, it led to arguments. But over the last few years, I have been able to articulate myself better, and explain to them why I do what I do,” he says, adding, “Though there is a community that has begun to understand my work, I feel that as I take more risks, and I am sure I will, people might find my work more weird and become disconnected.” Mali says he is fine with that.

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In Memoriam

A filmmaker recollects experiences of working with acclaimed Bengali actor Soumitra Chatterjee in a book that aims to introduce him to a wider audience familiar only with his work with Satyajit Ray

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

IN November 2020, in the days following actor, poet, playwright, painter and singer Soumitra Chatterjee’s passing, filmmaker and professor of Economics Suman Ghosh remembers being mired in sadness. Around this time, Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri, editor-in-chief at Om Books International, who had previously written on the themes of memory, ageing and death in Ghosh’s films with Soumitra Chatterjee, proposed the idea of a book on the director’s personal and artistic relationship with Chatterjee. While initially hesitant, given that the book would be a daunting one, not least because it would be his first, Ghosh realised that this would offer the cathartic release he needed at the time. “Rather than lament his passing, I thought why not share my experiences with people and help them get an intimate glimpse of the man,” says the director. Soumitra Chatterjee: A Film-Maker Remembers, which released last week to commemorate the actor’s birthday this month, traces Ghosh’s observations and in-

teractions through five films over 15 years with “the last of Bengal’s Renaissance men”.

Ghosh writes about being in awe of Chatterjee’s stature as he watched the actor during shoots at a time when he was still a PhD student at Cornell, eager to venture into filmmaking. “I never expected to form a personal relationship with him. He had achieved so much in life, why would he be interested in giving a hundred per cent in a film with a debutant filmmaker like me?” wondered Ghosh who cast Chatterjee in Podokkhep (Footsteps; 2006) about a retired man and his bond with a little girl in a film inspired by F Scott Fitzgerald’s story The Curious Case of Benjamin Button about a man aging in reverse. While the sharpness of his craft was expected, what surprised Ghosh about the thespian was his hunger to work with younger directors and with newer mediums and formats right till the end. There was also, he recalls, a child-like curiosity in him for the mysteries of life, a quality he says he has observed in other greats



He was reading a book on the young Galileo [during the pandemic-induced lockdown], and discovering how his father who was a musician impacted him,” he shares. “I marvelled at this man who in spite of a pandemic ravaging the world and making people mentally and physically sick could still hold on to his sense of wonder

like Amartya Sen, the subject of an early documentary. He remembers how the last conversation he had with the actor was a few months before his passing when the actor, a well-known workaholic, was forced to sit at home during the pandemic. “He was reading a book on the young Galileo, and discovering how his father who was a musician impacted him,” he shares. “I marvelled at this man who in spite of a pandemic ravaging the world and making people mentally and physically sick could still hold on to his sense of wonder.” Everything from cricket and Garry Sobers to Satyajit Ray, the Masai tribes of Africa and the new Bengali literature and cinema interested him, he says, their conversations on these myriad subjects a generous source of nourishment for the director. “... It was as if he wanted to perpetually soak in the delirium of life and be bathed in all its beauty. His mind was like a blank canvas, ready to be painted with colours,” writes Ghosh in the book, pointing to how this receptiveness also informed his work as an actor.

In one of the book’s many interludes, Ghosh writes fondly about Chatterjee’s visit to his home and his mother’s trepidation over the

In his new book, Ghosh traces his observations and interactions with Soumitra Chatterjee and the forging of a personal and artistic relationship through five films over 15 years

him about how he thinks his book will add to the rich legacy the actor has left behind. While Chatterjee remained loyal to Bengal’s cinema, Ghosh believes that film lovers nationally didn’t get to appreciate his talent adequately. Even directors like Shoojit Sircar and Anurag Basu tried to get him to act in Hindi films and lament that they could not take his talent outside Bengal which he deserved, he says. “He was probably more famous internationally than in India apart from Bengal, and the national audience too only knows him through Satyajit Ray’s films,” he says, his book offering a list of some of his favourite films not directed by Ray featuring the actor. He was a popular star, he points out, delivering superhits as well as artistically refined films even in his 80s. “The book is a way to provide a glimpse of this person to a national readership so that they are inclined to follow up on his work,” says Ghosh. “That’s why I wrote it in English.”

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A still from Suman Ghosh’s second film Dwando (2009), where Chatterjee played a neurosurgeon who saw his work as akin to that of an artist. **PICS COURTESY/ OM BOOKS INTERNATIONAL**