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‘Josheen Oberoi visits AICON Gallery’s expansive Sadequain exhibition.’

By Josheen Oberoi

New York: It’s been a quiet month in the New York art world. With half the community decamping to Art Basel and the rest distracted by the blessed warm weather (we had a tough winter here!); interesting shows have been relatively thin on the ground. Not for South Asian art, thankfully. AICON Gallery is showing a mini retrospective of the Pakistani artist Syed Sadequain (1930-1987) and I was excited to see it not only for the quality of art but also the rarity of having access to such a body of work.

Occupying the entire expansive space of AICON’s Lower East Side gallery, this exhibit shows the gamut of Sadequain’s oeuvre. One of Pakistan’s most celebrated modernist artists, Sadequain was born in 1930 in Amroha, east of Delhi, in a family of calligraphers. He subsequently moved to Pakistan after his graduation from Agra University in 1948. He shot to fame at the young age of 31, when his work won recognition at the 1961 Paris Biennale.

A self-taught artist, he is most commonly identified with the development of a uniquely idiomatic calligraphic aesthetic. However, his visual language is in fact one of the most variegated and complex of the South Asian modernists working post 1947. He simultaneously worked through a variety of calligraphic, narrative, abstract registers, with artistic influences that ranged from multiple mediums; poetry, Western and South Asian historical artistic traditions. His compatriot, collaborator and famed poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz stated about his work, “In spite of his considerable pre-occupation with the solution of technical formal problems, Sadequain has never been purely a formal painter. Recordist, abstractionist, social critic, emotional visionary, within a few short years, Sadequain has sped from one role or compulsion to another with equal impetuosity.”



Three Standing Figures, 1966, Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches image courtesy: AICON Gallery, New York

Sadequain’s engagement with language was seminal to his work and this is visible in this exhibition. Comprising twenty seven paintings and three drawings, the show is dominated by a collection of paintings from the 1960s, when Sadequain lived and worked in Paris. Titled *The Lost Exhibition*, this set of eight paintings are dancing figures of calligraphy; lyrical despite their scale. These works are considered examples of what the artist called “Calligraphic Cubism”. Employing the scratched surface technique on the background, the texture produces volume and three- dimensionality. Seemingly caught in action, the elongated movement of the script along the vertical axis make these works appear monumental in viewing. Sadequain described himself as a figurative painter and the dramatic execution of the Arabic Kufic script in these works, the ensuing conversations that are taking place on the canvas, did bring home that idea to me. These are the strongest works in the exhibit and definitely worth a dekho.

Some of Sadequain’s formally figurative works are also part of this exhibition and these underline the remarkable range of his visual vernacular. Line, form, perspective – I was hard won to find a singly unifying element among these paintings. One of the more striking of these was *Man With Dagger*, showing a man holding a dagger in one

hand and a head that resembles his own in the other, accompanied by a smaller figure of a woman holding a leaf. These muscular renderings, so different from *The Lost Exhibition*, are echoed in another set of calligraphic paintings in the exhibition, *Untitled (Abstract Formation I and II)*. Interestingly, the image of a severed head is repeated in one of the works on paper, *Untitled, Headless Self-Portrait*. It clearly shows the headless artist in a studio, with a work of calligraphy in the background.

In 1962, an edition of the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* rightly noted, “Sadequain adds up the impression of space, density, volume and the reality of matter, which transforms an abstract thought into a material fact in plastic.” He shifted the paradigms of calligraphy, especially in his realization of its abstracted and stylized forms. This post cannot effectively capture the entire spectrum of his languages and so I would strongly recommend a trip down to the gallery to see them yourself if you’re in New York.

You can learn more about Sadequain at the Sadequain Foundation website (co-sponsor of this exhibition) and from this article by art historian Iftikhar Dadi.



Man with Dagger, Oil on canvas, 54 x 30 inches
Image courtesy: AICON Gallery