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festival '18



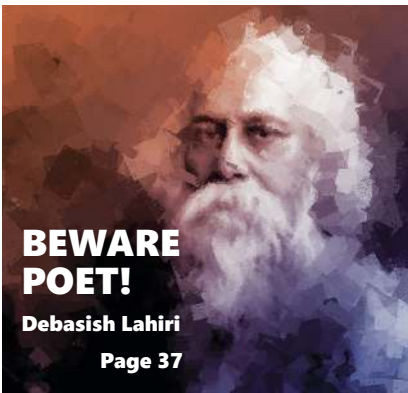
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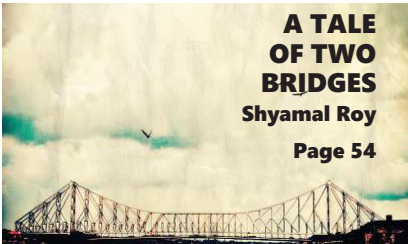
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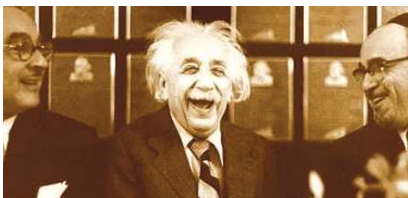
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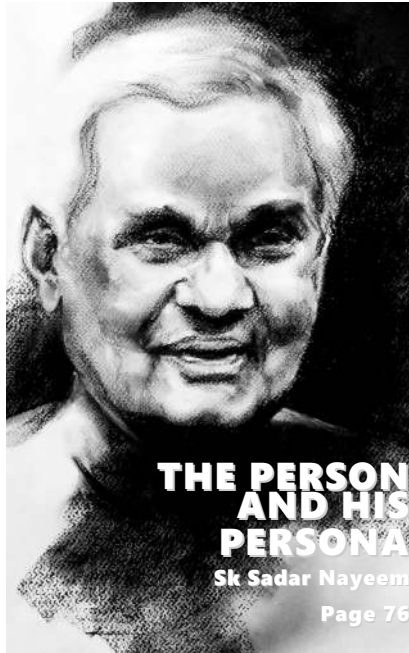
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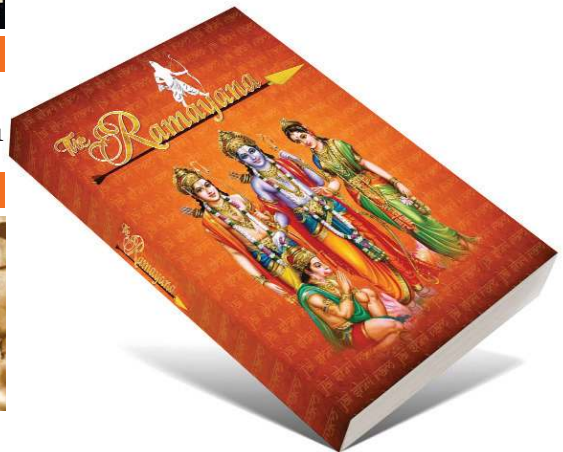
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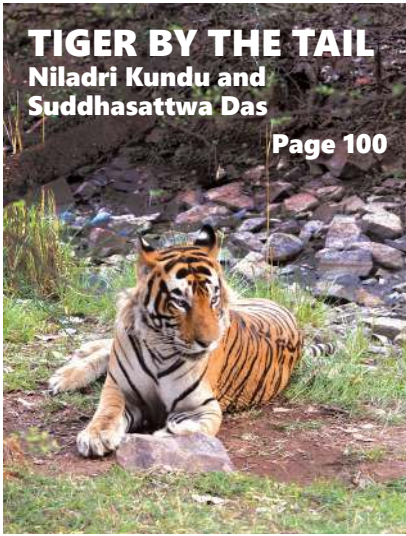
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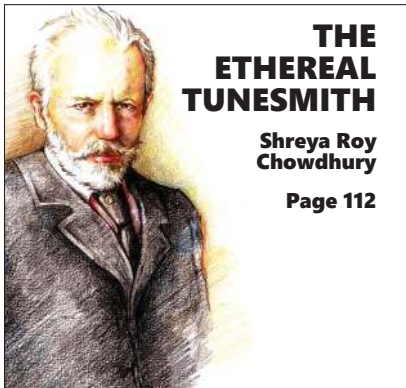
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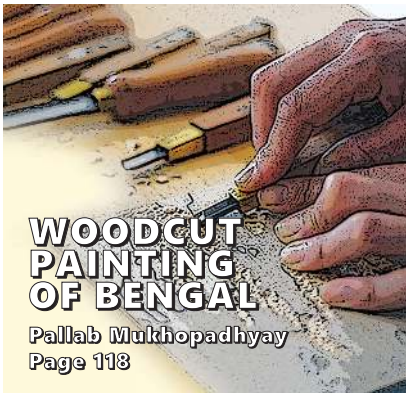
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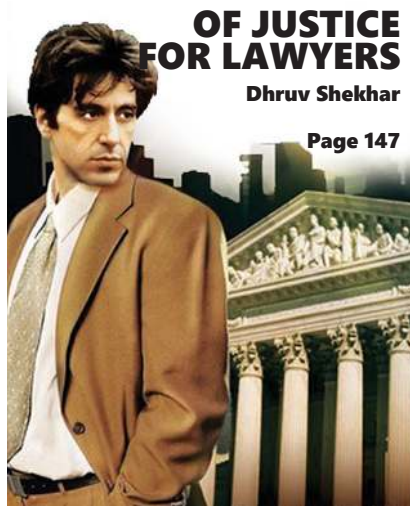
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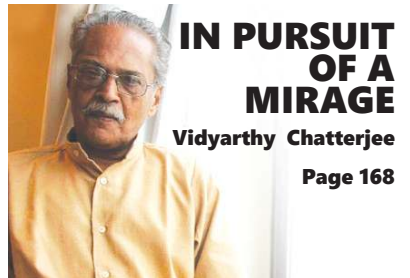
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Dear Reader,

Greetings of the season!

As we embark on this trimester of festivals, it is time to reflect on the months that have gone by and those that will follow. Festivities, like life, must be framed by reality, by an awareness of what we did wrong and what we can do right.

Our lives have seen several momentous changes, principally because our apex court has chosen to take a nuanced rather than a tradition-bound view of interpersonal relations and the relation between the individual and the state, striking down sections of the penal code while upholding the constitutional validity of the controversial Aadhaar scheme. Jurisprudence, too, is a work in progress and doubtless some of the questions that have been answered now will surface afresh.

The other prongs of our polity have a little less to show for themselves. The executive ducked important questions – leaving them for courts to answer – and the legislature was not a particularly vibrant institution, lacking both substance and style. Unlike jurisprudence, they sometimes showed up as works in regress.

The season of festivals will doubtless be punctuated by frenetic political activity as we ready ourselves for a renewed engagement with the ballot box. As we find the time to put our feet up, or engage in revelry, perhaps we will deem it prudent to reflect at least a little on the course we want our democracy to take.

But enough of that now. It is time to sit back and relax with this collection of essays, fiction, satire and so much more that we have put together for you. We hope you will enjoy this offering, painstakingly put together by my colleague Gopali Bandyopadhyay and her team. Design inputs have been provided by Partho Sheel and Amit Majhi.

Ravindra Kumar
Ravindra Kumar
Editor

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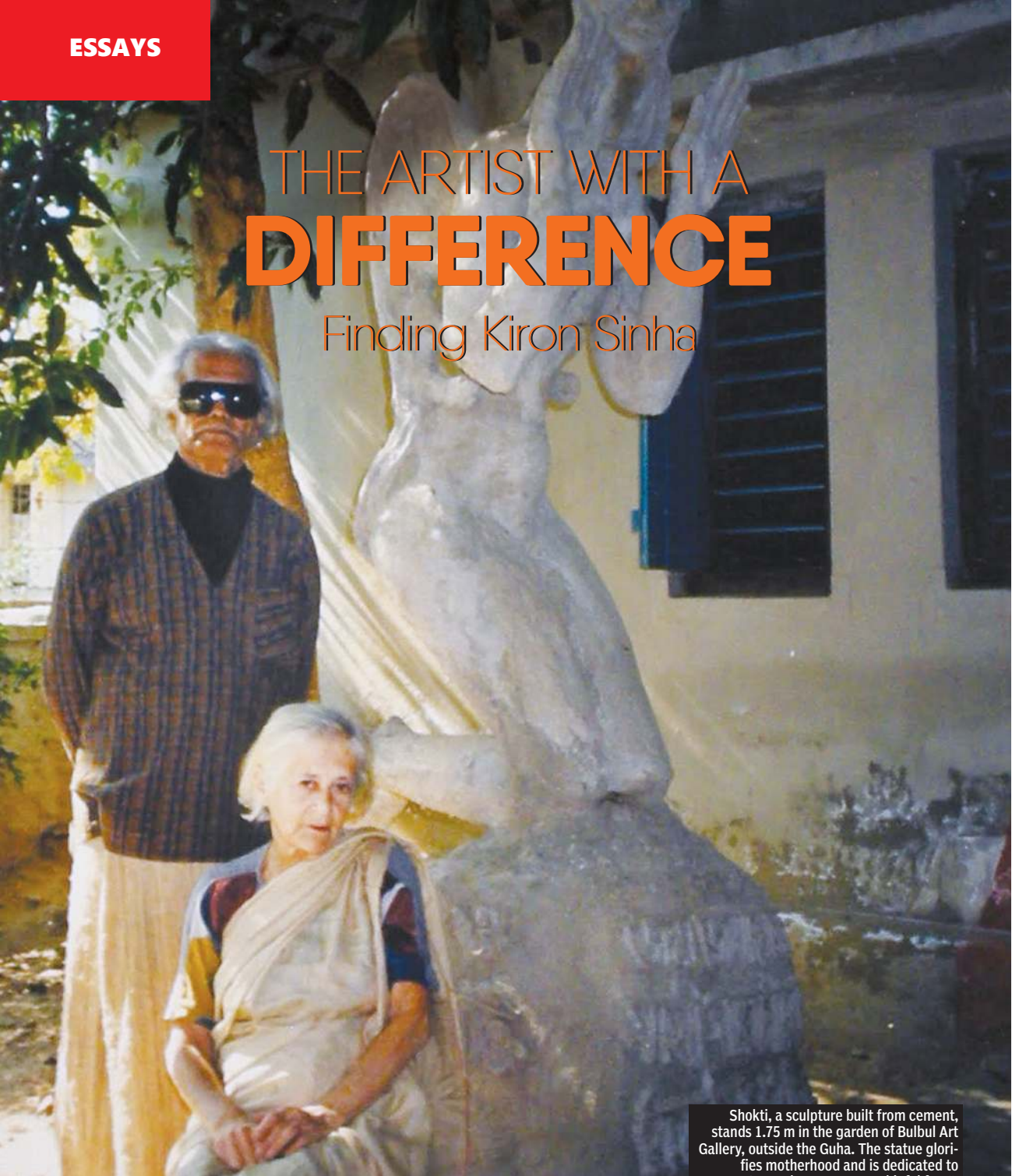
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THE ARTIST WITH A DIFFERENCE

Finding Kiron Sinha



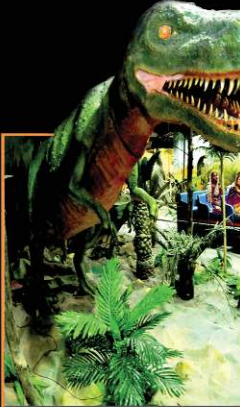
Shokti, a sculpture built from cement, stands 1.75 m in the garden of Bulbul Art Gallery, outside the Guha. The statue glorifies motherhood and is dedicated to Gertrude “at your worshipful feet”. The artist and his wife with the sculpture in 1988.

VERNA BLEWETT

Kiron Sinha described his existence as “a life of loss”. This extraordinary Bengali artist, who worked in many media, certainly had a remarkable life with its share of tragedy, but in a broader sense he and his work were effectively lost.

“Enjoy the Festive Season at Science City”

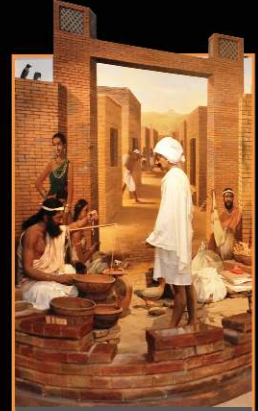
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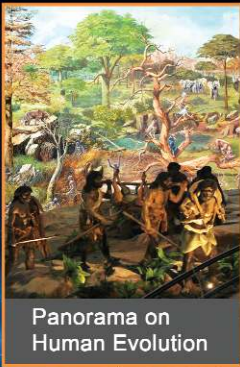
Evolution of Life -
Dark Ride

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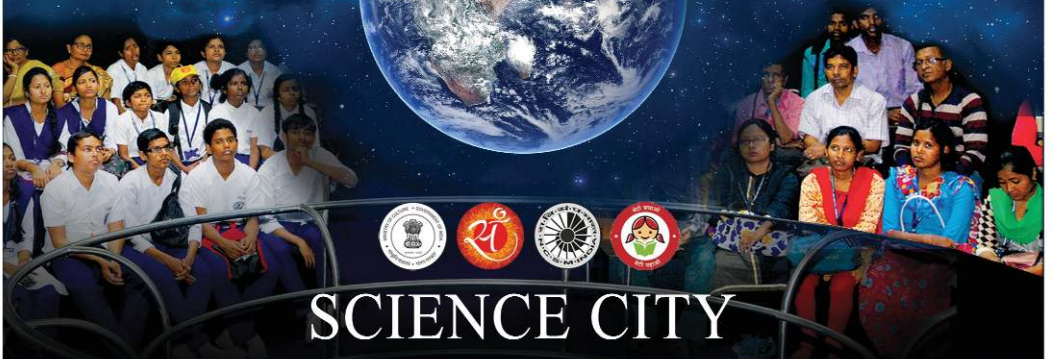


Panorama on
Human Evolution

Popular Attraction Science On a Sphere



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The artist's studio at Bulbul Art Gallery in 2008. Amongst the merry jumble of tools of the trade are examples of his work: a sketch, ceramics, some small sculptures, a wood carving and a part of a cartoon for a weaving. On the desk sits a book by Dr Jeanne Openshaw featuring Kiron's painting, *The Singing Baul*, on the front cover. The Baul's featured frequently in Kiron's paintings.

Kiron Sinha lived the last 60 years of his life in Santiniketan and for many of these years he and his Austrian-born wife, Gertrude Sinha (née Hirsch) lived in the midst of this thriving arts community in self-imposed exile. When I first visited them in Santiniketan in 2007, people there were surprised to learn that they were still alive. In fact, Kiron passed away at the end of 2009 at the age of 93 years, while Gertrude celebrated her 100th birthday in 2011 and died a few months later. For 15 years they had barely stepped outside their

compound, relying on a few trusted helpers to meet their daily needs. Kiron was blind by the mid-1980s, although he continued to sculpt until a few years before his death, and Gertrude was unable to walk well following a severe accident when she was 85. I 'met' Kiron and Gertrude many years earlier, but not face-to-face, rather it was in writing. I joined the Australian branch of the Hirsch family when I married Gertrude's nephew. I was

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immediately drawn into the regular letter writing to India - and was generously included in the replies from Gertrude. I finally met them in person in 2007 and, overcome by the beauty of Kiron's body of work, became his appointed curator and the 'catalogue-er' of his works. He was thrilled to have someone pay such close attention to his work and ideas and charged me with the responsibility of helping to get him the recognition that he deserved. My daughter, Dr Lily Hirsch, and I have been working on this task ever since.

Of course, the story starts much earlier. Kiron was born in 1916 in the village of Khalapara, in the Netrokona District (now in Bangladesh). His folk artist mother encouraged her son's obvious talent from an early age, but she was his first loss. Following her death from cholera when he was only twelve years old, his school-teacher father continued to encourage his growing talent. At seventeen he was sent to Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati in far

Kiron was born in 1916 in the village of Khalapara, in the Netrokona District (now in Bangladesh). His folk artist mother encouraged his obvious talent from an early age, but she was his first loss. Following her death from cholera when he was only 12, his school-teacher father continued to encourage his growing talent



Santal Woman, textile dyes on homespun fabric (approx 90 x 50 cm). From the 1940s to the 1960s Kiron carved wood-blocks that Gertrude printed on fabrics. At their many exhibitions these items were very popular, but sometimes Kiron would use the textile dyes to paint on fabric and Gertrude would get quite cross with him. This piece was purchased at one of three exhibitions of Kiron's work held in Australia in 1963. It hangs in a private collection in Australia.

off Santiniketan. The "village boy" soon made his mark under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and his staff, but he was shy of people. He recalled how Rabindranath Tagore came to view the students' work and singled out Kiron's painting as meritorious, asking "who is this boy?" But Kiron shrank away from the praise and failed to identify himself as the artist. Nonetheless, he regarded Tagore as his first patron, as an important person who in acknowledging his talent gave him confidence. Much later, his classmate and friend, Indira Gandhi, would also become an important patron.

Later in his life, Kiron had a difficult relationship with his old master, Nandalal Bose, but in 1937 Bose awarded Kiron his Diploma of Fine Art and a travelling scholarship to Nanjing, China, to learn Classical Painting from the masters there. His visit was curtailed by the 2nd Sino-Japanese



War and the Massacre of Nanjing. He recalled that he had to escape and leave everything behind; his clothes, his work, his papers. Jumping on the first ship back to India he took landfall in Madras and found himself a job as an art teacher to senior students at Kalakshetra, the education wing of the Theosophical Society.

It was at Kalakshetra that his world changed. There he met the young and beautiful 26-year-old Viennese artist, Gertrude Hirsch, who was Jewish. She had been recruited to teach art to young children at Kalakshetra by Rukmeni Devi Arundale during a brief interlude in Vienna. For Gertrude the appointment turned out to be life-saving as her Jewish identity would have made her a victim of the Holocaust in Hitler's Europe. As it was, her whole family was annihilated in various extermination camps - except for her older brother, Leopold Hirsch, who immigrated to Australia in

Inside the guha. Radha Playing, fresco c1977. "You must view the guha by candlelight", Kiron instructed. And indeed, soft candle glow picks up the highlights on the human forms so that they seem to dance off the walls. Here are Radha and the Gopis, playing with Krishna's flute and riding the waves in a boat that is not there. The ethereal nature of this work is compelling.

1937 as a refugee and who ultimately became my father-in-law.

I suspect there were fireworks when Kiron and Gertrude met. He told me that "there were many men sniffing around, but I won!". They married in 1938 in Madras but were warned that the marriage wouldn't last more than six months; Kiron would give a hearty chuckle when relating this, "I have the last laugh". It lasted until their deaths more than 70 years later. They remained the presidents of each other's fan clubs for the rest of their lives. She regarded him as India's best ("Why would I want other artists' work on my walls when I have the best," she would say). He regarded her as his muse, his inspiration, his mentor, his teacher and the love of his life.

And she was all these things.

For the next fifteen years or so the couple led a peripatetic dance around India. Kiron sought inspiration from Mahabalipuram to Rajasthan painting and sketching landscapes and life in the villages. Gertrude gave up her own artistic career to support her husband, “I am an Indian woman” she would say proudly by way of explanation. She taught Kiron about the use of oils and about anatomy using the notes she’d made in her own studies in Vienna. She advised him on perspective and discussed the great European masters. These were important influences in Kiron’s work and he acknowledged her role in his artistic development. Meanwhile, Gertrude found jobs for herself allowing Kiron to be a full-time artist. In 1945 Gertrude was in Mussoorie escaping from the heat of the plains when their daughter, Kamona (aka Bulbul) was born. Her birth signalled the time to ‘settle down’ so Kiron commenced

At 17 he was sent to Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati in far off Santiniketan. The “village boy” soon made his mark under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and his staff, but he was shy of people. He recalled how Rabindranath Tagore came to view the students’ work and singled out Kiron’s painting as meritorious, asking “who is this boy?”

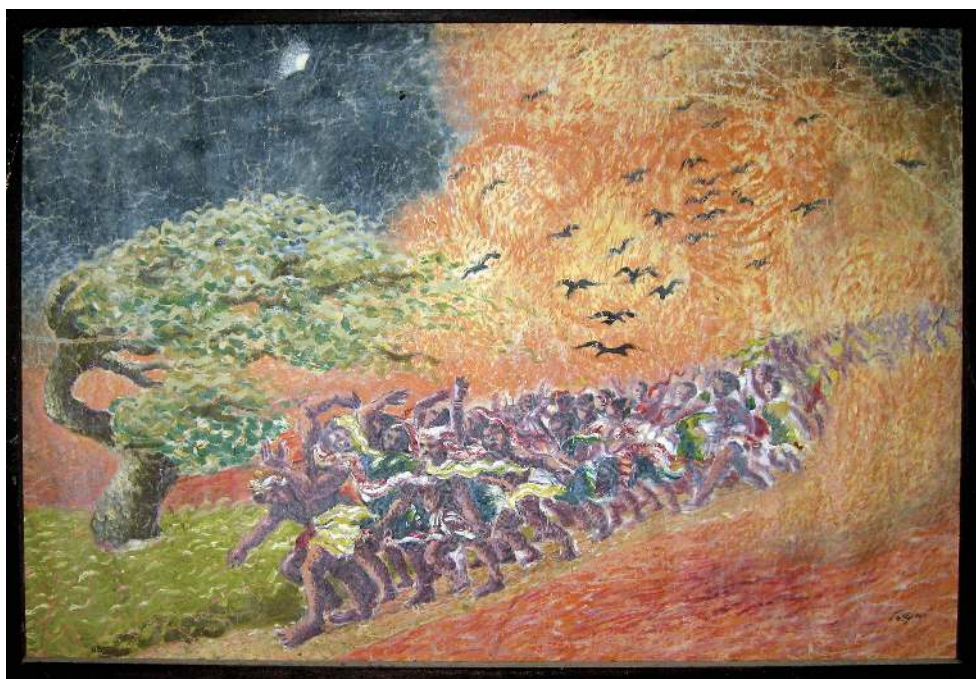


Women at the Lily Pond depicts Radha playing Krishna’s flute in the moonlight surrounded by the Gopis. This oil on chatai (259 x 152 cm) is a fine example of the luscious work Kiron did following the death of his beloved daughter, Bulbul. Bulbul loved fireflies, so Kiron included them in his paintings in her memory. Private collection, Australia.

construction of their Santiniketan home, Bulbul Art Gallery. But in the meantime, there was a job for Gertrude in Lahore.

They did not anticipate the problems of Partition; Gertrude was forced to shelter with a Christian community while Hindu Kiron fled with their young daughter, leaving on the horror that was the last train from Lahore. In the shemozzle they lost most of their possessions, including most of Kiron’s work.

Life settled somewhat after this. The family home, the only house in the middle of an empty paddock in Rattanpalli, Santiniketan, was gradually completed and Bulbul grew up there. Kiron’s studio was on the top floor and there he worked from 9 to 5 each day (“and on the weekends I did the garden”). He was driven to produce. His palette with its multiple influences and strange to his contemporaries, inspired the work of others, according to Mukul Dey. Throughout the house he painted the walls in glorious colours: frescoes dedicated to Tagore, to life



The frequent monsoonal thunderstorms with their threat of lightning, strong winds and pelting rain bring relief to parched ground and skin, but can be very intimidating. Kiron described *The Storm* (c1948, oil on unprimed silk, 81 x 119cm, private collection, India) as follows, "This was one of my very early oil paintings. I saw this scene from my house at a time when Santiniketan was very small, with only a few houses. I saw people running down the lane outside my house, struggling against the wind".

and to love; friezes built into the walls; sculptures and ceramics in the house and the garden.

There were jobs for Gertrude in Assam and at the Dowhill School in Kurseong, but nothing for Kiron at Kala Bhavana, where he (unrealistically) expected to be fêted. From time-to-time his patron and friend, Indira Gandhi, flew in by helicopter to visit the studio and buy works that she placed in public offices or gifted to diplomats and dignitaries. Despite this influence, there was only a short appointment at Silpa Sadan that introduced him to ceramics and weaving to add to his repertoire. The family lived very frugally for much of this time and Kiron developed a rich resentment of Visva-Bharati that remained with him until his death. To say he was a difficult man is an understatement. "He is so arrogant" Gertrude would say in her Viennese accent while



Kiron started to decorate his new home, Bulbul Art Gallery, Rattanpalli, Santiniketan, even during its construction. He painted the walls with frescoes and built friezes from cement. Many of these were coloured with cement oxides so their colours are durable and their surfaces washable. This lyrical frieze, *Krishna and Radha* (123.5 x 95 x 10 cm) was sculpted from cement into wall of the entry hall of during its construction in the 1950s. Kiron built his first cement and oxide sculpture in 1952 and continued to sculpt, even after he lost his eyesight, until just a few years before his death.



rolling her eyes. Unfortunately, his artist's temperament saw him distance himself from much of the art community and he failed to do the work necessary to have his contribution recognised.

Both Kiron and Gertrude were devastated by the sudden and untimely death of their daughter, Bulbul, following a fall in her bathroom. In response, Kiron's post-1972 work focused on love, an exploration of the love between Krishna and Radha. The complex array of this outpouring is seen on the walls of the house and when he ran out of walls he built a small building in the garden, a 'Guha', dedicated to this work. He also painted numerous large canvases and *chattai* on this theme.

This was the final phase of his work. He stopped painting when he lost his eyesight but continued to create sculptures until his fingers also wore out.

Living in Santiniketan gave Kiron immediate access to Santali villages and he spent many days observing them at work and at leisure and sketching them from life, often accompanied by younger artists. *Santal Melody*, depicting the unique music and dance of the Santals, is painted with oil on canvas c1957 (54 x 74.5 cm). It was purchased in Melbourne, Australia, during an exhibition there in 1963. It remains in a private collection in Melbourne.

The legacy of Kiron Sinha's work is massive. It's time to find Kiron Sinha again and reassess the value of his artistic contribution and his place in the pantheon of Santiniketan painters. We have over 800 pieces recorded in the catalogue and are gradually adding others as we find them in public galleries and private collections in India and all over the world. The catalogue will be freely available online at www.bulbulart.com by the end of 2018.

Verna Blewett is an Australian social scientist and art lover. She is the niece and biographer of Kiron and Gertrude Sinha. She and her daughter, Dr Lily Hirsch, are researching and writing the Sinha's biography and completing the catalogue of their works.

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A Forgotten
Genius

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