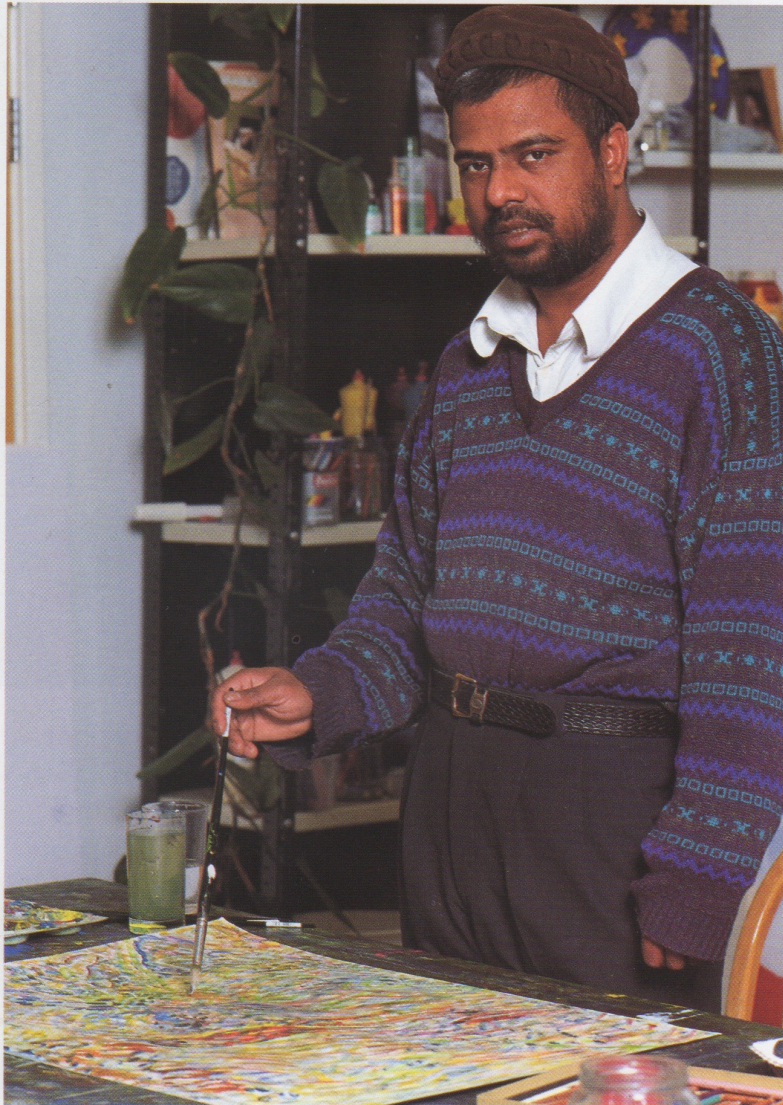


# IN THE MIND'S EYE PHILIP VANN LOOKS AT THE ART OF SHAFIQUE UDDIN



**above**  
Shafique Uddin in his studio in the East End of London.

**opposite**  
'A Couple Outside a Mosque'  
acrylic on paper  
33 x 23 inches, 1998.

**O**n first meeting Shafique Uddin at his studio in London's East End, I spent an afternoon leafing through his works on paper. Their diversity and universality, whirling energy and sensitive use of colour amazed me. As time went on, and I handled more pictures, it felt as if I were somehow near to touching fire. His myriad-brushstroke works radiate an inner light through many layers of paint. Even his darker-palettred pictures exude a magical phosphorescence, a heart-warming illumination – that of an artist who is a born visionary.

The second time I saw Uddin, he was painting onto a large sheet of paper a ground of yellow and green – countless, exuberantly concentrated brushstrokes making a background of sun-infused leaves of grass. Less than an hour later, I saw him applying, in the centre of the shimmering, now red-flecked field, a few final, staccato strokes to conjure up the figure of a large bird. It was extraordinary to have seen this picture at start and finish, the dynamic urgency of the artist at work and the consummate subtlety of the completed picture. It seemed to me that its vibrantly notated background corresponded exactly to the bird's song.

Shafique Uddin was born in 1962 in the village of Borobari in Beani Bazar in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. In 1976, he came with his family to live in London. Then every few years, he revisited Borobari where other members of his family still live. After settling in London, he says: 'I missed the village and the countryside for a long time.' Though he had painted since childhood, it was at his London secondary school that, encouraged by an art teacher, he quickly found himself. At the age of 17, he had a one-person show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the East End, and from 1983 onwards regularly showed in the renowned Whitechapel Open exhibition. His talent was recognised early on by Victor Musgrave and Monika Kinley, who included his works in their burgeoning London-based Outsider Art Collection.

The twin poles of his art are Borobari and his present life in London. He says: 'I painted a Whitechapel painting not long ago – it's got the hospital, the Underground, Brick Lane and everything. I also do memories of my life in Bangladesh. I keep them separate. I enjoy both paintings.' I asked him if the subject of a particular picture of a basket of flowers was something he remembered or imagined. His answer was telling: 'I remembered and I imagined that this picture is a basket and flowers.' Indeed, 'I remembered and I imagined' as a phrase excellently sums up his approach. For him, recollection and imagination are at once indivisible and mutually enhancing.

Creative assurance came to him





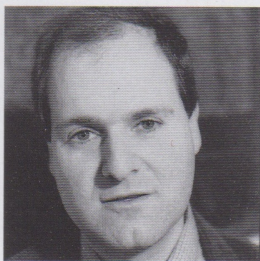




**above**  
'Aerobela For Ever Living Products'  
acrylic on paper  
19.5 x 27.5 inches  
1998.

Photographs by Andy Keate.

Courtesy of the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.



Philip Vann has written widely on naive, visionary and outsider art, including British, French and Central European folk art. He curated the South Bank Centre touring show of Patrick Hayman's visionary paintings and constructions, and his book on Dora Holzhandler was published recently by Lund Humphries, London, and by The Overlook Press, New York.

in London but art was ordinarily all around him as a child; he says: 'I remember pictures on the walls of the houses in the village, and embroidery and hand-stitching. I love *kanthas*.' In his work throughout the 1980s, his myriad brushstrokes were even more feathery, minuscule and copious than they are today. There was a hiatus in his work in the early 90s, during a period of depressive illness.

He then resumed painting with a recovered and inspired vigour, only now his brushstrokes were on the whole larger, freer and looser than before. The flowing spontaneity of his recent work contrasts with the immaculate technical refinement of an earlier period, but his primordial vision remains.

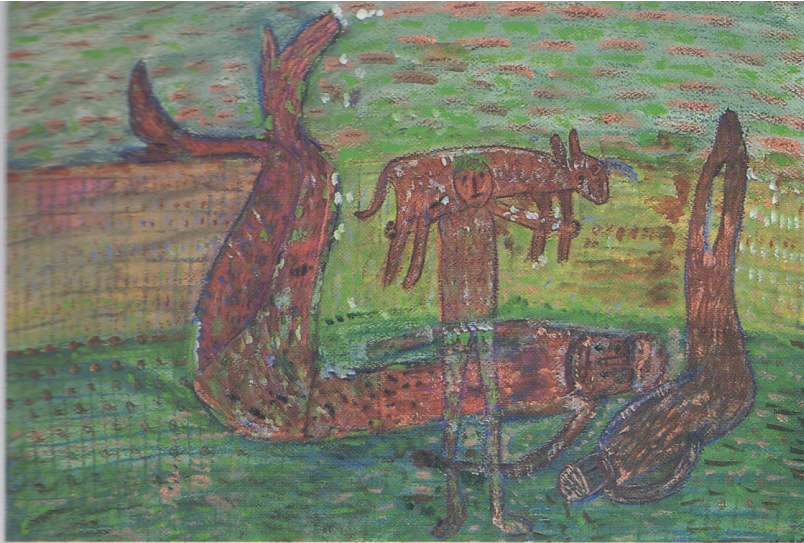
The Uddin brushstroke irresistibly calls to mind the multi-coloured hand-stitching of the beloved naive *kanthas* (patched cloths of used saris embroidered with mandalas of floral, vegetative and organic motifs) of his rural childhood. A devout Muslim, Uddin perhaps unconsciously reflects in his work a sense of the divine luminosity at the core of Islam (the Quran states: 'The first being created by God was light') – a yearning for illumination so beautifully propounded by the great Sufi mystics and poets, whose influence has long suffused Bangladeshi culture. The Bangladesh he remembers and imagines is at once exotic and intimately familiar. Exactly

the same can be said of his vision of London and, increasingly, the English countryside.

Each of his pictures tells a story. Speaking or writing in Bengali, Uddin is more extensively and confidently descriptive than he is in English, though his English is good. In his descriptions of his pictures (as in the following translations from Bengali), animals and inanimate objects are seen as narratively active and vital as human participants. Speaking of one work, he describes a musical instrument, left outside a musician's house, as 'wondering whether it should go into the house... so that it could be played as well'. In a painting of a cemetery, he says: 'an animal called "Pit Dog" is consolingly telling a little boy, whose father died recently and is buried there, not to cry'.

The poetry of these descriptions and of the pictures themselves, is neither whimsical nor nostalgic; it is in fact the matter-of-fact yet allusive language of fable or folk tale. These things indeed happened as they are recounted through the medium of Uddin's 'remembering imagination'. As he sees it, his native village is a place of ecstatic pastoral innocence; it can also be one of flaming belligerence, and sometimes these extremes uncannily meet. An example of this is the disquietingly lyrical 'Two People Kissing', where a couple is seen embracing; to their right a red and white-flecked dog is seen leaping on a woman, almost as canine





**top**  
'Morning Exercises'  
acrylic on paper  
23 x 31 inches, 1998.

**below**  
Untitled, April 25 1983  
acrylic on board  
89 x 48.5 cm  
Outsider Archive, Dublin.



in appearance as her assaulter.

On his last visit to Bangladesh a decade ago, Uddin saw a woman performing a kind of yoga on the beach – her morning exercises. In his recent painting of this title, he depicts the woman lying on her back, her legs in the air. She appears contorted yet

incredibly at ease. In front of her, a man is doing his morning labour, carrying a goat over his shoulders. The freedom of perspective and proportion here is hilarious to behold (the slender man and goat dwarfed by the woman's beefy, upright legs), yet we identify exactly with the woman's easy agility just as with the man's burdensome exertion.

Uddin is intimately aware how vulnerable people can be. He recalls swimming in the sea as a child, and seeing sharks. He was also terrified by crocodiles in the village river. His painting of two giant crabs fighting contains a minuscule human figure in the background – the man's stark, blood-red appearance echoing the creatures' savage naturalness.

A recent picture contains at the top the written slogan 'AEROBELA FOR EVER LIVING PRODUCTS', words taken from the pharmaceutical packaging of a medicine Uddin took for severe depression in the early 90s. He reproduces the eagle (which also appears on the packaging) in several different ways, poignantly portraying the bird carrying patients away to a state of weightless bliss and health.

After leaving school, Uddin worked unhappily for a time in a cramped East London sweatshop. Since then his prolific full-time work has been painting, which he loves. He and his wife have six young children. In one picture he portrayed all six (along with two other children) in an endearing line of infants steadily diminishing in stature, being led by a teacher, a stooping sage who walks ahead supported with a stick.

The group is seen passing two churches. He often depicts, and celebrates, temple life in Bangladesh, and mosques and churches in England. 'Figure in Landscape', portrays an old church with a red steeple amid woods and cornfields, and is a rapturous English pastoral idyll with sweetly melodic, sensuous colours.

Some of his London scenes evoke a heart-rending urban loneliness. Sometimes he isolates individual figures against desolate backdrops, which nevertheless pulsate with waves of energy. All Uddin's accustomed vibrancy is there – yet at a deliberately subdued key. His grand London panoramas of well-known historical and modern buildings are at once quotidian and apocalyptic.

Childlike in directness, Uddin's art has been mature, complex, richly unpredictable and paradoxical in its nature from the start, with an inimitable cosmic humour. He makes no preparatory sketches or drawings but embarks on each painting as on a fresh, unpremeditated voyage. Hence as an artist he never remotely repeats himself. 'I paint as I go along', he says simply but revealingly. It's all there in his mind's eye.