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Power of wild

The paintings of Bangladesh-born Shafique Uddin evoke an intimate kinship between all creatures

As a child in a Bangladeshi village Shafique Uddin joyously imbibed the art around him: murals on homes, intricate hand-stitching on clothes, and mandala-like *kanthas* by local women.

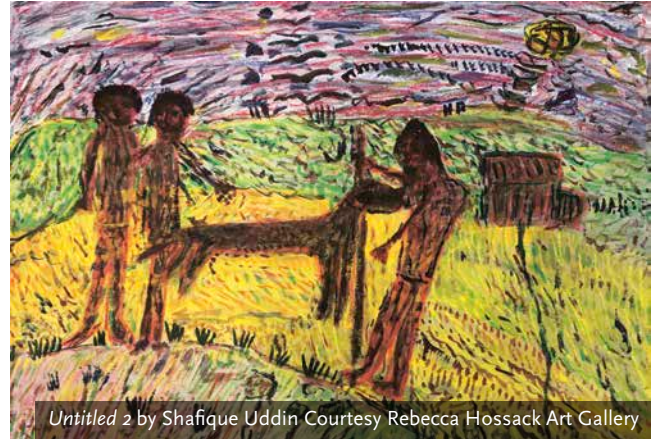
When, aged 14, Uddin settled in London's East End, "my first paintings were memories of the village. I missed the countryside for a very long time." Every few years, he revisits his native village.

At the age of 17, the self-taught Uddin had a one-person exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. His paintings focus on the Bangladeshi countryside and East London (with imaginative sojourns in rural England). Many are inspired by Whitechapel, with its large Bangladeshi community. "I just sit here and paint as I go along," he says.

"I love animals, birds, crocodiles, insects as well." He sees human beings and other creatures as inextricably linked. One picture shows "a frog chasing a human figure in a park with trees – chasing him out of the place".

In a picture of a fantastically elongated village cat, nearby diminutive, naked villagers do not appear to feel threatened by its tigerish presence. (In traditional Bengali art, the tiger is revered as an enigmatic and formidable being.) Uddin makes it clear that this 'Serious Cat' is a "real pussy cat".

People co-existing with animals are at the heart of Bangladeshi village life, and of Uddin's pictures too. In 'Farmer with Cows', we see two beasts – one red, one green – dragging a heavy stone through a field. The sinuous blue line extending all down the farmer's left side, up his arm to the whip held awesomely aloft, is a chillingly masterful stroke.



Untitled 2 by Shafique Uddin Courtesy Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery

Awe and reverence towards Nature, and a poignant sense of how fragile life is have been Uddin's primary feelings since childhood. Crocodiles in the village river, sharks in the sea, where he swam, terrified him, as did snakes emerging on rainy days. He recalls the awful hopelessness of villagers when, in monsoon season, rivers broke their banks, threatening their houses.

He remembers "fish underneath nets, shimmering. A sort of fire shining, a fiery light, molten. Like green grass". He describes his paintings in terms at once human and fairy-tale-like: "A bird was flying in the sky alone, singing to himself.. When I saw him, he looked as if he were crying." Elsewhere, a mouse is described as "seeing something extraordinary" and he writes about a dog in another picture as consoling a little boy whose father has died.

At the heart of Uddin's art is an interior visionary light – one known too by the great Sufi mystics and poets. To see the artist at work, dynamically dabbing a sheet of paper with countless variegated brush strokes, is a most inspiring experience. **R**

Philip Vann is a writer on the visual arts, and the author of many texts for books and catalogues on modern British, Irish, Spanish and Australian painters, printmakers and sculptors. He lives in Cambridge.

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