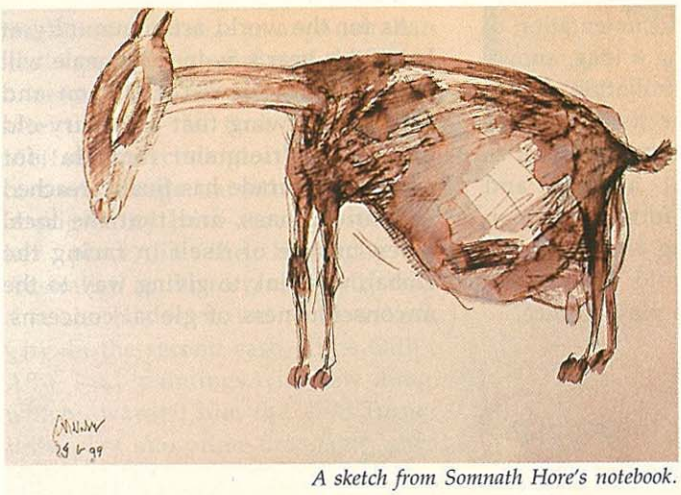
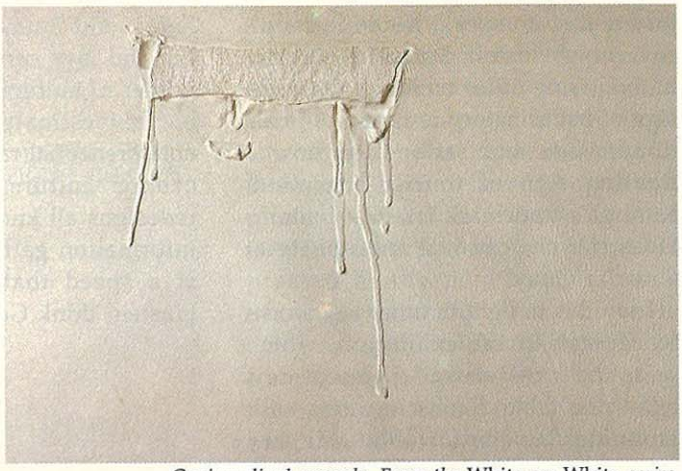
A Finger in the Wound

Shiladitya Sarkar makes a pilgrimage to Santiniketan and is rewarded with an illuminating conversation with the distinguished artist, Somnath Hore.



A sketch from Somnath Hore's notebook.



Gaping sliced wounds. From the White on White *series.*

Axioms for a ten-finger exercise

How does an artist remain meaningfully creative while being locked within a set of pet themes for six decades?

The reticent artist Somnath Hore is probably best suited to answer that question. For he does not regret the pursuit of a singular identity as a chronicler of wounds, depicting laceration in whatever medium he may choose to work. Moreover, he prefers to term all his creations as products of a trial run, all yields of a single lifelong exercise.

But, asking Hore questions is a difficult proposition. While we search for his house, walking through muddy roads turned slushy after an abrupt burst of rain, we do feel intimidated. For he is known to be ruthlessly blunt.

And he hates quite vocally – for whatever reason – the three cornerstones that are held sacrosanct by many artists: money, media, and the glitz and glamour of the 'gallery culture'. In addition, Hore does not indulge in pampering his art-works by positioning them within the rubric of any lofty theories. So there is no chance of even enjoying some high-powered rhetoric.

After a pause, Hore lets out a dry laugh and speaks frugally like a Zen master, "I am preoccupied with these subjects because as an artist, I derive aesthetic pleasure out of these themes". The response could trap one into believing that, perhaps for want of an alternative, he has become another hackneyed biographer of time's ills. For a better survey of his works and his sense of aesthetics, it is mandatory to read the details of his life, whose very chapter is replete with the story of personal struggle alongside his responses to the upheavals of the socio-political milieu around him.

The abiding influences that have shaped his sensibilities are the Bengal famine of 1943, the communal riots of 1946, the devastations of war and the resultant images of the wounds and the wounded, and the social philosophy of communism. Although he admits that art is not so much dependent on theme as on the expressive powers of the artist. Yet, as he himself admits, there is no getting away from the remembrance of ugly dishevelled skins that still haunt him and impart velocity to his aesthetics.

But why choose the most apparent manifestation of pain?

Hore replies: "Wounds are everywhere. A cut-mark on a tree, a road gouged by a truck tyre, a man knifed for no visible reason. The turbulent 70s, or earlier, the famine, have all thrown up examples where the object was eliminated and only the wounds remained. I hung on to the concept and have been trying to evoke it as best as I can."

But why the obsession with this particular theme?

Hore launches into a story: "In China once, an artist was invited by the queen to draw a rooster. The artist returned after years and informed her that he was now ready to paint. Within minutes, he executed the picture. The queen was disturbed and asked why he took so long to produce the work if he could execute it so fast. The artist replied that, in order to do it in five minutes he had to toil for many years. Many Zen artists you will see, were involved in a lifelong attempt to master a single theme".

This sort of rigidity has also harmed his popularity. Hore knows this, but prefers not to hanker after it. He even turns down those who do not match up to his sense of morality. He refused to accept the Kalidas Samman given by

Writhing animal form. Bronze sculpture.

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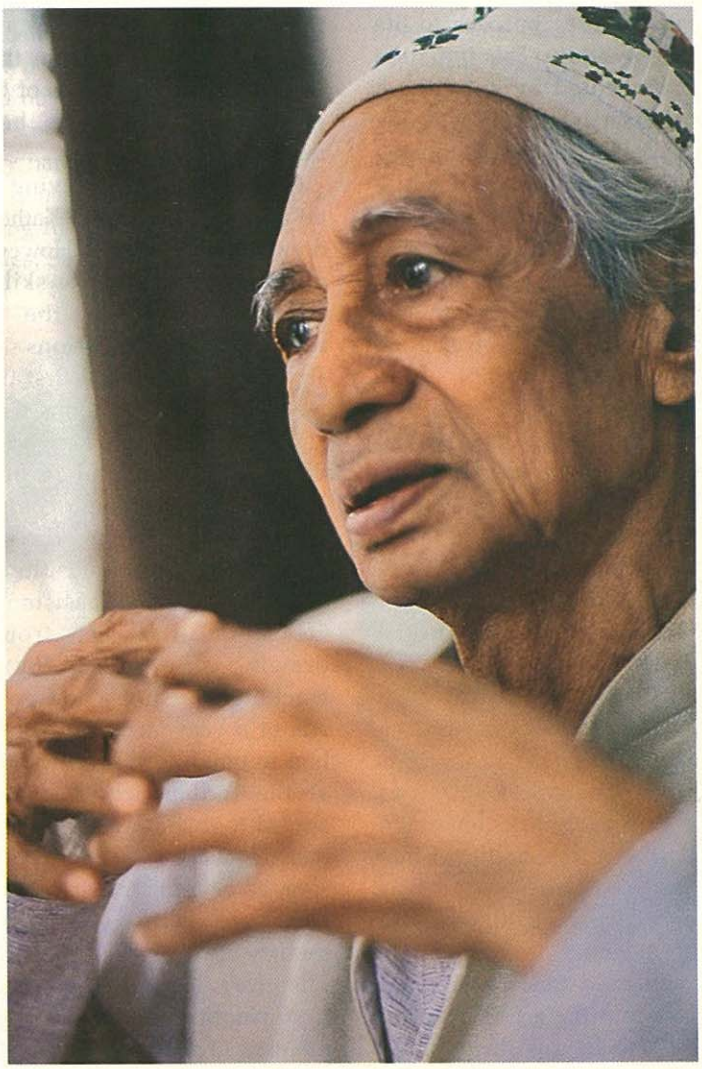
the M.P government because, in 1992, the Babri Masjid demolition happened and it is, "difficult to accept the prize for aesthetics given by political zealots who share no concern with it , while playing political game-plans".

Apart from his attitude, the media that Hore has worked with have helped to accentuate the sense of laceration. "The burin mercilessly cuts the surface of wood, acid attacks the zinc or copper plate, these exercises continue without any premeditated design, but in the end an icon of a wound emerges. These icons represent the hapless, deserted, starved and tortured. Empathy seems to be a major force in creating this sense of beauty."

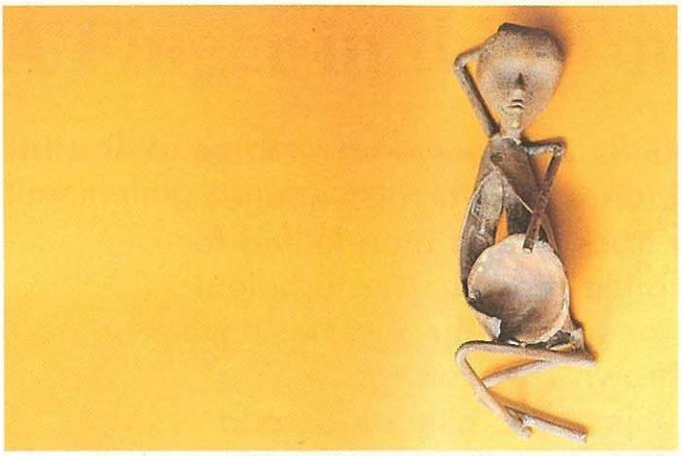
Today the same wounds are pursued with bits of broken, twisted, molten, moulded wax. To understand Hore's sculpture, one needs to route it through the innumerable exercises that he was involved with in various media.

Persistence of vision

Hore is now 82-years-old. All through these years he has continually made shifts from one medium to another. But he does not attempt to draw an aesthetic veil over these transitions. "Chance was the main



Somnath Hore.



(Above and facing page) : Human and animal forms expressing a primordial raw lifeforce. A selection of Hore's bronze sculptures. All photos by Samiran Datta.

impetus behind the choice of the various media".

While Hore is known today primarily as a sculptor, he has come very late in life to this medium. He has been actively involved with sculpture only for the last 17 years. His earliest initiation into art was when he was given a small box of watercolours as a gift from his uncle Sailendranath, whose approach to life was slightly unworldly. This initiation was further bolstered by watching a group of painters in his village depicting scenes of Raja Harishchandra on the mud walls of a house. Later, while studying in the City College, under the influence of his roommate, Hore began making handwritten political posters, mostly for the then banned Communist Party of India (after 1956, however, he did not renew his membership).

These posters were put up at various points of the city. Political involvement was an exhilarating experience for Hore in his formative years. His family background provided the impetus. When his father died in 1934, Hore was only 13. Even then his mother joined the Communists and worked underground. Also, his sister, aged nine, was a messenger for the party. In his early teens, Hore was in the company of older cousins and friends who believed in terrorist activities against the British. In his hometown Chittagong, these terrorists turned into Communists. Naturally, it was enlivening to be producing political posters with slogans.

Later, the renowned artist Chittaprosad initiated Hore into the art of drawing people directly, as he saw them on the streets and hospital beds. Today his sculptures often bear the first-hand experience of poverty and hunger that he got by this initiation.

Seeing his posters, the provincial committee asked him to return to Calcutta. Hore was older and yearned to improve his skills in painting and drawing. P.C. Joshi advised him to join the Government School of Art in Calcutta. Zainul Abedin, the painter who depicted the victims of the famine with powerful emotion, became his teacher and mentor.

Chinese wood engraving, after the art of the German artist Kathe Kollwitz, drew Hore to the craft. However, he did not have the requisite skill. Yet, he laboured on with the medium, reworking compositions from his *Tebagha Diary*. For the first time, these were neither illustrations nor posters. He was realising the need to develop a distinctive form and to build up a latent tension through compositional variants within a pictorial space.

In 1953, he joined the Calcutta Corporation as an assistant teacher, "teaching all subjects from drill to drawing". He utilised his free time teaching the slum children to paint. About a year later, Atul Bose invited him to build up a graphics department at the Indian School of Art. Hore agreed to take up the assignment on a meagre salary of Rs. 95 per month. As soon as he joined, he realised that the technical expertise of producing high-quality prints was not available. Therefore, he willingly slipped away from painting and decided to learn the nuances of the new medium.

Four years later, in 1958, he joined the Government College of Art in Delhi as a lecturer in charge of the graphics department. For nine years, he remained involved in developing his skills. However, the overtly success-oriented milieu suffocated him and his artist wife Reba. After much hesitation they returned with their three-year-old daughter, Chandana, to Santiniketan and joined the Kala Bhavan in mid-1969. Dinkar Koushik insisted on building up the graphics department with his help. In addition, Benode Behari Mukherjee's encouragement also influenced his decision.

The epitome of print-making: *White on White* Series

Few examples are available of the frugal approach Hore evolved to create the most apparent pictorial depiction of lesion. From the cold blank white pictorial space of handmade paper, the gaping sliced wounds stare like raw hoof-marks on a tranquil space.

Technically, these bruises are inflicted on sheets of clay and wax. It was an extension of the wounds that a burin or acid would make on surfaces like wood or metal sheets. The knife or some other implement is thrust into the body of clay or wax. A blow-lamp or red-hot rod burns the surface of the wax sheets and these physical effects are produced. Hore manufactured a cement matrix over which handmade paper was produced. He had no prototype to follow, so the entire procedure was self-learned. "On a first viewing, some critic remarked that they were a pure hoax," Hore informs us

quietly. It is natural, because eyes used to the sentimental or overt depiction of pain probably missed the terse, almost repressed, sense of violence effected so sparsely. This subtlety is mesmerising and lifts the *White on White* series above banal stylisation.

Structuring wounds in bronze

Hore stumbled upon the creative delight of sculpture while seeking a diversion from printmaking. During the summer vacation of 1974, while toying with bits and pieces of wax in the company of senior sculpture students, he produced some unusual figures covered with lesions. One of the students cast them in bronze, and the experiment proved to be successful.

Again, Somnath Hore found a new vocation. In this new medium, he was principally influenced by Ram Kinker Baij's coalescing of a mass of concrete and bronze, a manifestation of human, animal and abstract forms all expressed with a primordial raw life-force. Hore regrets the fact that he could not learn directly from the great master.

After Hore's retirement in 1983, a casting complex on a humble scale was set up in the premises of his house. From this venue came an astonishing array of writhing human and animal forms, all exemplifying the mortal pain of inflicted wounds. However, he does not characterise his bronze pieces as sculptures. "They do not have mass, volume or even weight. They are small and done without the help of armatures. Each figure stands or rests on its own. With its own logical structures".

One of his earliest bronze works was inspired by the victory of Vietnam in 1975 against the U.S.A. This victory aroused a vision in him of an eternal mother holding her head high with a new-born child cradled against her shattered chest. It took him two and a half years to make, but it was stolen on November 3, 1977, and never recovered.

The works that followed are all small. Hore's method of working directly from sheets of wax is not suited to large works. He is more at home doing small pieces, which are mostly mono-products with no duplication since the piece-mould technique cannot be applied to his pieces.

And each of the specimens testify to the way in which the artist has harnessed the whole gamut of expertise gained from working in various media. The sculptures bear the quality of supple lines as in a drawing, the engraved feature wrought by etchings and the manipulative feel of mass as in sculptures.

Another distinctive feature of his sculptures is that huge areas of the animal and human forms are left hollow and the edges of the body structures are uneven, as if they had been roughly scissored. Thus the roughness and empty space within these sculptural forms help to accentuate the latent horror of pain and suffocation.

One of the artist's favourite pieces is that of a hungry rabid dog with bent head, possibly sniffing at the left-overs after a deluge or a drought. A diabolic sense of hunger pervades this small, delicately contoured piece. A battered woman, with her sagging breasts compressed out of her dishevelled body, evokes the feel of being kneaded under raw hungry hands. The piece is simply called *Molestation*. In fact, Hore refrains from naming his pieces with any hi-fi, abstract titles. Simple words like *Thirst*, *Hanging*, *Hunger* are needed since famine, drought and genocide wipe away the individuality and turn mass suffering and yearning into a single general reference of agony and pain.

Does his work then make him vulnerable to the criticism that he is selling poverty?

Hore keeps quiet. Probably because he feels that there is no need for him to answer. After all, he has survived on two paltry pieces of beef and dry *chapatis* – day after day while he worked for the then Communist Party of India, and as an art student. And even today, his material needs are few, an attitude that may not always find favour among those near him. He has never bothered to market his art. His first solo show was held in 1968, and his second in 1991. Of his famous *White on White* series, only two specimens were sold between 1969 and 1983! If he has chosen the subaltern as his subject, it is because he shares an intuitive empathy for them. And it is not armchair idealism because Hore's career graph corroborates that empathy.