

JOYDEB ROAJA



JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

14 JULY–
20 AUG 2022

A woman pierces us with her stare as she stands tall in the center of Joydeb Roaja's 36th drawing from the series *Generation Wish Yielding Trees* and *Atomic Tree*. While the background of the work is devoid of any physical topography that might help us imagine where on the planet she might be holding her ground, the cascading lines on her shawl seem to weave together hills that harbor a *jum* house on the right side of the garment, a motif linking the eleven different ethnic groups associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, through their use of a shifting slash-and-burn form of agriculture known as *jum* farming.

The *jum* house in this drawing serves as an emblem, bestowing upon this woman the power to unite different languages and cultures as a leader of the *jumma* people of Bangladesh¹. The military surrounding her are reduced to the scale of toy soldiers, attentively waiting to execute any command she might dictate. In art, anything is possible, and artists such as Joydeb Roaja are able to refute and reverse problematic power dynamics they encounter in life through their artistic practice. Case in point: the woman in Roaja's drawing described above is Kalpana Chakma, the vocal human rights activist battling for *jumma* and feminist causes who is now presumed dead after being abducted by the Bangladeshi army in 1996, whose force was too large for her to fight.

Joydeb Roaja (b. 1973) is a member of the Tripura community of Bangladesh and he has spent his entire (artistic) life trying to claim space and dignity for his identity within a Bengali majority country. As Katya Garcia Antón aptly observed when convening the 2018 Critical Writing Ensemble at the Dhaka Art Summit with a focus on indigenous art, curation, and criticism: "The country of Bangladesh upheld the premise of 'One language' (Bengali) and 'One people' (Bengali) following its independence from Pakistan in 1971. This constitutional negligence of languages and identities other than Bengali adds to the complexity of the notion of Indigeniety." Part of the nation building process of Bangladesh was to firmly associate Bengali, Bangla-speaking people as the people of the land, even within the very name of the country which translates to "land of Bangla speakers," therefore actively refuting the application of the terminology 'indigenous' to cultures currently resigned to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, such as Roaja's Tripura community.

Roaja came to art as a form of expression as early as his childhood days, when he would struggle to learn from a Bengali curriculum, as a *Kokborok* (Tripura language) speaker. He could not understand most of his text books but he was fascinated with the Hashem Khan (b. 1941) illustrations adorning his school books with visual stories of rural life in Bangladesh. Artists and writers, both historical and contemporary, tended to romanticize the nature-entangled lives of *jumma* people as peaceful; Roaja was one of the first artists to show the violent struggle necessary to maintain a *jumma* way of life in the face of confidence-crushing military occupation. Bangladeshi writer Prashanta Tripura, who comes from the same community as Roaja, poignantly expresses the following when

¹ This essay follows terminology spelled out by Naeem Mohaiemen in a previous catalog essay for Roaja: "The indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts are identified by various names, and this nomenclature has changed over time. "Pahari" (hill people) is perhaps the most widespread, while "Adivasi" (indigenous) is a term popularized by NGO activities and rights discourse. I have consciously chosen "Jumma" (people of Jum cultivation) which is a more politically assertive term that is linked to the idea of united 'Jumma Land.'"

thinking about art and indigeneity in Bangladesh: “An artist who identifies with ‘Indigenous peoples’ thus needs to ask herself: will my artistic creation make the audience reflect on and identify with the crises faced by Indigenous people? Or will my artwork end up in the collections of Individuals or groups that are directly responsible for the denial of rights of Indigenous peoples?”

Roaja first started creating artworks that re-scaled the relationship between *jumma* people and the military forces swarming the landscape of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1998, a year after the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed into being. Unlike the works we experience in this exhibition, the early drawings were made secretly, hidden in a corner of the artist’s house, and destroyed out of fear before any photos could be taken. He picked up making these confrontational works again in 2009, a year before the Bangladeshi government coined the term ‘*khudro nrigoshthi*’ (‘small ethnic group’) to replace the term ‘tribal’ when describing *jumma* people. This terminology served to further belittle *jumma* people as part of ensuring that Bengalis be the true “adibashis” of the country, an ongoing process of shrinking the agency of *jumma* people even before this new terminology came into use.

The Tongan-Fijian writer Epeli Hau’ofa described how external belittling can often be internalized and self-perpetuated as part of a chain of toxic colonial dynamics: “...*I make a statement of the obvious- that views held by those in dominant positions about their subordinates could have significant consequences for people’s self-image and for the ways they cope with their situations. Such views, which are often derogatory and belittling, are integral to most relationships of dominance and subordination, wherein superiors behave in ways or say things that are accepted by their inferiors, who in turn behave in ways that serve to perpetuate the relationships.*”

Roaja’s practice is not limited to two dimensions on a sheet of paper; his drawings often become performances, and his performances often become drawings, where his body claims the power and agency that his rendering of Kalpana Chakma does. For example, some of the works in the *Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree* series include imagery of Roaja and his young children navigating space with forms of military tanks on their heads. These drawn depictions relate to a performance series he executed with his children on a beach as part of instilling confidence in them that similarly to tanks, their bodies and presence have power, too. Works such as *Go Back to Roots 36* (2021) and *Go Back to Roots 37* (2021) posit scenarios that appear historical in terms of *jumma* people entangled in the love they hold for each other and their land, but they are actually futuristic since these sorts of scenes would necessitate that Roaja’s “wish yielding” demilitarize the Chittagong Hill Tracts and allow for their way of life to rebalance with nature. His practice is an exercise in blasting away at fatalist attitudes through a playful imagining of other futures that could allow his people to cultivate and thrive from their cultural roots.

Diana Campbell
Artistic Director, Samdani Art Foundation
Chief Curator, Dhaka Art Summit

JOYDEB ROAJA ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I am Joydeb Roaja. Born in 1973. Khagrachhari, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. I graduated from Chittagong University with an M.F.A in Painting in 1999. I was born in a small village surrounded by jungles. There are 11 different language speaking indigenous communities living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh; I am a Tripura indigenous people. My primary education was not very good because my mother tongue was Kokborok, but the textbooks were in Bangla. The teachers were also from different languages so I didn't understand anything! Besides, at that time, all the local indigenous people had started an armed struggle to demand autonomy. As a result, we almost had to hide in the forest. That's why the content of most of my artwork is influenced by this childhood event. However, in 1997, a peace agreement was reached between the government and the local indigenous people through the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. Sadly, our indigenous people are still losing their land and culture because the peace agreement has not been implemented properly. I publish these drawings, paintings, installations and performances from my own life experiences.

At the beginning of my artist life, I practiced painting and installation art and due to financial problems, it was not possible to continue it later. I started practicing performance art in 2003. I think I can express my thoughts through this by spending very little money. Performance art is a very new art medium in Bangladesh, very few artists are practicing it. Sadly this subject has not yet been included as an art medium in our art institutions.

In Bangladesh, it is impossible to make a living by practicing only performance arts. For this reason, since 2014, I started making drawings alongside my performances. Fortunately, I was able to sell those drawings at home and abroad. Since then, I have been practicing performance art as well as drawing.

In my private life, I am the father of two children. My wife works as an art teacher in a private school. And I'm caring for our two children as well as doing art somehow...

GO BACK TO ROOTS



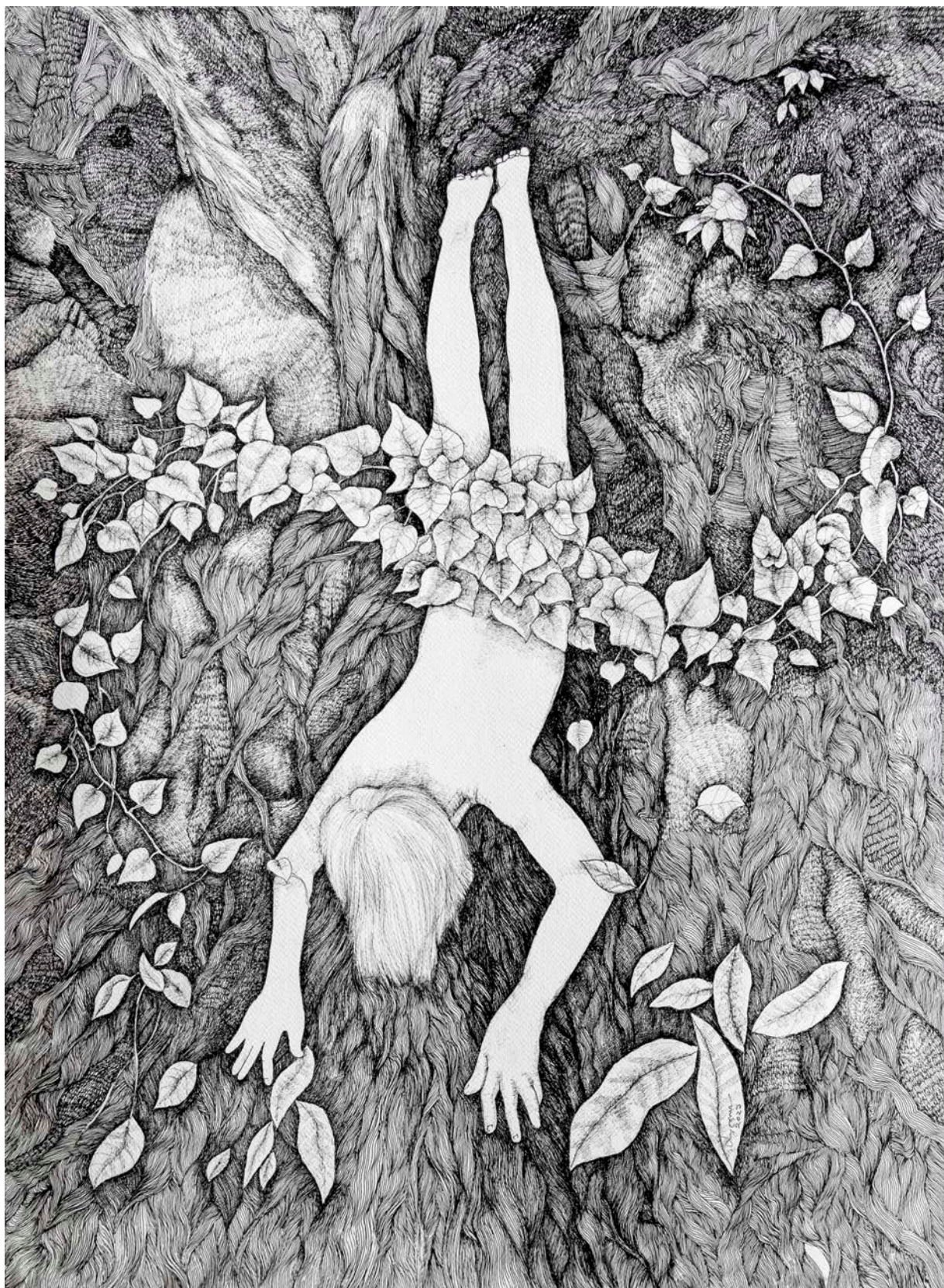
Go Back to Roots 20, 2019
Ink pen on paper
41 x 32 cm
16.1 x 12.5 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



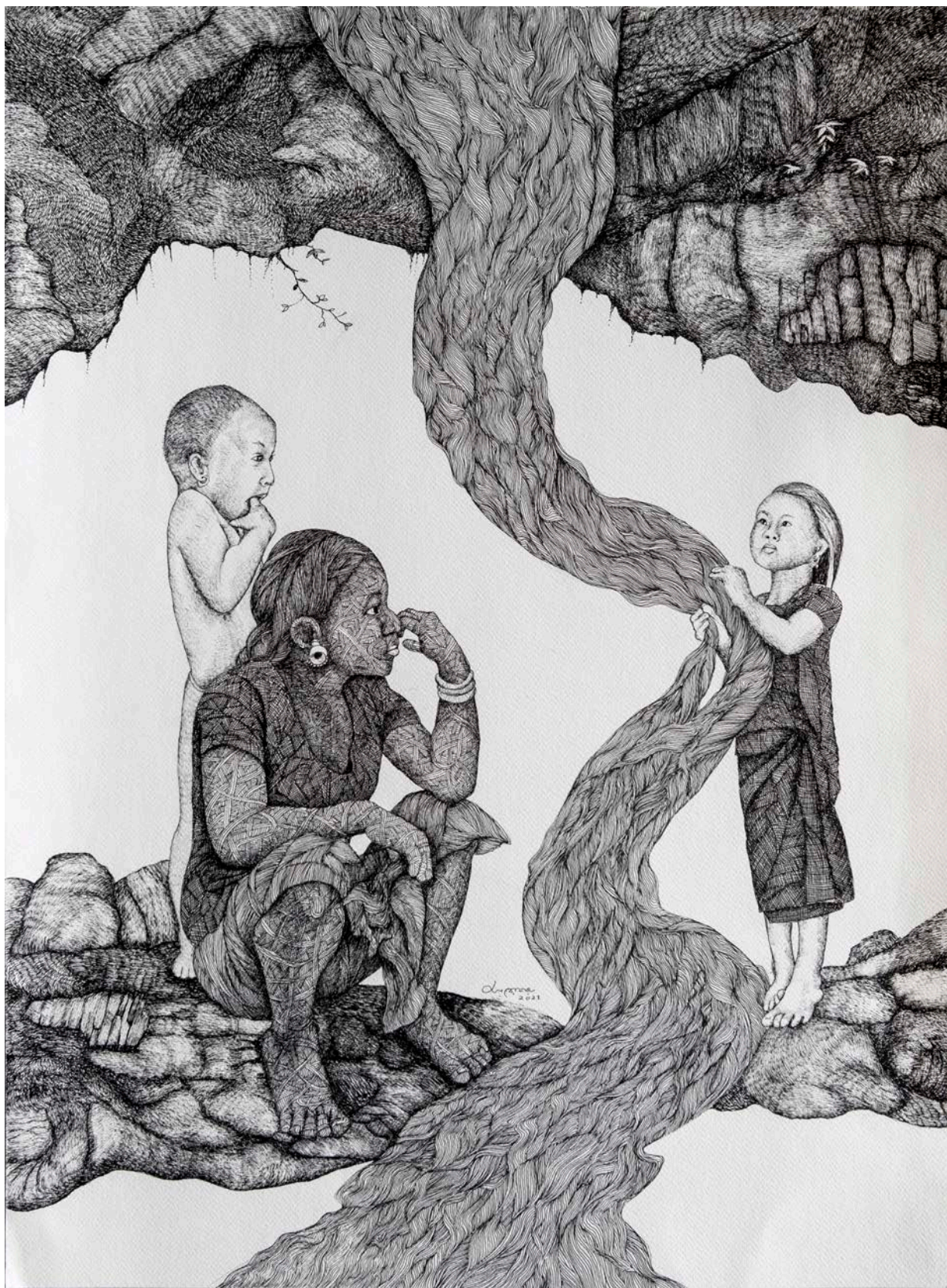
Go Back to Roots 25, 2019
Ink pen on paper
100 x 75 cm
39.3 x 29.5 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



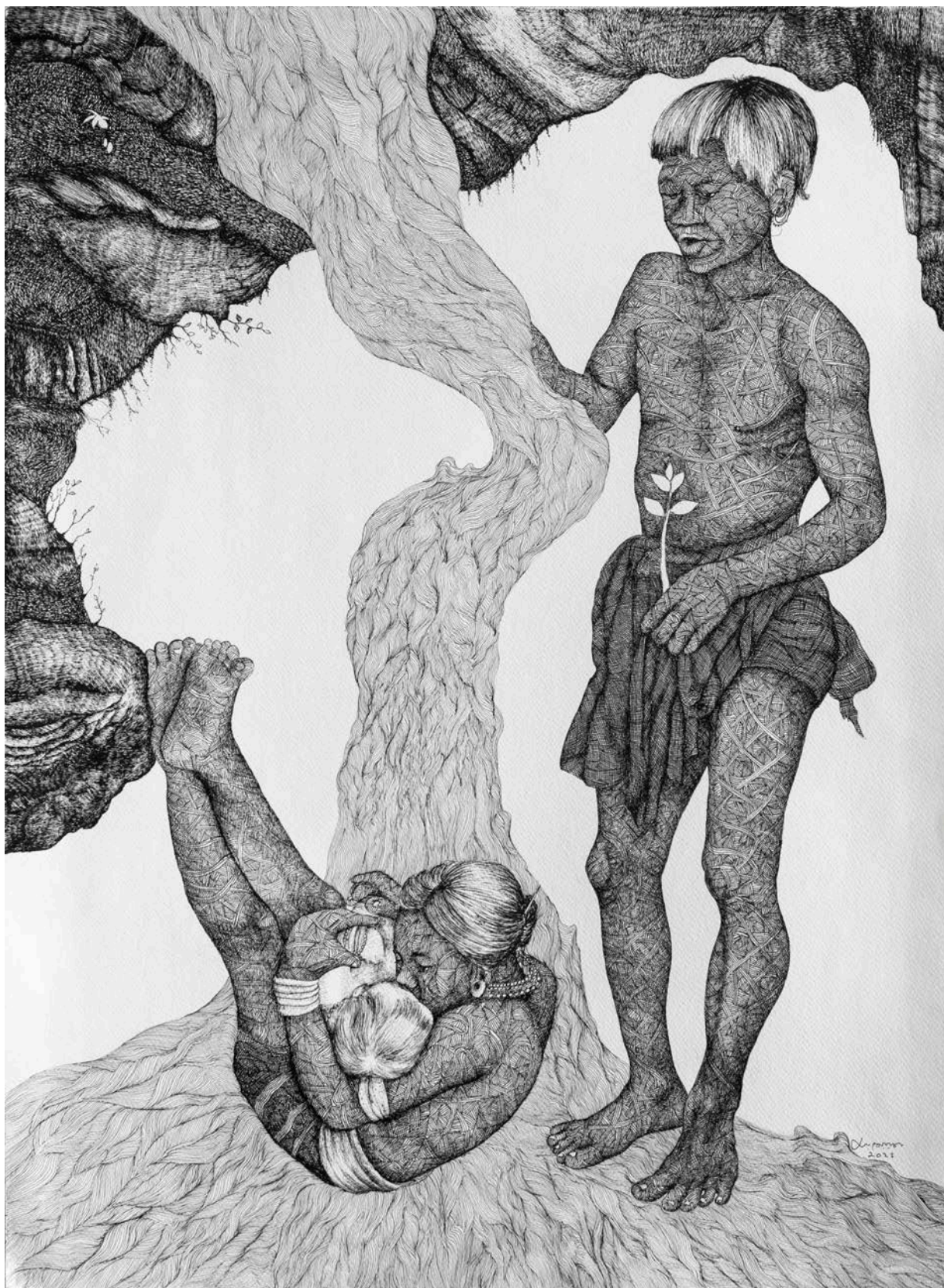
Go Back to Roots 35, 2021
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



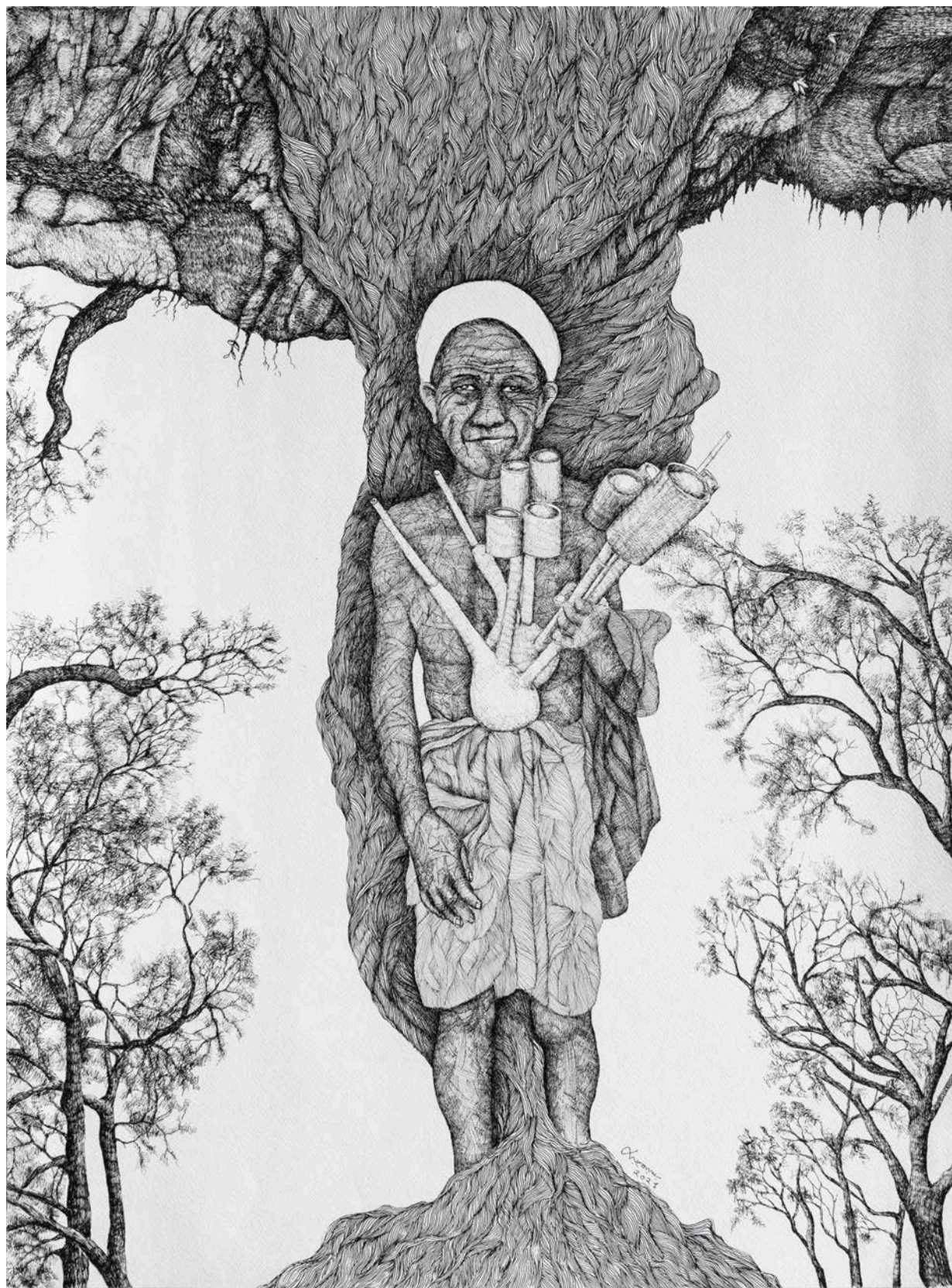
Go Back to Roots 36, 2021
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



Go Back to Roots 37, 2021
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



Go Back to Roots 38, 2021
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



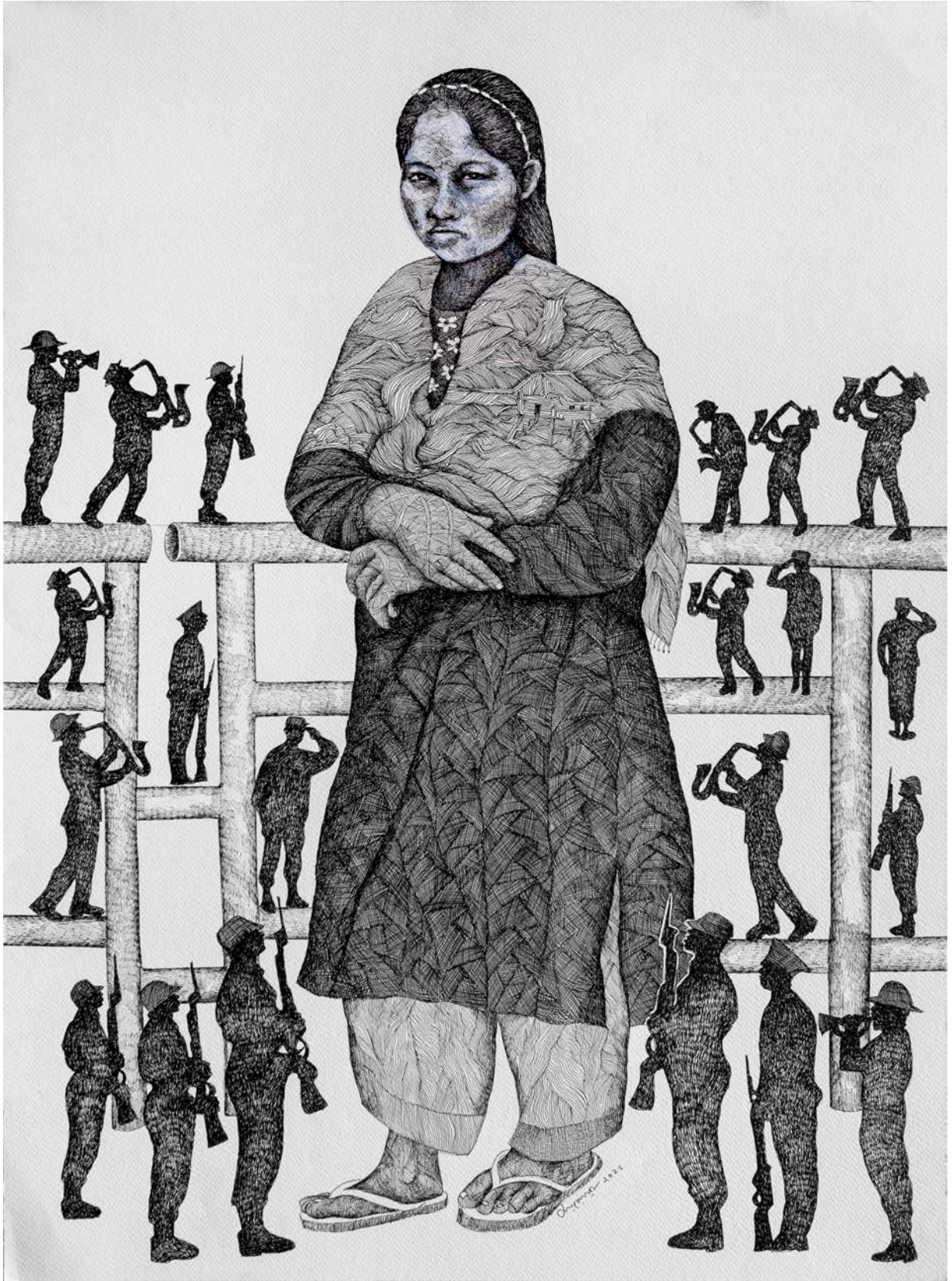
Go Back To Roots 39, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

GENERATION WISH YIELDING
TREES AND ATOMIC TREE



Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 35, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



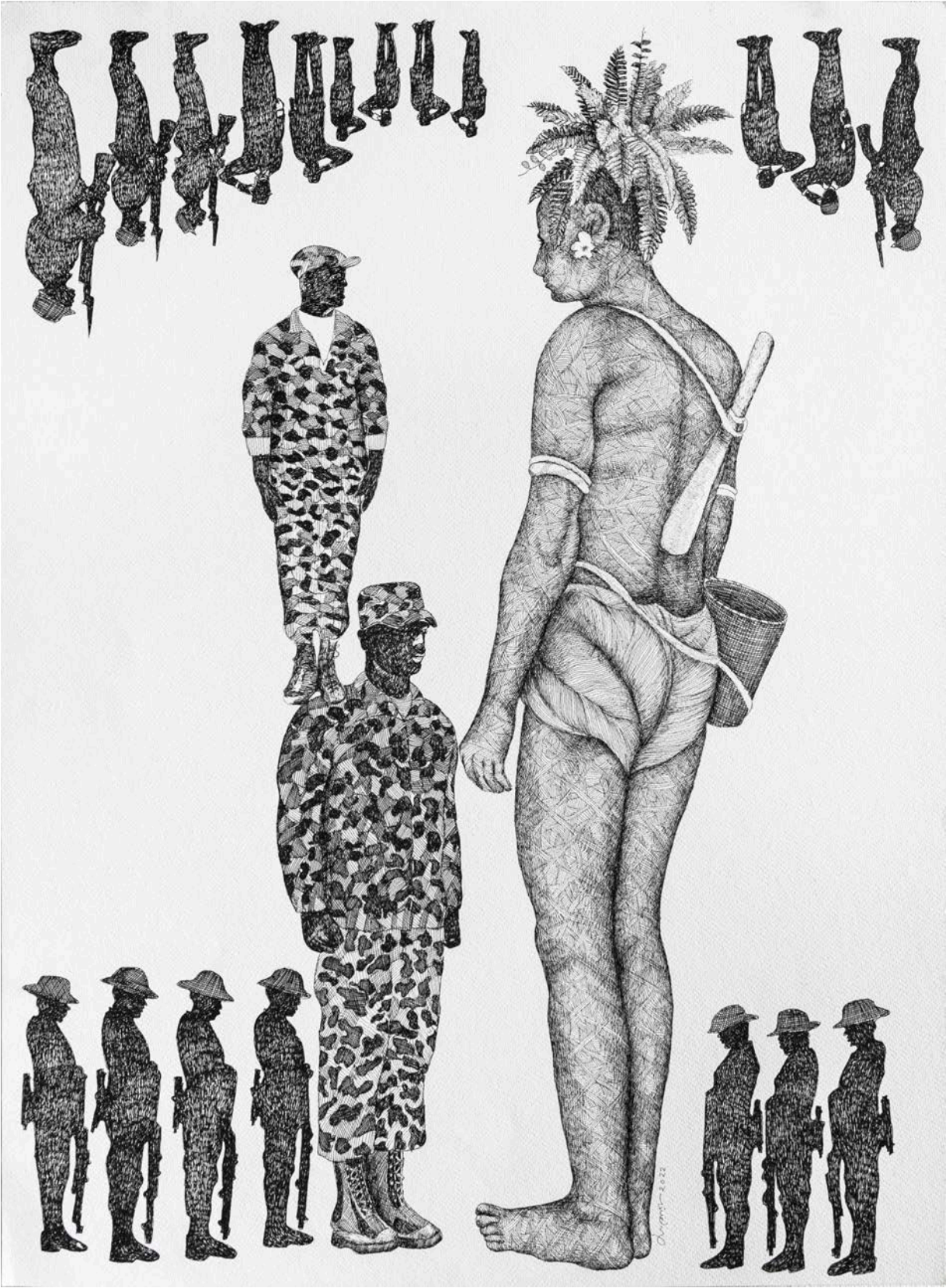
Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 36, 2021

Ink pen on paper

76 x 56 cm

29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA

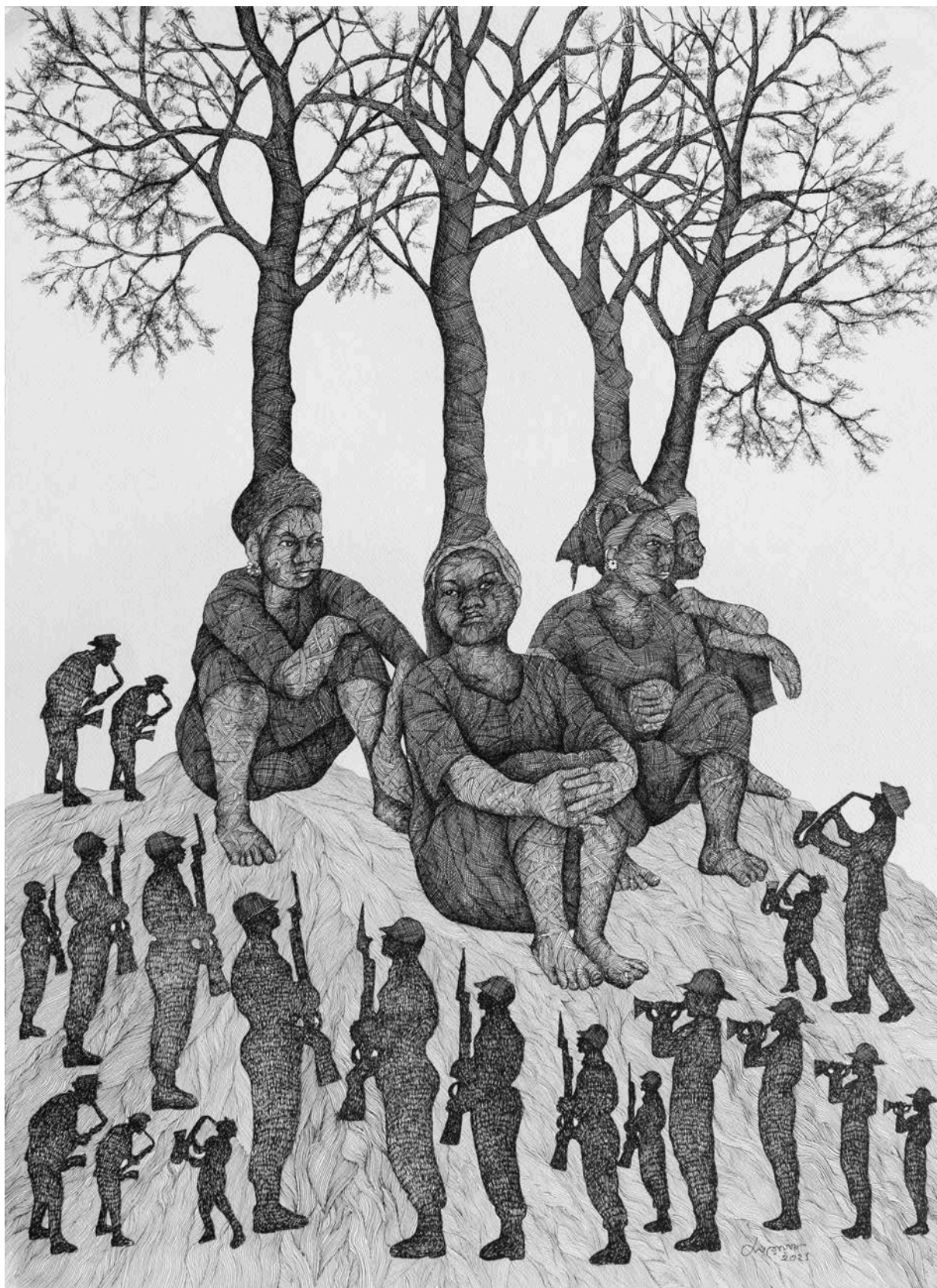


Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 40, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in



Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 41, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 43, 2022

Ink pen on paper

76 x 56 cm

29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA



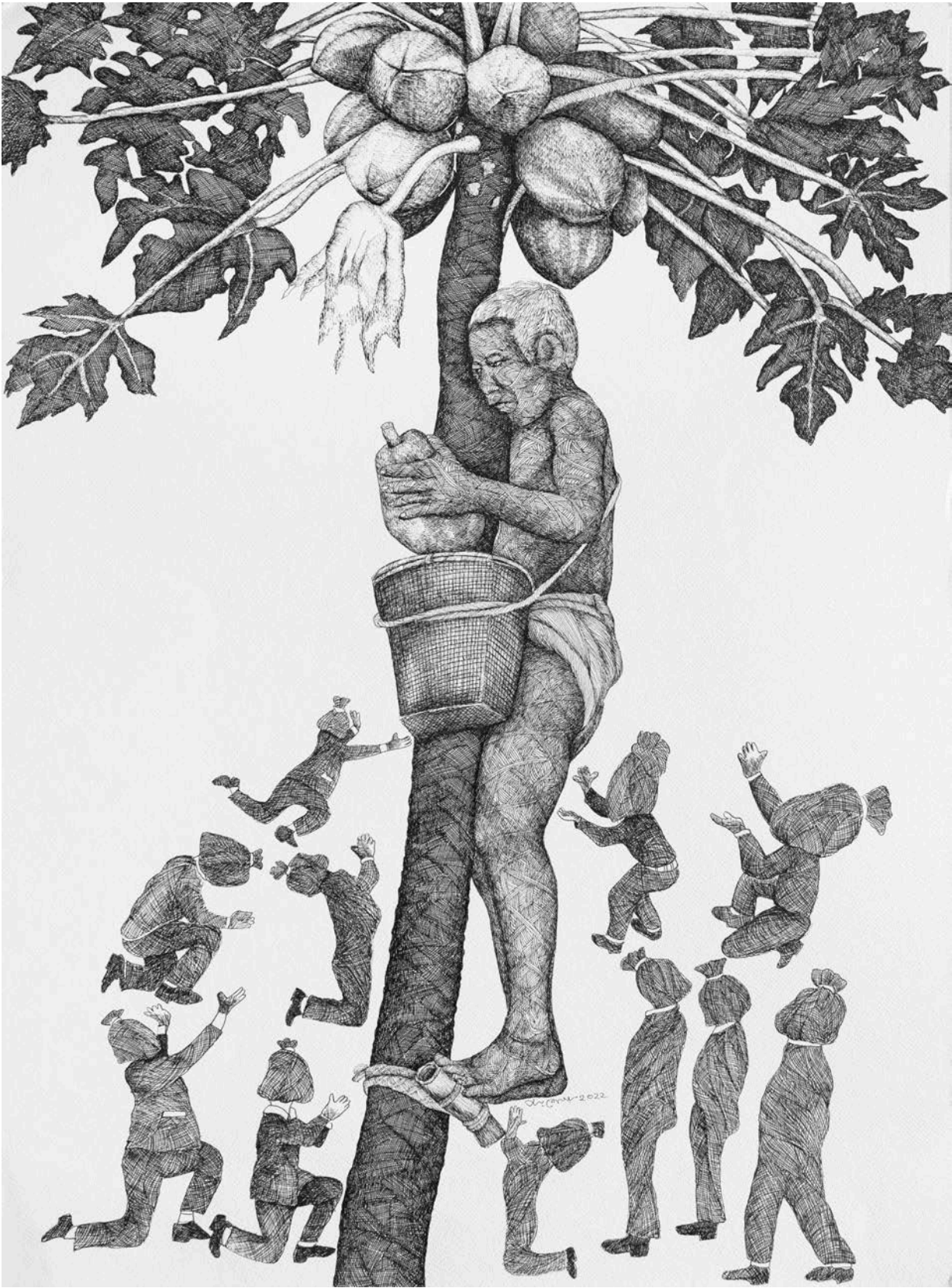
Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 44, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA

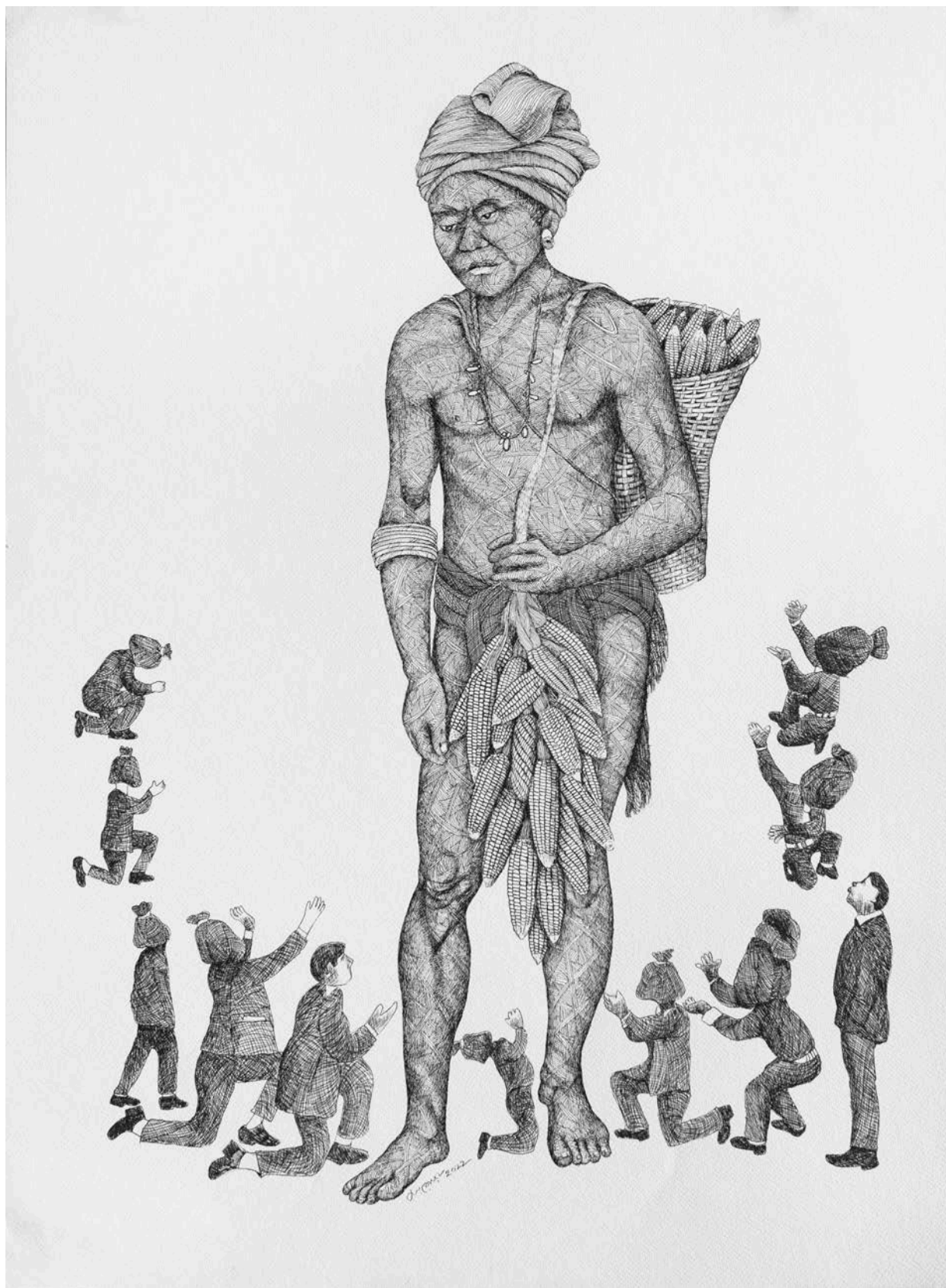


Generation Wish Yielding Trees and Atomic Tree 46, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

RIGHT TO RELIEF



Right to Relief 5, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in



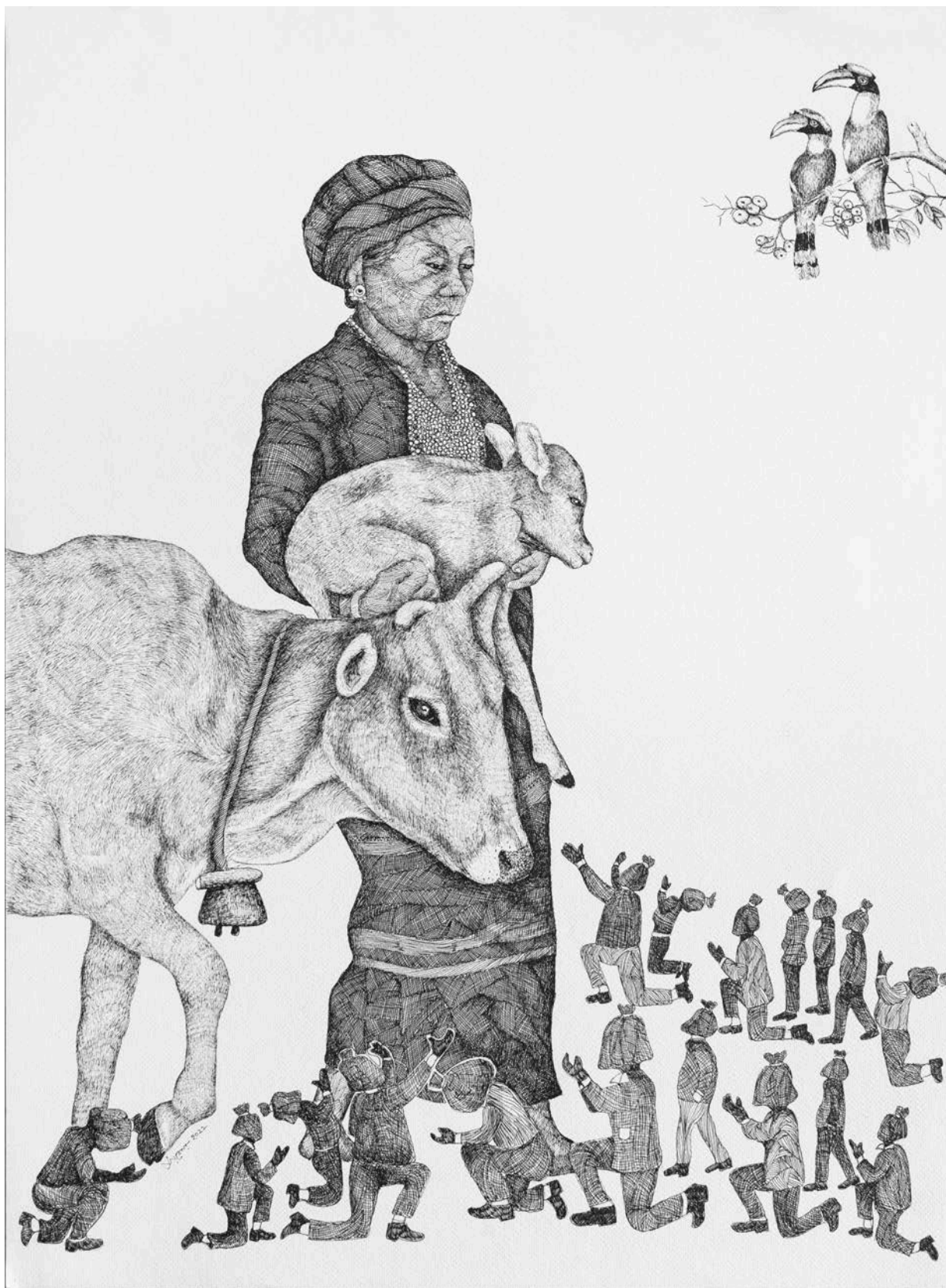
Right to Relief 6, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in



Right to Relief 7, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in



Right to Relief 8, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in



Right to Relief 10, 2022
Ink pen on paper
76 x 56 cm
29.9 x 22 in

JOYDEB ROAJA BIOGRAPHY

Joydeb Roaja (b.1973, Khagrachari, Bangladesh. Lives and works in Khagrachari) has an interconnected performance, painting and drawing practice that highlights the challenging social and political landscape of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts. The area is home to eleven indigenous groups including Roaja's community, the Tripura. His works are tied to the experiences of indigeneity, often emphasising the deep and symbiotic connection of these groups with their land as well as the fight for recognition and rights in a state that has denied them. In line drawings, figures are entwined with the natural world and at times, share the pictorial plane with army personnel, guns and ammunition recalling the historic military occupation of the hill area. This presence remains imprinted in the communities' collective memory with Roaja's works forming an empowering call to demand autonomy and ensure preservation of these minority cultures.

Roaja received his MFA in painting from Chittagong University in 1999.

Roaja had his first solo exhibition at NIPAGEN Tokyo: Performance Art Today (2016), and has participated in performance festivals and exhibitions internationally, including: SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin (2022); Kathmandu Triennale, Nepal (2022); Chobi Mela Shunno, Dhaka, Bangladesh (2021); Sea Art Festival, Busan, South Korea (2021); Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bergamo, Italy (2020); Alserkal Avenue, UAE (2019); Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, Poland; TS1, Yangon, Myanmar; Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2018); The Tetley, Leeds, UK (2017); Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF), Asia (Vietnam, 2016 and Japan, 2014).

CONTACT

jhavericontemporary.com

info@jhavericontemporary.com
+91 22 2202 1051

Gallery Address

3rd Floor, Devidas Mansion
4 Merewether Road, Apollo Bandar
Colaba, Mumbai, 400 001—India

Registered Office

AM Art India Pvt. Ltd
26 B.G. Kher Marg
Mumbai, 400 006—India

JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY