Krishen Khanna *The Embrace of Love*

Gayatri Sinha



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Krishen Khanna speaks of his drawing as an intuitive process. "I start to scratch the surface of a piece of paper. Soon enough, the pencil moves as if of its own accord, putting my hand this way and that rather like a pencil in a planchet creating a nervous scribble meaningful only to the directing ghost...." In an output of painting that exceeds fifty years, Khanna attracts more than one reading of his work. His paintings and drawings emerge as nuanced narratives in which the artist plays out his formal concerns, as well as the shifting and unfolding theatre of human relationships. Politics and identity remain fluid in the larger question of humanity. Effectively, the paintings constitute a powerful psychological engagement, one that also serves as a document of the passage of time in modern India. While many Indian artists during these decades have slipped in and out of experimentation with other media, Khanna has remained faithful to painting and drawing as central to his art practice. Retrospectively, in a career that has spanned nearly six decades, his large body of work places him at the apex of engagement with everyday Indian life.

With 63 images

Jacket:

Front:
Doubting Thomas and Christ.
Oil on canvas, 60 x 40", 2005

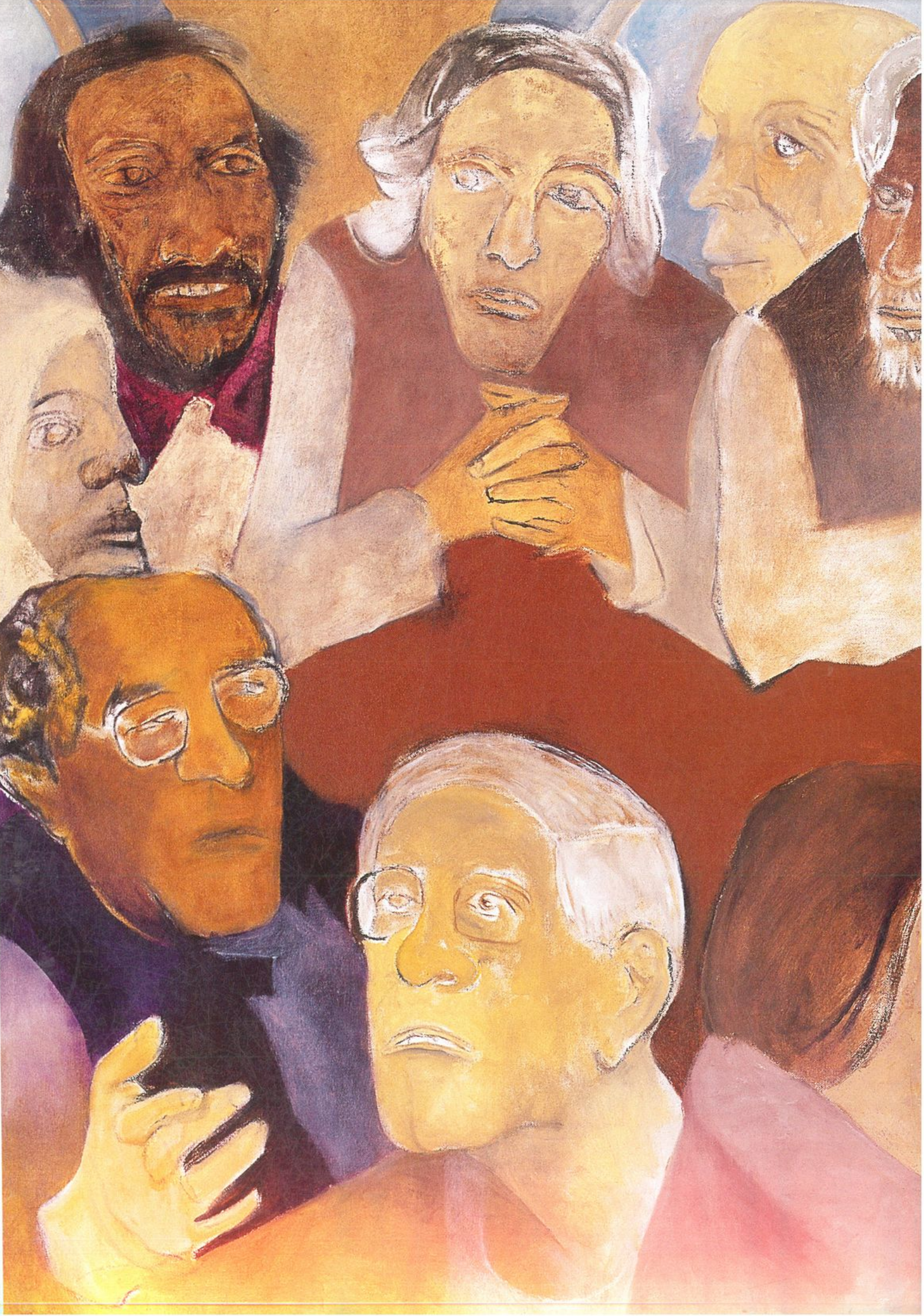
Back:
Cardplayers in a Forest.
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30", 2005

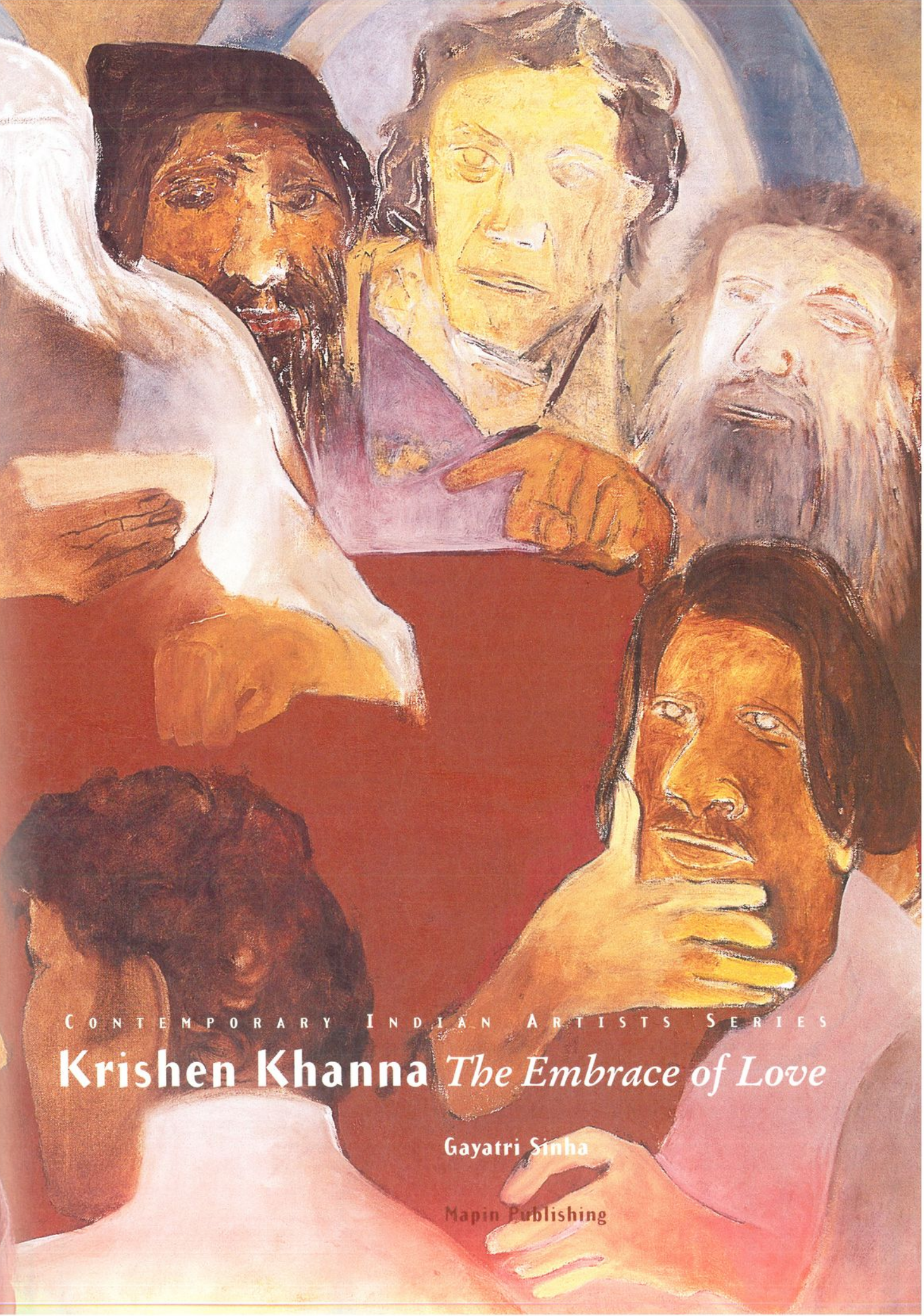


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Krishen Khanna





CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS SERIES

Krishen Khanna *The Embrace of Love*

Gayatri Sinha

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Page 1
Bandwallah. Oil on canvas. 24 x 18"

Page 2-3
The Last Bite... See page 27

Foreword

Krishen Khanna's paintings cater to the eyes of a cross-section of viewers and invoke a feeling of exhilaration in everyday existence. It seems to us that, as an artist, he has been distinctive in accepting in his work multiple factors rather than focusing on the purely formal aspects of painting. This has made for richness rather than purity.

The response evoked by his work has not been purely aesthetic, containing as it does a strong moral undertone which is more humanist rather than didactic. Art is not seen as a separate or secluded aspect of human activity but one which encompasses all. It is this comprehensive view which made possible the large mural on the dome of the Maurya Sheraton at New Delhi and the enormous drawing of the Chola migrations. In addition, of course, to the innumerable paintings and drawings which he has executed.

There is a belief in this country that actions performed in previous lives have repercussions in the present one. Should this be so, it would seem that the sum total of Krishen Khanna's past actions is bearing a rich harvest now.

We are delighted to have known him and consider ourselves fortunate to have had the privilege of acquiring a variety of his work, a selection of which is published in this book. It brings us great pleasure having been able to contribute to this publication in celebration of Krishen Khanna's 80^{th} birthday and it is our sincere wish that he should continue his journey with added strength and fortitude.

Saman Malik **Tanuj Berry**

Krishen Khanna



A Retrospective View

In an output of painting that exceeds fifty years, Krishen Khanna the artist attracts more than one reading of his work. For some viewers, he has come to be seen as a genre painter, a narrativist who weaves and spins images out of fragments of time. On the other end of the spectrum he is an artist who encapsulates the climatic episode of myth or poetry into the painted image. It is a seemingly seamless movement in the hierarchy of values attached to the subject of art, of encapsulating the quirky, the occasional and the ironic in the same oeuvre that returns again and again to the heroic and decisive moments in the epic imagination.

With the benefit of hindsight Krishen Khanna's paintings may be arranged into serial narratives, of areas of renewed interest that recur with unpredictable regularity. Krishen Khanna has tended to engage with his subjects as if in an extended and somewhat unstructured conversation between old friends, in which figures from another time often wander in and out of the frame. Categorizing them to assume a general structure, one can perhaps identify paintings as recollection, and those that belong to the realm of the imagination. As bodies of work, his paintings and drawings emerge as nuanced narratives in which the artist plays out his formal concerns, as well as the shifting and unfolding theatre of human relationships. Effectively, the paintings constitute a powerful psychological engagement, one that also serves as a document of the passage of time in modern India.

It would be interesting to speculate if Krishen Khanna sets up conversations between his characters, whether he draws on salient connections between these figures and on the nature of his own relationship with these figures. His position within this thickly peopled sphere is one of a participant observer, who tilts the scales of ironic observation on the one hand, and the enactment of immense human theatre on the other.

A Brief Biography

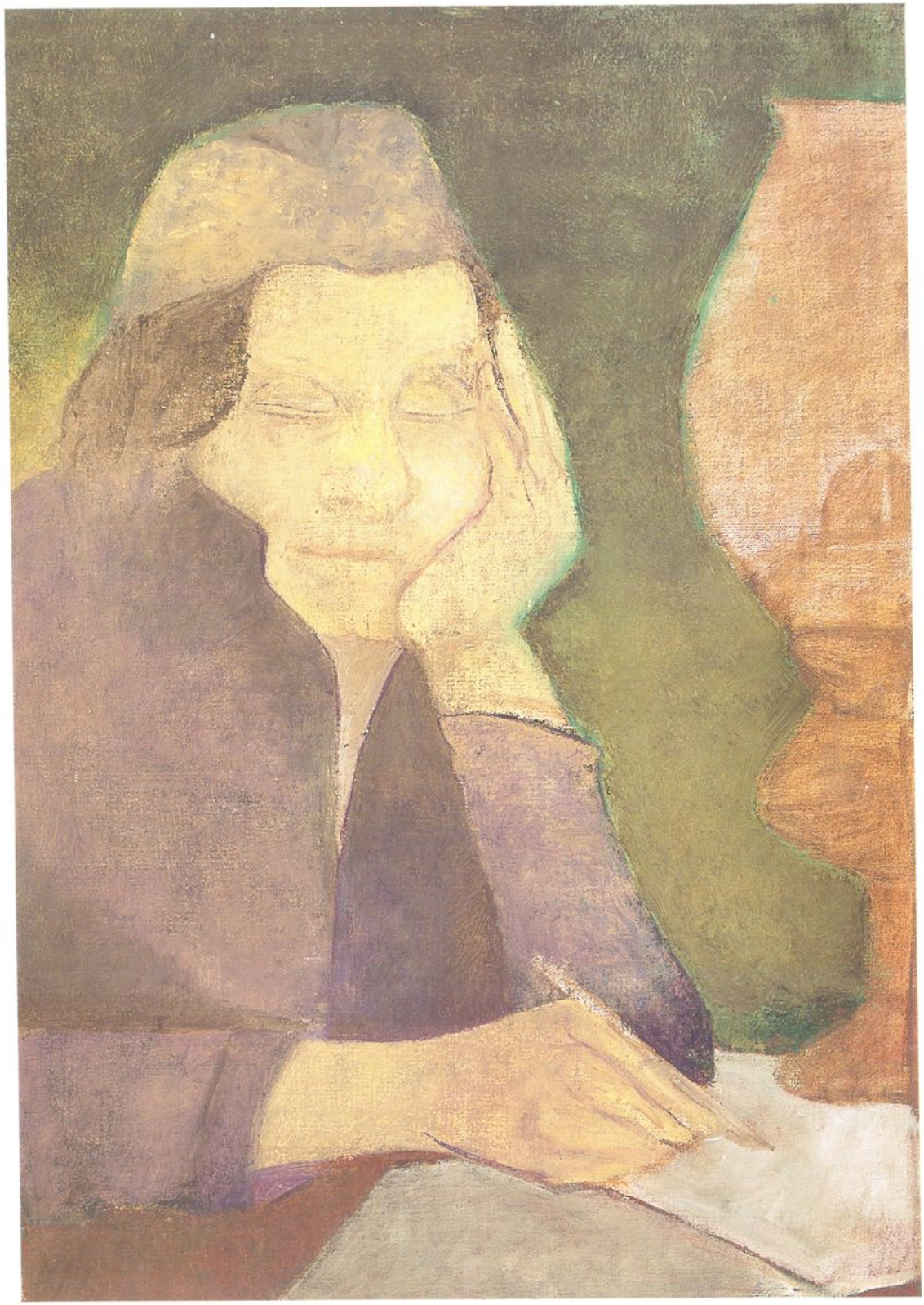
Krishen Khanna's art practice is embedded in the unfoldment of his own life experiences. With his colleagues he belongs to the generation that experienced painting and independence, painting for independence and painting from a position of independence. In a clear paradox, his art springs from

observation of life lived around himself but it is not an intimate act of confession or self examination. In this way, Khanna is central to his own practice as mediator and interpreter, but never as subject. He assumes the position of the *katha vachak* or narrator, looking outward to the other rather than the self. The central image then is of the artist as commentator, who through painted gesture and narrative seems to set up threads of connectivity.

The image of the storyteller as a fabulist traces back to Krishen Khanna's early childhood.[1] To all families, like his own which suffered the ravages of the partition of India, the accumulation of family and community narratives, of loss and survival became like a bank of stories, shared and adapted over the years. In Khanna's case, the narrator, however, had much earlier antecedents in his early childhood in Lahore, with its rich syncretic culture. The gaggle of children who grew up together in what he describes as "my peaceable kingdom" near his father's home on Lahore's Maclagen Road return to his paintings nearly six decades later. The central figure of the narrator is epitomized by his images of the family retainer Mahantram in the large painting *Maclagan Road* (1990).

In most of his depictions of Mahantram Khanna pictures himself as a young boy, perched on the shoulder of the servant who reads assiduously to a group of listeners. The painting is bathed in the deep yellowing light of a late afternoon North Indian sun, the cluster of figures still in concentrated listening; their bodies huddled close in a shared sense of community and unconscious pleasure. In two other paintings titled *Story Teller* (1989), the figure of the family retainer recurs with children nestling into his large frame as if trying to find shelter under a protective tree. The remembered figure of the storyteller appears apocryphal in the artist's own career, where Khanna himself appears as narrator, painting long-remembered experiences of a childhood idyll. The image of the storyteller has another point of reference in his childhood, of stories of his ancestor who served as a scribe. Since the mid-1990's this historic-fictive scribe has become central to his oeuvre.

For many young Indians growing in the Punjab, it was partition that drove the first wedge of displacement and deep anxiety into everyday experience. For Khanna however, the actual sense of displacement came much earlier during his schooling in England at the Imperial Services College. When war broke out, shelling and air raids became a part of the students' experience.[2] He returned to Multan and then joined the Government College at Lahore where he studied English literature. That he was conversant with Persian, Urdu, English and Punjabi speaks of the amalgam of literatures and cultures that flourished in North India, the fairly seamless movement between the imperial and the nationalist framework and the tangible access to different literary traditions that Khanna demonstrates in his painting.



Scribe. Oil on canvas. 14½ x 21". 1989

The Punjab was then the hub of deeply divided nationalist and communal politics. The Khanna family emigrated to India just days before the enforced partition. This violent displacement from their home was compounded with Krishen's need to seek work. In 1948, in Bombay, his appointment with the Grindlays Bank coincided with his befriending the artists who made up the core of the Progressive Artists Group–Husain, Souza and Raza. He also met with Gade, Ara, Mohan Samant, and Tyeb Mehta; together it was a loose fraternity of young painters and sculptors that shared ideas on a theoretical framework of "modernity" and on ways and means of exhibiting their work together. A dominant influence on Indian modernists was their reading of Bloomsbury critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell whose *Art* (1914) introduced the concept of aesthetics as "significant form". Bell wrote about a unique aesthetic emotion or appreciation of an object that is irrespective of what else the object may signify, describing it as "significant form", a concept that strongly influenced Khanna's early abstract work. Bell's theory was also dependent on that of GE Moore, the British philosopher, author of the *Principia Ethica* (1903) who believed that aesthetic values also contain a realization of goodness.

From the late 1940s, guided by senior artists like SB Palsikar, Khanna began to exhibit his work at the Bombay Art Society, the well established if conservative site for modern art in India. Founded in 1888, it exercised considerable influence as an exhibition venue, which also awarded prizes in the competitive section. In 1949 Khanna was invited to show with the Progressives; the Progressive Group, such as it was, would meet at Chetna Restaurant or at the Artists Aid Centre, and Khanna exhibited with them at the Jehangir Art Gallery in 1951.

Khanna's banking career that spanned the decade of the 1950s at Madras and Kanpur represents another idyllic period of a family of young children, and his growing fascination for Indian classical music, which he introduced as a subject in his painting.[3] He also did several paintings on the subjects of death and displacement and revealed the first inclination to paint subjects from myth and history. In a critical decision to become a full-time painter and to abandon his career as a banker, he came to Delhi in the early 1960s with a family of three small children and his wife Renu. For several years, they lived with his parents on 3B Mathura Road.

It was a period that witnessed three wars with China and Pakistan, and the growth of the city from a sleepy town to a city that mediated through covert power structures of complex political alignments and an uneven process of modernization. Khanna's increasingly figurative bent with strong sociological observation and a deviation from his early commitment to significant form in his painting can be traced to this period. While many Indian artists during these decades have slipped in and out of experimentation

with other media. Khanna has remained faithful to painting and drawing as central to his art practice. Retrospectively. in a career that has spanned nearly six decades. his large body of work places him at the apex of engagement with everyday Indian life. How he mediates this engagement. the parables and play that he brings into view are the determinants of how we may read his paintings.

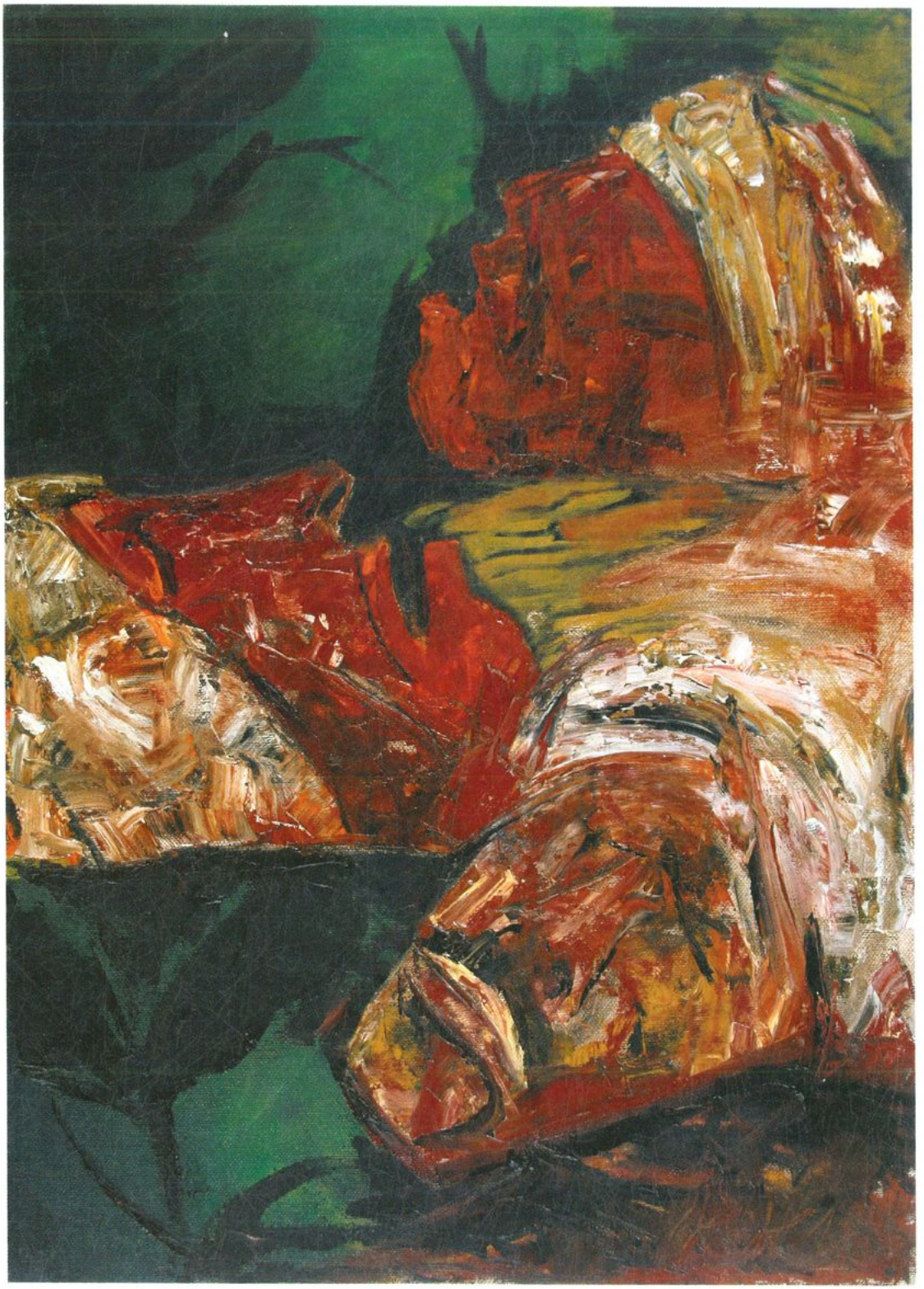
The Subaltern Figure, or 'The Embrace of Love'

The reading of the subaltern figure within Indian modern art history is still an unfinished project. Krishen Khanna reveals an enduring kinship with the subaltern stream that weaves through his oeuvre. lending it a rugged vitality. He began to paint the subaltern in the city before this subject entered critical discourse. The labourer arguing or haggling. the bandwallah in syncopated unison with a troupe of music makers. the fruit seller. are figures of the street. the piecemeal wage earners who enter the city as lumpen migrants and who spend perhaps an entire lifetime on the margins of recognition. The treatment of subalterneity. especially for an artist who comes from a background of privilege has several implications. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that if one who belongs to a background of privileged education and class engages with the subaltern as the "other" then the ideal relation to the "other". is an "embrace. an act of love". that transgresses the structures of historical abuse.[4] Krishen Khanna through a lifetime of engagement with these marginal figures through the median of negative capability confers attention and a lasting sympathetic attention on his subject. In the context of his art. one would also have to consider the forms of social oppression. of the denial of fundamental rights that are evident. As Gayatri Spivak says. "everything that has limited or no access. to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference." (Spivak in the 1992 de Kock interview).

Krishen Khanna's approach to the subaltern subject is not expressly polemical. Nevertheless. he does calibrate his figures in moral terms and the question of goodness. particularly in the terms suggested by GE Moore. is never far. The labourer in heated argument. or the labourers packed into trucks come from a long line of images that resonate with the politics of India of the 1960s and 70s. This period coincides with Khanna's marked commitment to art: he had resigned a lucrative job as a banker and moved with his extended family into a small house. in New Delhi's Bhogal. a resettlement area of wholesale wood and vegetable markets dominated by small traders and partition migrants from West Punjab. Bhogal's close proximity to Nizammuddin lent access to the site of the shrines of Amir Khusrau. Humayun and Jahanara. the annual *Urz* or anniversary celebration of saints which attracted thousands of pilgrims in a layered cultural texture. "It was a fantastic bit of living: I had to shrink." he says of his crowded family flat in which he would paint with his canvas nailed to the back of a door.[5] The bylanes of Bhogal suggested a panoply



Bandwallahs. Mixed media. 11 x 9". 1999



Nocturne. Oil on canvas. 20 x 14". 2004

of characters. who represent the particular tensions of the displaced. now seeking a life even as the city changed in unpredictable ways. In the early days of their friendship. Krishen Khanna and Husain would go and sketch refugee families at New Delhi station. Decades later. as he returned to the subject of the dispossessed refugee. Khanna maintained the humane engagement in his paintings of the street.

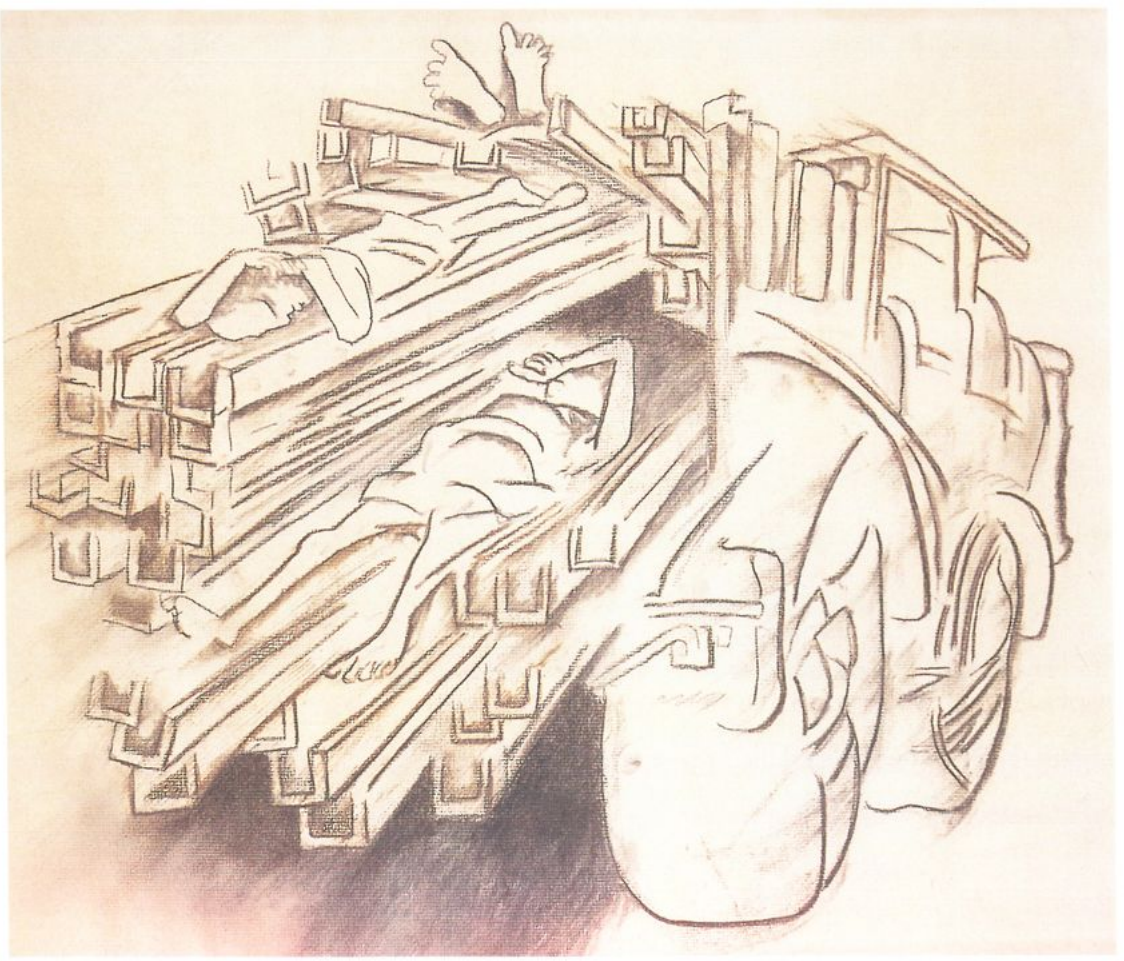
Khanna's paintings of the subaltern are also an engaging psychological document of the changing character of the city of Delhi. These works are not concerned with the subject of interiority or indeed of the exterior as subjects–fleeting details appear only in so far as they affect his human subjects. The artist sketching alone in the small tea-shops of Bhogal recreates the figures that construct the city of the 1960s and 70s as it heaves and lumbers uncomfortably into a developing third world capital of replicated government colonies. institutions and office blocks that virtually characterize New Delhi. From his location on Mathura Road. which is one of the main arterial roads into the city from the neighbouring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. he had made the Bhogal/Nizamuddin area the laboratory of observation. Bhogal. as a post-partition resettlement colony of refugees. evoked in the artist a spirit of sympathetic kinship. In a series from the late 1960s and 1970s he painted the men of the city streets– the small *dhaba* or wayside cafeteria. in *Ramu ka Dhaba*: sleeping exhausted men covered with the fine layer of cement dust in the painting *Nocturne*. and labourers crowded into the back of trucks in the series *Rear View*. All of these are street sites of restless movement. With the men's faces covered against the heat. their limbs and clothes apparently dust-laden in the hot incipient city. these paintings evoke the city only through acts of excruciating labour. The rootlessness of the migrant worker is imaged in the urgent sense of constant movement–of men. iron pipes and rods. or cattle packed into speeding trucks– and virtually caught in the lights of the rushing city traffic. The city. Delhi. only appears to grow by implicating these figures in its concrete advance and the anonymity that a metropolis confers.

The genesis of these paintings lies in the troubled 1970s. in the massive influx of refugees in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war and India's failing socialist political model. The fading shadow of the Nehruvian socialist era had left a country ill prepared for escalating levels of poverty. Khanna's studies of refugees of the 1940s and 50s now mutate into these migrants figures trapped in the hustling onrush of the growing metro. Their drapes of mainly unstitched cloth that protect their faces against the dust and fumes of the street identify them as rural migrants–probably fleeing the village as a consequence of drought or floods– now confined to the margins of the city.

In his analysis of the marginal. Homi Bhabha speaks of the figures on the margins as those that belong within a state but who bear only a tenuous claim on its benefits. In their anonymity and their resilience



Truck. Oil on canvas. 60 x 96"



Rear View. Charcoal on paper. 23 x 18". 1990

Khanna's labouring men of India's vast urban spaces form a genre within a generic style of the subaltern. These works are soaked in a deep irony and would bear a thematic kinship with two areas of shared commonality—the urban paintings of Sudhir Patwardhan and Bhupen Khakhar, and the social realist cinema of the 1950s and 60s by Bimal Roy and Mrinal Sen of the post-independence disenchantment with the nation. Khanna's imaging of a modernizing India bears interesting points of comparison with Bhupen Khakhar and Sudhir Patwardhan, both of whom deal with the effects of urbanism. A professional radiologist and painter, Patwardhan's view of his city Bombay yields once vast denuded stretches of land, now converted into multiple building blocks, and stations and the onrush of trains with an unflinching realism. Khakhar's autobiographical world of Bombay, Baroda or Ahmedabad sees city spaces as offering sites of intimate contact that petrify and disperse male desire. If Sudhir Patwardhan seeks to question the uncertain benefits of modernization and progress by representing the concrete structures, massive apartment blocks, uneven roads, forgotten and abandoned factories, Krishen Khanna paints the human consequences of the modernizing project—the agglomeration of labour, displacement and hostile state agencies. Arguably, in Krishen Khanna's paintings, the modernity project of India, envisioned through his city Delhi in the 70s and the 80s is largely repudiated. The benefits of classic liberalism that drive modernization do not appear to filter down to the actual builders of the citadels to modernity. In this context, his large mural—dedicated to street jugglers and men at the street side tea-shop, beggars and women at prayer—at the luxurious Maurya Sheraton hotel lobby is rich in irony. As an image of ordinary India at this site of wealth and global interface, the mural is an insistent affirmation of the values he brings to his painting.[6]

Khanna's location of these figures tends to vary. In his large oil paintings there is a narrative context and a representation of character; in his small heads, the types become universalized. Abstracted from the stories that vivify them they appear like the faces of everyday encounters, men and women of the street plucked out of obscurity, unaware that they are observed. Khanna confers upon these figures a rare kinship, entering the area of quotidian struggle with a negative capability that disarms with its sympathy and humour.

Yet even within this polyphony of voices from the street, of the jostle of bodies rendered hard and brown, and faces that peer contemplatively out, perhaps no further than the other side of the street, Khanna creates issues of survival and heroism. Some figures draw attention through acts of endurance, others in evocative narratives that testify to the dignity that even quotidian acts can confer. His work may be qualified as moral, but it tends to honour strategies of survival.



Pieta. Oil on canvas. 42 x 30". 2004

Myth and Allegory

Krishen Khanna's introduction to allegory and religious symbolism is buried in a childhood memory. When his father returned from his doctoral studies in England in 1932, he brought with him a copy of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* which he keenly studied. A few years later as a schoolboy in war stricken England he would spend his summer holidays at the vicarage of the Franciscan Brother, Joseph Gardener, who reinforced his readings of the Bible. This gentle figure inspired Khanna's first painting of St Francis, a recurring subject in his painting, rendered in a peaceable natural world. Khanna's engagement with biblical allegory and Hindu myth has served as his instrument of engagement during troubled periods in Indian polity. The fact that Khanna's labouring men are reimaged in the Christ cycle of paintings indicate how he brings the economically disenfranchised and the religious minority on the same plane. This reflects what Homi Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*, "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation".[7]

His early paintings on the Christ cycle, such as *Betrayal* (1955) and *St Francis and the Birds* (1957) anticipate the more reflective and cogent Christ paintings of a challenging period in modern Indian history. The decade of the 1970s with the Bangladesh war, the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi and the resultant political turmoil challenged and demolished the Nehruvian utopia of the 1950s. From the late 1960s Khanna engaged in a series of paintings on Christ that start with *The Last Supper*, and *Garden at Gethsemane* and gradually culminate in *Betrayal*, *Christ's Descent from the Cross*, *Pieta*, and *Emmaus*. The series gains significance not only because of its appearance during the emergency—a period of midnight arrests, censorship of the press and a repressive state machinery—but because of the kinship it shares with Khanna's other work of the 1970s, in a climate in which power masquerades as order, and colonial laws which are hostile to the subject are still operative.

By this time Krishen Khanna had arrived at a distinctive style that stands apart from his larger body of expressionist painting with a strong impasto texture. The Christ paintings are often located against deeply coloured backgrounds which lend a warm emotive quality and an air of tight compression. Through a lack of physical detail, the paintings aspire towards a quality of timelessness. In similar works, most notably in his mural at the Maurya Sheraton, Khanna works towards highly defined figures, a smoother paint application and strongly expressive faces. This figuration and facial type, common to his Christ figures, the labourers packed into trucks on Delhi's dark bleak roads, or the wayside figures hunched over a cup of tea in the street *dhaba* are hewn out of the same forms of hard endurance. Krishen Khanna is probably the first painter of the unromanticized subaltern who

does not lend it the redeeming rhythms of his contemporary, Husain, or the abstracted spaces and forms of Tyeb Mehta. The manacled Christ, the tangle of the sleeping apostles in the garden of Gethsemane or the rough men supping with the Christ at Emmaus show a kinship with his exhausted labourers sleeping beneath their dusty trucks.

Biblical narratives have been variously interpreted by the Progressive Artists Group and bear out interesting points of comparison. In the paintings of Francis Newton Souza, the narratives of the New Testament serve like a form of aggressive self-definition. Souza's saints are iconically rendered like Byzantine figures defined by the dark outlines of Roualt, rendering them disturbing, even menacing. "For the Goan Catholic Souza, the recurring portraits of priests, prophets, cardinals and popes are therefore to be taken literally for what they are, but also symbolically are representatives of institutions and authority, only more treacherous in that they claim divine sanction."[8] Souza's early Communist leanings would also have predisposed him towards saints as figures of a perverse and wayward authority. His painted Christ shifts in register from the sexual to the violently persecuted, often supported by powerful Pieta figures. These he represents as a distinct development in figurative paintings. He writes, "In *The Last Supper* there are two or three faces and they are drawn in a completely new iconography, beyond Picasso. I have drawn the physiognomy way beyond Picasso in completely new terms."[9] The other modernist who engaged in a series of paintings on the saints, Akbar Padamsee presented them with a fixed iconicity and a deep, sombre dignity. These paintings form an interesting point of comparison as post-colonial subjects. Certainly in both Souza and Krishen Khanna, Christ becomes emblematic of resistance to persecution, and what Khanna speaks of as "the tragic and perfidious in man." As artists, they bring to the Christ cycle the coherence of narrative and an explicit conflict with figures of authority, symptomatic of public life in the subcontinent.

The insecurity caused by communal riots in Gujarat, Moradabad or his own locality Bhogal and their resonance thirty years later at Godhra in Gujarat in 2003 motivates the sense of betrayal. Christ's absorption into the lumpen labour of the city is complete: this is neither the healing Christ, the divine worker of miracles or the haloed Son of God, but the persecuted figure within an oppressive system.

Khanna's sympathetic portrayal encodes some critical readings of the subaltern figure. His figures as labouring class men bear all the marks of urban migration under duress, wearing their marks of poverty. Khanna's interest in the subaltern is political, but unlike the earlier Bengal Famine artists, Chittoprosad and Somnath Hore, or Sudhir Patwardhan's engagement with the urban city dwellers, he resists a historical analysis, or any theory of praxis. Rather, he invokes the biblical narrative and its



Emmaus. Oil on canvas. 40 x 30". 2004

location within India as allegorical of specific and universal class struggle. Where Khanna's urban migrants, rendered into unstable lumpen groups, bear a resemblance to the Bengal documentary art of the 1940s is in the overwhelming spirit of fatalism.[10] The blindfolded Christ or the labouring figures, faces protectively covered against the blinding North Indian dust are finally individuals who submit to the depredations of state apparatuses, notably the police and the politician, and the classic domination/submission pattern that is a mark of subalterneity.

In this allegorical arrangement, several areas of confrontation come into play. The appropriation of the Christ by a post-colonial artist in a manner that challenges both the Christian missionary enterprise as well as the Hindutva platform and the location of such figures against the still standing colonial structures of the British-India police station carry with it a deeply ironic historical resonance. The militaristic figures that represent within the police station the vestiges of colonial power reveal how this power has turned inwards, on its own people. Khanna's Christ, as one among his subaltern figures, reveals an interesting passivity. The foremost engagements are with the states of doubt and persecution.

Subaltern studies have yielded concepts on what Gautam Bhadra describes as the mentality of subalterneity.[11] Bhadra speaks of subordination and domination as political realities, and the manner in which subordinate groups become dominant at the critical historical moment. To quote from the essay, "the religious message that teaches submission also forms the basis of rebellion." In Khanna's painting the oscillation between the labouring figure and his reappearance as the figure of divinity contain elements of both submission and heroic transgression. Further, the fact that Khanna locates the passive rebellion of Christ not within the mainstream faiths of post-colonial India, but in the Christ narratives speaks of a politically defined climate of minority persecution in which resistance becomes not only individual but cultural. By stripping his images of specific location Khanna in fact problematizes the idea of cultural identity and resistance.

> "Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, he said, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful and began everyone of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I? And he answered and said He that dippeth his hand, with me in the dish, the same shall betray me."
>
> —Matthew 26: 21-23

The Christ paintings may bear a number of similarities with other modernists. One may, for instance, see similarities in Krishen Khanna's Bhogal and Stanley Spencer's Cookham as small communities of ordinary

people. rendered by a storytelling painter with a strong sense of the place of allegory in a contemporary setting. If Spencer brought miracles of the Old and New Testament to Cookham High Street. where Christ carries his cross past women who peer at him through post-war. red brick English houses. Khanna paints the *dhabas* of Bhogal as Emmaus. the colonial police stations of British India and the thick *khadi* or handspun wraps of Indian labour. Like Spencer in Cookham. Khanna has actually executed a large body of his work in Shimla with its strong colonial residue drawing upon the themes of love. death and resurrection. However. Khanna's influences for his frequently heavy and sombre figures in the Christ cycle make reference to a multitude of precedents in western painting. A subject that he has returned to frequently is the Last Supper. with its dramatic prophecy of impending betrayal and doom. Artists from the time of Giotto have sought resolution on the presentation of perspectival space in the subject of the Last Supper. Khanna's contemporary. Husain brings characteristic flamboyance to possibly the largest Last Supper executed by an artist on canvas. It stretches to 40 feet and presents as the apostles a pastiche of global figures. Khanna's Last Supper typically introduces the apostles and Jesus around a table: its square dimensions over a compressed view that is emphasized by the raised perspective that the artist assumes. affording a foreshortened view of the scene. If we use da Vinci's Last Supper as a base reference—which Khanna saw and first attempted to paint at the age of seven—we see a profoundly indigenist and subaltern view at work. In *The Last Supper* (1979) many of the obvious similarities—such as the remains of the repast. the bread and the Eucharist—are dispensed with. As Christ speaks of imminent betrayal. each of the disciples. except Judas react with profound emotion—from Philip and John's intense questioning to the expressly held hand of Thaddeus. By presenting a square format rather than the conventional rectangular frontal viewing of the apostles. Krishen Khanna engages in several formal innovations. All architectural details or a view of the well illuminated landscape behind the apostles are dispensed with. Khanna's Last Supper is set in an interior within such compression that we have the impression of a single spartan room in which even the air is still. No source of light is visible. Christ himself is the solitary source of illumination and the shadows appear to descend into the edges of the frame. In dispensing with all props and accoutrements. he nevertheless retains the possibility of symbolic references.

Khanna retains some of the symbols of the original. notably the central Christ. who cups his hands on the table in a void. An unexplained source of light illuminates his face and upper body. bound tightly with a cloth. The disciples around the table enact the responses that his revelation inevitably brings. from dismay to animated exchange. The uncertain location. the absence of any social context is only mitigated by the disciples themselves. Their rough handspun clothing. largely unstitched in the manner of Indian farmers or poor labourers. their heavy features and limbs identify them as working-class men. By locating the Last Supper within this group. Khanna opens up the possibilities of varied

interpretation. The absence of any vestige of the meal, the subaltern status of the dark rough-hewed men, their tense huddled bodies betray an anxious concern with issues of survival.

Compositionally these paintings bear comparison with Khanna's works titled *The Game* (I and II, 1971-72), which coincided with the liberation of Bangladesh. He uses the device of the table as a negotiation site for military men while corpses lie strewn near their booted feet. In *The Last Supper*, the cause for anxiety lies in the amorphous area of 'betrayal', of a sense of the loss of kinship and shared fraternity. As with the Mahabharata paintings of the dying Bhishma Pitamah, there is a subtle interplay on faithlessness, and the tragic unfoldment of a life, dedicated to a higher principle.

Khanna's foregrounding of subaltern figures is not only in keeping with the Christian narratives but also locates his own humanist concern among the migrant, the uprooted figure seeking refuge from homelessness, or an oppressive, political structure. Khanna's own experience of displacement and the displaced has complex accretions. As a schoolboy in Britain he would spend his summer holidays in a Franciscan priory that was among the many safe houses that received German refugee children, several of whom who had suffered physical and mental trauma. In Multan in the 1940s his experience was of refugees from Iran who had fled political crisis to reach India. His acquaintance with these families was fortuitous as he befriended them with his Persian teacher, to brush up his Persian. Through such halting conversations Khanna learnt of their private stories of persecution. The realization of enforced migration returned with greater intensity as the Khanna family fled Lahore on August 12, 1947; just days before the partition of India and Pakistan. The images of mass carnage and loss were compounded by the actual reality of homelessness, and the urgent necessity to find work.

"It was a period of great uncertainty a constant feeling at the pit of my stomach," he recalls. Krishen Khanna and his family were part of the largest population movement in history in which roughly 13 million people crossed the border to what they hoped was the safety of the religious majority. In this massive demographic shift, approximately five million people are believed to have died. Khanna's move to Mumbai, his integration in an international banking concern and his fairly smooth absorption within the art fraternity reflect a relatively easy erasure of refugee identity. Nevertheless, the displaced figure continually recurs in his painting. Khanna's position is not overtly political nor does he potentially address question of nationalism and displacement. It is through subtle markers—such as the apostles wearing *gamchha* (cloth used for a variety of purposes) or the sola topi-clad Miss Amery who taught his mother English in Lahore in the 1930s—that he marks his recognition of the displaced. His own experience then is only partially reflected in his sympathetic portrayal of Bihari labour, allying as he



Miss Amery with her Pets. Pencil on paper. 12 x 9". 2000

does a post-colonial perception of power structures to the workings of a state that is hostile to its own citizenry. Politics and identity remain fluid in the larger question of humanity. In Khanna's location of these figures in a religious setting other than a majoritarian one, the benefits of nationalism, of the modernizing project are completely nullified.

A redeeming feature in Khanna's work is not the complete pursuit of the tragic but its deflation into the frequently petty and ridiculous. One of the most cogent expressions of this split vision is his painting *The Last Supper* (2004) seen with its companion piece *The Last Bite* (2005). Inevitably, spoofs on the Last Supper have been painted, most notably the Damien Hirst series titled *Meat Balls, Sausages, Chicken* (1999) presented as medical labels for food supplements. Hirst's dark humour collapses the essence of spirituality and material sustenance contained in the original idea into a cynical rendering on consumerism, food, art and religion to off-the-shelf food supplements.

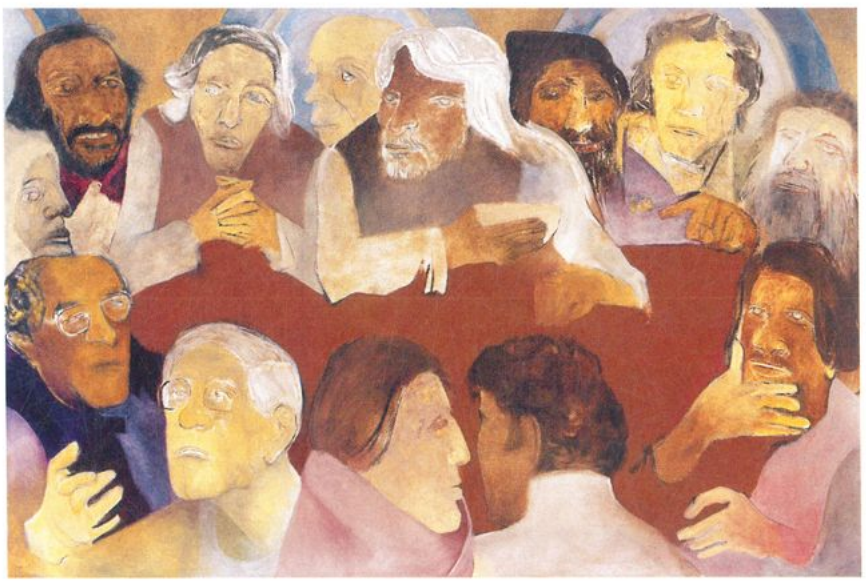
Among other references is Salvador Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955). Dali spoke of his painting as an "arithmetic and philosophical cosmogony based on paranoiac sublimity of the number twelve... the pentagon contains microcosmic man: Christ." Khanna subverts the notion of the spiritual significance of the number twelve to comment on his own artist fraternity, the proponents of the modern art movement. In a suite of related paintings, it is the critical painters of the 20th century who come to be represented as the twelve apostles.

In *The Last Supper* (2004), Jagdish Swaminathan (1928-1994) clad in a *lungi* (unstitched lower garment worn at the waist)—artist and ideologue with whom Khanna was competing interlocutor and friend—vies for attention in the foreground. For several years Khanna and Swaminathan were neighbours at the Garhi Arts Studios in Delhi, where they exchanged their frequently oppositional views on modernity in the company of others, notably Himmat Shah and Manjit Bawa. Khanna who wrote of Swaminathan's paintings as "a universe of mystery and wonder, creating images which are about to reveal themselves but never quite do so"[12] presents him in this work as the disciple who holds up his finger in the interrogative gesture. Is it me? The picture gains pungency when seen with its companion piece, *The Last Bite* (2005) which is edgy and fraught with the possibility of interpretation. Instead of the central figure of the Christ it is Husain who sits at the centre of the table. Husain's position as a founder member of the Progressive Artists Group has gained several layers with his preeminence as India's most popular and widely recognized artist. He is holding a cup that replaces the empty table of Khanna's earlier compositions on the same subject. The configuration of artists that he introduces is apocryphal as an enduring comment on Indian modernism. Husain is

flanked on the left by Tyeb Mehta. Souza and Bhanu Atthaiya. the only woman who was a member of the Progressives. who shot into prominence not as a painter but as a costume designer for Bombay films. notably in her Oscar winning contribution for Attenborough's *Gandhi*. From the loose fraternity of the Progressives. there is also the bespectacled Akbar Padamsee who appears to address Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2004) who. in turn. is speaking out of the frame. On Khakhar's right the somewhat spectral figure of Gaitonde is in conversation with Jeram Patel who appears uncommitted. as conversation appears to fly around the table. Jogen Chowdhury who looks contemplatively out of the frame. Manjit Bawa. Raza and Swaminathan complete the table of artists. Krishen Khanna speaks of the shared confabulations across such settings that have sustained the artists. of *chai* sessions at Chetna Restaurant in Mumbai. of just a cluster of chairs at the Bombay Art Society. and meetings around a *dastarkhan* of shared *biryani* in Husain's house. The prominent table in these paintings is. he states. "a formal device that defines the painting. but it is also a divider." The division apparent at this table is the differing views on Indian modernism. and the debate that raged between the poles of indigenism and internationalism. between the Progressives and Group 1890. led by Jagdish Swaminathan. Through the 1960s and 70s the chief preoccupation in Indian art was the central ideological concern—with artists arraigned on either side of the debate. Perhaps the striking exclusions here are Gulam Mohammed Sheikh. an ideologue who emerged out of the Swaminathan-led Group 1890. Ram Kumar. who has probably been the most faithful adherent of the Paris school of abstraction that several of the Progressives initially followed. and Khanna himself. His composition locates such leading figures around the table in apparent confabulation. yet on closer inspection. there appear to be several dialogues on at the same time. areas of patent distraction. and the lack of coherence. Finally. it is also a painting that marks his affection for his fraternity of artists. in the true modernist spirit that honours the artist at the apex of art production.

Another subject from the Christ cycle that Khanna returns to is of the Pieta or the Mater Dolorosa. as she holds the exhausted Christ on his descent from the cross. He returns to it over the decades with different stylistic variations. The Pieta paintings relate to his concern with the subject of the dead and the dying. as much as with the persecuted figure of the Christ. Khanna uses the essential composition of the seated Mother Mary cradling her son. as widely perpetuated by the *Pieta* of Michaelangelo. The Pieta is among the few maternal figures in Khanna's oeuvre. and his interpretation of the figure varies in its palette. as well as the reworking of the pyramidal structure. In an early *Pieta* (1966). Christ lies to the right rather than the left. his face obscured from view and his body bled of all colour. The Mother. whose face and body are rend with deep sorrow. appears to be covered in a sanguine red shroud. a colour that she shares with other figures familiar in the artist. such as the arguing labourer. or the marching





The Last Bite... Oil on canvas. 40 x 60"

The Last Supper. Oil on canvas. 71 x 50"





Pieta. Conte crayon. 30 x 24". 1990

Pieta. Oil on canvas. 97 x 70"

bandwallah. In a later painting, *Pieta* (1988), Khanna abandons the strongly expressionistic style of the first painting to introduce the two Marys at the base of the cross. The central figure of the Mother, who appears to speak to figures outside the frame, is draped in the deep blue vestments that compare with Alessandro Allori's *Pieta* as well as the *Pieta after Delacroix* by Vincent Van Gogh. In a telling letter to his sister Wilhelmina, dated 19th September, 1899, Van Gogh wrote of his Mater Dolorosa that "one sees the good sturdy hands of a working woman... And the face of the dead man is in the shadow, but the pale head of the woman stands out."[13] These are some interesting points of comparison with Khanna's own painting, but what merits particular attention is the Mater Dolorosa's shift from a passive suffering figure to an active resisting one, a working class woman with the strong hands of her class, who protests the persecution of her exhausted son. The movement from the subordinate to a dominant position of heroism, from suffering to resistance is at this moment, complete.

Khanna's other engagement with the fabric of myth has been with Indian epics, notably the *Mahabharata*. Typically Indian epics and mythic narratives codified as the *Puranas* that further elaborate on narrative cycles contained in the great epics comprise an episodic structure, in which each episode begins and then ends with a question. The condition then is one that challenges closure and instead creates a climate of doubt. The heraldic presence for his readings lie in stray paintings such as *Sati* (1964), *Durga* (1966) and *Kalinga* (1977), until there arises more sustained engagement with the subject of the great war of the Mahabharata during the decade of the 1990s. As in the Christ painting, his chosen episodes from the *Mahabharata* are not of glorious resolution or the spoils of kingship, it is rather the climatic moments of extreme provocation or doubt that he paints. Arjuna on the battlefield as he questions Krishna raises the essential existential question, concerning the Kurukshetra or the field of war as the *dharamkshetra*, or the plain of belief and action. Draupadi, who laughs as the dying Bhishma Pitamah pontificates, embodies elements of irony tinged with cynicism that he introduces in his larger body of work. As the central woman protagonist of the *Mahabharata*, and the victim of molestation by her kinsmen at least four times in the course of the great epic, or Arjuna, who sees war as an attack on his own brothers, they present the same issues of betrayal already familiar in Khanna's oeuvre.

From the *Mahabharata*'s rich fount of dramatic confrontations, Khanna has repeatedly returned to the subject of the dying Bhishma Pitamah, patriarch of the Pandava and Kaurava clans, who is driven by an abiding sense of duty. In an extraordinary discourse, the dying Bhishma Pitamah speaks about the duties of a king to the very kinsmen, the Pandavas, who injured him in battle. His discourse, spread over a period of 58 days, and alleviated by his own power to determine the moment of his dying are a powerful document to issues of survival, to the interpretations of *dharma* or righteousness and

desire, and the ideals of kingship. The advice of the dying Pitamah is contained in the 13th book of the *Mahabharata* titled 'Last Advice'. As in his Christ paintings, he brings to this body of work a modified social realism. But while Christ is located in the police stations of Khanna's own city Delhi, interrogated by a recognizably contemporary Indian politician and policemen, his Mahabharata paintings that bear all the signs of a bygone age are the artist's engagement with the moral contradictions of the great epic.

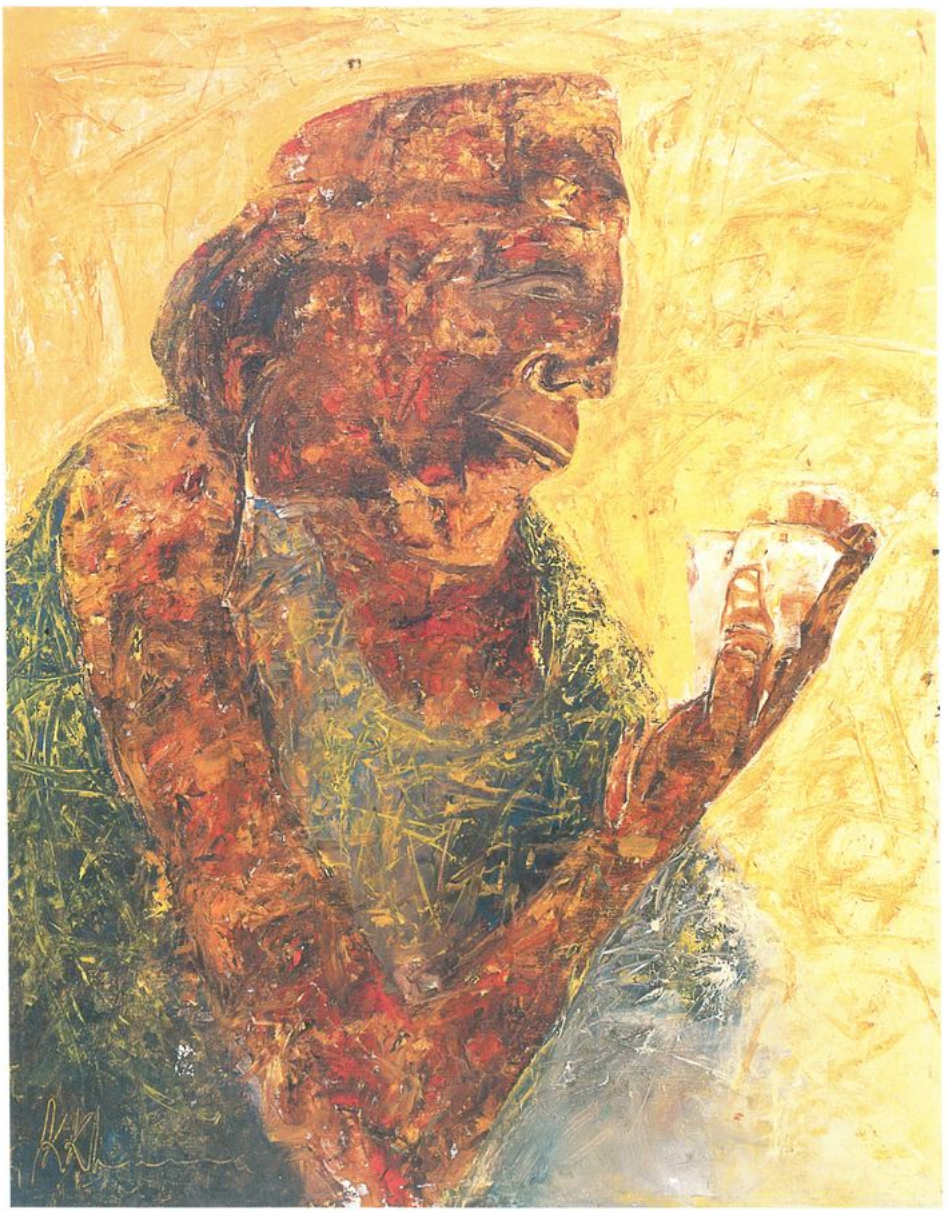
The other reference to the *Mahabharata* which Khanna introduces in different registers is of the *Card Players*. In this overtly moral work, the reference to Yudhishthira, as Dharmaraj, or the upholder of moral rectitude who gambled away everything including his wife is not far to seek. In Khanna's paintings the gambler appears most memorably in the work the *Dead and the Dying*, in which a group of gamblers continue to play, indifferent to the corpse that lies close to them.

The narrative structure of these episodes, the intense theatre that is being played out should be studied within Khanna's abiding response to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as a paradigm for human existence. These evocations establish the movement in Krishen Khanna from the subject of the observed to the text, from eidetic painting with its strong visual inspiration to the literary. Chaucer was a part of Khanna's studies as a schoolboy at the Imperial College, Windsor in the 1930s. The untrammelled movement in time that the painter allows in his work to conflate and read aspects of human nature draws from the allegorical writing dispersed in time. Chaucer's great work, *Canterbury Tales*, written in the 1390s concerns a group of 30 pilgrims who agree to engage in a storytelling contest as they travel from an inn in Southwark to Canterbury. Khanna's own painting does not necessarily involve such a framing device, but it brings together people of diversity, saints and subalterns, all presented through the prism of the acute observation of daily life. Chaucer's emotional inflexions of seeing the humour, the vanity and the pathos in every condition become the framework to analyse Khanna's paintings.

Memory and Recall

Khanna speaks of his drawing as an intuitive process. "I start to scratch the surface of a piece of paper. Soon enough, the pencil moves as if of its own accord, putting my hand this way and that rather like a pencil in a planchet creating a nervous scribble meaningful only to the directing ghost... I would fain repeat the contours of a subject I've tackled before, which is not to say that I would not go back to the same subject in the hope of discovering another dimension."

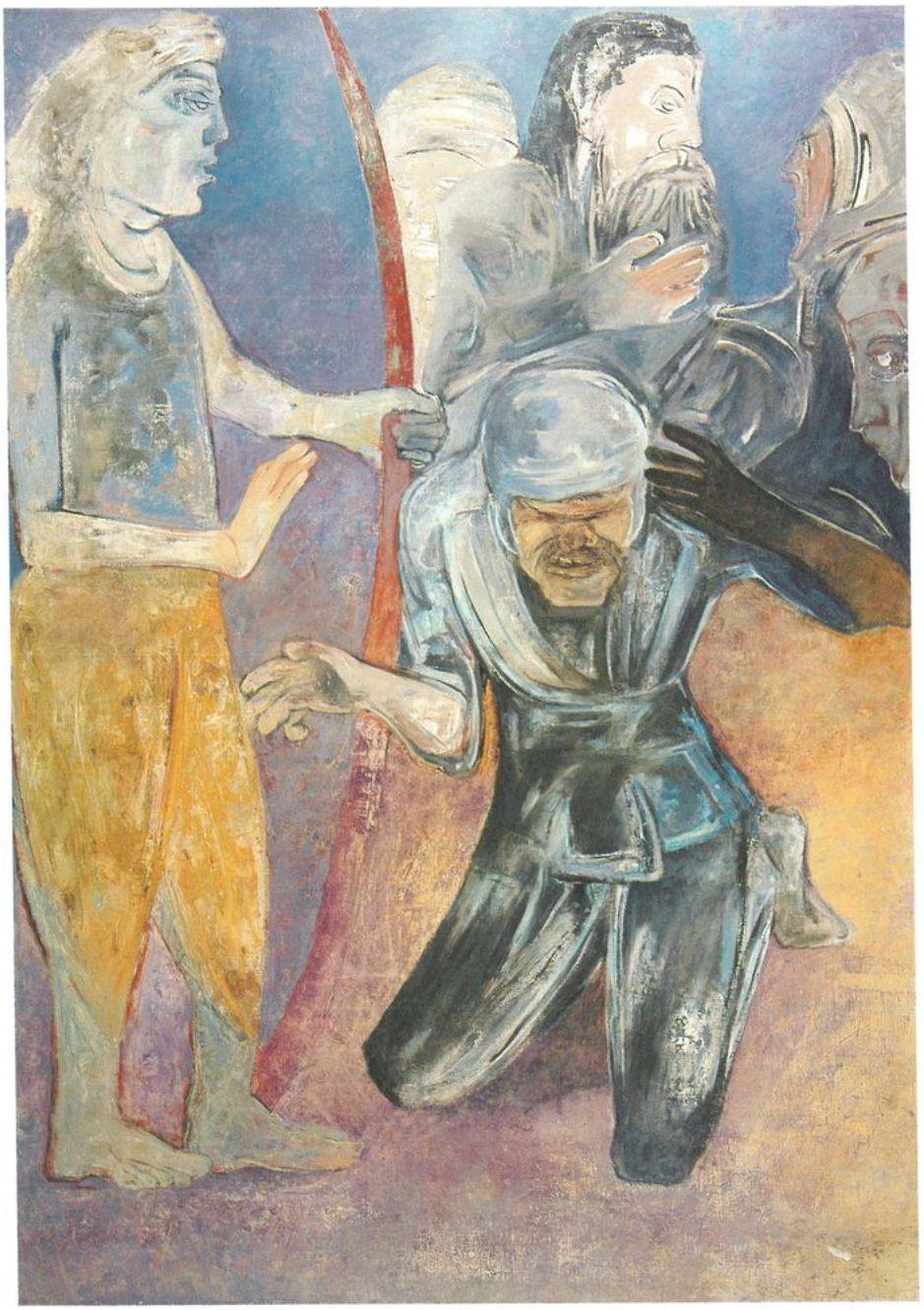




Card Players. Oil on canvas. 28 x 22"

Card Players. Oil on canvas. 28 x 22". 2004





The Quandry of Arjuna. Oil on canvas. 57 x 40"

Draupadi's Last Laugh. Oil on canvas. 71 x 50"

A large part of Khanna's paintings emerge from the recesses of memory, often appearing like serial contemplations on the same subject. His childhood and its sharply etched recollections of Lahore emerge in a body of impressionist works. When placed in a chronological sequence, the broad brushstrokes of a narrative emerge: of a community of close-knit neighbours on Maclagen Road, story sessions under the warm Punjab winter sun, the boy Khanna strategically perched on the shoulders of Mahantram, the family retainer. The unselfconscious pleasures of childhood spill into his frequent subject of *Children Eating Watermelons*, where the large wedge of fruit yields its juice, the sensuous pleasure of cool sweet sustenance. Children eating watermelons—in drawings, or oil paintings—that are soaked with the high sun of an Indian summer, the deep crimson of the fruit topped by the dishevelled heads of the children is among Khanna's favourite subjects. The uninhibited brushstrokes and the strong expressionist feel of the work suggests his indebtedness to Willem de Kooning and his adaptation of a rugged agitated painting style to the subject of innocence.

The subject of death also occurs as the interjection of a teenage recollection. With a recurring frequency from the mid-1950s onwards, the sunny warm palette of childhood evocations, or else of the white heat of the Madras sun turns dark and sombre in the series of paintings of the dead and the dying. This subject is transfixed in a childhood memory. On his return from England in 1939, Khanna's terminally ill cabin mate who was making the journey back to India died at sea; his body was buried overboard. This concern with the dying translates in an overt form into the climactic moment of actual death. *Concerning a Drowned Girl, Che Dead, Electrocuted Bird, The Dead and the Dying* all reflect upon this lasting engagement with the allegorically represented Christ or Bhishma Pitamah. The moment that he chooses is that of imminent death. The scale of values of adherence to duty and a persistent heroism are heightened by this proximity to death. An acceptance of death and its inevitability guides this engagement with his subject. In this context Krishen Khanna quotes his favourite poet, WH Auden:

Winter for the earth and us
A forethought of death,
So that at death,
We may not be
Helplessly new to strange conditions.[14]

Khanna's other evocation from the dead is an evocation from the scribe. Like the bandwallah or the card player, the scribe is usually depicted as a solitary figure. Crouched on his haunches behind a *takht*,

an Indian style desk, poring over his manuscript or book of accounts, he brings an air of intimacy to bear. The fixity of his role, his distance in time from the present, is communicated in Khanna's drawings in sepia tones, his place in another time suggested by the loose Indian clothing of a pre-modern era.

> "At one time it was very daring to make a figure red or blue—I think now that it is just as daring to make it flesh coloured."
>
> —Willem de Kooning, BBC interview, 1963

Entering his oeuvre only in the 1990s, the scribe represents the artist in repose. The agitation of expressionist impasto brushstrokes impacted with paint, the roiling noisy scenes of the bandwallahs, the rumble of the trucks and the clatter of the street *dhaba* fades. The scribe is not a visionary like the risen Christ at Emmaus or the dying patriarch Bhishma, but testimony to a life lived in quiet perseverance. The figure was inspired by Khanna's grandfather, a man of whom he had only heard some stories, who lived in the latter half of the 19th century, and of whom there are no photographs. The details themselves are quite sketchy, of a writer with a good hand, who had worked as a *munshi* or clerk. The only existing remnant of the scribe is a fragment of court petitions inscribed in Urdu, testimony to the kind of work he did everyday. As a visitant from the past the scribe often appears as if in nebulous detail. Sitting in profile at his *takht*, with a stylus in hand, he appears to listen intently, or write as his patron speaks, an oft-painted figure in sepia tones, on the edge of definition. "I am more and more interested in middle tone painting partly because more of my contemporaries do it. I like a quality of a certain uncertainty," says Khanna. In his apparent patience and attitude of a certain resignation, the scribe allies with the fruit sellers, the quiescent sleeping bandwallahs or labourers in his oeuvre, which when seen together point to the resilience, if not the heroism, of the ordinary.

If the scribe belongs to the area of childhood evocations of memory, Khanna is much less ambiguous in his admiration of the poet. The painting *Remembering WHA* is a direct engagement with his favorite poet WH Auden, whom he quotes with acute regularity. Auden's mop of hair and deeply creased face, in what may be seen as a psychological portrait, represent Khanna's love for poetry as a redemptive presence against life and its terrible uncertainty. The 12th century Sufi mystic, and the whirling dervish, Rumi; the 20th century writer TS Eliot, and Auden—spread over the continents in a vast stretch of time, it is their poetry that has played a large sustaining power in the painting of Krishen Khanna. The poet like the scribe can cross the distances of time appearing with a defined modesty as he works on his papers, the grandeur of the creative moment only suggested by the sobriety of his demeanor.



Untitled. Oil on canvas. 10 x 14"

Children Eating Watermelons. Oil on canvas. 24 x 24"





Scribe. Oil on canvas. 28 x 22"

Notes:

1. Krishen Khanna was born in Lyalpur in Punjab in 1925, the eldest of five children. His father Dr Kahan Chand
2. Khanna was a professor of history, who taught, among other institutions, at the Government College, Lahore.
3. Khanna was a Rudyard Kipling scholar at the Imperial Services College Windsor, between 1938 and 1942. He returned to India at the height of the war, undertaking a three month long sea voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, to resume his studies.
4. In the 1950s the Khanna home at 115 Lloyds Road, Nungambakkam in Madras was a site for musical soirees with Mahalingam, Palghat Raghu, TN Krishnan and masters of the Carnatic tradition.
5. *The Spivak Reader*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Donna Landry and Gerald M Maclean. New York: Routledge, 1996. *Krishen Khanna: A Critical Biography*. Gayatri Sinha. New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2001.
6. In 1983 Krishen Khanna was commissioned to paint the dome of the lobby of the five star hotel, Maurya Sheraton in New Delhi. In the four year long project, he introduced figures of the everyday—jugglers, roadside tea shops, women waiting at balconies.
7. *The Location of Culture*. Homi Bhaba. London: Routledge, 1994.
8. *Contemporary Indian Artists*. Geeta Kapur. New Delhi: Vikas, 1977, p. 20.
9. FN Souza in an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Bombay 1991, quoted in *The Making of Modern Indian Art*. Yashodhara Dalmia. New Delhi: OUP, 2001.
10. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44*. Paul S. Greenborough. New Delhi: OUP, 1982. "Developments in the Modern Art of Bengal since 1940s." Sanjoy Kumar Mallik (unpublished doctoral thesis, 2003) for the understanding of how the dominant responsive to the Bengal famine was inward and fatalistic.
11. *The Mentality of Subalterneity: Kantanama or Rajadharma*. Gautam Bhadra. Subaltern Studies VI edited by Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1989.
12. *Contemporary Indian Art Series*. "Krishen Khanna". J Swaminathan. New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995
13. *Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York: Bulfinch Press, 1991.
14. *Poems*. WH Auden. London: Faber and Faber, 1930.



Remembering WHA. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16"



Untitled. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10". March 2005

Bandwallah. Oil on canvas. 18 x 14"







Tuba Player. Pencil on paper. 8 x 8". 2000

Bandwallah in a Frenzy. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"

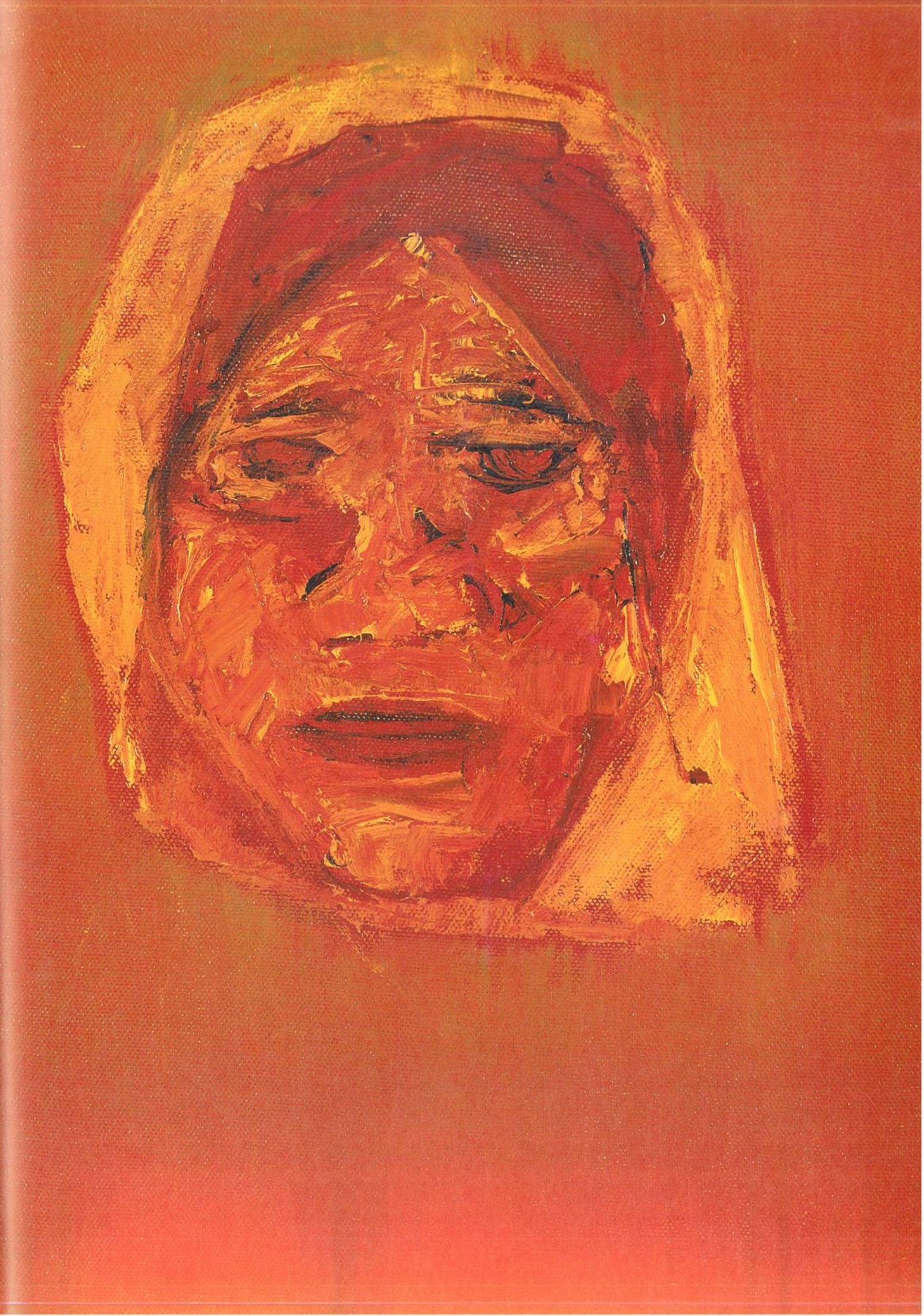
Untitled. Oil on canvas. 36 x 24"





Untitled. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"

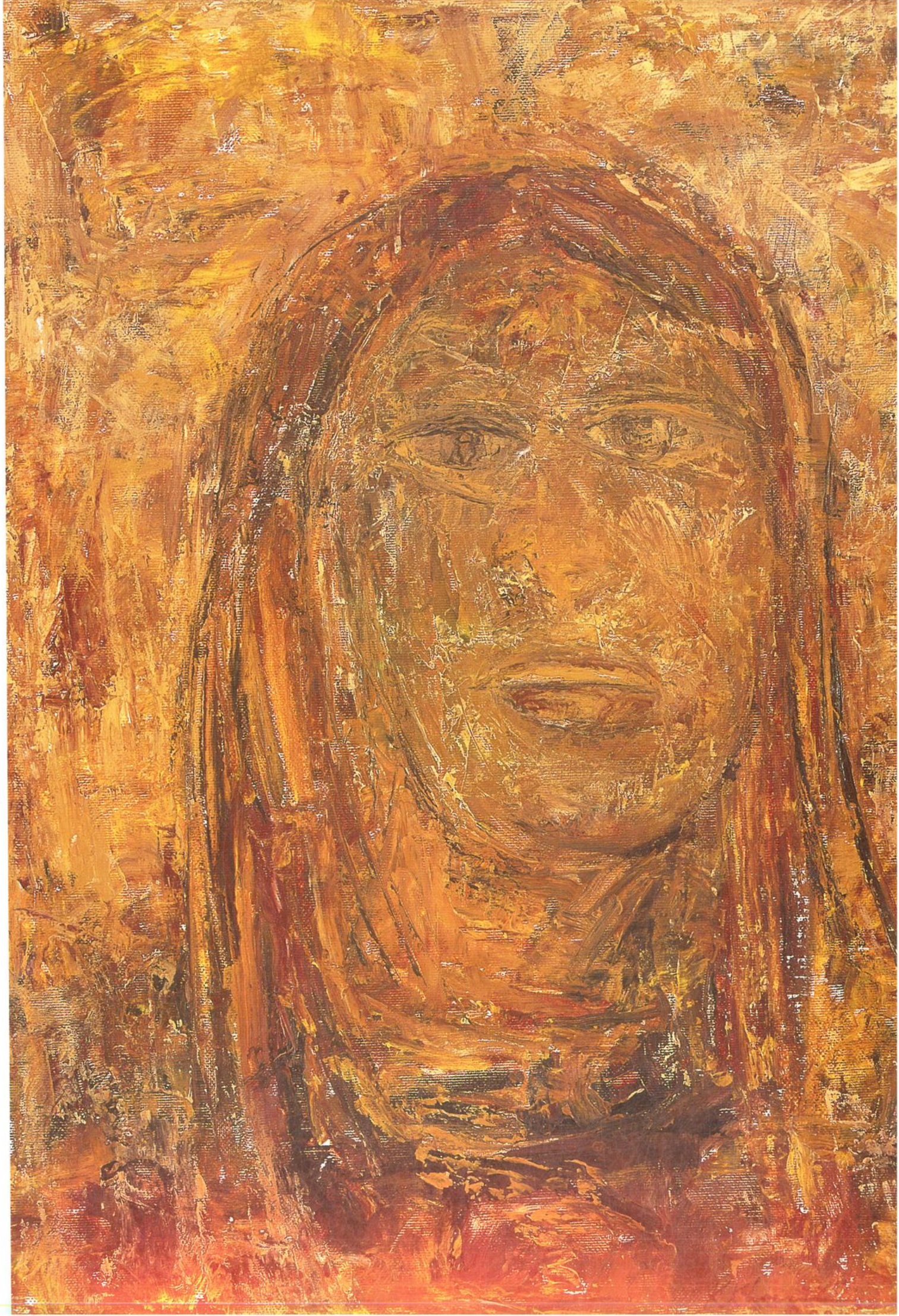
Untitled. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"





Study of Crucifixion. Oil on canvas. 20 x 14", 2004

Sundari. Oil on canvas. 20 x 14"





Rumi. Oil on canvas. 24 x 18". 2002

Remembering Miss Amery Teacher of English. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"





Untitled. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"

Portrait of a Poet. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16"





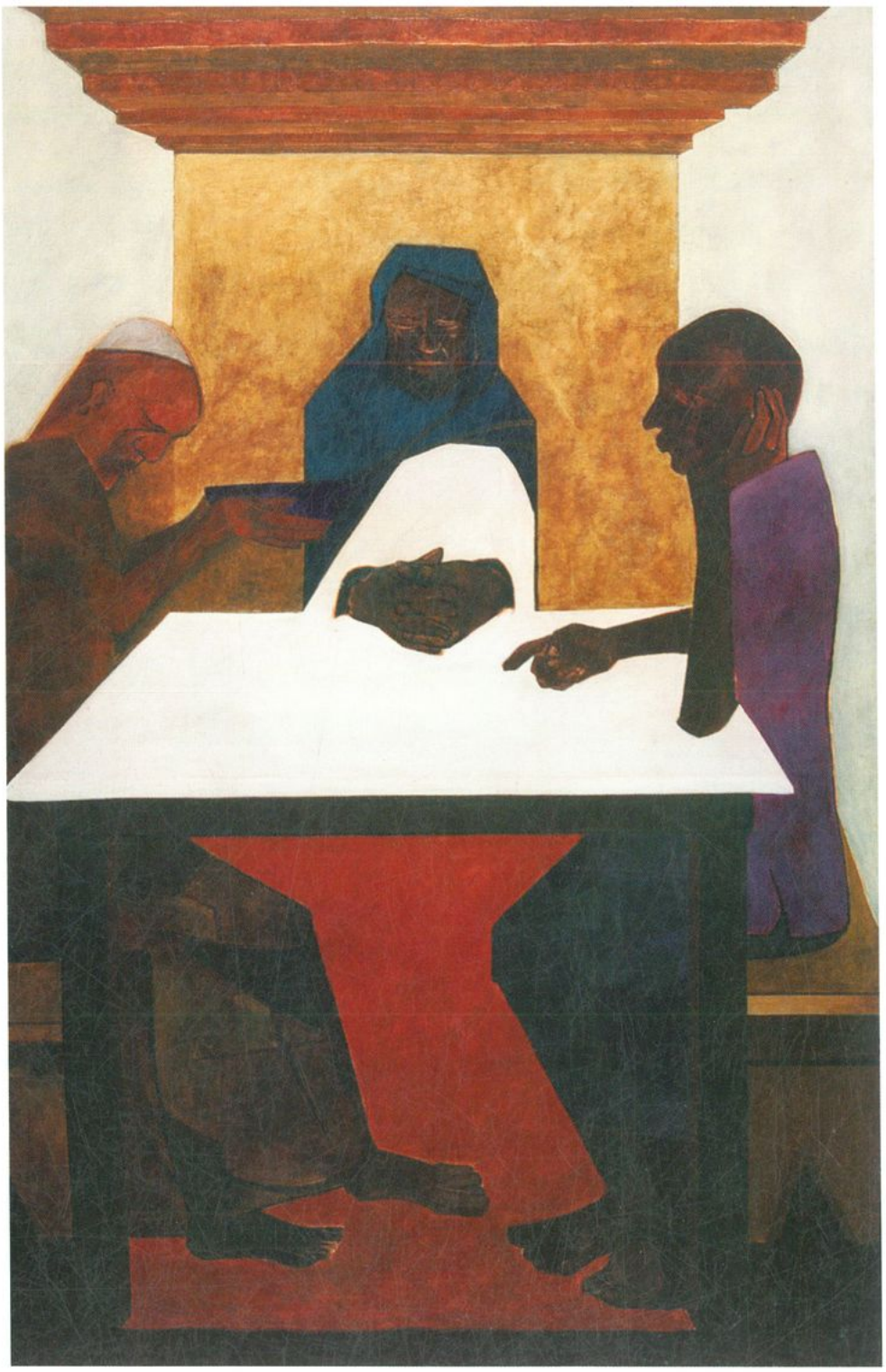
Boy with a Colourful Scarf. Oil on canvas. 14" x 10"

Head. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10"





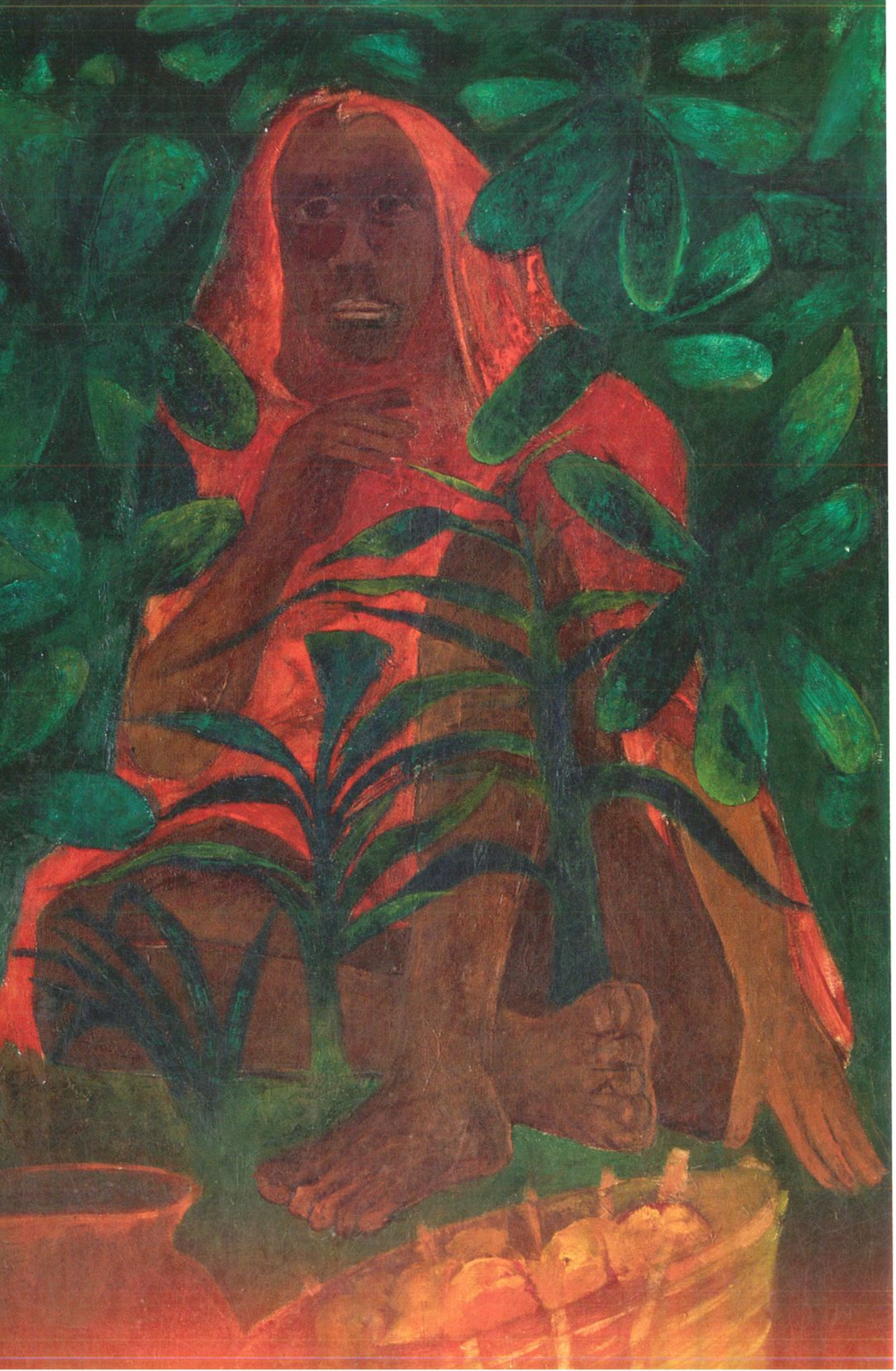
An Incident at Supper. Oil on canvas. 30 x 20". 2004



Meeting at Emmaus. Oil on canvas. 70 x 45"

Mahantram Recites from the Ramayana. Oil on canvas. 61 x 63". 2004





Fruit Seller. Oil on canvas. 46 x 30". 1980

Untitled. Oil on canvas. 20 x 30". 2004


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Fruit Seller. Oil on canvas. 22 x 22"

Fruit Seller. Oil on canvas. 22 x 22"





Miss Amery Teacher of English. Oil on canvas. 49 x 35". 2000

Miss Amery Teacher of English. Oil on canvas. 49 x 35". 2000



Doubting Thomas and Christ. Oil on canvas. 60 x 40". 2005





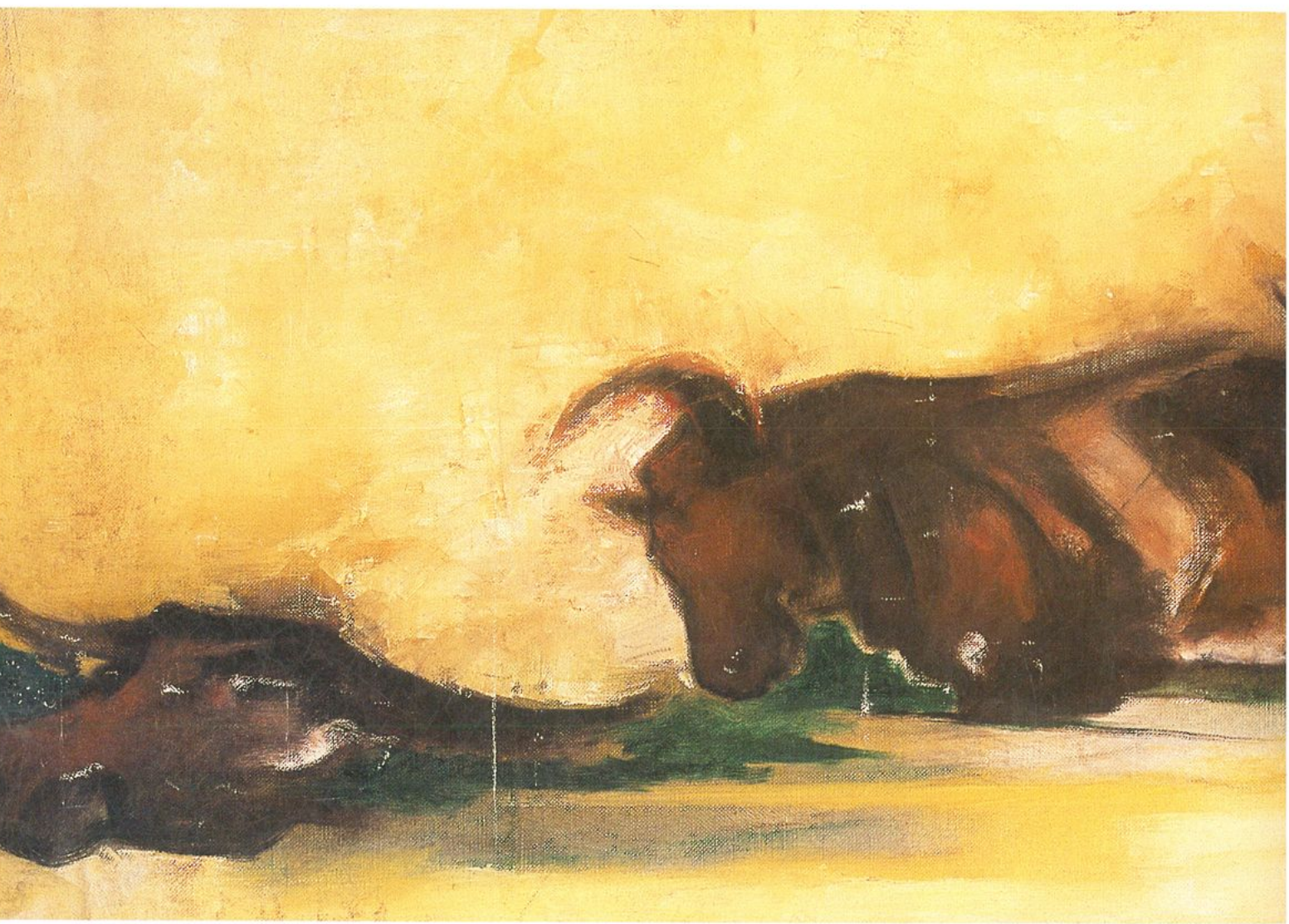
General Makes a Point. Oil on canvas. 28 x 44". (diptych)

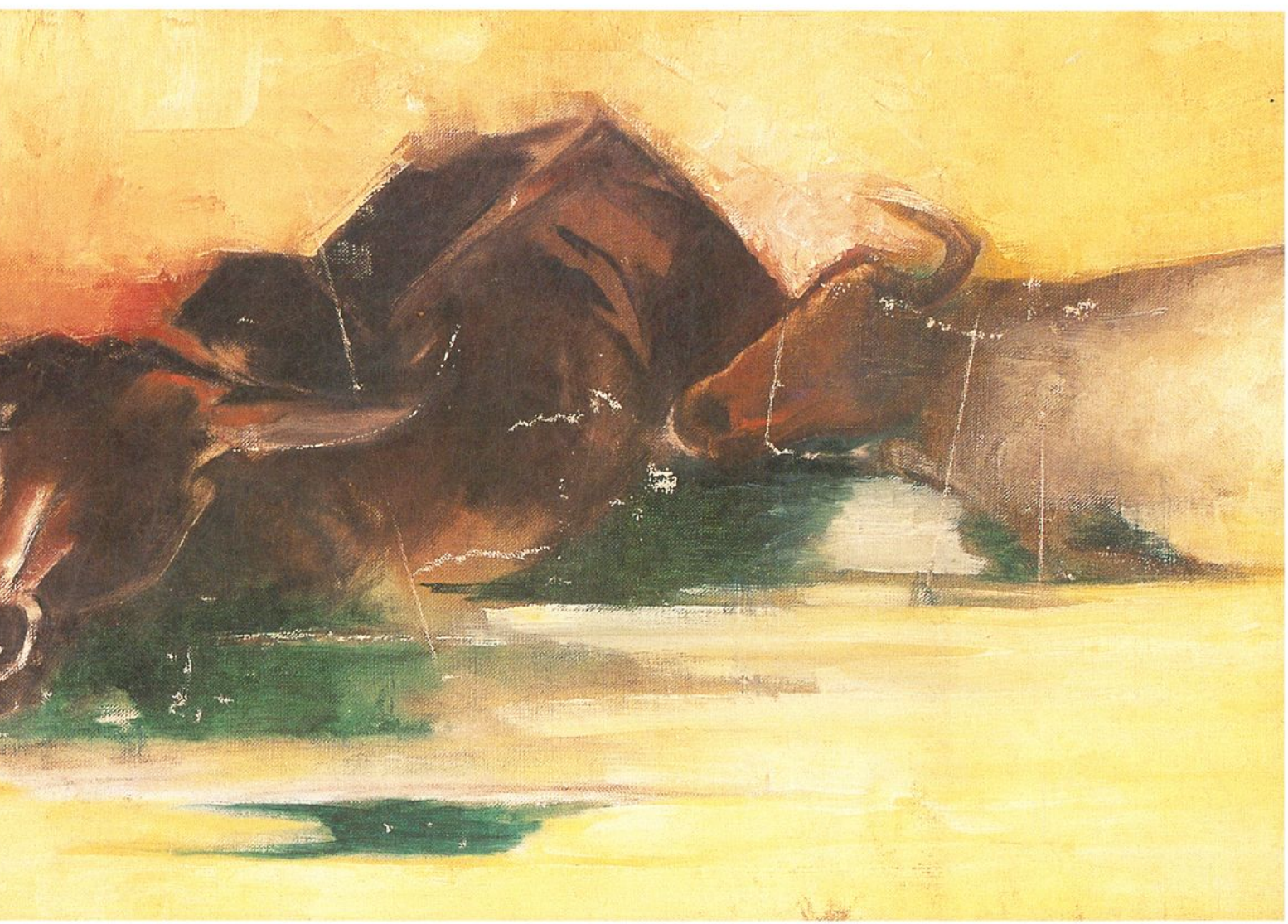


Suitable Boy. Oil on canvas. 45 x 31". 1995

Musicians. Oil on canvas. 40 x 50". 2003







Untitled. Oil on canvas. 13 x 39". 1969





Man with a Hawk. Conte crayon on paper. 28 x 19½". 1990

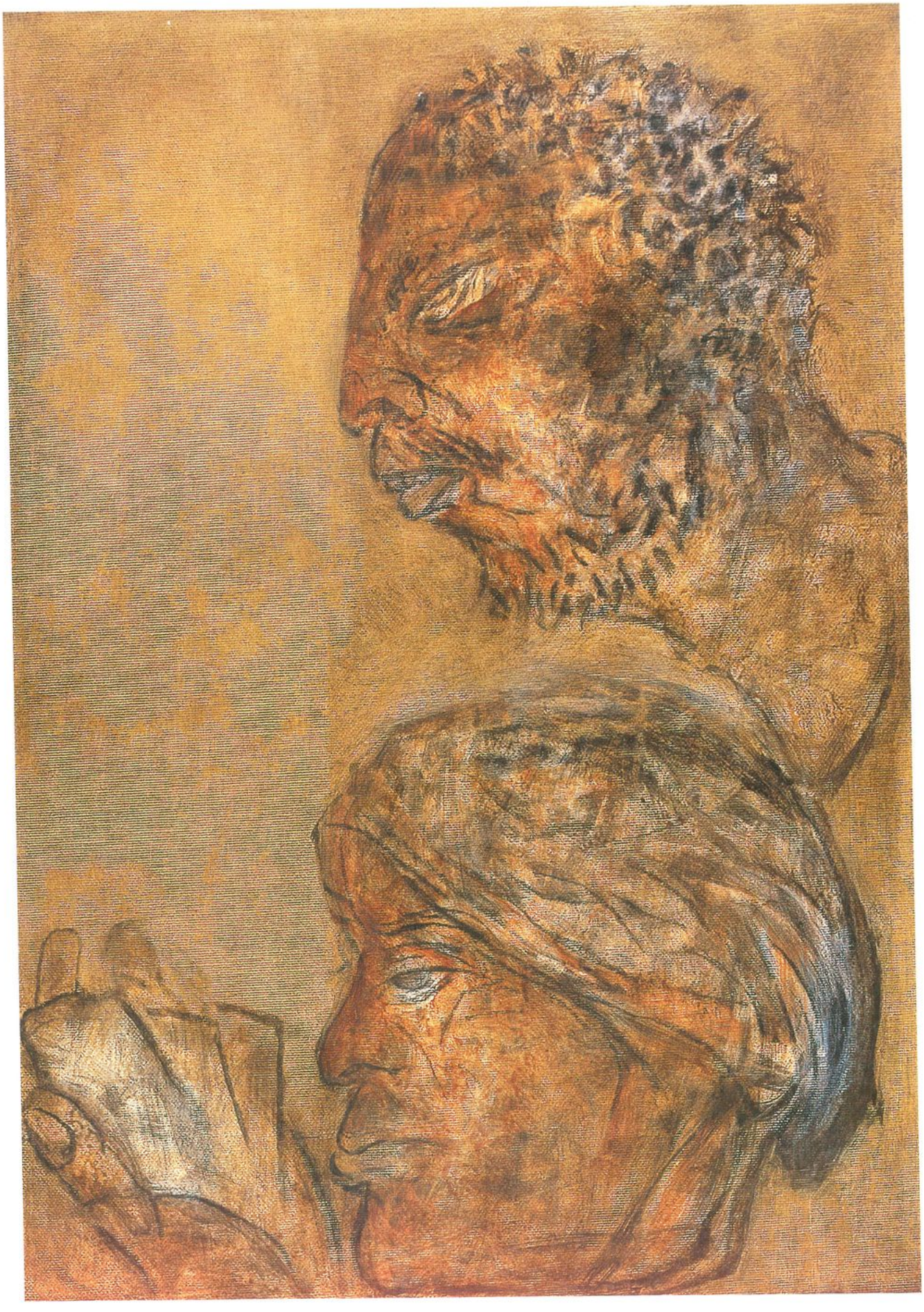
Man with a Bird. Mixed media. 13½ x 10". 1998



Gyano being Chased by a Dog. Pencil on paper. 14 x 11"

A Man with a Dog. Oil on canvas. 55 x 33"





Two Heads. Acrylic on canvas. 20 x 14". 2005

Two Heads. Charcoal and acrylic on canvas. 15 x 12". 1990





Refugees. Oil on canvas. 40 x 30". 2004

The Killing of Jatayu. Oil on canvas. 49 x 40"



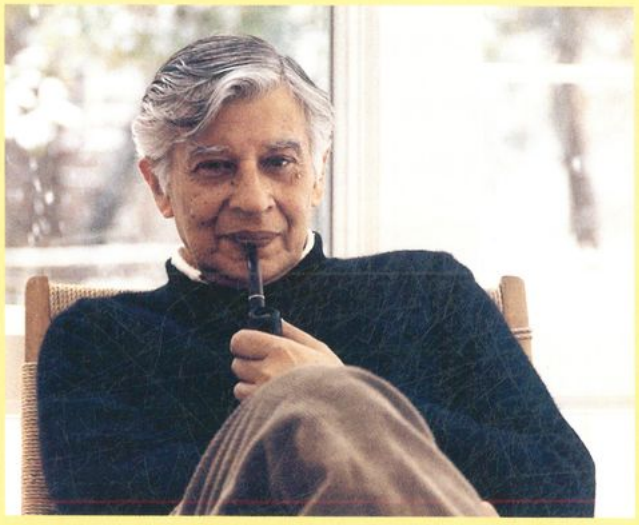


The Game. Black and white study. 8 x 5". 1971

Blindfolded Queen. Oil on canvas. 14 x 10". April 2005



Biography



1925
Born Lyalpur, Punjab

1929 - 1935
- Schooling in Lahore at Sacred Heart and Cathedral School. Passed two examinations of The Royal Drawing Society, London.

1936
- Father transferred to Multan. Entered Government High School. Emphasis on Urdu, maths and art. Mr Butt, a very sympathetic art teacher.

1938
- Successfully competed for Kipling Scholarship to study in Kiplings old school located in Windsor and renamed Imperial Services College. A typical English public school dedicated to stern discipline, sports, officers training corps, fagging and corporal punishment.

1942
- Outbreak of Second World War. Digging trenches against air raids, gas masks, greater emphasis on matters military. Passed Certificate A of the British War Office, courses in signals, tactics and machine guns. Passed Oxford and Cambridge School Certificate with art as a subject.
- School trips taken to The National Gallery, London, immediately attracted to Giotto, Piero Della Francesca, Uccello.
- Returned to Multan.
- Joined Emerson College and passed Intermediate Examination with Persian. Developed a great love for Persian poetry.

1944
- Family moved to Lahore.
- Joined Government College and completed BA (honours). Developed an abiding love for English poetry.
- Met Harkishen Lal and Prem Nath Mago, both artists of great merit.

1946
- Entered a large printing press as an apprentice–joined Sheikh Ahmed's Studio One to study drawing.
- Exhibited in annual exhibition of Punjab Art Society.
- Painting of *Dead Tree* commended.

1948
- Partition of India. Wandered over hills in Shimla trying to paint.
- Secured a position in Grindlays Bank and was sent to Bombay.
- Meeting with Souza, Husain, Gade, Ara, Gaitonde, Raza, Samant, Tyeb Mehta, Palsikar and Bendre.

1949
- Invited to join Progressive Artists Group and exhibited with this Group in Chetna Restaurant: Artists Aid Centre–Progressive Artists Group.
- Bombay Art Society.
- CJ Hall met Stephen Spender and WH Auden.

1950
- Married Renu Chatterji on her return from Bedford College, London.

1951
- Exhibition of Progressive Artists Group at Jehangir Art Gallery.

1952-1953
- Daughter Rasika born in Bombay.
- Transferred to Grindlays, Madras.
- Meetings with KCS Paniker, Santhanaraj and other artists in Madras.
- Exhibition of his collection of Progressive Artists at Madras College of Art.

1954
- Proceeded on six months leave to Europe with Renu–visited Rome, Arezzo, Assisi, Paris, London. Painted in Paris.
- Second daughter Malati born in Delhi.
- Joint exhibition with MF Husain at AIFACS, New Delhi.
- Returned to Grindlays, Madras
- Husain sold a small painting of Khanna's to Dr Homi Bhabha of TIFR.

1955
- Solo exhibition at USIS, Madras. Chief Guest: Rajaji.
- Friendship with Dr VK Narayana Menon who introduced him to Carnatic music. He got to know the great musicians of South India attending innumerable concerts. Great influence on him as a painter.
- Movement from informal, unchartered beginnings to a sense of order.
- Visits by Husain, Bal Chhabda and Roberto Rossilini who bought paintings.
- Concert organized in his studio for Pandit Ravi Shanker.
- Narayana Menon introduced him to Ben Brittain, Peter Pears, Lord George Harewood and the poet Louis MacNeice.

1956
- 'Eight Painters', at Indian and Eastern Newspaper Society building, Old Mill Road, New Delhi (Husain, Kulkarni, Gaitonde, Samant, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, Bendre, Satish Gujral).
- Sir Kenneth Clark visited exhibition. Offered to help find gallery in London.

1957
- Solo exhibition at AIFACS, New Delhi.
- Tokyo Biennale, Japan.

1958
- Solo exhibition, Kumar Gallery, Connaught Place, New Delhi.

1959
- Solo exhibition, Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.
- Inaugural exhibition, Gallery 59, Bombay (Husain, Raza, Padamsee, Gaitonde, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna).
- 'Contemporary Art from India', Essen, Dortmund, Zurich.
- 'Modern Indian Art', Cairo.
- 'Trends in Contemporary Painting from India', Graham Gallery, New York.
- 'Artists of Fame and of Promise', Leicester Galleries, London.
- Visited Paris. Guest of Jean and Krishna Riboud who introduced him to Tamayo, Matta, Sima and other artists. Small drawing acquired by Tamayo who advised him not to neglect his home territory.

1960
- Solo exhibition at Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.
- Solo exhibition at Leicester Galleries, London (visited by John Berger, Sir Herbert Read and Sir Kenneth Clark).
- Sao Paolo Biennale, Sao Paulo.

1961
- Solo exhibition, Ashoka Gallery, Calcutta.
- Solo exhibition, Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay.
- Tokyo Biennale, Japan.
- Resigned from Grindlays and motored up from Bombay to Delhi with Akbar Padamsee.

1962
- Solo exhibition, Kunika Art Centre. Catalogue introduction by Richard Bartholomew.
- Solo exhibition, Leicester Galleries, London.
- Travel Fellowship by Council for Economic and Cultural Affairs, New York.
- Meeting with artists in Dacca, Malayasia, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan and New York.
- National exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- Venice Biennale, Indian participation.
- Lecture on contemporary Indian art at Berkley, California.

1963
- 'Eight Contemporary Artists from India', Lever House, New York. Introduction in catalogue by Dr Laxmi Sihare.
- 'Contemporary Painters from India', Gallery 63, New York.
- Meetings with Berbert Ferber, Mark Rothko, Saul Steinber in New York.

1964
- Solo exhibition, Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.
- Artist-in-Residence, American University, Washington DC.
- Solo exhibition, Watkins Art Gallery, American University, Washington DC.
- 'Six Artists in Black and White', Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi (Husain, Padamsee, Gaitonde, Ram Kumar, Bal Chhabda, Krishen Khanna).

1965
- Solo exhibition, Egan Gallery, New York.
- 'Ten Contemporary Artists from India': University of South Florida, Tampa; Jackson Art Museum, Jacksonville; Delgado Art Museum, New Orleans; Hunter Gallery, Chattanooga; Colorado Fine Art Centre, Colarado Springs, Long Beach; Art Institute, San Francisco, East West Centre, Honolulu (introduction in catalogue by Dr Grace Morely).
- 'Ten Contemporary Painters from India': MIT, Cambridge, U.S.A.; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton.
- Morris Graves visits studio in Washington and acquires two *Sumi-e* paintings.
- Mr Duncan Philips buys a small painting for his collection.
- Lalit Kala Akademi, annual exhibition.

1966
- Solo exhibition, Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.

1968
- Solo exhibition, New Art Centre, London.

1969
- Solo exhibition, photographs, Kunika Chemould, New Delhi.
- Solo exhibition, experimental photographs, Pundole Gallery, Bombay.
- 'Contemporary Art, Dialogue between East and West', Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan (sixty invited artists).
- 'Indian Painters 69', Max Mueller Bhavan and Birla Academy, Calcutta.

1970
- 'Art Now', Kunika Chemould, New Delhi.
- Expo '70, Indian Pavilion, Osaka, Japan, three photographic murals.

1971
- Visited Khem Karan, Dograi and other forward military areas with Husain, Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta—paintings and drawings executed after visit.
- 'Contemporary Indian Art', Renwick Gallery.
- Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.

1972
- 'Art Now', Kunika Chemould, New Delhi.
- 'One World through Art', Ben and Abbey Grey Foundation, St Paul, Minnesota, USA.

1973
- Solo exhibition, Pundole Gallery, Bombay.

1974
- Solo exhibition, Black Partridge, New Delhi.

1975
- Solo exhibition, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- Third Triennale of Contemporary World Art, New Delhi.

1976
- 25th Pugwash Conference, Madras.

- 'Pictorial Space', Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 'Indian Painting 1977', Chandigarh, organized by Black Partridge Gallery.

1979
- Solo exhibition, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, (catalogue introduction by J Swaminathan).
- 'Modern Asian Art', Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan.

1980
- Solo exhibition, Rabindra Bhavan, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.

1981
- Inaugural exhibition, Roopankar Museum, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal.
- 'Indian Painting Today', Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay.

1982
- 'Myth and Reality', Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK.
- 'Contemporary Indian Art', Burlington House, London.
- 'Modern Indian Painters', Hirshorn Museum, Washington DC.

1983
- Solo exhibition of drawings, Garhi Studio, New Delhi.

1984
- Inaugural exhibition, Gallery 7.

1985
- Ram Kumar and Krishen Khanna at Gallery 7, Bombay.

1986
- Solo exhibition of drawings and paintings at Sarla Art Centre, Madras.
- Baghdad International Festival of Art.

1988
- First International Biennale, Lahore, Pakistan.
- Baghdad International Festival of Art (member of international jury).

1989
- Solo exhibition, Centre for Contemporary Art, New Delhi.
'Timeless Art', exhibition and auction.
- Sothebys in Bombay.
- 'Artist's Alert', exhibition and auction by Sahmat, New Delhi.

1991
- Solo exhibition, Gallery Espace, New Delhi.
- Birla Academy of Art, Calcutta, anniversary exhibition.
- Fifth Biennale, Havana, Cuba.
- 'Addressing Gandhi', travelling exhibition by Sahmat.

1992
- 'Masters of Indian Art', Hotel Oberoi Intercontinental, Bombay.

1994
- 'Indian Drawing Today', AIFACS, organized by Gallery Espace.
- 'The Solids', second Indian Drawing Biennale, exhibited as special invitee.
- Solo exhibition, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

1995
- Solo exhibition, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.
- 'Bombay', presented by RPG Enterprises.
- 'River of Art', inaugural exhibition, Art Today.

1996
- *The Mahabharata*, *The Card Player* and *The Scribe*– Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.
- 'A Tree in my Life', Village Gallery, New Delhi.
- 'The Moderns', inaugural exhibition, NGMA, Mumbai.

1997
- 'Tryst with Destiny', Art from Modern India 1947-1997, Singapore Art Museum, organized by CIMA Gallery, Calcutta.
- 'Six Modern Masters', Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.

1998
- 'The Probing Eye', an exhibition of photographs, Surendra Paul Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- 'Drawings', Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai.

1999
- 'Mahabharat', Gallery 7, Mumbai.

2001
- 'Living Legends of Indian Contemporary Art', Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai.
- 'In Conversations', curated by Gayatri Sinha at Gallery Espace, New Delhi.
- Indian Art Circle, Habitat Centre, New Delhi.
- Solo exhibition, Kumar Gallery, New Delhi.
- Saffron Art and Pundole Art Gallery, New York.

2003
- 'Of Memories, Dreams, Reverses', at Anant, New Delhi.
- Transition at UBS in London.
- Exhibition of drawings, Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai.

2004
- Solo exhibition, 'An Airing' at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai.

Special projects

- Laminated dawing. 7.6 feet x 80 feet mural at ITC WelcomHotel. Chola. Madras. (This has since been moved in blocks to WelcomHotel. Maurya's restaurant in the departure side of IG Airport. Delhi).
- Mural: oil on canvas on the dome of WelcomHotel. Maurya Sheraton. Completed after four years in 1987.
- Declaration Universelle Des Droits de L'Homme Liberté. 1998
- Tryptich. oil on canvas. *The Legacy*. British Council in India. 7 feet x 15 feet.
- Circular floor mural in mosaic in WWF building at Mahim Nature Park. Mumbai.
- Memorial to Salim Ali. WWF Mahim Nature Park–assemblage of stone and grass.
- Painting of St Francis with animals donated to WWF auctioned.
- Photographic murals for Shipping Corporation of India. MMTC India at Expo 70. Osaka. Japan.
- Photographic mural at Zagreb. Trade Fair.

Represented in the following public collections

- National Gallery of Modern Art. New Delhi
- Lalit Kala Akademi. New Delhi
- Roopankar Museum of Art. Bharat Bhavan. Bhopal
- Punjab Museum. Chandigarh
- Birla Academy. Kolkata
- Air India. Mumbai: Steel Authority of India
- Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Mumbai
- Larsen & Toubro Ltd.. Mumbai.
- Jehangir Nicholson Museum of Art. Mumbai
- Madhaven Nair Museum of Art. Kochi
- Himachal Pradesh Museum of Art. Shimla
- The Museum of Modern Art. New York
- Yad Vasham. Jerusalem
- Contemporary Art Society. London
- DeMenil Foundation. Houston. Texas. USA
- New York University. Grey Art Gallery & Study Centre. New York. USA
- Glenbara Museum. Fukuoka. Japan
- RPG Collection. Mumbai

Awards. fellowship and honours

1955

- Commendation. Bombay Art Society Award. Bombay Art Society
- Saurashtra Government Award for oil painting

1963-1964

- Artist-in-Residence. American University. Washington DC

1965

- Award. Lalit Kala Akademi Annual Exhibition
- Fellowship of the Council for Economic & Cultural Affairs. New York. USA

1968

- Invited by West German Government to see Documenta

1986

- President's Award at Baghdad International Festival of Art

1989

- Gold Medal. First International Biennale of Art. Lahore. Pakistan
- Sahitya Kala Parishad Award. Delhi for distinguished work

1990

- Padma Shri from the President of India

1997

- Kala Ratna from All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society. Delhi

2004

- Lalit Kala Ratna from the President of India

Films and documentaries

1995

- *Salman Rushdie & The Lost Portrait*. BBC London. directed by Chris Gramlund

1996

- *The AR Show*. Celeb: Krishen Khanna
- *Growing Up*. Episode VII. Beginnings & Ends. Krishen Khanna: RAQS. Media Collective
- *The Story of Indian Painting*. Episode 9-12. Cine Arts India. New Delhi

1998

- *Maraqua-e-Nafees*. ANZ Grindlays Bank

Index

Ara 9
Artists Aid Centre 9
Bandwallah/bandwallah 10, 30, 36, 44, 47
Bangladesh 13, 17, 22
Betrayal/betrayal 17, 18, 21, 22, 30
Bhogal/Nizammudin 13, 18, 20, 21
Bhupen Khakhar 15, 25
Bible 17
Bombay Art Society 9, 25
Bombay/Mumbai 9, 15, 22, 25
Britain/England 7, 22, 36, 17
Brother Joseph Gardener 17
Canterbury Tales 31
Card Players/card players 31, 33
Chaucer 31
Children Eating Watermelons/children eating watermelons 36, 38
Christ 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 30, 31, 36, 37, 90
Clive Bell 9
Concerning a Drowned Girl 36
The Dead and the Dying/dead and the dying 25, 31, 36
Durga 30
Electrocuted Bird 36
emergency 17
Emmaus/Emmaus 17, 18, 19, 21, 37, 75
FN Souza 9, 18, 25, 41
Gade 9
garden at Gethsemane 18
Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak 10
Government College, Lahore 7, 41
Homi Bhabha 13, 17
Imperial Service College 7, 41
independence 6, 15
Indira Gandhi 17
Jehangir Art Gallery 9
Kalinga 30
Kanpur 9
Krishen Khanna 9, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 30, 31, 36, 37, 41
The Last Supper/Last Supper 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 27
Leonardo da Vinci 17, 21
Maclagan Road/Maclagan Road 7
Madras 9, 36
Mahantram/Mahantram 7, 36, 76
Mary 25
Mater Dolorosa 25, 30
Maurya Sheraton mural 15, 17, 41
MF Husain 13, 18, 21, 24, 25
Mohan Samant 9
Multan 7, 22
Nehru/Nehruvian 13, 17
Nocturne 12, 13
partition 7, 9, 10, 13, 22
Pieta/Pieta 16, 17, 18, 25, 29, 30
Progressive Artists Group 9, 18, 24
Punjab 7, 9, 10, 36, 41
Puranas 30
Ramu Ka Dhaba 13
Raza 9, 25
Rear View/rear view 13, 14
Refugees/refugees 13, 22, 109
Remembering WHA 43
Renu Chatterjee 9
Roger Fry 9
Sati 30
SB Palsikar 9
Scribe/scribe 7, 8, 36, 37, 40
St Francis 17
St Francis and the Birds 17
Story Teller/storyteller 7
subaltern 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 41
Sudhir Patwardhan 15, 18
TS Eliot 37
Tyeb Mehta 9, 18, 25
WH Auden 36, 37, 41
Willem de Kooning 36, 37