

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in a vibrant palette of red, green, pink, and yellow. The composition is dense and layered, with various shades of color overlapping and blending into each other. The brushwork is visible, creating a sense of movement and texture. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

WORKS FROM THE ESTATE OF GEORGE CLAESSEN

Grosvenor
Gallery

CLAESSEN



Works from the Estate of George Claessen

14 May - 7 June 2026

**Grosvenor
Gallery**

35 Bury Street
London SW1Y 6AU

art@grosvenorgallery.com
+44(0)20 7484 7979

Two Islands Bound Together: George Claessen's Sri Lankan Art in Britain

A violent burst of black marks disperse and demarcate a body. *Tara*, a pen and ink drawing, was sketched in 1985 by Sri Lankan-British artist George Claessen. The subject of the artwork is an almost life-size gold-gilt solid bronze Sri Lankan statue of a Buddhist deity with Hindu origins, created between the seventh and eighth centuries in or with metals from South India, and looted by British colonisers in c.1815.[1]



The divine being has been entombed in the British Museum since 1830 – while the institution's South Asian sculptures would go on to inspire modernist British art, Tara was long hidden from public view in a secret collection deemed pornographic – which was, as one curator later claimed, 'their way of making sure the British Empire did not collapse'.[2] Since at least 1937 – if not earlier – the Sri Lankan Government has repeatedly requested the return of what is widely considered to be the Indian Ocean island's national icon.[3]

Why did Claessen draw Tara in 1985? What does the sketch reveal about historic and enduring entanglements between Britain and Sri Lanka?

Claessen first began making art in 1938, having taken up a role as a draughtsman at the Colombo Port Commission – a vital part of the British Empire's global infrastructure, created in 1913 under pressure from tea planters, local merchants, and shipping companies.[4] But Claessen's work as an imperial administrator did not necessarily represent colonial sympathy: five years later, he co-founded Sri Lanka's modernist art movement, the *43 Group*.

The woodblock print *Kingfisher* (1944) dates from the collective's early days: sparingly few gestural marks capture the bird's silhouette, perched on a branch in expressive lines against a black background, patterns of abstraction created by the production technique.

The image depicts a species historically abundant in Sri Lanka, thriving in complex interdependent ecosystems shaped by sophisticated pre-colonial hydroengineering technologies.[5] As part of the *43 Group*, Claessen contributed to a collective Sri Lankan imaginary, engaging with both the island's visual cultures and European aesthetics before and after independence in 1948.



As artist Jagath Weerasinghe argues, ‘*the formation of the 43 Group can be viewed as a project that constituted an anti-colonial stance within the larger picture of national struggles that gathered momentum in the mid-20th century in South Asia for regaining political independence from the British colonisers*’.[6]

Artist Anoli Perera agrees, insisting that the collective ‘*fused the indigenous draughtsmanship and colour schemes with the idioms of the West in an original way that paved the way for a new hybrid form of painting to emerge*’.[7]

For cultural geographer Tariq Jazeel, ‘*George Claessen, and Ivan Peries sought to bring Ceylonese folk culture into representation via formal modernist techniques and processes that effectively ruptured the colonial gaze on, and objectification of, Ceylonese culture*’.[8]

It is of little surprise, however, that British commentators at the time merely dismissed the *43 Group* as producing derivative replicas of European art. This narrative, which persisted for decades, was established by British Army Officer and official British war artist John Napper.

Writing for the *Ceylon Review* in 1943, Napper condemned what he considered to be ‘not very good copies of paintings by Picasso’ as ‘rather childish’.[9] What Napper and subsequent critics failed to take into account was that Claessen and his colleagues sought to confront the ways in which empire and its aesthetic histories – including the imposition of Global North institutions and secular concepts of art – had become entangled with or framed indigenous practices to such an extent that the very idea of a ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ and wholly untouched Sri Lankan tradition was in fact itself a colonial construct.[10]

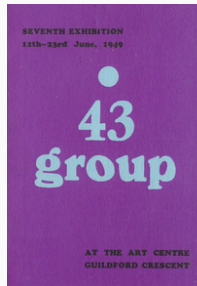
While the *43 Group* may have been invested in collectively creating a visual culture of national liberation, they were not nationalist in ways which would go on to dominate and divide the island in later decades.[11]

Instead, their work challenged empire and its aftermath, with its geopolitical and social borders, by crafting visions which evoked both complicity with and critique of Britain. ‘*Home at last*’, Claessen reflected, arriving by ship after permanently relocating to London in 1949.[12]



Claessen travelling to England, 1949

Claessen followed *Tara* to the imperial metropole – although, while the deity was stolen as part of a larger project to extract resources from Sri Lanka, the artist was able to migrate under the British Nationality Act 1948, which had granted citizenship to colonial subjects. In 1952, the *43 Group* held a show at the Imperial Institute in London. Writing for the catalogue, art critic John Berger explained that their display ‘took into account the emerging power and equality of Asia in the contemporary world’, with the collective ‘trying to do nothing less than solve the problems of a world revolution’.[13]



Claessen’s work was exhibited globally: from the 1956 Venice Biennale to the 1959 São Paulo Biennial. But while 1940s Sri Lanka had birthed the *43 Group*, its aesthetic vision was already coming in for some hostility locally. In 1956, art critic D.B. Dhanapala complained in the *Times of Ceylon* of the collective producing ‘degenerate art into comic, colourful patterns without a purpose’.[14] Such critique was made amidst rising ethnic conflict, once instrumentalised by the British, increasingly dominating the newly independent nation – with ethnonationalist laws and riots in 1956.

By 1983, civil war erupted in Sri Lanka. Two years later, when Claessen sketched *Tara* with furious lines, large civilian massacres were perpetrated on the island. Paramilitaries, fighting for secession in the north, killed 146 in Anuradhapura: Sri Lanka’s ancient capital, whose kingdom (437 BCE-1017 CE) is associated with Tara’s statue. The government’s forces murdered up to 100 in the eastern town of Muttur. Cycles of violence continued to escalate. It is hard not to read Claessen’s drawing *Tara* as bearing the traces of a profound horror, its aggressive marks capturing a haunting violence, the figure’s face a bristling ball of black energy.

A handwritten note on the mount describes the portrait being ‘from the bronze’: likely drawn on the spot, in the presence of the deity, on display in the British Museum itself. Consulting this national icon of Sri Lanka, imprisoned in the institution, Claessen may have not only expressed dismay at what the island had become – but also Britain’s enduring responsibility, having unified the island as a nation for the first time in 1815, institutionalising its ethnic groups to divide-and-rule the population, laying the foundations for civil war.[15]

Such an acknowledgement is important, given the racist backlash against migrants to the UK from former colonies, who had been subject to increasing restriction after the 1960s: from the Immigration Act 1971 to the British Nationality Act 1981.[16] Claessen had, after all, described the sight of Gravesend as *'home at last'*.

Painted towards the end of his life in 1997, I imagine his watercolour *Abstract (Blue)* (illustrated below), to represent two bodies of water: the Indian Ocean by the Port of Colombo, where he once worked, and the shimmering surface of the Thames upon his arrival, a home to South Asian sailors for centuries.[17]

For archaeologist Senake Bandaranayake;

'One of the most remarkable things about Claessen is that he was at one and the same time an abstractionist and a representational painter ... there is also constant interpenetration between the two modes'.

[18]

Throughout his career, he sought to craft an aesthetic vision of Sri Lanka that confronted its colonial past and turbulent present, a creative practice both implicated in and of significant contribution to British art history.

Dr Edwin Coomasaru, May 2026



- [1] Sharada Srinivasan, 'Tamil Chola Bronzes and Swamimalai Legacy: Metal Sources and Archaeotechnology', *Journal of the Minerals, Metals & Materials Society*, Volume 68 (2016), pp.2207-2221, p.2207, p.2217; Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.134; Elizabeth Lillehoj, 'Stolen Buddhas and Sovereignty Claims', in Douglas Howland, Elizabeth Lillehoj, and Maximilian Mayer eds., *Art and Sovereignty in Global Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp.141-167, p.149; Santhushya Fernando, Senel Wanniarachchi, and Janaki Vidanapathirana, *Montage of Sexuality in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka, 2018), p.14; Senel Wanniarachchi, 'Finders Keepers: On Sex, Tara the Buddhist Deity at the British Museum and Brownness in the Colonies', LSE Blog, 8 January 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/01/08/finders-keepers-on-sex-tara-the-buddhist-deity-at-the-british-museum-and-brownness-in-the-colonies>, accessed 25 October 2025; Sheruni Palapitaya, 'The Statue of Tara: It's Time to Come Home', *Ground Views*, 8 February 2023, <https://groundviews.org/2023/08/02/>
- [2] Sarah Victoria Turner, 'The 'Essential Quality of Things': E.B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Indian Art and Sculpture in Britain', c.1910-14', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Volume 11, Issue 2 (2010), pp.239-264; 'The Secrets of Cupboard 55', *The Telegraph*, 19 June 1999, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4717695/The-secrets-of-Cupboard-55.html>, accessed 22 October 2025; Victoria Donnellan, 'Ethics and Erotics: Receptions of an Ancient Statue of a Nymph and Satyr', in Jana Funke and Jen Grove eds., *Sculpture, Sexuality and History: Encounters in Literature, Culture and the Arts from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Palgrave, 2019), pp.145-167, p.162-163.
- [3] Shanthi Jayawardene, 'Sri Lanka's Tārā Devī', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, Volume 61, Number 2 (2016), pp.1-30, p.22; Palapitaya; Punsara Amarasinghe, 'Bringing Tara Home: Can International Law Help Sri Lanka to Return the Most Revered Cultural Object from Britain?', *Global Jurist*, Volume 25 Issue 1 (2025), pp.115-129, p.117.
- [4] Frank Broeze, Peter Reeves, and Kenneth McPherson, 'Imperial Ports and the Modern World Economy: The Case of the Indian Ocean', *Journal of Transport History*, Volume 7, Issue 2 (1986), pp.1-20, p.1, p.16; Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Towards a Critical History of Connection: The Port of Colombo, the Geographical "Circuit", and the Visual Politics of New Imperialism, ca. 1880-1914', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 59, Number 2 (April 2017), pp.346-384.
- [5] See, for example: Sriyani Wickramasinghe and Dharshini Diwakara, 'Diversity, Abundance and Conservation of Communal Floating Waterbirds in Kotuattawala Nature Reserve in Sri Lanka', *NeBIO*, Volume 8, Number 2 (June 2017), pp.98-103; P.D.R.S. Pethiyagoda and W.A.D. Mahaulpatha, 'Avian Fauna Abundance And Diversity in Horagolla National Park of Sri Lanka', *Wild Lanka*, Volume 4, Number 3 (2016), pp.141-147; Wiebke Bebermeier, Nuwan Abeywardana, Maija Susarina, Brigitta Schütt, 'Domestication of Water: Management of Water Resources in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka as Living Cultural Heritage', *WIREs Water*, Volume 10, Issue 4 (2023), pp.1-17.
- [6] Jagath Weerasinghe, 'Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka', in Caroline Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), pp.180-193, p.181.
- [7] Anoli Perera, 'Women Artists in Sri Lanka: Are they Carriers of a Woman's Burden?', *South Asia Journal for Culture*, Volume 2 (2008), pp.57-86, p.59; Anoli Perera, 'Defining Authenticity', *International Artist Camp* (Colombo: Goethe Institute, 1999), n.p.
- [8] Tariq Jazeel, 'Island Imaginaries: Insularity, Repetition, and the Spatial Politics of the National', in Kanchana N. Ruwanpura and Amjad Mohamed Saleem ed., *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp.33-42, p.39.
- [9] Neville Weereratne, *43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka* (Oakleigh, Victoria: Lantana Publishing, 1993), p.21.
- [10] Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p.5, p.9, p.12, p.43, p.59, p.93, p.97, p.175, p.193, p.207, p.249, p.294, p.299, p.317, p.321, p.327, p.330-334; Sasanka Perera, 'Politics of Showing, Seeing, and Remembering: Dynamics of Historiography in Contemporary Sri Lankan Visual Arts', in Sylvia S. Kasprzycki and Doris I. Stambrau eds., *Artful Resistance: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka* (Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers, 2004), pp.21-28, p.21; Sarath Chandrajeewa, 'Modern Art in Sri Lanka and its Socio-Political Environment', in Sylvia S. Kasprzycki and Doris I. Stambrau eds., *Artful Resistance: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka* (Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers, 2004), pp.29-39, p.29-30; Senake Bandaranayake and Albert Dharmasiri, *Sri Lankan Painting in the 20th Century* (Colombo: National Trust Sri Lanka, 2009), p.13-14, p.29-35.
- [11] See, for example: K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.608-617, p.626-633.
- [12] 'Babel to Abstraction: Seventy Years of Art and Poetry', *Artra*, Edition 63 (May-September 2022), <https://www.artra.lk/babel-to-abstraction-seventy-years-of-art-and-poetry>, accessed 21 April 2026.
- [13] Weereratne, p.26.
- [14] Weereratne, p.25-26.
- [15] Ambalavaner Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism* (London: Verso, 1990), p.199; see also: Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Identity on the Borderline: Modernity, New Ethnicities and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka', in Neluka Silva ed., *The Hybrid Island: Culture Crossings and the Invention of Identity in Sri Lanka* (London: Zed Books, 2002), pp.41-67, p.54-60; Sivasundaram, p.14, p.17-189, p.59, p.283-286, p.292-299, p.304-305, p.307-308, p.317, p.325.
- [16] See: Nadine El-Enany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp.1-16, p.73-132.
- [17] Ron Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain: 500 Years of Black and Asian History* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p.60-64, p.66; Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.2, p.11, p.14-33, p.37, p.54-57, p.59-62, p.181, p.256-257, p.357; Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915: Networks of British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.9-10, p.73-74.
- [18] Bandaranayake and Dharmasiri, p.62.



ART EXHIBITION

BY MEMBERS OF '43 GROUP

The first exhibition of paintings by the '43 Group will be on view from November 20th to 28th daily from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the rooms of the Photographic Society of Ceylon, 525, Darley Road, Colombo.

Admission will be fifty cents and the gross receipts at the door are being donated to the funds of the Deaf and Blind School.

The '43 Group has been formed with a view to provide more frequent opportunities to both artists and the public of exhibiting and seeing contemporary work. The artist-members contributing to this first exhibition, which will consist of paintings, drawings and sculpture, are: W. J. G. Beling, A. C. Collette, George Claessen, Ralph Claessen, Justin Deraniyagala, R. D. Gabriel, S. R. Kanagasabai, George Keyt, Manjusri Thero, Ivan Peries, Harry Pieris, Y. J. Thuring and W. Wittarane.

George Claessen

Kingfisher, 1944

Signed, dated and inscribed 'Kingfisher (white line woodcut) George Claessen (1944)' along lower margin

Woodblock print

Image: 25 x 15 cm (9 7/8 x 5 7/8 in)

Sheet: 29.5 x 19.2 cm (11 5/8 x 7 1/2 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Exhibitions

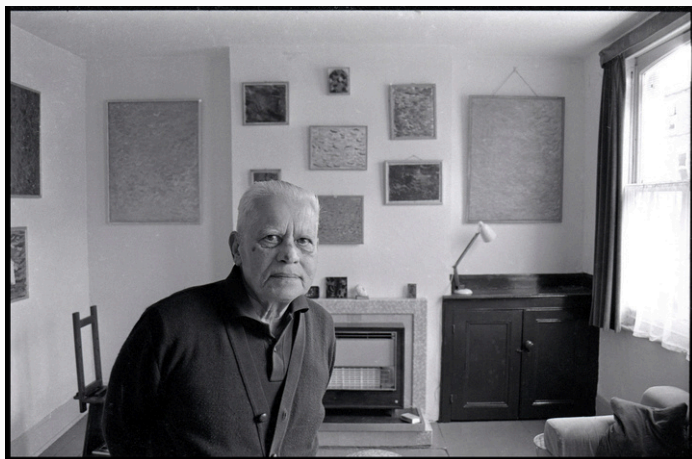
1944 (another edition)

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, Paradise Isle Publications, London, 2000, pg.69, No. 25 (another edition)



Kingfisher (white line woodcut) George Claessens (1944)



Photograph of George Claessen at his home, and studio, Tuffnell Park, London, 1994
Consort of the Primaries pictured above right. Photograph by Dominic Sansoni

George Claessen

Consort of the Primaries, 1969

Signed 'CLAESSEN' upper right; further signed, titled and inscribed 'CONSORT OF PRIMARIES/ George Claessen/ London 1969/ (28" x 36")' on the reverse
Oil on canvas

96 x 75 cm

37 3/4 x 29 1/2 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Exhibitions

London, Stanhope Gallery, *Exhibition of Paintings & Graphics by George Claessen*,
20 - 31 October 1975, No. 4

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.121, No.111



George Claessen

Blue Motet, 1969

Signed and dated 'CLAESSEN 69' lower right

Oil on canvas

71.1 x 91.4 cm

28 x 36 in

Provenance

Collection of the Artist;

Mrs. E.B. Payne, London;

Estate of the Artist, gifted by the above

Exhibitions

London, Stanhope Gallery, *Exhibition of Paintings & Graphics by George Claessen*,
20 - 31 October, 1975, No. 1

London, Phillips X & Grosvenor Gallery, *Crossing Borders: Modern Art from
South Asia*, 10 - 31 July 2025, (illustrated in the exhibition catalogue)

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen, Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg. 120, No. 110



2 STANZAS

*On some bright morning ,
When the sun is shining ,
I shall sparkle around you ,
Momentarily placing
A gold tiara on your head .*

*You would not know
Of such happening .
You would say -
<The sun is beautiful ,
The sun is so grand . >*

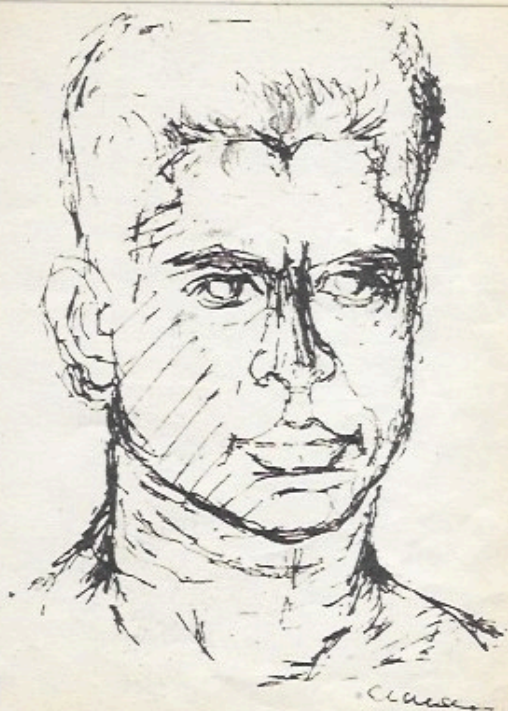
(1968)

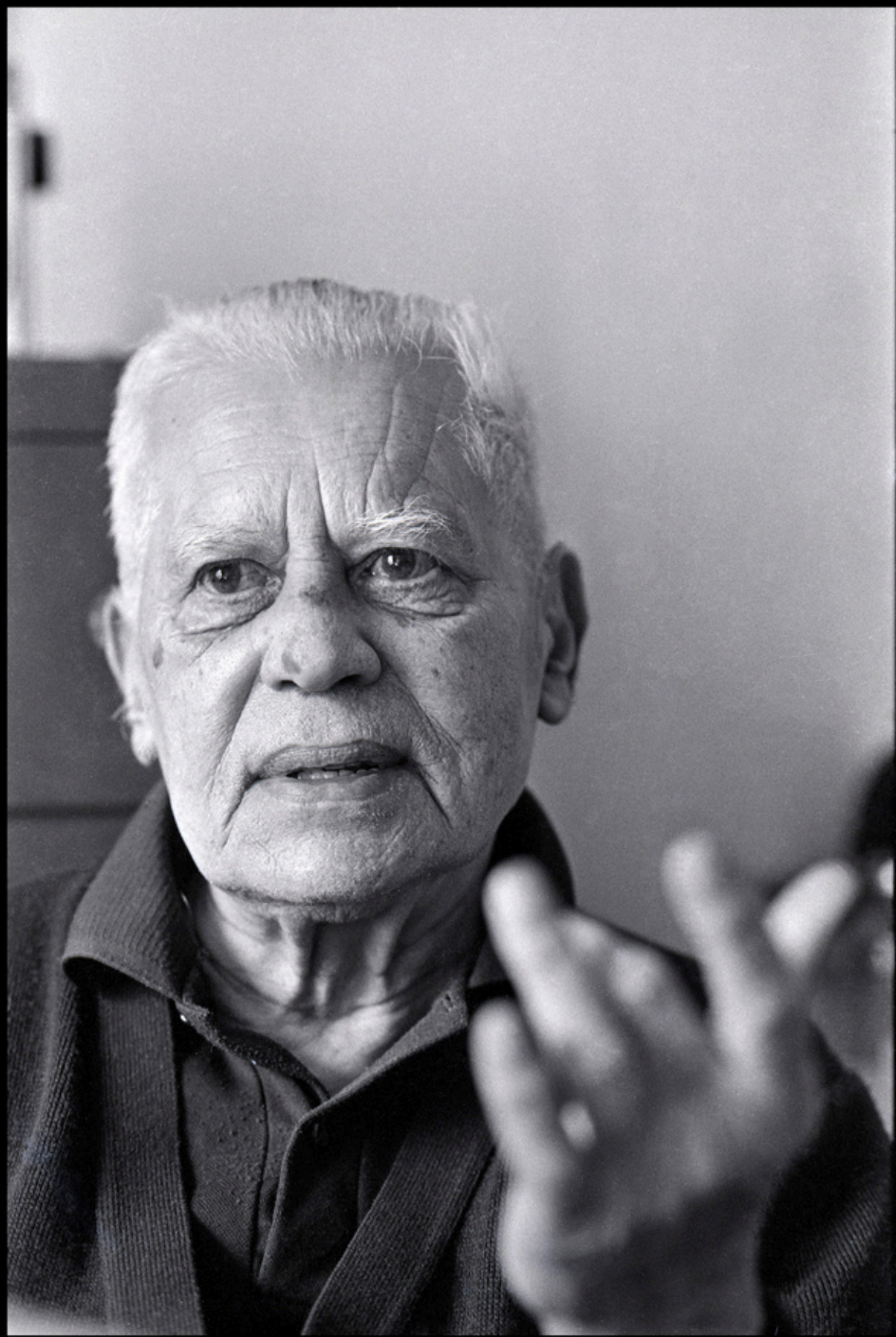
George Claessen.

UNTITLED

So it must be, as living
Begs a question in its wake,
Timeless infinity the answer,
With subjective love, points
All creation to the grave.

—
GEORGE CLAESSEN





Photograph of George Claessen at his home, and studio, Tuffnell Park, London, 1994
Photograph by Dominic Sansoni

STANHOPE GALLERY

Stanhope Institute · Longford Street · London N.W.1
Tel. 01-387 6787



Paintings & Graphics by

George Claessen

October 20-31 1975. 11a.m.-8p.m.
Monday to Friday

George Claessen

Formation, 1972

Signed CLAESSEN upper centre, titled on the frame; further signed, dated and titled '<FORMATION>/ George Claessen/ London/ 1972' on the reverse

Acrylic on board

42 x 37 cm

16 1/2 x 14 5/8 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Exhibitions

London, Stanhope Gallery, *Exhibition of Paintings & Graphics by George Claessen*,
20 - 31 October 1975, No. 15





George Claessen

Architectural Motif, 1974

Signed, dated, titled and inscribed '2/10 'architectural Motif', George Claessen (1974)' along lower margin

Lithograph on paper

44.7 x 32.5 cm

17 5/8 x 12 3/4 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist



George Claessen

Clown, 1976

Signed, dated and inscribed '9/25 Clown George Claessen' along lower margin
Etching on paper

Image: 19.5 x 15 cm (7 5/8 x 5 7/8 in)

Sheet: 37.3 x 30 cm (14 3/4 x 11 3/4 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.83, No. 50 (another edition)

*"I enjoy what I do. I paint with a sense of integrity.
I never compromised.
I don't care whether I am known or unknown."*

George Claessen in the 1980s

George Claessen

Self Portrait, 1979

Signed and dated 'George Claessen (1979)' lower right

Etching on paper

Image: 42 x 32 cm (16 1/2 x 12 5/8 in)

Sheet: 33.9 x 29.5 cm (13 3/8 x 11 5/8 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.8, No.49,
(another edition)



George Claessen (1979)

George Claessen

Back of a Woman, 1980

Signed and dated 'George Claessen (1980)' along lower margin

Etching on paper

Image: 22.5 x 9 cm (8 7/8 x 3 1/2 in)

Sheet: 27.5 x 14.5 cm (10 7/8 x 5 3/4 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist



GC

George Claessen (1980)



George Claessen

Transmission, 1980

Signed 'CLAESSEN' lower right, inscribed on the reverse 'Transmission/ (Acrylic)/ George Claessen/ 1980/ 15 3/4" x 17 3/4"

Acrylic on board

45 x 40 cm

17 3/4 x 15 3/4 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.49, (illustrated in the background of a photo of Claessen with Ivan and Veronica Peries, above)



George Claessen

Abstract, 1985

Signed 'CLAESSEN' lower right

Oil and acrylic on canvas

70 x 56 cm

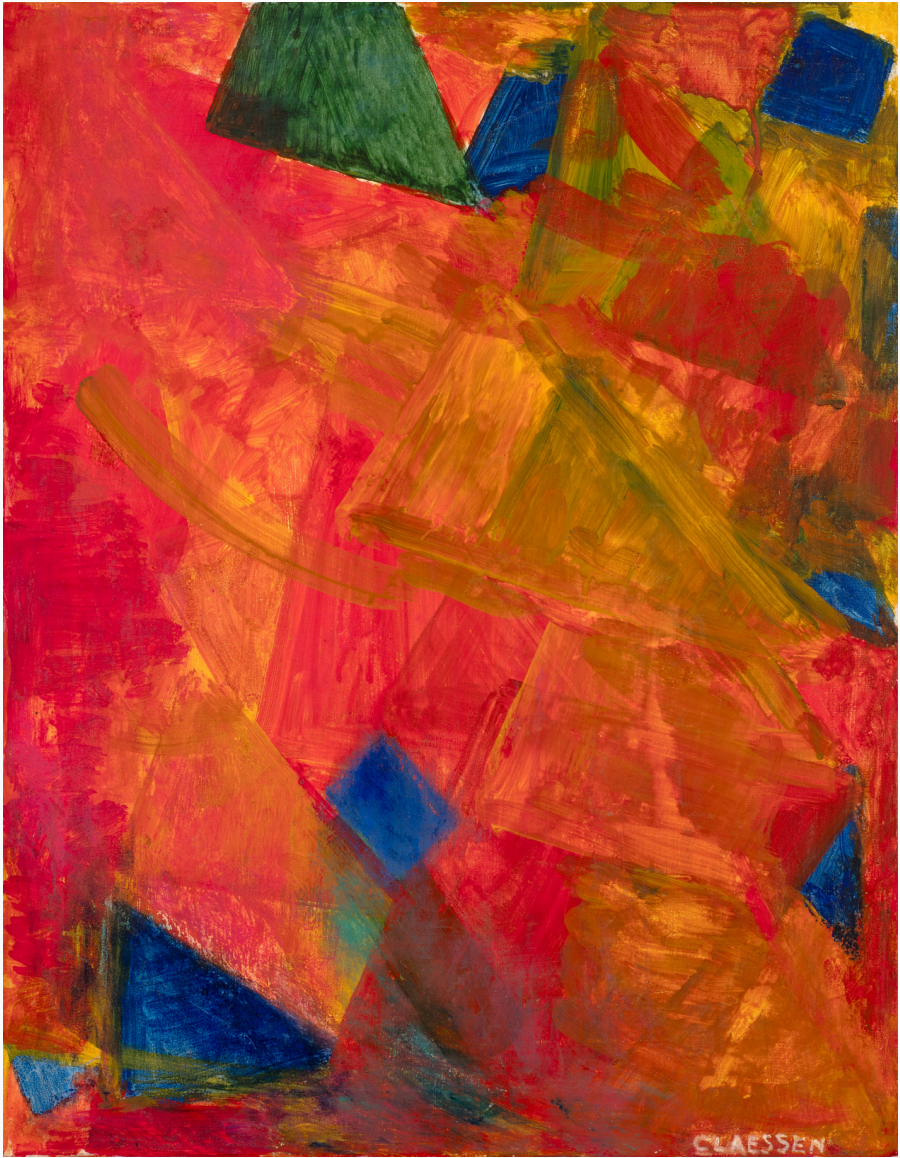
27 1/2 x 22 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.135, No.128





Statue of a Goddess (Tārā). Object 54 of 100. Gilded bronze, Sri Lanka, 8th century AD.
British Museum, OA 1830.6-12.4. Photograph by Mike Peel

George Claessen

Tara (From the Bronze), 1985

Signed 'George Claessen' lower right, titled and dated 'Tara (from the Bronze) (1985)' along the upper margin

Pen and ink on paper laid on paper

Image: 21 x 13.5 cm (8 1/4 x 5 1/4 in)

Sheet: 28 x 18 cm (11 x 7 1/8 in)

Provenance

Gifted to Narendrarajah Sivasambu (1928-2022) by the Artist in 1985;

Private British Collection, gifted by the above;

The Estate of the Artist, gifted by the above

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.90, No. 69

Tassa (from the bronze)

(1985)



George Claessen

George Claessen

Ad Infinitum, 1987

Signed 'CLAESSEN' upper right; further signed, dated and titled 'AD INFINITUM/
(GOUACHE)/ GEORGE CLAESSEN/ 1987' on the reverse

Gouache on linen laid down on board

49 x 38 cm

19 1/4 x 15 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Publications

Wanigaratne, Shamil, *George Claessen: Artist, Sculptor and Poet*, pg.139, No.133



George Claessen

Nude, 1988

Signed and dated 'George Claessen (1988)' lower right

Graphite on paper laid down on paper

27.5 x 13.4 cm

10 7/8 x 5 1/4 in

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist



George Claessen (1989)

George Claessen

A Tribute to Virginia Woolf, 1992

Signed and dated 'George Claessen (1991)' lower right, titled upper left;
further inscribed on the backboard 'a Tribute to Virginia Woolf/ (oil pastel)/
George Claessen/ (1992)'

Oil pastel on paper mounted on board

26.5 x 21 cm

10 3/8 x 8 1/4 in

Provenance

Gifted to Narendrarajah Sivasambu by the Artist in 1985;

Private British Collection, gifted by the above;

The Estate of the Artist, gifted by the above

Narendrarajah Sivasambu (1928-2022), known as Nathan or Siva, was born in 1928 into a distinguished Ceylonese family whose heritage in trade and learning instilled in him a deep respect for culture and intellect. Educated at the Royal College in Colombo and the University of Ceylon, he developed a lifelong fascination with philosophy and literature, particularly the writings of Leonard Woolf, whose years in Ceylon left a profound mark on Nathan's imagination. The values of the Bloomsbury circle — rationalism, humanism, and creative inquiry — resonated strongly with him, shaping both his scholarly and personal pursuits.

When Nathan arrived in London in the late 1950s to study under A.J. Ayer at University College London, he chose to live in Tavistock Place, near the Woolfs' former home in Bloomsbury. Immersed in this intellectual heartland, he became a fixture at institutions such as the British Museum, the British Library, and SOAS, where he researched Sri Lankan history and culture. His home, overflowing with books and papers, reflected a mind devoted to ideas and a life spent in conversation with the past.

In the 1960s, Nathan founded the *Ceylon Bloomsbury Group* — a gathering of Sri Lankan writers, artists and intellectuals in London who met to discuss art, politics, and literature. Members included Romesh Gunesekeera, the Sri Lankan-born novelist, Rohan de Saram, the celebrated Sri Lankan-British cellist, as well as various academics, poets, and artists, including Claessen, who gifted this painting to Nathan in 1985, which hung in his Bloomsbury home for 40 years until his death in 2022.

A tribute to Virginia Woolf.



George Claassen (1991)

George Claessen

Head, (Homage to Ludwig Beethoven), 1993

Initialed 'GC', and signed and dated 'George Claessen (1993)' lower right;
further signed, dated and titled on the reverse

Sepia ink on paper laid down on paper

Image: 28.6 x 21.5 cm (11 1/4 x 8 1/2 in)

Sheet: 35 x 26 cm (13 3/4 x 10 1/4 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist



George Claessen

Head, 1994

Signed, dated and titled 'Head George Claessen (1994) lower right; further signed, dated and titled on the reverse

Pastel and watercolour on paper laid down on paper

Image: 29 x 20.4 cm (11 3/8 x 8 in)

Sheet: 35.6 x 28 cm (14 x 11 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist



Head

George Claessen (1994)

George Claessen

Yellow, Red & Blue in Unity, 1996

Signed 'CLAESSEN' upper right, also signed, dated and titled 'Yellow, Red and Blue in Unity/ George Claessen (1996) along lower margin; further signed, dated and titled on the reverse

Egg tempera on paper laid down on paper

Image: 30 x 24 cm (11 3/4 x 9 1/2 in)

Sheet: 35.4 x 25.7 cm (14 x 10 1/8 in)

Provenance

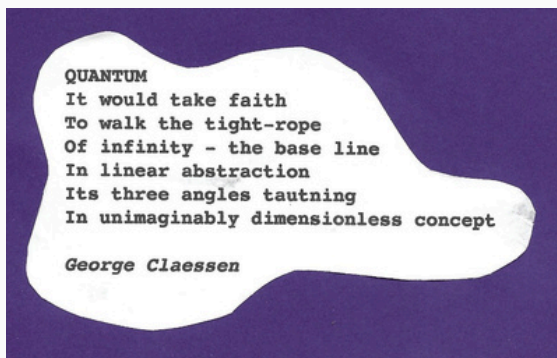
The Estate of the Artist



CLAESSEN

Yellow, Red and Blue in Unity

George Claassen (1996)



George Claessen

An Intimation of Infinity, 1996

Signed 'CLAESSEN' lower left, further signed, dated and titled along lower edge 'an intimation of infinity, George Claessen (1996)'

Egg tempera on canvas

81 x 61 cm

31 7/8 x 24 in

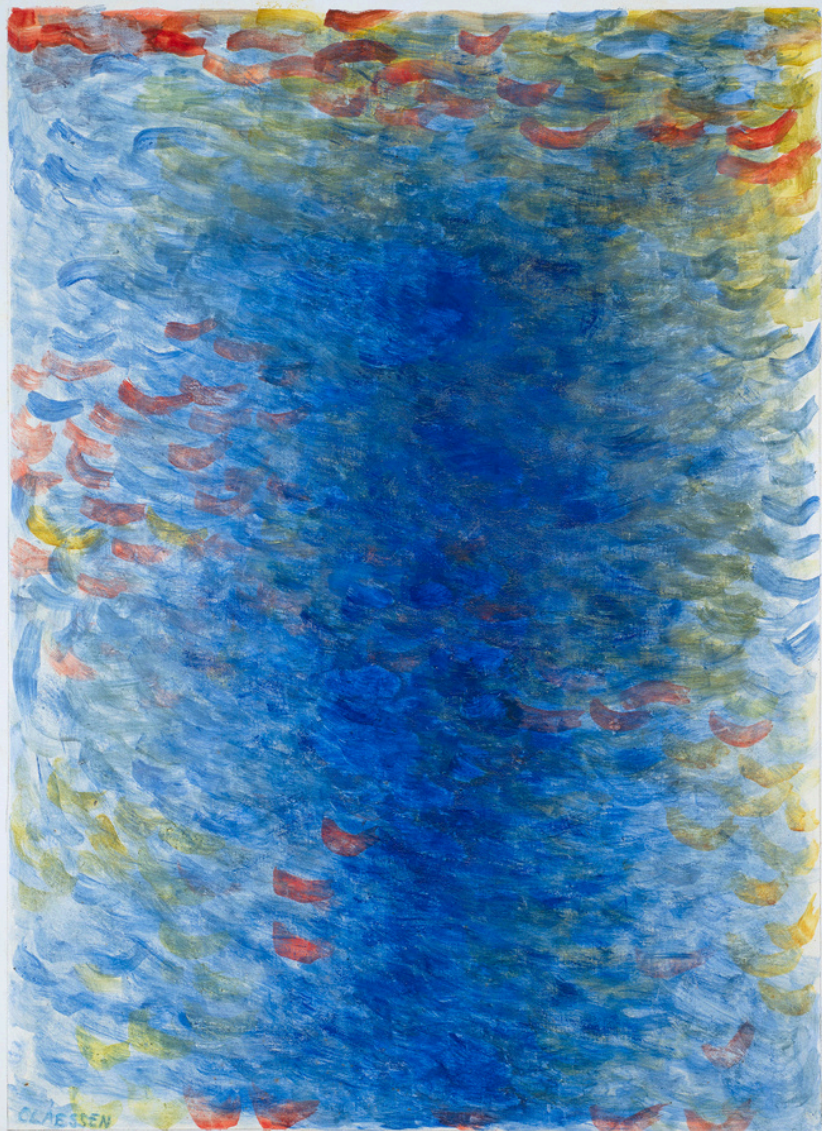
Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Exhibitions

London, Three Highgate, *From Babel to Abstraction*, 20 October 2023 - 9 February 2024, illustrated

London, Phillips X & Grosvenor Gallery, *Crossing Borders: Modern Art from South Asia*, 10 - 31 July 2025, (illustrated in the exhibition catalogue)



CLAESSEN
an imitation of depth

Georgia Cleason (1976)

George Claessen

Abstract (Blue), 1997

Signed and titled 'abstract/ CLAESSEN' upper left, also signed and dated 'George Claessen (1997) lower right; further signed, dated and titled on the reverse
Watercolour on paper laid down on paper

Image: 17 x 12.6 cm (6 3/4 x 5 in)

Sheet: 22.5 x 17 cm (8 7/8 x 6 3/4 in)

Provenance

The Estate of the Artist

Abstract

G. CLASSEN



George Classen (1997)

George Claessen

1909 - 1999

1909

Born in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) on the 5th of May.

Educated at St Joseph's College, Colombo.

1939

Started to paint whilst stationed in the ancient city of Anuradhapura.

1943

Founded the '43 Group with eight other Sri Lankan artists.

Exhibited in the first exhibition of the '43 Group. Exhibited in 10 of the '43 Group's 16 shows between 1943 and 1967.

1946

Book of drawings published in Sri Lanka.

1947

Left Sri Lanka to work in Australia. Joined the Victoria Arts Society.

1948

First one-man show at the Velasquez Gallery, Melbourne.

Returned to Sri Lanka.

1949

Left Sri Lanka for England via Bombay, India. Arrived in London.

1951

Joint exhibition with Mary Gorrara (sculptor) at the Archer Gallery, London.

1952

Exhibited in the 43 Group Ceylonese Paintings at the Imperial Institute, London.

1953

Exhibited at the Petit Palace, Paris, in *L' Art Contemporain de Ceylan*.

1954

Exhibited at the Artists International Association Gallery (AIA), London, in the exhibition '*6 Contemporary Ceylonese Painters.*'

Showed at the Heffer Gallery, Cambridge, in the exhibition *Contemporary Painters from Ceylon*.

1956

Represented Sri Lanka at the Venice Biennale.

1957

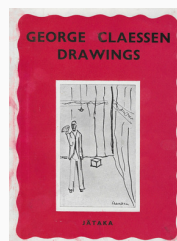
Exhibited at the New Vision Centre Gallery, London.

Exhibited at The AIA Gallery, London

1958

Exhibited at the touring exhibition *New Vision 58*

Exhibited with the Free Painters' Group, London



1959

Exhibited at the 5th International São Paulo Biennale at the Museum d'Arte Moderna, Brazil.
Received an award.

1961

Exhibited at Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford, in the exhibition *South Asian Artists at Work in London*

1962

Solo exhibition at the New Vision Centre Gallery, London.

1963

Exhibited at the *Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art* at the Commonwealth Institute, London
This exhibition then toured to Edinburgh in early 1964.

1967

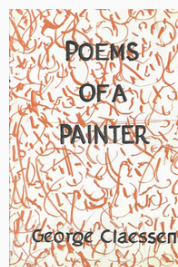
Book of poetry *Poems of a Painter* published by Mitre Press, London.

1973

Exhibited in the *Bertrand Russell Centenary Art Exhibition and Sale*

1975

One-man show at the Stanhope Gallery, London.



Throughout the 1970s - 90s, Claessen continued to draw and paint, exhibiting by invitation at various shows in Europe, Sri Lanka and Britain, many of which were organised by the Islington Art Circle.

1981

Poems about Nothing, published by Arthur Stockwell, Devon.

1985

'43 Group exhibition at the Royal Festival Hall, London.

1986

Exhibited in the collective retrospective exhibition, *New Vision 56-66*.

1993

George Claessen, A Retrospective, Gallery 706 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.
Work featured in subsequent exhibitions in Sri Lanka.



1996

Collected Poems published by Avon Books, London.

1998

Eight paintings acquired by the Government of Sri Lanka for the Presidential Collection.

1999

Passed away in London.

Archive images kindly provided by the Estate of the Artist.

Photographs of Claessen in his studio in 1994, kindly provided courtesy of Dominic Sansoni.

Works from the Estate of George Claessen

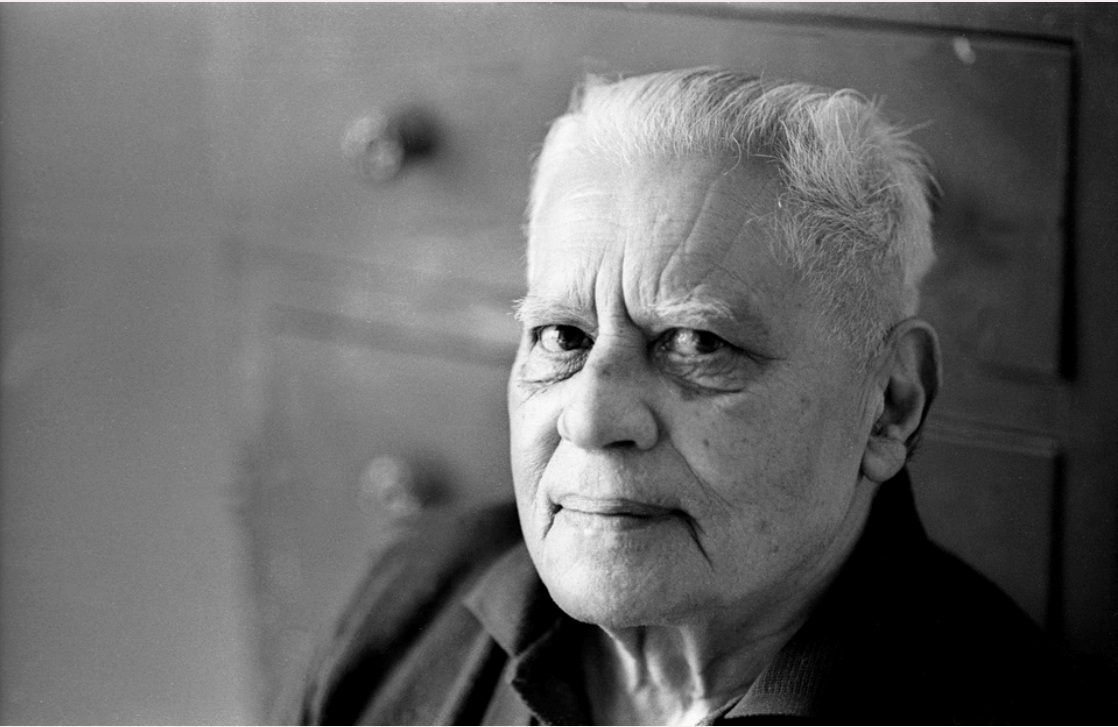
14 May - 7 June 2026

**Grosvenor
Gallery**

35 Bury Street
London SW1Y 6AU

art@grosvenorgallery.com
+44(0)20 7484 7979





**Grosvenor
Gallery**