

INDIAN ART



The Moderns Revisited

Grosvenor
Vadehra

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M F Husain

S H Raza

Ram Kumar

V S Gaitonde

F N Souza

Tyeb Mehta

Akbar Padamsee

I'm an impostor. I stumbled into modern Indian art while researching a fairly unknown British artist called Francis Newton Souza. As it turned out, Souza had had a bit to do with India in his early life, but in 1949, after a few professional set backs, he left Bombay and went to London, where he enjoyed a modicum of success before hightailing it to New York and oblivion in the late 1960s. That was the story I knew. And then I read some more and was reminded that history is a form of fiction. It filters, separates and compartmentalises events to fit ideologies, theories, needs. Twist the kaleidoscope and another pattern appears.

Toby Treves

Originality in art, as elsewhere, is a form of inspired appropriation. Every innovation has a lineage, every picture a precedent. Yet an individual style is unique. This is not so much a contradiction as a paradox. When Souza acknowledged his debt to Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, Rouault, among others, and simultaneously said that no one had ever painted like him, he stated a truth that applies to any artist who has a personal style.

For Souza that style is most identifiable when he forces the slithery substance of oil paint into a scaffold of thick black lines that describe rudimentary human or architectural forms. There's not much attention to elaborate composition, or such niceties of virtuoso painting as linear perspective and colour harmony. His is an art of stark contrasts and rough edges. Stylistically it shares much with Expressionism, but conceptually it is closer to another

tradition. Born in Goa and educated at a Jesuit school in Bombay, Souza was familiar with Roman Catholic imagery and often cited the icons of the Goan churches as a primary source for his own work. Those images do not merely declaim doctrine, they induce religious experience within the devout. As such they are from a different order of art to that of Expressionism, with its emphasis on subjective experience and self-expression; they are a form of public rhetoric intended to communicate a message of the highest importance and obliterate the worshipper's ego as it encounters the divine. In technique and tone this is not subtle art; the pervasive and emotionally overwrought images of Christ and the saints in the full gore of their martyrdom are an assault intended to drive the message home and break down resistance.



Souza adapted this forthright manner of address to his own purposes. Over the years he created a dramatic public persona. The photos he posed for, the prose he wrote, the things he said, contributed to a sense that he inhabited a world beyond the bourgeois, full of wonders and horrors. Yet, in truth, that persona was limiting. In his writings and paintings, Souza was an artist pushing against more than middle class convention. At its best his mature work is an uncompromising exploration of the nature of the self and its annihilation either through an encounter with the divine or the erotic. For sure there are the satirical swipes at institutional hypocrisy, particularly

within the church and commerce, but these are easy targets, ones Souza could hit with his eyes shut. It is only when he addresses the grander theme that his full powers become apparent. Within this body of work the cityscapes occupy a special position. These dark, glowering agglomerations are the antithesis of the ideal or heavenly city. Where the Renaissance artists posited a model of rational planning bathed in radiant light, Souza substitutes a ramshackle heap of rickety buildings packed in on one another and then casually throws in such a title as Paddington, one of the most rundown areas of London. But such pictures are not sermons on the degrading nature urban living conditions; Souza relishes this reality. It is here that the festering mess and complexity of humanity reveals itself shorn of its pretensions to wholesome order.

Like those images in the churches of Goa, Souza set his work at 'stun', but whereas religious doctrine rushed in to fill the awed silence of the Goan faithful, with Souza something more nebulous seeped in. It wasn't Existentialism, as he remained convinced that there was a higher force at work in the universe. No, it was a sort of agnosticism; a belief in a force beyond the self but a profound ambiguity about its morality. If Souza's paintings repulse, and some surely do, it is because they both reveal us to ourselves and acknowledge the torrential energy of a life force beyond the individual, which will annihilate each of us in turn.



That is not to say Souza only worked in one register. There are other, gentler facets to his work; some paintings are tender, even quiet in mood, and demonstrate an elegant handling of paint, colour and form. Yet he is less sure-footed when making such pictures and they can seem mawkish. Not so his contemporary Akbar Padamsee. Although the earliest paintings in this show demonstrate Padamsee's debt to Cézanne's treatment of form and space they are more than homage: they provide an insight into some of his abiding concerns. *Nature Morte a la Carafe et au verre* is a static image. The relatively flat perspective sets out a rational spatial arrangement with the interior divided into three clear zones: the tabletop, the left and the right background sections. The inherent stability of this scheme is complemented by the apparent solidity of the objects, which is achieved partly through the use of thick paint that literally enhances the physicality of the bottle and glass, and the use of shadow and colour to establish spatial relations. By contrast colour is used to confuse space in *Paysage Urbain*. The boundaries between form and space are dissolved within a flux of abstracted shapes and exquisitely subtle colour harmonies. As individual elements lose their identity and flow into the whole, the painting gathers a strong sense of movement. These twin concerns of movement and form find a psychological dimension in the recent watercolours and metascapes. With the watercolours, the myriad touches of light and dark tones form a trembling web on to which the monochrome figures are projected. Simultaneously insubstantial and real, these images capture a sense of a fleeting moment and a psychological condition. The shimmering metascapes, which are made with oil paint and a range of colour, are physically more substantial though they describe a world beyond the physical and perhaps the self.



There is also in Padamsee's late watercolours a sense of melancholy which is faintly reminiscent of Ram Kumar's urban paintings of the 1950s. Wrought in a naïve style the pathos of those images of ordinary individuals caught in the grind of life was part of the social realist tendency that Kumar was then associated with. His predilection for such subject matter and his membership of the Communist Party led some critics to read these paintings as political statements, but Kumar did not, and still does not, consider himself to have been a political artist. To him his paintings of the 1950s simply represent his personal sense of isolation as a foreigner living in Paris. And consequently when he found that his concerns had moved away from social exile and isolation he developed a more abstracted style better suited to his new subject matter. Crucial to this development was the Benares series of the 1960s. As is well known, Kumar was fascinated by Benares, a city shrouded by death and an attendant spirituality. As the series unfolded, the city was represented as a heaped island of irregular, rectangular patches of paint floating on, and sometimes dissolving into, a monochrome ground. The juxtaposition of these two elements, the formed and the amorphous, served a metaphor for the passage from life to death.

If the Benares series is a meditation on death, then the late landscape paintings concentrate on life. The vibrant colours, strong rhythms and shimmering surfaces convey a sense of restless vitality. In *Untitled* 2006 everything is in flux. The centrifugal rhythm of the spiral composition whirls the eye around the canvas, never allowing it to linger for more than a moment over any detail before sweeping it along. And round and round it goes, the wondrous cycle of life.



There is here a formal connection with Raza's mesmerising *L'arbre du mal* and his recent abstracts *Summer* and *Earth*. However, the dynamic arrangement of colour and form in Raza's work is more often directed towards a specific symbolic purpose. *L'arbre du mal*, translated literally as the tree of evil, is composed of a dancing patchwork of vibrant colours abutting a the black expanse of the tree; the one emitting energy and the other a deathly absorption of light. This tendency towards symbolism led to the established lexicon of signs. In *Bindu* the harmonious co-existence of the circle and square suggests an ideal state which many cultures have associated with the juxtaposition of those two shapes. But it serves as more than a symbol; the experience of looking at the picture is in itself restful, almost meditative, as the eye is led through darkening rings to the black inner circle, and vice versa.

By contrast Gaitonde's sensual abstraction is more ambiguous. However much the luminous forms of *Untitled* 1987 suggest letters or ideograms, they remain abstract fragments. The livid orange and black fungal smudges wreath it in an air of decay, as if it was rotting down to its constituent parts – a type of picturesque ruination. Yet Gaitonde described his painting as non-objective and said that his principal interest was the arrangement of colour, line and form without literal or metaphoric reference. The challenge for any artist following this path is to prevent the mark from being read as representing something else, be it a letter, a figure or simply creating the illusion of real



space. It is exactly this threshold that Gaitonde's work explores. There is a sense in his paintings that the marks before us are right on the edge of organising themselves into something recognisable but they never quite do. It is this visual ambiguity that breathes life into the work.

At the end comes the masterful painting of Husain, an artist with such a facility for figuration that he has painted in several styles with equal success. While Husain's interest in Indian cultural traditions is clearly relevant to his art it is not what marks him out as an outstanding painter. Husain's predilection for mythological subject matter means that for the most part he has been a narrative painter. The ability to tell a story in a single image requires particular skills and Husain excels at them. From the reflective mood of *Nude Women Abstract* to the energy and terror of *Wounds*, it is clear that Husain has a masterful grip on the pictorial elements of line, colour and form and an ability to convey a range of emotions convincingly. But to paint narratives an artist also needs an acute sense of imagination and composition. In his most ambitious works the positioning of figures in relation to one another and the space and objects around them is often startlingly complex but rarely confused. Indeed it is through this complexity that his paintings often gain the extraordinary narrative richness that has marked Husain out as a major figure.



It often used to be said that Husain was the only artist among the post-Independence generation who had an international reputation. While there are now others joining him on that stage, it is worth reflecting on what that means. To have such a position suggests not merely that audiences in other countries know Husain's work, but that they find it relevant. There is an irony in this, as Husain is also the one artist commonly identified as engaging most closely with what is called the 'indigenous' culture of India, and may therefore be considered the least international in subject matter. Ultimately, however, such ranking of individuals is a diversion. What matters and all that most artists want is for their work to be looked at without preconception or prejudice. For a long time modern art from India had a low profile in Britain and there were many reasons for this, some to do with the individuals involved, some cultural and some historic. Perhaps, as the world changes and new histories are written, a new audience is emerging.

Until recently **Toby Treves** was a curator of modern British art at Tate. In 2005 he organised the monographic display on Francis Newton Souza at Tate Britain and since then has done further research into Souza's life and work.

A self-taught artist M F Husain learnt the art of calligraphy at an early age and later on apprenticed himself to a painter of cinema hoardings. He was noticed for the first time when he won an award at the annual exhibition of the Bombay Art Society in 1947. Husain's watercolours of 1940s and '50s, that first got him noticed, are pragmatically illustrative of the modernising position of the Indian art. He was, at this point, totally influenced by the classicism and grandeur of Indian art and as a result his figures were transmuted into a space that was mythical as well as real. In late 1960s he painted the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the latter being displayed at the Sao Paulo biennale where Husain was a special invitee along with Pablo Picasso. In 1967, he made his first film, *Through the Eyes of a Painter* which was shown at the Berlin Festival and won a Golden Bear.

In his works Husain returns time and again to his roots, and to themes that blend folk, tribal elements with the everyday and the mythological to create vibrant, contemporary, living art forms. The villager took a prominent place in his canvas as an emblem of the Nehruvian era and social change. Husain's transpositions from the modern world are marked by strongly characterising pictorial and thematic traits along with his eclectic style – a combination of expressionism and Indian classical sculpture.

His enigmatic painting style, vibrant colours and of course his extraordinary multifaceted personality has attracted much attention of art lovers and critics. One of the identifying traits in his works is his characteristic use of strong bold lines that swiftly emerge.

Husain's horses are strong creatures, usually galloping, with reared heads and tremendous movement. Husain's horses are not plastic forms treated to stylistic variations; rather they are sensuous creatures that have become personal symbols for the artist. His inspiration to paint horses was a combination of a trip to China where he studied Song pottery horses and a trip to Italy where he discovered the sculptures of Marino Marini.

Husain's work has a complex structure due to the employment of variety of metaphors, images, themes, colours and moods. He does not subscribe to the concept of alienation in art but according to him one should have a total submission towards one's art and beliefs. He keeps returning to the subjects and themes that have been vital and at the same time discovering fresh ones.

As Alkazi states, "Husain's paintings are profound, but they are never forbiddingly intellectual or cerebral. They have a strong emotional undercurrent, an engaging warmth, an immediate visual appeal, and they are passionately humanistic."

WOUNDS

Acrylic on canvas
24" x 36"
61 x 92 cms
2005



NUDE WOMEN

Oil on canvas
35" x 35"



UNTITLED

Water color on paper

29" x 39"

74 x 99 cms



DADA & LAMP

Lithograph

28" x 21"

71 x 53 cms



MOTHER TERESA

Lithograph

24" x 35"

61 x 89 cms



UNTITLED

Lithograph

23" x 34"

58.5 x 87 cms



Paris-based S H Raza has created his own text for modernism through his large repertoire of symbols, colour tonalities and extended spaces.

Images from nature and specifically the forests of Madhya Pradesh retained a prominent place in his mind long after he left India in 1950 to study at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris, on a French government scholarship. His frequent visits back to India starting from 1960s contributed to a vast compilation of memories that would manifest themselves in various forms over the next two decades. He maintained an intense and powerful bond with the forests, rivers and parched earth of India.

In 1940s when Raza was pursuing his diploma at J. J. School of art, images of the large metropolis of Bombay became his source of inspiration. His paintings gradually evolved from these early expressionistic landscapes to more abstract ones and finally culminating in the Bindu series.

His experiments were influenced by the new medium of acrylic with which he began his experiments on canvas. The works of the '60s and '70s can be viewed as works in transition that engaged with abstraction and figuration.

Although the paintings are non representational, the combination of bright scorching colours and powerful brushstrokes succeed in invoking the vibrancy and spirit of both Indian languages and the people.

The *Bindu* is the seed, the germ, the core, and it gives birth to the fecund world. The black Bindu becomes cosmic force, the sole energy for the universe. In *Summer* the tones of yellows express a certain mood of saturation. The constant core of creation imbued his work with new territories. According to Raza, "The point, the *Bindu*, symbolizes the seed-bearing, the potential of all life, in a sense. It is also a visible form containing all the essential requisites of line, tone, colour, gesture and space."

The circle becomes a central point representing concentrated energy. This circle of Bindu manifests itself in various forms throughout Raza's works where the Bindu can be seen as the point or genesis of creation as well as a focal point of meditation. His paintings from 1970s are more gestural in technique and expression, even in terms of colours exuding its spontaneity.

L'ARBRE DU MAL

Oil on canvas
28¾" x 36¼"
73 x 92 cm
1961



UNTITLED

Oil on canvas

Signed and dated 1964 lower right and countersigned on reverse and inscribed '23 x 29 ^{1/2} p.550'64'29.5 x 23 cm

30 x 23 cm

1964

Provenance Galerie Lara Vincy, Paris



L'ESCALIER

Acrylic on canvas

Signed and dated lower right, signed and inscribed on reverse 'P.672'66' 'L'escalier' '6M' and stamped with Lara Vincy address

16" x 9.5"

41 x 24 cm

1966

Provenance Galerie Lara Vincy, Paris



WHITE BINDU

Acrylic on canvas
100 x 100 cms
2006



EARTH

Acrylic on canvas

31.5" x 31.5"

80 x 80 cms



SUMMER

Acrylic on canvas

16" x 16"

41 x 41 cms

2005



SATHURA

Acrylic on canvas
120 x 60 cms
2006



Ram Kumar shared with his other contemporaries, who were part of Delhi Shilpi Chakra and Bombay Progressive Group, the dream of working in an art language that would be as comprehensible in London and Paris as in Delhi.

And that led him to Paris where he studied painting under Andre Lhote and Fernand Leger. The human condition is the main concern of the painter in his early works that depict the alienated individual within the city. In the transitory period, the lines give way to sweeping strokes of blue and golden yellow lending buoyancy to the painting.

In the early 1960s, Ram Kumar took to abstract painting after a pivotal journey to Benaras and never returned to figural painting since. Since 1960 his paintings have opened out in sweeps of ochre, viridian and aquamarine as he mounted his contemplations of the cosmic cycle of creation, dissolution and regeneration. In his paintings of last two decades, a residual geography and a notational architecture has crept in. Ram Kumar's landscapes often straddle the boundaries between abstraction and naturalism, quoting both but succumbing to neither. With a cool palette of aquas, blues, greys and tawny yellows, his prime motifs oscillate between the numerous visitations he made to Benaras and the open vistas that are in essence painterly vestiges of his life's journey. By banishing the figure he was able to emphasize the nullification of humanity, and to deploy architecture and landscape as metaphors articulating cultural and psychological fragmentation. He translates the landscape into a system of line, planes, blocks; their machine-edged logic, entering into dialogue with texture and tone, that govern the distribution of significant masses over the picture space. One can see old gold and russet as the prime palette with hints of blue and a yellow that verges on moss and a white light. The horizontal, hard, straight line is most intrinsic to Ram Kumar. He states his art is about the rediscovery of elemental origins within the lingua franca of the landscape, the translation and storage of essential energies, the spiritual properties of meditative melancholia.

In '80s, with his broken structures, Ram Kumar made a reference to an incipient violence and destruction. The recent landscapes are not representations of specific sights, but rather a complex hybrid of memories merged with actual sights visited over the years. "With all the transcendental lyricism of his landscapes, Ram Kumar has never been attracted to the unearthly or other worldly. His feet have always been planted in the terra firma, the palpable reality of the world. His 'abstractions' are not flights into the 'unknown' but like shifting beams of light they move, passing through the entire space of the painting, from one segment of reality to another, uncovering the hidden relations, between the sky, the rock, the river. The sacred resides not in the objects depicted, but in the relations discovered."

UNTITLED

Oil on canvas
36" x 24"
91.5 x 91.5 cms



UNTITLED

Acrylic on paper
16.5" x 23.5"
42 x 60 cms



UNTITLED

Acrylic on paper
16.5" x 23.5"
42 x 60 cms
2006



UNTITLED

Oil On Canvas
36" x 36"
91.5 x 91.5 cms
2005



LANDSCAPE

Watercolour on paper
21.5" x 34.5"
55 x 88 cm



Vasudeo S. Gaitonde is one of India's most profound and evocative artists, who impressed his sublime vision on the canons of contemporary Indian art. Playing a vital role in establishing the foundations of abstraction in India, he was an artist who was indeed ahead of his time.

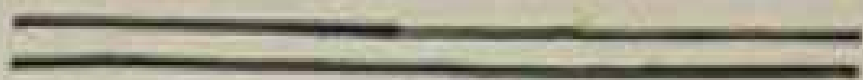
The disassociation with representation seen in the way he used symbols, calligraphic elements and hieroglyphs in his early works were the beginnings of Gaitonde's fully abstracted paintings that were influenced by his study of Zen Buddhism. Influenced by Zen philosophy and ancient calligraphy, his works have an inherent structure and control in the midst of their stream-of-consciousness composition. The mysterious and personalized hieroglyphs of Gaitonde are the manifestations of intuitions invested in the eternal and meaningful silence, seeking to open up the space. In Gaitonde's works a spiritual sublimation is created and the translucent planes create an underwater ambience.

Unlike his more prolific contemporaries, Gaitonde produced very few finished works during his lifetime, preferring instead a slow and meticulous painting process. His technique of meticulously applying and then removing paint with a palette knife allows him to control his canvas to a startling exactitude. Gaitonde's characteristic feature is his lack of ground line and use of symbolic elements to build his lyrical compositions. Through a brilliant manipulation of form, colour and technique, he has the ability to transform basic elements into platforms of spiritual introspection. The textural structure with the interplay of colour in Gaitonde's paintings are the central devices in the works. The mysterious 'self' in the painting is hieratic but never insistent. His compositions possess a kinetic power that imparts movement to the delicately balanced configurations for Gaitonde governed their formulations with a feeling for the form that was imperative.

His non-conformist nature was accompanied by a firm belief in his identity as a painter, and because of his firmness, Gaitonde isolated himself very early in his career from everything in his environment which he considered irrelevant to this identity.

UNTITLED

Ink on paper
14" x 10.5"
36 x 27 cms
1987



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UNTITLED

Oil on canvas

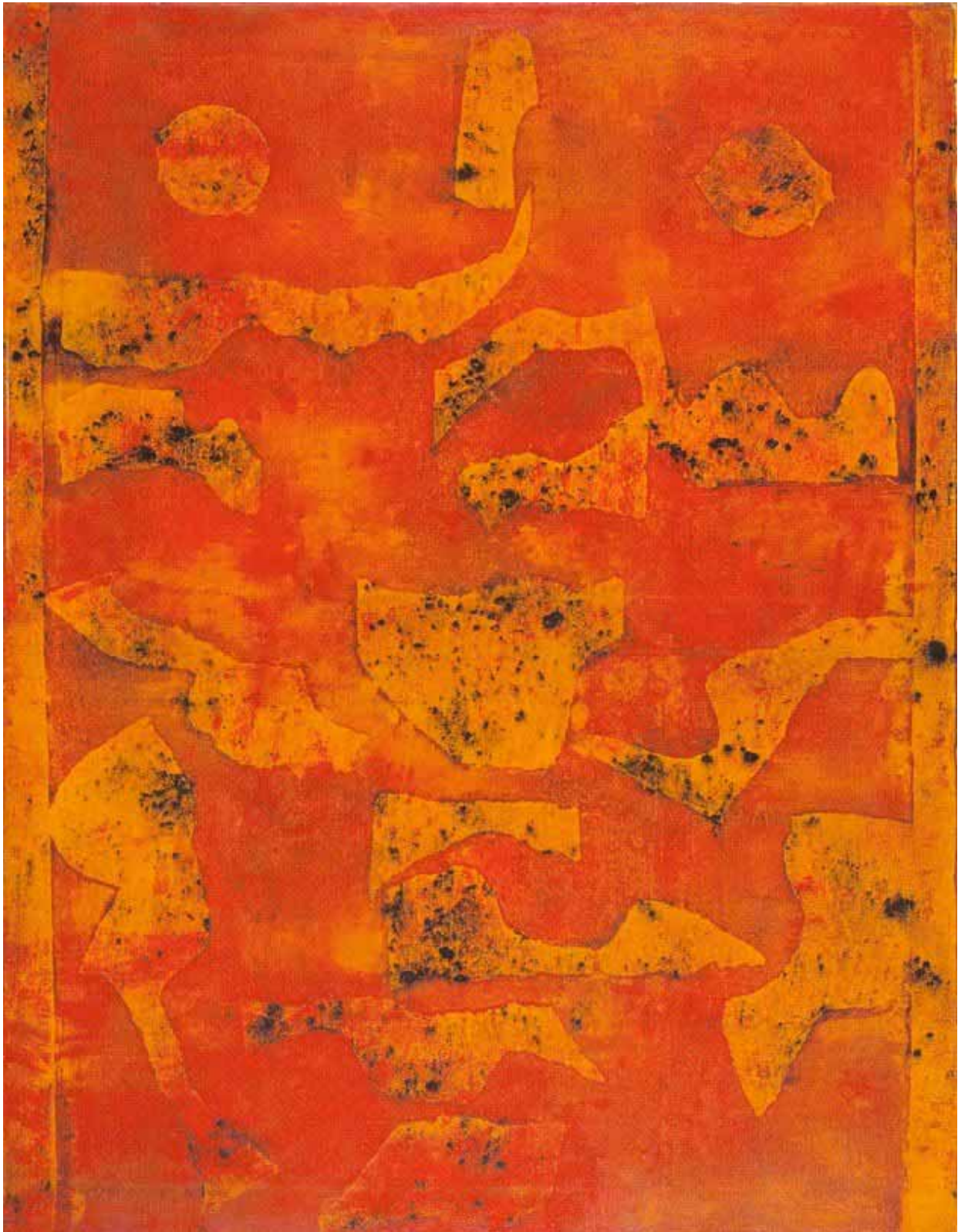
Signed on reverse 'V.S. Gaitonde 1987'

39.5" x 30"

99 x 76 cms

1987

Provenance Private collection



F N Souza 1924 - 2002

Francis Newton Souza, the founder of the Progressive Artist's Group in 1947, is best known for his inventive human forms particularly the heads. Born and brought up in a Catholic family in Goa, Souza left for London in 1949 after a brief stint at Sir J J School of Art in Bombay.

In London, he had several shows and his career was on a rise. In the next two decades the morphology of the face changed and new forms were invented.

Souza's themes ride the waves of our human concerns, errant but able, containing and embracing all the aspects of life, from his political affiliations to Christian overtones, from his Greek relatives to Hindu philosophy. Souza's contemplative energy is vitalized, revitalized and deposed with such organized disorder that it exposes and yet conceals the designs of our psyche.

His thinking was a medley of diverse influences: the folk art of native Goa, the upbeat stance of the Catholic church, the grandiose portraiture of Renaissance Europe, the landscape art of the 18th and 19th century, the writings of Einstein, Darwin and Hawking.

Souza is an image-maker whose subjects ranged from representation of landscape, women, to still life and portraits, bearing an uncanny metaphysical force reminiscent of medieval occidental art forms. The brute force of his images cuts through the fabric of social norms and conventions, unveiling the latter's underlying tensions, suppressed violence and animal urges.

In Souza's work, Christian icons are imbued with an aura of cruelty, they are revealed as instruments of torture, imprisoning and repressive in the fear they evoke. Souza's nudes exhibit bold and unrestrained sexuality, they stare directly at the viewer unashamed by the nakedness of her flesh. Their monumentality demonstrates Souza's ability to transform the nude into both a sublime image of idealized beauty and a virulent icon of sexual power. His landscapes enhance a pictorial image of desolation with agony and transforms visual perception into significant form. Lyrical within their architectonic forms, his landscapes comprise a colour palette of pristine shades of green outlined by sketchy black. His landscapes demonstrate the inherent tension between nature and civilization. Few most evident tendencies of his paintings from later phase consist of thick bounding line, distortion and dislocation. The most interesting aspect of Souza's work is the infuriating aspect of his aesthetics. His own words describe his works more explicitly than anything else, "I express myself freely in paint, in order to exist."

PADDINGTON, W2

Oil on board

Signed and dated 1952 top right, entitled on reverse

16" x 24"

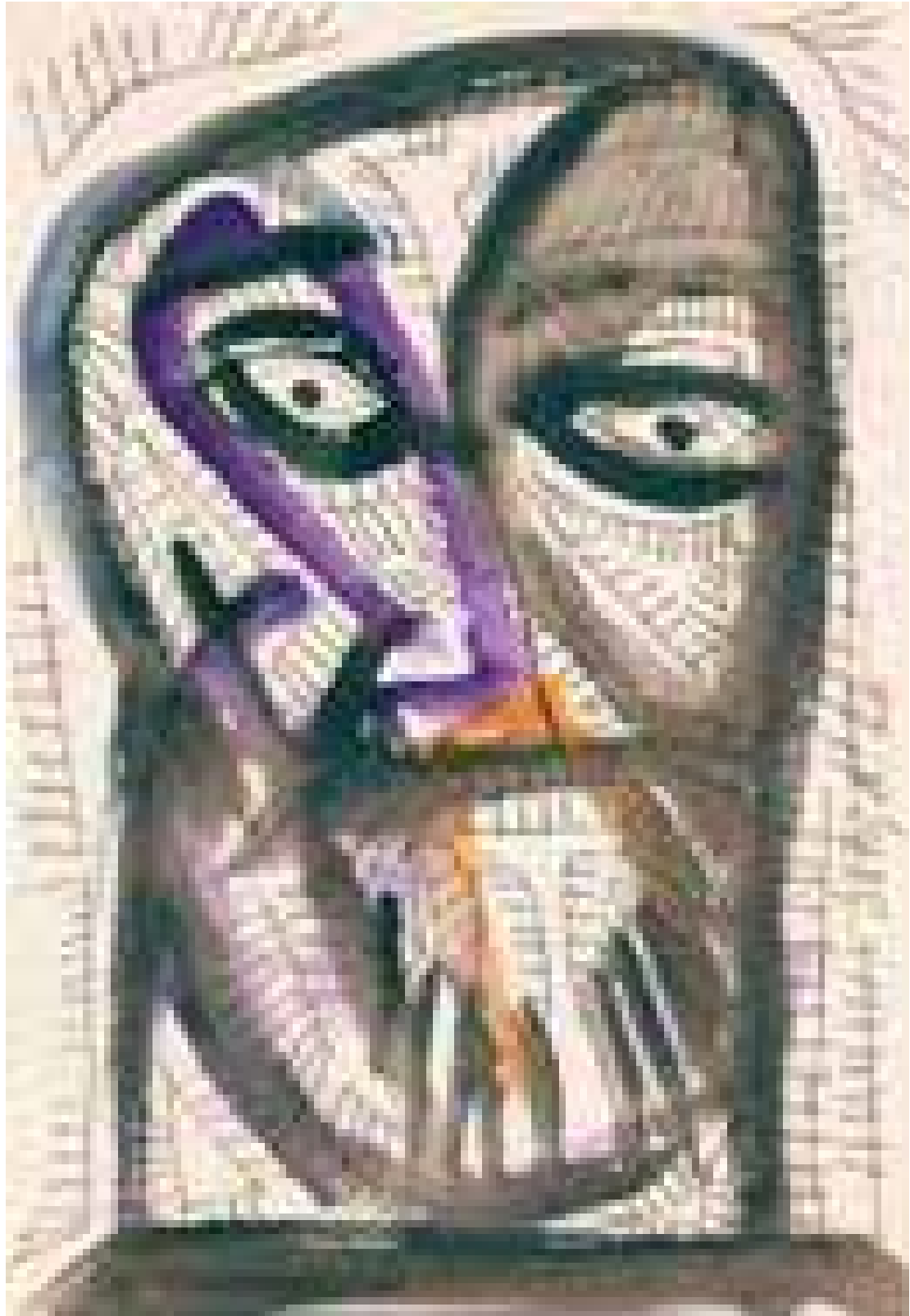
41 x 61 cms

1952



HEAD OF A MAN

Mixed media on paper
Signed and dated lower left
9½" x 6½"
24 x 16.5 cm
1960



HEAD OF A MAN

Pen on paper

Signed and dated upper left

7½" x 5½ "

19 x 14 cm

1964



HEAD

Chemical on upside down front cover of London Life magazine, (Issue title 'The Swinging City' 13th June 1966) Signed and dated upper left Image size: 27.8 x 21.4 cm (11 x 8 ½ in.)
Paper size: 15" x 10"
38 x 25.5 cm
1966

Provenance Estate of F.N Souza (CROO2)



HEAD

Chemical on front cover of Time Magazine, Issue Oct 3, 1969

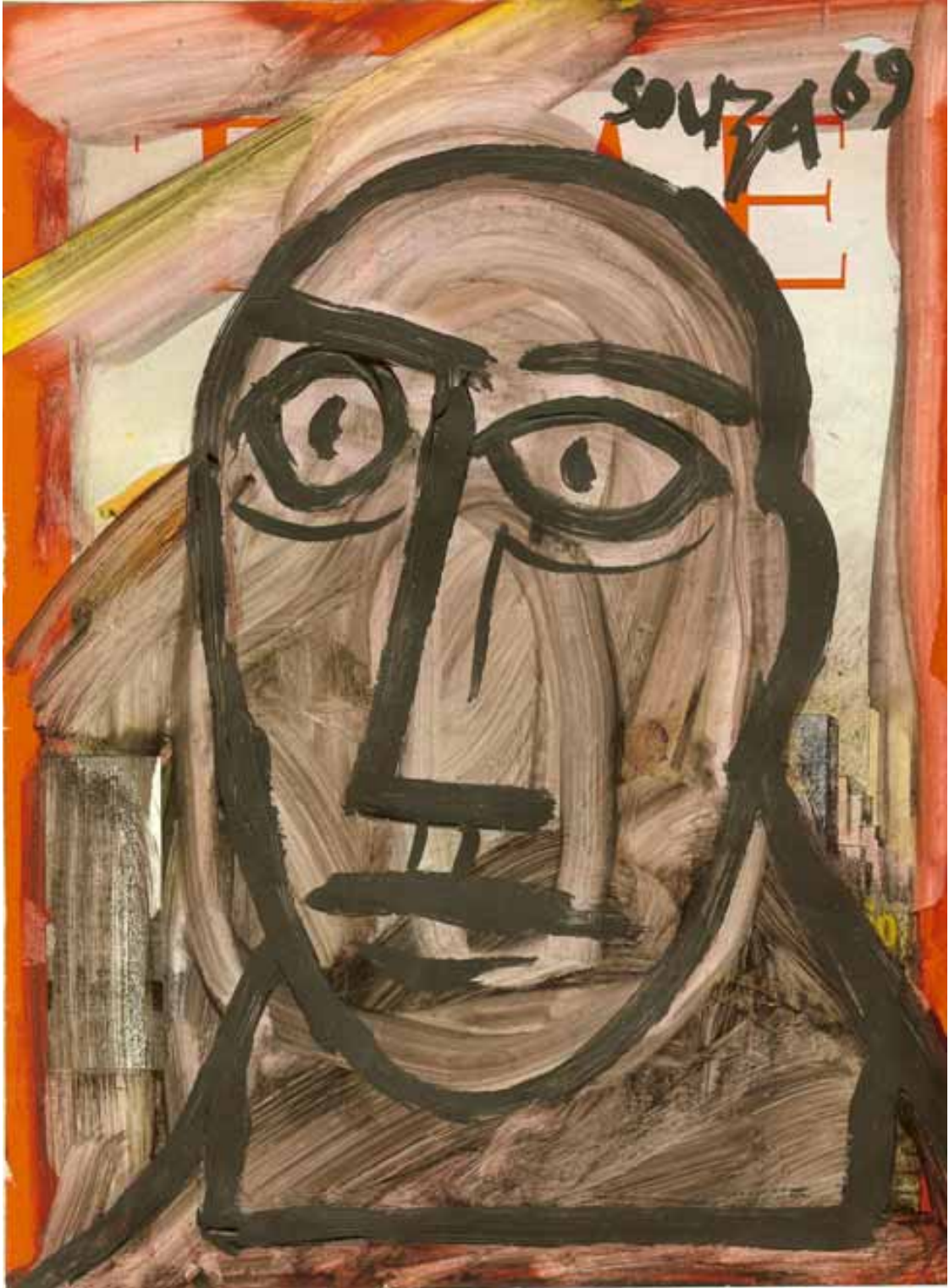
Signed and dated upper right

11" x 8¼"

28 x 21 cm

1969

Provenance Estate of F.N. Souza (C-69-389)



LOVERS

Chemical on magazine paper

Signed and dated upper left

7 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

19.5 x 27.5 cm

1973

Provenance Estate of F.N. Souza



HEAD

Chemical on paper

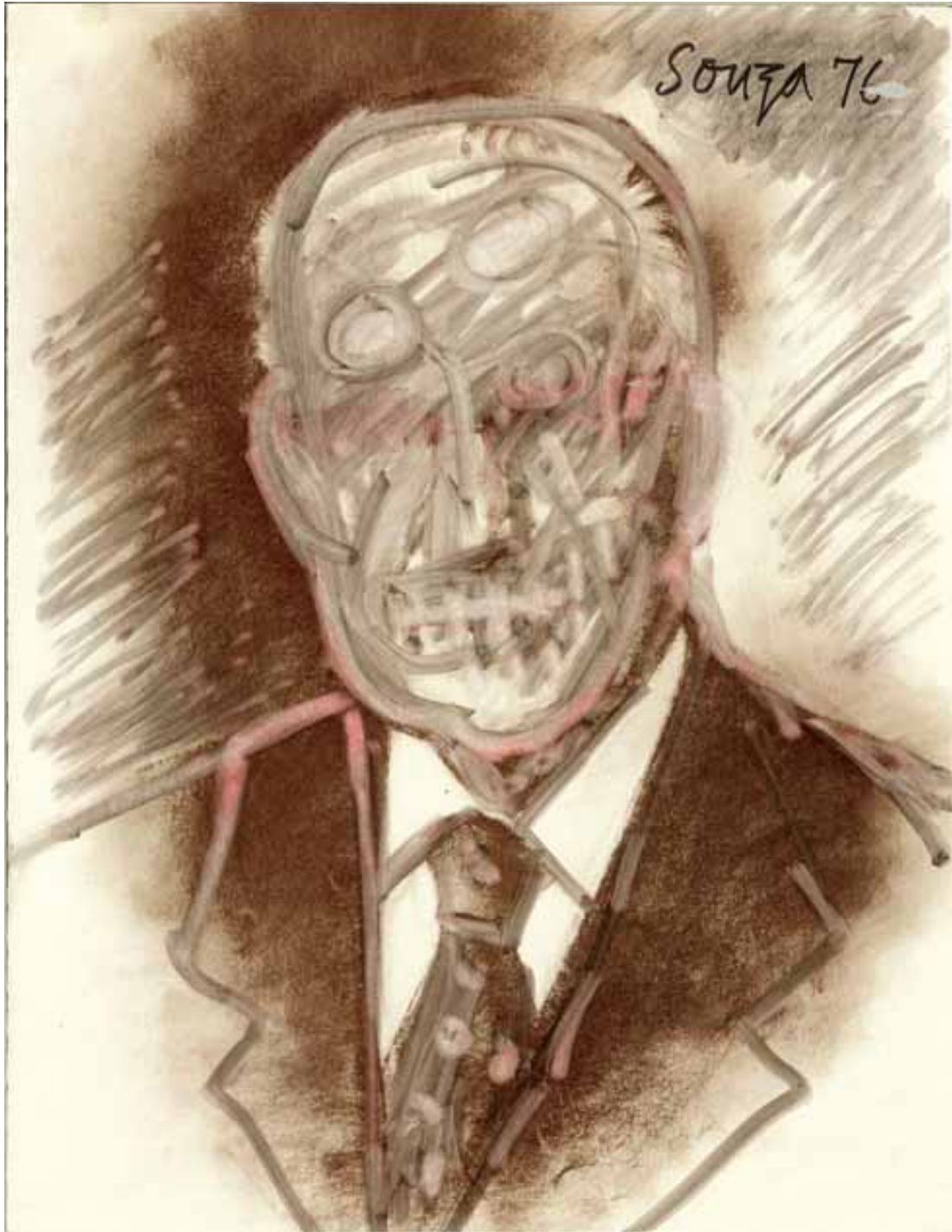
Signed and dated upper right

10¼" x 8¼ "

27.5 x 21 cm

1976

Provenance Estate of F.N. Souza (CROO1)



LANDSCAPE

Oil on typed writings of Souza
Signed and dated upper centre
8" x 13"
20 x 33 cms
1960



From the beginning of his career, Tyeb Mehta has used the handful of images, and these have been repeatedly worked at in different contexts, at different times: the trussed bull, the falling figure in mid '60s and in '70s, the diagonal slashing across these. Influenced by the French modernism in 1950s and 1960s, Mehta practised a brushy texture and impasto-laden expressionism. In 1959, he left for London and stayed there for next five years. He returned to India in 1964, to a country anxious to modernize and yet optimistic of its future.

After 1968, the year in which he received the Rockefeller Foundation grant, he gravitated towards a new set of formal choices. The falling figure was born from his struggle with the self that accentuated the formal explication while lessening the forcefulness of the experience. The vulnerability of the bull proposed the nature of the successor image and the terrifying memory of a man whose death Mehta had witnessed during the partition. It was also the anguish and the horrors of the aftermath of Partition and the state of turbulence of the nation that led Mehta to create such powerful imagery. The diagonal, that fierce weapon by which space could be reorganized and the self could stage its battle with itself, was born out of painterly frustration. As a symbol of separation, cleavage and schism, the diagonal was the tool with which Mehta activated the pictorial space. The acquisition of these themes into Mehta's work is very much evident as it further enhances the fractured pictorial space, and the distorted figures bring in the ancient and the modern on the same plane. The flat planes of contrasting colours heighten the intensity of their physical impact.

As an Artist-in-Residence in Santiniketan between 1984-85 Mehta returned with significant changes in his work, which was revitalizing and endowed his art with a new imagery. The image now started challenging the onlooker's self that constantly shifts while negotiating with the different trajectories of the world.

As Ranjit Hoskote states, "Thus the diagonal leads directly to Mehta's images of the 1980s and 1990s which carried the metaphorical resonances of what I have termed the self-agnostic self: the man and the bull who form the conjoined halves of a tauromachy; Mahisha, who is part-buffalo and part god, perennially addressing the Devi, the mother goddess, in combat." Significantly, Mehta's icon of choice whether Kali or Durga Mahishasurmardini has invariably been the *samhara-murti*, the war-like-deity embodying destruction, which he prefers to *shanta-murti*, the benign deity in tranquility.

His new-found image of Kali emerged in mid-1980s, an image rendered in Prussian blue, cobalt with the pink mouth and tongue as a shocking provocation. His quest has been for an imagery that can convey the extremity of conflict, of strife, of schism, without in the slightest way suggesting a literal explanation. Mehta's preoccupation with the myth of the goddess with a contemporary relevance succeeds in evoking the primordial presence of the goddess with a shocking effect.

His film *Koodal*, an experimental film made for the Government of India's Film Division, is a powerful depiction of the ordinary man's dilemma and won the Filmfare Critic's Award in 1970.

DIAGONAL SERIES

Oil on canvas
59" x 47 ¼"
150 x 120 cms



MAHISHASURA

OIL ON CANVAS
60" X 48"
153 x 122 cms
1996



Akbar Padamsee studied at Sir J J School of Art, Mumbai, where he was loosely affiliated to the Progressive Artists' Group. He completed his diploma in 1949 and left for Paris in 1951 where he was lived for many years.

Early works drew much from Picasso, Klee and French modernism as can be seen in his treatment and handling of planar space and in the definitive lines that encased the heads and figures.

During the mid-1950s he painted the still lifes as a result of new found domesticity in Paris and this marked a departure where he created paintings of great intimacy. These still lifes were still dominated by the softer geometry and darker tonalities. This was followed by the famously productive Grey Period, where Padamsee limited himself to various shades of grey to produce works that ranged from very small canvases to large, monumental studies of figures and landscapes.

After receiving Nehru Fellowship in 1969, Padamsee established the Vision Exchange workshop for artists and filmmakers where he made two short films – SYZGY, based on a set of his animated geometrical drawings, and *Events in a Cloud Chamber*. These exercises in film allowed him to rework the image of the landscape in his paintings.

Padamsee is concerned with the mythic or archetypal landscape, depicting classically identifiable elements like the earth, the sun and moon in a temporal space. Padamsee depicts a world that is both real and transcendental, his forms often hovering on the boundary between abstraction and representation. Finding inspiration in the competing elements of earth, water, air and fire, Padamsee's work connote no specific time or place and instead become mythical examples of the natural world.

From abstract landscapes he moved on to his famous metascapes in 1970s which invoke infinite time and space. These were the result of a series of experiments in juxtaposing colours and exploring structures. The use of bold palette and handling of colour, for example placing diametrically opposite orange and blue in close proximity, evokes a sense of movement in a static space.

On the other hand his heads and nudes exude his sensitivity to the human presence, sometimes strong, sometimes indistinct and ethereal as his images are never portraits of identifiable people. Whether its grey paintings or sepias, the figures evoke a sense of vulnerability and anguish as Padamsee succeeds in capturing the ambiguities of life.

In the mid-'80s, the sculptural practice led him to a period of figural brush drawings in black and white and towards the end of 1980s he returned to figurative painting. In 1990s, Padamsee ventured into the region of computer graphics.

NATURE MORTE A LA CARAFE ET AU VERRE

Oil on panel
15.5" x 10.5"
39 x 27.5 cm
1956



PAYSAGE URBAIN

Oil on board
39" x 40.5"
99 x 103 cm
1961



METASCAPE

Oil on canvas
36" x 54"
92 x 137 cms
2005



UNTITLED

Watercolour on paper
26" x 30"
59 x 76 cms
2006



UNTITLED

Watercolour on paper

15" x 11"

38 x 28 cms

2006

