

Raza / Tantra



Black & White Aesthetics



Grosvenor
Gallery

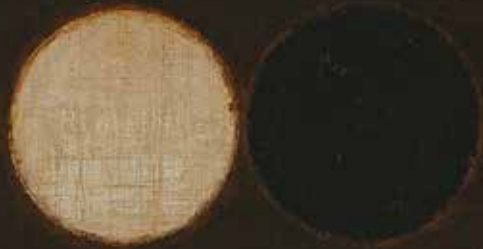
frieze
masters

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Aesthetics**

**Frieze Masters
2-6 October 2019**

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‘My present work is the result of two parallel enquiries. Firstly it aimed at pure plastic order, form order. Secondly, it concerns the theme of Nature. Both have converged into a single point and become inseparable; the point, the bindu, symbolises 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, texture and space. The black space is charged with latent forces aspiring for fulfilment.’

—S. H. Raza, *Statement for the Visual Arts East-West, Bombay, 1985*¹



Bindu/Germination, 1986



Bindu Diptyque, 1992

Raza made his first bindu paintings in the 1970s and continued to make them into the 2000s. Entering a new phase in his career he explained it as an almost inevitable and logical development. In Sanskrit, the word ‘bindu’ means point, or dot and in Indian philosophy it is understood as the point of all creation; the source of space, time and consciousness. Raza recalls an episode from primary school in the dense forests of Madhya Pradesh, in which his teacher, looking to still his pupil’s wavering concentration, drew a dot on the blackboard and told him to focus on it. He came to understand the intervening decades spent studying in India and then living in France as ‘research’; he was developing and refining the tools, technical and conceptual, needed to make these later works.

Looking back at Raza’s previous work there is a consistent drive towards capturing visual and physical experience. Throughout all his stylistic shifts his paintings are characterised by technique, mood and colour rather than any obvious subject. His relationship to India, its religions, its traditions, its colours was something he always nurtured, but it was only later rendered explicit in his paintings.

While Raza’s understanding of his own relationship to Indian art is instructive, it is also important to consider its place in a bigger history of exchanges between Indian culture and western abstraction.



Raza's studio, Gorbio, c.1989

L. P. Sihare, Director of the National Gallery of Art in New Delhi in the 1980s, writing about interactions between Indian art and the west around the turn of the twentieth century detailed how artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich and Paul Klee, were very much drawn to Upanishadic and Vedantic teachings, concluding '[...] Western artists found essential nourishment and guidance in Indian doctrines [...] Indian theories of cosmogony extensively discussed principles of macrocosmic creation, using terms such as space, light, colour, form, and geometric shapes which are also common to the vocabulary of abstract art.'²

In the 1960s art historian and dealer Ajit Mookerjee shaped and presented 'Tantra Art' through a series of widely disseminated books and exhibitions throughout the west. According to Mookerjee 'Tantra is both an experience of life and a scientific method by which man can bring out his inherent spiritual power' and, broadly, Tantric Art was a tool for connecting with the cosmos.³ Many artists were influenced by Mookerjee's work including Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, and critics drew on his findings to perceive affinities between Tantra and the post-war American painters Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman and others. Raza himself encountered the work of the Abstract Expressionists while teaching at the University of California, Berkeley in 1962 and was particularly drawn to the work of Rothko. This experience encouraged him to progressively shed traces and constraints of realism and work more gesturally before entering a period of more formal geometry that can be compared to instructive mandalas.



Genèse, 1981



Radiations, 1993

Openly referencing Clive Bell, what Raza sought was 'significant form'.⁴ While some artists such as Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella might have engaged with Indian art, they sought to detach it from any kind of symbolism. For his part, Raza said: 'More than being only abstract or modern or symbolic or religious, it is important that there should be an integration of vital form and a mystic, emotional, divine perception of this universe, which is a very complex matter.'⁵ He was also often keen to stress that while he had an appreciation of a great range of religious and cultural rituals and beliefs he was neither an expert nor a practitioner.

The drawings and paintings by Raza included in Grosvenor Gallery's Frieze Masters presentation are from across the period that the bindu featured prominently in his work. The selection is further concentrated by being predominantly in black and white, a far cry from the bright colours that he is usually associated with. Shown in combination with what are commonly understood to be Tantric drawings and Linghams, Grosvenor Gallery makes a complex connection to visual and spiritual forms that Raza would have grown up with and have had embedded in his consciousness. Raza's understanding of the bindu is expansive, as demonstrated in the quote above and in the works included in which sometimes it appears as part of an eye or two bindus are presented side-by-side. In the same way, the links made in this display are not literal and the associations are not grounded in specifics. The overarching question is about what ancient Indian art can teach us about being in the world today.

Rebecca Heald, 2019

1. Sen, Geeti (1997) *Bindu: Space and Time in Raza's Vision*, Media Transasia Ltd: New Delhi, p.134
 2. Sihare, L.P. (1985) 'Contemporary Neo-Tantra Art: A Perspective', *Neo-Tantra: Contemporary Indian Painting Inspired by Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p.18

3. Mookerjee, A. & Kumar, R. (1967) *Tantra Art: Its Philosophies and Physics*. Paris: Rupa & Co., p.11
 4. Clive Bell coined the term 'significant form' in 1914 to capture the idea in art representation was less important than evoking aesthetic emotion.
 5. Vazirani, Minal et al (2007). *Raza: A Retrospective*. Saffronart: New York, p. 9



‘For I can see, that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists.’

—Mahatma Gandhi

A study of S.H Raza’s oeuvre of work reveals that the artist, through his time spent in Europe and America, touched upon virtually all the important movements in Western art history from Post-Impressionism to Cubism, and from Expressionism to Abstract Expressionism. Raza’s paintings were an evolving vocabulary that finally rested on the abandonment of any trace of representation in favour of pure abstraction. His vision has developed from one preoccupied with the outer world to that of the inner world of our minds. This change coincided with Raza becoming increasingly drawn to what was inside himself, ‘I wanted to aim at something more than mere technical command. I realized that my eyes were focused outwards, and there was an imperative need to look within myself. Thus began a transformation in my vision, and in my work’¹.

An important part of this shift was as a consequence of his regular visits back to his homeland of India beginning in the late 1960s.

Like the Hindu force of *kundalini*, these visits and his examination of his country’s art, poetry, philosophy and iconography, reawakened the dormant energy of his Indian heritage. As he described ‘I realized somehow that the water of Satpada in my body, the water of river Namada was flowing in my veins’² The writer Rudolf von Leyden talks of Raza’s move to abstraction as a spiritual pursuit, ‘in the sixties and seventies visits to India re-sensitised his perceptiveness for a final supreme and universal viewing of nature, not as appearance, not as spectacle but as an integrated force of life and cosmic growth reflected in every elementary particle and in every fibre of a human being’³.

The Bindu is an essential metaphor for this metamorphosis. Raza first encountered the Bindu during his time at primary school. As a restless child his teacher had instructed Raza to concentrate on a small black circle that he had drawn on a white washed wall and such a focus brought a centering of his energies and thoughts. In Raza’s early paintings, this black circle at first appears as a dark sun or *sourya* in the sky over an expanse of landscape or buildings. However, over time, the sun descends to become one of the central components of his works. Drawing on tantric symbolism, the Bindu for Raza grew into something that represented all of nature, a seed bearing the potential for all life. Just as Kazimir Malevich saw the black circle, square and cross as his new spiritual icons that could ‘free art from the dead weight of the real world’⁴ so Raza used the Bindu as a symbol for ‘a cosmic force, a source of energy for the universe’⁵. In *The Inner Eye*, 2003 [7] this energy



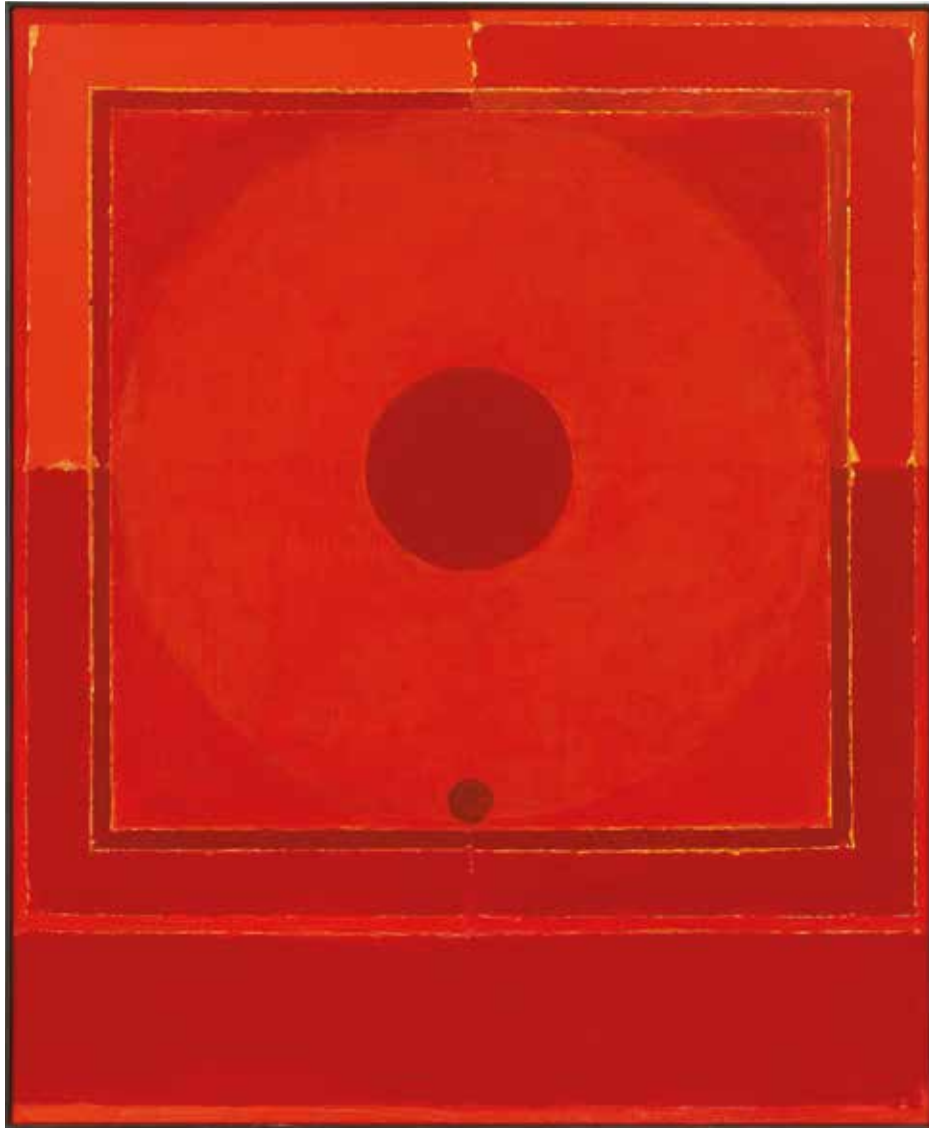
Rangmala, 1999



Dwig, 2007



Nagas, 1991



Bindu, 1986

resonates through the pulsating rings of black passing into grey and ethereal white seemingly extending into infinity.

The Bindu was an idea that Raza repeated and repeated, as he details 'I painted Bindus which were black, I painted them when there were lighter, they were white among white. I tried to split the Bindus as if the forces dormant in the circle which represented energy were coming out'⁶ Sometimes, the Bindu appears as the divine third eye, a gate to a state of enlightenment as we see in *L'oeil*, 1992 [4] and *Eye*, 2000 [6]. Raza often compared the act of painting to a prayer and thus, just as one would repeat a mantra in meditation to reach an elevated level of consciousness, so Raza would duplicate the Bindu to reach a higher level of energy and depth in his art.

In many of Raza's works the black Bindu is placed at the centre of the canvas surrounded by a colourful square composed of red, yellow, green and blue. The nucleus, heavy with energy and potential appears to radiate the forms and hues of paint around it. As Raza describes 'a visible form containing all the essential requisites of line, tone, colour, gesture, and space'⁷. However, in other paintings, as we see in the selection here, the palette used is entirely monochromatic. By removing the distraction of colour, these works become a study in the contrast between light and dark and gain a meditative strength in their simplicity.

Duality was a fundamental element of Raza's work and he explored such binaries as earth and sky, life and death, pleasure and pain and female and male. This is evident in his work *Polarite*, 1991 [3] and in *Bindu*, 1977, where the latent force of the ebony or white bindu is heightened by being set against the opposing colour making it appear like a magnetic force pulling the viewer in. In all the works selected, it is Raza using 'the very tints of the spirit'⁸.

Anne Macklin, 2019

1. Raza quoted in Geeti Sen, *Bindu: Space and Time in Raza's Vision*, Media Transasia, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 58–59.
 2. Raza quoted in an excerpt from Yashodhara Dalmia, *Journeys: Four Generation of Indian Artists in Their Own Words*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011 republished in Ranjit Hoskote, Ashok Vajpeyi, Yashodhara Dalmia and Avni Doshi, *S.H Raza: Vistaar*, Afterimage Publishing, Mumbai, 2012, p. 145
 3. Rudolf von Leyden, *Raza (Metamorphosis)*, Vakil & Sons, Mumbai, 1979, unpaginated.
 4. Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 1927.
 5. Geeti Sen, *Bindu: Space and Time in Raza's*

Vision, Media Transasia, New Delhi, 1997, p. 107.
 6. Raza quoted in an excerpt from Yashodhara Dalmia, *Journeys: Four Generation of Indian Artists in Their Own Words*, Volume 1, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011 republished in Ranjit Hoskote, Ashok Vajpeyi, Yashodhara Dalmia and Avni Doshi, *S.H Raza: Vistaar*, Afterimage Publishing, Mumbai, 2012, p. 145
 7. Ursula Bickelmann (ed.) & Nissim Ezekiel (ed.), *Artists Today: East-West Visual Arts Encounter*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 1987, p. 18
 8. Ashok Vajpeyi in *Raza: Avartan*, Vadehra Art Gallery and Gallery Chemould, New Delhi, 1997, unpaginated.

The image shows a dark, circular opening, possibly a tunnel or a large hole in a structure. The opening is framed by a thick, textured border that appears to be made of many thin, parallel lines or fibers, creating a woven or layered appearance. In the center of the dark opening, there is a smaller, circular hole. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source highlighting the texture of the border and the central hole.

Plates

1.

Bindu, 1977

Acrylic on canvas

Signed, dated and titled
'RAZA/1977/ "Bindu"'
on the reverse

24 x 18 cm

9 ½ x 7 ¼ in

Provenance

Private collection, Paris (M. Mariette)

Private collection, Monaco;

acquired from the above

Grosvenor Gallery, London



2.

Polarite, 1991

Acrylic on canvas, diptych

Upper canvas signed and dated 'RAZA '91'
lower right, the reverse signed, dated, titled and
inscribed 'RAZA / 1991 / "Polarite" / 160 x 80cm /
Acrylique sur toile / Diptyque I'.

The lower canvas signed and dated 'RAZA '91'
lower centre, the reverse signed, dated, titled
and inscribed 'RAZA / 1991 / "Polarite" / Diptyque II'

160 x 80 cm (total)

63 x 31 ½ in

Provenance

Apparao Galleries, Chennai, acquired directly from
the artist Grosvenor Gallery, London



3.

L'Aube, 1991

Acrylic on canvas

Signed, dated, titled and inscribed
'RAZA/ L'aube/ 1991/ acrylique sur toile'
on the reverse

30 x 30 cm
11 ¾ x 11 ¾ in

Provenance

Acquired directly from the artist's studio,
Gorbio, France, 1991
Gallery Adriano Ribolzi, Monaco
Private collection, France
Grosvenor Gallery, London

Exhibitions

Retrospective Raza,
Musée de Menton, 1991, no.37

Sayed Haider RAZA,
Oeuvres 1950–2001,
Gallery Adriano Ribolzi,
17 November 2010–11, Monaco

Publications

Catalogue for Sayed Haider RAZA,
Oeuvres 1950–2001,
Gallery Adriano Ribolzi,
Monaco, 2001, p.64



4.

L'oeil, 1992

Acrylic on canvas, diptych

Signed, dated and inscribed
'RAZA/1992/ "L'oeil"/
54 x 22cm/diptyque/acrylique
sur toile' on the reverse

54 x 22 cm (total)
21 ¼ x 8 ⅝ in

Provenance

Private collection, Paris
Grosvenor Gallery, London



5.

Bindu, 1994

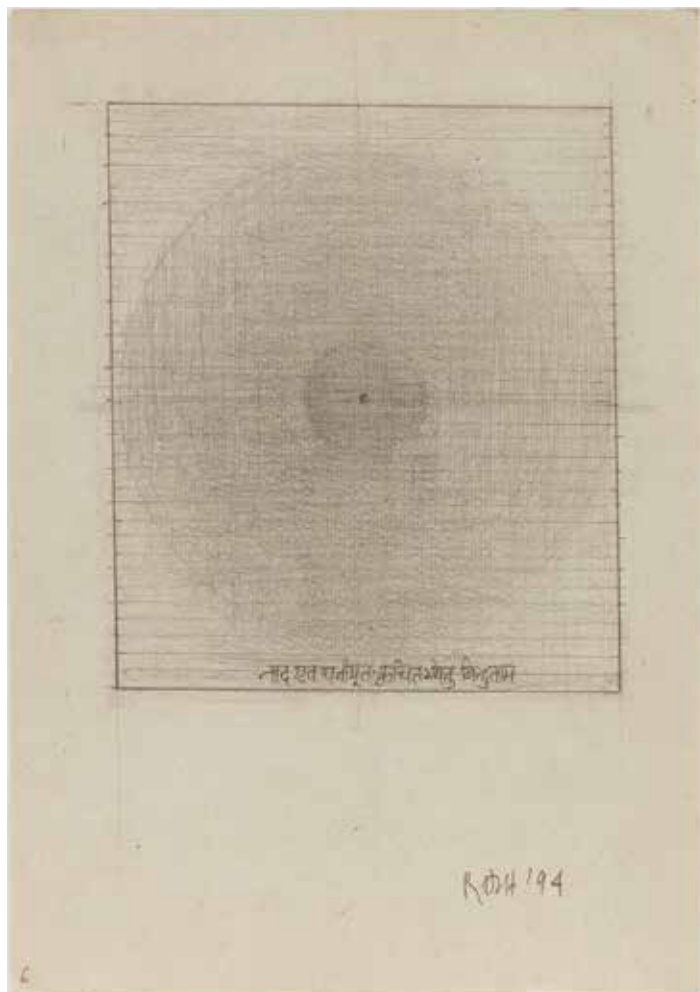
Graphite on paper

Signed and dated 'RAZA '94'
lower right

29.5 x 20.5 cm
11 5/8 x 8 1/8 in

Provenance

Apparao Galleries, Chennai;
acquired directly from the artist
Grosvenor Gallery, London



6.

Eye, 2000

Pen and ink on paper

Signed, dated and
inscribed 'Raza '2000/
DELHI 4/2/2000'
lower centre

20 x 10.7 cm
7 7/8 x 4 1/4 in

Provenance

Apparao Galleries,
Chennai; acquired
directly from the artist



7.

The Inner Eye, 2003

Acrylic on canvas

Signed and dated 'Raza 03' lower right,
further signed, titled and dated
'RAZA/ 2003/ 80 x 80cm/ "THE INNER EYE"/
Acrylic on canvas' on the reverse

80 x 80 cm

31 ½ x 31 ½ in

Provenance

Gallery Mirchadani Steinruecke, Mumbai
Grosvenor Gallery, London

Exhibitions

S. H. Raza: Paintings from 1966 to 2003,
Berlin, The Fine Art Resource, 2003,
(illustrated in the exhibition catalogue,
unpaginated)

Anticipations, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai,
8–12 December 2004, (illustrated in the
exhibition catalogue, unpaginated)



12.

A Grey Shiva Lingam Mantra,

19th century
Rajasthan, India
Opaque watercolour on paper

20.7 x 16.1 cm
8 1/8 x 6 3/8 in

Provenance
Private UK collection; acquired
from the London art market



13.

A White Shiva Lingam Mantra,

19th century
Rajasthan, India
Opaque watercolour on paper

25.2 x 18 cm
9 7/8 x 7 1/8 in

Provenance
Private UK collection; acquired
from the London art market



8-11.

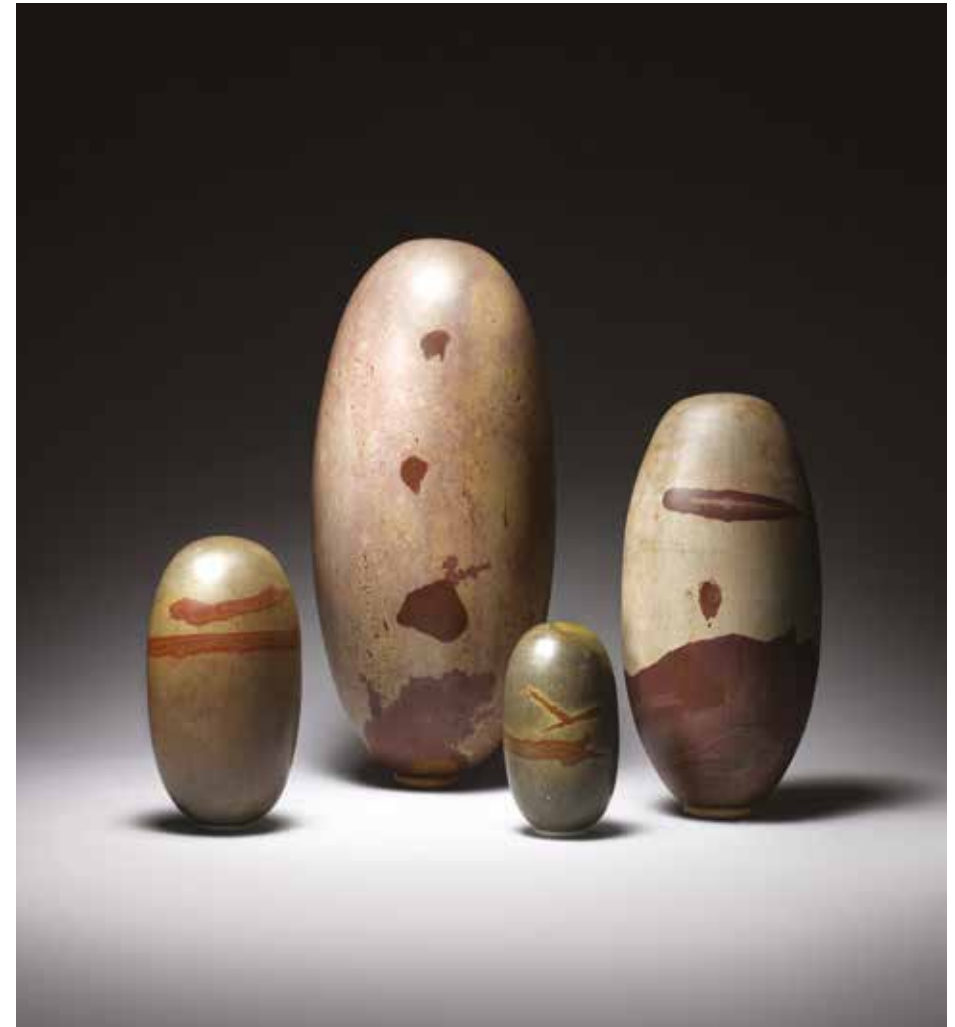
Four Lingam stones,
Madhya Pradesh,
India

Age unknown

From left to right:
Height: 19.5 cm (7 3/4 in)
Height: 40.7 cm (16 in)
Height: 14 cm (5 1/2 in)
Height: 29 cm (11 1/2 in)

Provenance (8, 10)
Michel Andrault, Paris

Stone lingams are found in the
Narmada river in Madhya Pradesh;
the state in which Raza was born.
They are naturally formed over
centuries and were collected and
installed in temples as symbols of
the god Shiva and fertility.

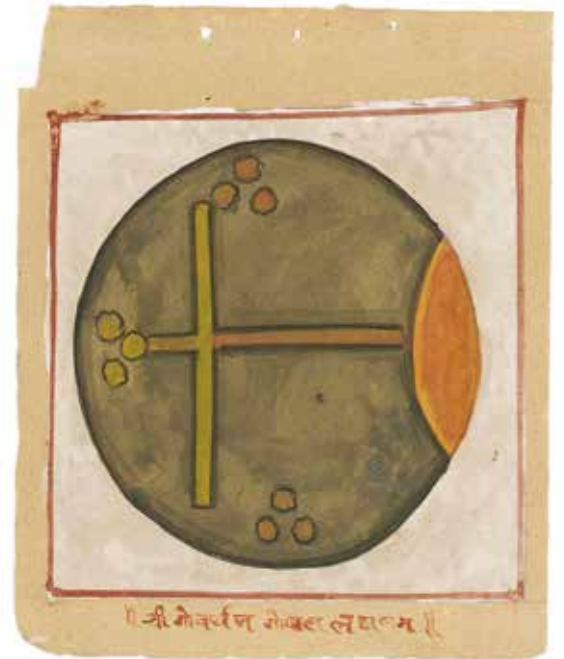


14.

Badrinath Pandit (c.1915–1999)

*Four Manuscript pages depicting salagram forms, early 20th century
Natural pigments and gum Arabic on paper*

13.5 x 11.5 cm (each)
5 ¼ x 4 ½ in



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All works illustrated will be published
in a forthcoming volume of the Raza
catalogue raisonné



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Rebecca Heald is an
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