



**The Human and the Divine Predicament**

new paintings by

**F.N. Souza**

**Grosvenor Gallery**



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31 March - 25 April 1964

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Francis Newton Souza was born in the Portuguese Catholic Colony of Goa in 1924. Shortly afterwards his father died, closely followed by his elder sister. At five Souza contracted a near-fatal attack of small-pox and his mother, a devout woman, vowed that if he recovered he should train for the priesthood. Mother and son moved to Bombay and Souza was sent to a Jesuit school from which he was expelled after two years. He enrolled at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay from which he was also expelled for his connection with the movement for India's independence.

In 1947 he founded the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay and exhibited his work regularly until he left for London in 1949. On arrival in Britain he studied drawing at the Central School of Art and wrote for a living. Krishna Menon commissioned him to paint a series of large murals for the Indian Students' Bureau (which was subsequently demolished) and organised a retrospective exhibition at India House for him in 1951.

His work was shown in Paris in 1952 and 1954—the latter a one-man show. Souza made his first impact on Britain in 1955 with a one-man show at Gallery One and the publication of 'Nirvana of a Maggot' in the magazine *Encounter*. He was one of five painters who represented Great Britain in the Guggenheim Museum in New York and one of the prize winners in the first John Moores exhibition in 1958. Since then he has had more one-man shows in London, Paris, Frankfurt, Stockholm, Stuttgart and New Delhi and has been included in exhibitions all over the world—at the Venice Biennale, the Guggenheim Museum, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Cairo. After fifteen years he had a one-man show in Bombay last year which received great praise and wild protests from the press including a headline in the *Times of India*: 'Indian painting will never be the same again.'

Souza has published a book of essays and drawings, 'Words and Lines' and was the subject of a monograph by Edwin Mullins.

### Souza

Souza is one of those painters who jolt me into realizing how very little good art has to do with good taste; and that the artist who can affront our aesthetic values is more likely in the end to prove interesting than the artist who merely tilts at our moral standards. I begin by saying this because I feel that were Souza a 'sweeter' painter, his agonised saints and sinuous nudes might now have acquired the necessary degree of pathos and romantic glow to have won him wide, uncritical acclaim as a latter-day Rouault.

But to give pleasure has never been Souza's aim, and he holds little respect for other artists who set out to do so. He feels that a painter is rather like a furniture manufacturer who possesses an inner compulsion to build the most uncomfortable chairs he can, and then make people sit in them. Why, one may ask, this determination to offend? Why never to please? The answer is, I think, that to Souza art is a form of propaganda, a means of hypnotising others into accepting his view of what the world is like. And because what he has to say is uncomfortable, he feels that his paintings must initially cause discomfort or they have failed: they are sweetmeats. His mistrust of sweetness is so extreme that it has led him to suspect most accepted criteria of what good painting is, and to court individuality at any cost. 'I now know what art is', he has written with disarming conceit: 'art is what I do'.

In a sense Souza is a dedicated vulgarian. The weapon with which he makes his first attack on our sensibilities is vulgarity; and one of the principal claims these pictures have on our attention is the challenge they throw down, that we should reconsider yet again what, in terms of art, words like 'vulgar' and 'shocking' really mean. And what it is that we ask of a work of art.

A look at Souza's paintings may make this seem an overstatement of the case, for at heart Souza is a conventional painter. Technically he is an experimenter, and his work is inventive enough stylistically, but at no time has he fallen in with any of the art movements initiated during the post-war era. He has never quite severed his links with Indian bazaar painting, with Indian erotic sculpture, and with South Indian bronzes (he was born in Goa in 1924). There still remains, too, a profound debt to Byzantium and to the Romanesque art of Spain, and there are further debts

to El Greco, Goya, Picasso, Van Gogh and Soutine. His wilder distortions of the human form owe much to the sadistic *Kitsch*-imagery of the Catholic Church which made an overwhelming impression on him as a child in Portuguese Goa—a message of pain and evil in contrast to the delights of the flesh and body, which were the traditional themes of Indian art. Sin and sensuality: the two have grown together in Souza's work, tempting and mocking one another.

It is this built-in conflict in Souza's work which supplies its restless, fighting quality and what I have called its 'dedicated vulgarity'. It is as if each painting were both an act of hate and an act of love, and he himself were torn between disgust and longing, uncertain whether painting is a protective daydream or something unpleasant in his system to be purged away. Escapism or catharsis. The surface of a canvas thus becomes a battleground on which are fought out the fears and passions of one man's

experience. On the dark side: the holocaust, horror of the flesh, bodies distorted by fall-out or thalidomide, the weight of sin and evil, sexual longing and despair, a sense of the ludicrous and the disgusting. Against this: the wonderment, the celebration of the flesh and of fulfilment, a delight with the naked grace of a woman's body, joy at the colours of a landscape and still-life, and awe at the proximity and terrible power of God.

For all this, the quality most immediately noticeable in these recent pictures is virtuosity. They have a certain coolness, a detachment about them, a feeling of 'here is my repertoire'. This exhibition is a brilliant anthology of Souza—a show of disguises and disparities which suggests not so much the impassioned sufferer whom we used to know as the clown of many faces. Peter Sellers with a brush in his hand.

Edwin Mullins



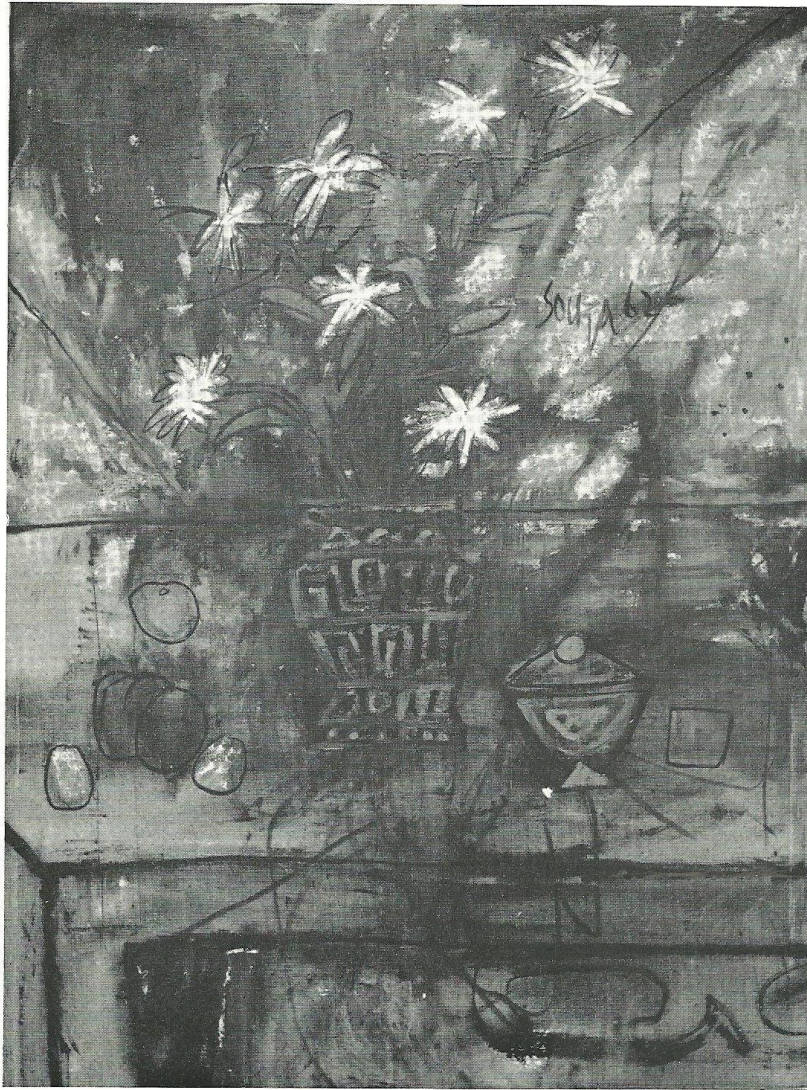






5 Figure in Landscape





52 Still life with white flowers

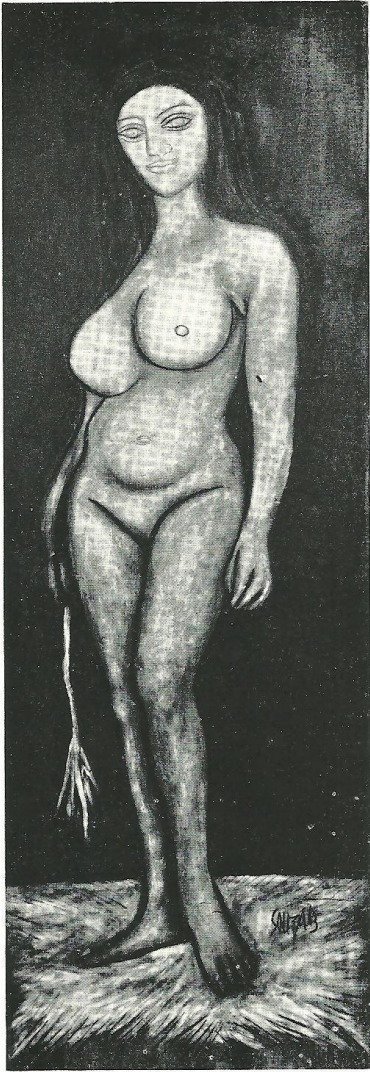












## next exhibition

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