

O B S E R V E R

By documenting defining moments that shape contemporary history in India,

C H R O N I C L E R

artist ABAN RAZA reminds us about citizens' resistance, says SOMAK GHOSHAL.

P A R T I C I P A N T



Aban Raza's apartment in Noida is an accurate reflection of the person she is. This is where she lives and makes art. No boundary separates the two activities, one seamlessly feeding into the other. Perched on the floor against walls and furniture stand large-format oil paintings that are part of her new show opening at the New Delhi wing of Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke on 31st of October. Some of the canvases are ready, while others are still in progress, and all of them feature the human body in different states of repose.

Like her earlier exhibition with the gallery's Mumbai outpost, titled *Luggage, People and a little space* (2020), Raza's upcoming show has a poetic title: *Nothing Human is Alien to Me*. "The line is attributed to German philosopher Karl Marx," she says, pointing at a whiteboard in a corner where she has jotted it down with a blue marker. "But it comes from the Latin playwright, Terence."

The phrase beautifully captures the vision and motivation behind her practice.

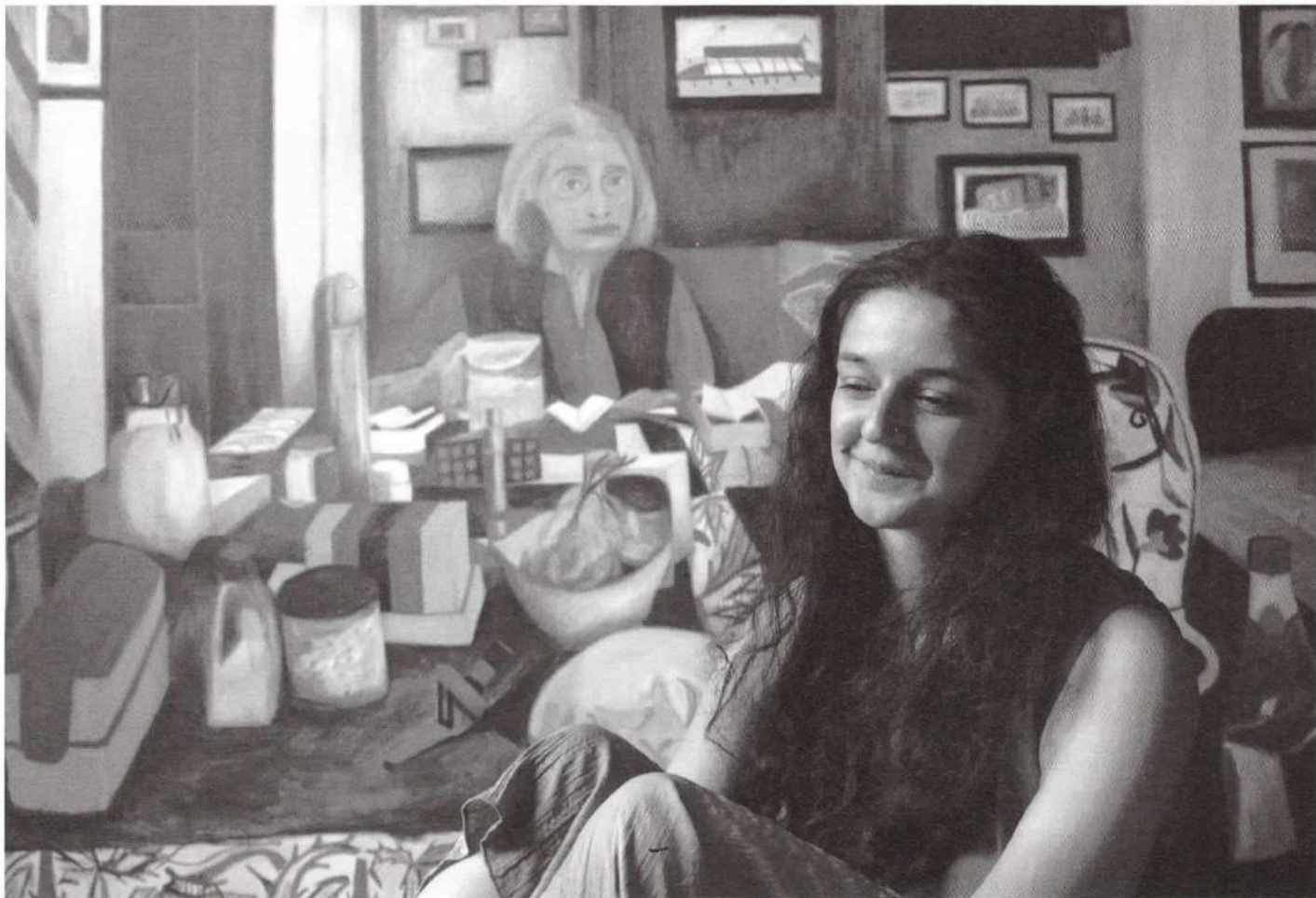
Over the last decade, the 36-year-old artist has stood witness to some of the most tumultuous moments in India's history. From joining the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in New Delhi's Shaheen Bagh to the farmers' rallies against the Indian government's "anti-farmer laws" to meetings held by the Majdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan to the annual gatherings of former employees of the Maruti factory in Haryana's Manesar, Raza has been an observer, participant and chronicler rolled in one. From the sidelines of these events and during her travels across the country by trains and buses, Raza has witnessed glimmers of humanity in these "collective spaces," as she puts it, and memorialised them in her art.

"I paint because I was there, because it matters, and I want what I witnessed to be part of the discourse," Raza says. "I may not be able to change anything, but at least my body was there. That's why I need to document that moment for others." This impulse is as old as the origins of what constitutes "political art," be it in the form of German Expressionism (Raza mentions Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Käthe Kollwitz among her influences) or neoclassical romanticism (one of Raza's paintings, depicting a protest condemning Israel's atrocity against Palestine, bears unintended echoes of *Liberty Leading the People*, Eugène Delacroix's iconic painting from 1830). Closer home, she acknowledges artists Sudhir Patwardhan and Navjot Altaf as formative figures in the evolution of her sensibility. Yet, the figurative language isn't the one with which Raza had started her career.

Until 2018-19, before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the world into a lockdown, Raza was absorbed in making lithographs. She studied painting for her bachelor's degree and printmaking at the post-graduate level from New Delhi's College of Art. A scholarship from the Lalit Kala Akademi gave her access to a studio at Garhi, a locality in South Delhi, where she practised the all-consuming art of making lithographs for a while.

"When you are making lithographs, you don't have time for anything else," Raza says. "You can fall in love, but not have a heartbreak because you cannot be distracted—you have to give it your all." The outcome of her intense labour was a body of work, which included, appropriately enough, images drawn from nature and the universe.

Some of the most haunting pieces in this collection are prints that refer to the sun, black



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 ABAN RAZA
Kolhantola Street, Rani Mandi, Allahabad
 Oil on canvas
 72" x 60"
 2024

[Above]
 Photograph by Devika Swarup

hole, and other riveting abstract forms. “When the ruling dispensation was re-elected to power in 2019, I was besieged with hopelessness,” Raza says. “The universe turned into a point of fascination for me during that time, a lens to look beyond the despair all around.”

Soon after, the onset of the pandemic led to another shift in her style.

With her studio inaccessible and now confined to her home, Raza painted scenes she had filed away in her sketchbooks or as photos on the phone during her travels. These paintings, which revolve around women’s lives by sheer accident, were part of her 2020 show. “That exhibition had a directness in the way the paintings were rooted in politics,” Raza says. “But my new work has more to do with what happens around protests.” Although not by design, many of the paintings happen to be composed around the theme of waiting—for justice to be served, for reprieve from the State or, as in the scene of a meeting of union workers at MKSS *yatras*, demanding basic human rights.

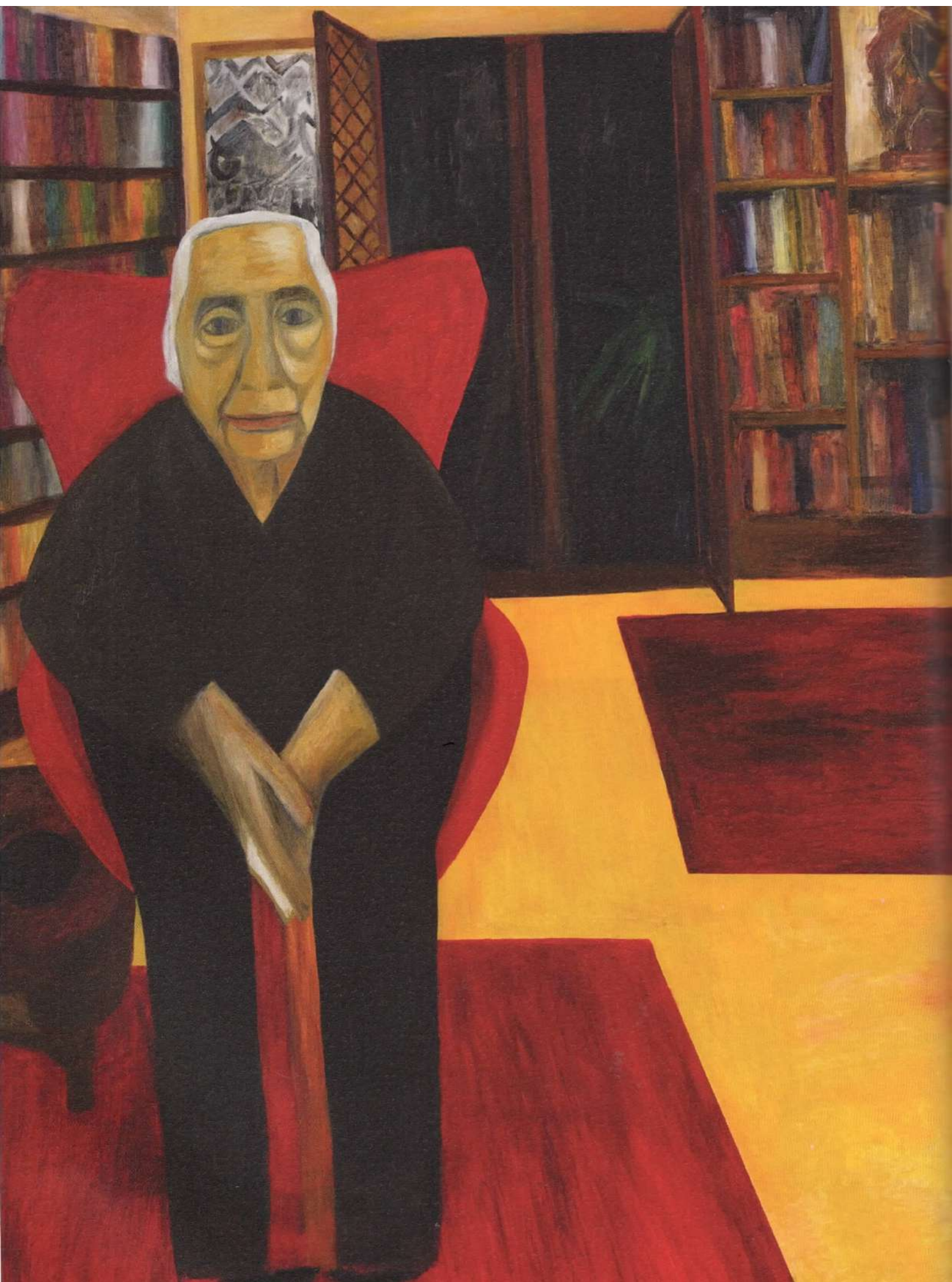
Looking at Raza’s art from the vantage of the 21st century, one might reasonably question the relevance of realist painting in an age where photography is the go-to medium for capturing any slice of life, however grand or small. The camera freezes a moment in a click, which a painter usually takes several days to recreate. Yet, there is a quiet sense of bravery in the very act of putting brush to canvas, a bodily investment of labour, an effort to excavate a truth out of a two-dimensional image. It’s a skill that is hard to replicate with a machine.

In her portraits of her mother, or of veteran historian Romila Thapar, or MKSS co-founder Aruna Roy, for instance, Raza brings an interiority to her subjects that is the result of

[Right, above]
ABAN RAZA
Pengwan, Madhya Pradesh
Oil on canvas
60" × 72"
2020

[Right, below]
ABAN RAZA
Rajpath
Oil on canvas
60" × 72"
2022





deep attention, personal imagination, and a subtle alchemy of paint and oil on canvas. It would be near-impossible to achieve such a textured effect in a photograph.

One of the most compelling paintings in Raza's new body of work is inspired by a video clip that went viral during the New Delhi riots of 2020. It shows a group of Muslim men sprawled on a street, being assaulted by the police and forced to sing the national anthem. Raza zooms into the faces of some of the men, especially of 23-year-old Faizan, who later succumbed to his injuries. A pair of boots peek out of a corner of the canvas, the spirit of tyranny slyly breathing terror into the scene. If the video was horrific, the painting stills this moment of horror and traps the viewer inside a bubble of violence without any promise of reprieve.

By their very nature, therefore, Raza's paintings are the antidote against the flow of time, the collective amnesia that engulfs the world as social media and the internet turns trauma into fleeting, bite-sized Reels. The solid presence of her best paintings—like the depiction of protests against the genocide in Gaza—are proof against the transience of online activism or journalistic images that vanish in 24 hours from our timelines. “In the past, people in Delhi would march from Mandi House to the Embassy of Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians,” Raza recalls. But Gaza has now become a rarefied metaphor, even in the minds of those with the best of intentions. Yet, as she enagages with organisations like MKSS and Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), Raza remains clear-eyed and unsparing about the position of privilege she comes from.

“I’m always wondering what gives me the right to tell a story through a painting, sell it out of a gallery, and make a profit from it,” she says.

“I donate a part of my income to organisations that are fighting the good fight, but it never gets easy.” [•]

[Left]
ABAN RAZA
Romila Thapar
Oil on canvas
48" x 36"
2020





[Left]

Aban Raza

*Faizan, Waseem, Rafiq, Kausar Ali and Farhan,
Kardampuri, North East Delhi, 2020*

Oil on canvas

60" x 48"

2024

[Above]

Aban Raza

Republic Day, Tikri Border, Delhi-Haryana II

Oil on canvas

48" x 60"

2024

Images courtesy of Aban Raza and
Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke