

RED

Abir Karmakar • Anita Dube • Anju Dodiya • Arun K.S.
C. K. Rajan • Gieve Patel • Nicola Durvasula
S.H. Raza • Siji Krishnan • Somnath Hore • Sosa Joseph

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To the artists participating in this exhibition, the valency of red emerged from their response to their immediate environment, as well as to their reflection on their own state of mind, during the long year of pandemic and lockdown that 2020 was. In their work, the 11 artists participating in the first part of RED have addressed the colour in various ways, interpreting it viscerally, metaphorically, by allusion and association, through cultural memory and the clarity of a survival experience. Red, to them, is the temperature of crisis. It is the atmosphere of peril. It is the emotion of resistance. It is a wall peeling on solitude, a mind taking stock of itself in isolation, preparing for remedial action. Red, to the artists in this exhibition, is anything but a pigment that drops readymade on a palette.

I.

Sosa Joseph

Sosa Joseph's *Pieta* had its beginnings in a photograph of a woman belonging to a tribal community, which the artist saw in print. The woman's red sari assumes an animated independence in the painting, suggestive of the intimacies of the flesh or an expanding flower. The woman is seated, and across her knees lies a lifeless figure, pallid. A peripheral figure looks with sadness and devotion at these key figures, and it is unmistakably one of the great subjects of Christian iconography that meets our gaze. Sosa (born 1971) approaches that piercingly tender, deeply moving moment when the body of Jesus Christ is taken down from the cross and his mother, the Virgin Mary, holds him on her knees. Jesus is no longer a child but a saviour who has played his historic role and given his life to atone for human sinfulness and suffering.

As Mary mourns Jesus, there is no thought of the Resurrection and the Redemption to come, only the experience of a mother who has lost her child. This compelling painting is made from veils of colour; its figures seem shaped from mist and flame, leaf and aura. It takes the form

of a tableau, rather than Sosa's preferred format of the densely peopled landscape or processional group. The central figures are in close-up rather than in the panoramic perspective that she usually favours. Sosa's interpretation of the Pieta is set strongly in the present, in an ethos and habitat drawn from everyday Indian life.

2.

C K Rajan

Like an entry in a journal of residues, C K Rajan (born 1960) presents us with an austere near-white house, isolated in a field of darkness. The scale of the painting suggests the miniature, but it is a small canvas rendered in oils, brushily applied, creating hints of an extensive terrain. The windows of the house display the word R E D in large, spaced-out letters. Is it a slogan or a warning? Does it connote a political affiliation? The artist claims that all he wishes to convey is that the house is empty except for its red walls. But paintings, like all productions of the creative imagination, hold impulses that escape the artist's intentionality. Might this minatory sign, R E D, not be a stop signal for those who mistake this painting for a take on the landscape? Are we, perhaps, being told that this painting is a self-reflexive, self-critical account of painting's possibilities and limits, a brief allegory on the relationship between image and language?

Alongside this painting, Rajan's maquettes – sculptures in miniature, in anticipation – suggest the quicksilver thrum of everyday life overtaken and embalmed by Vesuvian ash or the Midas touch of the museum. Were these objects artefacts that once played a role in a civilisation's everyday life? Were they toys? Were they ritual objects? Rajan invites the viewer to play archaeologist. Red, here, is the colour of festivity fossilised, of caveats and auguries.

3.

S H Raza

S H Raza's *La Croix* symbolises Raza's deep connection with Europe's spiritual and civilizational sources. The cross, glowing on an incandescent red field, is the cross potent or Jerusalem Cross, with crossbars at its four ends. As a symbol of the Crucifixion, it embodies the central belief of Christianity: that Christ sacrificed himself to atone for human sinfulness. As a cosmic symbol, the cross potent reaches far back into pre-Christian antiquity, and is found as early in human history as the Neolithic. In that early vocabulary, it stands for the wholeness of the universe, its four quarters defined by the cardinal directions. The red field in *La Croix* can symbolise Christ's holy sacrifice as much as it can the regenerative fertility of the cosmos.

Raza (1922-2016), a founder member of the Progressive Artists Group, is closely identified with the symbolic abstraction that he elaborated from the 1980s onward. He focused on

variations and permutations of patterns formed around the *bindu* or pulsating source of energy in Tantric ritual practice. At the same time, he always emphasised his admiration of Europe's accomplishments in art and culture, and his close engagement with these during his decades-long period of residence in France (1950-2010) and his marriage to the French artist Janine Mongillat.

4.

Somnath Hore

The formative experience in the life of Somnath Hore (1921-2006) – the experience that radicalised him, as a young man in his early twenties – was the catastrophic Bengal Famine of 1943. This catastrophe shocked and galvanised a generation of artists, including Hore, Chittaprosad, and Sunil Janah, who journeyed through Bengal's worst affected districts at the time, recording what they saw. Ever after, in his art, especially in his *Wounds* series, Hore would bear witness to the starvation, the suffering, the needless deaths of men, women and children that he had seen, the entire famine brought about by the cynicism and miscalculations of the British colonial regime.

Hunger, a lithograph, offers testimony to how even the most seemingly serene rural environment can be devastated by decisions taken in the metropolis, by natural forces beyond human computation or resistance. Red, in this work, is a token of this ceaseless danger that threatens the basis of human settlement, community, collective action.

5.

ARUN K S

Arun KS invites us into a space of ceremonial, even sacred theatre: a stage for silence. At its centre stands a columnar sculpture, behind which stands a multi-panel painting that serves more as an active counterpoint than merely as a backdrop. The column, an archetypal axis connecting earth to heaven, suggests a stele or a memorial pillar. Monumental in intent, it is composed from carefully selected fragments evocative of the work of the elements: a yellow Gujarat sandstone base with a brass plate, pieces segments of century-old termite-ravaged timber from old temples and ruined houses, wooden finials held in place by brass shafts. For Arun, the practice of collecting such relics of history, residues of previous usage in domestic or ritual contexts, nourishes his image-making practice.

Meanwhile, for the multi-panel painting – in more technical terms, a polyptych – Arun coats raw canvas with layers of rice paper, then brushes these down with paper pulp composed of the dust of pages from the Bible and sized with alum. Using jewel-like mineral colours chosen

from the palette of the Jaipur miniaturists' ateliers as well as powder pigments, ink and watercolour, he covers this prepared surface with a multitude of spots, circles, and dots. These arrays of motif and momentum form mysterious patterns, between symbol and properly non-objective abstractionist statement.

6.

Siji Krishnan

Siji Krishnan (born 1983) delights in evoking the daily life and routines of a village community, usually as a tableau that encompasses within itself smaller tableaux, each such detail assuming the aura of a significant scene of action in itself. In this untitled painting, rendered in oil on canvas rather than Siji's preferred rice paper pasted on canvas, we come upon a community posed as though on an island protected by a grove of seven coconut palms. Siji employs a principle of cellularity to stitch her various scenes together into a larger social fabric. Here, we see various individuals at work on their grinding querns and mortars, a banana seller inviting the interest of potential customers, storytellers or gossips in action, the perennial processes of birth, weaning, play, and commerce all unfolding simultaneously. Siji regards red as an emotion, rather than a colour. It was omnipresent to her as a child growing up in the village of Chittikulangara in Kerala's Alappuzha district. A focal point in this village is the famous Chittikulangara Sree Bhagavathi temple, dedicated to the Devi, the Great Mother, in her form as Bhadrakali. In Siji's memory, red is closely and palpably identified with the *chembarathi* or hibiscus flower, sacred to the worship of the Devi. That memory colours this painting.

7.

Anita Dube

Language is a cradle, crucible, and catalyst for political processes, for ingrained ideologies and transformative ideas, for hegemony yet also for resistance to hegemony. Anita Dube (born 1958) is singularly alert to the nuance and potentiality of words; to the way in which they can be shaped to convey subtle ideas or weaponised to spread notions of hatred and polarisation. From the constellations of words that surround and condition us, exalt or diminish us, Anita has often sifted through poems, propositions, slogans, and graffiti to arrive at keywords – this vocabularian turn owes as much to her commitment to a conceptually resonant art practice as it does to her early training in the concepts and categories of art history. Whether cut in meat or carved in ice, or set among formations of the enamel eyes used in Hindu ritual as offerings to the Divine, these keywords or key phrases are zones of conjunction, for the artist, in her own words, between “the sacred and the revolutionary”. In the presence of her work,

we ask ourselves how we might access the emancipatory energy of the heterodox sacred; how we could re-infuse value into words that have been neutralised by overuse.

Whether it is the non-mirroring Devanagari word 'Bahujan Samaj', the *Samaj* set inversely above the *Bahujan* to indicate how the burden of caste society weighs down the traditionally oppressed 'lower-caste' multitudes, or the enmeshed word formed from 'Erotics' and 'Politics', or the call to liberation, 'When injustice becomes a law, resistance becomes a duty', Anita speaks powerfully to our turbulent historical moment. Red, to Anita, is the revolution in its many strategic and tactical avatars. It does not have to appear *in propria persona*. It informs all acts of opposing the tyrannies of society and polity, all gestures and utterances of emancipation.

8.

Anju Dodiya

Whether rendered in watercolour or in mixed-media formats as *Pillow Bearer* and *Red Wind* are, Anju Dodiya (born 1964) invariably stages her paintings around variations on the self-portrait, which are drawn out into a gallery of personae – a word that, in the original Latin, literally means *mask*. This preference is not to be mistaken for a self-regarding self-portraiture – it is more in the nature of an artist's articulation of affect at the border where self meets Other, or shrinks back from meeting the Other, or finds definition under pressure from the emphatic Other. That Other could be a person, but equally a correlate from cinema, poetry, theatre, or the domain of fashion.

The samurai is a constant presence in Anju's art: a point of reference, a solitary figure committed to fighting demons within and enemies externally. Anju has long been preoccupied, also, with the psychosomatic states of dream, anxiety, insomnia, and fear, articulated as phantasmagorical figures that beguile or besiege the embattled self. In *Pillow Bearer*, with its tonalities of watercolour, charcoal and soft pastel segueing into one another, sleep proves paradoxically elusive or is embraced in relief; in *Red Wind*, with its charcoal, watercolour and fabric collage striking out in distinctive directions, by contrast, sleep arrives as repose. Red, to Anju, has symbolised a heightened state of consciousness and attention to self and world, a colour that signals, in varied contexts, auspiciousness and festivity, yet also hazard.

9.

Abir Karmakar

Red, for Abir Karmakar (born 1977), connotes the temperature of crisis, the pitch of emergency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, red has acted as a call to secure oneself while

retaining a profound empathy with those imperilled by the virus, those in the front line fighting it. “I wanted to work from my immediate neighbourhood, my location in Baroda – and to go beyond visual information,” reflects the artist. The ‘red zones’, marking quarantined areas during the early months of pandemic and lockdown, seized his attention. He recognised that many of these zones were situated in the densely packed inner-city areas, their population belonging largely to the Muslim minority. Seen through this optic, Abir points out, the red zone highlights urban histories of ghettoization, the granting or withholding of amenities and civic entitlements depending on a politics of crude communal polarisation.

In his trilogy of works for this show, collectively titled *Surface*, Abir demonstrates his remarkable technical mastery, dwelling on the illusionistic surface, using oil paint in a manner suggestive of chalky pastel. He invokes streaky, weathered granite cladding; a stained, flaky, time-scarred wall; then brings them together in a tightly cropped view of an exterior wall, a metal staircase and a peach-pink wall beyond. He delights in the formal play between abstraction, through his evocation of surfaces, and illusionism, by conjuring up recessive space and the *trompe l’oeil* of the peeling notice stuck on the granite slab. At the core of Abir’s oeuvre is an inquiry into the boundary between the world as experienced and the world as represented to the most persuasive and, indeed, artful degree of verisimilitude.

10.

Nicola Durvasula

The red bowl, rimmed in blue, which represents Nicola Durvasula’s contribution to this exhibition embodies the interplay of design and accident, the artist’s considered calibration of the mechanics of slip and glaze on the one hand, and the aleatory combination of material and temperature that results in the unforeseen blue trimming the red that was the bowl’s key proposition: a gift of chance. Nicola (born 1960) has evolved a subtle and evocative practice that extends from the most substantially material and haptic to the most shimmeringly immaterial and elusive media: painting, drawing, and the ceramic sculpture to music, graphic notational forms inspired by musical experience, and the filmic. Nicola’s art is inspired by a deep conviction that the image marks the point of convergence between an inner life of refined consciousness and the play of contingent, ephemeral appearances that constitutes the external world. Between these two domains come the senses, and how they mediate between interiority and the outside remains one of the enduring preoccupations of Nicola’s art. As a corollary, Nicola is deeply committed to the dyadic relationship between materiality and abstraction.

11.

Gieve Patel

The portrait has been a lifelong painterly commitment for Gieve Patel (born 1940). It has taken the form, in his work, of the solitary porter at the railway station, the marginal people of the street, the elderly drunk making his way home in the rain, clutching at bread or bananas. To Patel, the portrait acts as a record of the vulnerability of the human subject, the damage it can suffer from ageing and disease, from malaise and trauma, the mortality that shadows our vital signs. In *Mary, My Patient*, Patel brings his gaze – a finely calibrated gaze that combines deep human empathy with clinical inquiry – to bear on a personality he has known well, a patient from his days as a general practitioner with his clinic at Lamington Road, central Bombay. In his poetry and plays as much as in his paintings, Patel has found inspiration among his patients; the healer's vow of confidentiality has prevented him from naming them before, a rule from which he departs in this work. The sitter, here, embodies the daily cycle of struggle and survival. She embodies, also, the ordinary individual's indomitable resilience in the face of relentless forces of attrition, a heroism of the everyday. Red richly informs Patel's palette in this painting, not as literal presence but as undertone and overtone.

— Ranjit Hoskote, Mumbai, January 2021