Pleasures of the other flesh

A painter who has internalized the Western Orientalist gaze, a minor artist given recognition as lip service to the British Indian community, or one who offers a sharp, complex, subversive outlook on identity, society, and sexuality? Bar Yerushalmi writes for Tohu about Indian-born painter Bhupen Khakhar's retrospective at the Tate Modern.

Critique / Bar Yerushalmi September 4, 2016

For the 19th-century Western traveler in the Indian subcontinent, the encounter with the Oriental dream was like opening a trunk full of colorful scarves and forbidden passions. As the centuries go by, we still seem to be unable to release our hold of the magical trunk. The Orient is, and always has been, 'opium for the masses' in the Western world.

Entry into Bhupen Khakhar's retrospective at the Tate Modern not only confirms the delusions of Oriental culture but also feeds us an overdose of it. The exhibition of an artist not well known in the current art scene in London, might open a window into the complicated relations between India and the United Kingdom. The fact that the Tate chose to mount a retrospective of one of the most significant artists of late 20th-century India is part of a long journey of reconciliation the institution has been undertaking regarding the unheard voices in the history of art. This is a (sometimes failed) attempt to turn the gaze to alternative, or parallel, sources and narratives of Modernism, which is playing like a broken record in the minds of those who have grown up on the lap of Western art history.

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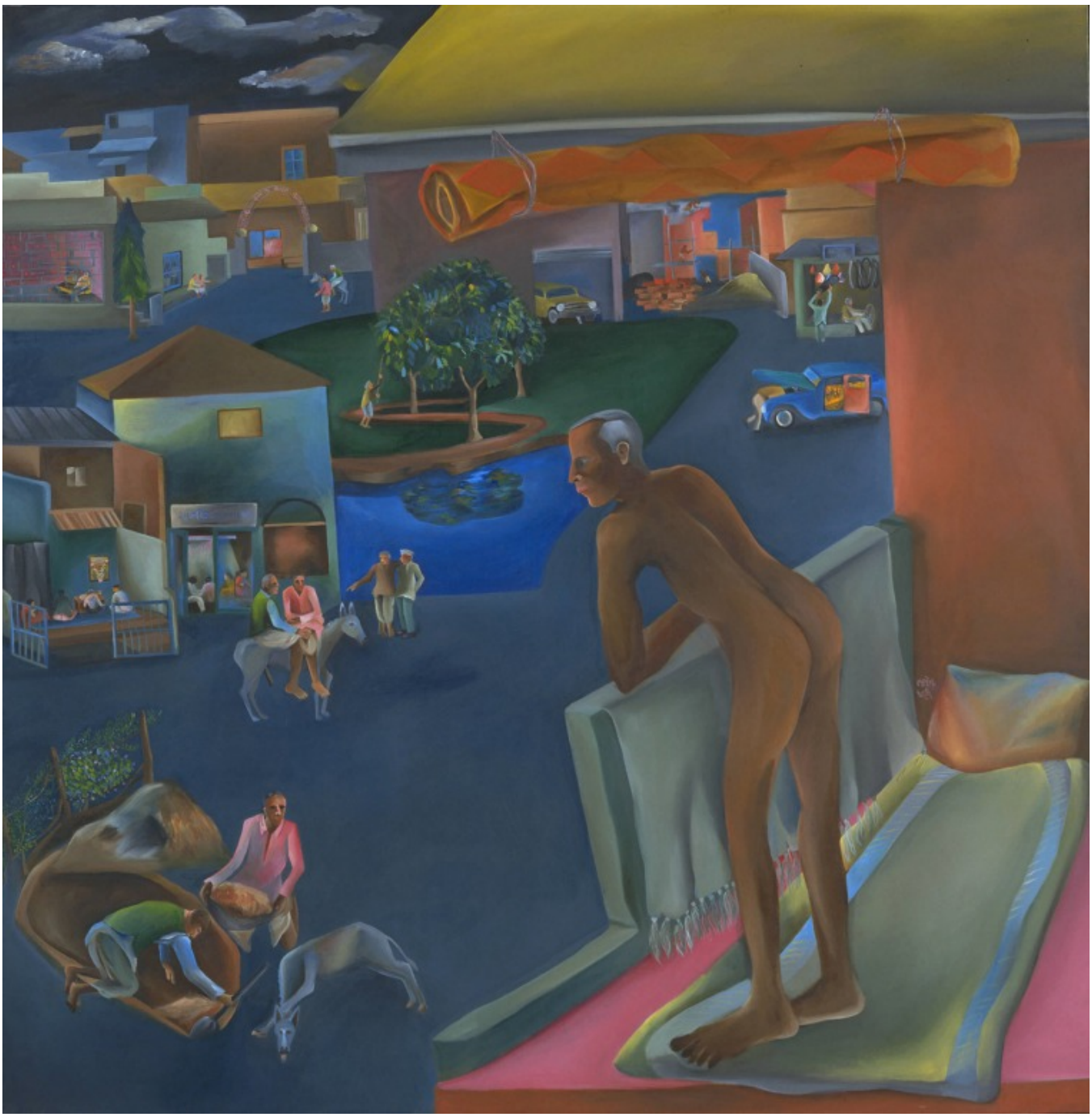
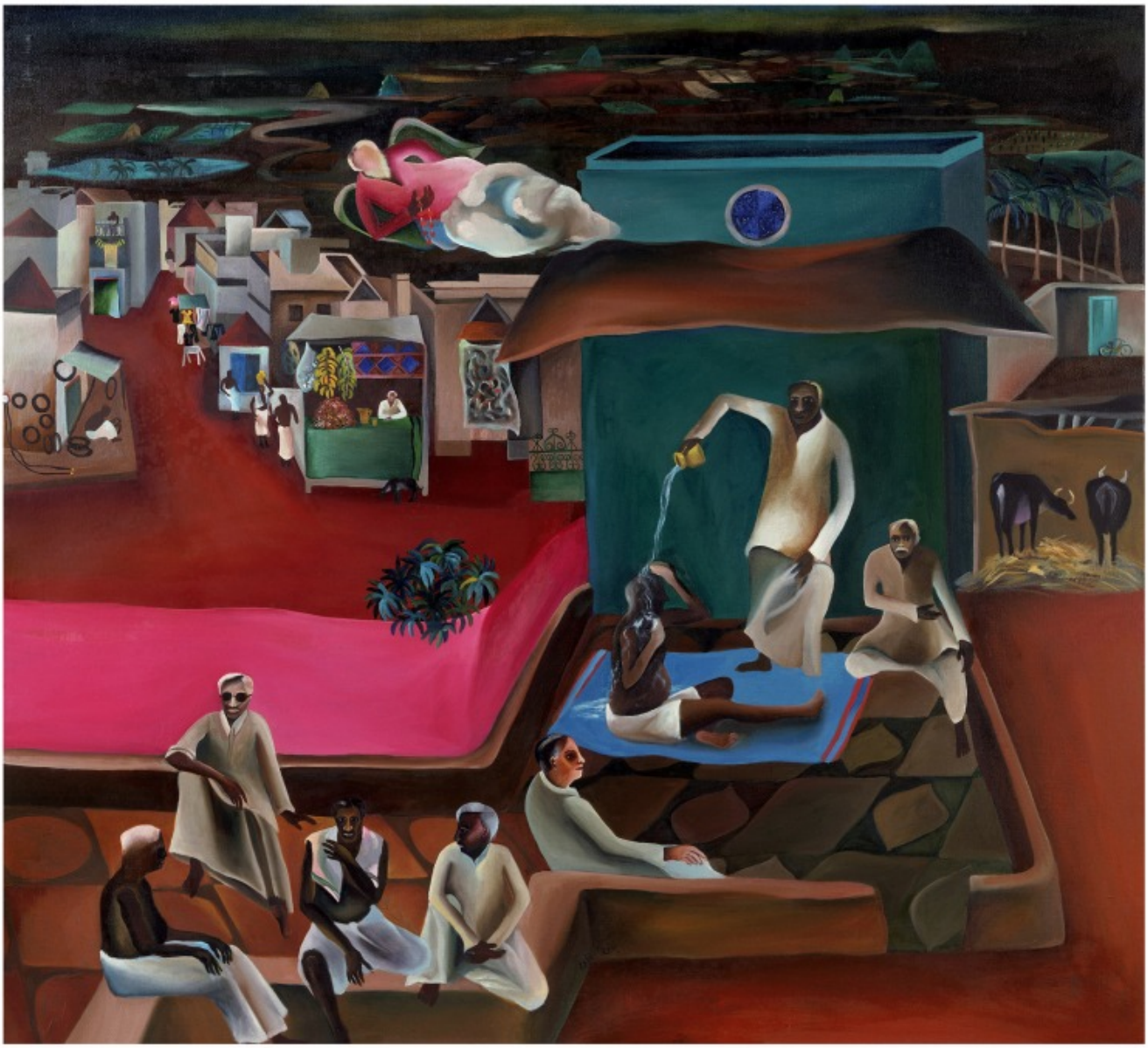


[1]Bhupen Khakhar. You Can’t Please All. 1981
Oil paint on canvas. 1756 x 1756 mm. Tate
© Bhupen Khakhar

Khakhar's show, which opened last June, has already provoked waves of rage in the art community in India and Bangladesh, following a devastating review [2] by Jonathan Jones, the guardian's art critic. Jones defines Khakhar as "an old-fashioned, second-rate artist whose paintings are stuck in a time warp of 1980s neo-figurative clichés. His question is simple: why has the Tate chosen to mount a retrospective for such an artist, while the like of David Hockney and Frank Auerbach are being relegated to side galleries at Tate Britain?

ID_74_lowres.jpg **[3]**

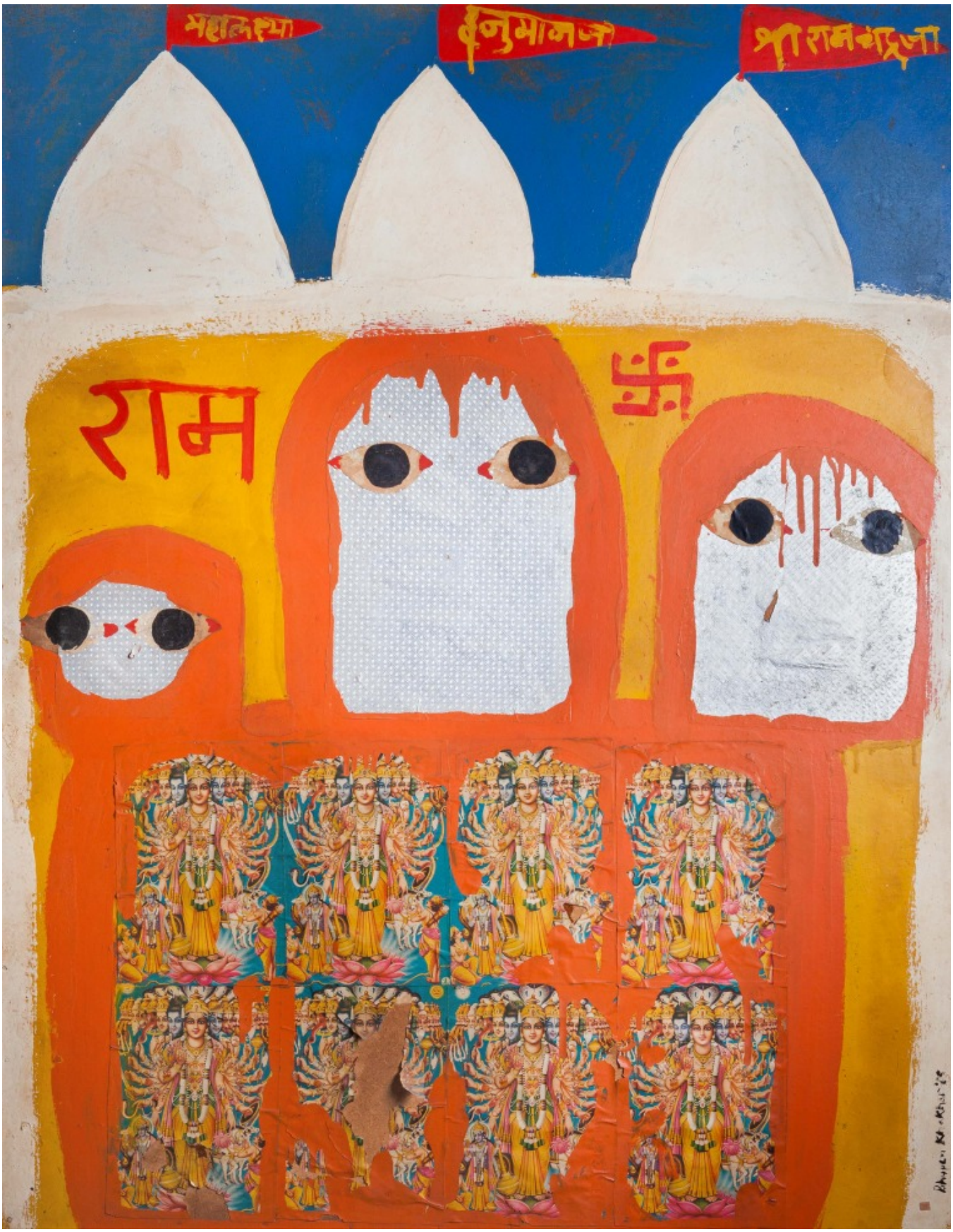


[4]Bhupen Khakhar. Death in the Family. 1977
Oil paint on canvas. Victoria and Albert Museum

A first look at the works by Khakhar (1934-2003) presents a certain difficulty. He uses that Oriental culture trunk defiantly. His paintings, characterized by many references to Indian mythology, create a coded visual culture screen, a medley of symbols that offers a peek at the artist's daily life, but leaves the Western viewer unable to understand what he's seeing. In one of the early works in the show, *Interior of a Hindu Temple III*, 1965, we witness the formation of the artist's painterly vocabulary. He simplifies the temple into a basic icon, staring at us out of three pairs of eyes painted on aluminum foil sheets glued on the painting's ground. The temple stares back at the viewer, so to speak. It does not function as a character; it signifies cultural codes that remain inscrutable to the

casual visitor to the museum. This early work is a sign of things to come in Khakhar's work, which would use Indian iconography to seduce the viewers and communicate with them.

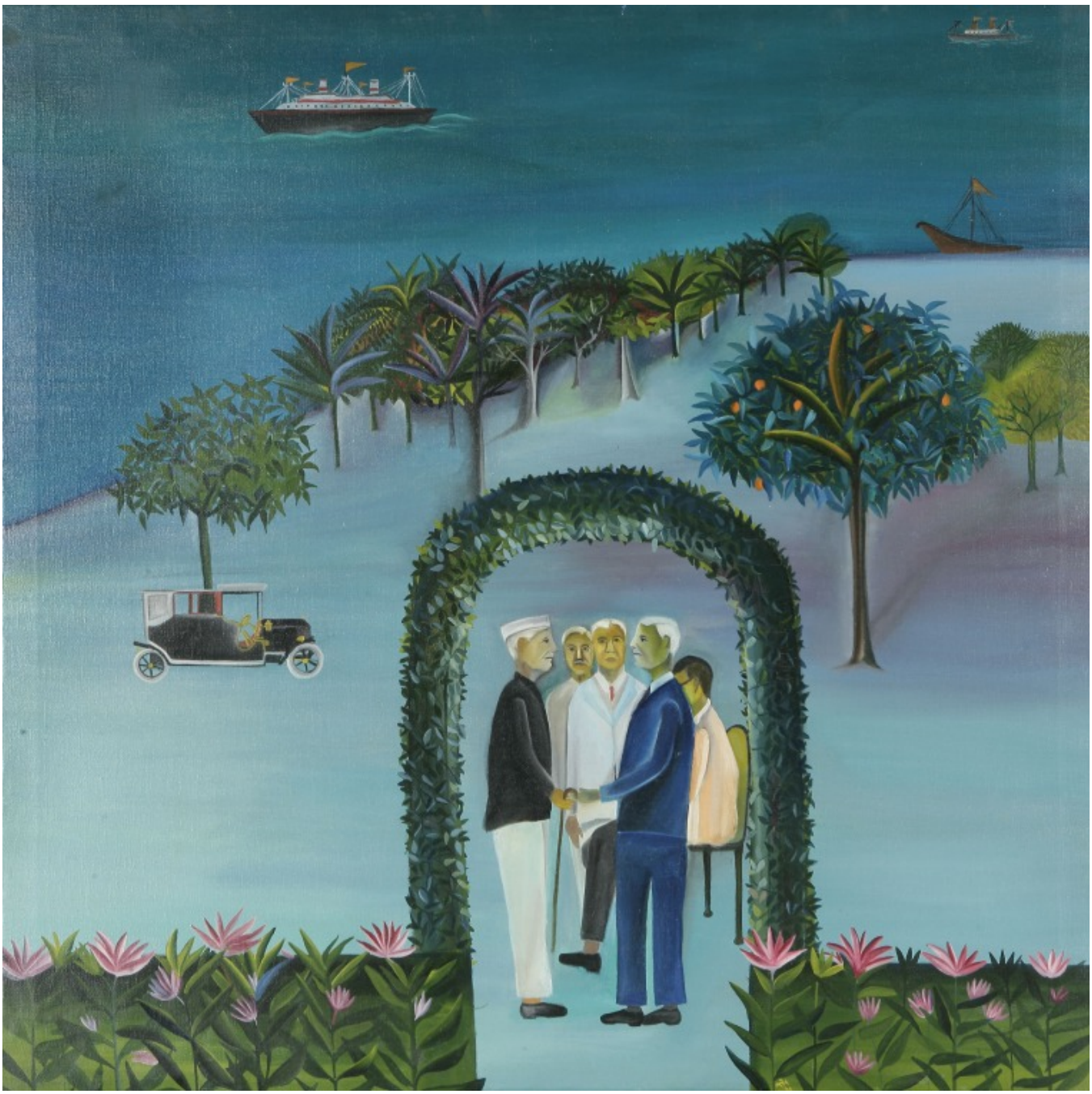
Interior of a Hindu Temple.jpg **[5]**



[6]Bhupen Khakhar. Interior of a Hindu Temple III. 1965
Mixed media (printed paper. paint and silver foil) on board. Courtesy of the Museum of Art and Photography

Khakhar was thirteen when the British Raj ended in 1947 and modern India declared its independence. He is a member of the generation that experienced the dramatic events of the partition. His art is a direct product of the study of identity that swings between locality and foreign influences, mostly European. This is familiar to anyone who has lived in the shadow of an occupying culture, but Khakhar plays a double agent in his paintings. He is well acquainted with European art history and identifies himself as a follower of the Primitivists, mainly Henri Rousseau. The paintings are a supermarket of quotes from Western art, but they are used by Khakhar to establish his private, local identity; he is riding piggyback on top of Modernist Europe.

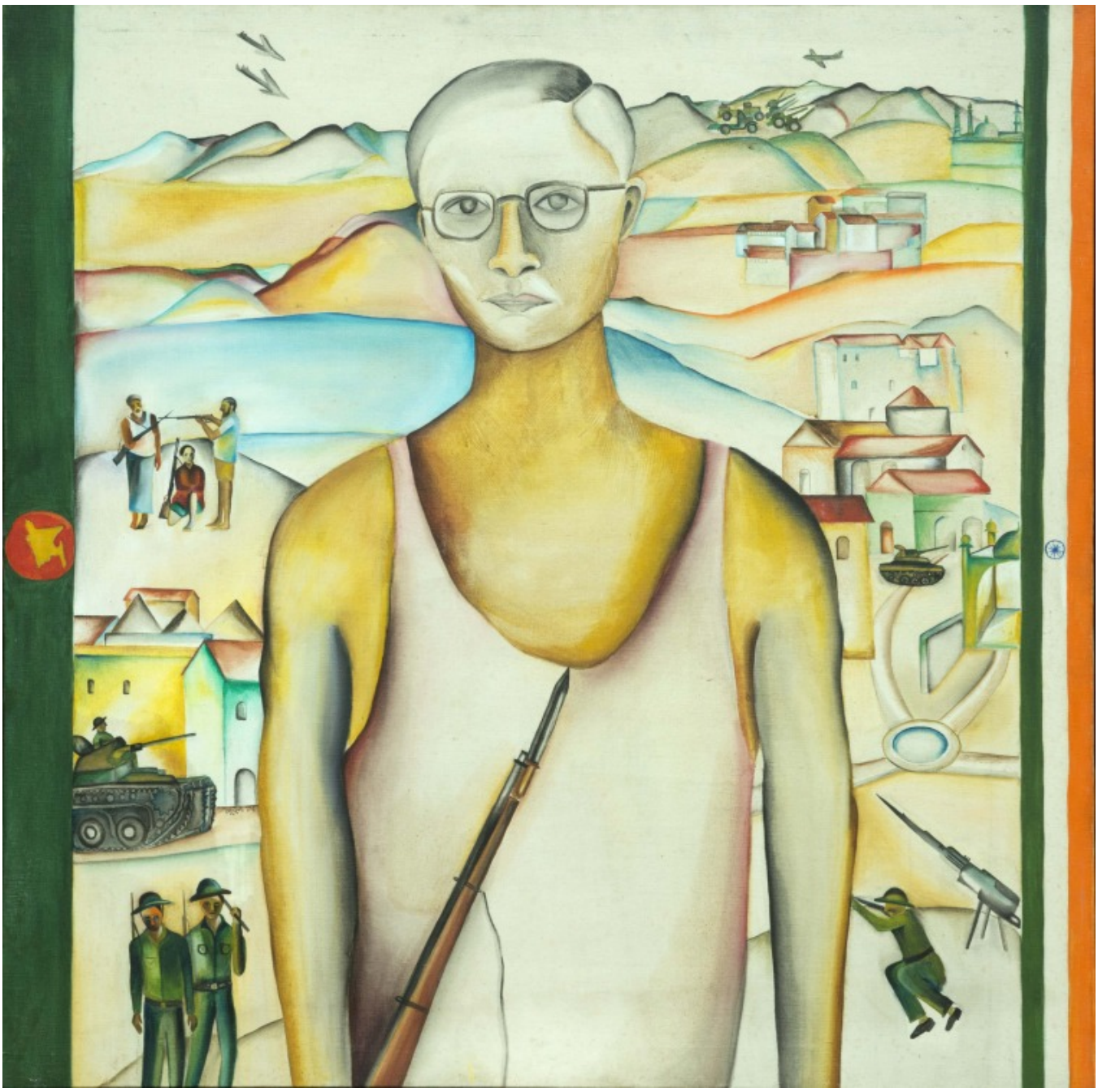
ID_67 TC.jpg **[7]**



[8]Bhupen Khakhar. Man Leaving (Going Abroad). 1970
Courtesy of Tapi Collection, India

In a later work, *Muktibahini Soldier with a Gun*, 1977, he shows a Bangladeshi "freedom fighter", painted holding a gun against his chest, surrounded by scenes of artillery and soldiers who train their weapons on the main figure. The painting refers directly to the Bangladeshi guerrilla movement, which took part in Bangladesh's war of independence. Something in Khakhar's style reminds me of incidences from Israeli art – I'm thinking of *Self Portrait with a Flower* (1922), by Reuven Rubin, with fledgling Tel Aviv in the background, or Nahum Gutman's Tiberias landscapes. The local aspect is immediately identifiable, even if it's not my own. These body-landscape images are the ultimate goal of anyone who tries to define identity on foreign land.

Mukhti Bahini Soldier.jpg **[9]**



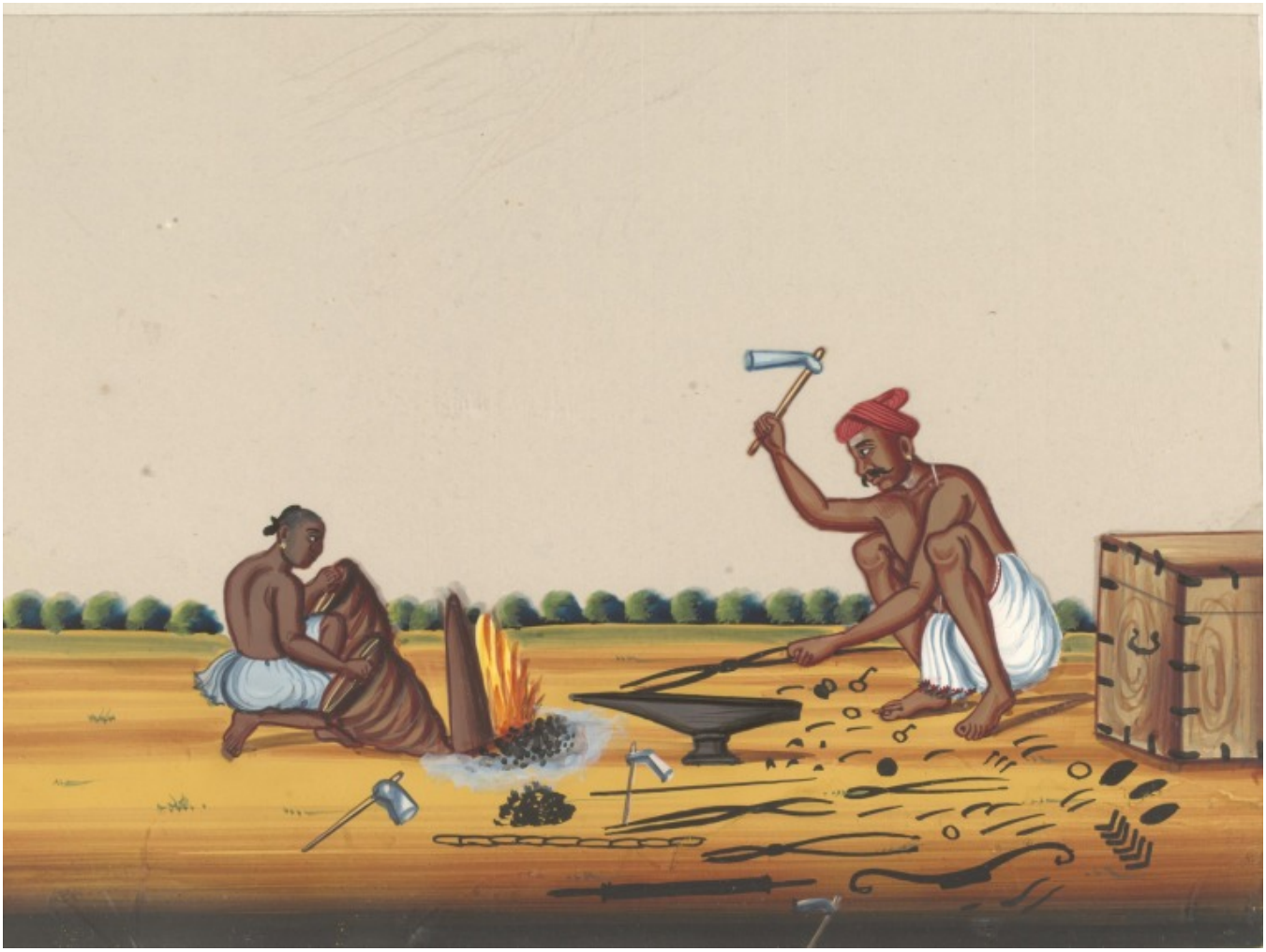
[10]Bhupen Khakhar, Mukhti Bahini Soldier, 1972
Oil paint on canvas. Collection Devinder and Kanwaldeep Sahney.

Photo: Pablo Bartholomew

Going back to Jones's criticism: the critic apparently evaluates a painting on its ability to conform to the permanent criteria of the history of modern painting. By these criteria, there is nothing new under the sun in Khakhar's world, and he functions only as a stencil machine for Modernist romanticism. Although Jones raises a few good questions regarding the inner mechanism of value-building in the art world (it is hard to ignore the fact that the market value of the works will increase now). Like him, I recall a list of artists, similar to Kahkhar, who have not managed to get through the doors of the Tate, but by sticking to his position, he remains blind to other issues the show deals with, especially the window of opportunity it offers to non-Western identities.

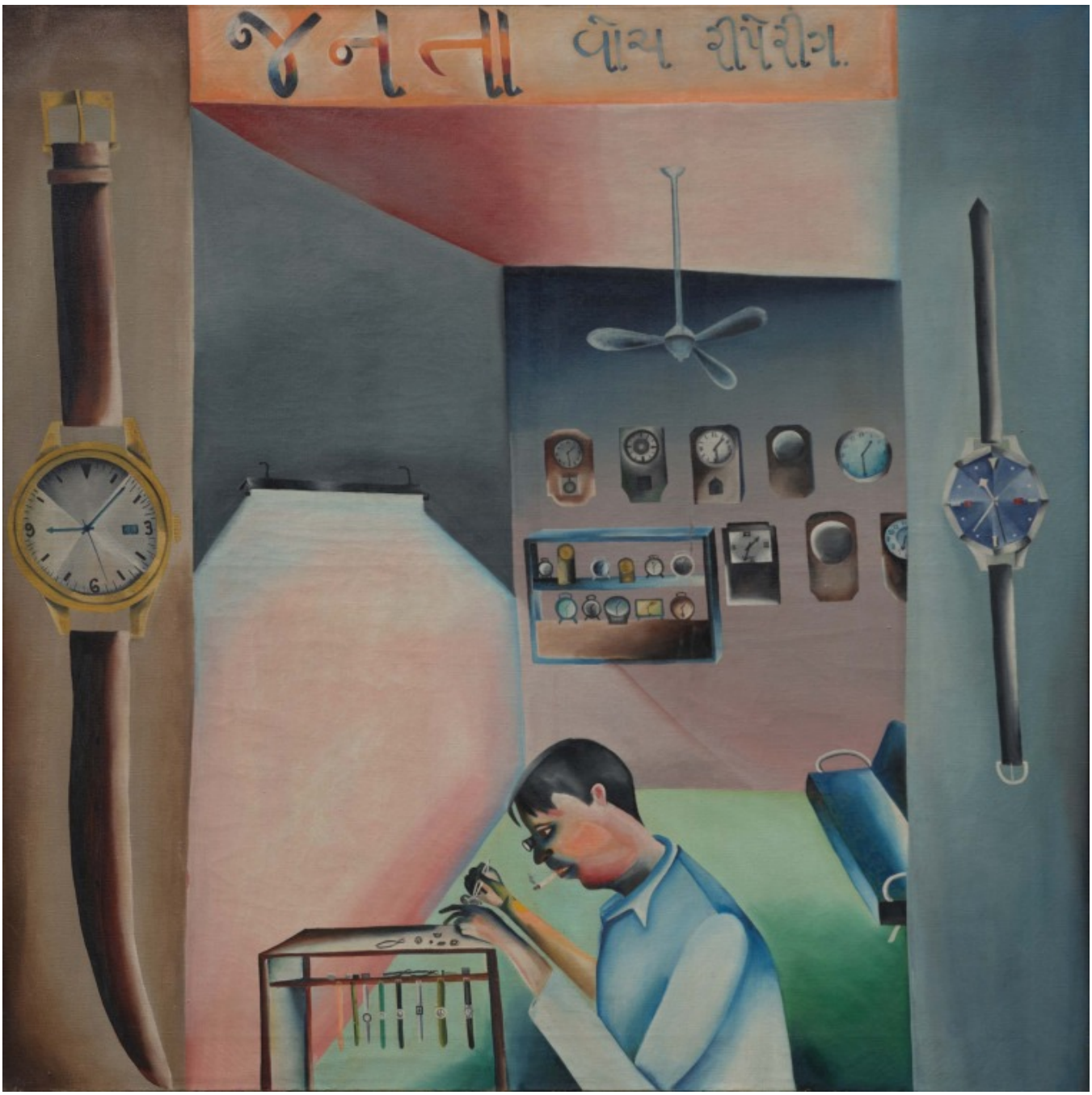
For example, the visual content of Khakhar's work cannot be read without acknowledging the relationship that has developed between the British gaze on the Orient in the 19th century and the social order in India across centuries. In certain works Khakhar appears to defiantly adopt the visual language of the West, as seen in the works reminiscent of 19th-century painted postcards [11] prevalent throughout the Empire, which described scenes of daily life in regions under the Empire's rule. In another series of paintings, portraits from the 1970s, the artist observes different characters in the fabric of life of his city: the watch repairer, the window cleaner, the accountant, a hata-yogi meditating. Khakhar has worked as an accountant most of his life, and he is clearly familiar with the condition of those prawn in the anonymous cartoons, people who are trapped in their caste and their profession. In these series, Khakhar's gaze sways between naiveté and a sharp observation of the social space around him, while his paintings seek to shine a light on the nameless people comprising the hierarchic world of castes in which he lives.

One of eleven paintings of occupations.jpg **[12]**



[13]Artist unknown. One of eleven paintings of occupations.
ca. 1870. Trichinopoly, India (made).

Janata Watch Repairing.jpg **[14]**

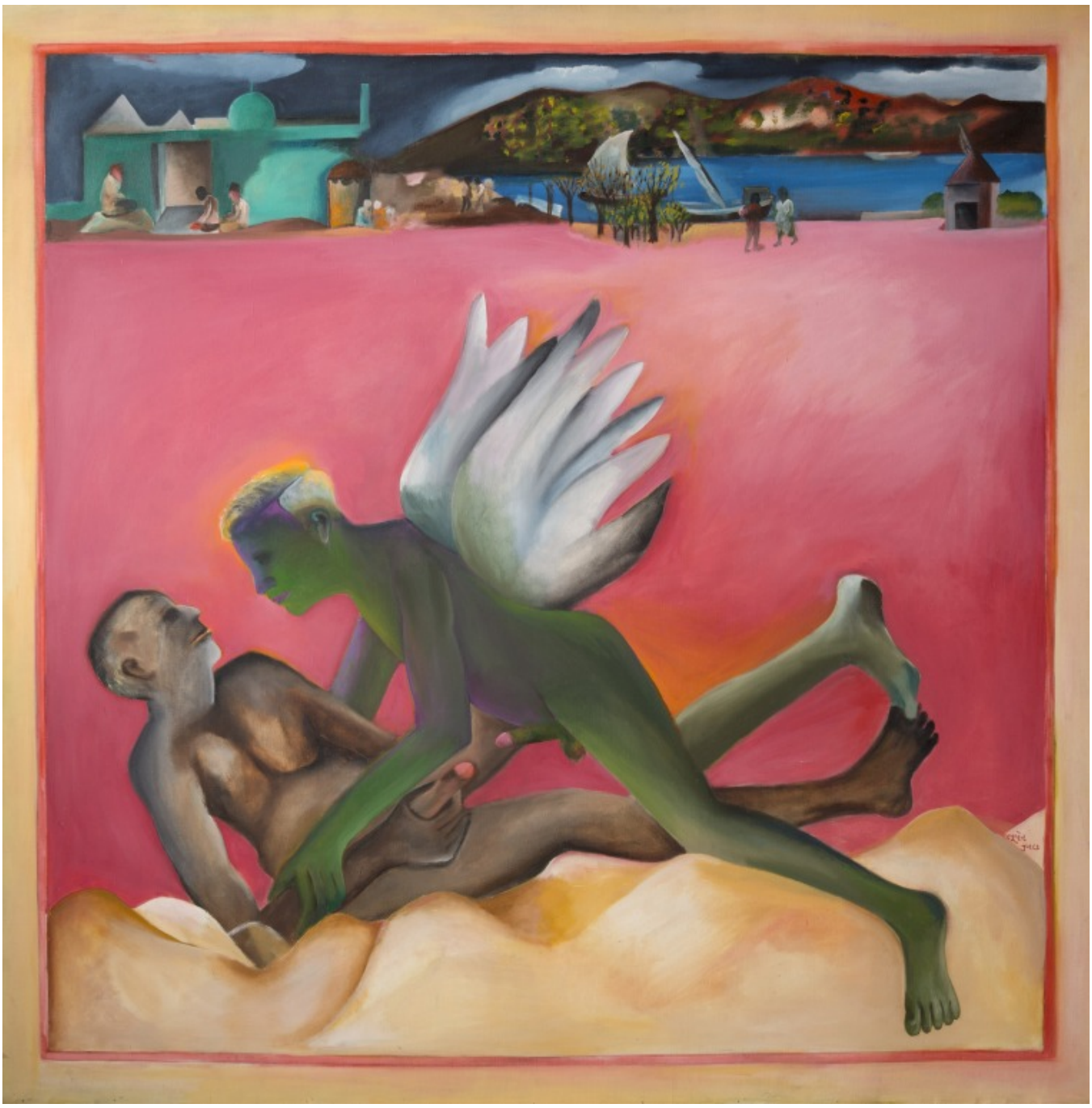


[15]Bhupen Khakhar. Janata Watch Repairing. 1972
Vivan Sundaram and Geeta Kapur

The drawing *Man with cataract* (1989) is a poignant self-portrait. The eyes are riddled with dozens of tiny arrows, a memento of cataracts from which he has suffered for many years. He is looking ahead, blindly, his eyes seeing something that we cannot see. The myth of the blind prophet, who can see beyond physical reality, is realized through the portrait of the painter who cannot see at all. And later in the show, it's hard not to smile at the self-humor in *An Old Man from Vasad Who Had Five Penises and Suffered from Runny Nose* (1995), which shows a seated figure, with its five penises turned to all points of the compass – an illustration of a lecherous old man that winks at the Hindu cosmology, with its various multi-armed gods and goddesses.

Another work which demonstrates the artist's preoccupation with corporeality and sexuality is *Yayati* (1987), based on a tale from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa story cycle, one of the foundational texts in Hindu literature. The story tells of King Yayati who has been cursed by his wife's father and became old prematurely. His young son, Puru, took pity on the father and exchanged his youth for the father's old age. The story ends when, after one thousand years of indulging in the pleasures of the flesh, Yayati finds corporeal life meaningless and gives his youth back to his son. He then devotes himself to the ageless and godless aspect of the soul. Khakhar gives this tale a passionate, erotic interpretation. Young, golden-haired Puru hovers over Yayati, who is lying below him, sexual organ erect – a lyrical portrayal of the ultimate wish to be one with the beloved, but also an expression of the loaded interaction between a young man and an old one and a reference to the relationship of the father and the son in the original story.

Yayati_lowres.jpg **[16]**

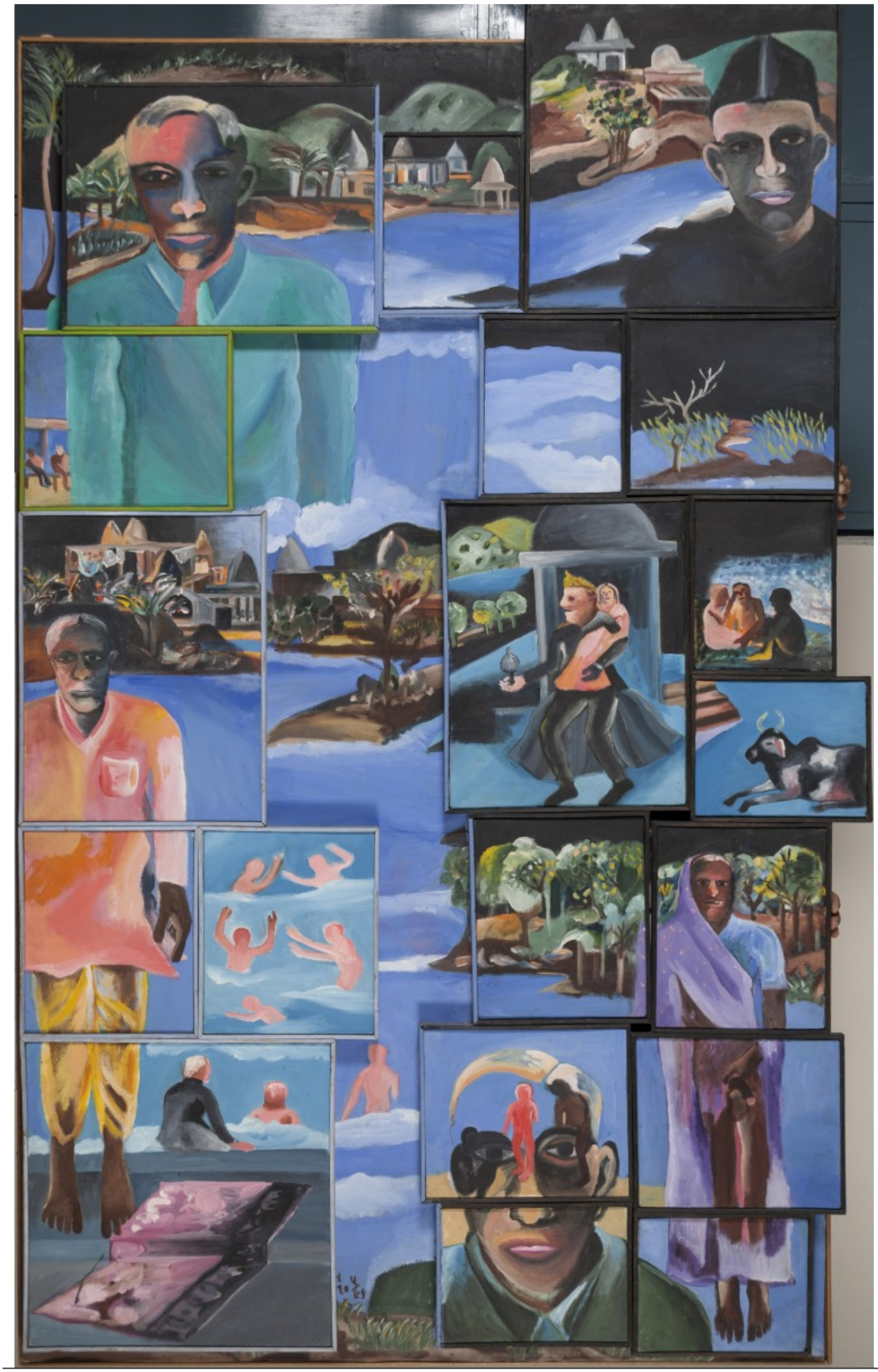


[17]Bhupen Khakhar. Yayati. 1987
Oil on canvas. 170 x 170 cm.

Private collection

These works reveal Khakhar as a biting, alert politician, who maintains a dialog with Western culture, but is not in a hurry to give in to it. He adheres defiantly to his local and personal language, which blends local traditions with his own intimate, physical biography. Khakhar, who was interested in the Bhakti tradition, a spiritual practice that advocated total devotion to loving one god, chose to use his sexual encounters as sensual fireworks, to throw light on a world conceptual model in which identity is experienced first through the filter of the iconography of the traditions surrounding it.

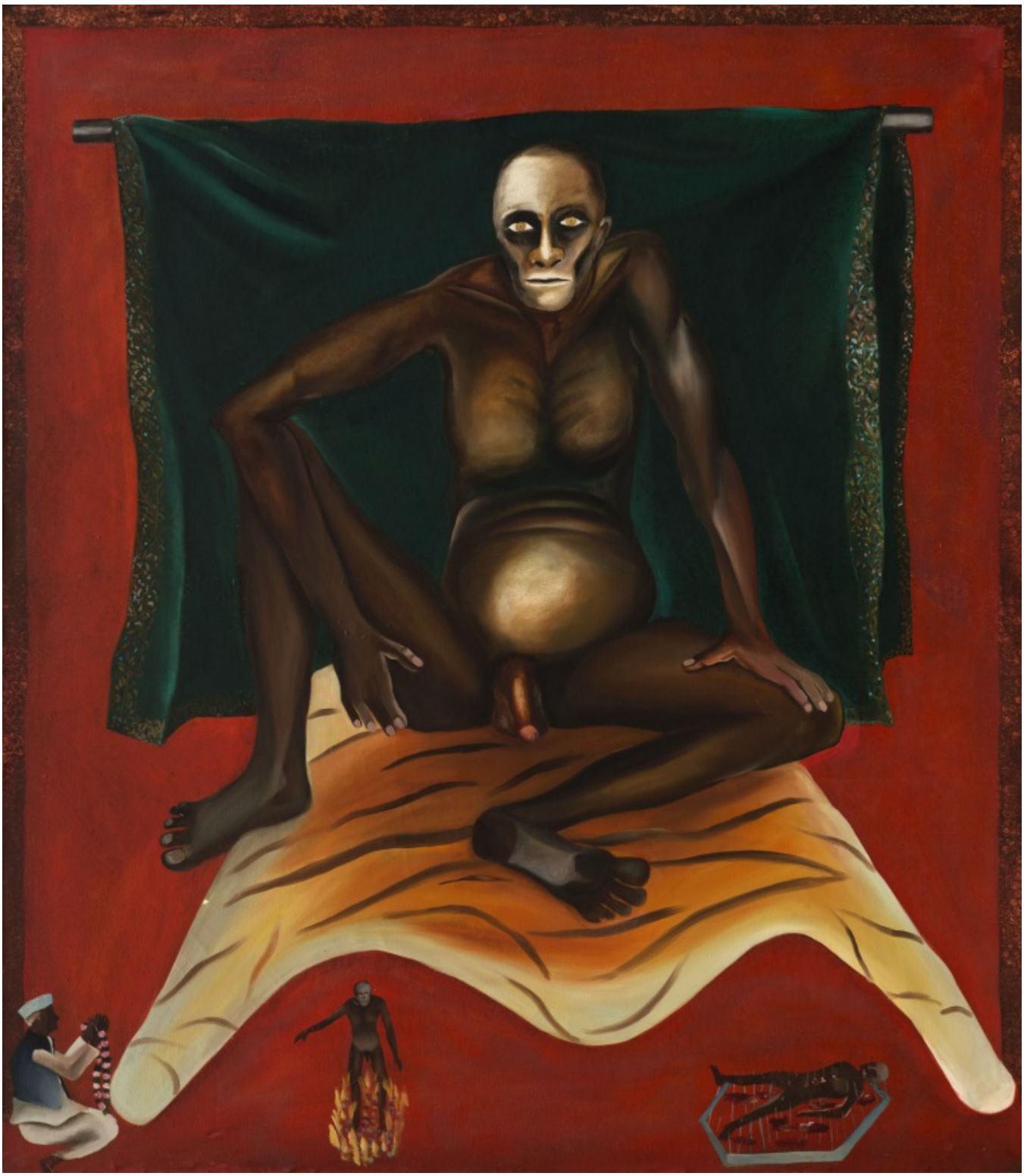
ID_40_lowres.jpg **[18]**



[19]Bhupen Khakhar. Night. 2002
Oil paint on canvas. Courtesy of Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (New Delhi, India)

Anyone who has visited the changing exhibitions at the Tate surely knows the suffocating caution the Education Department applies to efficiently whitewash 'problematic' information in the display spaces, to the point of washing away the content. The texts expound on Khakhar's bravery as a declared homosexual and preoccupation with detailing his relationships with his lovers over the years and refer to his ability to maintain his identity freely while living in the UK, when in India the ban of relations between men was still being enforced. All the same, you can't miss the ironic notice at the entrance to one of the rooms, warning visitors of images which are "sexually explicit." Apparently, the informational ambiguity points to the institution's lack of imagination, preferring to present a one-dimensional picture, boring in its political correctness, instead of conferring true and complex meaning to the life and work of the artist, whose politics go beyond his love for painting erect penises.

ID_18_lowres.jpg **[20]**

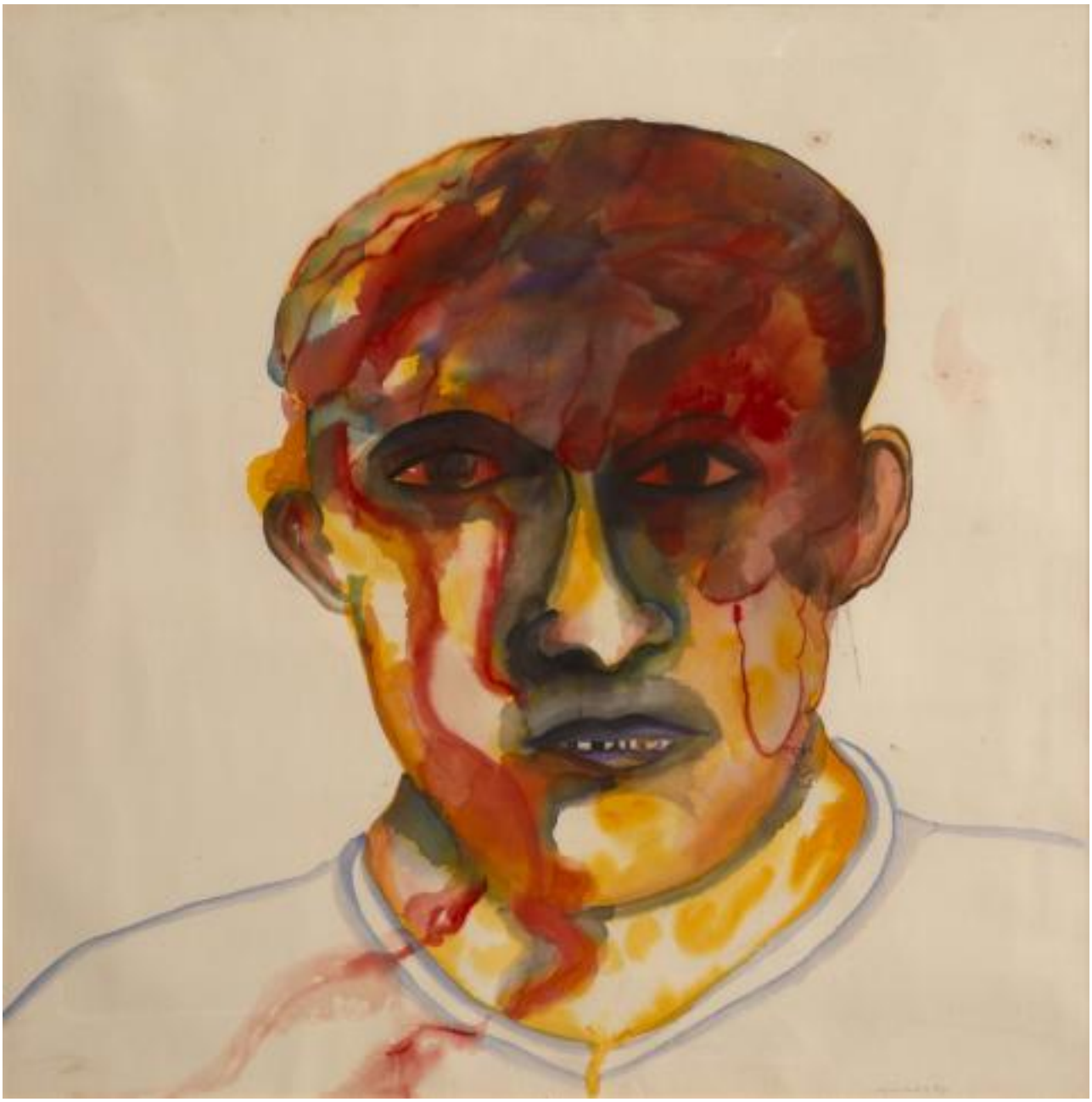


[21]Bhupen Khakhar. Hathyogi. 1978
Courtesy of the Estate of Bhupen Khakhar/National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi

The exhibition reaches its apex in a series of paintings made close to the artist's death, of cancer, in 2003. Dark paintings of life under the shadow of the disease replace the colorful, erotic scenes of his former life. The moments of suffering and indignity are described with brave generosity, like a

private diary chronicling a fading life, a look at the interior of the artist's body. In a small watercolor, *Sri Lanka Caves* (2002), made a year before his death, there's apparently nothing more to describe; all that's left is a collection of brown, feces-like stains, which, at a closer look, reveal faded, bent figures in a maze of underground tunnels. The artist's last moments bear moving testimony to the way in which painting itself changes. The obsession with the sick body turns into wounds that leave their marks on the porous paper. It seems that in his last days Khakhar experienced painting in its most physical form. He abandons storytelling and explores the basic act of painting: layers of paint piled on top of each other, commemorating the transient flesh.

ID_25.jpg **[22]**



[23]Bhupen Khakhar. Injured Head of Raju. 2001
Courtesy of Estate of Bhupen Khakhar/ National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi

The reasons for the Tate's decision to give an artist like Khakhar a solo exhibition are hard to understand. It is interesting to point out that the exhibition opened right alongside a grandiose retrospective for Mona Hatoum, the Middle East's superstar, which makes the question of the survival of Khakhar's figurative, somewhat naïve work even more poignant. Is the exhibition nothing but the museum's lip service to the Indian community, or is it a brave decision made by an institution trying to turn itself around? Khakhar is indeed a bird of a strange feather in London's halls of fame, but the fact that he has slipped under the radar so far makes him even more interesting – like a mole crawling out of another world to leave its mark, a reminder that there are many branches and trails beyond those drawn by one British art critic.

Bhupen Khakhar's exhibition, "You Can't Please All," [24] curated by Chris Decron and Nada Raza, will be on display at the Tate Modern in London through November 6, 2016.

Links
[1] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/T07200.jpg
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/31/bhupen-khakhar-review-you-cant-please-all-tate-modern
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/file/id74lowresjpg
[4] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/ID_74_lowres.jpg
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/file/interior-hindu-templejpg
[6] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Interior%20of%20a%20Hindu%20Temple.jpg
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[9] https://tohumagazine.com/file/mukhti-bahini-soldierjpg
[10] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Mukhti%20Bahini%20Soldier.jpg
[11] http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O427508/one-of-eleven-paintings-of-painting-unknown/
[12] https://tohumagazine.com/file/one-eleven-paintings-occupationsjpg
[13] http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/One%20of%20eleven%20paintings%20of%20occupations.jpg
[14] https://tohumagazine.com/file/janata-watch-repairingjpg
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