



Indian Council for Cultural Relations
भारतीय सांस्कृतिक सम्बंध परिषद्

KRISHEN KHANNA

PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS | A HUMAN ODYSSEY - 96 YEARS



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A HUMAN ODYSSEY -96 YEARS

CURATOR : **UMA NAIR**

PHOTOGRAPHS: **KARAN KHANNA**

ICCR Presents

VISITING INDIAN MASTERS

Bandwallahs, 1971, Oil on canvas



Bride's Toilet, 1956, oil on canvas

From the series on the truck – the ramshackle juggernaut hurtling into space piled up with construction materials and brutalized labour, to the generals and politicians negotiating peace around the table with the skeleton of humanity lying under it, to Jesus and his betrayal, to the cacophonous irrelevance of the marching band, Krishen has been preoccupied in his work with the state and fate of man in our times. In a sense, his work is a graphic record, a visual documentation. What makes it art and lifts it out of the transient, are the abiding elements of the tragic, the sublime and the ridiculous -which are woven into it’.

Jagdish Swaminathan



Artist Krishen Khanna is known not only for being prolific but also has influenced the artscape of India, capturing with brilliance and accuracy the vibrant hues of a diverse nation.

Last living member of the Progressives Art Group, in India, Krishen Khanna who turned 96 on July 5th 2021, is perhaps one of the most versatile self-taught modernists of our times. His life and art have been witness to some of the most turbulent times of India's political history and his works traverse an Indian idiom of everyday living. A voracious reader, think tank and greatly respected, Khanna is an artist who has weathered all seasons in his 96 years.

Khanna grew up in pre-partition Lahore, before moving to England, to study at the Imperial Service College on a scholarship. These early years of life with family and friends was the subject of some of his earliest works, where he reconstructed this "small, composite world, in which religious difference and the slowly gathering tide of nationalism were only a distant rumble."

His friendship with the Progressive Artist Group (PAG) brought him to hold his first exhibition in 1949 with them in Mumbai. He joined the PAG on the invitation of MF Husain. His love for an abstracted figurative terrain saw him through events and images that transcend time. Into his subjects he wove a universality and aesthetic that was rooted in Indian idioms and one that embraced deeper human values.

His bank job with Grindlays took him to Madras, and it was here in 1955 that he had his first solo show at the USIS. His love for culture as well as music saw him introduce formal elements of colour and line. Thus began his series -the bandwallahs, the Rumi series the Biblical stories, the Christ series, the musicians and Mahabharata -there was deep passion in each narrative. He moved to Delhi and became a full-time artist -in 1962 he was awarded the prestigious Rockefeller Fellowship and was Artist-in-Residence at the American University in Washington in the years 1963-64.

Portrait of Husain, 1954, oil on canvas

He used his scholarship to go to the Far East, including Japan, where he was greatly influenced by the art of Sumi-e (Suibokuga) practiced by Zen Buddhists there around 1330. In 1964 he was granted an artist residency at American University, in Washington, D.C., and won a fellowship from the CECA, which brought him to New York, where he began experimenting with Abstract Expressionism.

A witness of the Partition, Krishen, whose paintings evoke the uncertainty of the turbulent times and the bloodshed and massacre that ensued, is heartbroken by the machinations of the political parties which are using caste and religion as a tool to divide India. “Nobody would have imagined that the Partition would mean this. We never thought that the movement of people across the border would be restricted. The worst has happened to people of my generation because for us, Muslims were our friends. So, suddenly I can’t start thinking or believing that they are vile and horrible people. But then, the new generation didn’t go there and has no friends on that side of the border. So, they are beginning to look at them as ‘the other’. This isn’t a good thing. Actually, there is no other. Good and bad people are on both sides of the border.”

Khanna has described his technique as a process of welcoming the unpredictable as he created work built around the urban experience. He dwelt on sacred mythologies, both local and foreign. At the age of six Khanna’s father came back from Milan with a copy of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo Da Vinci, thus initiating a lifelong fascination with Christian imagery. Khanna’s *La Pieta* works are amongst his most striking.

When he created Biblical theme paintings, Khanna placed his own interpretation upon the themes and events he was showing. His Emaus series were emotive works. When he painted Christ it was in an Indian setting. The features were far from European. Neither did we see undulating rolling landscapes that would have been seen in earlier biblical works by Piero Della Francesca or Fra Angelico. Khanna said about his Christ series, “I painted Jesus, not in the image given by European painters, but as one of the fakirs one sees around Hazrat Nizamuddin.” (As told to Chanda Singh, “Looking Beyond His Canvas”, *India Magazine*, September 1984). Khanna’s adaptation to the Indian context in place and character allows for a greater identification with the scene and the figures.



The Last Supper, 1979, oil on canvas



La Pietà, 1988, oil on canvas



The Last Laugh, oil on canvas



Khanna the voracious reader has also created a series from the Mahabharata as well as a series on musicians and other subjects. His *A Far Afternoon* is a monumental work of many panels. His handling of the human form and the abstracted elements along with a panoramic perspective all come together to create a fascinating ensemble of characters. One of his earliest works *The Day Gandhi Died* is yet another masterpiece of deep devotion and pathos as you look at people reading newspapers to read details of Mahatma Gandhi's death. Emotion and evocation writ large this work reflects Khanna at his potent best in terms of the translation of event and history in memory onto canvas. Khanna consistently embedded the figurative idiom in his everyday life paintings. Populated by a cast of characters, his canvasses are intrinsic to the Indian streets: Chaplinesque bandwallahs in red uniforms, stoic truck drivers huddled with mouths covered, busy dhaba (roadside eatery) owners, fruit sellers, and even card players engrossed in their game. People in their humdrum existence became his subjects.

Emmaus, oil on canvas



Black Truck, 1974, oil on canvas

Truckwallahs

From the early 1970s, Khanna's work engaged with urban life as he experienced it in the rapidly expanding metropolis of Delhi, particularly through subaltern figures like the bandwallahs, truckwallahs and manual labourers he encountered. The truckwalla series were austere and more or less monochrome while the bandwallahs were created in crimson yellow and scarlet with a dash of green.

In his evolution he says: "I got involved with painting the rear of trucks with the huddle up and dehumanized cargoes of labourers, a common enough sight in the country. Since the men at the back acquired the character and colour of the cargo that they were carrying, it was only appropriate that they and the tortuous machines be painted in monochrome. A series of grey and dusty pictures were painted."

In these works he "depicts the hard life of rural migrant labourers who form an important part of the urban landscape, in the late hours of the day when the privileged step out for a night of entertainment. Covered with dust, their identity obscured by a thick veil of grime, the figures in these monochromatic paintings seem to disappear into the fold of the city to which they migrated in the hope of a better life [...] the truck becomes an on-the-spot home, on the move, emphasising rootlessness as well as alienation." (R. Karode and S. Sawant, 'City Lights, City Limits – Multiple Metaphors in Everyday Urbanism', *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857-2007*, Mumbai, 2009, p. 198)



Truck, 1975, oil on canvas



OK Tata, 2005, oil on canvas



A Far Afternoon, 2014, 5 panels, size 6ft x 20 ft, Exhibited at India Art Fair 2015

“There is something sad and ridiculous about the band. A legacy from our erstwhile English rulers, whether official or military in pompous regalia, or shabbily costumed when accompanying middle-class marriage processions in the cities, the band is a macabre comment on bourgeois existence.”

Jagdish Swaminathan



Bandwallahs

Beginning in the 1980s, the *Bandwallahs* became a recurrent theme in Khanna's oeuvre. Khanna's ability to translate the daily life and pathos of the common man is what kept his works alive and animated with a human spirit of eking out a life.

Delhi's bandwallahs held a comic and bold portrayal -their bright colourful uniforms, gold epaulettes and brass buttons right down to their often tired expressions as they belted out the same tunes repeatedly for one wedding procession after another. This year at Grosvenor in London he created the *Bandwallahs* in deep despair thinking of what they would be doing during the pandemic with such few festivities and weddings. And his words of the past come back:

“What would happen were I to begin with no drawing or compositional props, where figures are not in space but are space themselves, and colours ringing loud and clear in merry juxtaposition without tonal continuities or intermediary grays, and the application of colour pigment were assertive and not tentative? I found a new exuberance in the act of painting. Using the image of the Bandwallahs, I let it go, not attempting to rub out or physically eradicate, and gave vent to all the possibilities stimulated by that odd instinct.” (Krishen Khanna, ‘Beyond the Bandwallah’s Cacophony: a non-committal statement by the artist’)

His obsession with the Chaplinesque bandwallahs in red uniforms is well known, but not many know that he picked on them not only because Krishen has always painted the ‘common man’, but also because they were the “post-Partition variety”. “There is something sad and musical about them. Like refugees, they too came to this side of the border and like me, they too didn’t know what to do in life. They had the skill, got together and waited for the first wedding session. The irony is that nobody wants them otherwise. So, I have some affinity for them,” he says.

Celebration at Ravensdale , Oil on canvas



Ministrels in the forest, 2019, oil on canvas



The Last Love Song, 2017, oil on canvas



*Malti's Marriage Band
at Ravensdale, 2019,
oil on canvas*



Verve and versatility

From the richness of mythology and literature he painted stories of the Mahabharata drawing from the rich fount as he created Dhritrashtra and Gandhari and many more characters with verve and versatility. His work *Blessing on the Battlefield* is from his famous series of drawings.

It runs like a narrative of the battlefield and the journey. Varying in size and subjects, these unusually large drawings appear from the recesses of a nuanced imagination, to present a play about little and big heroisms, small ironies and monumental follies. At the apex appears the work, *Benediction on the Battlefield*, the moment of the Pandavas wishing farewell to Bhishma Pitamah before his death, an image that Khanna had worked on over the decades.

Victorious in battle over the Kauravas, the Pandavas speak with the great preceptor in his final hours. Propped up on his bed of arrows, Bhishma addresses Yudhishtira on the nature of kingship and different forms of truth: "Nothing sees like knowledge, nothing purifies like truth, nothing delights like giving, nothing enslaves like desire." At this juncture, in the twilight of a battle in which there are no victors, Krishen creates a compact between two great textual sources, the Mahabharata and the Bible, with their narrative of adversarial conflict and persecution and the memory site of his own experience, the Partition of India.

Benediction on the battlefield, acrylic and charcoal on canvas



Untitled (South Indian soiree), oil on canvas

The human figure

Khanna's paintings are usually large. They fascinate viewers for their magnitude of fervour and flavour in humanist codes. "I like to paint large, because it is infinitely more rewarding to me as a painter. When you do not see the edges of the painting—it spreads like the Ajanta murals—that's very conducive to a narrative. When you tell a story it must have gravitas and its own integrity. I have always felt large canvasses are a bigger challenge and you are glued in for a long period of time. Large pictures necessitate this penetrative way of looking. And the human figure has so many perspectives and generates so many emotions. The human has a multiplicity of attributes and is a compound of so many actions."

Khanna reflected on his choice of the human figure. "It's not easy being a figurative painter—you have to be true to space, colour, the drawing and, more than that, to the image that you're taking." He drew upon eclectic references which encompassed everything from poetry to Indian miniatures, to the European masterpieces he's been revisiting since he was a boy. "It is like ploughing and fertilising a field, you don't know what crop will grow, but something does come out when you're completely switched to one line of thinking. This would have never happened if I had not left (banking). I might have become a good Sunday painter."



Wedding Celebrations, Oil on canvas, three panels



Bandwallahs at a dhaba, 2015, Oil on canvas



News of Gandhiji's Death, 1948, Oil on canvas

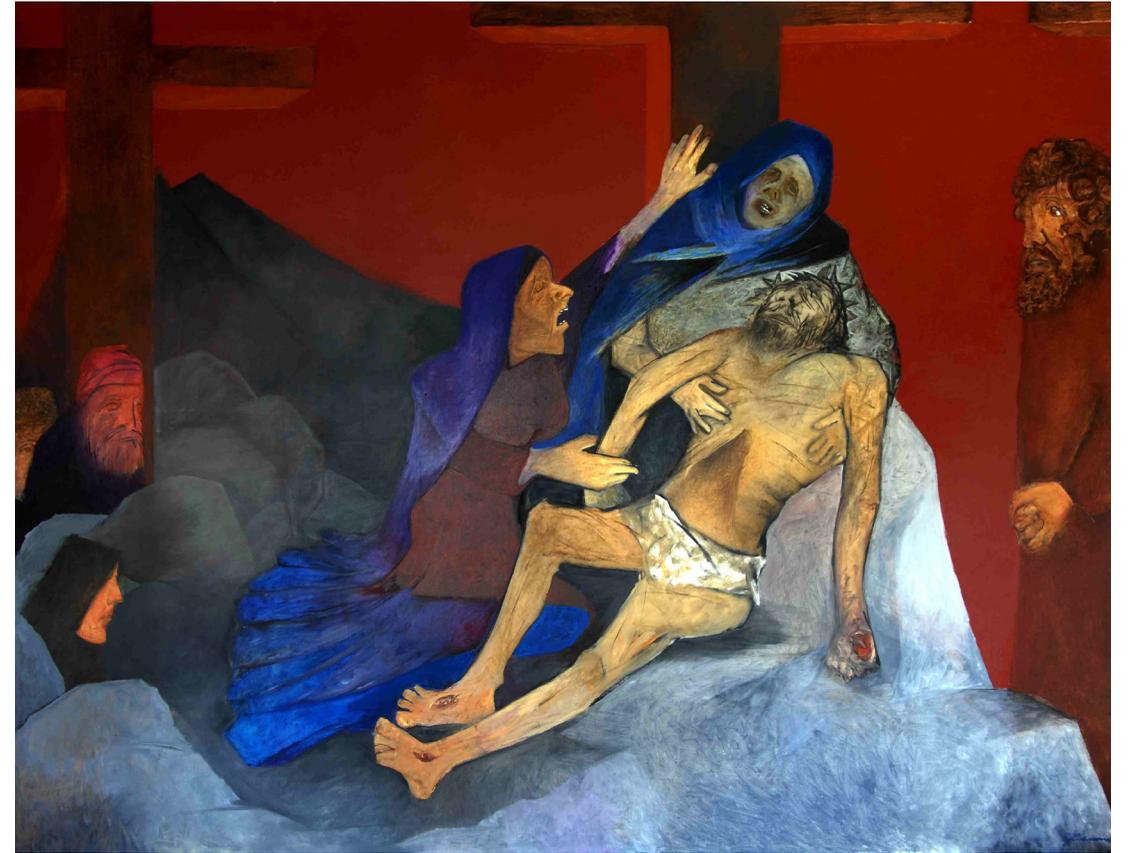
News of Gandhiji's Death 1948

The partition and its aftermath had a huge impact on Khanna. His painting of 1948 *News of Gandhiji's Death* is a historic milestone in memory and impact on India's masses. In this painting we see an array of Indians united in shock. Silenced by the tragedy they stand reading the newspaper. We also note differences in clothing, class, and gender, amongst them we Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh figures standing and reading the news under a street light, surrounded by darkness.

News of Gandhiji's Death was featured in a 1949 exhibition of works by the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, an informal collective, with which Khanna later became associated. He shared the group's search to apply modern aesthetics to describe the hopes and fears of independent India. *News of Gandhiji's Death*, for example, uses a painterly technique to define modernist distortions of perspective, colour, and figure, but maintains clarity and precision by representing the fraught and increasingly divided population of India.



Blessing on the battlefield, 1997, Oil on canvas



Pieta, 2007, oil on canvas



Exodus, oil on canvas



Untitled Acrylic, charcoal on canvas

In 1990 Krishen Khanna was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri, one of the Indian government's highest civilian awards, and in 1997 he received the Kala Ratna from the All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society. In 2000 the Indian Govt bestowed on him the prestigious Padma Bhushan for his unparalleled contribution to Indian contemporary art. He has participated in the Venice, São Paulo, Havana and Tokyo biennales and in the International Triennale in New Delhi.

He has exhibited in solo and group shows around the world, in places like New York, London, New Orleans, Honolulu, Oxford, Washington, D.C., Geneva, and at the festival of India in Japan. Khanna lives and works in New Delhi-he just celebrated his 96th birthday. He is the last living member of the Progressive Arts Group of Mumbai. He was invited to join by M.F Husain. The members of the Progressive Arts Group were his close friends. Important works from this series are part of the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, as well as the Jehangir Nicholson Foundation in Mumbai.

Uma Nair
Curator



KRISHEN KHANNA

A largely self-taught artist, Khanna studied at the Imperial Service College, Windsor, England, from where he graduated in 1940. After his family's move to India, a job with Grindlays Bank brought him to Bombay where he was invited to be a part of the now famous Progressive Artists' Group. The first exhibition in which Khanna's works were featured was one of this Group's exhibitions held in 1949. In 1955, Khanna had his first solo show at the USIS, Chennai, and since then has been exhibiting his work widely in India and abroad. Among his solo exhibitions are *Krishen Khanna: Drawings & Paintings* at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, in 2016; *When the Band Begins to Play...* at Grosvenor Gallery, London, in 2015; *A Celebration of Lines* at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, in 2013; *Krishen Khanna: A Retrospective* presented by Saffronart, Mumbai at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, in 2010; *The Savage Heart* at Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, in 2008; *Krishen Khanna*, Saffronart and Berkeley Square Gallery, London, in 2005; and *An Airing* at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, in 2004. Recent group exhibitions include *Ideas of the Sublime*, presented by Vadehra Art Gallery at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, in 2013; *The Discerning Eye: Modern Masters* at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, in 2013; and *Masterclass* at Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi, in 2011.

In 1964, Khanna was artist-in-residence at the American University, Washington D.C. In 1965, he won a fellowship from the Council for Economic and Cultural Affairs, New York following the travel grant they had awarded him three years earlier. Recognising his immense contribution to Indian Art, the Government of India has bestowed several honours upon him including the Lalit Kala Ratna from the President of India in 2004 and the Padma Shri in 1990. In the year 2000 he was conferred upon with the Padma Bhushan for his contribution to contemporary Indian art as a versatile modernist.

Krishen Khanna lives and works in New Delhi.
(Saffronart.com)



UMA NAIR



Curator

Uma Nair has been curating art shows since 2005 in the capital city of Delhi. Her first show Terra Natura, was a show of five seminal ceramic artists that sold out in Delhi.

Her curatorial ventures have spanned painting, photography, ceramics and sculpture.

Moderns, Earth Songs and Gandhi @150 years

History happened when she was invited to curate an archival show at the Lalit Kala Akademi in a show called *Moderns* that was sent to Jordan, Berlin and Vienna in the years 2008-2016.

In researching the archives of the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi her next historic culling was *Earth Songs* a show of 86 works from the Lalit Kala Archives, a study on India's tribal art.

She also curated Gandhi@150 Years an epic show of sculptures paintings and graphic prints and photographs at Lalit Kala Akademi on October 2nd 2019 with 86 artists.

iSculpt I and II

In terms of public exhibitions her most important curatorial exercises have been *iSculpt I (2016)* and *iSculpt II (2018)* at the India International Centre, Gandhi King Plaza. *iSculpt* was a revolution in the making of public exhibitions and public art that expresses fidelity to the idea of a "sculpture of one's own"—in this case, a series of literal and metaphorical works dedicated to material experimentation

and innovation, and in doing so provides a plethora of works for the history of ingenuity among sculptors to take root. The Gandhi King Plaza morphs into a sculptural court for 10 days creating dynamics of a rare aesthetic order.

Photography

Coupling photography and paintings happened with a show in 2007 with Gallerie Nvya called *Darpan*. It looked at how artists and photographers dealt with the concept and idea of a mirror in art. 2011 became an important year when a small show of photographs and paintings and sculptures was held at the India Art Fair entitled *Womb to Tomb* with works by Raghu Rai, Pablo Partholomew and Pankaj Mistry.

Two important solo exhibitions in photography were Pankaj Mistry's *Reverie* in 2009 and Prabir Purkayastha's *Borokhun* in 2011.

The greatest exhibition of photographs happened at Kolkata Centre for creativity in 2019 when she curated Kolkata International Photo Festival with the masters Jyoti Bhatt and S Paul other than many other Indian photographers.

Painting

Nair goes by the discipline that solo shows as curatorial exercises hold greater weight when you curate a show of an artist with great talent specifically for artists who have worked for more than a decade and are still relatively unknown.

Among artists who revel in painting Nair's most

important exhibition was Sanjay Bhattacharyya's *Emerging Krishna* at the Religare Art Gallery in 2012. Iconic oils and a series of photographs became the focus of an exhibition that celebrated form as much as the spiritual aura of the flute player as an incandescent symbol cast against different prisms of light by the master disciple of Bikash Bhattacharjee.

Nair's next curation is Prabhakar Kolte's 50 years of work at Treasure Art Gallery in Delhi.

Printmaking -intaglios and serigraphs

Nair's group shows like *Vriksha*, (2019) *Gandhi @150 years* (2019) and *Yatra Naryasthu* (Women's show at NGMA-2021) have included leading printmakers like Jyoti Bhatt, Zarina Hashmi and Soghra Khurasani.

Her most historic solo exhibition to date has been 84 intaglio prints by the mentor and leading printmaker Jyoti Bhatt. This solo show was a collection of prints and serigraphs from Collectors all over India and held at the prestigious Bihar Museum, Patna.

Sculpture/ Installations

In the year 2010 Nair was invited to write about the Lalit Kala Akademi National Exhibition that was held in Kolkata. At the exhibition she discovered the work of the brilliant bronze sculptor Arun Pandit. She came back and connected with Pandit who was working at Garhi Studios and curated his first solo show in 2012. Later in 2016 his epic show of sculptures *Power and Pathos* was well received with the Alkazi Foundation picking him up as their lead sculptor and buying 4 works for the foundation.

In January 2020 Nair curated Prodosh Dasgupta: A journey of 60 years at Akar Prakar Delhi for the India Art Fair. This exhibition became one of the most highly proclaimed exhibitions because it became an educator's paradigm of modernist moorings.

Ceramics

Nair is both a collector and a great patron of contemporary ceramics. Her first show *Terra Natura* 2005, became a lesson in history and techniques and the alchemy of textural terrain in ceramics.

The next show she curated was in April 2017 by Architecture Professor Manjari Sharma who had been dabbling in sculptural ceramics more than 10 years. *Sculptour* became an exhibition that spoke of the power and passion for explorations and experiments with clay.

Nair's next solo unveiling was the enigmatic and brilliant ceramic artist G. Reghu's ceramic show at Jehangir Art Gallery Mumbai on January 15, 2018. As a voice in contemporary art criticism it is Nair's in depth analogies and critiques that pitch her amongst the best in the nation.

International

On the international front it is the Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition *Moderns* that has garnered great recognition and appreciation for Nair's curatorial and historical annotations. *Moderns* has travelled to Jordan and Berlin for epic unveilings and rave reviews.

Author

Nair has been writing as an art critic for 31 years.

Nair's first monograph was published in 2005 -25 years of Paresch Maity.

Nair's monograph on Arpita Singh's *Wishdream* was an essay that was penned as far back as 2005 but published by Saffronart in 2010.

Nair's last book was *Reverie with Raza* for Akar Prakar and Mapin Publications published in 2016. It became the last book to be published on Sayed Haider Raza during his living years just before his passing away.

Nair has also penned more than 100 catalogues in 31 years of work. Her most important ones are *ITIHAAS*, *Dhanraj Bhagat at 100*, *Dhvani-Shabd our Chinh* and *Upendra Maharathi* for NGMA Delhi.

She currently writes as critic for: *Architectural Digest India*, *The Hindu*, *The Pioneer*, *EXOTICA Magazine*, and writes a blog called **PIUMAge** on *Times of India*.



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