

JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

Registered Office
AM art India Pvt Ltd.
26 B.G. Kher Mara
Mumbai 400 006
India

Gallery Address
3rd Floor, Devidas Mansion
4 Mereweather Road
Colaba
Mumbai 400 001

022 2202 1051
info@jhavericontemporary.com
www.jhavericontemporary.com

Mohan Samant: Masked Dance for the Ancestors 11 October—17 November 2018

Jhaveri Contemporary is proud to present a solo exhibition by Mohan Samant (1924–2004), who is considered to be a ‘missing link’ in the narrative of modern Indian art.¹ The exhibition includes paintings and works on paper spanning three decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s. A member of the short-lived Progressive Artists’ Group, he exhibited alongside many of India’s leading artists, including FN Souza, SH Raza, and MF Husain. Samant also showed with the Bombay Group, which included KK Hebbar and KH Ara. He spent 1957 and 1958 in Rome on a scholarship awarded by the Italian government. He visited Egypt the same year. In February 1959, a Rockefeller fellowship took him to New York City, where he would remain until 1964.

Born in Bombay, Samant grew up in a cultured environment where music and literary pursuits were central to his family. He attended the JJ School of Art and upon graduation in 1952, won the Governor’s prize at the Annual Bombay Art Society Exhibition. In 1956, Samant was awarded the Gold Medal at the Bombay Art Society’s group exhibition, the Gold Medal at the Calcutta Art Society show, and the Lalit Kala Akademi All India Award. Samant also participated that year in the seminal exhibition *Eight Painters: Bendre, Gaitonde, Gujral, Husain, Khanna, Kulkarni, Kumar, Samant* curated by Thomas Keehn in New Delhi.

Exhibitions during Samant’s first New York period included what is considered the first showing of the Progressive Artists’ Group in America: *Trends in Contemporary Painting from India: Gaitonde, Husain, Khanna, Kumar, Padamsee, Raza, Samant, Souza* curated by Thomas Keehn and held at the Graham Gallery, New York, as well as *A Collection of Contemporary Art* (organized by the Art in Embassies Committee), the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1961); *Recent Acquisitions*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1963); *Dunn International: 102 Best Painters of the World*, Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, and the Tate Gallery, London (1963).

The organizers of the legendary Dunn exhibition in 1963—whose international selection committee included Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Sir Anthony Blunt, Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures—chose works by Edward Hopper, Robert Rauschenberg, and Willem de Kooning, among others. Samant was one of only two newcomers included in the exhibition, and was singled out for special recognition in the *Time* article on the show. The same year, the Museum of Modern Art acquired a painting, showing it alongside a painting by Antoni Tàpies.

Samant joined Herbert Mayer of the World House Galleries in New York. World House dealt with Giacometti, Ernst, Dubuffet, Fautrier, and Bacon, among other European artists. It was also where the young Paula Cooper worked between 1959 and 1961. Samant’s ascent was rapid – his 1961 exhibition includes loans from several distinguished collectors such as Mr and Mrs John D Rockefeller III, Joseph Hirshhorn, and George Montgomery of the Asia Society. An active period of international exhibitions followed: Tokyo, Rome, London, Zurich, Basel, and Brazil, where he participated in the 1959 Sao Paulo Biennale. In the mid 1960s, Samant returned to live in Bombay. The association with World House continued despite the gallery’s premature closure in the late 1960s.

In 1968, Samant, like SH Raza and FN Souza before him, left India permanently. Returning to New York and with the gallery no longer active, he turned his attention to his other great passion – music. An accomplished *saranggi* player, he spent the better part of the day practicing. With his wife Jillian, who was an accomplished musician herself, they hosted recitals and concerts in their New York loft surrounded by Mohan’s paintings and collection of objects, which ranged from Indonesian shadow puppets to African masks. For a prolonged period between 1975 and 1994, Samant held no public solo exhibitions, although he never stopped painting.

¹ Ranjit Hoskote, *Mohan Samant: Mixed Media Works*, Pundole Art Gallery, 2008

Samant's paintings are a marriage in diverse materials, exploring the boundaries between painting and other disciplines, including sculpture, drawing, and architecture. Unlike the medium-specific practices of the Progressive Group, Samant's hybrid and playful compositions deploy unusual materials that challenge the distinctions between high and low art, art and craft. Jeffrey Wechsler observed in his essay that 'Samant's practice was the antithesis of a signature style. Throughout his career, he delved into divergent materials and techniques and constantly shifted imagery. While some of his processes and forms can be perceived on a regular basis over long periods of time, there was no hewing to a given image, endlessly repeated. He stated that "I find that stagnation in style and the search for the same forms cause an artist to suffer an immense amount of laboriousness in his work."'

As the 1970s progressed, Samant began to incorporate increasingly complex imagery and techniques into his work. Gone were the textured impasto paintings of the previous decade. Samant began to cut into the canvas, folding paper to make dense overlapping constructions that teeter between figuration and abstraction. He began to incorporate hand-twisted wire and readymade toys into assemblages that were painting, relief, sculpture, found object, and wirework construction in equal measure. His inspirations were wide ranging too: from prehistoric cave paintings and Egyptian funerary wall drawings to Indian miniatures and folk art. Samant's unique approach to the surface of the canvas raised new conceptual questions, prising open psychological and sexual experiences. His work paves the way for the new generation of Indian artists who emerged in the 1990s, such as Atul Dodiya, whose experimentation with materials and processes stretch the limits of painting practice.

A renewed interest in the modern period has meant that Samant's works have begun circulating once again in significant exhibition in Europe and America. These include *Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection*, Grey Art Gallery, New York (2015); *Postwar Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-65*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2017); *Everything we do is music*, Drawing Room, London (2018); *South Asian Modernists, 1953-63*, the Whitworth, Manchester (2017/18); and most recently, *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India*, Asia Society, New York (2018). Jhaveri Contemporary presented a solo display of paintings and works on paper by Samant earlier this year at Frieze New York (May 2018), for which it was awarded the Frieze Stand Prize.