British Art Studies

September 2019

London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories

**Edited by Hammad Nasar and Sarah
Victoria Turner**

British Art Studies

Issue 13, published 30 September 2019

London, Asia, Exhibitions, Histories

Edited by Hammad Nasar and Sarah Victoria Turner

Cover image: Rubber shavings made during Bettina Fung's performance of "Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019.. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.

PDF generated on 14 April 2022

Note: *British Art Studies* is a digital publication and intended to be experienced online and referenced digitally. PDFs are provided for ease of reading offline. Please do not reference the PDF in academic citations: we recommend the use of DOIs (digital object identifiers) provided within the online article. These unique alphanumeric strings identify content and provide a persistent link to a location on the internet. A DOI is guaranteed never to change, so you can use it to link permanently to electronic documents with confidence.

Published by:

Paul Mellon Centre

16 Bedford Square

London, WC1B 3JA

<https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk>

In partnership with:

Yale Center for British Art

1080 Chapel Street

New Haven, Connecticut

<https://britishart.yale.edu>

ISSN: 2058-5462

DOI: 10.17658/issn.2058-5462

URL: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk>

Editorial team: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/editorial-team>

Advisory board: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/advisory-board>

Produced in the United Kingdom.

A joint publication by

PAUL MELLON
CENTRE

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

Contents

Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond, Sonal Khullar

Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond

Sonal Khullar

Authors

Sonal Khullar is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Washington

Cite as

Sonal Khullar, "Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond", *British Art Studies*, Issue 13, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/skhullar>

The global turn in the discipline of art history over the past decade has generated new accounts of modernism and modernity, challenging Eurocentric, and especially Greenbergian, narratives of modern art. These new histories have expanded our canons and conceptions of modern art to include practices and discourses from Mexico, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Vietnam, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Britain, and the Soviet Union, which is to say, outside the art world centers of Paris and New York. Examining overlooked artists and artworks and highlighting circulation and mobility, new scholarship has called attention to imperial and diasporic formations in ways that illuminate the aesthetics and politics of global cities and cosmopolitan art worlds rather than reinforcing the logics of empire or nation-state. Such scholarship has challenged the conventional organization of syllabuses, specializations, art exhibitions, and museum departments along national-cultural lines, and offered an opportunity to rethink the intellectual efficacy and analytic contours of subfields such as British art history and South Asian art history.

Taking its cue from these developments, *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain, 1900 to Now* (co-organised by Sonal Khullar, Hammad Nasar, Devika Singh, and Sarah Victoria Turner), brought together specialists from these subfields that have functioned separately in modern museums, galleries, and the academy. Our focus was on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given the relatively rich and robust scholarship on the nineteenth century. We took a *longue durée* approach to British colonial rule in South Asia, accounting for both pre- and post-independence periods. Our title emphasized the exhibition as a process: not a static collection of objects or assembly of forms, but rather like artistic practice that unfolds over time, tells stories, has histories, entails recursions, creates rituals, conjures place, displays objects, and shapes consciousness. Writing about exhibitions of Indian art in the United States, Rebecca Brown has used the evocative and historically resonant metaphor of the tent as “encampment, environment, all-encompassing lived experience”.¹ That metaphor extends to the Crystal Palace exhibition in London (1851) and *The Fabric of India* exhibition (2015–2016) at the Victoria and Albert Museum and refers to the ritual construction of kingship and sovereignty in South Asia through tents, canopies, carpets, and other luxury textiles (Fig. 1). Often relegated to the category of crafts, decorative objects, or applied arts in histories of art, these textiles were crucial to constructing a relationship between South Asia and Britain, and thereby the making of the modern world. That relationship, as the *London, Asia* project demonstrates, did not end with India’s independence from British rule in 1947. Its reverberations are evident in artistic practice and exhibitions in Bradford, Manchester, Leeds, and London, home to large South Asian and other diasporic communities settled in Britain.

Figure 1.

The Fabric of India, installation photograph, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The conference explored the aesthetic, social, political, and phenomenological dimensions of exhibition practice, broadly construed to include institutions (e.g. Burlington House, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford) and individuals (e.g. Dayanita Singh, Lionel Wendt). Panels and roundtable discussions addressed “curatorial practice”, “crafting practice”, “institutional histories”, “writing about exhibitions”, “competing modernities”, “exhibition circuits/networks of display”, “experience and event”, and “other stories”, and involved curators, artists, critics, and professional academics from the United Kingdom, South Asia, and the United States. Our venues in central London—the Congress Centre, One Alfred Place, the Paul Mellon Centre, and Tate Modern—spoke powerfully to the themes of the conference. Jacob Epstein’s *Pietà*-like sculpture of a woman holding her dead son, a monument to workers who served in the two world wars and completed in 1956-57, stands in the courtyard of the Congress Centre, home to the Trades Union Congress (Fig. 2). Epstein’s modernism—and that of other avant-garde British artists such as Eric Gill—was deeply influenced by traditional Indian temple sculpture and emblemizes what Rupert Arrowsmith has called a “global aesthetic exchange” centered on “London’s museum network” during the 1910s.² That sculpture suggests London’s privileged place as the site of exhibitions, collaboration, and education for many artists from Britain and South Asia. The pioneering art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), a friend of Epstein and Gill, made his home in England between 1907 and 1917 (with long stays in India) and founded the India Society in London in 1910. In 1908, he published *Medieval Sinhalese Art* on William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, and

pursued multiple inquiries into the conjunction of art, labor, and value (Fig. 3). Coomaraswamy's friendship with Charles Robert Ashbee, a key figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and involvement with the Chipping Campden Guild and School of Handicraft attest to complex bonds that emerged from doing, making, and writing—and indeed, showing, telling, and seeing—and that defy nationalist or colonialist narratives of art.

Figure 2.

Interior view of Congress House, Great Russell Street, London, photograph, showing the *Trades Union Congress War Memorial* by Jacob Epstein, 1956-1957, roman stone, 1956. Collection of English Heritage. Digital image courtesy of James O. Davies and English Heritage.

Four hundred and twenty-five copies printed under the care of the Author at the Essex House Press in the Norman Chapel at Broad Campden, Gloucestershire. Begun September, 1907, and finished December, 1908.

Of twenty-five copies on hand-made paper this is No. 14.

Figure 3.

Publisher stamp, reproduced in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden: Essex House Press, 1908), 1908. Collection of The British Library. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.

Those bonds were not limited to the colonial period. Take, for instance, the exhibition *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (1 June—6 November 2016) at Tate Modern, which provided an ideal opportunity to explore themes of the conference with an art world audience (Fig. 4). In 1976, Khakhar (1934–2003), a largely self-trained artist and part-time accountant, visited Britain, where he befriended the artist Howard Hodgkin and critic Timothy Hyman. He would later return to teach at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham in 1979, with his style of figuration inspiring Francesco Clemente and Salman Rushdie, whose portrait, *The Moor*, Khakhar painted for the National Portrait Gallery in 1995. In 1962, Khakhar wrote a master's thesis on Company Painting (so named after the British East India Company), a genre of art executed by Indians, patronized by Europeans, and collected by British institutions. His paintings of the late 1960s and 1970s drew inventively on

the visual culture of empire, including paintings, prints, and photographs, as well as the figure of the colonial hunter, surveyor, and ruler. “Photographs of the British Raj,/Viceroys, battalions of attendants, pomp, hypocrisy,/and glamor of white skin” were among the visual sources Khakhar cited.³

Figure 4.

Bhupen Khakhar, *You Can't Please All*, 1981, oil on canvas. Collection of Tate (T07200). Digital image courtesy of Tate and the estate of Bhupen Khakhar.

In a public program at Tate Modern, organized by Sandra Sykorova and Nada Raza in conjunction with *Showing, Telling, Seeing* on 2 July, critics Geeta Kapur and Deepak Ananth and art historians Sonal Khullar and Karin Zitzewitz along with museum director Chris Dercon reflected on the artist's career and contributions. Jonathan Jones' controversial review of the exhibition in which he declared Khakhar a “hamfisted hack” whose “paintings belong in the Royal Academy summer show, not Tate Modern” made the stakes of the conference more urgent.⁴ Was Khakhar “Mumbai's answer to Beryl Cook,” as Jones suggested, or an artist who “can make the language of painting offer the gift of a complex vernacular and vivid speech to their (beloved) subjects,” as Kapur claimed in a rejoinder to Jones?⁵ What

was Khakhar's place in Britain, and by extension, the role of South Asian artists and artworks in British museums? For Kapur, the debate over the exhibition was about "other cultures lay[ing] claim to modernity as a historically co-produced project," a claim she first articulated in a master's thesis completed in 1968 at the Royal College of Art, "In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture With Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting".⁶ That project of modernity remains unfinished as other artists and artworks continue to demand representation on equal and ethical terms in our exhibitions, institutions, and imaginations.

Footnotes

- 1 Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 3.
- 2 Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.
- 3 Bhupen Khakhar, "Notes on the Visual Sources of My Painting", *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 10 (1969): 24–26. This essay was first published as Bhupen Khakhar, "Visual Notes", *Vrishchik* 1, no. 1 (1969): n.p.
- 4 Jonathan Jones, "Bhupen Khakhar Review—Mumbai's Answer to Beryl Cook", *The Guardian*, 31 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/31/bhupen-khakhar-review-you-cant-please-all-tate-modern> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Laura Cumming, "Bhupen Khakhar—You Can't Please All Review: A Sprawl Through a Life's Work", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/05/bhupen-khakhar-you-cant-please-all-review-tate-modern-pop-art-pink-city-howard-hodgkin-david-hockney> (accessed 25 June 2019).
- 5 Geeta Kapur, "Guardian Review of Bhupen Khakhar at Tate Narrow-Minded", *The Wire*, 5 June 2019. <https://thewire.in/40568/guardian-review-of-bhupen-khakhar-at-tate-narrow-minded-geeta-kapur/> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Amit Chaudhuri, "Bombay Dreams: How Painter Bhupen Khakhar Captured the City Spirit", *The Guardian*, 21 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/21/bombay-dreams-how-bhupen-khakhar-captured-spirit-of-city> (accessed 12 January 2018).
- 6 Geeta Kapur, *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting* (Baroda: Vrishchik, 1973), no page numbers. This thesis was serialized in the journal *Vrishchik* in 1971 and 1972, and published in its entirety as a special publication of the journal in 1973.

Bibliography

- Arrowsmith, Rupert Richard (2011) *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Rebecca M. (2017) *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Chaudhuri, Amit (2016) "Bombay Dreams: How Painter Bhupen Khakhar Captured the City Spirit". *The Guardian*, 21 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/21/bombay-dreams-how-bhupen-khakhar-captured-spirit-of-city> (accessed 12 January 2018).
- Cumming, Laura (2016) "Bhupen Khakhar—You Can't Please All Review: A Sprawl Through a Life's Work". *The Guardian*, 5 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/05/bhupen-khakhar-you-cant-please-all-review-tate-modern-pop-art-pink-city-howard-hodgkin-david-hockney> (accessed 25 June 2019).
- Kapur, Geeta (1973) *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting*. Baroda: Vrishchik.
- Kapur, Geeta (2019) "Guardian Review of Bhupen Khakhar at Tate Narrow-Minded". *The Wire*, 5 June. <https://thewire.in/40568/guardian-review-of-bhupen-khakhar-at-tate-narrow-minded-geeta-kapur/?fromNewsdog=1> (accessed 25 June 2019).
- Khakhar, Bhupen (1969) "Notes on the Visual Sources of My Painting". *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 10: 24–26.
- Jones, Jonathan (2016) "Bhupen Khakhar Review—Mumbai's Answer to Beryl Cook". *The Guardian*, 31 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/31/bhupen-khakhar-review-you-cant-please-all-tate-modern> (accessed 25 June 2019).

Licensing

The Publishers of *British Art Studies* are committed to supporting scholarship on British art and architecture of all periods. This publication is made available free of charge at <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk>. We ask users to identify the use of materials made available through this website and to provide an appropriate credit to the to the author and the publication, so that others may find and use our resources.

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence (CC BY-NC 2.0 UK). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/uk/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

The Publishers fully support the protection of intellectual property and are committed to complying with, and strictly adhering to, all applicable copyright law. In many cases, copyright or other proprietary rights may be held by individuals or entities other than, or in addition to, the Publishers. If a work or a photographic image is still protected by copyright, you must cite the relevant copyright information when using the image and comply with all other terms or restrictions that may be applicable to that material.

In some cases, exceptions to copyright that permit limited use of protected works without the permission of the copyright owner may have be applied. We are confident that we have carried out due diligence in our use of copyrighted material as required, but we apologise for any inadvertent infringement of rights.

Digital copies of resources are made accessible for research for one of the following reasons:

- they are in the public domain;
- the rights are owned by the Publishers;
- we make them accessible under an exception or limitation to UK copyright law, as outlined in the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended);
- we have permission to make them accessible;
- or, there are no known restrictions on use.

If you believe that we have made a mistake and wish for your material to be removed from our site, please contact us at copyright@paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk.

Please include the following information with your request:

- Name and contact information, including email address and phone number.
- Identification of the resource for consideration of removal. Providing URLs in your communication will help us locate content quickly.
- The reason for the request.

The Publishers respond promptly, normally within 21 business days. We may remove the resource from our site while we assess the validity of the request. Upon completion of the assessment, we will take appropriate action and communicate that action to you.