

Between the Popular and the Personal: Bhupen Khakhar

Developed in the 1950s, the Pop Art movement is distinguished by its use of bold colours, humour and satire, references to everyday imagery and criticism of consumerist culture. Through the integration of irony, imagery from popular, religious and secular visual cultures, and representations of disparate classes of people in ordinary environments, Bhupen Khakhar is known for developing a unique approach to Pop Art.

Background

Khakhar was born in 1934 in Bombay, and moved to Baroda in 1963 to study art criticism on the artist Gulammohammed Sheikh's (b. 1937) invitation. Part of a vibrant circle of artists that were shaping the debates on Indian art and aesthetics of the time, he experienced social freedoms in Baroda that would have been impossible for him at home in Bombay. Here, he simultaneously worked as a chartered accountant, a painter and a writer until his death in 2003. Let's now turn to some of his iconic works that reveal how he developed a unique visual language within the frame of Pop.

Man with a Bouquet of Plastic Flowers

Man with a Bouquet of Plastic Flowers (1975–1976) exemplifies the use of irony and artifice, which were two hallmarks of Pop. The composition is centred around a man in a characteristically stiff or intentionally awkward posture, typical of many of Khakhar's figures. This painting can be read within the context of Indian 'calendar prints' which often featured prominent figures like politicians, as we see here. By drawing from such styles of prints, postcards or posters that were found across homes and streets in India, he bridges the gap between the highbrow, academic art of oil painting and popular visual culture.

Understanding this work hinges in large part on the fact that the flowers the man holds are plastic, and therefore artificial and devoid of life. This may make us pause as we read his expression and body language. He looks straight at us, his face shaded and mouth downcast. Is he melancholic? Is he to be read as sincere? Further clues can be found in the everyday events portrayed in the background. Instead of scenes of glory or admiration that were conventions of calendar art, this man is surrounded by empty interiors and scenes that speak of alienation, and the darkness of ordinary life.

Let's now turn to another work where his figures are painted in a deliberately awkward and unsettling manner.

A Parsi Family

The painting *A Parsi Family* (1968) presents a traditional group portrait seen from an unusual distance. Instead of the warmth we might expect from a family portrait, we find the figures placed in an uninterrupted, unmarked and strange setting. The family is framed by two potted floor plants on each side, without much indication of liveliness among them otherwise, almost like a still life. The distance of our viewing and abstraction from normal life add to the wryness of this portrait. The work is also a clever comment on the long tradition of studio photography in India, whereby families might have their portraits taken in front of aspirational backgrounds signalling ambition or other desires.

The family is presented as Parsis, a small Indian community primarily associated today with the history of Bombay, and including some of the most prominent citizens of the city. Parsis, or Zoroastrians, are an ethno-religious group who fled from persecution in Iran to ports in Gujarat beginning in the 8th century. It's ironic and almost humorous to see the family stripped of any further context.

Employing techniques of satire and humour to reflect on societal conditions and familial lives, Khakhar also turns his lens inwards in his later works, presenting deeply personal narratives with a sense of vulnerability.

You Can't Please All

Beginning in the early 1980s, Khakhar's work took a more personal turn, making him the first artist in India to address his homosexuality through his paintings. Khakhar's iconic 'coming out' painting *You Can't Please All* (1981) shows a nude man on a balcony in the foreground as he watches a layered townscape below. The balcony acts as a physical and metaphorical edge of his private life, and the man's position and gaze indicate his engagement in the public realm.

In the narrative scene below, we see ordinary elements of village life amidst a representation of one of Aesop's fables about a man and his son who unintentionally end up killing their donkey by obeying the guidance of their community. The very title of Khakhar's painting comes from the last line of the story, when an old man advises the father and son, 'Please all, and you will please none', implying the difficulties Khakhar himself faced with not being accepted in society. In this way, the painting integrates the personal, the everyday and the symbolic, all of which remain central to Pop and elements of Khakhar's work through the rest of his life.

Khakhar not only left a deep imprint on the trajectory of Indian art through his radical subject matter, but also through the influence he had on a closely-knit circle of artists in India. Following his death in 2013, his legacy has been celebrated in a number of works his friends and contemporaries such as Jogen Chowdhury (b.1939), Atul Dodiya (b.1959) and Gulammohammed Sheikh created in his memory, as we see here.

Works by Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003) have also contributed to the narrative figuration movement that he was a part of in Baroda. His painting, 'You Can't Please All' was exhibited as part of the landmark exhibition 'Place for People', which toured from Bombay to New Delhi in 1981. This exhibition is now regarded as a turning point in Indian modernism, moving from symbolic and abstract imagery to personal and narrative subject matter.

Bibliography:

Citron, Beth. "Bhupen Khakhar's 'Pop' in India, 1970–72." *Art Journal* 71, no. 2, (2012): 44-61.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2012.10791093>

Dercon, Chris and Nada Raza, eds. *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016.

Desai, Mahendra. *A Man Labelled Bhupen Khakhar Branded as Painter*. Mumbai: Identity People, 1983.

Hyman, Timothy. *Bhupen Khakhar*. Mumbai: Chemould Publications and Arts, 1998.

Kapur, Geeta and Vivian Sundaram. "Place for People." *Asia Art Archive*, 1981.
<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/geeta-kapur-and-vivan-sundaram-archive-place-for-people-1981>

Khakhar, Bhupen. Exhibition catalogue. Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1986

This document is part of an online course on Modern & Contemporary Indian Art. Click [here](#) to access.

© 2023 MAP Academy, all rights reserved. The MAP Academy is a project of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru.

<https://mapacademy.io/> | [instagram.com/map_academy/](https://www.instagram.com/map_academy/)