

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Where He Belongs

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At 82, British master Howard Hodgkin's paintings may be 'debuting' in India, but this is the country that has made him the artist he is.

One wall of eminent British painter, Howard Hodgkin's temporary residence-cum makeshift-studio at a plush Colaba apartment carries six of his new abstract works on wood. These include Britannia Bombay, Hello and Goodbye, all painted during his current visit to India. They will make it to a forthcoming two-month-long show, along with 20 other works that capture his oeuvre from 1984 until now, at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, CSMVS.

Supported by Tate, Howard Hodgkin: Paintings 1984 -2015 A Tribute also marks the London gallery's entry into the Indian exhibition scene as it brings down two large works of the artist in its collection - Rain (1984-9) and Come into the Garden Maud (2000-3).

Hodgkin, now 82, has been painting for more than five decades, but remarks, "I should say this immediately, that I can't tell you much about my work, because I don't know."

"He can't sit down and explain his work; Howard can't and won't do that," smiles music writer Antony Peattie, Hodgkin's partner.

“And to be honest,” adds Britain’s most revered colourist, “I don’t enjoy painting at all; I hate it. I paint only because I have got used to it.” But what he enjoys about the process is “that you can invent whatever you like in art. So much of the work is the thinking behind what I hear and see.”

He then draws our attention to a cache of 30 gouaches called Indian Waves. Hand-painted over intaglio printed Indian khadi paper, these were shown a few months ago at London’s Gagosian Gallery.

Twelve of these gouaches will also be on display in Mumbai. They were created between 1990-91 at the 107 Workshop with printers Jack Shirreff and Andrew Smith. Inspired by India, and specifically, Mumbai’s waves, they were packed and stored away for 20 years, until Shirreff found them while emptying out his workshop. One day, Hodgkin’s assistant Andy Barker accidentally stumbled across them. “But I completely forgot about them,” he shares.

Hodgkin never belonged to a school of art, because, “as a student, he did not fit in with the dominant Euston Road ethos. While his contemporaries became pop artists, or members of the School of London, he remained independent, marking his outsider status with a series of portraits of friends, colleagues and their families,” reads his biography.

Back in Britain in 1943, Hodgkin had run away from Eton and Bryanston, convinced that school would hinder his progress as an artist. But at Eton, it was professor Wilfrid Blunt, who introduced him to art from a country he’d grow to love. Blunt also introduced him to the idea of collecting Indian art, a passion Hodgkin supported by dealing in picture frames. A keen collector of Indian miniatures, he is particularly interested in elephants. “I think, elephants are like the nude human being in Western art; examples of ideal form and I find them very exciting always,” he says. In all Indian miniatures he acquires, elephants always happen to be there.

Today, he is one of India’s greatest friends, and has been returning every year since 1964, with Mumbai serving as a constant source of inspiration. Indian Room (1967) was his first print inspired by an Indian theme. He followed this up with two series of prints - Indian Views (1971) and More Indian Views (1976) - that took off from sights he took in while travelling on Indian trains. Hodgkin, who has designed a mural for the facade of master architect Charles Correa’s building for the British Council Headquarters in New Delhi has since returned to the subject in Indian Tree and Mango (1990-1991), In India and Delhi (2012).

In fact, in an interview published in The Guardian last year, Hodgkin said that he ‘would not have been able to produce the art he has if it were not for India: “I couldn’t work without it.” His forthcoming show only stands as testimony.