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Dying Breaths:

Bhupen Khakhar, Queerness, and Late Style

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Art History

by

Syantana Mukhopadhyay

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Dying Breaths:

Bhupen Khakhar, Queerness, and Late Style

by

Sayantana Mukhopadhyay

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Saloni Mathur, Chair

Bhupen Khakhar's legacy lives on as one of the most radical Indian painters of his generation. Working in Baroda and gaining recognition throughout the 80's and 90's, Khakhar was a pioneering voice in queer aesthetics in context of South Asian modernism. This paper examines the last phase of his career before his death in 2003, in which the artist traded out images of homoerotic *jouissance* for pictures depicting gore, disease, and the macabre. I argue that death's intimate connection with queer identity helps provide an ontological bridge between his earlier work and his 'late style.'

I first give an overview of the stakes of inserting a queer visual lexicon in the modern moment, comparing India's experience of modernity to the canonical moment in nineteenth century France for corollaries. before giving a broad overview of the artist's biography, as well

as the scholarship that has already been conducted on him. I then discuss an early monograph that was published by friend and fellow artist, Timothy Hyman, to establish the limiting way in which his sexuality is often discussed as a bounded ‘period’ in his life’s work. I finally propose an alternative mode of accessing his ‘late style’ by queerness’s links to mortality, in an attempt to open up the discourse on Khakhar into more flexible categories.

The thesis of Sayantan Mukhopadhyay is approved.

George Baker

Steven Nelson

Saloni Mathur, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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## Introduction

Fourteen years have passed since the death of the Indian painter, Bhupen Khakhar (b. 1934-2003), and his admirers have increased in number and become more vocal over time. For the friends and colleagues who have outlived him, he is a tender memory that continues to inspire, as evidenced in their art, their writings, and their wistful conversations. Part of the second wave of modernists to rise to prominence in India in the post-Independence period, Khakhar and his paintings started to garner attention in the 1970s with their commitment to a vision of Indian urbanism that contrasted with the dominant portrayals of Bombay artists that prevailed at the time. He painted life in his adopted home of Baroda, a “beta” city often overshadowed by its large metropolitan counterparts, capturing its grit and glory in equal measure. Most importantly, Khakhar has been branded India’s first openly gay artist, a fact that came to permeate the images he produced throughout the 1980’s and 90’s that depicted men among men caught in various salacious acts of sexual union.

Despite the overt presence of this homosexual imagery, discussions of Khakhar’s work have shyly skirted any meaningful assessment of its central role and function in his paintings. Scholars often recognize the inherent eroticism present in his works, yet there has been little to no engagement with this theme through the specific apparatus of queer theory. It is thus my intention to directly address the *queer* implications of Khakhar’s work, turning — perhaps counter-intuitively — to the paintings he executed in the last years of his life when he was succumbing to his long battle with cancer. I use the term “queer” deliberately, circumventing the commonly-employed term ‘gay’, to encompass a non-binary identity that espouses a broader

politics that transcend easy, rigid categories.<sup>1</sup>

Looking past the symbolism present in Khakhar's bombastic paintings of male-male sex in the 1980s and 90s, I wish to center my discussion instead on his pictures of the macabre, and connect them to the queer politics that suffuses the artist's oeuvre. On the one hand, these late paintings, which deal largely with the body and its susceptibility to disease, represent an important transition away from Khakhar's interests in depictions of homosexual pleasure and sex. On the other hand, they elucidate a salient connection between queer identity and mortality. In assessing these images of death through their relationship to non-normative sexuality, I wish to elucidate the ways in which Khakhar's paintings consistently presaged a concern with the fallibility of the body. My goal is to articulate how the artist's interests in the dissolution of the body in his 'late style' find an imminently comfortable place in the discourses surrounding sexual politics within marginalized communities.

## **Men & Modernity**

Khakhar's images of men among men are singular in the context of modernist art practice in India. Modernism in South Asia, as in other locales, was a male domain that made early female figures such as Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) and Sunayani Devi (1875-1962) anomalies. The former was a liberated, bi-racial, bisexual young woman forging her own path<sup>2</sup> and the latter a self-taught "leisure" artist connected by birth to high society as a sister of the Tagores;<sup>3</sup> due to privileged circumstances, both were able to partake in a community otherwise sealed off to men.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 231-2.

<sup>2</sup> Saloni Mathur, "A Retake of Sher-Gil's Self-Portrait as Tahitian," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 516.

<sup>3</sup> Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 36.

In addition to the lack of a discernible contingent of early women modernists, the blatant chauvinism exhibited by the Progressive Artists' Group surfaces in much of their imagery. As is well known, this all-male Bombay-based cohort, known for their interventions into abstraction and expressionist visual languages at the cusp of Indian independence in 1947, forged their radical aesthetic project through the sexualized female body.<sup>4</sup>

MF Husain — a leader in the Progressive Artists' Group and its most famous member — was caught in an incendiary debate during the mid-1990's surrounding his representations of nude Hindu goddesses.<sup>5</sup> While the vitriol stemming from this issue was framed in largely religious terms, the discussion was also intensely gendered, involving questions of blasphemy and disrespect of the female form within the dominant modes of aesthetic production. Looking also at his comrade FN Souza's grotesque and misogynistic representations of women, it becomes clear that the terms in which modernist painting was initially framed in India carried strong assertions of traditional masculinity that served to normalize the objectification of the female figure.

Enter Khakhar, scarcely a decade later in a shifting landscape of artists, with pictures that placed a specifically un-idealized and common male body in focus. Khakhar's admittedly homosocial imagery harkened a new set of possibilities at the time. While figures such as Shergil turned away from the aristocratic leanings of the Bengal School and introduced plebeian faces into a modernist vision for art, Khakhar's insistence on an urban (rather than pastoral) engagement with the everyman that populated India's growing cities was unique. A parallel

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<sup>4</sup> Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Veena Das, "Of MF Husain and an Impossible Love," *Barefoot Across The Nation*, Ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (London: Routledge, 2011), 122.

might be drawn in the canonical moment of modernism represented by 19th century France, during which rapid urban industrialization became foregrounded in art, displacing the academic tradition of history painting. While Manet's *Olympia* (1856) marks a critical turn in the treatment of the female nude, Gustave Caillebotte and Frédéric Bazille are two contemporaries whose depictions of the male body offered a revolutionary vision of masculinity.

Gaining recognition only slowly and long standing in the shadows of their peers, Bazille and Caillebotte's orientations toward the male body — their interest in the sociality and bonding that took place between men in a modernizing Paris — might be considered as a productive correlation to Manet's *Olympia* in a queer realm (to lay aside momentarily the lesbian undertones operating in *Olympia* itself).<sup>6</sup> Norma Broude's assessment of the discomfort represented by the men in these images addresses the stakes at hand in a society experiencing social change.<sup>7</sup> The presence of nude men, subject to the male gaze of both the viewer and the artist, displaced all prior association of nudity with a classicizing heroism.<sup>8</sup> These men, going about their day in a domestic setting or ambling out by the water, troubled the traditional relationship established between viewer and subject, and presented nudity that was for the first time not predicated on either an historical (largely Greco-Roman) narrative or on heterosexual desire.

This makes scenarios such as Bazille's *Summer Scene* (1869) intensely provocative (Fig. 1). Although separated by a century, Bazille's paintings, like Khakhar's canvases, are punctuated with male bodies in states of undress, asking the viewer, for once, to confront relationships of

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<sup>6</sup> Norma Broude, "Outing Impressionism: Homosexuality and Homosocial Bonding in the Work of Caillebotte & Bazille," *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*, Ed. Norma Broude (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002) 117-8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 153-4.

desire among men. On a languorous afternoon, Bazille's male subjects find a watering hole that permits them to shed their clothes and their mores to be among each other under the summer sun. Bazille borrows several prototypical poses found throughout the history of the male nude and deploys them strategically: a man sidled up to a tree reminiscent of Saint Sebastian on the far left, wrestlers at the center, a relaxed reclining figure in the middle-ground looking on. It is a legible lexicon that is repurposed for a scene void of women, intensifying the homoerotic tension that electrifies the gazes darting between the figures.

Bazille and Caillebotte's subtle treatments of the sexuality of the male subject might offer a corollary in underscoring the importance of Khakhar's work in introducing a possible "queer aesthetics". By this, I mean an art that lends itself to non-normative readings, moving beyond traditionally heterosexual modes of spectatorship.<sup>9</sup> The claims that Khakhar has on modernism in India are not entirely dissimilar to Paris in the preceding century. India at this juncture is still a newly liberated nation, industrializing at a steady clip, and artists throughout the country are grappling with the task of expressing new visual languages in their work; France's growing capitalist industrial economy of the mid- to late 19th century experienced an analogous crisis — and new set of opportunities — in representation. These two discontinuous modernisms both opened up new horizons in painting in their respective times and locations, and encouraged practitioners to experiment with the flexibility of boundaries allowed to them by medium and history. Moreover, the ability to examine two different modern moments in this discrepant and conjunctural fashion without reproducing an evolutionary teleology has been well

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<sup>9</sup> This has been exemplified in the 1980s and 90s by artists in the West such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, and Wolfgang Tillmans.

established by Geeta Kapur's foundational writing on postcolonial modernism.<sup>10</sup>

As Broude has identified in the case of French Impressionism, a time of intense social transition in France changed the parameters in the expression of male-male intimacy.<sup>11</sup>

Modernism therefore has claims on the representations of the body, and this is as true in the South Asian context as it is in the Western European one. Khakhar's willingness to bring the erotic pleasures of urban men to paint points to a new climate in post-Independence India and evinces a desire to recalibrate expectations for the fine arts in a period of continuing social dynamism. Working against the prevailing modernist grain set up in Bombay by the PAG, Khakhar negotiated a set of changes to the aesthetic playing field. It was a dramatic turn given the lack of an existing precedent in India.

And yet, the discussion surrounding Khakhar has never fully accounted for his radicality in quite these terms. By outlining the potent politics of his work, and by focusing closely on the unsung queerness of his 'late style', I wish to introduce Khakhar into the folds of a resolutely *queer* history that celebrates his singular and progressive contributions to Indian modernism, working in a time when the stakes in claiming identities in the new nation-state were high. Khakhar's inquiry into the Indian modern came through his narratives focused on men among men, men loving men, and men in the city. As I will show, this radical vision of human sexuality never fails, persisting still when these images of men give way to representations of illness.

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<sup>10</sup> Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?" *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tullika Books), 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Broude, 165.

## **From Bombay to Baroda**

Bhupen Khakhar was born in 1934 to a Gujarati family in Bombay, the youngest of four children. His father was an engineer, but passed away when he was four years old from complications arising from his alcoholism.<sup>12</sup> Left to fend for her children alone, Khakhar's mother placed a magnitude of hope in his future success. He delivered on her wishes, doing well in school and going on to become a chartered accountant. This was a job he was to keep informally throughout his life, even at the peak of his career as an artist.<sup>13</sup>

Much to his mother's chagrin, Khakhar moved to Baroda in 1958 to follow a longstanding passion and curiosity for art, enrolling in a graduate program in Art Criticism at the then-new Faculty of Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University.<sup>14</sup> This was primarily at the insistence of his friend Gulam Mohammed Sheikh,<sup>15</sup> who would be a confidant and colleague throughout his life. Baroda would become Khakhar's permanent home and a respite from the intense urbanity of Bombay, and shelter from the prying eyes of the community he lived in.

Khakhar was an autodidact and worked diligently throughout his life despite an absence of any formal training. The milieu he had built for himself in Baroda was a nurturing one: he was surrounded by a group of like-minded artists who were at the beginnings of a counterculture that developed in response to the dominant school of painting emerging at the wake of a new nation. The university, with which they were all affiliated, became a hub for vociferous dialog on

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<sup>12</sup> Geeta Kapur, "The View from a Teashop," *Contemporary Indian Artists* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978) 149-77. 149.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Hyman and Bhupen Khakhar. *Bhupen Khakhar* (Mumbai: Mapin Pub., 1998), 9.

directions in art and culture.<sup>16</sup> Nilima Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, Mrinalini Mukherjee, GM Sheikh, and other artists had banded together to establish a fresh outlook on art in the generation following from the Progressives, forging ahead in the early decades after India's liberation from the British Empire.

Khakhar started showing his work in India as early as 1965, and while it took him some time to lead the cosmopolitan life of his peers, he was traveling internationally by 1976. His first foray abroad took him to the USSR, Yugoslavia, Italy, and most significantly, England, a country with which Khakhar would develop an ambivalent but sustained relationship. It was after his stint in London that Khakhar started speaking openly about his sexuality, reflecting on the comparative sexual freedoms of the old metropole.<sup>17</sup> From then on, male sexuality became a focal trope in his work. His mother's death in 1980 also allowed him greater openness about his preferences, as he became less concerned with reactions from his family.

Those close to Khakhar have commented on the intense personal relationships he developed with men in Baroda: invariably older than the artist, sometimes ailing, and often of lower social status.<sup>18</sup> These lovers would be rendered as the everyman that appeared and reappeared in his paintings: the tea-shop owner, the zoo keeper, the average city dweller. He would care for these frail men intensely, looking after their wellbeing and often their medical expenses.<sup>19</sup> It is both in his art and his life that Khakhar would establish an alliance with

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<sup>16</sup> Nilima Sheikh, "A Post-Independence Initiative in Art," in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulamohammed Sheikh, (New Delhi: Tullika, 1997), 55.

See entire edited volume for discussion of the artistic and discursive climate in Baroda in the 70s and 80s.

<sup>17</sup> Nada Raza, "A Man Labeled Bhupen Khakhar Branded as Painter," Dercon, Chris, and Nada Raza, eds. *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (London: Tate Publications, 2016), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



vulnerable or marginal subjects;<sup>20</sup> the beauty Khakhar was to find in them became the topos of his art.

In the late 90s, after a busy decade with multiple important international exhibitions, Khakhar was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which was ultimately the cause of his death. The reverberations of this tragic loss continue to be felt today.

### **Men in Paint**

Given this unusual biography, scholars have tended to categorize Khakhar's art into three periodized divisions, beginning with his arrival in Baroda, extending to the 1980s and 90s when his work addressed explicitly sexual subject matter, and then ultimately to his post-cancer work. In the first phase, he began experimenting in material and showed a particular interest in the art of the street. The textures of daily life in India — particularly the cheap reproductions of Hindu idols seen pasted on walls of roadside temples — made appearances in pastiche collages. Even at the outset, Khakhar's sensibilities were configured (somewhat presciently) towards the aesthetics of the British and American Pop movement, and its defiant breakdown of painterly conventions that maintained the sanctity and purity of medium.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Khakhar's lexicon has often been identified with the work of British artists David Hockney and R. B. Kitaj.<sup>22</sup>

This is also the time when Khakhar worked on a series of "trade paintings": portraits of men diligently at work in their local shops, allowing for a certain view into a world ordered by their particular line of business. These works took their queue from colonial era "Company

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<sup>20</sup> Ranjit Hoskote, "A Crazy Pair of Eyes: Remembering Bhupen Khakhar," in *Touched By Bhupen* (Mumbai: Mirchandani + Steinrucke, 2013). 14.

<sup>21</sup> Beth Citron, "Bhupen Khakhar's "Pop" in India, 1970-72" *The Art Journal* 71.2 (2012): 44-61.

<sup>22</sup> Hyman, 12.

Painting,” a largely anonymous phenomenon that arose in the nineteenth century during the expansion of the British East India Company.<sup>23</sup> European travelers to the subcontinent would hire artists to portray daily life, with the intention of bringing these images back to England to share with their compatriots. Subjects were varied, but one prominent use for the Company style was to document uniforms of different groups of trades-people.<sup>24</sup> Khakhar’s paintings took this imperial motive and redeployed it for his own inquiries into the lives of his fellow countrymen, the everyday people who would become his muses in love and art until the very end.

At the zenith of this so-called early period, Khakhar also painted comical scenes from his own time in England, drawing on his travels: an ironic postcolonial reversal, in a sense, of the colonial documentation embodied by Company Painting. The sardonic tone in these images emerges from the artist’s general dislike of London’s glumness, reflected in paintings such as *Man in Pub* (1979) (Fig. 2). Three small panels on the left of the image follow a British man’s empty day, leading to the large panel on the right, showing the same sad face cradling a pint alone in a garishly decorated pub. He holds a pair of driving gloves near his crotch: the fingers bunching into a bouquet of phalluses. This subtle nod to male sexuality becomes thoroughly explicit in the next stage of his career, which, by contrast, featured graphic images of men engaging in a variety of sexual acts.

This second phase of his practice hinges on the symbolism of Khakhar’s celebrated *You Can’t Please All* (1981) (Fig. 3). It has been repeatedly cited as his ‘coming out’ painting<sup>25</sup> — a

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<sup>23</sup> Sonal Khullar, "Paan Shop for People: Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003)," *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland: U of California, 2015), 181.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Raza, 19.

declarative announcement of a gay identity that Khakhar claimed and opened up for discussion by way of this image. The painting is composed of a continuous narrative in the background, telling the Aesop's fable of a man, his son, and their donkey. This muralistic style of composition reveals Khakhar's study of the Sieneese painting tradition that flourished in Italy between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>26</sup> an interest which he shared with his colleagues in Baroda, who consumed reproductions in books obtained at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

*You Can't Please All* relays the tale of the father-and-son duo leading a donkey to the market in order to sell it. Throughout the course of their journey, the pair receives contradictory advice from passers-by, each suggesting a different way to manage the donkey for efficacious travel. Ultimately, they choose to carry the donkey on their backs, so as not to tire it out before its sale, but the donkey falls after a misstep and dies from the injury. The moral of the story is that despite how much one may try, it is impossible — even futile — to appease everyone.

In the foreground of the same scene, we see a man in the nude — a characteristic self-portrait of Khakhar himself — looking out over the developments in this narrative from his perch on a balcony. Khakhar, while speaking of this painting, had said, rather naughtily, that if indeed one cannot please all, one should please themselves.<sup>27</sup> The nudity suggests a kind of voyeurism that the central figure engages in, as if he were receiving a certain pleasure from watching these two men go about their day. When Khakhar was asked why the donkey was sporting an erection, he responded, “Because he is carrying two men.”<sup>28</sup> The man in the painting, with his back towards us, may very well be enjoying the view just as much.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Hyman, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

An engrossment in matters of same-sex love becomes a key ingredient in Khakhar's paintings in the 1980s and 90s, oftentimes married with iconography from Hindu mythology and folkloric practice. In these decades, any timidness around the male body and eroticism disappears, allowing for graphic images that explore love and lust between Indian men. These works are a willful affront to the famously conservative values of the middle class, and successfully mine a long tradition of homosociality in Indian history to locate a local vision of queer identity. The subjects are oftentimes Khakhar's own lovers, who, as already noted, came from lower socioeconomic classes. They are painted as humble subjects, with unimpressive bodies and a largely unglamorous presence.

In *Gallery of Rogues* (1993), for example, independently framed panels are arranged together in a constellation of working-class faces: lovers from all corners of Baroda who have been the object of Khakhar's doting admiration (Fig. 4). It is a journalistic documentation of the people who populated the artist's life and an assertion of a borderless pursuit of love — an aspect of Khakhar's unwavering anti-elitism manifested in both the method of his art and its subject matter.

Towards the latter end of his life, Khakhar's interest in the male body took a turn towards the grotesque. As his own relationship to corporality shifted in response to his battle with cancer, so did his approach to its painted form. His third and 'late style' is informed by the way sickness ravages and limits the body, most notably seen in *Bullet Shot in the Stomach* (2001), a somber painting in which entrails spill from a man's midriff after being assailed by a gun (Fig. 5). The texture and sheen of oil paint is disturbingly evocative of fetid flesh and reveals an inner struggle

that tormented Khakhar in his last years.<sup>29</sup> This is found too in portraits such as *Injured Head of Raju* (2001), in which the face disintegrates and liquifies into the blood it is made up of (Fig. 6). In these paintings, the body is no longer a site of sex and love, but the place of terrible decay.

### **Bhupen on the Mind**

In the growing but still nascent field of modern South Asian art history, Khakhar is one of the few figures around which a literature has accrued. Through this scholarship and a spate of exhibitions dedicated to his legacy, Khakhar has increasingly become a canonical figure.

Much is owed to two formative writers on Khakhar, Timothy Hyman and Geeta Kapur. The British artist Hyman's mid-90s monograph on the artist has become a foundational text. The scope of an artist monograph has historically been to furnish a comprehensive overview of a given artist's work, and as such, Hyman's volume has provided insight into the painter's developmental trajectory and supplied a public with the hitherto most important compilation of color reproductions of Khakhar's paintings. This monograph has had serious implications on the way the discourse surrounding the artist has grown ever since its release, which I consider critically in more detail below. The second formative writer, the art critic Geeta Kapur, is a formidable figure still in the Indian art world and pioneer in the development of discourse surrounding modernism in the South Asian context. She has been a prolific voice in establishing a canon of artists for 20th century India; her writings on Khakhar — and indeed on other painters such as MF Husain and GM Sheikh, for instance — have provided solid groundwork for further scholarly investigations. A dear friend of Khakhar's (and wife of his close colleague, Vivan

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<sup>29</sup> Geeta Kapur, "Mortality Morbidity Masquerade," Dercon, Chris, and Nada Raza, eds. *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (London: Tate Publications, 2016), 162.

Sundaram), Kapur used her familial proximity to Khakhar to return time and again to his work. Seemingly bewitched by the man and his art, Kapur wrote about him in her 1969 Master's Thesis for the Royal College of Art in London,<sup>30</sup> and then again in multiple outlets: one of the first histories of modern Indian art,<sup>31</sup> the catalog for a tightly curated show at the Tate in 1982,<sup>32</sup> a tribute text published shortly after his death,<sup>33</sup> an anthology of essays regarding the trajectories of Pop in global culture,<sup>34</sup> and most recently in the catalog for the Tate retrospective.<sup>35</sup> Her consistent efforts have defined Khakhar as a pivotal figure in post-independence India, and opened up further lines of inquiry for her successors.

Two recent volumes, written by a younger generation of scholars, have taken up Kapur's mantle and advanced research into Khakhar's life. Karin Zitzewitz has studied Khakhar's painting in regards to Hindu philosophy (particularly the notion of "*bhakt*" or devotion)<sup>36</sup>, while Sonal Khullar has examined Khakhar's work as an intensely urban and democratic project.<sup>37</sup> These interventions have not only galvanized a more scrupulous discussion of the modern moment in India, but have served to underscore Khakhar's immense role in shaping conversations on art, aesthetics, and politics at a critical juncture in South Asian history. It is telling that these most recent entries into the field should both turn to him as a leading example

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<sup>30</sup> Geeta Kapur, "In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting." Serialized in *Vrischik*, 1971-72.

<sup>31</sup> Kapur. "Indian Contemporary Artists"

<sup>32</sup> Geeta Kapur, "Bhupen Khakhar," in *Six Indian Painters*. Ed. Howard Hodgkin. (London: Tate Gallery, 1982)

<sup>33</sup> Geeta Kapur, "Saint Bhupen," in *Bhupen among Friends: A Tribute to Bhupen Khakhar by Friends*, (Mumbai: Chemould, 2005)

<sup>34</sup> Geeta Kapur, "The Uncommon Universe of Bhupen Khakhar," in *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Geeta Kapur, "Mortality Morbidity Masquerade," *You Can't Please All*, Eds. Nada Raza & Chris Dercon (London: Tate Publications, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Karin Zitzewitz, "An Artist's Claim to Truth: Bhupen Khakar," *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014),123-48.

<sup>37</sup> Khullar, 2015.

of the kinds of experimentation that were taking place in early national visual culture.

On the occasion of the 2016 exhibition at the Tate, the museum released a catalog with important texts that further feed the artist's legacy and process of memorialization. Curator Nada Raza's introductory biography might be one of the most comprehensive to date,<sup>38</sup> drawing thoroughly on Timothy Hyman's monograph and Geeta Kapur's texts. There are also contributions by Zitzewitz, expounding on prior Hindu readings of Khakhar's work, as well as Kapur's essay reflecting on the artist's morbid late style. As a compliment to an exhibition that attempts to provide the most thorough look into Khakhar's world to date, the essays that fill the pages of the attendant catalog round out and legitimize the conversation about the implications of Khakhar's work on art history more generally.

While the enthusiasm for Khakhar in academia is an encouraging indication of the vaunted status he is to achieve as histories continue to be written, the resulting discourse is striking for its lack of engagement with the queer implications of the artist's work. The origins of this lacuna may well reside in Hyman's structuring of a hagiographic monograph, to which I will turn now in order to consider its afterlife and effects.

### **Monographic Memorial**

Hyman is a British figurative painter who has also written extensively as a critic and practiced as a curator. He enjoyed a deep friendship with Khakhar, kindled on his many visits to India and during the two years he spent living and working in Baroda as a member of the faculty of Fine Arts. Of their many shared interests, one of the most important for Khakhar might have

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<sup>38</sup> Raza, 2016.

been their love for Sieneese painting — an influence in Khakhar’s work, as previously noted, that becomes evident in his large-scale mural-like paintings and a topic that Hyman wrote two volumes on.<sup>39</sup>

Hyman’s ode to Khakhar reads as an act of devotion of sorts: it is a powerful dedication from one contemporary to another, shedding light on a practice the British artist-critic felt a profound conviction for. The structure of the monograph narrates Khakhar’s life under two headings, “The Life as Prelude to the Work” and “The Work”. The setup makes a clear distinction at the outset between a kind of pre-consciousness and consciousness: a life that precedes art and one that is seamlessly bound up in Khakhar’s studio production. Starting in 1972, Khakhar’s biography and his artistic output are presented as mutually reinforcing one another — a life that feeds itself onto a canvas. Hyman strings together ideas within Khakhar’s oeuvre through broad conceptual umbrellas, concentrating in turn on Khakhar’s commitment to a democratic vision, his insistence of narrative, and ultimately — the climax — his sexuality. This has cemented a documentary-type take on the artist’s life, and has oriented most later discussions of Khakhar’s work. While this adds structure and a potentially neat periodization of his paintings, I suggest that the close correlation of life with output is ultimately limiting in that it curtails more expansive approaches to the artist’s oeuvre.

The most problematic of the categorizations stems from the location of a moment in which Khakhar “comes out”. The painting *You Can’t Please All* (1981) has been repeatedly identified as an instance of reckoning and of public avowal, and valorized most recently in the title of the retrospective held at London’s Tate Modern by the same name. The canvas sat firmly

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Hyman, *Sieneese Paintings: The Art of a City-Republic*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003)



at the center of the latter exhibition: it was the focal element in the narrative surrounding the artist's sexuality. The painting serves as a testament to Khakhar's newfound openness in his preferences, and ushers in a new understanding of his subsequent work. Using this image as a fulcrum point — a pivot that changes the course of Khakhar's art and life — Hyman develops a teleology for the artist's work that achieves an apex in the moment when homosexual erotics come to the fore. While there is a pre- and post-consciousness with Bhupen as an artist, Hyman's text also asserts a pre/post timeline with sexuality. Khakhar as a "gay" artist is only truly born at the execution of this painting.

Eve Sedgwick, the seminal queer theorist, wrote extensively in *Epistemology of the Closet* on the inherently modernist issue of sexual identification and its implications for language. For Sedgwick, the "closet" and "coming out" have become ways to police identities in the modern age.<sup>40</sup> The process of coming out has been reinforced as a necessary speech act that supports and reifies binary oppositions: if I am not 'x', I am 'y', and so language comes to order and restrict more elastic definitions of sexuality. The closet limits the possibilities of more flexible categories and privileges the notion that one must make certain "secrets" known to the world; that public acknowledgment is tantamount to a confirmation of an either/or dialectic. Hinging any analysis or understanding of a person's life through the idea of a closet inherently shuts down interpretation into reductive parameters such as "gay" or "straight", "out" or "closeted". This is essentially the outcome when Hyman titles his chapter "Sexuality and the Self (1981-95)", a decision that functions to fix the discourse on Khakhar along a temporal division constructed through the idea of the closet. For Hyman — and so too for the scholars and critics

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<sup>40</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U California P, 1990), 71.

that follow — once *You Can't Please All* is painted, everything afterwards comes to be understood as a definitively gay style. Khakhar's vocalicity surrounding gay issues after his mother's death only furthers this orthodox line of thought, using this as evidence and a buttress for a formulation that privileges a pre/post biography.

While acknowledging the importance of Hyman's publication, the narrativization and compartmentalization in his treatment of the artist's story has encouraged a periodized approach that has been reiterated and reinforced in subsequent writings. In Geeta Kapur's elegiac "Saint Bhupen", she too dedicates a part of her essay to "Sexuality", sealing it off hermetically as a distinct time in his life that translated into an extended moment of pontification expressed in paint. The literature on Khakhar, particularly from Hyman and Kapur, who worked alongside him, could be deemed to operate within a "minoritizing" view:<sup>41</sup> one that sought to selectively categorize his sexuality as definable and locatable. The erotics of Khakhar's paintings are thus only present when it is bestowed with a rigorously "gay" identity and there is no possibility of recuperating the rest of his life's work within a queer framework. *You Can't Please All* is the metaphoric "speech act",<sup>42</sup> in Sedgwick's terms, that outs him and so the discourse surrounding "gay" sexuality is only allowed to emerge after 1981. There is a gay moment and a gay period that subsequently ushers forth.

While Kapur and Hyman's assertion of the importance of marginal sexuality is not to be underestimated, there is an insidious issue at hand of heralding Khakhar as a gay artist on the one hand, and allowing his apotheosis to this status only after coming out, on the other. A

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

disproportionate weight is placed on the importance of *You Can't Please All* — the suggestion is that something was brewing, lurking in the shadows, and finally finds release after sex is on the table for discussion. While it is thanks to Hyman and Kapur that a conversation about Khakhar's important work exists at all, it is necessary to recognize how they have ossified some of the approaches towards a subject that has only received surface-level attention in the writing on the artist. The “gay” question for Khakhar does not develop far beyond identifying a “coming out” moment, and this is precisely where the discussion around his sexuality has stagnated.

Thus, in spite of Khakhar's status as modern India's first openly gay artist, there has been no deep excavation into Khakhar's work through a distinctively queer lens using the tools of more recent theory to understand some of the broader implications of his corpus. Khakhar's sexuality has, in general, been a lesser part of researchers' purview. There has been interest in the artist in the notion of *bhakht* as it appears in the paintings of male union, which positions Khakhar's work squarely in a Hindu context above all else, despite the homosocial undertones.<sup>43</sup> This intervention serves to highlight Khakhar's interests in spiritual devotion, by way of the relationship between Rama and Hanuman. Other scholars have sidestepped the issue of Khakhar's queer identity entirely and centered their arguments on the question of Baroda and urbanity.<sup>44</sup> Other inquiries still have looked to Khakhar's Pop aesthetics<sup>45</sup> and his cosmopolitanism,<sup>46</sup> but few have interrogated the political potential found within Khakhar's work in the service of a radical queer agenda. My analyses, by contrast, suggest ways to

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<sup>43</sup> Zitzewitz, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Khullar, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Citron, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Shanay Jhaveri, “Living without Limits: Bhupen Khakhar's Cosmopolitanism,” *You Can't Please All*, Eds. Nada Raza & Chris Dercon, (London: Tate Publications, 2016).

transcend the dyadic investment in a “pre-gay” then “gay” art, which effectively duplicates the heteronormative binaries that constrain both thought and practice.

### **At Death’s Bed**

If a monographic text were to be written about Khakhar today, years after his death, it would clearly have to contend with the difficult work he made in his final years. A periodized formulation would mean that the aberrational transformation that took place towards the end of his career would have to be read as another stylistic revolution akin to his “coming out”. This “late style” can be described in a Saidian sense — a period of intense work before death that does not resolve, that frenetically rushes towards an unfulfilled ending.<sup>47</sup> For Khakhar, there is no neat and clear consummation of his characteristic style, but rather a dizzying new development that cannot find easy peace with the rest of his life’s work. Nor do the images that emerge at this time fit so comfortably within the gay paradigm: they are unctuous paintings of gore and death, repeatedly meditating on mortality. Gone is the interest in male-male intimacy, replaced instead by disturbing manifestations of morbid dread. The artist’s illness starts to inform his aesthetic, a preoccupation that means the joyous images of union fall away to blood and darkness. How is this development reconciled with Khakhar’s supposedly “gay” art, if at all?

In *Bullet Shot in the Stomach* (2001), a square canvas is appended to a rectangular one, each presenting a portrait of one of Khakhar’s men. (Fig. 5) But in this iteration by Khakhar, they are not in a lascivious or affectionate embrace. Instead, the man in the left panel, bleeding from the exposed tissue on his cheek, shoots a smoking gun into his companion’s midriff, causing a

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<sup>47</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*, (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 16.

bloody, pink set of entrails to unravel wildly out of the black confines of his body. They share muted expressions of pain, eyes deadened from the shock of the bullet. They are the same working class men that populate Khakhar's other canvasses, identifiable by their archetypal garb — a white sleeveless shirt on one, and a blue half-sleeved shirt paired with a *lungi*, now stained with the intestines tumbling out of his abdomen on the other. Their hair is white like so many of Khakhar's men — and like the artist himself — which heightens the relationship to aging and decrepitude. Finally, the intense blackness that swirls around them serves to underscore the intensity of the despair emanating from their faces. Whereas Khakhar's earlier images of men would invariably involve at least the suggestion of sex, if not full-out pornographic depiction of sex acts, this coupling is one grounded in death and destruction. The dialectic here between sex and unbridled violence raises important questions in Khakhar's work. While this image might seem like a transgression in relation to the artist's prior paintings, I argue that it signals a more penetrating dialogue between the pleasures of sex and the prospect of death.

There has been little reflection on this “late style” of Khakhar's, except for Kapur's essay in the catalog for the exhibition at the Tate. This might be in part because of the daunting nature of finding a place for it in a discourse that celebrates Khakhar's enjoyment of the male body. Kapur, in her melancholic mediation on his last years, deftly reads an erotics into these late images where at first there are none to ostensibly find, folding this lateness back into his earlier work by locating a sustained interest throughout in the body. For her, blood acts as a corollary to semen;<sup>48</sup> and the cadaver expresses the aging body that Khakhar was attracted to.<sup>49</sup> These

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<sup>48</sup> Geeta Kapur, “Mortality Morbidity Masquerade,” *You Can't Please All*, Eds. Nada Raza & Chris Dercon, (London: Tate Publications, 2016). 162-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

ghoulish images, she states, “rendered the body with cancer through something like a transparent cartography of the organs.”<sup>50</sup> And so for Kapur it is the haptic quality of paint that relates to the decay of the corporeal; the body in turn becomes the central element in Khakhar’s work in her interpretation. This is an effective means of bringing Khakhar’s work together using broader conceptual underpinnings: the body as the locus of desire but also of decay.

Kapur makes inroads into developing a cohesive link across the *longue durée* of Khakhar’s work, and in part finds a way to establish a late style not totally out of bounds with everything that precedes it. If an investment in the body is the characterizing drive in Khakhar’s work, then this logic can be extended to the issue of sexuality. The theme of death and morbidity is not so much at odds with his paintings of sex, as Kapur has shown, but rather a maturation in his consideration of the corporeal. But this too can be positioned in a more radical formulation within the identitarian politics Khakhar operated in.

A queer reframing of Khakhar’s work must begin by recognizing the artist’s fascination with death as itself a form of queer expression. Lee Edelman writes in his groundbreaking text, *No Future*, about queer identities and their intimate connection with the death drive: the lack of the prospect of progeny in most non-standard non-heterosexual unions results in a correlation between queerness and finitude.<sup>51</sup> This proves a serious threat to heteronormative lifestyles that support the mechanisms of capitalism by encouraging monogamous coupling, their investment in landed property, and their capacity to supply future agents in labor markets. The queer individual thus represents, according to Edelman, an affront to this perfectly orchestrated system that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>51</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 3-4.

ensures slick machinations of markets.<sup>52</sup> This equation of queerness with finality was exacerbated by the 1980s AIDS crisis, in which the gay male became a symbol of the walking dead.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, Edelman argues that this is a radical position, one that should be embraced and that offers disruption to normative modes of living.<sup>54</sup>

Edelman's theorizations come on the heels of other queer thinkers, including Leo Bersani, who famously asked, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" This vanguard text in queer theory established a connection between sex, self, and erasure — a set of concerns Bersani mined, significantly, during the height of the AIDS crisis. For Bersani, sex cannot be separated from some of its less romantic aspects, which are powerful for their "anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving" nature.<sup>55</sup> He offers the subversive potential for sex to allow a humiliating and radical disintegration of the body in the way penetration is indeed an abdication of strength and power. Sex, then, is not simply a celebration of corporeal delight but also a shattering of the self.<sup>56</sup> Bersani calls for the negation of the self among gay men and to undermine the importance placed on the individual. The ability of sex to break down established boundaries; to have negative implications on the self: this comes to bear on Khakhar's later work through its rumination on the darker side of gay sexuality and the way in which sex ultimately causes the body to fall apart.

This emphasis on the connection between queerness and death allows for the possibility of recuperating Khakhar as a radically queer artist throughout his life. In other words, the images

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Leo Bersani, "Is The Rectum A Grave?" *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: U Chicago P: 2010), 22.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 23-4.

of doom and destruction that emerged towards the end, suffused with the pain of illness, are as “queer” as his paintings of men romping naked through the city. Images like *Bullet Shot in the Stomach* do not unite queer identities through love or lust but through a heightened awareness of mortality, and the end of the genetic chain that gay lives symbolize. The act of sex between men, so prominent in Khakhar’s work, represents not only a moment of bliss, but also, in Edelman’s terms, a constant expression of an end — an orgasm that does not culminate in anything greater; that is not life-giving. The French term ‘*petite morte*’ (little death) is here also pertinent: a climax that momentarily stops life in its tracks. And so the bullet shot into the man’s core is just another orgasm; the gun another phallus. The death that these two bodies will share is tantamount to a sexual crescendo. Khakhar’s turn towards the dark themes of his late years can thus be seen as a natural extension of his interests in queer unions; an exploration of the underbelly of affection and love that is suppressed under the surface of any euphoric encounter.

Interesting then that this investment in death is persistently foreshadowed in Khakhar’s early images. The artist consistently showed a romantic interest in older, oftentimes sick, men and demonstrated a desire to care for them. This predilection emerged several times over in his canvasses, in which Khakhar’s own prematurely whitened hair was mirrored in the age of his partner. In *Yayati* (1987), a winged green-skinned angel — perhaps a portrait of Khakhar himself — comes down to the aid of a naked man who lies across the bottom of the frame, erect penis in hand (Fig. 7). The man is balding and his skin sallow, not conventionally attractive and almost certainly older than the celestial figure descending on him. This image can be taken as an autobiographical expression of Khakhar’s benevolence towards his older, sick lovers and his wish to be a revivifying force in their lives. And here, it is not just Khakhar himself who comes



to bestow that gift to the aged man, but an avatar of himself from beyond the dead, coming to him as an angel to grant him another chance at life.

The insistence and preoccupation with aging that Khakhar demonstrates by way of his partners further cements a thread between his later works and his paintings from the 1980s and early 90s. Throughout Khakhar's work and life there is a sense that even as he celebrates the pleasures of the body, he is also deeply anxious about its frailty. Death is perniciously present in many quiet forms across Khakhar's canvases, though it only becomes intensely explicit in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Perhaps this concern about age and illness is a disproportionate burden to a queer populace: people like Khakhar who did not have children and have no certainty of comfort in their old age. And so it is this pressure that drives Khakhar to look on longingly at those men who were older than him, to care for them, and to translate the banal beauty he saw in them into paint. It is not surprising, then, that when he himself is diagnosed with prostate cancer, the fear of erasure, of a body consumed and ravaged by disease, comes hurtling forward to the surface of the canvas. Images such as *Blind Babubhai* (2001) and *Injured Head of Raju* (2001) are grim portraits — of erstwhile lovers perhaps — eaten away by contagion, the pleasures of their body in turn become specters of an end from which there is no return (Fig. 8). Just as in *Bullet Shot in the Stomach*, these works show the fine line that exists between skin and scintillation and skin and death.

By shifting the discourse on Khakhar away from a strict focus on sexuality, and by also accounting for other themes in Khakhar's work such as aging, there is strong potential to inscribe Khakhar more diligently into a history of queer aesthetics and politics. It is my contention that the full breadth of Khakhar's queer politics have not been fully explored in the literature, and that

working through his interests in death and the moribund is a powerful and productive place of entry into such a radical project. Death as a queer moment is ever-present across a wide array of Khakhar's canvasses, recalling another eminent queer artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Gonzalez-Torres has been inducted into a queer contemporary canon for his work that directly addressed the AIDS crisis, a disease to which the artist lost his own life. In Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), for example, a pile of candy gets taken away piece by piece by museum-goers, an analogy for the body as it is slowly lost to illness (Fig. 9). As they walk away, visitors are left with a Eucharist-like memento and the lingering sweetness of the candy, leaving a sensory imprint of the sculpture with them. The heap of candy morphs and dwindles — the sweetness and joy associated with the pleasures of the body, also simultaneously gives way to death and nothingness, both as it dissolves on the tongue and as the sculpture diminishes in size.<sup>57</sup>

The way erotics are equated with death in Gonzalez-Torres's work is analogous to Khakhar's: both foreground the volatility of the body's potential to offer both pleasure and pain. Whereas Gonzalez-Torres's place in the American context has helped establish him as an essential figure in the story of queer art, Khakhar's position within India has not resulted in a similar exposure. It is only now, with the kind of posthumous recognition he has received from institutions like the Tate Modern, that Khakhar is slowly being inculcated into the larger narrative of modernism. Yet it is important to expand the discussion of this artist to further establish his importance in the spaces of a queer modernism in India — a phenomenon that is

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<sup>57</sup> Reed, 214.

For further discussions on this artist, see: Miwon Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, A Chance to Share, A Fragile Truth," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, edited by Julie Ault (Gottingen: Steidl, 2016), 216-316.

largely uncharted. While it is essential to frame his work within terms of urbanity, urbanism, Hinduism, and Gandhian ideology, I have argued that it is equally crucial — and politically necessary — to fully address the radical queerness embodied by Khakhar's life's work.

## CONCLUSION

The scholarship on Bhupen Khakhar continues to address the multivalent interpretations that usher forth from his paintings. But given the importance of discussions surrounding marginal identities within postcolonial societies, there is danger of a willful obliteration of something politically potent in Khakhar's work. That is why it is necessary to assert the shift in parameters for Indian modernism that Khakhar was able to establish by way of the male body. His introduction of the naked, queer, proletarian Indian male into fine art needs to be acknowledged as a pioneering moment in the history of South Asian painting.

Beyond the radicalism that a queer erotics proposes in the 20th century Indian context, it has been my desire to imbricate Khakhar's life's work into a set of queer aesthetics; to study his career as one that cannot be limited to a two-dimensional treatment that curtails other possibilities. As his health failed, so did the joy and hope he found in sex and the body. But I argue that this development is also inherently queer in its scope and consonant with prevalent interests throughout Khakhar's life, such as the connection between desire and the body impaired by age. The anxieties written into queer experiences — the differences in the way time and aging are felt — are deep-rooted in Khakhar's images, and we must continue to ensure in our consideration of bodies and desire that even the more harrowing aspects of the corporeal are fully encompassed.

List of Images



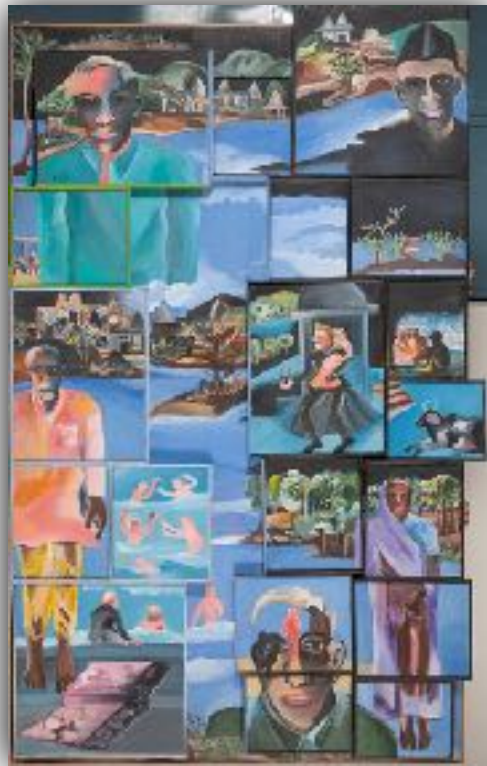
**FIG. 1**  
**FREDERIC BAZILLE, BATHERS (SUMMER SCENE), 1869, OIL**  
**ON CANVAS, 158 X 158 CM**



**FIG. 2**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *MAN IN PUB*, 1979, OIL ON CANVAS, 122 X 122 CM**



**FIG. 3**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *YOU CAN'T PLEASE ALL*, 1981, OIL ON CANVAS, 175.6 X 175.6 CM**



**FIG. 4**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *GALLERY OF ROGUES*, 1993, OIL ON CANVAS,**  
**193.5 X 137.2 CM**



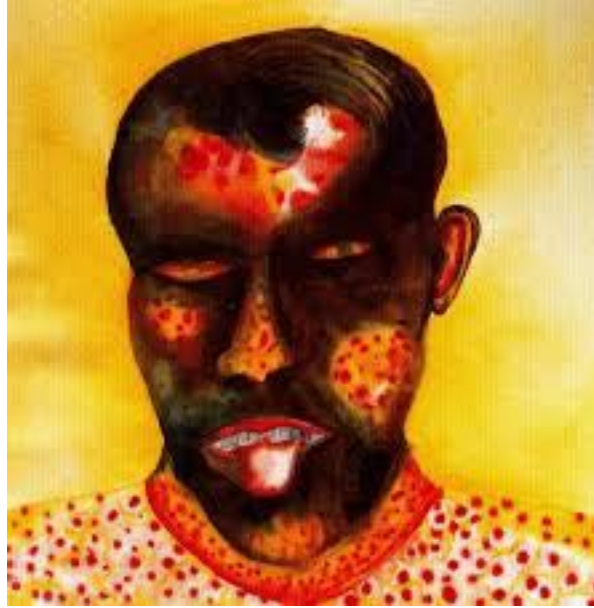
**FIG. 5**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *BULLET SHOT IN THE STOMACH*, 2001, OIL ON CANVAS, 228.6 X 353 CM**



**FIG. 6**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *INJURED HEAD OF RAJU*, 2001,**  
**WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 113 X 111 CM**



**FIG. 7**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *YAYATI*, 1987, OIL ON**  
**CANVAS, 170 X 170 CM**



**FIG. 8**  
**BHUPEN KHAKHAR, *BLIND BABUBHAI*,**  
**2001, OIL ON CANVAS, 111 X 110 CM**



**FIG. 9**  
**FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, *UNTITLED (PORTRAIT OF ROSS IN L.A.)*,**  
**1991, CANDIES INDIVIDUALLY WRAPPED IN**  
**MULTICOLORED CELLOPHANE, ENDLESS SUPPLY, SIZE**  
**VARIABLE**



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