After the staggering initial impact of these intense, compressed works, one can't help thinking that here, with a modicum of basic, 'hands-on' tools, was a seething, vibrant world of pulsating movement, wit and multi-dimensional form that was far richer, more intriguingly complex than so much of the current, clever computer-generated art that, with all the tools at is command, tries rather too hard and, in most cases, falls flat on its face.

I first met Mohan Samant in Bombay of the early fifties. The Progressive Group had already broken free of the 'Colonial' tradition, setting the scene for a new generation of younger painters who drew from their own art traditions tempered with an easy familiarity and knowledge of the major international movements in contemporary art. Samant was one of them and he made quite an impact when he showed with the Progressives. His work was excitingly original and unlike anything else preceding it. Soon after, he left for Europe, returned to India and took off for New York some time later.

When I reached New York in the early sixties, Samant was already one of the major new painters on the scene, showing his powerful, exciting work at the World House Galleries which made quite an impact on the New York art world. One of the few times I met him was when he invited me to his spectacular, huge loft to hear Amjad Ali Khan who was visiting New York.

A few years ago, I saw his work again in Mumbai - a brilliant combination of the drawn line and metal wire. But this series of works on/with paper is truly a tour de force by a master in total command of his art. Modest in scale but teeming with a veritable orgy of jostling Rabelaisian figures that come leaping at you from their formal confines! Linger, as you must, at your peril but you will leave joyously
well -feasted.

Mehlli Gobhai

Mumbai, 2008

Mehlli Gobhai (born 1931) is an abstractionist. Educated at St Xavier's College, Bombay, the Royal College of Art, London, and the Pratt Graphic Center and the Art Students League, New York, Gobhai has lived and worked in London, New York and Bombay. He has held seven solo exhibitions of his paintings; his work has also been shown in major curated exhibitions, including 'Marking Black' (Bronx Museum of the Arts, curated by Madeleine Burnside, 1980), 'Hinged by Light' (Pundole Art Gallery, curated by Ranjit Hoskote, 1994), and 'Crossing Generations: diVerge, 40 Years of Gallery Chemould', curated by Geeta Kapur and Chaitanya Sambrani, 2003).

THE ONE-MAN AVANT-GARDE
Mohan Samant: Cutouts and Works on Paper, 1974-1985

Ranjit Hoskote

I have long suspected that Mohan Samant was the missing link in the evolutionary narrative of contemporary art in India. A dislocated, but never disoriented pioneer, Samant (1926-2004) spent most of his life in New York, exhibiting largely in North America and periodically in curated exhibitions in Britain and India. The actors and stage managers of postcolonial Indian art ought to have embraced him as a valuable colleague and major contributor to their project. But they did not, since they were unable to look beyond the national boundaries they had set for themselves. Their understanding of the postcolonial was rooted in the ideological categories of autonomy and resistance, limited by a specific developmentalist history, and fixated on a misguided obsession with reconciling an elusive Indianness with a spectral modernity. They could not make room for a figure like Samant in their atlas, because they could not re-vision the postcolonial as the intensely contested, collaborative, pluralising, hybrid, self-renovating and transcultural enterprise that it is.

As it turns out, many of Samant's contemporaries in India dismissed him as an aberration. His critical absence from our scene is a tragedy. For his work embodies those avant-garde possibilities of the period between the 1960s and the 1980s that Indian art did not explore, or explored only to reduce the coursing energy of an artistic engagement with history and culture to mere simulacrum and style. As far as Indian art is concerned, Samant is Frost's road not taken.

In introducing the vibrant and remarkable cutouts and works on paper that he made between 1974 and 1985, I would like to present Samant as an unacknowledged one-man avant-garde who traversed and overcame the medium-specific art practice of the Progressives and their contemporaries. On the evidence of this body of work, he also anticipated, outperformed and overtook the second generation of postcolonial Indian artists whose efforts were enshrined in the epochal 1981 exhibition, 'Place for People', and its allied manifestations. Samant more than matched this self-avowed avant-garde, whether in the investigation of new conceptual questions, such as how to ground the art-work contextually and how to rephrase the relationship between artist and audience; or in the prising open of psychological and sexual experience; or

in the remapping of such key artistic concerns as identity, locality, allegory and narrative. And indeed, while these younger artists remained, for the most part, producers of well-behaved, properly framed, two-dimensional pictures, Samant ruptured the prevailing distinctions between one art and another, high art and low art, vision and craft, work and play, generating a series of versions of what Wagner celebrated as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total art work'.

In the 11 cutouts and 9 works on paper that comprise the present, historically important exhibition at the Pundole Art Gallery (works that have never been exhibited before), we find a variety of prompts to transition. Samant choreographs for himself a dance of the berserk warrior, seeming randomness of violence underwritten by perfect breath control and economy of gesture. He collapses the boundaries between painting and sculpture, drawing and painting, sculpture and architecture, and even painting and a prototype of cinematic treatment, most evident in his stacking of a simultaneity of impressions, his polyphonic narratives, and his multiple layering of paradoxical effects in a single frame.

Unlike many other artists of his generation in India, Samant did not believe the medium to be sacrosanct. Mastery over a medium meant, to him, the power to cross, graft and reconfigure it in such a way that an art-work could transcend its formal limitations while extending its conceptual premises. Samant's cutouts, especially, are possessed of what I would call an *unsummability*, a surplus: each of these works appears to be a gift of excess, and taken together, they point towards the large-scale mixed-media constructions that would preoccupy him during the final decade of his life.

Samant could rip up, scissor, re-glue, and violate the picture surface into a multi-layered montage. His art glows with a lavish, volatile, outrageous sensuality: an erotic charge such as may be found in artists of the generation that followed his, including Laxma Goud, the early Jogen Chowdhury and Manu Parekh. In Samant's art, however, this eroticism is veined with the unceasing awareness of performing in conversation with validating presences, some long dead but influential, others his contemporaries: in these works, we find emphatic traces of Blake's prophetic figuration, Picasso's mythic amplifications of women and animals, Tapies' deceptively rough handling of heterogeneous materials, and Guston's ironic, idiosyncratic self-portraiture. Samant invokes these presences through citation, argument and improvisation; as a result, his picture surfaces are open grounds of debate rather than self-enclosed territories.

Samant's pencil, crayon and brush seem to have been propelled by the impulse that the legendary choreographer Twyla Tharp calls 'muscle memory', an artist's mental and instantly available archive of exemplars, images, gestures and sensations, garnered through a lifetime of focused attention, whether at the museum, gallery, concert or ballet.

Samant's art celebrates the partnership of a voracious eye and a versatile hand. He had an enormous appetite for unfolding multiplicities; his approach was hands-on artisanal. Look closely at his cutouts, at the magnificent 'Night Show' and 'Battlefield Negotiations', 'River Crossing' and 'Three Women', 'Midnight Pickup in the Park' and 'Man with a Child in a Chair'. These works are by turns festive, sinister and voluptuous; they call upon us to revel in the unpredictable combinations of gouache and aquarelle, acrylic and charcoal, ink and gauze, oil pastel and silver foil, from which they are shaped. Samant's work is characterised by a constant shifting between dilute and rough-textured, delicate and bold. He draws on fretwork, the production of arabesques and lattices in wood, a hobby popular among 19th-century male members of the bourgeoisie who had otherwise lost all contact and existential connection with manual labour. In casting his idiom of portraiture, he also draws on the art of the silhouette, another genteel parlour art beloved of 18th- and 19th-century hobbyists; but Samant deploys the amatore's pastime to weapon-grade effect.

Yet another source, evident in the cutouts, is the *wayang* shadow puppet theatre of Indonesia and its counterpart in the leather puppet theatre of Andhra Pradesh. As these sources and treatments collide and offer their viewers a sequence of proposals and counter-proposals, made, withdrawn and replaced, we realise that Samant's art, though powered by the strange and the unfamiliar, is resolutely counter-exotic. Even when he takes up apparently Orientalist subjects, such as 'Folk Music Festival' or 'Tourists at the Sea Festival', the enigma of the figures and the precariousness of their settings put any lightweight Orientalist fantasy to flight.

II.

Samant created his cutouts in the first phase of a period of apparent withdrawal from exhibiting. Although he was invited to participate in major curated exhibitions, he held no public solo exhibitions between 1975 and 1994. I have sometimes wondered about this interval in Samant's career: was it a deliberate retreat, a result of the withdrawal of gallery or dealer support; or did he move towards Hindustani classical music as his major preoccupation, as some observers have suggested in casual

conversation? Or did Samant simply continue to work away at his constructions in the solitude of his studio, while declining to share these with the viewing public? I have since learned from the artist's wife that World House Galleries, which had shown his work for many years, continued to represent him privately in New York during this period.

I imagine the everyday life of the Samants, building on my vivid recollection of having had dinner with them in the fall of 1995. Their loft apartment was a Xanadu: in its centre stood a vast and airy dome, an aviary populated by thirty birds. Here, Samant played the *sarangi* and produced his art-works. His wife, the Australian-born Jillian Samant, herself an accomplished musician who plays the viola da gamba, says that he played every morning "with a view to clear his mind and then be able to view his paintings objectively".

In the course of two extended conversations (New York, 1995, and Bombay, 1997), Samant told me that he so preferred solitude to company that he would rather work on his paintings or devote himself to his *ragas* than venture out. He claimed to step out of his loft not more than 25 times a year; and on each of these sorties into the world, he would make a pilgrimage to the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Museum of Modern Art. Samant's was an archaeological imagination; the museum was a living environment to him. The ancestral spirits of every nation and culture, with whom he communed in this state of exalted dream-like feeling, seemed to him more truly his confreres than the contemporaries among whom he led his waking life.

The past is an undying presence in Samant's art. In some of the seething tableaux executed during the last few years of his life, stony Mayas, their eyes fixed on death, coexist with the warriors and the heroines of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana; a parade of fire-breathing dinosaurs bursts across a futuristic landscape of holocaust. If Samant found inspiration in Egyptian Dynastic funerary wall drawings, he also turned for sustenance to the Ajanta murals and the Rajput miniatures that exercised his imagination when he was a student at the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy School of Arts in Bombay, from 1948 to 1951. With this strategic depth of the past behind him, Samant composed, in the late 1990s and the early years of the 21st century, assemblages that were in equal measure painting, relief, sculpture, found object and wire-work construction. In these works, the barbaric, primitive force of the archaic self sparked off against the abstract departures of a more sophisticated contemporary identity. "We must address the monstrosity within," asserted Samant.

Some of Samant's fellow artists have occasionally essayed an explanation for the oscillation, in his art, between violence and cohesion, dissolution and form, hard-

edged iconography and the variousness of the palimpsest. His constant and deliberately de-stabilising alternation between additive and subtractive manoeuvres, integration and de-composition, has led these informal commentators to align Samant with Tapies, who worked with a mixture of puddled sand, marble dust, string, rags and paint, and Dubuffet, whose *pâtes* were inspired by graffiti and crafted from sand, paint, tar, scratched and sprayed glass, and broken, bizarre-coloured toys. Like Tapies, Samant delighted in orchestrating unsettling effects from the marriage of diverse materials; like Dubuffet, he articulated a freight of psychological violence.

The ferocity of his version of *art brut* was always tempered, however, by compositional intricacy and finesse. "Most *art brut* bears a primordial stamp but Samant's is sophisticated," observed the critic of *Time* magazine (6 March 1964), writing during the years when Samant's work was shown in prestigious curated exhibitions at the National Gallery, Washington DC (1963) and at the Commonwealth Exhibition, London (1963), as part of 'Dunn International: 102 Best Painters of the World' mounted at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick (1963), and 'Paintings from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC' (1963-1964).

I would like, however, to speculate on other compelling choices that Samant might have had before him. Not only the collage of early Picasso, the frottage of Max Ernst, and the crisp paper cutouts of Matisse in his final years, but also the assemblages of Schwitters, and the violently kinetic palimpsests of de/collage, inspired by graffiti and urban walls covered with posters, as elaborated by Raymond Hams, Jacques Villeglé, and Wolf Vostell from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. I would also propose, as a possible point of comparison, Gordon Matta-Clark's work in New York and various European cities, done through the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In developing his concept of 'anarchitecture', Matta-Clark cut sections through buildings marked for demolition, made scissions and posted bridgeheads through dense neighbourhoods, dramatised economic asymmetries in the urban environment, critiqued private property and reclaimed public space, and announced epiphanic conjunctions of man, house, street and sky, which cut across mythic time and metropolitan schedules. All these art practices involved elaborate processes of conception and preparation, and were realised through extreme and near-shamanistic performances. I can see how Samant might have belonged in a context such as this one.

Unfortunately, Samant's art was a proposal made in a kind of voluntary exile, before the South Asian diaspora became a fashionable creed to subscribe to. Although he

settled down permanently in New York in 1968, Samant does not seem to have made an effort to stake his claim to a place in the narrative of Western art. And despite having been shown in the landmark exhibitions of Indian art, 'Pictorial Space' (Lalit Kala Akademi/ Rabindra Bhavan Galleries, New Delhi, 1977-1978) and 'India: Myth and Reality', Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1982), in both of which contexts his art was commented upon by the distinguished critic Geeta Kapur, he was not prominently featured in the main line of Indian art history either. In the cultural theorist Nancy Adajania's phrase, applied by her to artists using new media in India during the 1960s and 1970s before a receptive climate had evolved for such work, Samant was a 'no-context' artist.

Samant is the subject of an oral history that circulates among members of his generation in India: anecdotes from the 1950s, half-remembered folklore about the last phase of the Progressive Artists Group and the role played by Krishen Khanna and Samant in it, and the subsequent formation of the so-called Bombay Group in 1956, with Samant as one of the most impressive protagonists. By then, though, he was preparing to leave for Europe on a scholarship, and eventually decided to live and work in the West. He is variously portrayed as a runaway Progressive, a recluse who immured himself in New York, a fortunate speculator in that city's real estate scenario, and a musician who turned the stereotype of the mystical Eastern performer to advantage. All these images miss the point of the man and his achievement.

Perhaps the most productive way to read Mohan Samant is to view him as a dissenter from the limiting armature of national history. He was a very early transcultural figure, emancipated from the debilitating logic of conscriptive nationalism and stylistic dogma, an inhabitant of the in-between. In reflecting on his life and art, we find ourselves meditating on the figure (and the fate) of the eccentric. Samant neither rejected the periphery to go to the centre, nor did he reject the centre to embrace the periphery. Rather, his practice negated the centre/ periphery model of the world altogether: a courageous stand to take, at the height of the Cold War and while the Vietnam conflict raged, thirty years before such a theoretical manoeuvre became possible or even desirable. Along with the centre/ periphery model, Samant also rejected its attendant psychology of master/ slave. Against this, he asserted his claim to speak from the multiple and unpredictable locations of cultural production, wherever they might be located among this planet's buried genizas and shaded courtyards.

(Bombay: October 2008)

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