

Mohan Samant

Publishing

Abraham Joel, New York and Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad



FIG. 1. James Stevenson, "Now, there's a nice contemporary sunset!" Cartoon published in *The New Yorker*, August 29, 1964 (media ID 72875). © James Stevenson/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

poured webs, and Mark Rothko painted stacked, soft-edged rectangles. Such was the recognizability of these motifs that museums, galleries, collectors, and public came to expect and accept only those selected images as the proper achievements of these artists. Ultimately, these became "signature" styles, virtually iconic and immutable in the public psyche, to the point that an abstraction could become the subject of cartoons in popular, albeit sophisticated, periodicals like *The New Yorker* (fig. 1)

Samant's practice was the antithesis of a signature style. Throughout his career, he delved into divergent materials and techniques and constantly shifted imagery. While some of his processes and forms can be perceived on a regular basis over long periods of time, there was no hewing to a given image, endlessly repeated, as can be seen in much prime Abstract Expressionism. He stated that "I find that stagnation in style and the search for the same forms cause an artist to suffer an immense amount of laboriousness in his work."²

Of course, Samant's diversity of output is not simply a function of his non-American, or specifically Indian, origin. For example, two other pioneering emigrant artists from India, Krishna Reddy (arrived in the U.S. 1964) and Natvar Bhavsar (arrived in 1962) have produced significant bodies of work that reveal proficient and powerful artistic development within purposefully more restricted ranges than Samant. Reddy is an important figure in American mid-twentieth-century printmaking, developing highly complex intaglio techniques that derived from organic surrealist and automatist methods, which he explored throughout his own work and long teaching career. Bhavsar has created his own genre of abstraction that relates to Color Field painting. Both of these artists worked variations on basic themes for decades, creating admirable oeuvres, but did so without recourse to Samant's more extreme and continual shifts of material, technique, and image. Thus, their work fits more comfortably into both wider technical and stylistic trends and the American context of digging deeply within a given method or image.

Samant's art is, instead, determinedly far-reaching and inquisitive, and encompasses admitted influences that cover the whole history of human visual creativity, Eastern and Western. Samant stated straightforwardly that his sources derived from five thousand years of art from varied civilizations. These included the cave paintings of Lascaux, Egyptian wall paintings and hieroglyphs, Indian miniatures and murals, Precolumbian ceramics, African sculpture, and the modernism of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Paul Klee. Given that the critical establishment in New York had originally striven to present Abstract Expressionism as a style virtually without external sources or formal precedents, it is evident that a culturally voracious and inclusive enterprise such as Samant's was following different parameters of artistic values. The simultaneous publicizing of Abstract

Expressionism as a "breakthrough" style—the next step on the modern road of aesthetic progress that moved through Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Cubism, and abstraction—also diverged from the ethos of respectful elaboration upon, and synthesis of, past styles that characterized Samant's art.

The veneration of the utterly new—or at least what is perceived to be as such—can theoretically alter the perception of almost any artist's work, since very few individuals can be proven to have produced a wholly new form of artistic expression. For the sake of argument, consider Paul Klee (fig. 2). Certainly Klee is deemed one of the major masters of early modernism, having created much semiabstract and some virtually abstract imagery by the second decade of the twentieth century. His art is highly regarded for its technical facility, endless imagination, and pictorially cogent variations on Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and the geometry-inflected art and design of the Bauhaus. Yet despite the evident quality and inventiveness of Klee's work, it is would be quite feasible to teach a course in the major movements of modern art that leaves him out entirely. This surprising statement can be justified because Klee, despite his gifts of imagination and process, in a very strict sense did not invent any new styles or "isms" that became the foundation of modernist practice. Rather, he was a superb (and quite early) manipulator of these styles into a marvelous oeuvre of personal variations. He stands out as an exceptional example of how an individualist can transform artistic methods and trends into something that ultimately separates itself from art history through its very strengths and uniqueness. Klee's work, however, does not represent a specific "advance" within a formalist view of art history, the branch of art criticism that held sway in the United States from the 1940s through the 1960s. Given this view of the exceptional synthesizer, it is interesting that one of Samant's visible influences was Klee, which Samant has specifically acknowledged. The searching, playful linearity of Klee's work found receptive ground in Samant's developing approach to art, and filtered into his earlier pieces (fig. 3). Klee's searching method, impelled equally by technical experiment and sparks of intuitive subject matter, is also a hallmark of Samant's art.

Samant was a natural individualist. While living in New York, the center of the art world, with new styles bubbling up and hyped all around him, he chose to unperturbedly follow his own interests and lines of inquiry. He employed a historical, universal view. "A relevant detail or technique or treatment is all that captures my eye," he claimed. "It matters little to me whether such significant information comes from a painting by Rembrandt or the prehistoric art of the Lascaux caves, or ancient Roman coins, Greek vases, or Egyptian art."³ Although he was certainly aware of contemporary artistic practice, he took it as simply another aspect of the ongoing panoply of visual production throughout history, with specific motifs or techniques



FIG. 2. Paul Klee, *Tale à la Hoffmann*, 1921. Watercolor, pencil, and transferred printing ink on paper, bordered with metallic foil. 12¼ x 9½ in. (31.1 x 24.1 cm). The Berggruen Klee Collection, 1984 (1984.315.26). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

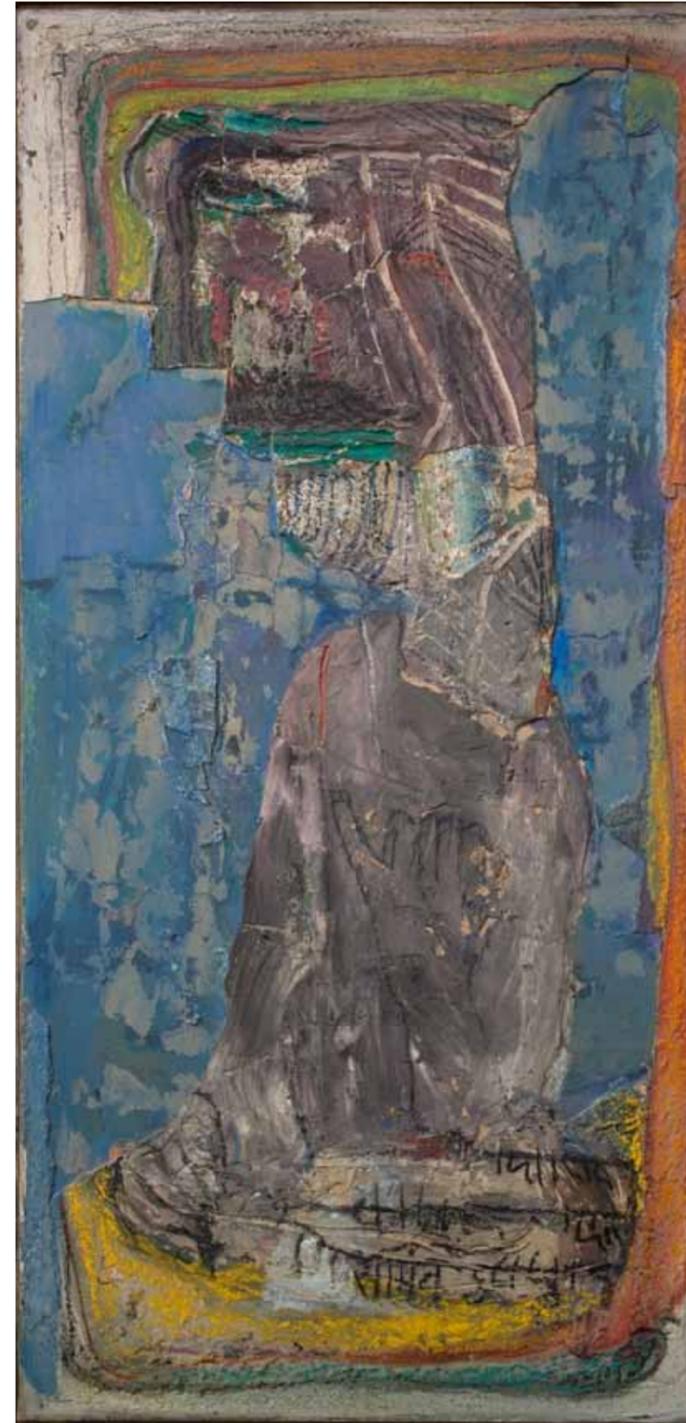


FIG. 3. Mohan Samant, *Mirror*, 1953. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 12 in. (35.6 x 30.5 cm)



Green Square, 1963

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Astolger, 1964