

SADAA

SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA **ARTS ARCHIVE**

Amal Ghosh

Born Calcutta, 1933. Artist; oil paintings, enamel, stained glass

Education

1953-1958 Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta

1958-1960 Central School of Art and Crafts, London

1980-1981 Hertfordshire College of Art, St. Albans

Teaching

Subject Leader, Stained Glass and Transparent Media, Central School of Art and Crafts, London (1977-98).

Professor Emeritus, Kolkata Government College of Art and Crafts and Kolkata University.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1969 Vanview Gallery, London

1969 Gallery Grude, Oslo

1970 Gallery Grude, Oslo

1971 Sheila Davis Gallery, London

1972 Bizet Gallery, Kristiansand, Norway

1974 University of Leicester, Leicester

1981 Birla Academy, Calcutta

1982 Leinster Fine Arts, London

1986 RIBA, London

1987 Connections, Horizon Gallery, London

1988 Nottingham Playhouse, Nottingham

1991 Amal Ghosh, Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi

1995 Amal Ghosh: Vitreous Enamel Murals, Eastman Dental Hospital, London

2014 Amal Ghosh, Galerie 88, Kolkata

2011 Snow Soliloquy Amal Ghosh, Galerie 88, Kolkata

Selected Group Exhibitions

1974 Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London (also 1975 and 1977)

1982 Between Two Cultures, Barbican Concourse, London

1993 Transition of Riches, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

1988 Numash Lalit Kala, Bluecoat, Liverpool

1990 In Focus, Horizon Gallery, London

Selected Public Collections

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

University of Leicester

Arvika Commune, Sweden

Landstiget, Sweden

Birla Academy, Calcutta

Le musée de l'Évêché, Limoges, France

Decorative Art Museum, Palanga, Lithuania

Arts Council of Great Britain

Ely Cathedral

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Walsall Museum

British Council, Calcutta

Bradford Art Galleries and Museums

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Bengal Foundation, Dhaka
Fukuoka Asian art Museum, Japan

Selected Public commissions, with Iris Hudson-Ghosh

Great Ormand Street Hospital, London; Tile mural, 1981
House of Lords, Palace of Westminster, London; Stained glass shields, 1982
Charing Cross Hospital, London; Vitreous enamel, 1986
Manchester Cathedral; Ambry and Architrave, enamel, copper and gold, 1986
Eastman Dental Hospital, London; two Vitreous enamel murals, 1991-1992
West Middlesex University Hospital, London; Glass and metal sculptural hanging, 1998.
Hillingdon Hospital, Uxbridge; Glass hanging, 2000

Selected Bibliography

Amal Ghosh, "Introduction", *Between Two Cultures*, London: Indian Artists UK, 1982.
Michael Horn, "Amal Ghosh at the Horizon Gallery, September 1987", *Bazaar Magazine*, No.3, 1987, pp.17-18.
Onita Hudson, "Amal Ghosh at the Horizon Gallery", *Art Rage*, No.18, Autumn 1987, p.41.
Sutapa Biswas, "Introduction", *Numaish Lalit Kala*, Liverpool: Bluecoat, 1988.
Amal Ghosh (ed.), *In Focus*, London: Horizon Gallery, 1990.
Andrea Finn, "Amal Ghosh: Allegories in Exile", *Amal Ghosh, Catalogue No.10*, New Delhi: Art Heritage Gallery, 1991.
Sonali Fernando, "Amal Ghosh", *Transition of Riches*, Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1993, pp.34-37.
Tania Guha, "Transition of Riches", *Third Text*, 7:25, 1993, pp.81-86.
Amal Ghosh, Bangalore: Gallery Sumukha, c.1999.
Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds.), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, London: Saffron Press, 2001.
Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

Amal Ghosh: Transcending Vision

Dr. Alice Correia

Writing on the occasion of Amal Ghosh's 1987 exhibition at Birla Academy, Calcutta, the artist Cecil Collins wrote, "The great need of the West today is the contemplative life. In his paintings Amal has created an equilibrium between eastern and western culture. He has succeeded in combining the speculation of the West with the contemplative tradition of the East".ⁱ Over the course of his career, Amal Ghosh has established his own painterly vocabulary that incorporates elements from various schools of modern European art, displaying an interest in colour theory, abstraction, and symbolism, while being simultaneously steeped in a deep understanding and appreciation of his Indian heritage and its artistic history. Ghosh's affecting aesthetic investigations have resulted in a series of resonant and lyrical paintings that convey universally felt emotions, ranging through hesitancy and abandon, fear and joy.

Amal Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1933, and attended the Government College of Art and Craft, studying painting; although the college had, in the early decades of the 20th century been associated with the Bengal School of Painting, which encouraged students to look to ancient Indian and Mughal art for inspiration,ⁱⁱ traces of this approach to art making had all but disappeared by the time Ghosh attended, and his was an Euro-centric arts education. He recalled, "cultural colonialism ensured that my initial development as an artist had little to do with my own cultural heritage ... Calcutta Art College was modelled in philosophy and practice on the Slade School of Fine Art in London".ⁱⁱⁱ Nonetheless, Ghosh excelled, and arrived in Britain, where he attended Central School of Art and Crafts, 1958-60, specialising in mural painting.

Amal Ghosh joined Central at a moment of radical change in the British art education system. In the post-war period, there was a shift away from a system of mimetic reproduction, towards a prioritisation of how materials might be manipulated and worked to achieve particular sensory or emotional affects. One of the principle advocates of this new system of thought, known as Basic Design, was William Johnstone, who, as principle of Central between 1947 and 1960, encouraged tutors to run classes that "provided training in understanding the qualities of line, pattern and form and their interaction when freed of representational content".^{iv} One of the central components of Basic Design was an appreciation of intuition, where an artist developed a painting through the processes of

making, rather than start a painting with a predetermined objective about how it would look. At Central, Ghosh was taught by the artists Cecil Collins and Alan Davie; Collins was a noted Surrealist, who during the 1950s created a series of mystical paintings, drawing on far Eastern art and philosophy. Davie was similarly interested in non-western art and spirituality, and at that time was creating work in a vigorous, gestural abstract style that was influenced by jazz improvisation. Significantly, Ghosh has recalled that Collins and Davie “reaffirmed and valued my Indian heritage in a way that had not been possible in India”.^v At Central, Ghosh was encouraged to draw on the visual traditions of his Indian culture, while also exploring “the essential principles of space, form and colour”.^{vi} The impact of Ghosh’s training at Central may perhaps be discerned in his assertions that,

My paintings have developed from the surfacing of images and ideas from my subconscious. A fusion of collective and individual consciousness which encompasses a coming together of European experiences and influences with my fundamental feelings, life and experience of India. This has become increasingly the source and inspiration of my being. It is both reflected and revealed to me in my work. At one level my paintings involve dreams, myth, mythology and story-telling, but I am still not aware of the nature of the story – on the canvas it just ‘IS’. It derives from the deeper intuitions of the mind, a level of understanding, which is at the same time as act of reverence and communication.^{vii}

As part of his training in Basic Design at Central, Ghosh would have been exposed to the ideas and colour theories of German Bauhaus artist Josef Albers. In *The Interaction of Colour* (1920) Albers advocated a practical, exploratory approach to colour that included exercises in hue and intensity, transparency and opacity, and discordant colour relations. However, Ghosh accounts for his particular use of colour through reference to an Indian visual tradition, explaining:

Colour establishes a range of moods, much as do different ragas. In the process of painting, as I break down literal narrative, it yields to a hidden language of colour, space and form. I am not interested in tonal rendering but in the notation of colour – and there are no arbitrary colours in my pictures. I am aware that, in this, I am drawing on the richness and symbolism of my Indian heritage.^{viii}

Ghosh has reflected that one of the formative experiences of his artistic career was studying the Ajanta cave murals as a student during one of his return visits home.^{ix} Regarded as being amongst the finest examples of early Indian art, the ancient Buddhist mural paintings and sculptures located in the Ajanta caves, Maharashtra date to the 2nd century BCE and depict Buddhist tales.

Although he had been influenced by Francis Bacon and FN Souza as a student, Ghosh quickly moved away from their aggressive and vigorous styles of gestural painting, instead developing an approach to painting in which fields of colour stain or saturate the canvas. In this, he Ghosh's paintings suggest an appreciation of the colour-field abstractions of the American Abstract Expressionists, Mark Rothko and Mark Tobey, while his wrestling with figuration and its inevitable recourse to storytelling is perhaps a legacy of his early influences. His paintings from the mid-late 1980s are characterized by the use of human and animal forms depicted in non-naturalistic ways, which combine the modernist examples of distorted, stretched and often contorted bodies by Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall with symbolic animals and creatures from Hindu and Buddhist visual culture. In paintings such as *Allegory I*, his work eschews three-dimensionality, favouring instead, flattened, shallow compositional spaces within which his protagonists appear floating in dream-like scenarios, perhaps indebted to the ways in which compositions in the Ajanta caves are not presented in sequential horizontal bands, but rather spread outwards in all directions from a central figure or group.^x

In discussions of Ghosh's work, scholars and critics have identified recurring themes and motifs, that include the symbolic use of animals and human figures; a concern with spirituality, informed by knowledge of Western and Asian religions and philosophies, as well as magic, alchemy and the unknown. Sonali Fernando observed that he developed a "personal mythic grammar" that "is always allusive and associative rather than denotational".^{xi} Paintings may appear to have narrative content, but the message or story depicted is obscure and uncertain. Establishing the canvas as an illusionistic, "non-hierarchical space"^{xii} in paintings such as *Reflection*, 1987, Ghosh created visual conundrums where each representational component is potentially of equal importance. As such, the painting offers what Tania Guha identified as "unspoken, emotionally charged dramas that resonate with the promise of narrative, but [which] remain hermetically sealed".^{xiii} Indeed, although Ghosh was discussing the work of his near contemporaries, FN Souza and Avanish Chandra, he might also have been talking about himself when he wrote

that, “Each, in different ways, pursued a process of abstraction through the creation of ambivalent imagery which required the viewer to engage with deep and complex levels of meaning”.^{xiv}

In the painting *Allegory I*, two bodies form a circular shape around the perimeter of the canvas to define a horizontally placed heart-shape. The figurative forms stretch across the canvas in non-naturalistic ways. Oversized limbs enact movement; the arm of the upper figure reaches down to touch the arm of the lower figure in a gesture of tenderness. Between the two figures is a pink elephant, which fills the space between them, creating a barrier. The feet of the figures touch at the right-hand edge of the canvas, at which is also a pair of entwined serpents. The figures and animals are positioned on a red ground, and in the upper left corner is a cluster of flowers. Ghosh’s use of flattened, shallow space, the red background, and the figure’s arm bisecting the composition along its central vertical axis, recalls Paul Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon*, 1888 (Scottish National Gallery), in which the a post-impressionist created a mysterious and puzzling, but religious, image via daring compositional forms. In his painting, Ghosh similarly distorted and exaggerated his figurative shapes, which are rendered in non-naturalistic colours for expressive purposes. The painting’s title, *Allegory I*, does not provide any details about it’s narrative or meaning, but rather, prompts audiences to consider the individual components as symbolic. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, it is possible that the couple may be Adam and Eve, and the serpents refer to Biblical themes of temptation. However, the presence of the elephant introduces the possibility of Hindu and Buddhist referents. Traditionally, the deity Ganesh is represented in the form of an elephant, rendered in red or pink, and is often encircled by serpents, used as sacred thread. If the figures are read as Adam and Eve, and the elephant as Ganesh, the painting may be understood as a mediation on origins and beginnings from a trans-religious perspective.

An elephant also features in Ghosh’s painting, *Allegory III*, here rendered in red with a pink head, alongside two other figurative forms. In this work, the figures are positioned vertically, standing shoulder to shoulder, so that their bodies merge in and out of one another. The central figure is a dark-skinned woman wearing a pink dress, although her head and body are seemingly mis-aligned. For artist and curator Sutapa Biswas, “Her blackness points to her being indigenous to India”,^{xv} and Biswas suggests that she may be understood as a representation of Kali, a benevolent mother, who enacts violent but restorative justice. Contrasting this figure is another with a lizard, or reptilian face. This figure is wearing a black

dress with red buttons and large white collar; another lizard appears to be climbing up the figure's face, and a fox-like form sits on her shoulder. Biswas has suggested that this dress is "reminiscent of a colonial/Victorian missionary outfit",^{xvi} and as such, the painting as a whole may be regarded as a commentary on the role that religion played in the colonisation of the Indian subcontinent by the British. In this reading, Indian and Western religious symbols may be positioned side by side, but are not rendered on equal terms; violence and threat are positioned alongside dignity and serenity to present an allegory of "a political conflict between the colonialist/ ruling classes and the oppressed classes/ castes".^{xvii} However, since Ghosh has asserted that his use of symbolic forms should not be understood in such literal ways (where X equals Y), the meaning of his paintings are open for interpretation, and are dependent upon the viewer's own frame of reference. As Andrea Finn has suggested, in looking at Ghosh's paintings, "we enter an imaginative world which engages both head and heart in a spiritual journey".^{xviii}

Although Ghosh exhibited and continues to exhibit regularly, he has nonetheless found himself at odds with the ways in which mainstream Art History is narrated. Recent scholarship examining migrant South Asian artists living and working in Britain during the 1950s and early '60s notes that artists were generally regarded by critics and curators through tropes of hackneyed colonial stereotypes, when they were regarded at all. As Leon Wainwright has put it, "presupposed by the tropes of orientalism and primitivism that reviewers subjected them to was the idea that their paintings were passé, that they had come too late to Britain to be considered seriously as contemporary artists and were out of step with 'modern art' ".^{xix} The legacies of colonial biases found in contemporaneous criticism held sway for decades; Reviewing the 1989 exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in post-war Britain*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, and which included work by Chandra, Souza, and others, then-celebrated critic Brian Sewell argued that that generation of African, Asian and Caribbean artists who came to Britain in the post-war period failed to establish enduring critical reputations in London because "they are not good enough. They borrow all and contribute nothing".^{xx} Sewell's comments were indicative the every-day structural racism that artists of colour face in Britain. And, in addition to this racism, by the 1970s Ghosh also worked within and against an artistic environment that prioritized conceptual artistic endeavours. Although painting remained central to narratives of British art in the 1970s – such that John Hoyland could be described as the most important artists of his generation – as Sonali Fernando noted in relation to Ghosh's work, there was a "tabooing of the spiritual (the internal, psychic, imaginative and philosophical), within both

conservative and progressive arenas, as a viable subject of painting”.^{xxi} As such, it may be possible to claim that his mode of artistic activity was marginalised by the mainstream via the double impact of racism and postmodernism’s rejection of spirituality and claims to universality.

Although Rasheed Araeen’s curatorial intervention *The Other Story* is perhaps the best-known exhibition of migrant and diaspora artists in Britain, it was by no means the first. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, groups of South Asian artists collaborated in order to counteract their experiences of “aesthetic unappreciation and discrimination in Britain”.^{xxii} Ghosh, with Ibrahim Wagh, Prafulla Mohanti and Yashwant Mali, was a founding member of the group Indian Artists UK (known as IAUK). Established in 1976, IAUK aimed to support its members in their artistic careers by providing exhibition opportunities and working collectively to raise awareness of Indian arts and culture in the UK.^{xxiii} Ghosh was on the selection committee for one of the group’s most significant achievements, the exhibition *Between Two Cultures*, staged at the Barbican Concourse gallery, London, in 1982. The exhibition was staged to coincide with the large-scale Festival of India; this festival was sponsored by the British and Indian governments and took place in venues across London. However criticisms were levelled at the Festival for its prioritisation of folk and traditional art forms to the exclusion of not only contemporary art but, significantly, contemporary art made by Indian artists who had made Britain their home; In his opening statement for the *Between Two Cultures* catalogue, Ghosh asserted:

...no one should be unaware of the cultural and social implications of a Festival of India, which has glorified crafts, glorified native folk culture, glorified the artistic past, but finds the path of accepting and acknowledging the modern artistic achievements which are a blend of the Indian past, and the British present and future, too uncomfortable to follow. Ethnic minority has stuck as a badge of separation with the status of a separate elite, but it is sad, when for want of openness, a veiled prejudice prevails, and ability denied, through want of understanding the complexity of a particular visual language. This exhibition, we hope, will create greater awareness and break down some of the prejudice towards the Indian Artist in the U.K.^{xxiv}

Between Two Cultures showcased the work of eighteen artists of South Asian heritage working in Britain; exhibitors came from different generations, and worked in different media

and styles; although the majority of exhibitors were male, a significant proportion were women, including, Vinodini Ebdon, Shashi Mehra and Chila Burman.

In 1983 Indian Artists UK renamed itself the Indian Arts Council (IAC) and from the outset, the new organisation held a long-term ambition to establish a gallery to promote the visual arts; the Horizon Gallery, which opened in Marchmont Street, London, in 1987, was the outcome of this ambition.^{xxv} For much of the gallery's lifespan it was run by committee, and Ghosh was a central figure within the gallery. He ensured that exhibitions were offered to younger artists and was particularly supportive of women artists; Sutapa Biswas exhibited during the Horizon's inaugural year, and Chila Burman and Bhajan Hunjan also had solo shows.

However, it is notable that many of the younger Black and South Asian artists who were leaving art school in the early 1980s were rejecting the type of formal modernist painting practiced by Ghosh and his contemporaries. Artists including Zarina Bhimji and Allan deSouza addressed social inequalities and racism (albeit in varying degrees), and their work in photography may be positioned withing a broader context of art that engaged with identity politics. However, in 1990 Ghosh raised concerns that the prioritisation of politicised content by the younger generation was a trap, in the form of self-marginalisation. Discussing their 'protest' art, Ghosh observed,

It is acceptable as art if it continues to validate the dominance and superiority of the white, male dominated art scene. Protest describes discrimination and injustice, it reminds the complacent majority of their relatively comfortable position, but it may also serve as a reminder to defend it. In artistic terms, issue based art is a challenge to injustice and the establishment, but is a 'safe' challenge for the 'art establishment', because it is not perceived as a challenge on the dominant white majority's own artistic ground.^{xxvi}

For Ghosh, the type of political art espoused by Rasheed Araeen would not afford artists of colour critical recognition; instead such work would exist at arms-length from the mainstream because both its content and formal vocabularies remained outside of mainstream preoccupations. In contrast, it is possible to argue that Ghosh's modernist form of painting offers the greater ideological challenge to the art historical status quo. Throughout his career, Ghosh has worked from within the British establishment, engaging with modernist

discourses of colour, improvisation and abstraction, while simultaneously incorporating South Asian symbolism and spirituality in his work. While praising Ghosh's modernist credentials, Michael Horn's assessment of the artist's exhibition at the Horizon Gallery in September 1987, perhaps misses an important point. Horn suggested that Ghosh's paintings, such as Allegory Series VII, 1987, recall the warm, sun-drenched Mediterranean paintings of Picasso and Matisse, created in the inter-war period; he praised Ghosh for creating a body of work "relevant to its time in an attempt to confirm hope and salvation through creativity ... There is no polemic here, no grabbing at our allegiances and shaking them".^{xxvii} While Ghosh's paintings are not immediately polemical or violent, some nonetheless bristle with pent-up tension and anxiety. Through his concern for how paint is applied to the surface, in conjunction with how colour affects mood and tone, many of his works having a strange stillness - a meditative quality that in some cases is calming, but in others is unsettling. His are not decorative or comfortable paintings, and arguably, it is Ghosh's commitment to a modernist form of painting that is provocative. His work challenges predetermined Western notions of modernism by addressing it in its own terms.

ⁱ Cecil Collins, cited in Amal Ghosh, "The Transcending Vision: Another Story", in Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds.), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, London: Saffron Press, 2001, pp. 75-89, p.79.

ⁱⁱ See Partha Mitter, "Indian Artists and the Raj: Westernisation and Nationalism (1850-1947)", in Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds.), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, London: Saffron Press, 2001, pp.31-43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ghosh, "The Transcending Vision", p.76.

^{iv} Elena Crippa and Beth Williamson, "Basic Design", in Elena Crippa and Beth Williamson (eds.), *Basic Design*, London: Tate, 2013, pp.6-13, p.8.

^v Ghosh, "The Transcending Vision", p.76.

^{vi} Crippa and Williamson, "Basic Design", p.9.

^{vii} Amal Ghosh, "Artists' Statement", *In Focus*, London: Horizon Gallery, 1990, unpaginated loose-leaf exhibition catalogue.

^{viii} Amal Ghosh, "Part of the Universal Story", in Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds.), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, London: Saffron Press, 2001, pp.141-142, p.142.

^{ix} In conversation with the author, 6 September 2019.

^x James C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, 2nd ed., p.359.

^{xi} Sonali Fernando, "Amal Ghosh", *Transition of Riches*, Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1993, pp.34-37, p.36.

^{xii} Ghosh, "Part of the Universal Story", p.141.

^{xiii} Tania Guha, "Transition of Riches", *Third Text*, 7:25, pp.81-86, p.85.

^{xiv} Ghosh, "The Transcending Vision", p.80.

^{xv} Sutapa Biswas, "Introduction", *Numaish Lalit Kala*, Liverpool: Bluecoat, 1988, unpaginated [pp.1-4, p.3]

^{xvi} Biswas, "Introduction" [p.4]

^{xvii} Biswas, "Introduction" [p.4]

^{xviii} Andrea Finn, "Amal Ghosh: Allegories in Exile", *Amal Ghosh*, Catalogue No.10, New Delhi: Art Heritage Gallery, 1991, pp.33-34, p.33.

^{xix} Leon Wainwright, "Francis Newton Souza and Aubrey Williams: Entwined Art Histories at the End of Empire" in Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy (eds.), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 101-126, p.104.

^{xx} Brian Sewell, "Black Pride or Prejudice", *Evening Standard*, 4 January 1990, p.25.

^{xxi} Fernando, "Amal Ghosh", p.36

^{xxii} Charles Moore, "Introduction", in Charles Moore (ed.), *The Roots of the Indian Artists' Collectives*, London: Grosvenor Gallery, 2019, p.4.

^{xxiii} See Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, p.39.

^{xxiv} Amal Ghosh, "Introduction", *Between Two Cultures*, London: Indian Artists UK, 1982, unpaginated.

^{xxv} South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, Horizon Gallery, Biographical Notes,

<http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=47942&sos=5>

^{xxvi} Amal Ghosh, "Introduction", Amal Ghosh (ed.), *In Focus*, London: Horizon Gallery, 1990, unpaginated [pp.1-3, p.2].

^{xxvii} Michael Horn, "Amal Ghosh at the Horizon Gallery, September 1987", *Bazaar Magazine*, No.3, pp.17-18, p.18.