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| Khakhar, Bhupen (1934-2003) |
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| Born in the Baniya community of Mumbai and originally from an artisan caste, Bhupen Khakhar is often considered India’s first ‘Pop artist.’ Having revealed his homosexual identity in 1982, Khakhar is widely known as India’s first gay artist, and as one of the first openly gay figures within the modern Indian cultural consciousness. Working as a charted accountant while practicing his own art in 1958, Khakhar met the young Gujarati artist Gulammohammed Sheikh, who encouraged him to join the recently established Fine Arts Department in the M.S University Bardoa. Following a brief enrolment in evening classes at the J.J School of Arts in Mumbai, he completed his Master’s in Art Criticism in 1964, and began exhibiting paintings in both group and solo-exhibitions. His participation in the renowned ‘Place for People’ exhibition in 1981 and his involvement in the Baroda-based ‘figurative-narrative movement’ are often considered as the discursive events prompting Khakha to reveal his sexual identity. Among many other honours and having participated in a range of international exhibitions including Doucmenta IX (1992), Khakhar received the Indian Government’s Padma Shri Award in 1984 and the Prince Claus Award in 2000. Today, Khakhar is remembered for his poignant paintings (as well as many short stories) depicting India’s small-town bourgeois class, and for opening up the marginalized world of queer desire and identity in India.  Khakhar is recognized for the stylistic shifts throughout his artistic career, and for his critical success in both national and international circles despite the subversiveness of his art. By the mid-1960s, Khakhar had invented a new pictorial language of religious kitsch and playful collages, parodying the puritan aesthetic of the then dominant Group-1890 and the so-called ‘neo-tantric school’ of abstraction. After his first solo-exhibition of collage-paintings in 1965, Khakhar gradually shifted to figurative art (fearing he lacked the necessary skills, Khakhar was hesitant to experiment with this style). Notable paintings during this period include *Janata Watch Repairing* (1972) and *Mukti Bahini Soldier* (1972). When India fell to the Emergency rule from 1975 to 1977, Khakhar struggled with the death of his close male friend, and began exploring the darker elements of human subjectivity (as in *Man with a Bouquet of Plastic Flowers* [1976]) as well as new painterly techniques and pictorial strategies (which were largely influenced mainly through Khakhar’s study of Sienese murals and the British artist Timothy Hyman). The 1980s saw Khakhar executing his most mature and well-known paintings including *You Can’t Please All* (1981) and *Yayati* (1987). In the 1990s the biographical and allegorical complexities of Khakhar’s art gave way to a simpler and more playful engagement with different imageries and mediums (mainly ceramics and watercolour). Khakhar was diagnosed with prostate cancer late in his career, resulting in a body of work exploring the subjective realms of bodily pain and mental distress. He died in 2003. |
| Further reading:  (Ezekiel)  (Hyman)  (Citron)  (Kapur)  (Kapur, Contemporary Indian Artists )  (Panikkar)  (Panikkar, Inter-Subjectivity/Intervisuality — Bhupen Khakhar among Friends and Foes: An Inquiry into Homophobia) |