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| Khakhar, Bhupen (1934-2003) |
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| Born in the Baniya (merchant) community in Mumbai, originally from an artisan caste, Bhupen Khakhar has been called “India’s first ‘Pop’ artist”. After revealing his homosexual identity in 1982 (Illustration.), Khakhar is more known as India’s first gay artist; perhaps the very first gay figure in the modern Indian cultural life itself. In 1958, while working as a charted accountant along with practicing art on his own, 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. From there, following a brief perusal of evening classes in J.J School of Arts in Mumbai, he completed his Masters in Art Criticism in 1964 and started exhibiting paintings in both group and solo-exhibitions. His participation in the renowned ‘Place for People’ exhibition in 1981 and the Baroda-based ‘figurative-narrative movement’ is often valorised as the discursive event making the artist confident enough to reveal his sexual identity. Among many other honours and participation in international exhibitions such as Doucmenta IX (1992), Khakhar received the Indian Government’s Padma Shri Award in 1984 and Prince Claus Award in 2000, three years before his death. Today Khakhar is remembered for his poignant paintings (as well as many short stories) on India’s small-town petty bourgeois class and opening up the marginalized world of queer desire and bodily delights.  Khakhar’s artistic career is intriguing not only for its many stylistic shifts but also for its remarkable 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 moved to the challenges of figurative art which he had been hesitant to take up for the fear of lacking artistic skills. Notable paintings during this period are *Janata Watch Repairing* (1972) and *Mukti Bahini Soldier* (1972). From 1975 onwards, when India fell to the Emergency rule (1975-1977) and Khakhar painfully went through the demise of his male friend, he started to explore the dark and gloomy sides of human subjectivity (*Man with a Bouquet of Plastic Flowers* (1976), for example) as well as new painterly techniques and pictorial strategies (mainly through a study of Sienese murals under the influence of the British artist Timothy Hyman). The decade of the 1980s witnessed Khakhar executing his most mature and famous paintings such as *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 playful engagement with different imageries and mediums (mainly ceramics and watercolour). The sustained preoccupation with middle-class desires and fantasies took a surprising turn, by the end of Khakhar’s career, to the very subjective realms of bodily pain and mental distress as he was tragically succumbing to prostate cancer which killed him in 2003. |
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