

# Art Gets in Line

Two exhibitions in Mumbai look at drawings as final products

AMRUTA LAKHE

THEY call it drawing. I really have no name for it. It's a compulsion, an itch. The more I scratch, the more I want to continue. I start to scratch the surface of a piece of paper. Soon enough, the pencil moves as if of its own accord, pulling my hand this way and that," says Krishen Khanna in one of his essays. The artist, known for his figurative style, is still more attached to his drawings. Some of these are a part of the exhibition titled "A Celebration of Lines" at Sakshi Gallery in Mumbai. "But please don't call them sketches," the 89-year-old Padma Shri awardee objects. "A sketch is like a mental note you make while writing a novel, but not the novel itself. But a drawing is the final product, not just something to get you started," he says.

At the gallery, there is a diverse collection that aren't perfunctory sketches, rather large canvas works. Among them, Khanna narrates first-hand stories of the Independence struggle. There are a few works where Indian revolutionaries, hidden among the bushes, are spying on British officers, looking for their next victim. Then there is a large suite of paintings that depict the long painful journey that people undertook after the Partition. His stark and daunting works have the accuracy and preciseness of a black-and-white photograph.

Like Khanna, our Modern masters too, at a certain point in their careers, reached out more easily to



pen and pencil than paint. Kamini Sawhney of the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, says, "While going through our collection we realised how many Modernists indulged in drawings that were only drawings, and not preliminary sketches for a larger piece of work."

The gallery has put together a rare collection of 45 drawings by prominent artists such as FN Souza, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Vasudev Gaitonde, Sudhir Patwardhan and MF Husain. Titled "Taking the Line for a Walk", the exhibition is inspired by the quote made famous by artist Paul Klee (a big influence on the Modernists): "A line is a dot that goes for a walk." A copy of Husain's book, *Sansad's Upanishads*, which takes a cheeky look at the drama at Rajya Sabha—



for which the master was nominated and where he spent six silent years scribbling on a pad—through "drawings only and not caricatures" is also on display.

The reason there was such a substantial contribution towards drawings is because, as Khanna explains, it is a more intimate relationship. "It



Clockwise from left) Artist Krishen Khanna; a work by Sudhir Patwardhan; Khanna's drawing showing Indian revolutionaries hiding behind bushes and spying on British officers

is only you and the canvas without the distraction or obligation that comes with the use of colour. There's a certain immediacy to drawing, no other form offers." For instance, about the black-and-white work of his straight-jacketed, simple and curt English teacher, *Bye Bye Miss Amery*, Khanna says, "To paint her in colour would have been unfaithful to her demeanour and ap-

pearance. She was frugal, colourless and extremely precise." This is exactly how she appears in the work.

Although it is the most primitive art form, Sawhney believes, "Drawing is slowly being overshadowed by contemporary art practices such as video art, installations and performance art. So this exhibition is an attempt of trying to resurface the original drawing."