

# Nothing is absolute

An exhibition that explores not only a moment in the artistic and intellectual history of India, but the question of form, image, narrative and location, expanding and involving in conversation, that which is 'abstract' and that which aspires to 'the absolute'

*Exhibition curators*  
**Mehli Gobhai**  
**Ranjit Hoskote**

*Text*  
**Mortimer Chatterjee**

*Photos courtesy*  
**Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation**



The *Hriyagarbha* and the Tantric *yantra* diagrams juxtaposed within the collection of some of the most important works of abstract art by artists from India

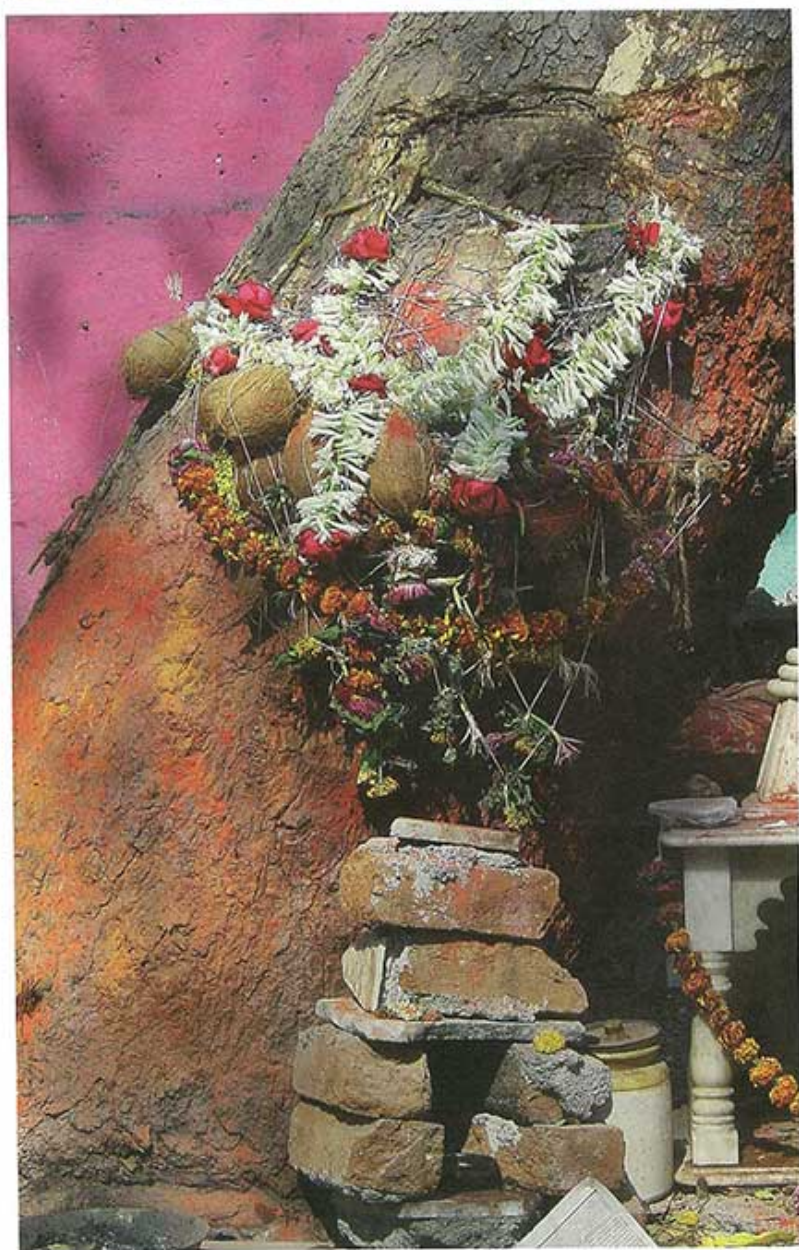
Patronage in the context of modern and contemporary art in India is an area of research that has been neglected amongst the academy. Much of the reason is to do with the dearth of major collections assembled over the last seventy years or so. Compounding the problem is that patrons mostly collected without recourse to scholarly help and, added to this, galleries and artists were not in the habit of methodically recording exhibitions and sales. Where collections do exist, few have found their way into the public consciousness until very recently. Thankfully over the last two years the significant holdings belonging to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) and Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation (JNAF) have been opened up to a new generation of viewers. Unlike the TIFR collection, which brought only new work from exhibitions and artists' studios, the JNAF was, partially, retrospective in nature as it only began acquiring in 1968. These two collections, along

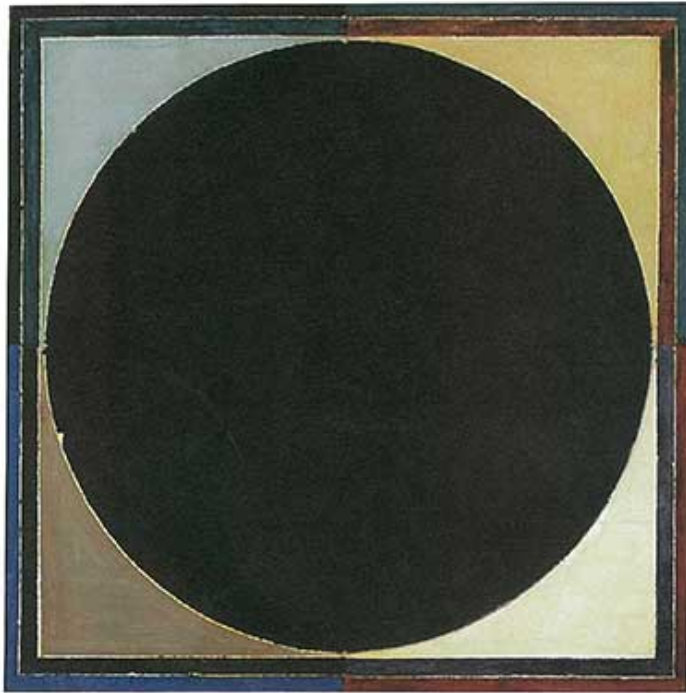
with those of the Taj and Air India, formed the four great patrons of the visual arts during the first three decades of the post-independence period. Jehangir Nicholson's taste was extraordinarily eclectic. It is hard to tie the collection to a particular style, school, or medium. It is certainly the case that lesser known Bombay (Mumbai)-based artists are particularly well represented, however this seems to be little more than a function of where the collection was based and the work that Nicholson was offered. There seems to have been a desire to collect as widely as possible and, often, there will be found but one example of a particular artist's oeuvre extant in the collection. Consequently curating thematic exhibitions around the JNAF holdings is no mean feat. The fact that co-curators Ranjit Hoskote and Mehli Gobhai have put together a first-class exhibition is testament to the depth of knowledge and sensitivity both have brought to bare on a subject close to their hearts, one as a practitioner and



Wayside shrines across Mumbai  
Vidya Kamat

- I Ceremonial stirrer, spatula and ladle
- II Inkwell, box and scissors
- III Incense burner and oil lamp





Bindu Serenity  
Syed Haider Raza  
1999

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Detail from  
*Shatrugaya Pat*  
Rajasthan  
Late 20th century



the other as a critic. Their show, the latest in a growing number at the Jehangir Nicholson gallery, is titled *Nothing is Absolute: a journey through abstraction* and offers nothing short of the most insightful commentary yet produced on abstract art produced in India during the 20th century. In particular, they have reclaimed abstraction from the realm of the decorative that has been its fate over the last few decades. This has been achieved by a combination of carefully considered exhibition design, lucid and insightful accompanying texts, and a series of talks on abstract art that have taken place at the exhibition venue.

The central premise provided by Hoskote and Gobhai is that abstraction should be viewed as 'a relay of positions' rather than as a singular, lumpen, non-figurative mass. The exhibited works are broken into four distinct zones, each interspersed with wall text and quotes. In addition to paintings from the JNAF collection, the curators have added to the exhibition with loans from both private and public collections. The zones that demarcate both the space at the Jehangir Nicholson gallery and, also, the accompanying catalogue are given the following descriptors, 'drawing away from visually experienced reality'; 'transfiguration of landscape into the cosmos'; 'quest for the hidden order of nature'; 'the continuous interplay of form' and 'non-form, iconic and aniconic'. Spread across the gallery spaces are examples by many of those artists most intimately connected with the abstraction's long moment in the history of Indian modern art, in particular Prabhakar Kolte; V S Gaitonde; Laxman Shreshtha; Ram Kumar; S H Raza; Akbar Padamsee; Ganesh Haloi; J S Swaminathan; R Broto; G R Santosh and Mehli Gobhai. There are also artists whose work is seen more rarely nowadays, and here one thinks of Laxman Pai; R M Palaniappan; Muzaffar Ali; Jin Sook and Homi Patel.

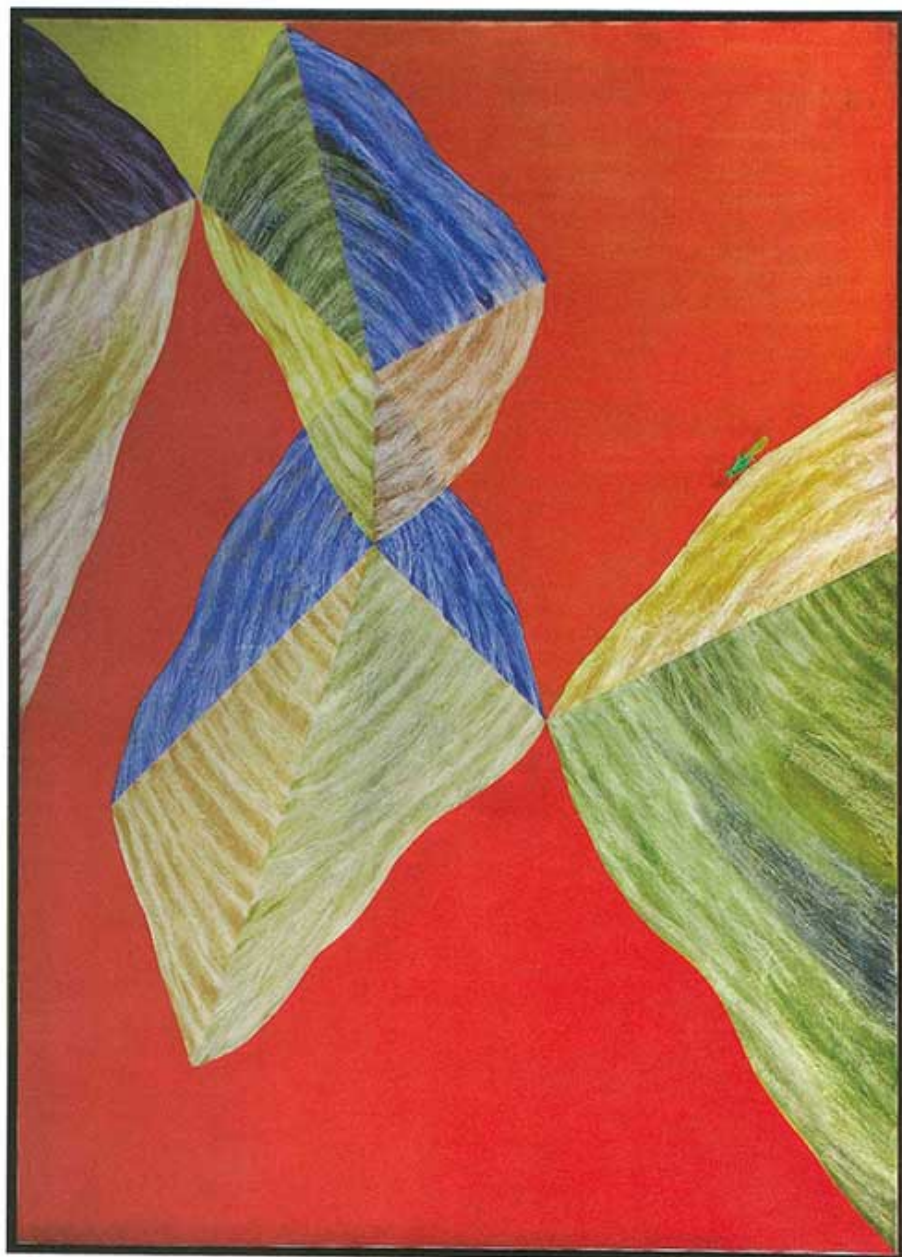
It is the grouping of artworks titled 'transfiguration of landscape into the cosmos', that allows a viewer the easiest entry point to the classifications. The history of mid-to-late 20th century Indian abstract painting is heavily indebted to the tradition of landscape painting. When, in the latter half of the 1950s, the space for

Views of the exhibition, indicating the juxtaposition of visual objects from many and varied histories and world-views



Islamic Tiles  
From the CSMVS  
collection  
17th-18th century





Untitled  
Jagdish Swaminathan  
1972

the human figure became increasingly tenuous in the work of many would-be abstractionists, the imagery that often took its place quoted the topography of an India marked by fracture and dissonance. Much of the most well-known work of Ram Kumar, Akbar Padamsee and S H Raza (in the decade following approximately 1958) all seem to speak of inhospitable, turbulent environments. Shreshtha, too, seemed engaged in a similar programme but with perhaps fewer of the tensions inherent in the work of his peers. It is interesting to note that the viewer encounters the work of Raza in two separate areas of the exhibition, both in the section mentioned above (with a work dating from 1966) as also where artists have dealt with the numinous through the mode of abstraction. The manner in which the artist neatly fits into both sections is striking, even though the groupings of artists are completely different and, stylistically, the works between the two groups diverge significantly. The deeper truth that this example highlights is that many

artists throughout the post-independence moment revealed in a multiplicity of formal experimentation. Any number of artists included in the exhibition could have been shown to have experienced similar journeys. The admixture of objects and artworks from beyond the JNAF collection succeed in adding great value to the exhibition, especially when dealing with pictorial investigations of sacred geometry and in explorations of the blurred line between the abstract and the representational. It is here that the hand of the curators is most visible. Their decision to cast a net over the subcontinent's vast cultural heritage has succeeded in revealing everything from the quotidian to the very rare. In these sections the viewer encounters photographs of wayside shrines; texts on yantras; Islamic decorative tiles; a contemporary *pichwai*; traditional metal containers and utensils; an aniconic rock formation. Each of these objects illustrate the degree to which the abstract is embedded in the psyche of the artist, artisan,

householder and devotee. These pieces have been chosen with a judicious eye on quality and speak volumes for the connoisseurship of the curators which, to be frank, at points in the exhibition exceeds the limits of what the JNAF itself can offer by way of prime examples from the careers of the artists under discussion.

The JNAF must be congratulated for encouraging the experimental nature of their programming. In order that freshness is retained in the forthcoming exhibitions, it is hoped that future curators will continue to look outside the confines of the permanent collection so as to bolster the quality of the exhibitions, even as they remain committed to its key works to anchor the arguments and positions taken in each case.

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**MORTIMER CHATTERJEE**  
Gallerist and art historian



Raga Bhairav  
Laxman Pai  
1965



Untitled  
Mehlii Gobhai  
2000



Untitled  
Ambadas Khobargade  
1968

What abstraction does, at its best, is to resist the ability of language to frame explanations; to defy interpretation by offering few clues to cogent meaning; to render a singular narrative unstable by fluctuating constantly among rival dimensions of significance. Abstraction, I would argue, summons language out of its citadel and obliges it to renew its resources, its relevance and its ability to grasp the world. Both in its interplay with what is visible and palpable in the everyday world, as well as in its vexed yet productive relationship with language, abstraction reminds us of the ceaseless cycles of creation and dissolution through which images are established and eclipsed, meaning is made, unmade and remade. Far from being a schematic and universal programme, abstraction sustains itself through contradictions. Even as abstraction presents itself as a wager on an absolute that lies beyond the reach of form, it must confront the abyss of nothingness, beyond the range of all expression. Even as it claims the conceptual space of an imagination liberated from the structures of conditioning, its primary appeal is to the eye and the other sensory faculties of the bodied self. The productions of the abstractionist thus emerge, not only from the erasure of the visible and the free fall into *shunya*, but also through a continuous dialogue with *sarsara*. The abstractionist has engaged, in various times and places, with the materiality of artisanal objects,

the landscape's intimations of cosmic expanse, the hidden order of forces and relationships in nature, the symptoms of belief and desire in everyday life, and the mysteries encrypted into ritual diagrams. Our exhibition, accordingly, is enacted as a relay among diverse objects, evidentiary materials and visualities, which we link together by means of a set of formal and intuitive relationships: paintings selected from the Jehangir Nicholson Collection, objects borrowed from the holdings of the CSMVS (formerly the Prince of Wales Museum), objects on loan from private collections, photographic research documentation, and textual citations from the abundant literature on abstraction and its multiple contexts. Thus the abstractionist painting takes its place in relation to many other cultural practices and foci, whether the Tantric *yantra* or the Buddhist *mandala*, the aniconic wayside deity, the elegantly shaped traditional utensil, or the treatise on classical dance. It is to this relay of positions, these shifts of gear within abstraction that we allude through our title, *Nothing is Absolute*.  
**RANJIT HOSKOTE**  
*(Closing notes from a longer essay written for the catalogue published along with the exhibition, extract published with permission from the author)*