

Anjolie Ela Menon

**BY THE RIVER**

AICON



Anjolie Ela Menon

**BY THE RIVER**

AICON ART | 35 GREAT JONES ST | NEW YORK, NY 10012

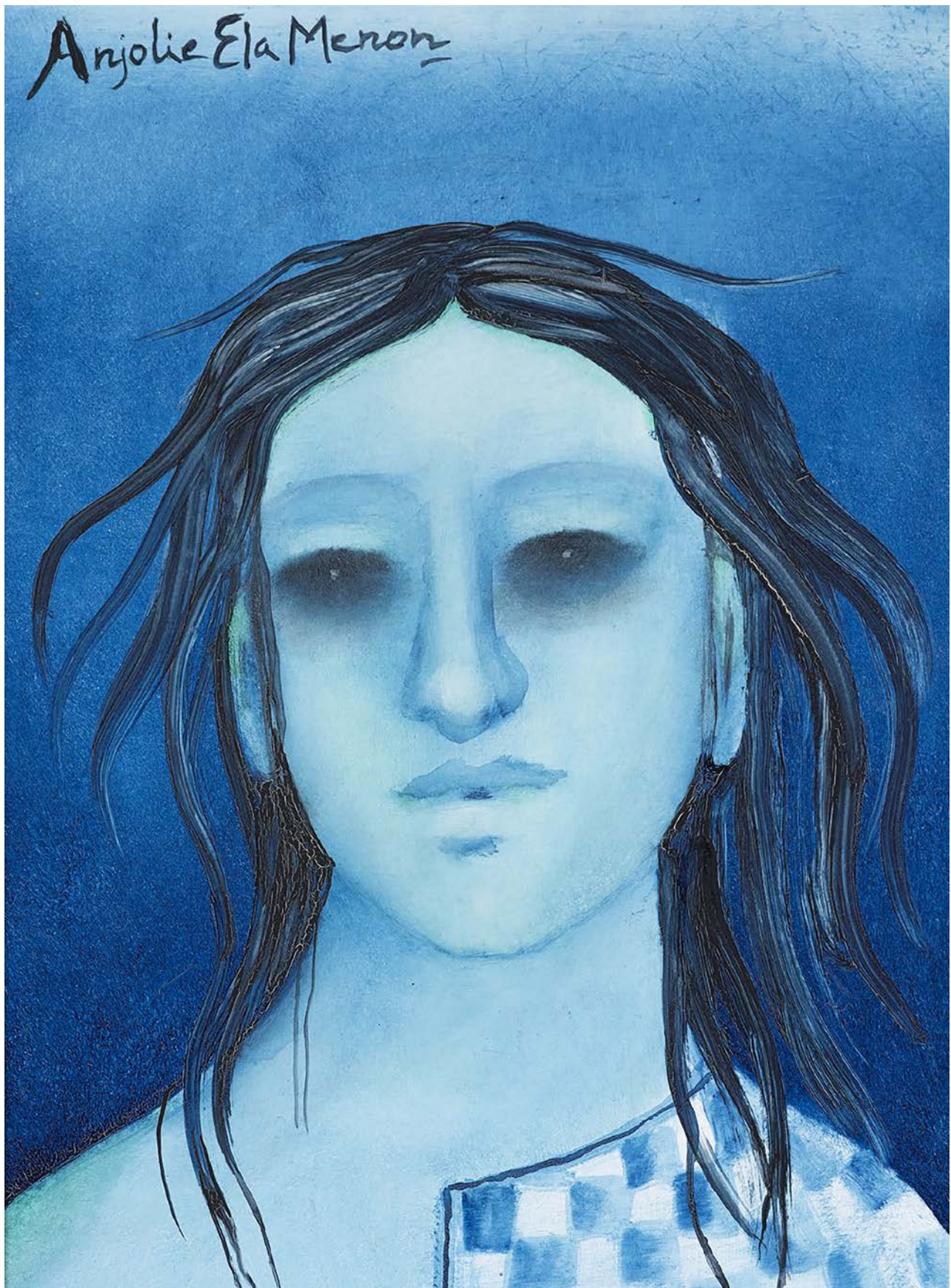












*Madhavi*, 2020, Oil on masonite board, 16 x 12 in.

Previous: *Avanti's Birthday*, 2021, Oil on masonite board, 36 x 48 in., detail

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# Introduction

Aicon Gallery is incredibly grateful for its decades-long relationship with renowned Indian painter Anjolie Ela Menon. Over the course of a career spanning more than sixty years, Menon has cemented her status as a pioneering figurative painter, working in defiance of the trends of the day. The themes that have pervaded Menon's artwork are universal but also distinctly Indian: urban life, family, spirituality. An octogenarian as active as ever, Menon continues to evade attempts to neatly classify her art. Her flat, decisive brushstrokes evoke the style of Byzantine art, harking back to her studies of medieval Christian iconography during her time in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts. Since setting off as a young artist committed to deliberate, almost austere figures, Menon has evolved greatly and perfected a style signature to her enigmatic story. Anjolie Ela Menon has an unusual ability to distill a scene to its essentials while breathing life into all that she paints.

Observers of Menon have likened her works to that of Modigliani, Van Gogh, M. F. Husain, and Amrita Sher-Gil. Her bold brushstrokes, cutting lines, masterful use of color, and well-developed portfolio of characters inspired by loved ones render her a one-of-a-kind talent. She applies her unique technique to a range of subjects from Jesus Christ to her grandchildren to her neighbors in Nizamuddin, a lively Muslim neighborhood in Delhi.

*By the River* showcases an artist at her apex. Menon grants us the gift of canvases that plumb the depths of her rich lived experience. Menon will always appeal to a wide audience because, as Gautam Bhatia puts it, she “retains a resolute determination to stay clear of cultural stereotypes, and deliberately straddle a wide range of diverse geographies and time frames.” It is through the colorful lens of this artist that we can better appreciate the world around us. In our presentation, we witness a woman who gracefully carries the burden of being an unapologetically female narrator of Indian culture. Ultimately, the show is a tribute to an artist who “dreams in color.”





*By the River*  
2021  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 48 in.







*Goatherd I*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
48 x 24 in.





*Goatherd II*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
48 x 24 in.

# By the River

By Gautam Bhatia

One of the many unique aspects of Anjolie Ela Menon's art is the difficulty of easy classification. A figurative painter, a painter of intimate landscapes, a portrayer of divinity – images of South Indian priests and those of Christ, Madonna and Child, or Parvati and Ganesh – there exists in all the work an allegiance to a universal message that plainly removes any traces of place and history. The very fact that in a six decade long career Menon's work has consistently baffled critics and brought on comparisons as varied as Amrita Sher-Gil, classical medieval painting, and the contradictory vitality of Hieronymus Bosch is part of her intrigue. Now at 80, she retains a resolute determination to steer clear of cultural stereotypes, and deliberately straddles a wide range of diverse geographies and time frames.

What strikes first is the bright sheen of the painted surface. As if the starkness of the images needs such clarity and focus that space and objects must be rendered with a primal immediacy. Ever present too is the quest for the beautiful. Not beauty as conventionally understood but as an underlying human condition expressed in different ways – faces shrouded, always shadowed, depicted in colors so clear and shimmering, as if life has been expunged of the dirt and grime of reality. "I admit I am still fixated on the idea of beauty in art. For me aesthetics is not a thing of the past," reiterates Menon, "even at a time when beauty seems to have become a dirty word". Paint appears in vivid and often brilliant contrasts, taking the subject away from reality into the fantastic and surreal. "I don't draw. I think and dream in color, its intensity, translucence, even depth..." Working on hardboard rather than canvas, the application of several layers of transparent paint creates a sheen that lifts the painterly flatness to a magical iridescence.

During the recent isolating months of the pandemic, the search for visual expression became more inert and

guarded. Menon's lockdown period coincided with a remarkable rejuvenation of pictorial memory. It was as if the mind was reliving an archaic period of portraiture once remembered and then recalled in fleeting moments. The subjects vary, but they all remain imbued in a private melancholy. "Indian life is a state of such difficult confinement," admits Menon, "it is hard to see anything else...poverty, sadness, moments of joy are so closely knit, sometimes they happen all at once." It is a mark of her finely wrought artistic sensibility that the message is never direct, and gets conveyed – even with a singular subject like the human face – as an elongated meditation in time.

And so, the portraits come, enigmatic parcels of local city identity. Blue girl with flowing hair, boy clutching goat, yellow face against yellow background. Not a detached rendering of casual pictorial observation, but as the artist says, "These are people I yearn to touch, people I long to be." The subjects and their chronicler are meant to be one.

If that is the case, then it is easy to see traces of her own self in the portraits Menon paints, the look of both newness and a sad vulnerability. The eyes are invariably in soft focus; the figure caught in an accidental exposure, as if the reality of a formal pose goes against the truth of the personality. Eyes turned inwards, or away from the viewer, the Namboodiri priest or Christ, the young girl, or the old man, faces remain cast in a somber gaze attending to their private world.

Did the lockdown and the scale of public distress spark political unrest in the artist? "I don't believe art should espouse causes. Politics degrades art and reduces it to an event or a time." For Menon, the pandemic's physical closure instead released internal moments of visual enthrall. Rather than being closeted in fear, she opened up her gaze to the surroundings around her studio in the crowded settle-



ment of Delhi's Nizamuddin village. The series captures moments of urban domesticity: a child lurks behind a torn curtain, the priest surrounded by prayer flags; in a window, a resident reading the morning paper. Another window, partially open, is carefully angled to reveal to the homeowner his goat in a shadowed veranda. Ordinary objects and situations absorbed from a familiar locale acquire metaphysical mystery – like the torn curtain, at once revealing and concealing. “I am the voyeur peering into the darkened interiors behind the small windows and open doors in the narrow lanes outside my studio”, says Menon. “I try to conjure up the life that goes on inside those secret spaces.”

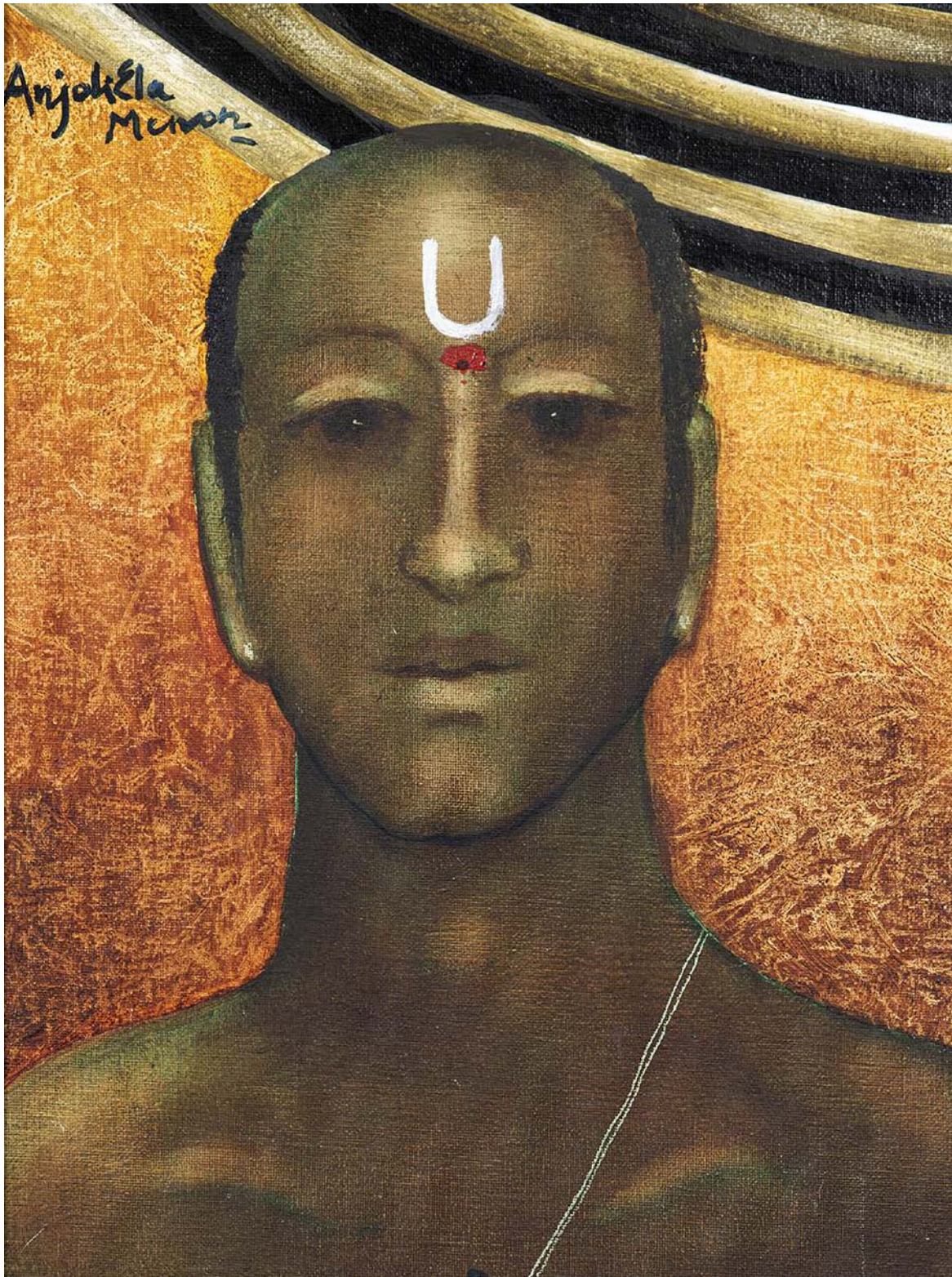
At another level, Menon works with a broad open horizon where the absence of humanity consistently negates conventional subject matter. Instead, engaging the day to day – chair and bottle, glass, balloon, or checkered cloth – the endless composition creates a lyrical arena, sometimes also littered with animals, birds and combs and bottles. The black crow makes a regular appearance, as do colored plastic chairs. Like pieces of personal driftwood they rise to the surface whenever required to enact moments of private idiosyncrasy. Though each object derives celestial meaning by contrast, it is impossible to ignore their surrealistic distribution. A transposition of scales occurs when the small and ordinary appear against an imaginary infinite background.

In these long lonely perspectives of the landscape, the desolation reminds of Giorgio de Chirico's flat planes of building and shadow. The colors, similarly stark and primary, each object is pressed into a defining clarity. Despite some commonality of visual approach, Menon remains entrenched in evocation rather than statement. In an open formless horizon, so stretched is space, that the only way to contain the vastness is to bring in the birds, toys, furniture, or kites. Even then, place is never clearly

defined; objects mingle in the most unlikely of connections. They themselves are painted as perfect and ordinary, but their incongruous proximity results in a pictorial irony that is both, myth and apocalypse – a revelation that invites constant misreading.

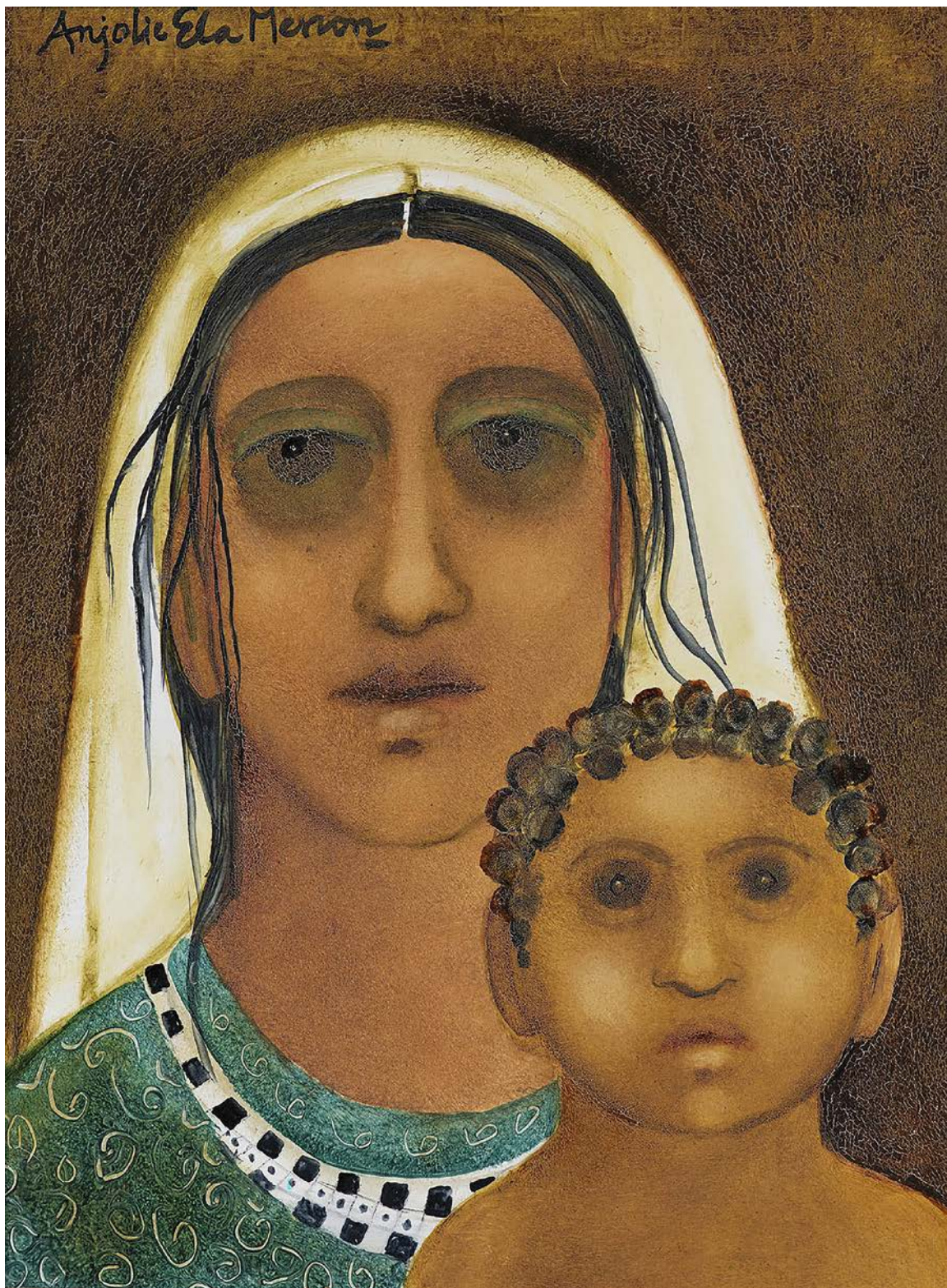
Such visual contradictions make it hard to pinpoint the source of Menon's inner world. “I don't subscribe to didacticism in art,” says the artist who is often inspired by Indian calendar art, and also experiments with computer-aided imagery. “I am admittedly self-indulgent.” There is little doubt that her deep understanding of Indian urbanity has played a definitive role in this perception. The details drawn and painted, the checker-board pattern completely rendered but unlinked to space or design, the newspaper defined by disturbing headlines, each frame is meticulously detailed, but also marked by a rigorous incompleteness. The viewer's imagination is called into play not to complete the picture, but to decipher its larger inexplicable mystery. Far from setting up depth and perspective, Menon moves her figures and objects in flat planes, often using the window as metaphor to create distance. Everything thereby assimilates in a floating frame, yielding easily to pictorial ambiguity – incomplete, and redolent with an atmospheric unease, an unease that casts no shadows, only more doubt in our uncertain world. What begins as a fragmentation of reality eventually becomes a subversion, the view allowing for a multiplicity of meanings.

This, Menon's most recent lockdown collection, intrigues by its anthropological optimism that in the constricted space of a poor urban neighborhood, life carries on despite uncertainty and hardship. It takes the practiced eye of a thoughtful artist to frame its unselfconscious privacy and release it in stolen moments to the public.



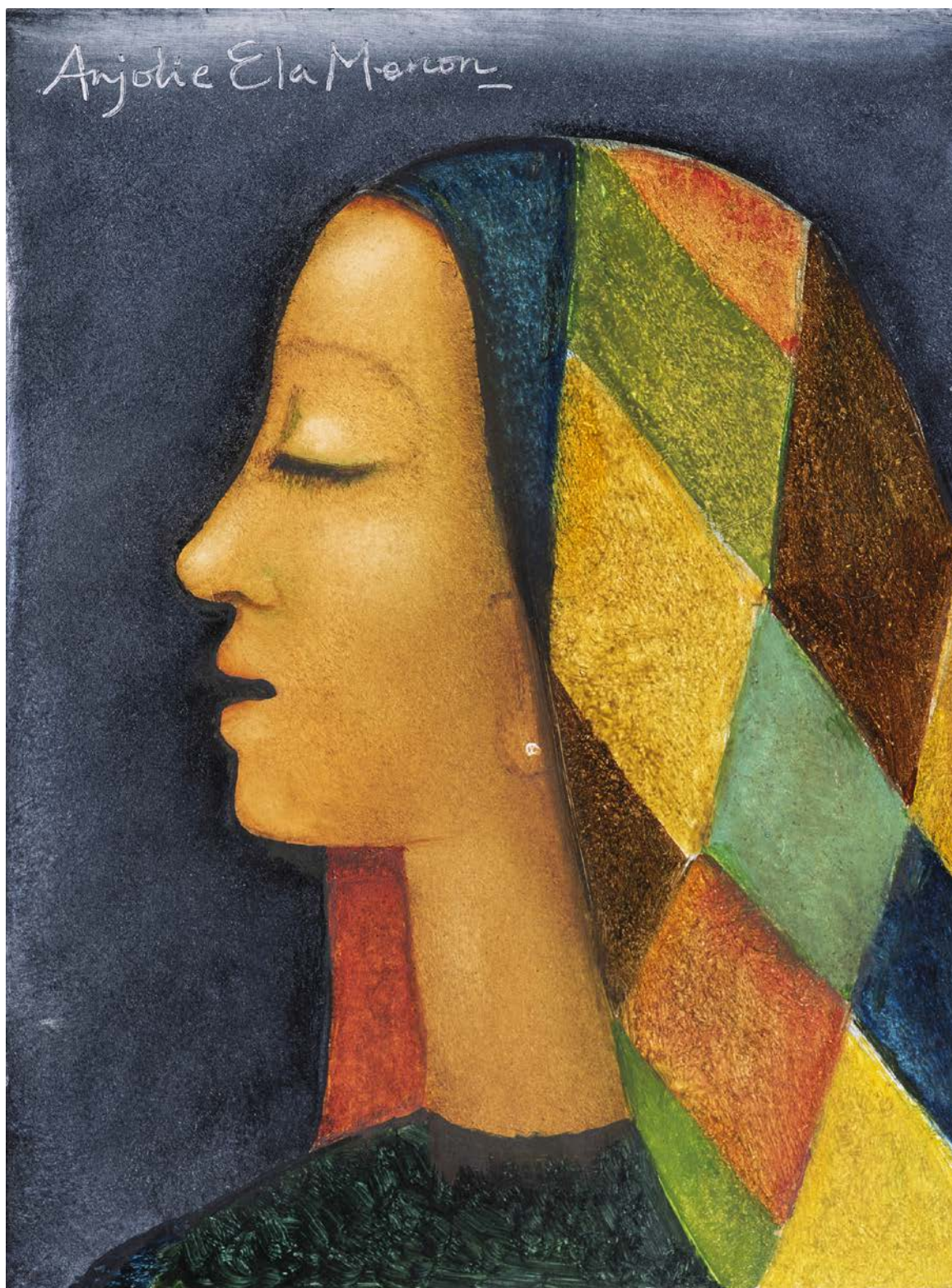
*Pandit*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





*Divine Mother III*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





*Nasifa*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





*Madonna & Child*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
24 x 18 in.









*Blue Nude*  
2016  
Oil on masonite board  
24 x 48 in.





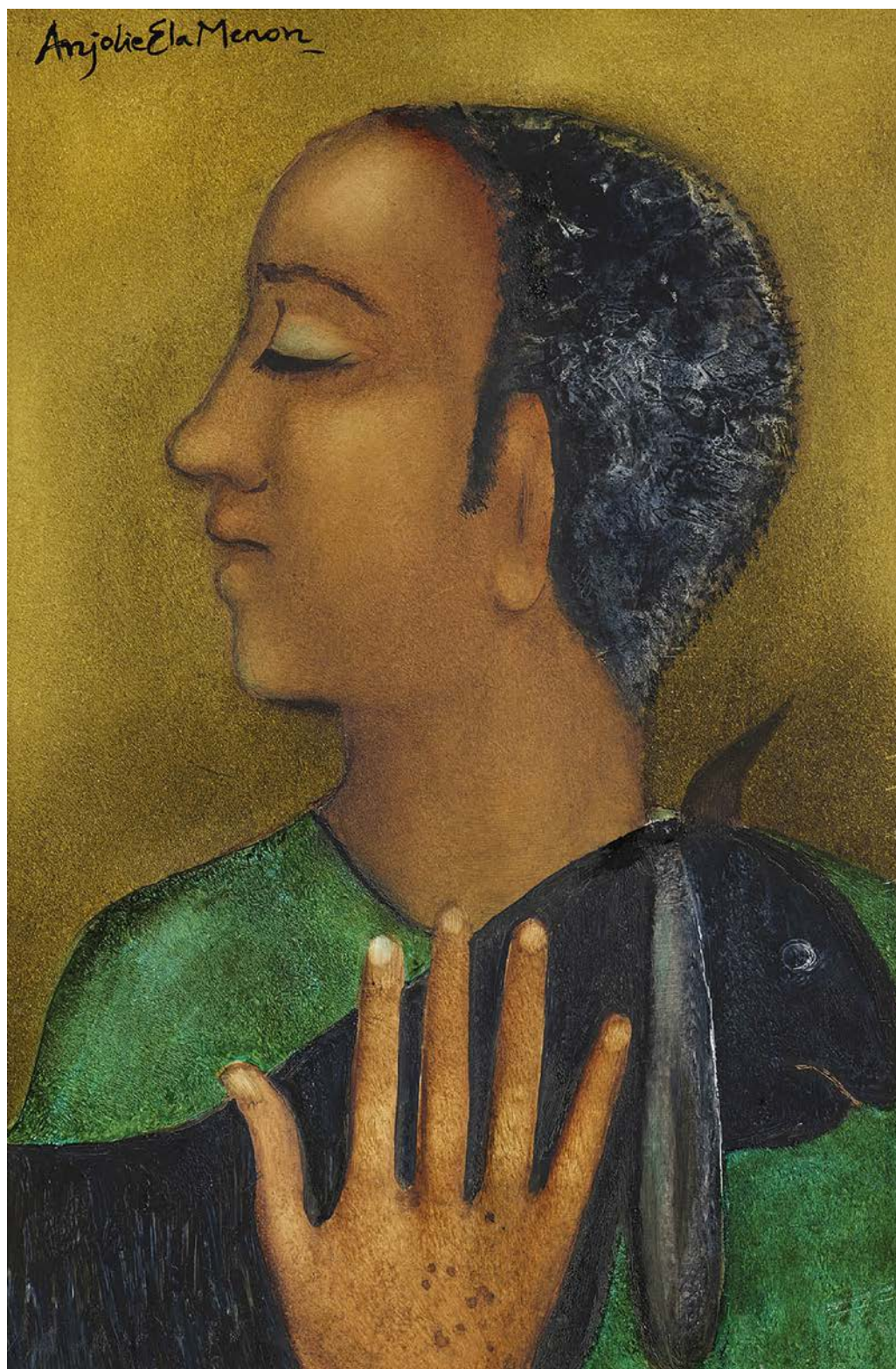
Rafiya Manzil  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 24 in.





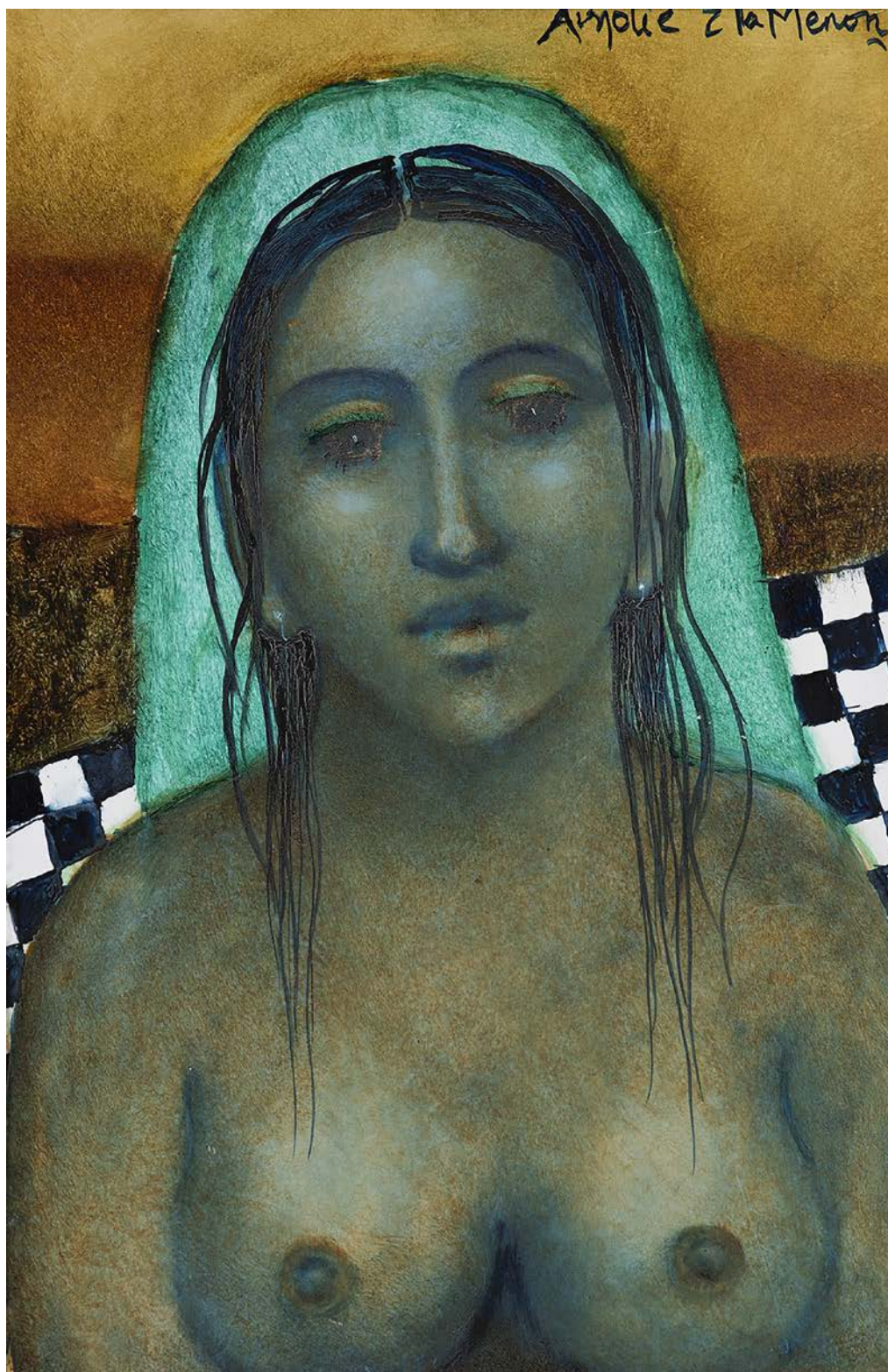
Crow  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





*Boy with Goat I*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





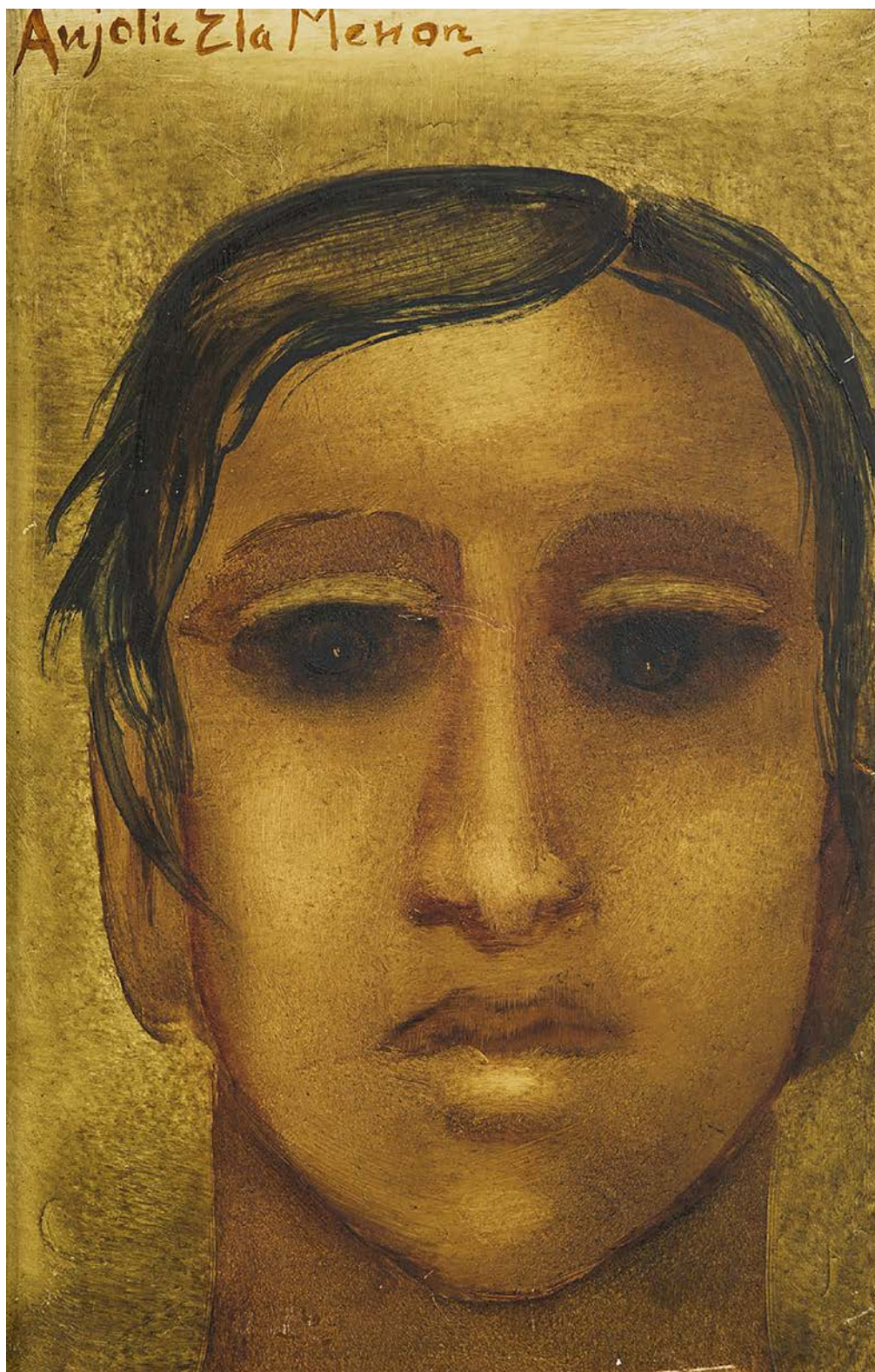
*Torso*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.

*Haveli*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
48 x 36 in.



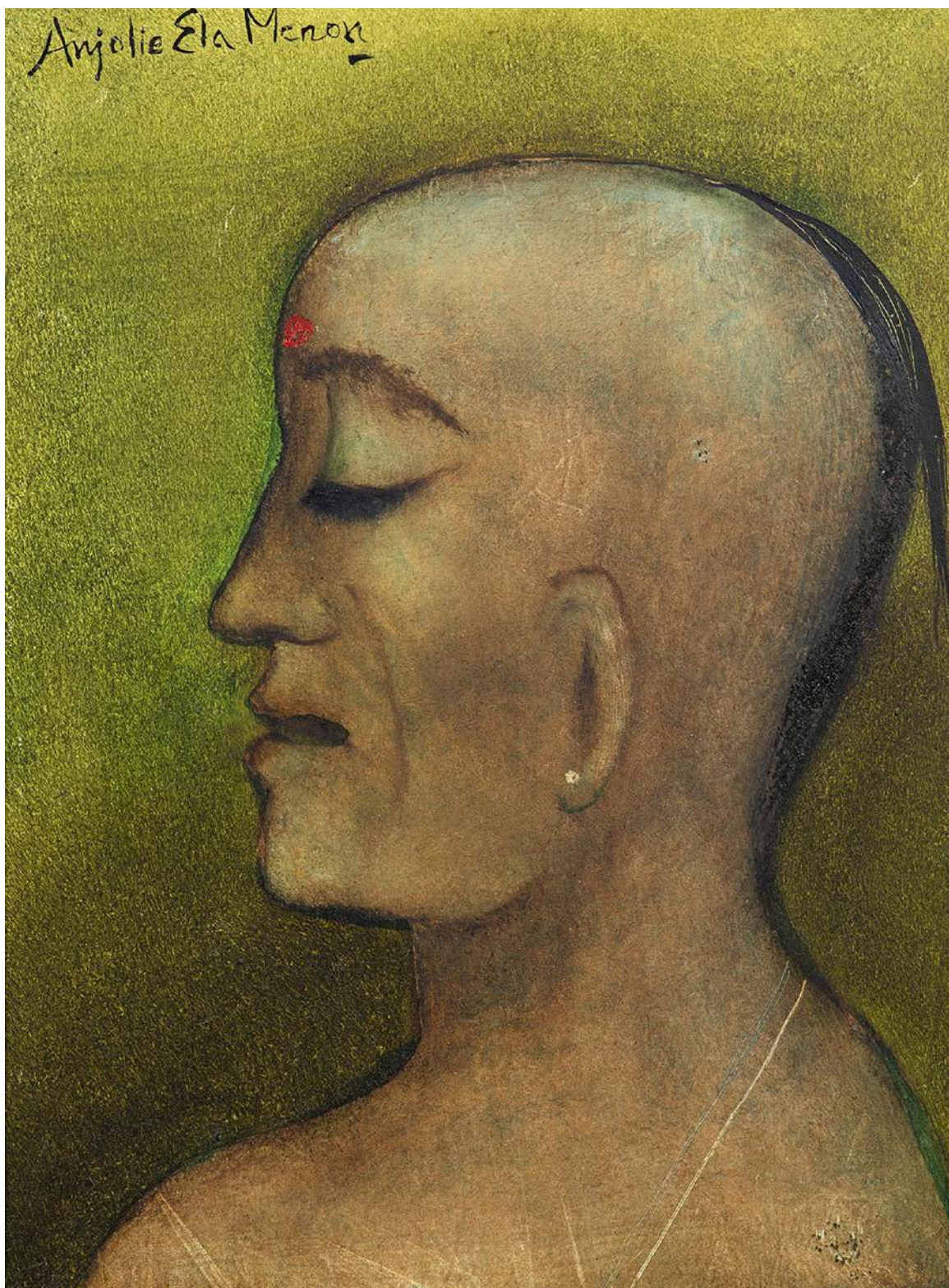






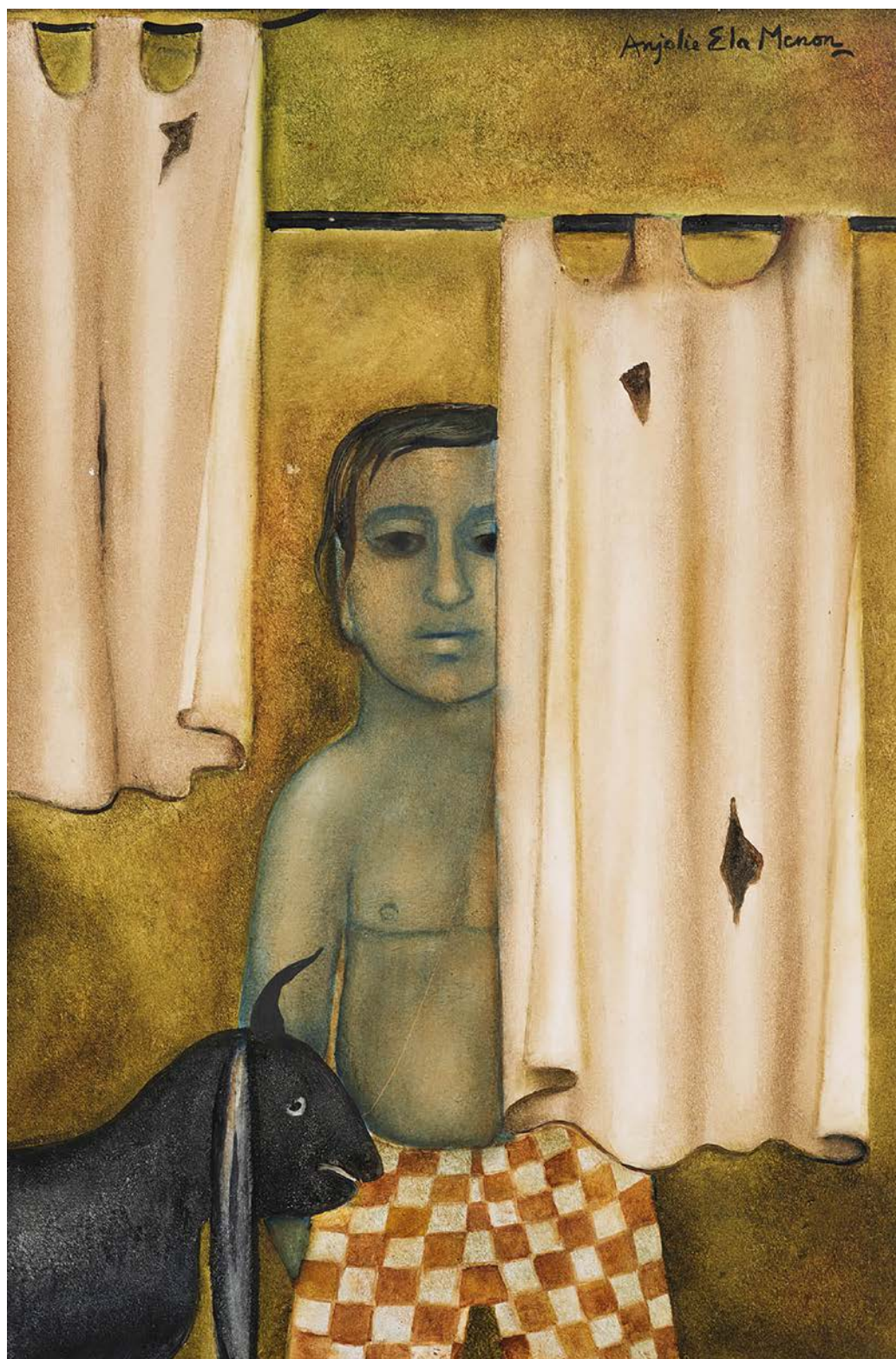
*Rajaraja*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
10 x 7 in.





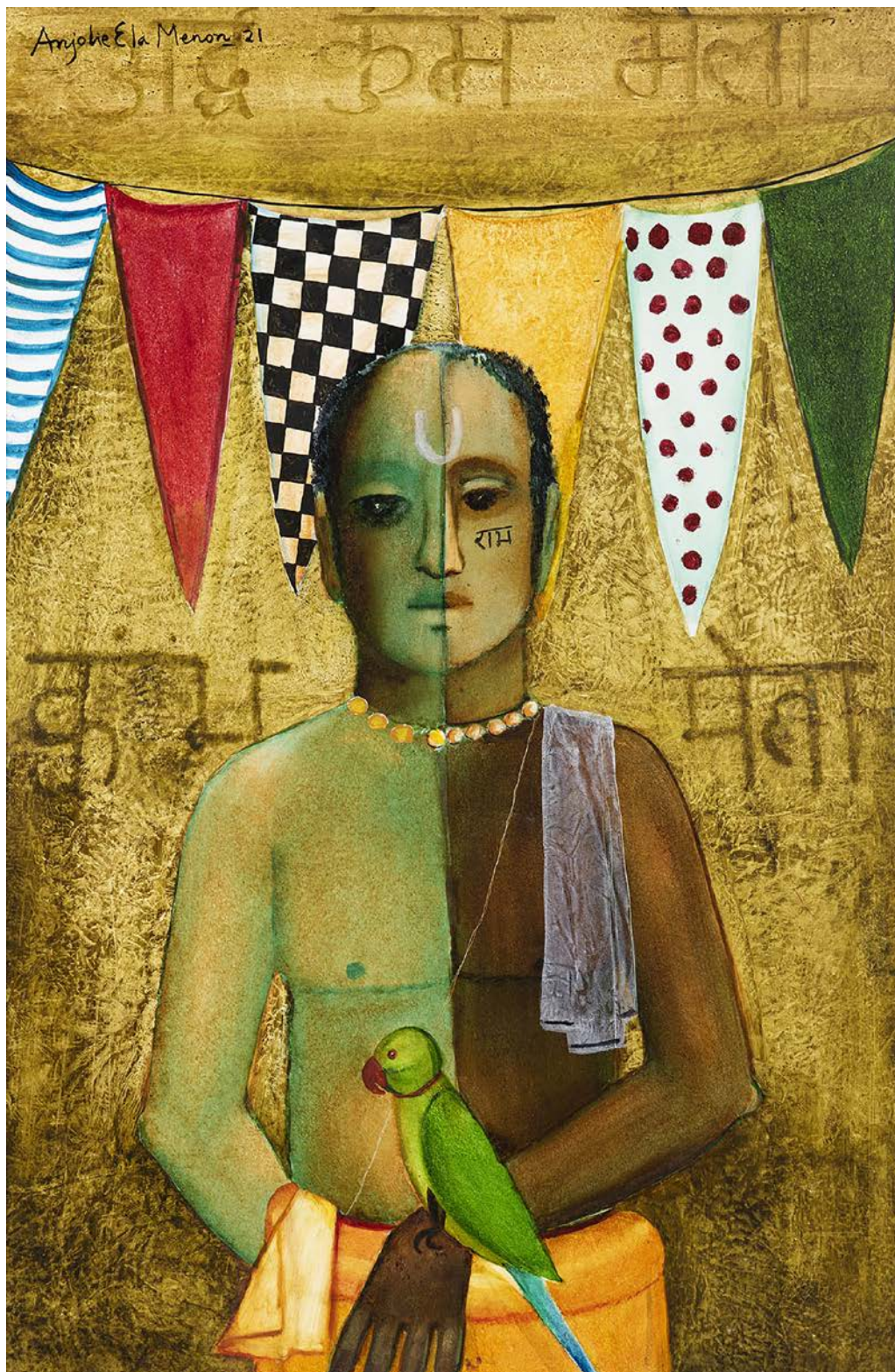
*Guru*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





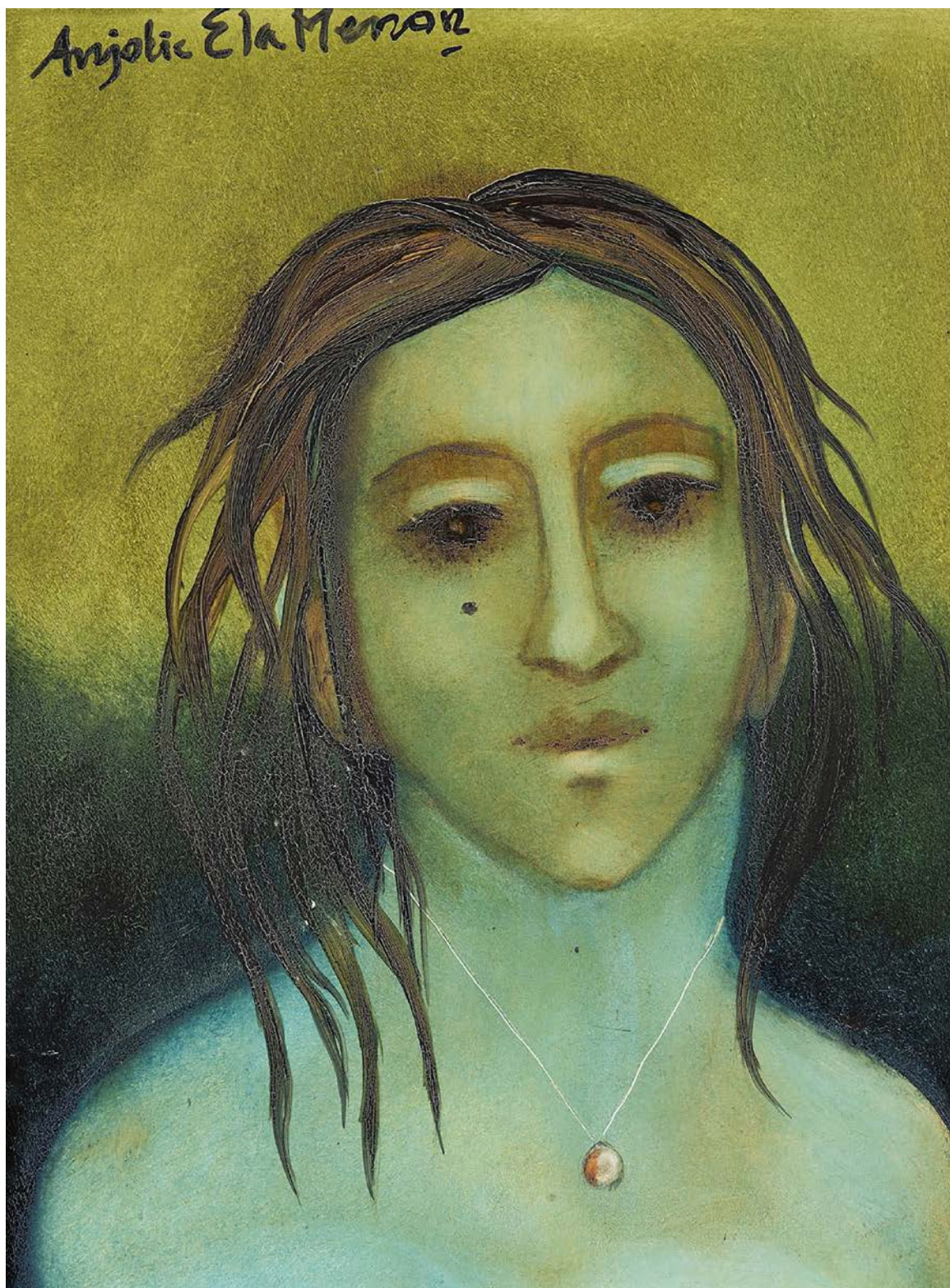
*Behind the Arras*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 24 in.





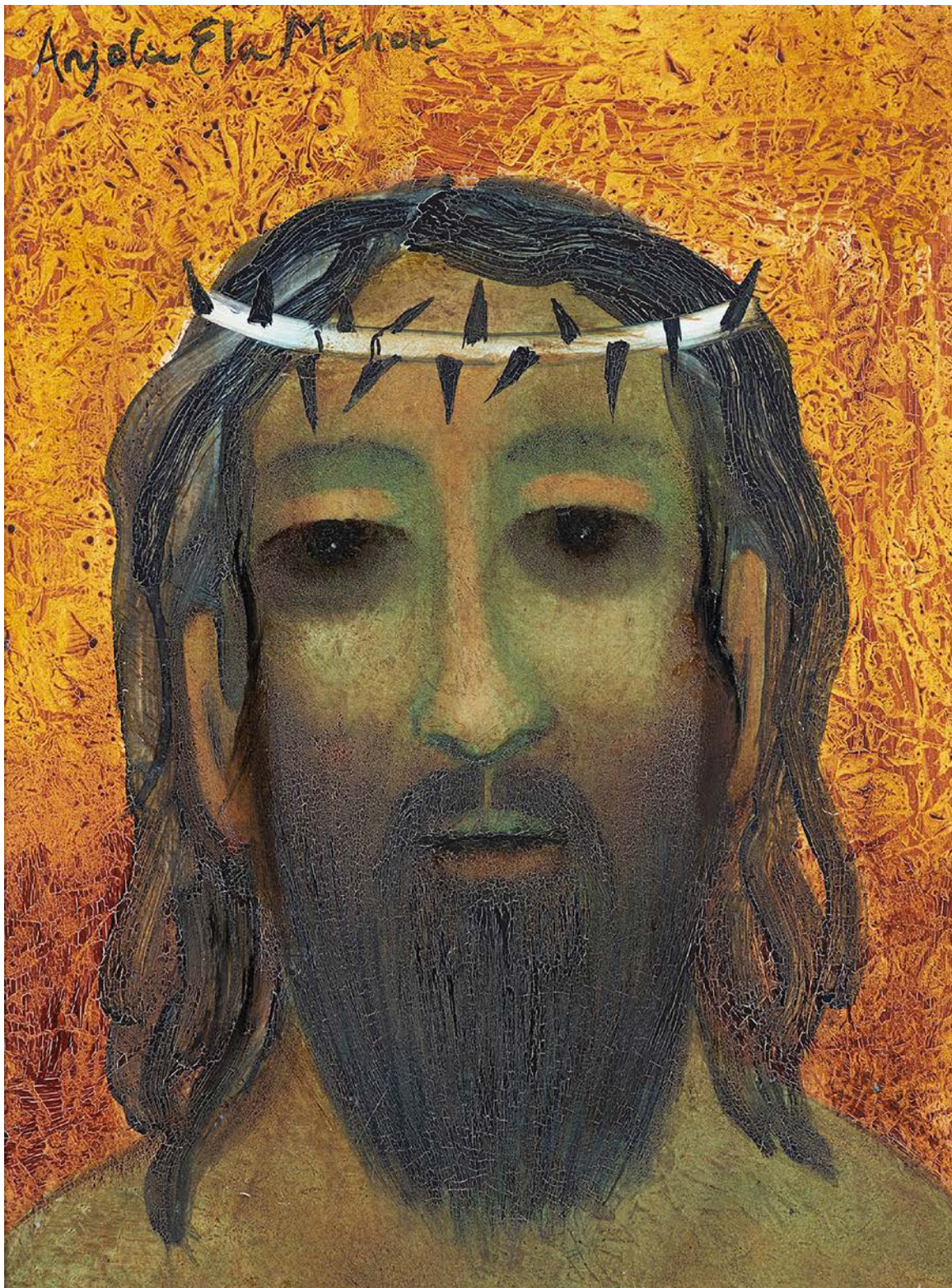
*Kumbhmela*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 24 in.





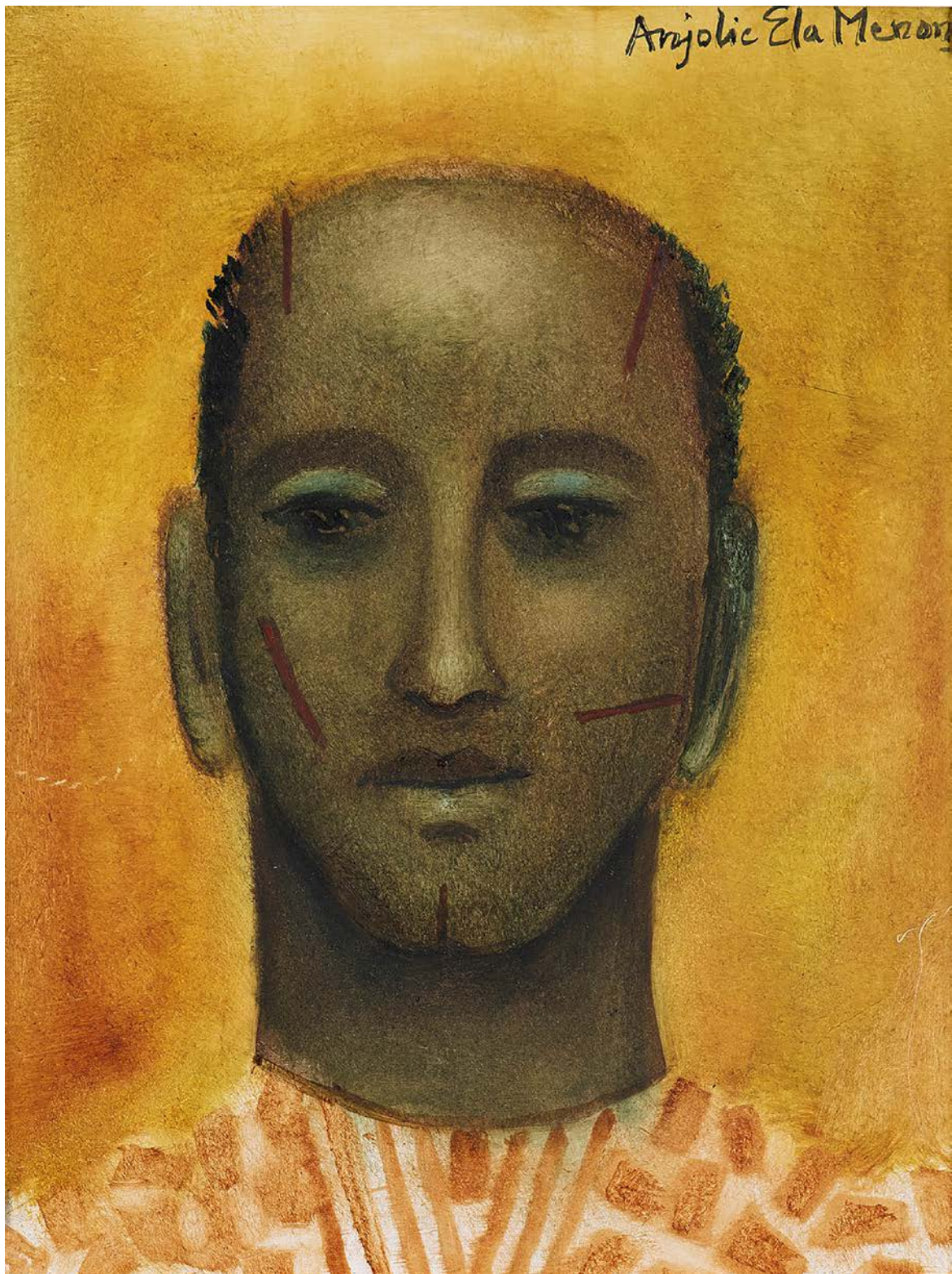
*Indeera*  
2021  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





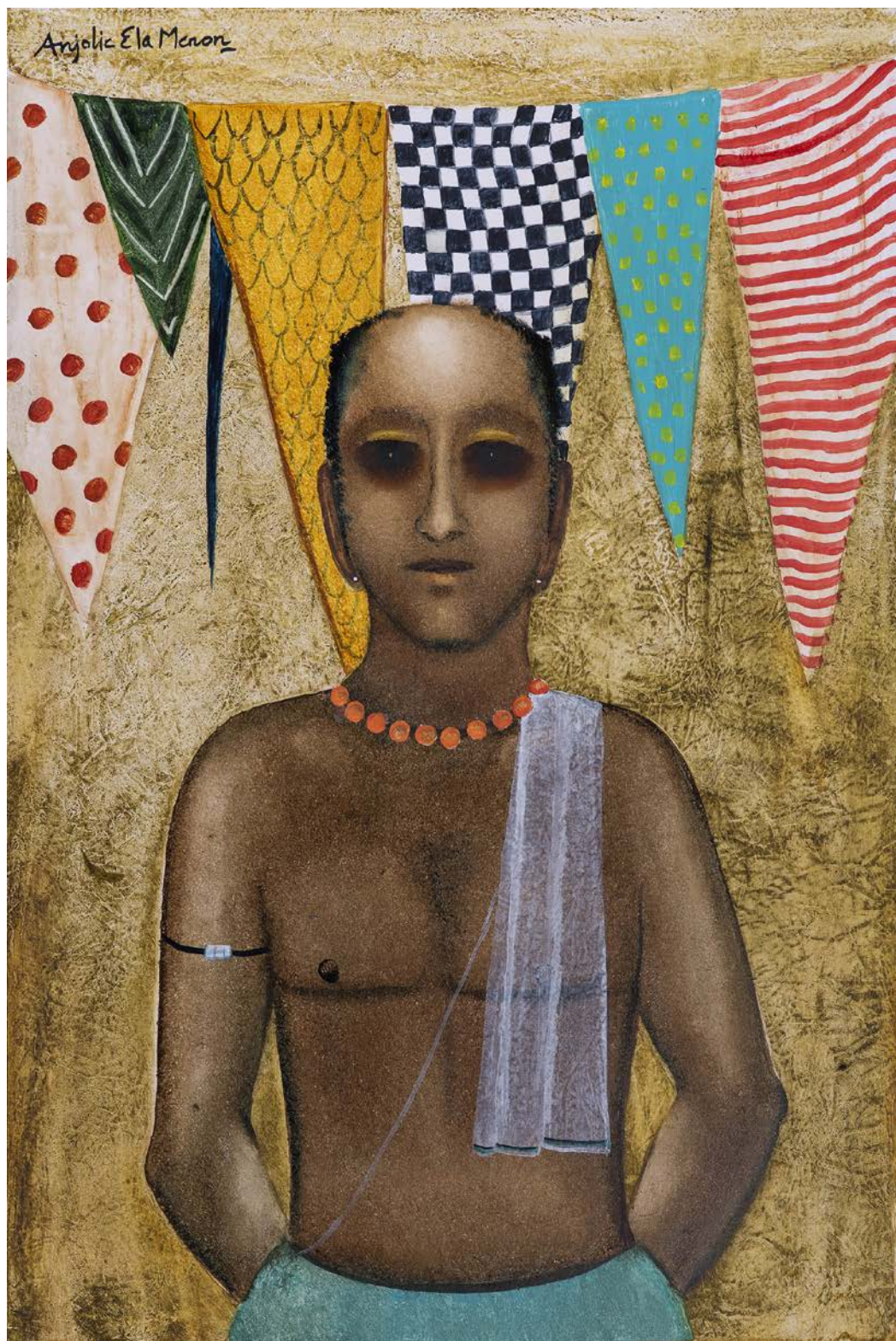
*Jesus*  
2021  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





Vir  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
16 x 12 in.





*Festival*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 24 in.



*Avanti's Birthday*  
2021  
Oil on masonite board  
36 x 48 in.



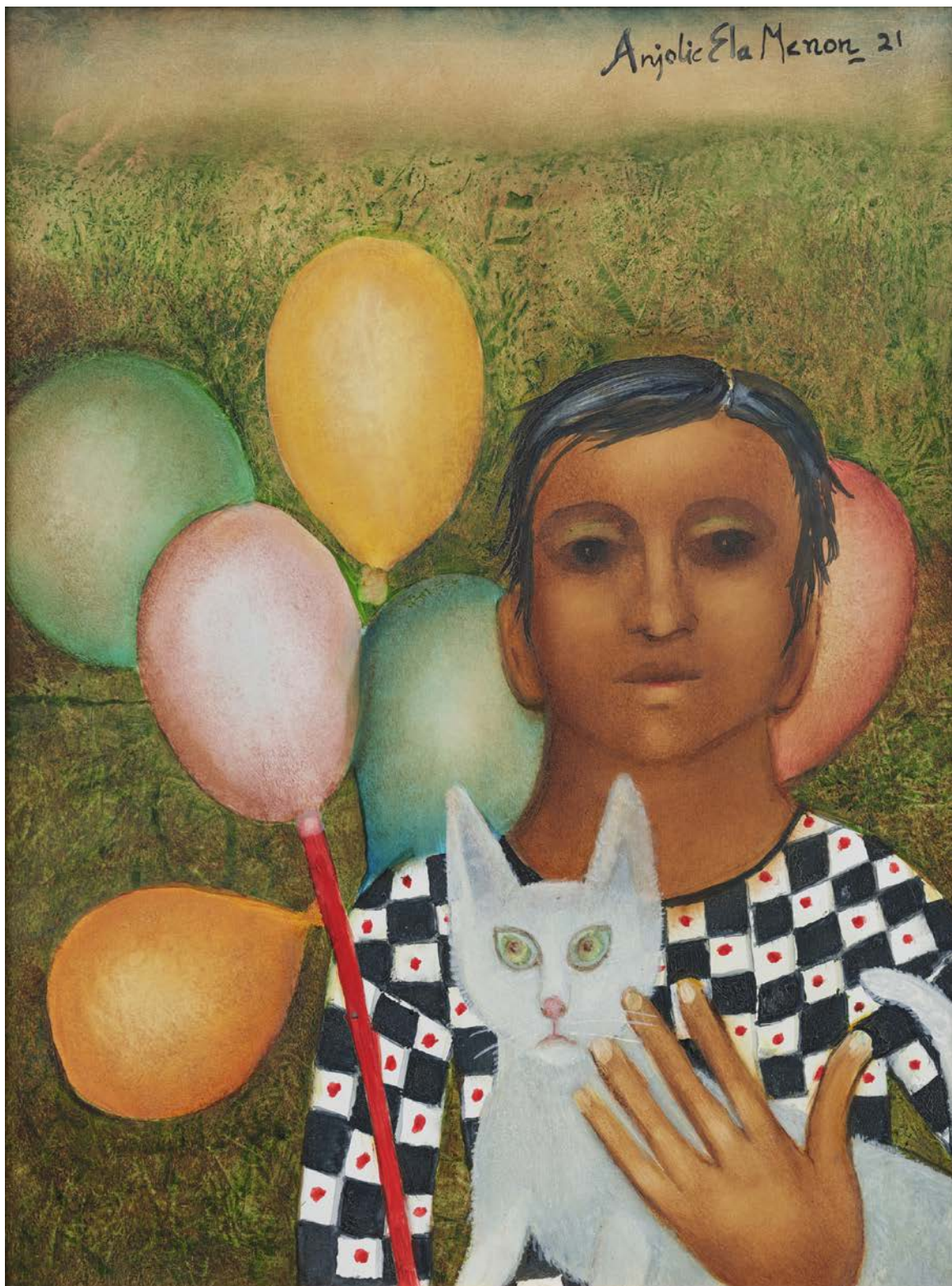






*Landscape*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
26 x 20 in.





*Boy with Balloons*  
2021  
Oil on masonite board  
24 x 18 in.



*Boy Behind the Curtain*  
2020  
Oil on masonite board  
48 x 24 in.













# EXHIBITION

August 19 — September 18, 2021













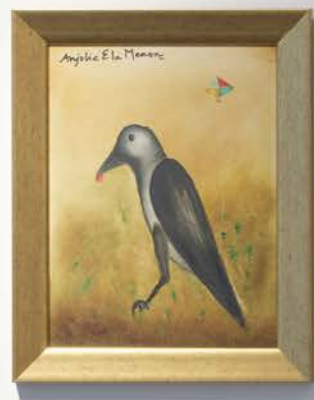
# Anjolie Ela Menon

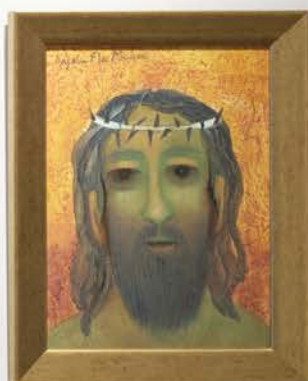
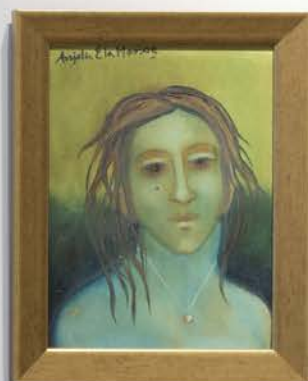
## By the River

August 19 – September 18, 2021

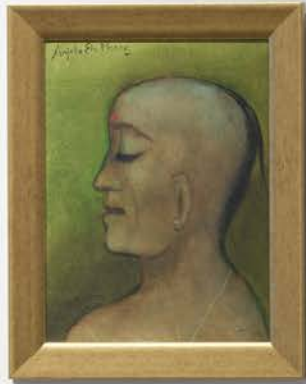
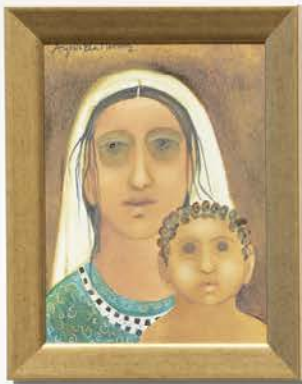
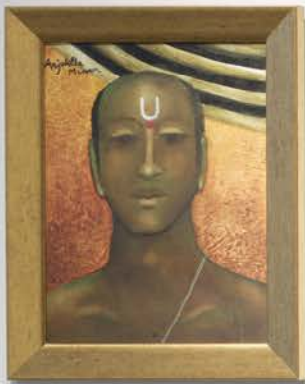




















































# ABOUT

## Anjolie Ela Menon

Born 1940, Burnpur, West Bengal, India.

Throughout her artistic career, Anjolie Ela Menon has re-envisioned her role as an artist and has produced various bodies of work toward her aim to defy categorization. Menon's early paintings, mainly portraits, imply inspiration from the likes of Modigliani, Van Gogh, Amrita Sher-Gil, and M. F. Husain. She comments on her approach of using flat areas of thick bright color with sharp outlines, which were done "with the vigor and brashness of extreme youth."

Menon's studies in Paris in the 1960s exposed her to the techniques of medieval Christian iconography, particularly Byzantine art. A period of experimentation led to a muted palette of translucent colors, by her layering thin glazes of oil paint onto hardboard. The finely textured surfaces were further enhanced by burnishing the finished work with a soft dry brush, creating a glow reminiscent of medieval icons. As her style continued to evolve, Menon developed the distinctive features of early Christian art - namely the frontal perspective, the averted head, and the slight body elongation - but took the female nude as a frequent subject. The result is a dynamic relationship of eroticism and melancholy. Menon developed her artistic approach of distance and loss in her later works through her thematic depiction of black crows, empty chairs, windows, and hidden figures.

Menon's prolific output has resulted in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally. Her works have been acquired by major museums in India and abroad and reside in both private and corporate collections. She is also well known for her murals and has represented India at the Algiers Biennale and in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Solo exhibitions include the Winston Gallery, Washington, USA; Doma Khudozhnikov, U.S.S.R; Rabindra Bhavanand Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi; Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta and a major solo exhibition at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco in 2006.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi.

## Education

Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay  
Bachelors in Literature, Dehli University, Delhi, India  
Atelier Fresque, Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, France  
(1961-62)  
Study tour to France, UK and USA (invitation by the  
Government of France, 1980-81)

## Selected Exhibitions

### 2021

*By the River*, Aicon Gallery, New York

### 2017

*Anjolie Ela Menon, A Retrospective*, Aicon Gallery,  
New York

### 2015

*Enchanting Voyages*, Indian Contemporary Art Gallery,  
Hong Kong

### 2014

*Immutable Gaze Part I: Masterpieces of Modern and  
Pre-Modern Indian Art*, Aicon Gallery, New York

### 2013

*Remaking the Modern: An Indian Modern & Contemporary  
Art Exhibition*, Alon Zakaim Fine Art, Grosvenor Gallery,  
Dover Street, London

*Immutable Gaze Part I: Masterpieces of Modern and  
Pre-Modern Indian Art*, Aicon Gallery, New York

*Glimpses of I am the Tiger*, Indian Council for Cultural  
Relations (ICCR), New Delhi

*Ideas of the Sublime*, Presented by Vadehra Art Gallery at  
Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi

*Quatro' 13*, Art Musings, Mumbai

*The Drawing Wall*, Vadhera Art Gallery at Lalit Kala  
Akademi

*Color My World*, presented by Mahua Art Gallery at Leela  
Galleria and Windsor Manor, Bangalore

*Edge of Reason - and beyond, into pure creativity*,  
presented by Indian Art

### 2012

*Talking Heads*, Art Alive Gallery, New Delhi

*Iconic Processions*, Aicon Gallery, New York

### 2009

*Three Paintings*, The Cultural Center, Kahlo Gallery,  
Hampshire College, Amherst Massachusetts

### 2006

*Yatra*, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

### 2001

*Sacred Prism*, Exhibition of Murano Glass sculpture,  
National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai

### 1988

Retrospective, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai

### 2000

*Gods & Others*, Wallace Galleries, New York



# ABOUT

## Aicon Art

At Aicon Art we specialize in modern and contemporary non-Western art with a special focus on South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The New York gallery provides a vital platform for artists from these regions to show in the United States. Alongside in-depth, focused solo shows, the gallery presents a program of curated group exhibitions that are international in their scope and ambition. Following recent debates in institutional curating, the program deliberately links together contemporary art with art made in the latter half of the 20th century. Through this, the gallery hopes to produce unexpected congruencies, shed light on multiple modernisms, make complex the designation “contemporary” and signal a shift away from simple survey exhibitions.

In solo shows, Aicon Art has shown the work of established 20th century artists such as M. F. Husain, F. N. Souza and S. H. Raza. The gallery has also presented solo shows of senior living artists Victor Ekpuk, Nataraj Sharma, Natvar Bhavsar, Rina Banerjee, Anjolie Ela Menon and Surendran Nair; from the younger generation, we have exhibited solo shows of Salman Toor, Mequitta Ahuja, Khadim Ali and Youdhisthir Maharjan. Group shows have included *Readymade: Contemporary Art from Bangladesh* as well as *Between Line and Matter: Impulse of Minimalism in South Asia and the Middle East*. The gallery has collaborated with museums such as The Art Institute, Chicago; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; The Jewish Museum, New York; and Louvre Abu Dhabi. Exhibitions have been reviewed and the gallery has been profiled by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times of London*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *ArtForum* and the *Financial Times*.

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

#### 2021

Mequitta Ahuja, *Ma*

Saad Qureshi, *Tanabana*

Nataraj Sharma, *Travel Log*

#### 2020

Natvar Bhavsar, *Sublime Light*

Rasheed Araeen, *In the Midst of Darkness*

Pooja Iranna, *Silently...a proposed plan for rethinking the urban fabric*

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, *Mixed Lines*

#### 2019

Bernardo Siciliano, *Pigs & Saints*

Sheetal Gattani, *Unmaking Space*

Ghulam Mohammad, *Gunjaan*

Mohammad Omer Khalil, *You Don't Have to Be*

Victor Ekpuk, *Marks and Objects*

Jamini Roy, *Hemen Mazumdar: Two Rebels*

Natvar Bhavsar, *Beginnings*

Ahmed Morsi, *The Flying Poet*

#### 2018

Salman Toor, *Time After Time*

Rachid Koraïchi, *Les Sept Stations Célestes*

Rasheed Araeen, *Recent Works*

Jayasri Burman, *Born of Fire: A Tale for Our Times*

Mohammed Kazem, *Ways of Marking*

#### 2017

G. R. Iranna, *The Primordial Ash*

Saad Qureshi, *When the Moon Split*

Manisha Parekh Open Studio

Surendran Nair, *Cuckoonebulopolis: (Flora and) Fauna*

Anjolie Ela Menon, *A Retrospective*

Ernest Mancoba

## 2016

Rasheed Araeen, *Geometry and Symmetry*

Sunil Gawde, *Id – Od & Other Dimensions*

Rachid Koraïchi, *Love Side by Side with the Soul*

Rekha Rodwittiya, *The Rituals of Memory*

## 2015

Bernardo Siciliano, *Panic Attack*

Paresh Maity, *Cityscapes – Part I*

Salman Toor, *Resident Alien*

M. F. Husain, *Husain at Hundred: Part II*

M. F. Husain, *Husain at Hundred*

Jamini Roy, *Living Folk*

Sadequain, *Exaltations*

Rasheed Araeen, *Minimalism Then and Now*

## Selected Group Exhibitions

### 2021

Khadim Ali and Sher Ali, *What Now My Friend?*

Rina Banerjee, Jayashree Chakravarty, Nadia Kaabi-Linke  
Suchitra Mattai, *Fresh Earth*

### 2020

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba | Ernest Mancoba

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Victor Ekpuk, *Vernacular  
Automatisms*

*Outside the Lines: Secular Vision in South Asian  
Modernism*

### 2019

Mequitta Ahuja, Peju Alatise, Rina Banerjee, Faiza Butt,

Saba Qizilbash, *Intricacies: Fragment and Meaning*

## 2018

*Timeless India: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography of India*

Shilpa Gupta, Waqas Khan, Ghulam Mohammad, Priya  
Ravish Mehra, *Pale Sentinels: Metaphors for Dialogues*

## 2017

Peju Alatise, Omar Victor Diop, Hassan Hajjaj, Aisha  
Khalid, Naiza Khan, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, *Interwoven  
Dialogues: Contemporary Art from Africa and South Asia*

Janananda Laksiri, Anoli Perera, Dominic Sansoni,  
Priyantha Udagedara, Jagath Weerasinghe, *Portraits of  
Intervention: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka*

*Seed for History and Form – Tebhaga*

*Culture of the Streets*

## 2016

*Tantric: The Corporeal and the Cosmic*

*Split Visions: Abstraction in Modern Indian Painting*

*Go Figure*, Curated by Salman Toor

*Between Structure and Matter: Other Minimal Futures*

## 2015

*Approaching Figuration: Modern and Pre-Modern Indian Art  
and the Figure*

*Approaching Abstraction: Works from the Herwitz  
Collection*

*Eat Pray Thug*

## Collections

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery

The Art Institute of Chicago

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

Louvre Abu Dhabi

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Museum of Modern Art

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Tate Britain

Tate Modern



Thank you Prajit and all the Aicon Art team for your support! In particular Harry, Hussain, Timm, Erica, Rowena and Pam, thank you all for your professionalism and hard work. I am very grateful to Beena Nair for your support and to Gautam Bhatia for your beautiful words.

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Gautam Bhatia

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Alex McAdoo

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