

‘Revisiting M.F. Husain's Colorful, Controversial Works at Aicon Gallery’

BY JUDD TULLY | OCTOBER 01, 2015

A mini-retrospective of M.F. Husain — the celebrated and colorfully controversial Indian painter who died in London in 2011, at the age of 95 — runs through October 24 at Aicon Gallery in NoHo. Covering six decades in approximately 24 paintings, the show affords a rarely seen overview of India’s Picasso, with excellent examples from every decade of his wildly prolific oeuvre.

Husain may be more familiar to art market followers than critics; six of his figurative paintings from 1955 to 1989 have sold for more than a million dollars at auction, and at least 60 have traded at auction in excess of \$300,000. (Of the dozen or so works that are available at Aicon, prices range from \$100,000 to \$300,000, according to gallery principal Prajit Dutta.) Though he exhibited extensively in India and abroad throughout his long career, Husain has never had a solo presentation in New York, at least according to his exhibition roster published on the gallery’s website.

Husain’s career began in the late 1940s, shortly after India declared independence, when he joined the avant-garde Progressive Artists’ Group in Mumbai. Much like the early career of Pop Artist James Rosenquist, who made a living as a billboard painter in New York City’s Time Square, Husain painted billboards for feature films in Mumbai, an early experience that fueled his life-long passion for Bollywood and his more checkered, part-time career as a film producer. Husain — who ultimately favored painting in posh hotel rooms, especially at the Taj Mahal, over anything like an artist’s studio — mastered a brilliant visual vocabulary that evocatively mixed Hindu mythology with the decadence of India’s raging film scene, replete with buxom and barely clad actresses.

For example, in “Durga,” 1976, perhaps the most important painting in the exhibition, the titular multi-colored Hindu goddess — known as the root of creation, preservation, and destruction — sits nude astride a magnificent tiger that bares its claws and teeth. There’s a bigger story behind the powerful image: At the time, then prime minister Indira Gandhi had decreed a “state of emergency,” curbing press and public freedoms for 21 months from 1975 to 1977, creating widespread civil unrest. Husain seemed to celebrate that action in “Durga” by making Gandhi a

