

SHAKTI MAIRA





THE SANGHA | **SHAKTI MAIRA**

A Creative Journey (1989-2011)

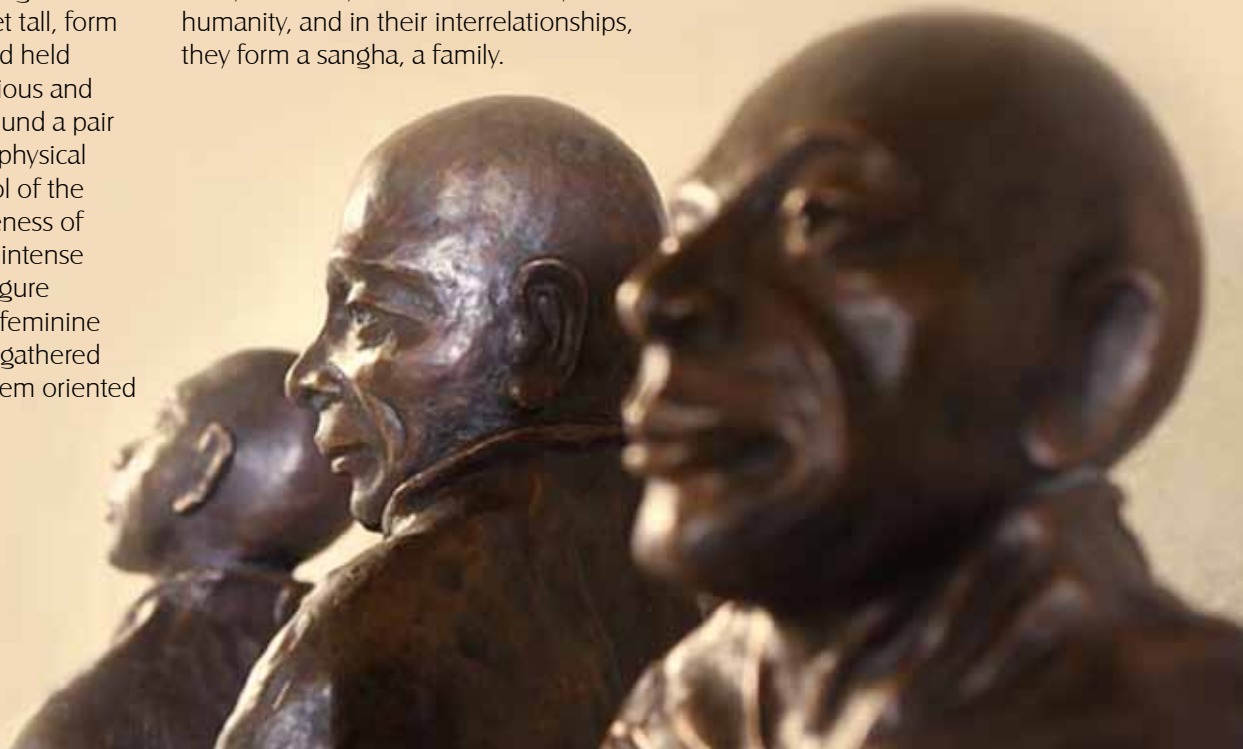
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India International Centre, New Delhi  
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This exhibition is centered on the Sangha, a group of bronze sculpture made on a commission from Mrs Sangita Jindal, and brings together some of the work that was part of the creative journey that led to them.

The twelve majestic sculptural figures of the Sangha, each about six feet tall, form a community of spirit, a garland held together by something mysterious and beautiful. The group pivots around a pair – two conjoined figures, their physical togetherness perhaps a symbol of the meeting of minds and a singleness of purpose. They stand locked in intense communion, the taller, male figure whispering into the ear of the feminine one. The other ten figures are gathered around this central pair and seem oriented

towards that delicate moment, as they listen in, and respond to what has been said with a range of movements and expressions – of concentration, delight, contemplation, devotion, rapture, laughter – all stages and experiences that occur during a spiritual journey. In their manyness, they mirror the diversity of humanity, and in their interrelationships, they form a sangha, a family.





The Sangha sculptures are an outcome, and an expression, of a concept and creative idea that germinated more than twenty years ago, and which has been explored by Shakti Maira in painting, printmaking and sculpture. These diverse strands have been brought together in this exhibition to show the kind of journey artistic ideas and concepts can make, and to share with art lovers how ideas form, how they may mutate and crystallize in a variety of materials, forms, lines and colours, leading to a flowering of creative art.

The concept that led to the Sangha had to do with the purpose of art and of the artist's intention: that art should uplift and transform both the artist and the viewer through an integrated engagement of the senses, the emotions, and the mind.

The idea behind the Sangha was to give palpable artistic form to spiritual seeking – the quest, the journey, the signposts. It was an idea that assumed a variety of shapes, which started in painting, then went into sculpture, printmaking, and a diversity of forms and materials that explored the boundaries between painting and

sculpture, and between two- and three-dimensionality in art making.

There are many spiritual paths, and in a sense, each individual forges his or her own special way to traverse the deep terrain of spirituality. In Shakti Maira's journey, Buddhism has been a strong inspiration, and indications of this manifest in the visual forms that appear – monks, robes, caves, the stupa, the alms bowl, the path – in the many series he has made anchored in these ideas and informed with his concept about the purpose of art.

Shakti Maira's work has often been categorized as 'spiritual'. When he was living in the USA (from 1979 to 2000), his work was described by Sam Bercholz, the publisher of Shambhala Publications, as the "best dharma art (i.e. expressing the essence of Buddhist teachings)...by any contemporary artist". The philosopher Ken Wilber wrote, "To integrate spirit and matter in an aesthetic presentation that opens the viewer to an integral moment is remarkable enough. But what is truly astonishing about Shakti's work is the depth to which that intention is realised. Shakti is the finest



integral artist now working in the fields of painting and sculpture.”

When asked about this, Shakti clarifies, “I am not drawn to religious beliefs or prayer, and my art has never been about religious subjects. I am wary of all forms of self-conscious spirituality, traditional or new age, and the art associated with them. My art is very simply about the concerns I have at that time. My work has always been ‘realistic’. I have made art about the real world as I experience it. A world that is filled with the tangible physical, what I can see with my eyes, and the tangible mental: feelings, thoughts and ideas. I have found it difficult to get excited about the reductionist and materialistic concepts of Modern Art, where the art object is a reality unto itself – ‘art for art’s sake’. To me, art has always been a medium of communication. Though Abstract Art has sometimes powerfully communicated with the senses and the spirit, it has usually neglected emotions and cognitive thought. Nor have I been much enthused by Conceptual Art. It seems too cerebral, often ignores the senses, and minimises emotions.”



The artist explains, “The themes and ideas in my art making are based on my core concerns, and not at all on what is happening in the world of art. Making art is not a meditative practice for me. It is not how I become concentrated and calm. On the contrary, making art often agitates the mind. It activates its judging and discursive faculties; it stirs the ego of authorship and anticipated societal response. What I have learnt is to watch all these tensions and not be bothered by them. Besides, I find it difficult to take too seriously the art practices these days that are so substantially swayed by the agendas of marketing, investing and conspicuous consumption.”

He goes on to say, “In the art world there has come about a decided preference for new materials and installation art can be made with almost anything. Many artists don’t make much themselves, and a whole generation of art school students never even had to learn to draw. For me, however, working with my hands is necessary – it gives me pleasure, it slows me down. I think it imbues my art with a certain subtle quality that would not be possible otherwise. In any case making bronze sculptures using the lost-wax process is slow and tedious. The making of the Sangha took eighteen months, and was made possible because of the assistance of Ajab Singh and his team of workers at the foundry. Their contribution was invaluable.”



To show the Sangha in its full artistic context, a selection of work has been collated from some of the series the artist has made since 1989, the year to which can be traced the beginning of the form that would eventually become the Sangha. In curating this exhibition, whenever possible, work that has not been exhibited before has been prioritised.

To contextualise this creative journey, one must go back over 20 years, when the artist was working on the *Fallen Gods* and *Intimations of Transcendence* series. Having finished a particular painting of three figures in white against a black and gold background, he understood that to fully express the spirit of the seeker, and the path, he needed to break out of the two-dimensional frame and bring in the third dimension.

This painting starts this exhibition, as it marks the artist's stepping point into sculpture.





Shakti's first steps into sculpture happened in a local junkyard in New Hampshire, where he lived at the time. With no formal training, other than the art classes at Mayo College, Ajmer, where he had schooled, he picked up odds and ends in metal – brass radiator parts, discarded electrical copper wire, and copper sheeting. With these he began making small sculptures, adding papier mache and acrylic paint, and developed his first sculptural series, *Sunyatta*.



Encouraged by the response from viewers and critics, Shakti decided to do more with this form, which was clearly the progenitor of the Sangha bronzes, in materials that were more malleable and resilient. He enrolled in pottery classes at the Manchester Institute of Art and discovered the joy of sculpting in clay. From this emerged a series of stoneware figures titled '*Silent Witnesses*' (1996-98), of which a few are included in this exhibition.



The essential form of the Sangha is a figure rising from the earth, rooted and still, seemingly echoing the organic growth of tree-trunks. These emergent forms have sinuous lines and textures – evoking fluidity and the merger of bark and the folds of a mendicant’s robes. Their limbs are invisible though suggested, and there is evidence of restrained movement – a step, a turn, a pause.



In this exhibition, going in a clockwise circumambulation, there is a small selection from The Intimations of Transcendence series (1991-1997) that includes a few works on paper, as well as some sculptures.



These sculptures include Shakti's very first bronze, which he cast in Sante Fe, New Mexico. The other sculpture, with upright arms flinging away the robe, won the 1994 Hitchiner Award for Sculpture at the Annual New Hampshire Art Association Currier Gallery Show, and was used by the Indian Embassy for their invitations for India's 50th independence celebration in Washington, D.C., in 1997.



Also included is a pair of Zen-like India ink and bronze paint drawings that perhaps were another early intimation of the Sangha group.

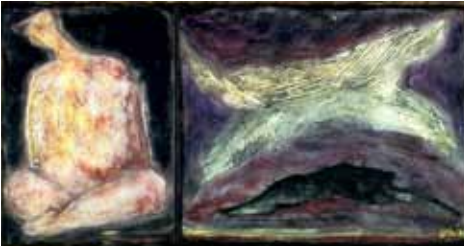


This is followed by a few works from two overlapping series: *Within* (1993-94) and *Absorption/Insight* (1996-97). Both represent the artist's continuing play and experiments in making two-dimensional paintings more sculptural.

The *Within* series began after a trip to Ajanta and Ellora, and expressed inwardness, both mental and physical, through expressionistic images of meditating monks and nuns in caves. These were done in a technique the artist developed himself, where he hand-etched marble and granite, and then ran the stones in his studio printing press to imbue and stain them.

In this exhibition the only remaining stone in the artist's collection is included, as are a few of the unique monotype prints that were created from the stones as they were run in the press. Also included is one canvas from the *Within* series.





In the Absorption/Insight series, the artist continued to bend the boundaries between painting and sculpture. He learnt how to make the Japanese byobu, and made a number of double-hinged screens that brought mobility and flexibility to a form that employed paintings on both sides of the screens. On one side he suggested states of meditative absorption, and on the other, flashes of insight. There are some smaller one-sided 'screen' paintings here that have not been exhibited before.

The artist says, "I find simple forms, such as the stupa, the alms bowl, the abstracted human form of the Sangha figures intriguing. They are mysterious and elegant. The rising human form of these figures that began so long ago continues to fascinate me. I find it primal, primitive, and ethereal. It is a very simple form, yet full of strength. It evokes rootedness and growth, stillness and being."



The form of the stupa, which also signifies the enlightened mind, was explored in the **Bodhi** series (1997), and the form of the mendicant's bowl became the creative springboard for the **Daan** series (1998). Daan comprised a series of unique collograph monoprints. The simple form of a bowl with grains of rice and split daal became a visual meditation on giving and receiving, and on reciprocal generosity. Though sometimes there might be the presence of a walking stick, the human form itself is absent in both these series. And yet, there remains an 'empty' evocation of the human hands that might have held these bowls or filled them, as well as of the human spirit that might have given or received the daan. In a sense, these bowls may well have been in the invisible hands of the Sangha.

This series is being exhibited for the first time.



"Daan" series # 140

J. M. S.

On the artist's return to live in India in 2001, the sculptural form of the Sangha continued to evolve in a number of smaller bronzes that he made in his studio in Delhi and cast in Chattarpur in Noida. These were *The Seekers*, of which a small group – in two sizes, roughly two feet and four feet – is included in this exhibition.



During this time, the artist finished the *Transitional Self* series (1999-2001) that he had started in his New Hampshire studio. This series explored and expressed the experience of impermanence and insubstantiality, the comings and goings that are inherent in life. The scale of the figures and their movement in and out of frames finds an unmistakable echo in the Sangha. A few heads from the *Transitional Self* series that dramatically emerge from the plane of the wall are being exhibited here for the first time.





The Pilgrims' Path series (2000-01) emerged from Shakti's stay in Varanasi, where he would walk on the old pilgrims' path from Varanasi to Sarnath. In these works, he explored the physicality of the path – roots, branches, fallen leaves, stones and dust underfoot, and the impossibility of an order that excludes randomness and chaos. In this work, he brought into his palette clay from the banks of the Ganga. A few works are here, and seem to suggest the ground on which the figures of the Sangha would have travelled.



The artist continues in his creative explorations, teasing the boundaries between painting and sculpture in another series titled *Mirror-Inner* (2009). They suggest So-hum ('you are therefore I am'), asking the viewer to see the seekers in these paintings and simultaneously remember their own search. The paintings-cum-bas-reliefs in this series inventively use stainless steel, copper, mirrors, and slate clay the artist found on a hillside after a landslip in Himachal Pradesh. Here, he reflects on an act of seeing that helps us see ourselves, as well as the fact that what we see is always a combination of what is out there and what is within ourselves.



Is the Sangha the end of the creative journey of this form? Do creative ideas end, or do they metamorphose? Do they hibernate? The only indication we have here is that the artist is not quite done with this form and the creative idea inherent in it, for he has done a small piece, a maquette, in bronze, made alongside the Sangha, where a diminutive figure stands on a mandala and the form itself seems to be emptying out, reminiscent of the Buddhist and Jain emptying out of inherent selfhood – nirvana.

When asked, the artist says, "I don't know where ideas come from, or whether they ever end. What is deeply felt lingers and tends to reappear in one's imagination and dreams. The beauty inherent in deep humanity is something I feel deeply. I keep an open mind about where my creative journey might flow."





**S**hakti Maira is an artist, sculptor and printmaker. He has had 25 one-person shows, the first of which was in 1973 in Mumbai. Since then, his work has been exhibited in solo and group shows in Boston, Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., Manchester, Concord, Henniker, Hollis, Acton, Portland, Newport, Portsmouth, Santa Fe, Cambridge, Rotterdam, Colombo, Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai and New Delhi.

His work is in the National Gallery of Modern Art in India, and in private collections around the world.

He has been engaged in children's education and development through art, and has conducted numerous workshops in schools in the US and India. In 2005 he helped organize the Learning through the Arts in Asia symposium in New Delhi, and was invited by UNESCO to formulate the Asian Vision of Arts in Education: Learning through the Arts.

He has written extensively on art, aesthetics, education and culture. In 2006,

his book 'Towards Ananda: Rethinking Indian Art and Aesthetics' was published by Penguin/Viking, which has developed a following around the world for pulling art out of its modern confusions and reconnecting it with everyday life and living.

He is a public speaker on contemporary issues in aesthetics, beauty, art and culture in India and abroad. He was invited to speak on art and aesthetics at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2011. He has recently been engaging in series of dialogues on beauty with scientists, philosophers and environmentalists, and is co-organizer of an international conference, The End of Art and The Promise of Beauty, in New Delhi, in February 2012.

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