

Breaking Walls

Struggling to cast off the shadow of his famous brother FN Souza, Lancelot Ribeiro found his warm, inclusive artistic voice in cold, indifferent London. It's a voice, writes **Anita Roy**, that remains relevant

ENTER THE LANCELOT RIBEIRO retrospective at Burgh House in London's Hampstead and you're almost immediately caught in the crossfire. To your left is a large painting composed in oils and acrylics (PVA) entitled "The Warlord". A black and red amorphous mass, suggesting a faceless head and shoulders, looms out of the canvas: in places it bristles with spikes, in others strange blobs erupt from the silhouette like solar flares or amoebas splitting. The black paint has coagulated, leaving behind empty grey-flecked pools. In one near the top right, a black blob floats like an eye—staring through you like some crazed Cyclops.

To your right, in stark contrast, is a series of small watercolour landscapes: the scudding clouds and quilted fields of the Yorkshire dales; the delicate pointillism suggesting trees in spring just coming into blossom; bare winter poplars lining the hillside edge, seeming to stitch together sky and frost-rimmed earth. It is hard to imagine that these paintings were made by the same man.

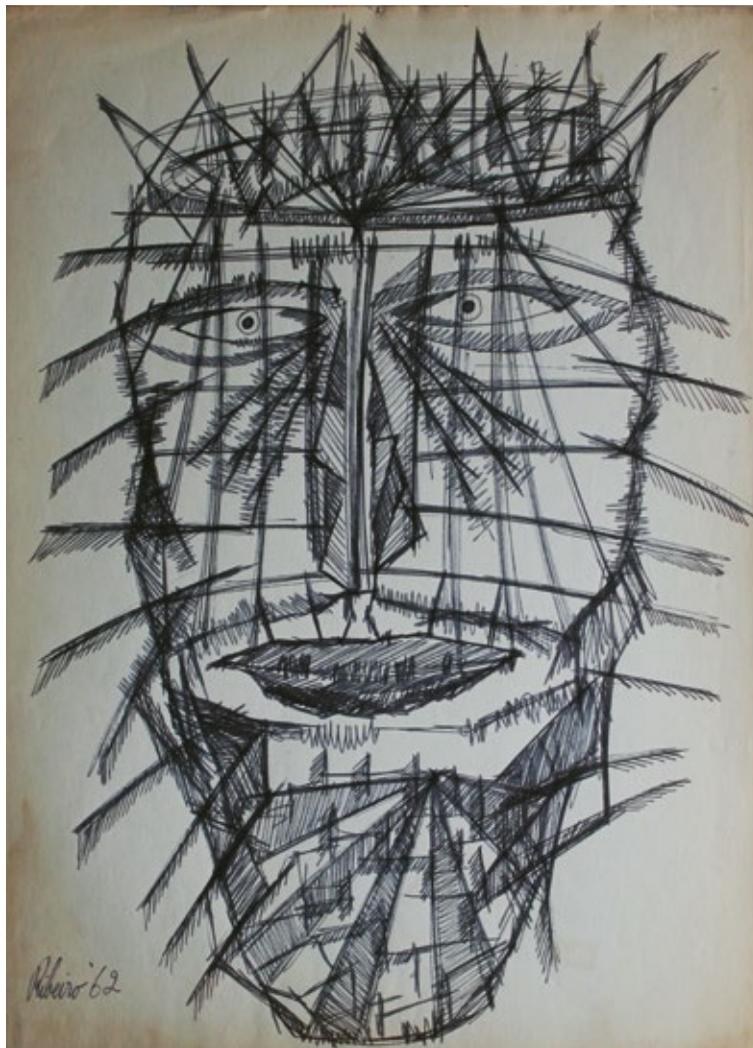
Lancelot Ribeiro was "one of the most original Indian painters who settled in Britain after the Second World War," wrote his biographer and friend David Buckman in an obituary of the artist who died, aged 77, on Christmas Day, 2010. I think Buckman may be right, although the charge most often levelled at Ribeiro, especially during his early career, was not one of originality but its opposite. Being the younger brother of the celebrated painter, Francis Newton Souza and, what's more, sharing his stylistic vocabulary—bold, heavy outlines, vivid colours and dense, layered brushwork—Ribeiro struggled his entire life to establish himself as a painter



Landscape as Blue, 1966
Oil on canvas

Images: © Marsha Ribeiro

Using dyes donated by carpet and curtain manufacturers, Ribeiro embarked on a series of paintings that heralded a new fluency and looseness. And with his experiments with PVA, he had also developed, almost singlehandedly, an entirely new medium.



Untitled, 1962
Ink on paper

in his own right. Souza, the product of their mother's earlier marriage and 10 years Ribeiro's senior, was already beginning to make a name for himself on the London art scene in the 1950s when Lance (as he was called) arrived by boat from Bombay.

Aged just 16, Lance came to Britain to study accountancy but, rather than following in his

father's footsteps, followed his half-brother into art: he gave up his course to join St Martin's School of Art and began working as an assistant in his brother's studio in Chalk Farm.

London in the 1950s was not a welcoming place for immigrants newly arrived from the "Commonwealth". It is easy to forget, now, what a shock it must have been for those like Lance—like my own father and his friends, and countless others—who arrived at the heart of Empire expecting if not streets paved with gold, then at least not the "No blacks, no dogs, no Irish" notices they found taped up on bedsit windows. It was during this period that politicians like Enoch Powell were gathering support, a tide of anti-foreigner sentiment that would come to a crashing head with his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968. London was bomb-damaged, soot-blackened, and England was still under rationing. On top of everything, there was the weather.

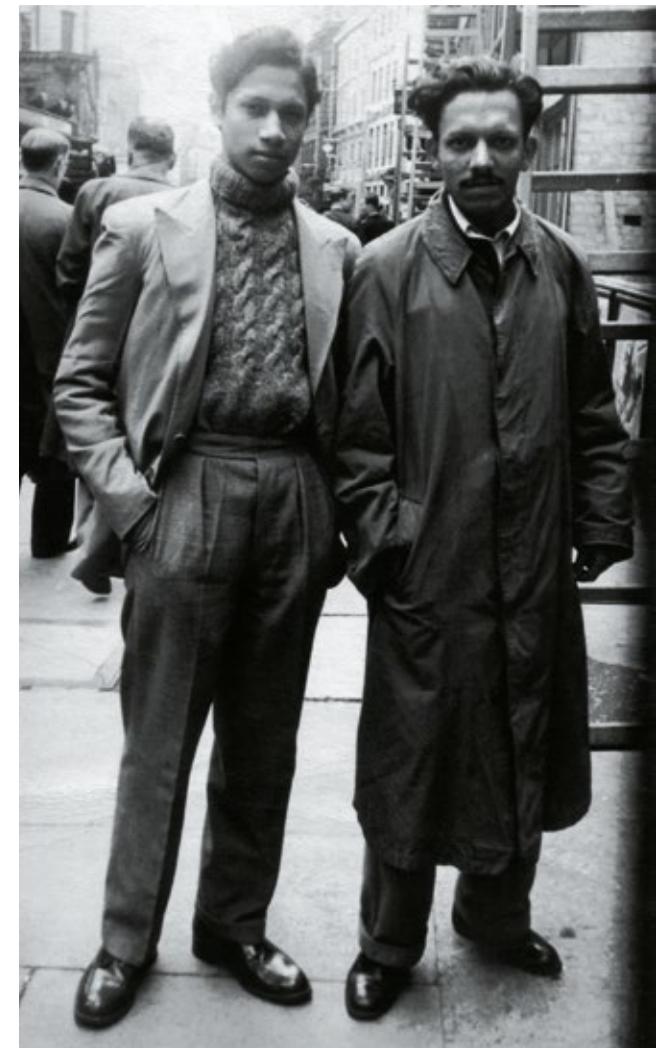
Recalling his arrival in September 1950, Ribeiro writes, "I had heard of dull and depressing weather. That these parts of the world were especially afflicted; but I heard this dullness was to do more with cold and snow, than with this dragging unceasing drizzle and rain. I was up early that morning plagued and tormented by my decision to come to a place I felt I was so misinformed about. If I was wrong about the weather, what about everything else?"

Many Indian immigrants felt understandably aggrieved. They had been led—or misled—to assume that having lived under and with colonialism for so long there would be a shared sense of cultural belonging with the natives. The "welcome" they received came as a rude shock. Bombay, where Lance grew up, was a thriving cosmopolitan place, and presided over by his vivacious and

cultured mother Lily. Their household was a gathering place for writers, artists, scientists and free-thinkers: the poet R Parthasarathy, playwright Nissim Ezekiel and members of the Progressive Artists Group such as SH Raza, KH Ara and MF Husain were frequent visitors, as were, later, theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi, poet Adil Jussawalla and even, in 1962, American Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. For a young man, head teeming with radical ideas and the unstoppable urge towards creative expression, the barriers thrown up by an insular English art world were a source of constant frustration.

Despite the age gap, the two brothers were always close. It was largely at his brother's instigation that Lance left India for Britain, where he not only worked with his brother in his artist's studio, but lived with him. Lance himself acknowledges that "the strongest influence" on his paintings during this early phase were the paintings of his brother. "Their lives were deeply intertwined," explains Ribeiro's daughter, Marsha. "Even when Souza had left England for America, they constantly talked and wrote to each other, sharing their ideas and their lives. They were both passionate and fiery individuals, and there was certainly rivalry—mostly healthy sibling rivalry, sometimes... perhaps not."

Souza's departure to live in the US is seen by some as giving Lance just the distance he needed to make a decisive creative departure from his brother's work. "In early '65, there was a positive move to break from these first influences and work toward a more unified and organic style," writes Ribeiro, and certainly from this point onwards, Ribeiro's own style becomes much more distinct from Souza's structural and linear townscapes and



Ribeiro and Souza

1950, London

his stark, almost grotesque, figurative work. Ribeiro spent much of his apparently boundless energy not only in creating his own work, but in organising and promoting the works of others through organisations such as the Indian Painters Collective, the Indian Artists Collective and, in the late 1970s, Indian Artists UK, a group including Yashwant Mali, Ibrahim Wagh, Mohammad Zakir and

Lancelot Ribeiro's life was one dedicated to tearing down walls, to opening up spaces. The victim of several racist attacks, and frustrated repeatedly by the more insidious institutionalised racism of the white art world, he was determined to make a stand.

others. They wanted, above all, recognition. Recognition that these modern, and mostly modernist, artists were creating work that was authentically Indian, but as far from the miniatures of elephants, tigers and doe-eyed maharanis expected by much of the British art establishment as it was possible to get.

In his scribbled notes for a speech inaugurating the first exhibition by IAUK in the 1970s—held, coincidentally, in the exact same place as the current retrospective, Burgh House in Hampstead—Ribeiro writes that artists like him, who have been long resident in the UK, “have lived and worked here in their individual capacities, trying very hard indeed to penetrate seemingly impregnable barriers. You may ask, brick walls in the art world? The answer firm, unhesitating: Yes! They are not the brick assemblages of the movable variety. How bad are these painters, you may also ask, to have been so ignored. Their reply would be surely that they have their share of the bad, as they do of the good. They know this well enough, but would you even come to know it? Not if you're hell bent on ignoring them.”

It was hard not to equate this with the other, very real, very immovable barrier a certain President-elect is hell-bent on building: a “big, beautiful, brick-and-mortar” border wall to keep the foreigners out.

Lancelot Ribeiro's life was one dedicated to tearing down walls, to opening up spaces. The victim of several racist attacks, and frustrated repeatedly by the more insidious institutionalised racism of the white art world, he was determined to make a stand. Salman Haidar, former Indian Foreign Secretary, recalls the young Lancelot—not dissimilar from his knightly namesake—as a “warm-hearted, proud, uncompromising in-

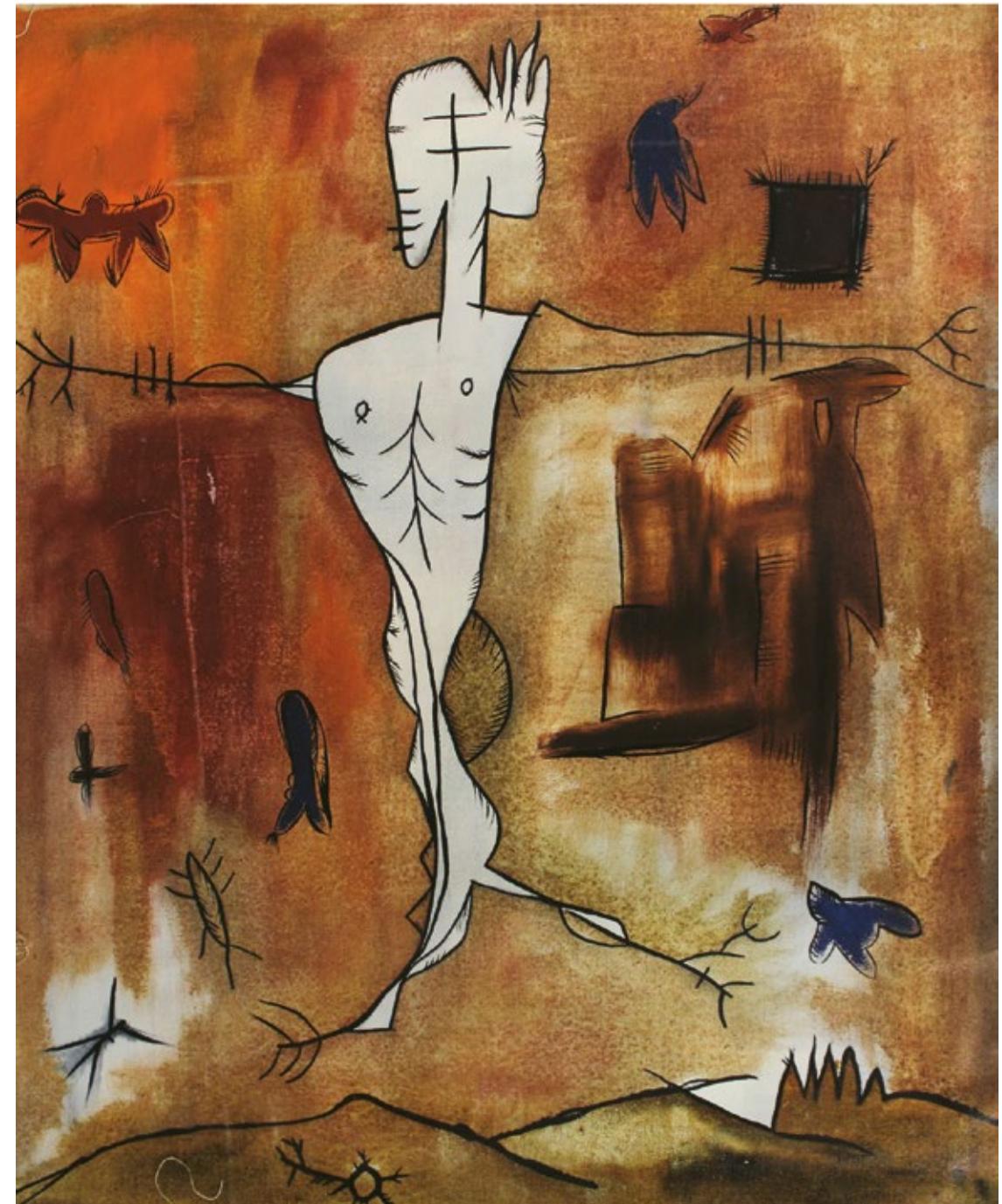
dividual, looking not to his own benefit alone but to wider causes. He carried others with him and had the gift of leadership.”

The current exhibition shows that Ribeiro was not a man who accepted his limitations easily—or indeed at all. He was tirelessly inventive, experimental not only in subject and style but in his medium of expression. He wrote poetry, loved music, created sculptures, worked in ceramics and was a masterful watercolourist, yet it is for his early oil paintings and his pioneering experimentation with acrylics that he is best known.

The jagged, rather bleak, cityscapes he produced during the early 1960s are his most recognisable works. The heavy, black outlines in-filled with vibrant colour suggest stained glass windows—an impression heightened by the fact that many include the church spires, towers and façades of his Goan roots. The urgent, decisive brushwork suggests that here was a painter who wanted—needed—to work at speed; as though the scene were not simply there, in front of his eyes, but a fleeting sense-impression that needed to be captured before it fled.

Frustrated by the technical limitations of working with oil colours (and perhaps freed from the immediate constraints of his brother's influence), he turned to acrylics. In the early 1960s, polyvinyl acetate, or PVA, was starting to be commercially produced for use in home décor. Ribeiro, unsatisfied with the existing options, approached PVA's main manufacturer, ICI, with a request: give him a quantity of base PVA to experiment with, and see what he came up with. A vast 22-gallon vat of this industrial compound (the smallest amount they could supply) turned up at

Untitled, 1965
Oil on canvas



his studio. Using dyes donated by carpet and curtain manufacturers, Ribeiro embarked on a series of paintings that heralded a new fluency and looseness, as he freed himself from the constraints of oil-based canvas. “Ribeiro found that by mixing his own PVA colours, a great variety of effects could be achieved, ranging from completely flat emulsion paint-like surfaces through to transparent, shiny-relief areas almost indistinguishable from modern enamels,” writes Buckman. Not only this, but he developed, almost singlehandedly, an entirely new medium. “Artists buying acrylic now do not realise what they owe to Ribeiro, who never patented what he discovered. If he had, he could have been a rich man.”

During this mid-phase in his career, Ribeiro’s townscapes evolved into “compositional” or what the curators term “flying landscapes”. The buildings sink further towards the bottom of the frame, and geometrical shapes and twisted ropes of colour snake across the sky creating surrealist patterns.

Marsha Ribeiro, the main instigator of this year-long programme of exhibitions, talks and events celebrating her father’s life, describes him as “a very tormented figure. He just couldn’t stop painting”. In many ways, he led “a classic artist’s life”—maverick, obsessed, uncompromising, a lover of women, passionate and driven. But lest that make him sound like a neglectful and emotionally distant father, she goes on to paint a picture (as it were) of a warm and generous man, whose “encyclopaedic knowledge of just about everything—art, politics, astronomy, you name it” he was more than willing to share with Marsha and her sister on their happy and frequent walks across Hampstead Heath. They would return with treasures—fistfuls of dried grasses, inter-

estingly shaped twigs and seedheads, some of which are on display among the other memorabilia—including letters, telegrams, old photos, half-squeezed tubes of paint and messy pallets, a travel iron that would fit on the palm of a hand, his harmonica, all evidence of her father’s endlessly restless spirit.

This is a word that keeps coming back: indeed, the title of the catalogue produced in 2013, not long after his death, is *Restless Ribeiro*, on the first page of which is a snippet from one of his diaries, probably dating from the mid-1970s: “I twist and turn, curve and straighten often without aim or result. Just an escape, an escapist thing into painting impulsively, compulsively, endlessly, tired, tirelessly, with or without joy.”

The painting we came in with was her father’s favourite, Marsha tells me: the only one he never wanted to sell. It forms part of a series painted during the 1960s, called “Psychedelic Man” a dark, disturbing parade of twisted faceless heads. “The Warlord”, an anguished response to American aggression in Vietnam, registers with the same kind of raw anguish as Ginsberg’s “Howl” published a decade earlier. Given the current geopolitical situation, it is a timely reminder of how history has a habit of repeating itself, and that the dark forces of prejudice and fascism can so easily rise if left unchecked and unchallenged. Ribeiro may not have achieved the recognition he deserved during his lifetime but this exhibition is a hopeful sign that that may be about to change. ■

Retracing Ribeiro at Burgh House and Hampstead Museum, London, is on until 19 March 2017. For more information visit www.lanceribeiro.co.uk