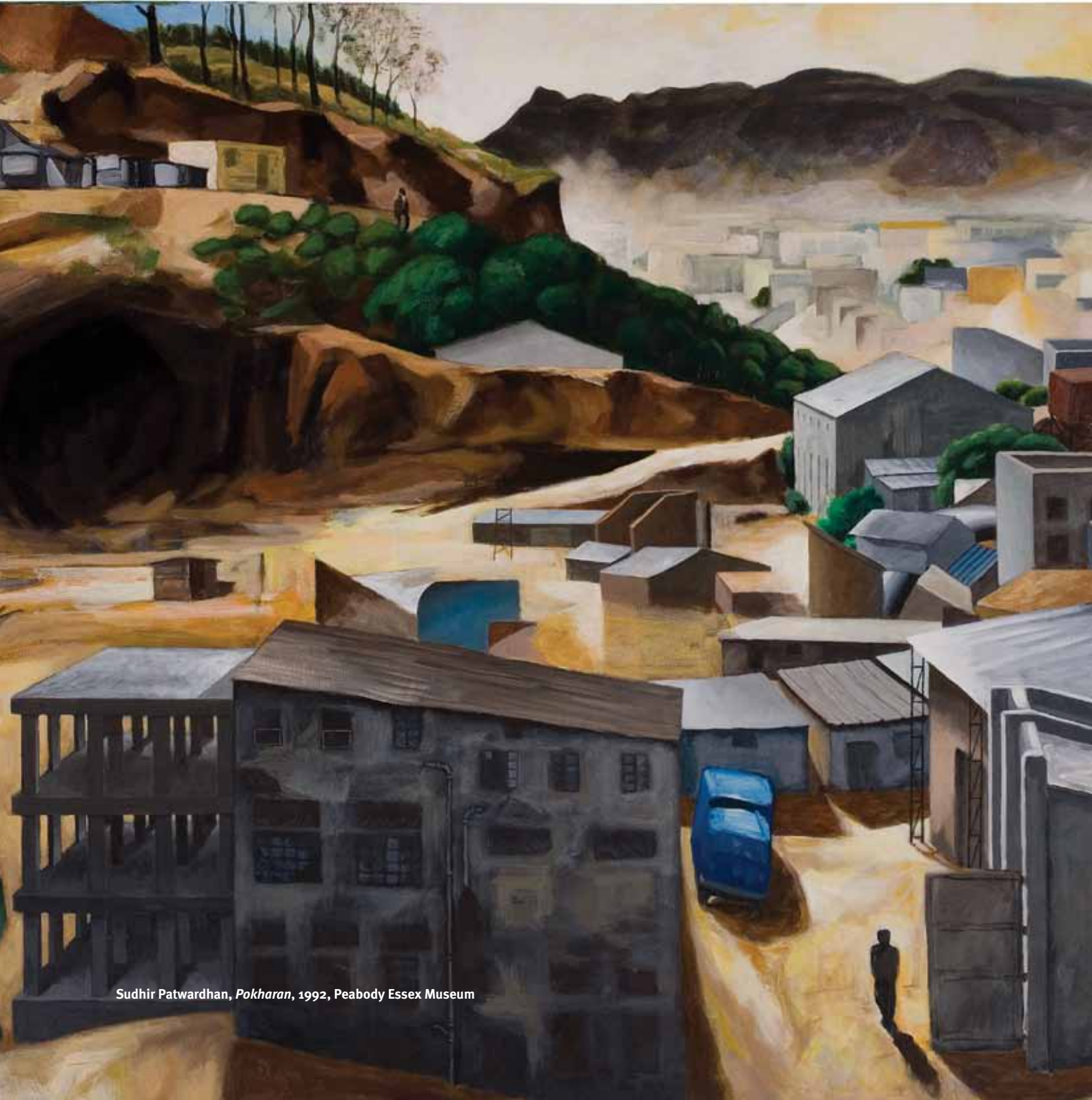


# THE CITY AS CANVAS



# GRADUATE STUDENT BETH CITRON TRACES THE RISE OF INDIA'S CONTEMPORARY ART MOVEMENT

BY PRIYA RATNESHWAR



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Pokharan*, 1992, Peabody Essex Museum

# THE CITY AS CANVAS

In a *New York Times* editorial following the terrorist attacks that ravaged Mumbai last fall, journalist Suketu Mehta described the city as “a mass dream of the peoples of South Asia.” Mumbai’s propensity toward extremes—expressed in images of destitute shantytowns amid sleek skyscrapers—commanded further international attention by way of this year’s Oscar-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. As India makes its place in the ranks of global powers, this teeming, diverse and often contradictory metropolis is becoming the face of the country’s contemporary zeitgeist.

While Mumbai may be the world’s window to India, it can also be considered India’s window to the world. “I think people in Bombay see themselves as looking as much to other cosmopolitan centers as they do to India,” says art history doctoral student Beth Citron. She prefers the

name “Bombay” over “Mumbai” for personal and political reasons shared by many of the city’s residents. Assisted by a Fulbright Fellowship, Citron recently spent two years in Mumbai studying the work of contemporary artists who are experimenting with international modernist styles and ideas while also tackling local subjects and aesthetics. “The result,” she says, “is a vibrant contemporary Indian art movement that has launched the country to the fore of the global art world.”

Citron explains that immediately following India’s independence from British rule and partition from Pakistan in 1947, artists in the country struggled with the issue of national identity. But by the mid-1960s nationalist priorities gave way to what Citron dubs an “urban, cosmopolitan creativity” centered in Mumbai. In addition to becoming the

## THE INDIAN ART WORLD IS RAPIDLY TRANSFORMING FROM A LOOSE COLLECTIVE OF GROUNDBREAKING ARTISTS TO A FORMIDABLE ESTABLISHMENT AS BIG AND PLURAL AND INTERNATIONAL AS MUMBAI ITSELF.

main intellectual and economic heart of post-colonial, post-Partition India, Mumbai was also becoming the center of the country’s commercial art world.

Despite the existence of this burgeoning art scene, Citron found that most surveys on Indian art extended only through the Mughal era, which ended in the 18th century, and that art history research on more recent periods tended to focus on folk art. She also found that her courses on modern and contemporary art rarely covered work produced outside the Western world.

Citron’s dissertation, *The City as Canvas: Five Exemplary Artists and Bombay, ca. 1965-1995*, offers the first historical assessment of art from this period and region through case studies of artists whose works epitomize India’s contemporary art movement. Her research also provided an opportunity to co-curate an exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum, titled *Gateway Bombay*, which featured pieces by her dissertation subjects as well as other Mumbai artists.

Citron approaches each of her subjects through the lens of a major issue explored in their work. For example, Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee, in the late 1960s and ’70s, tried to work through the dichotomy between figurative and abstract art. This was an especially pressing issue for



Atul Dodiya, *The Bombay Buccaneer*, 1994, Peabody Essex Museum



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Overbridge*, 1981, Peabody Essex Museum

contemporary Indian artists who were absorbing Western ideas of abstract expressionism and minimalism, but also had to grapple with the human figure's traditionally central role in Indian art. "The dialogue between abstraction and figuration became key to Indian artists' creating and asserting their artistic identities," says Citron, "both at home and abroad."

Sudhir Patwardhan's paintings explore the assertion of regional identity and politics, while Bhupen Khakhar's body of work parses ideas of displacement. "Khakhar's personal experiences of straddling class and regional boundaries, as well as of coming to terms with his own closeted homosexuality, profoundly informed his paintings," Citron explains. As a result, he serves as a touchstone for new generations of artists navigating the increasing fluidity of India's traditionally rigid social structures.

Atul Dodiya, the youngest subject of Citron's research, is the first Indian artist to explicitly identify himself as global and postmodern. Having adopted postmodernism's embrace of pastiche, appropriation and the blurring of high- and low-art distinctions, his work is often constructed in mixed media and is rich in stylistic and iconographic allusions to the pop culture and politics of his native Mumbai, as well as to his own artistic genealogy. For example, one of his most famous works, *The Bombay Buccaneer*, features a self-portrait modeled after a Bollywood film poster. The sunglasses

Dodiya wears in the painting reflect in one lens British artist David Hockney, and in the other Khakhar, whom he considers a mentor.

The two years Citron spent in India allowed her to cultivate the relationships needed to gain an intimate understanding of Mumbai and its art world. "Gallerists became like family; collectors welcomed me into their homes, and younger artists became my friends and colleagues," Citron recalls. She was also able to arrange in-depth interviews with all four living artists treated in her dissertation. (Khakar died in 2003.)

"I called *Art India* magazine," says Citron, "and I said, 'Hi, I'm a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania; I'm doing research, and I'd like to get in touch with some artists. Could you give me their phone numbers?' I'd call the artists, and they'd say come by on Tuesday or something. This was just three years ago, but you can't do this anymore. That's how quickly the Indian art world is changing."

According to Citron, the Indian art world is rapidly transforming from a loose collective of groundbreaking artists to a formidable establishment as big and plural and international as Mumbai itself. "Through the formal qualities of their art, their politics and their articulation of artistic positions," she says, "these artists collectively gave rise to something so much bigger than themselves." ♦