

CULTURE

See The Spectacular Paintings Of Mohan Samant

OCTOBER 16, 2013 7:22 AM



“Tourists at the Sea Festival” (1979). Photo courtesy JNAF and Estate of Mohan Samant.

When you visit *Mohan Samant: Paintings* at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, you’ll glean, even without the curatorial note, a great many things about this extraordinary artist who was largely forgotten by India. That he had an affinity for music for instance, or that he evidently had an eye for making swathes of colour pulse, and a rather clever way with impasto and paper. He also, importantly, had a sense of humour. Take a gander at “First Lesson in Water” or “Nudist/Man And His Machines”, to see what we mean. What you’ll learn from reading the wall text or thumbing through the dumbbell heavy book on the artist released to commemorate the show, is that Samant was something of a curiosity, a Mumbai-born painter who left both the city and the Progressive Artists Group for something more off the straight and narrow. He travelled, he moved to New York, he dabbled in styles like Cubism and Expressionism, took up the sarangi, fiddled around with wires and set ledges into his canvases, and became as art critic Ranjit Hoskote writes “an unacknowledged one-man avant-garde who remained, alas, always an outsider to a history that would not claim him”.

The Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, together with the artist’s estate, has now pulled together a number of his works, along with the sole one they had in their own collection, to mount a sort of “best of” retrospective, spanning mixed media, watercolour and paper works from the 1960s to 2002. Prime among them are his cut-outs, deftly layered so a sea of Cubist forms appear in pop-up book fashion. In “Midnight Pickup in the Park”, a pair of prostitutes tower over a wee man in his open-top car, appearing like a couple of giants out to slay themselves a meal (raising the question of who is picking up whom). Some, like “Tourists at the Sea Festival” and “Folk Music Festival”, are teeming muddles of appendage, accessory and instrument. They are glorious, and worth the trip alone.