

## Free spirit's positive energy

Sohan Qadri's vibrant abstract paintings sprang from a spirit of open-minded inquiry and philosophy, writes Enid Tsui

Enid Tsui

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Gallery owner Sundaram Tagore, who donated Qadri's Untitled to the auction. Photo: Nora Tam

Sohan Qadri is often compared with Mark Rothko, the American abstract painter, and it's easy to see why. Both artists abandoned the figurative early in their careers, had a penchant for monochromatic backgrounds and used predominantly primary hues. And then there is that shimmering luminosity in Qadri's works that is redolent of the mystical magnetism of Rothko's colour fields.

However, the two artists were poles apart in form and philosophy. Rothko believed in the two-dimensional "flat form" that destroyed illusions; Qadri created sculptures on canvas and paper. Rothko was all about the tragedy of the human condition; Qadri celebrated the force of life in all of his work.

Born Sohan Singh in 1932, Qadri was raised by fairly well-to-do parents in a small village in the Punjab. His parents expressed a remarkable degree of religious openness by encouraging the withdrawn child to spend time with a Sufi Muslim sage and a tantric Buddhist guru living near the family farm. Years later, the artist took the name of his



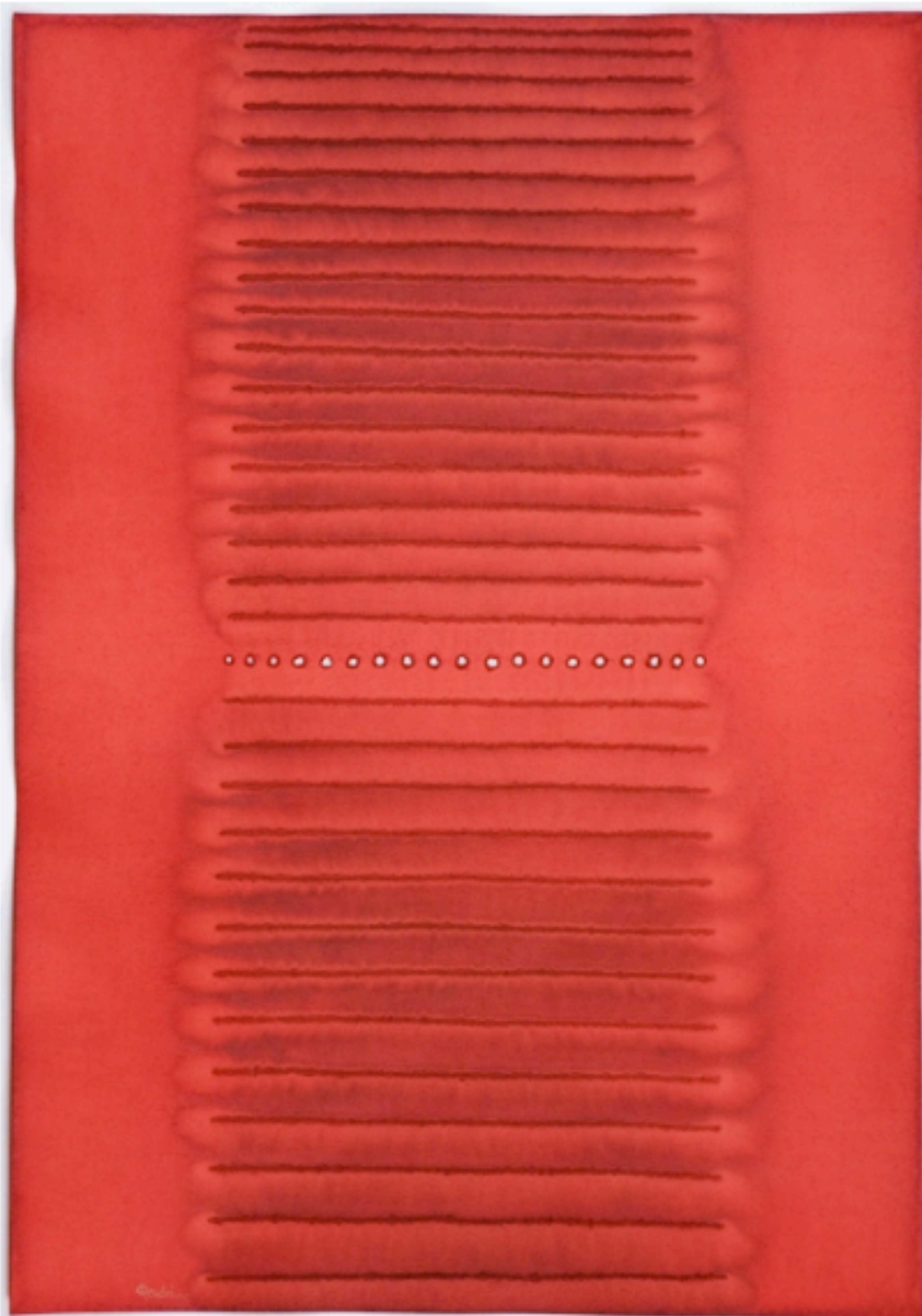
With tantric art, boundaries are meant to be dissolved. Qadri wanted to break

Muslim mentor on a whim: just before his first exhibition, he decided Sohan Qadri would look better than Sohan Singh when written on canvas.

But it was the Buddhist guru who planted the seeds of his lifelong devotion to tantric philosophy and art. He would ask the boy to make mandalas on the temple walls using mud from the ground. He also taught him yoga. As the artist once said in an interview, his guru was so skilled that when he breathed in, his eyeballs would pop out and he would go into a trance.

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SUNDARAM TAGORE



Untitled will be on the block at the SCMP Charity Art Auction.

A boy who spent all his free time with two much older men discussing comparative religion was bound to grow up unconventional.

Qadri, who died in Toronto at the age of 78 in 2011, left India in his early 30s and spent the rest of his adult life living in Canada and Europe. Outside his home country, he found success as an artist and also the freedom to live an ascetic, peripatetic and alternative lifestyle. As a self-avowed anarchist who hated rules and systems, Qadri was one of the original inhabitants of Christiania, an old military camp in Copenhagen that was declared a self-governing area by squatters 40 years ago. This was the hippie era and he found kindred spirits who shared an interest in the cerebral aspect of his philosophy and the practice of sexual rituals that are at the heart of tantric Buddhism.

All this may seem a bit esoteric if not downright kinky. But gallery owner Sundaram Tagore is confident that the "positive energy" that emanates from Qadri's beautifully crafted pieces will find a new audience in Hong Kong. He is donating a signature Qadri, the blood red *Untitled*, to the SCMP Charity Art Auction to be held in September. The 99x69cm work features the serrations and dots that became the artist's private language for his tantric belief.



Adya 1 is one prime example of Sohan Qadri's striking use of colour.

The sculpture-like quality of his artwork has to be seen to be appreciated: made on thick paper, *Untitled* includes a series of horizontal lines that are ridges created with a scalpel. In the middle lies a row of dots, Qadri's seeds of life, that were made by puncturing the paper. The red is a homemade vegetable dye brushed over the textured surface.

"Qadri switched to using paper and dye in the 1970s," says Tagore, because he found that the smell of oils, especially the turpentine, jarred with his meditative approach to creation. "He used to say he didn't want to do anything that took effort - his creative process had to be in tune with his yoga practice - and he found that making incisions on paper came naturally to him."

Qadri attended India's prestigious Government College of Art in the 1950s when the curriculum was highly technical and copied exactly from art colleges in Britain. But he abandoned the figurative as soon as he became an established artist, saying the abstract form was the only way to paint without being confined by boundaries.

"There was a huge age difference between us but I considered him a friend. He had a very serious knowledge about Buddhism and I learned a lot from him," says Tagore, who opened the Hong Kong branch of his eponymous gallery in 2008. Born into a Calcutta family with a great fortune amassed from banking, mining and trading activities since the 18th century, Tagore is a descendant of the poet Rabindranath Tagore and grew up in the lap of luxury.



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"My family was very conscious of how privileged we were and used our wealth on education and culture. We built a private university and a museum filled with, among other things, great 19th-century Western art massed over the years. I practically grew up in that museum," he says.

By the 1970s, much of the wealth had been spent or given away and so his generation had to go out and work. The knowledge that the palatial existence of his childhood would never return is one reason

why he has lived abroad for the past decades, Tagore says.

Today, he is using his galleries in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore to cultivate a real exchange of Eastern and Western culture which, he says, was what Qadri tried to do.

"With tantric art, boundaries are meant to be dissolved. Qadri wanted to break down barriers between 'us' and 'them'. To him, we are all part and parcel of the totality of the universe," says Tagore.

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