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LIFESTYLE

Sohan Qadri's Search for Samsara at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York

June 19, 2025, 11:48 AM IST / Uma Nair in plUMAge, Lifestyle, TOI

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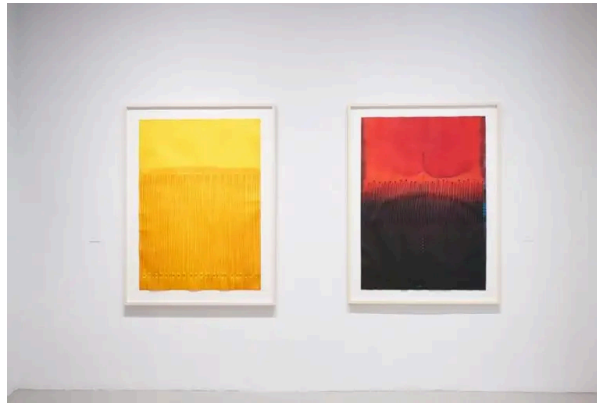


Uma Nair

Critic and Curator Uma Nair has been writing for the past 35 years on art and culture. She has written as critic for Times of India and Economic Times. She believes that art is ... MORE

In Search of Transcendence at Sundaram Tagore New York is an exhibition that dances in the spirit of the sublime through the pinholes and folded edges of corrugated, dyed paper sheets that unfold the saga of a meditation practitioner, Sohan Qadri.

WRITE



Himalayas Hinduism and the world

Qadri, who spent much of his working life in Copenhagen, grew up in northern India, where he was exposed to Sufism, Hinduism and Sikhism on his family's farm. He was particularly inspired by Vajryana or Tantric Buddhism, which emphasizes the notion of *sunyata* or emptiness.

In 1965, Qadri left India and began a series of travels that took him to East Africa, North America, Paris, Zurich and ultimately, Denmark. "I did not want to confine myself to one place, nation and community," he told *Times of India* in a 2002 interview. "My approach to life has been universal, and so is my art."

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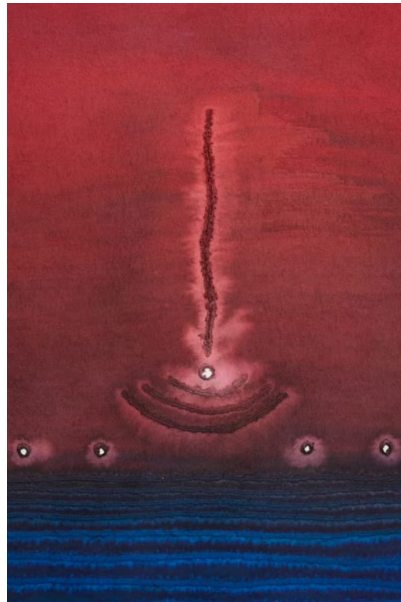
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Sohan and Sundaram

Although he began his career in the 1950s painting in oil on canvas, Qadri, in search of a process that would enable artmaking while in a meditative state, found his spiritual medium in paper. He covered sheets of heavy, bespoke paper with structural effects by soaking them in liquid and carving them in several stages while applying inks and dyes. In the process, he transformed the paper from a flat surface into an almost textile-like three-dimensional medium. The repetition of careful incisions was an integral part of his yoga practice.

“Sohan was a dear friend and it has been my honor to represent him for three decades,” says Sundaram Tagore. “I have never failed to be moved by the gravity of his work, which was so minimal yet so rich. He imbued it with his spiritual beliefs. He was a painter, poet and Tantric yogi,

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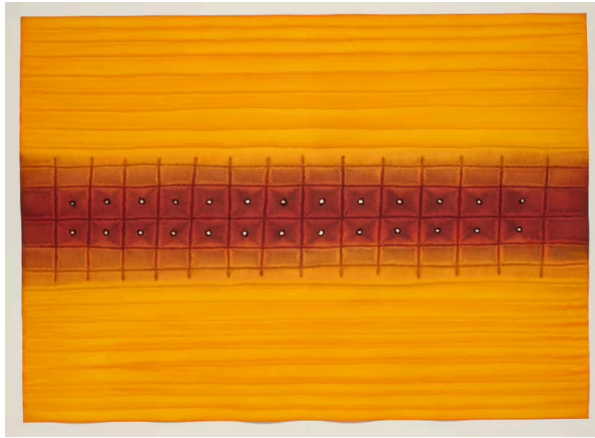
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and without a doubt, one of the world's preeminent spiritual artists."



Transcendental trajectory

He often said that the act of painting itself was a transcendental trajectory in which he looked beyond himself, beyond skin. He said: "I look for what lies beneath, down deep where there is complete silence, complete darkness. Darkness is where peace is, it's synonymous to silence. Our universe is 99% dark, space is dark, we have very little light. We're replicas of our universe, we're dark inside. I call this the darkness of recognition. When you look at a painting, it arrests your thought process. When you look at a painting, it arrests your thought process—your superimposition — then you imbibe it for a moment."



Interpretation and samsara

“ You can interpret it later, but that moment must happen,” he added. “ Yoga extends that moment – which happens in spite of you – into eternity: To live in that always, to have that taste continuously, in everyday life, right in the crowd, not on the mountain or in the cave. My search is for a samasara ,and you see that in the spine which is vertical.”

At Sundaram Tagore Gallery it is the colours that seep into your senses and you gaze at the wrinkles of meticulous meanderings as the shades of brilliance wrap itself into your memory chambers . Qadri's early works on canvasses have found buyers at Museums world over. The beauty of process and perspective both meld as you espie the turgid density of gorgeous handmade paper. As an artist, Qadri was known to rhythmically serrate and puncture the surfaces of the handmade paper that he used as a part of his meditative sojourn.

Degrees of distillation

The lexicon of light and lines, along with the residue of textural terrain forms the body of colour . And it is the experience of symbolism that resonates in the very tenets of a *sadhana*. Among Indian abstractionists, Sohan Qadri had an important place. The shades of sunset orange as well as buttercup yellow reflect the evocative energy of Qadri's silent , contemplative rhythms.

Viewers are treated to the ripples of silence that pulse with a peaceful pensiveness both rare and born of a ritual of the concentrated moment. That is why he said: "My paintings are characteristic for their emptiness and peace combined in a radiation of power. Ultimately it is the energy that is contained and coalesced . It is not really necessary to separate oriental art from western art. Energy is universal and one for all life. Deep and true aesthetic perception is never geographically conditioned. The intuitive experience speaks all languages and

knows of no formal boundaries." When you see the turquoise tinted blues it as if the percolation of colour seeps into the harmonic progression he attained. This exhibition reaffirms the truth that over the years, Qadri's work has gone through a distinct degree of distillation.

Role of a gallery

In an artist's career the role of a gallery is to be responsible in placing his/her works in prestigious collections. Sundaram moves mountains across seas to place representative artists works in museums that collect veterans .

Sundaram has placed Qadri's work in the British Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Rubin Museum and Royal Ontario Museum, among others. Additionally, the gallery has produced numerous publications of Qadri's work featuring scholarly essays by art historian Partha Mitter, critic Donald Kuspit and museum curator Tushara Bindu Gude. In 2011, Sundaram Tagore Gallery collaborated with the noted Italian