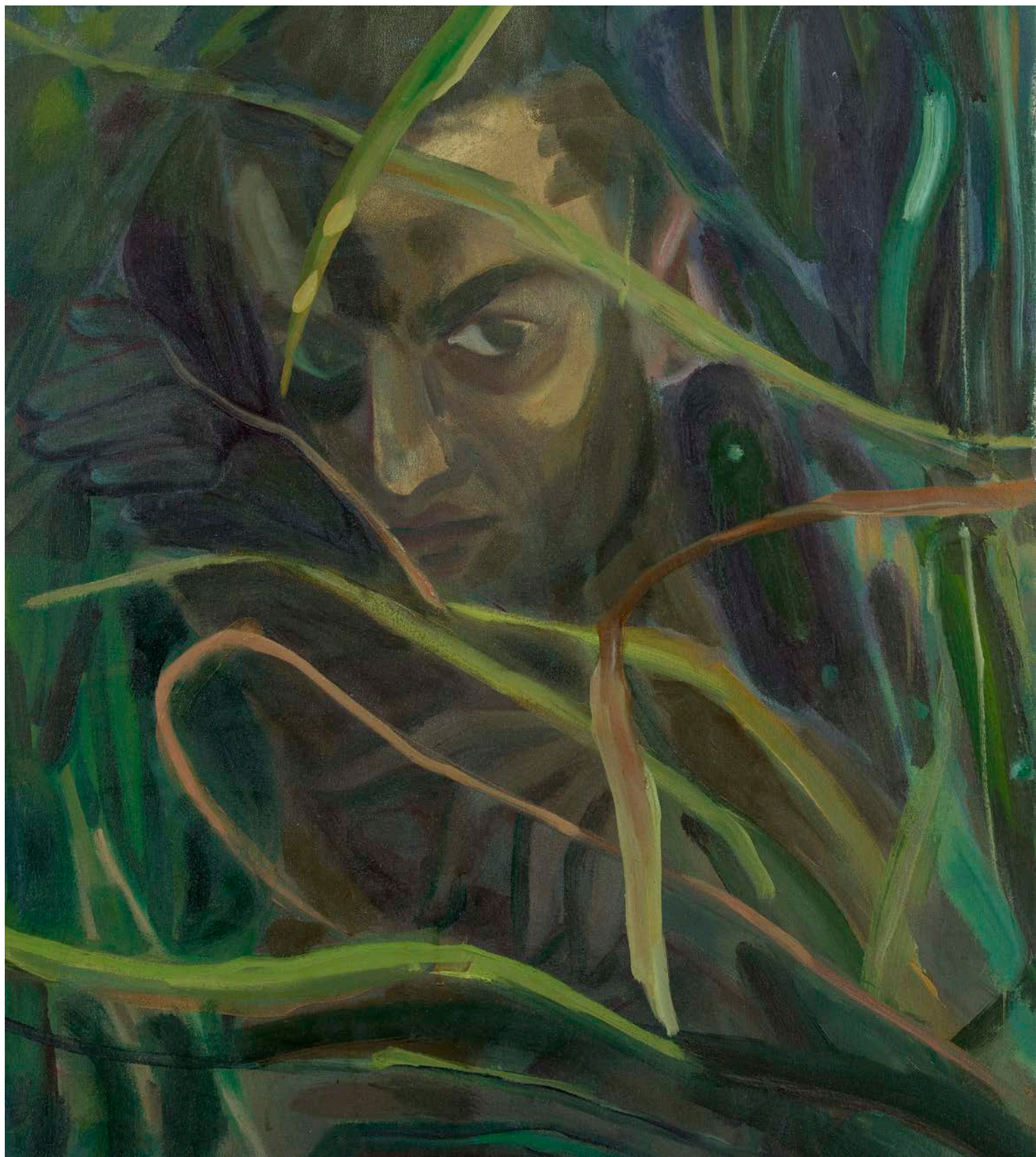


ON EARTH WE'RE  
BRIEFLY  
GORGEOUS



JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY



ON EARTH WE'RE  
BRIEFLY  
GORGEIOUS

JAKE GREWAL  
PREM SAHIB  
SUNIL GUPTA

11 MAR—  
29 MAY 2021

"I wanted to start with truth and end with art."  
Ocean Vuong on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

*Maybe Even Unattainable*

London-based artists Prem Sahib, Jake Grewal, and Sunil Gupta illuminate the queer form that 'place' takes within a range of aesthetic practices. Gupta was born in New Delhi, emigrated to Montreal, Canada in 1969, and lived in New York City before settling in London. He has also lived, worked, and shown in India, setting him apart in this exhibition. However, together these three artists engender an intergenerational dialogue invested in queer intimacies. Without forcing a genealogy neither, they deploy various media – photography, painting, and sculptural form – to demonstrate the agility and expansiveness of queer form at multiple convergences.

Across a promiscuous set of surfaces, Prem Sahib's (b. 1982) sculptural form animates slippery attachments to industrial materials such as ceramic tile, obsidian glass, puffer jackets, and kitchen rolls. His tile works hang on the wall like paintings – and given their dimensions, one must approach them closely to fully engage. Glazed and fired, a digital print remains underneath the surface "like a stain" in the artist's words and is intentionally faint thus hard to reach; maybe even unattainable. Part of an ongoing series, *Your Disco Needs You XXXX*<sup>1</sup> (2017) resembles a reflection, specifically that of a park seen when facing a white tiled wall<sup>2</sup>. Here, the blush and blue hues create a light bruising effect, saturating the sleek, glistening tile with more fleshy depth. And so, as the tile reiterates certain ideas about sanitation, just below the surface memories of jouissance are encased. Objects remember. This sentiment resonates with *Horizons XI* (2017), twin kitchen rolls cast in blue rubber with a goosepimple surface recalling the feel of skin – and by extension, touch. Used profusely in sex clubs for wiping, smears inevitably remain. What do we make of these traces? If *Disco* is laden with ecstatic perversity, the rubber rolls, as defunct facsimile, deny such discourses of hygiene weighed down by a politics of respectability. Beaded through a black steel rod, the identical rolls are metonymic of a kind of uniformity found in clubs, echoing a different kind of ubiquity in the puffer jackets, as seen in *Hers* (2013). Sahib interprets these white-and-black silhouettes through the pictorial. Sandwiching them between glass, he invites a clinical, surveilling eye on urban wear distorted by racialized stereotype. Caught somewhere between an embrace and a brawl, Sahib blurs the boundary between intimate and violent touch. Arguably, the black jacket serves as a reflective surface not unlike *Obsidian Mirror IVI* (2021). However, this surface that resembles cracked smartphone screens is more immersive and absorptive, gesturing toward a deep interiority. With long associations to scrying, the obsidian glass suggests a portal or the desire to communicate across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions – a potent sign of the times.

Finally, the *Middleton Green* series (2021) extends *Disco*'s concept in a different temperature. Reflecting a patch of green just outside the artist's residence located in the middle of a mixed neighborhood<sup>3</sup>, this public park is also a place of public surveillance – the effects of which are disproportionately worse for black and brown communities. The presence of the cops in one tile work reifies this explicitly.

<sup>1</sup>This title refers to Kylie Minogue's song from her album *Light Years* (2001); the lyrics call for a queer space.

<sup>2</sup>Zoom interview with artist. February 17, 2021

<sup>3</sup>This includes private and social housing.

As the only actual figures in artworks that otherwise index bodily attributes while rendering the body absent, their presence literalizes a policing gaze latent in Sahib's works. Ultimately, what resounds in his conceptually minimalist flirtations is the disorienting status of the perpetual outsider – where one never quite feels fully safe, never quite fully held, and perhaps longing for other thresholds beyond the here and now.

Jake Grewal's (b. 1994) enchanted forests also evoke a kind of beyond. However, his idyllic pastoral scenes are not simply picturesque (itself a colonial construct aimed at taming the wild) but instead disclose an open vulnerability difficult to contain. Working from observation, plein-air style, Grewal pays attention to markings and edges as they are before incorporating them into broader contexts. Small scale works capture floral species, summer swims in watering pools, and multiple silhouettes in various shades. His saturated hues of blue, green, and earth tones are as studious as they are decadent, indulging in stolen moments and secrets bespoken – or as this title names, *All The Things I Shouldn't Know* (2020). Simultaneously portraiture and landscape, his human figures often merge with nature engendering metamorphic, interspecies beings that invite alternative forms of intimacy. Alongside his ambiguous light and shadow, Grewal's scintillating scenes are hard to pin down. In a larger painting, *Twice Called To Listen* (2021), the branches of a tree stand out against a lush green backdrop to fuse with the lone nude central figure, almost suggesting the presence of antlers. And given the subject's posture – whose arched hip proposes a tail and whose feet positioning anticipates hooves, Grewal flirts with mythmaking and conjuring.

For Grewal, nature is play. As a child he visited his grandmother and remembers fondly how he cultivated a sense of imagination in the Welsh countryside. The title, *Searching For Dragonflies* (2021), speaks to such child's play innocence and reverie, yet another pathos, one more associated with St. Sebastian or Baskin's *Hanged Man* envelops the honest nude as well<sup>4</sup>. This makes me think of the title of Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and the beautiful<sup>5</sup> forms that inevitably emerge even in the midst of tragedy. Contrary to historical representation and popular stereotype, here the brown body is not perceived as a menacing threat or as a desexualized nude. Grewal offers a rare vulnerability; bracketing the strictly carnal for something more open hearted, and as his nudes gently graze one another, an air of tender submission unfolds. Finally, the intensity of the gaze, especially in *Lurking In Little Weed* (2019) and *Portrait In Earth Tones* (2020), locks you in a moment suspended in phantasmatic time – never crass, but still disarming.

As the most prominent queer artist in India and arguably in the South Asian diaspora, Sunil Gupta (b. 1953) has been uplifting queer brown intimacy in his photography for over 45 years. A recent retrospective at the Photographers' Gallery attests to a photographic career that unapologetically confronts institutional oppressions and pursues social change – a lens that crystallized during the Black Arts Movement in London in the 1980s, given his participation and leadership. An early series, *Toward an Indian Gay Image* (1980-1983) marks the absence of gay Indian representation at the time (not to be confused with gay Indian desire of course), however

<sup>4</sup>Zoom interview with artist. February 15th 2021

<sup>5</sup>Here by beauty, I am referring to aesthetic form.

the series is anticipatory in tone. The series looks forward even as it looks back at sites of significant cultural history while imbuing this heritage with queer subjectivity. These poetic juxtapositions signal a queer occupation, announcing the ways we have always been here, the ways we have always been queer. Though now repealed after a long arduous legal battle, Section 377 was after all a colonial import, a foreign imposition onto a region with a queer history of representation that is not only not absent, but that has been actively censored by empire. In one photo, the artist embraces his friend and comrade, Saleem Kidwai. The majestic Qutb Minar stands in the background against beaming smiles in the fore. In the only shot that does not intentionally obscure the sitter's faces, Gupta previews and cites the authorship of the "Indian Gay Image." Kidwai who is a medieval historian will come to write the pathbreaking *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) with Ruth Vanita, alongside other writings. In 1982 however, such projects were still on the horizon, working 'toward' something aspirational.

Some photos in this 1982 series show up in colour in a more well-known series titled *Exiles* (1986); perhaps this fact renders them preliminary but what if we approached them as primordial? That is, Gupta is known for documentary imagery during this period, however as I've argued elsewhere, he blurs the line between staged photo and his snapshot aesthetic<sup>6</sup>. Thus, style and form ground his political messaging. Like *Exiles*, the series captures various national monuments for the way they function as gay male cruising sites – pervasively albeit clandestinely. The sitters are seen from their backside protecting their identity against “compulsory heterosexuality”<sup>7</sup>. Unlike *Exiles*, these black-and-white stills are more open-ended, romantic even. In one photo two men overlook a lake in Udaipur; Gupta sees the mountain range at eye level while simultaneously looking down at the pair from a steep angle. This pluri-vision that attempts to contain the vastness of the scene also catches the intimacy of a fleeting moment. By the stairs' edge, faint ripples in the water suggest two recent disturbances. Maybe they were throwing stones, making a wish – wishing for the unattainable.

In 1982, Gupta may have been reaching for the unattainable, but today the history of photography is incomplete without his prescience and sustained commitment. Indeed, Jhaveri Contemporary gathers three artists who demonstrate the difference queer aesthetics makes in British diasporic art.

Natasha Bissonauth, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Women's Gender, and Sexuality Studies;  
College of Wooster

<sup>6</sup> Natasha Bissonauth. “A Camping of Orientalism in Sunil Gupta's *Sun City*” in *Art Journal*, vol. 78 issue 4, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” 1980.



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Lurking In Little Weed*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
71.2 x 51.5 cm  
28 x 20.27 in

JAKE  
GREWAL



*Twice Called To Listen*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
230 x 140 cm  
90.5 x 55.1 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Hunted Sunset // A Conversation Of Sorts*, 2021

Oil on canvas

93 x 153 cm

36.6 x 60.2 in

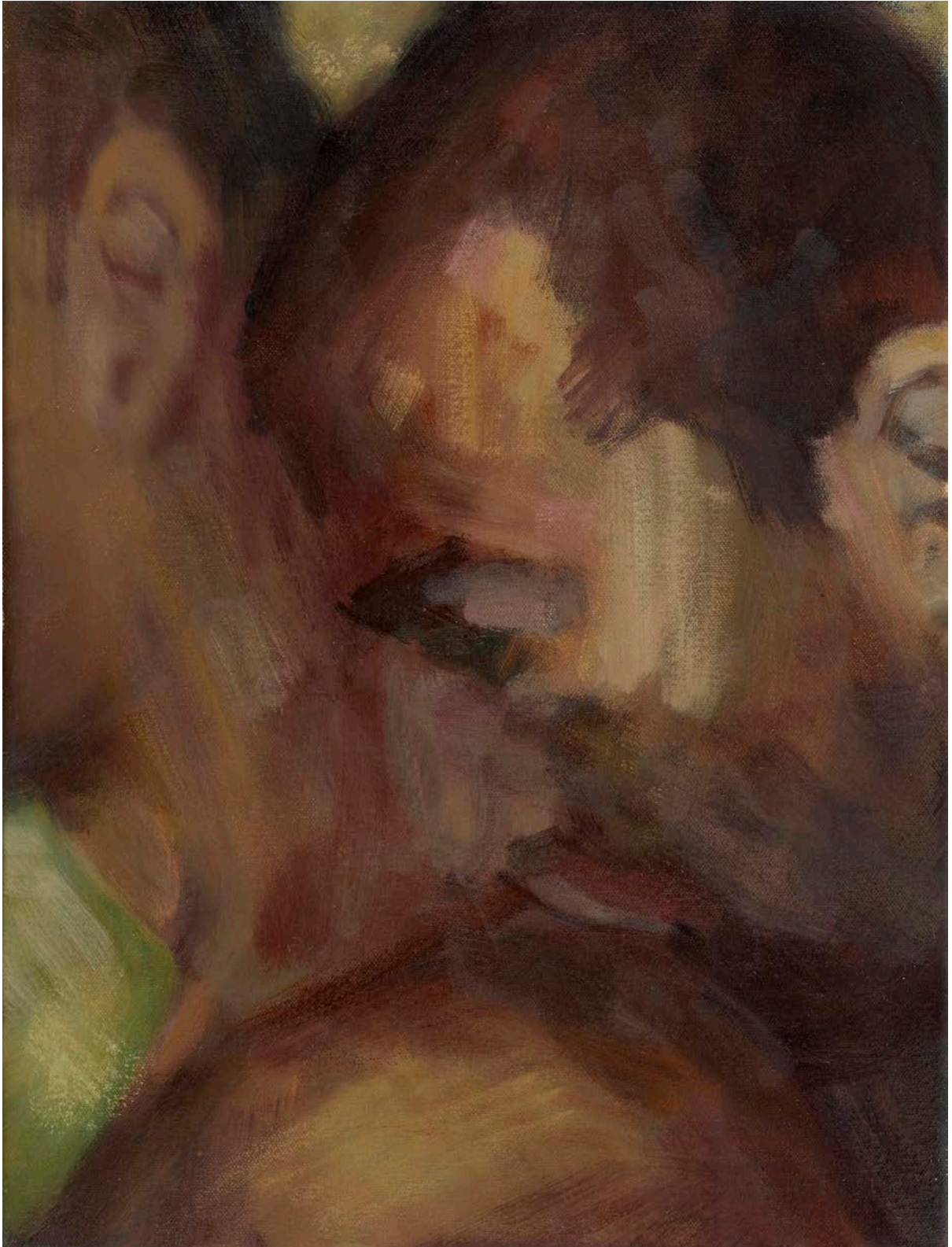
JAKE  
GREWAL



*Some Woven Complex*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 51 cm  
28.3 x 20.1 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Fled Tears // Eaten*, 2021 Oil  
on canvas  
41 x 31 cm  
16.1 x 12.2 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Rooted Jaw With An Open Heart*, 2021

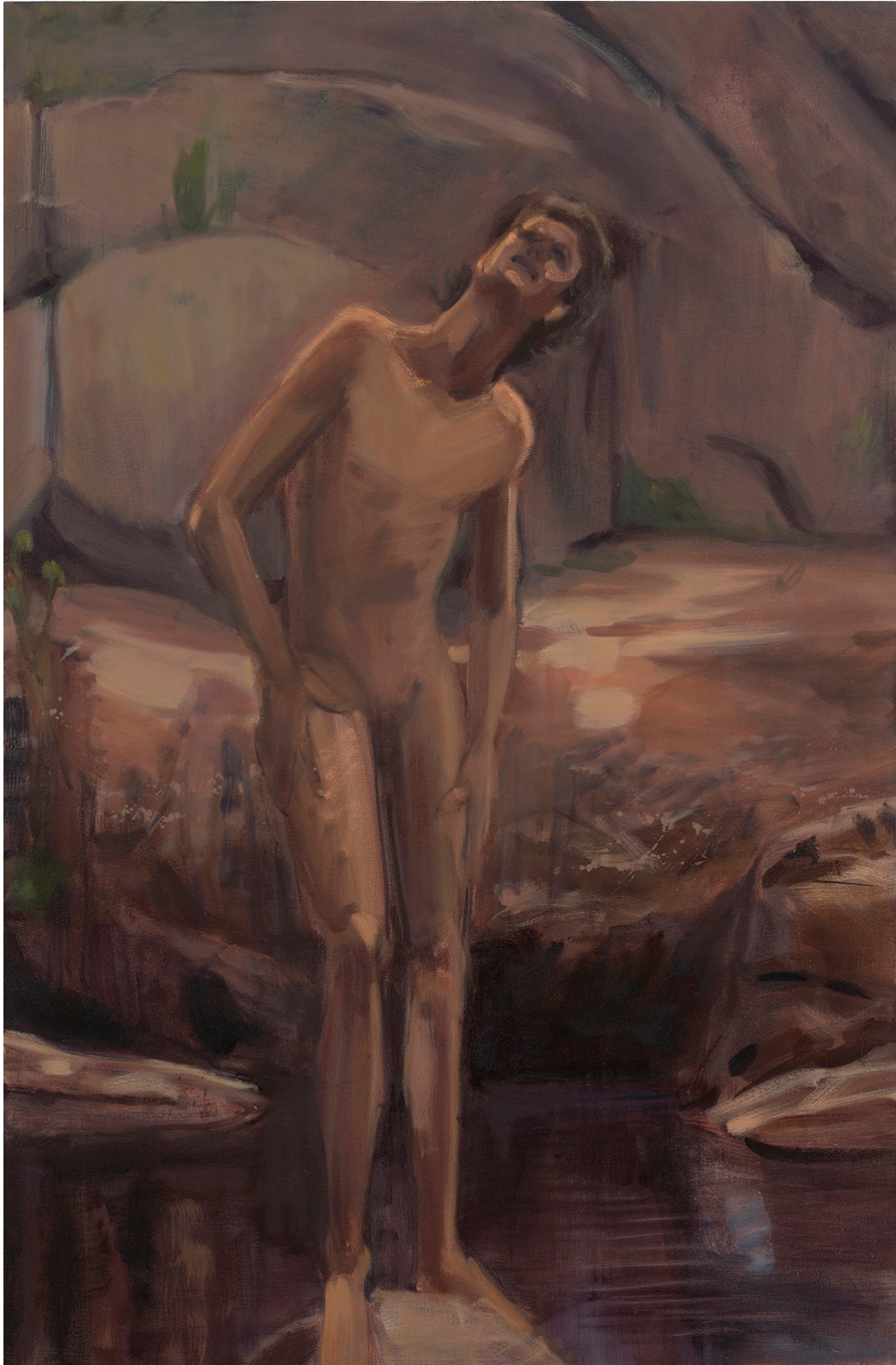
Oil on canvas

92 x 72 cm

36.2 x 28.3 in



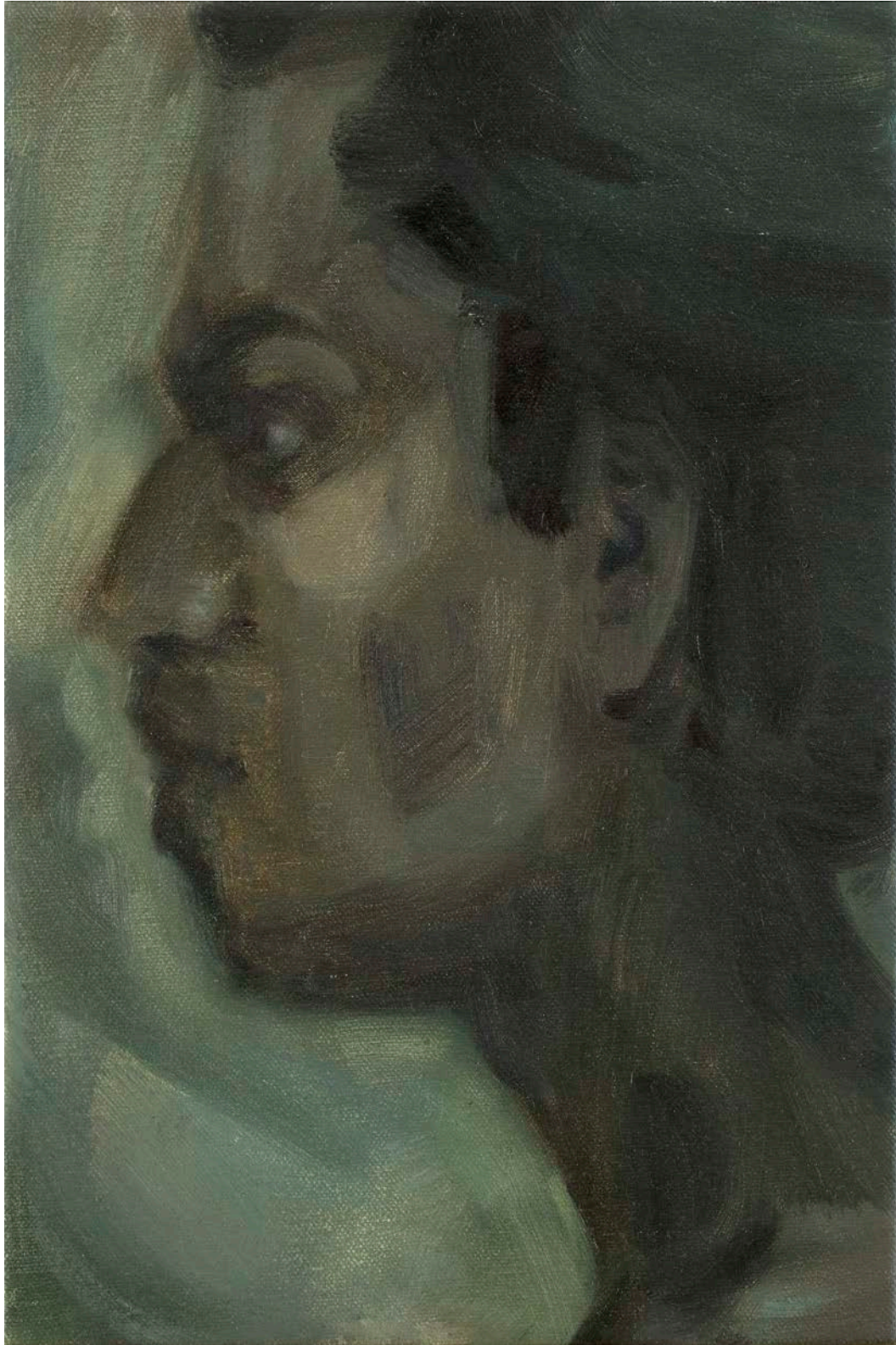
JAKE  
GREWAL



*Searching For Dragonflies*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
108 x 77 cm  
42.5 x 30.3 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*(Lost Time) As If It Were Written*, 2021  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 20 cm  
11.8 x 7.8 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*What I Said By The River I've Said And Will Say Again*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 30 cm  
7.8 x 11.8 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Histories // If I Knew Where I Could Stand, 2020*  
Oil on canvas  
15 x 20 cm  
5.9 x 7.8 in



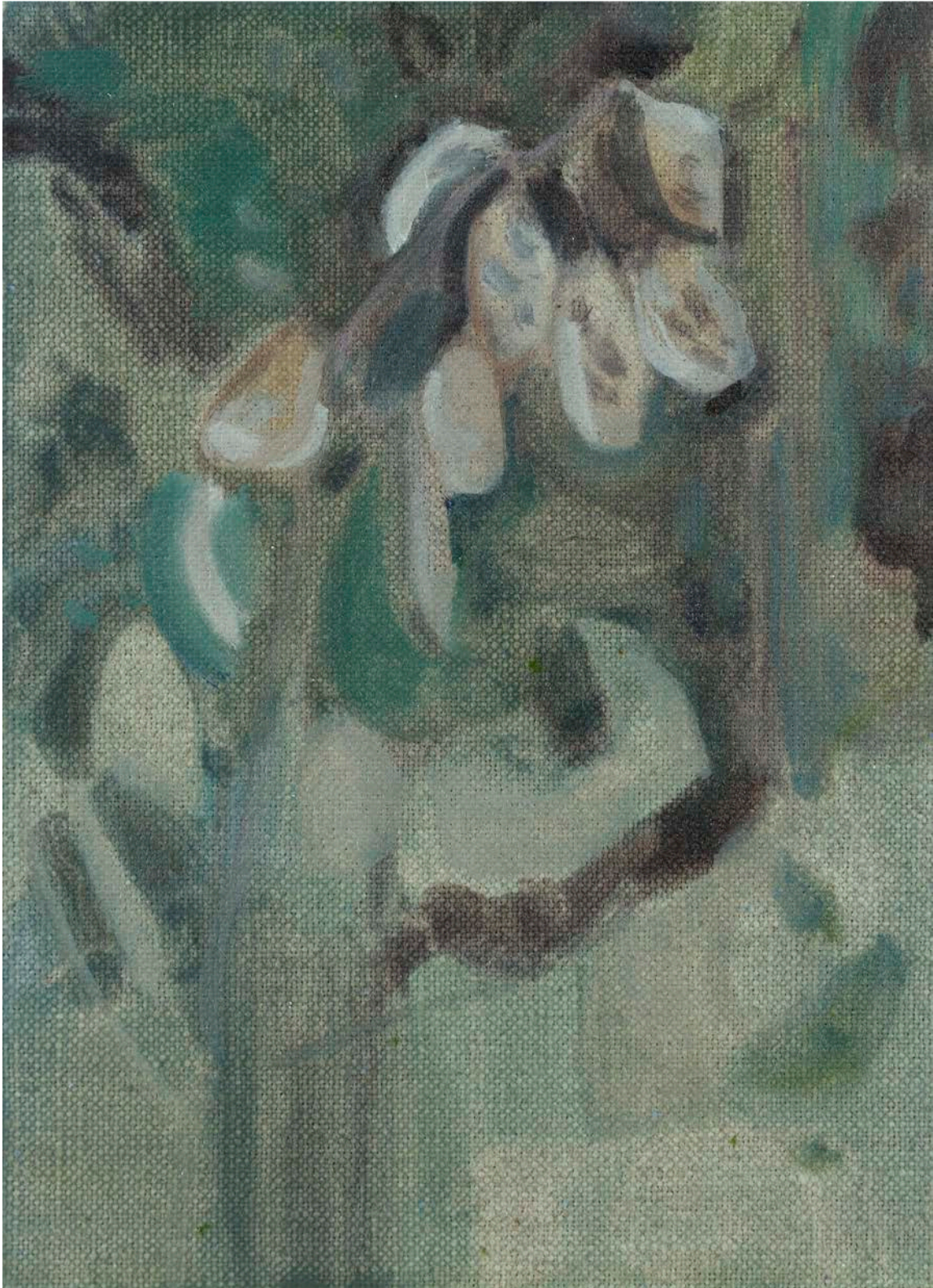
JAKE  
GREWAL



*All The Things I Shouldn't Know*, 2020  
Oil on linen board  
18 x 24 cm  
7 x 9.4 in



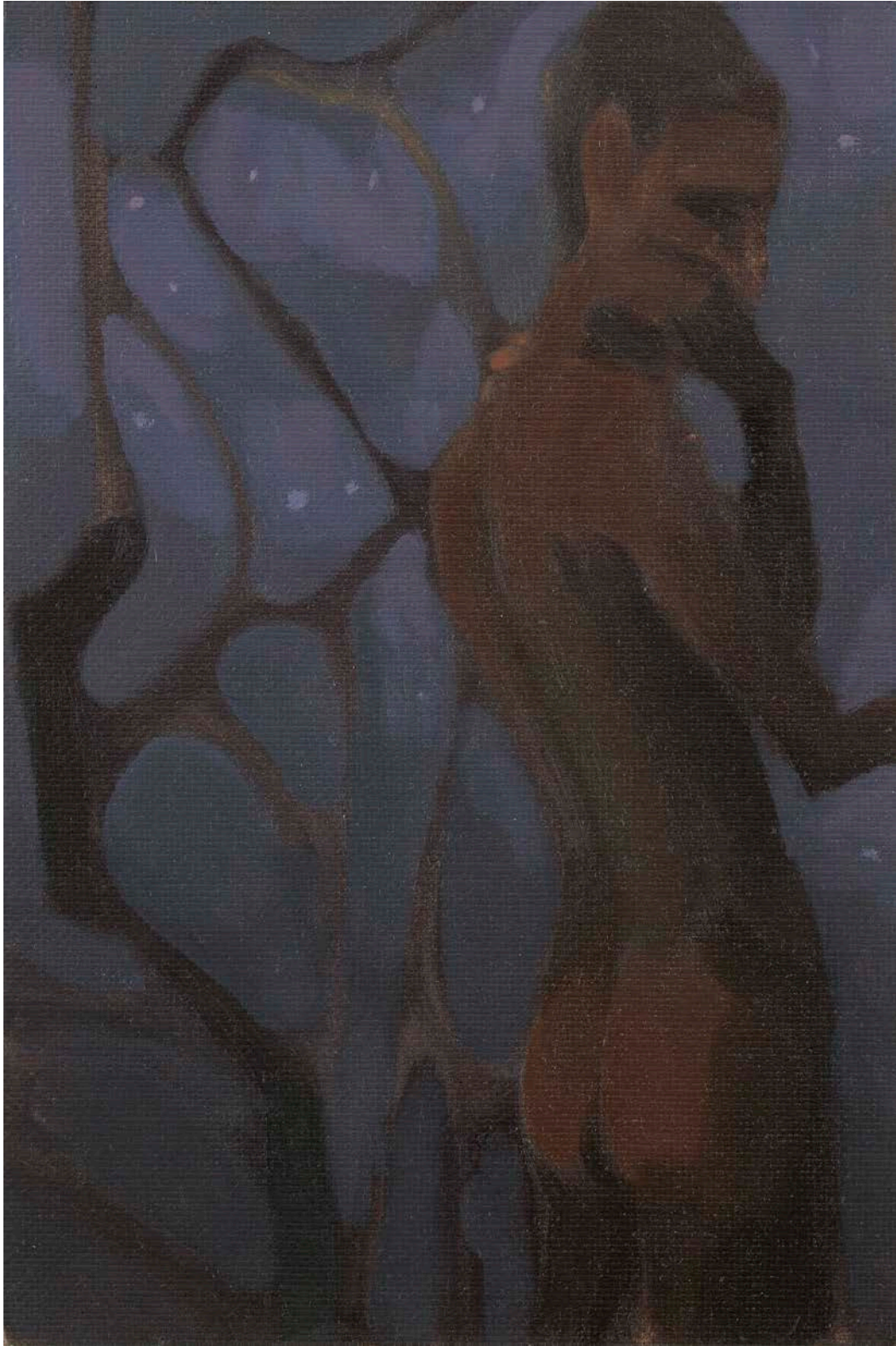
JAKE  
GREWAL



*Honesty*, 2020  
Oil on linen board  
18 x 14 cm  
7 x 5.5 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*A Faint Mist To Fly By*, 2020  
Oil on linen board  
30 x 20 cm  
11.8 x 7.8 in



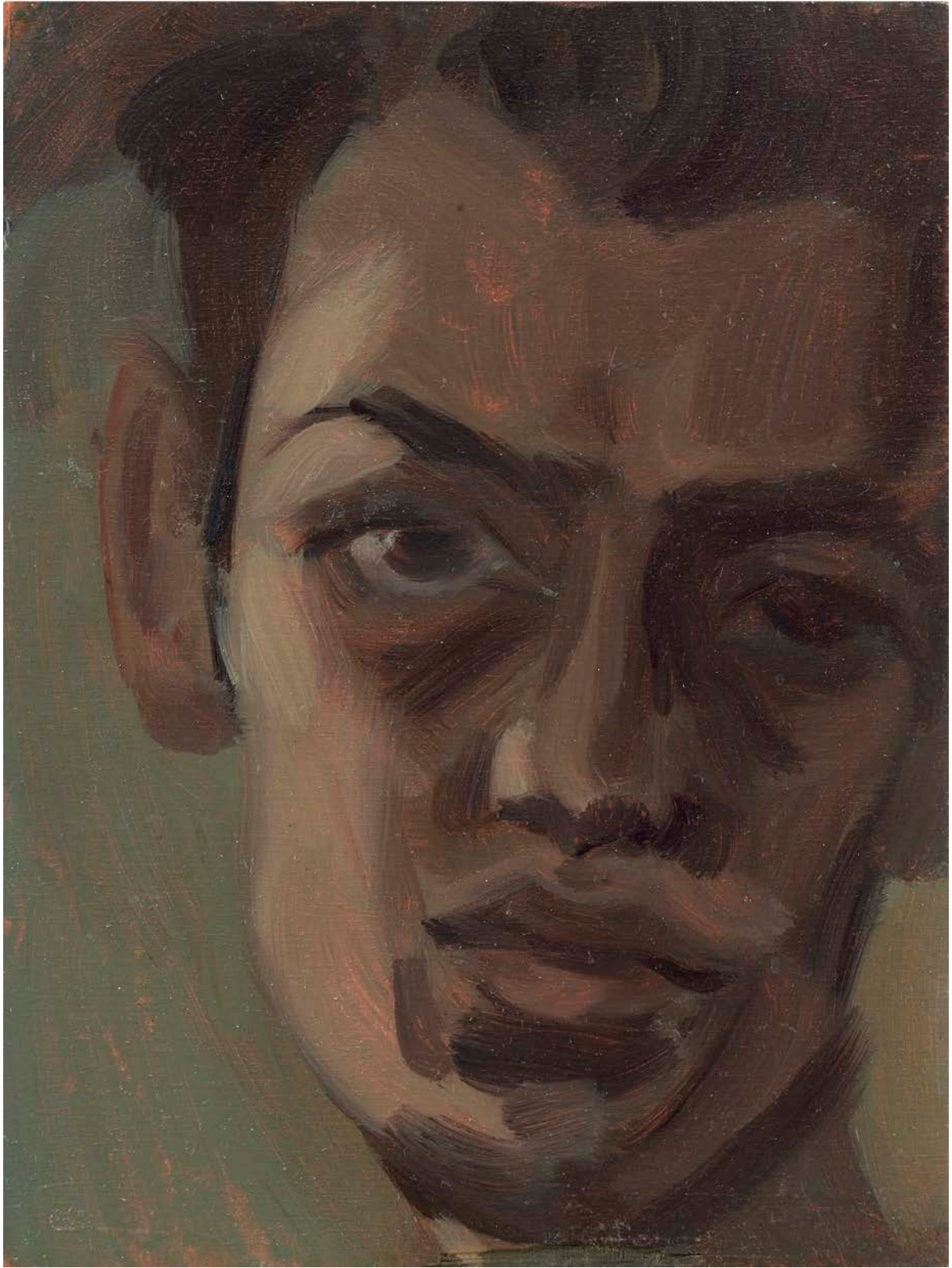
JAKE  
GREWAL



*Wings*, 2021  
Oil on linen board  
18 x 14 cm  
7 x 5.5 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Portrait In Earth Tones*, 2020  
Oil on linen board  
18 x 14 cm  
7 x 5.5 in



JAKE  
GREWAL



*Walking To Avoid Bear Traps*, 2020  
Oil on linen board  
24 x 18 cm  
9.4 x 7 in



## JAKE GREWAL BIO

Jake Grewal (b.1994, London. Lives and works in London) makes works in a constant dialogue between people and nature, portrait and landscape. His figures appear in uncanny scenes set in natural settings and are ambiguous within their environment. Grewal shows the male nude and the natural world through a queer gaze. There is fluidity in how he looks at the nature and the figure, both are of equal importance and are evocative of one another. His works can be read as allegories of his, as he calls it, inner landscape. They thus become an attempt to uncover something true from the inside and try to make it visible on the outside. Although Jake Grewal's works bear autobiographical traits that can be found fragmentarily within the paintings, they address essentially universal themes, which provide the viewer with intimate and emotional access to his painting.

Grewal received his postgraduate from the Royal Drawing School, London, in 2019, and his BA from The University of Brighton in 2016.

Selected group exhibitions include, most recently: *Bloomberg New Contemporaries* 2020, South London Gallery, London, (2021); *Deity*, Arusha Gallery, Edinburgh (2020); *Everyday is Sunday*, UTA Artists Space, USA (2020); *No Time Like The Present*, Public Gallery, London (2020); *The Drawing Year*, Open Studios 2019, London (2019); *The Drawing Year End of Year Exhibition* 2019, 19-22 Charlotte Rd (2019); *Best of The Drawing Year 18-19*, Christie's, London, (2019); *Full English*, Platform Southwark, London, (2019); *Looking for Validation*, The Nayland Rock Hotel, Margate (2019); *The Greek Street Art Show*, Gallery Maison Bertaux, London, (2019); *The Earth Issue X*, The House of St Barnabas, London (2018); *The Space Within*, Neo:Gallery 22, Bolton,(2017).

Grewal has completed residencies at The Drawing Marathon, Rhode Island School of Design, USA, (2020); Borgo Pignano, Pignano, Italy (2019).

Awards include NOA Prize Winner: Cass Art Award (2016); Woon Foundation Prize Judge's Discretionary Award (2016).



*Hers*, 2013  
Puffer jackets, glass, chrome, steel  
120 x 90 x 5 cm  
47.2 x 35.4 x 1.9 in



PREM  
SAHIB



*Middleton Green 10:02, 2021*  
Digital print on ceramic tile, steel, paint  
26.5 x 21.5 cm  
10.4 x 8.4 in

PREM  
SAHIB





PREM  
SAHIB



*Middleton Green 18:22, 2021*  
Digital print on ceramic tile, steel, paint  
26.5 x 21.5 cm  
10.4 x 8.4 in

PREM  
SAHIB





PREM  
SAHIB



*Middleton Green 14:40, 2021*  
Digital print on ceramic tile, steel, paint  
26.5 x 21.5 cm  
10.4 x 8.4 in



PREM  
SAHIB



PREM  
SAHIB



*Obsidian Mirror IVI*, 2021  
Obsidian, steel  
26.5 x 21.5 cm  
10.4 x 8.4 in



PREM  
SAHIB



PREM  
SAHIB



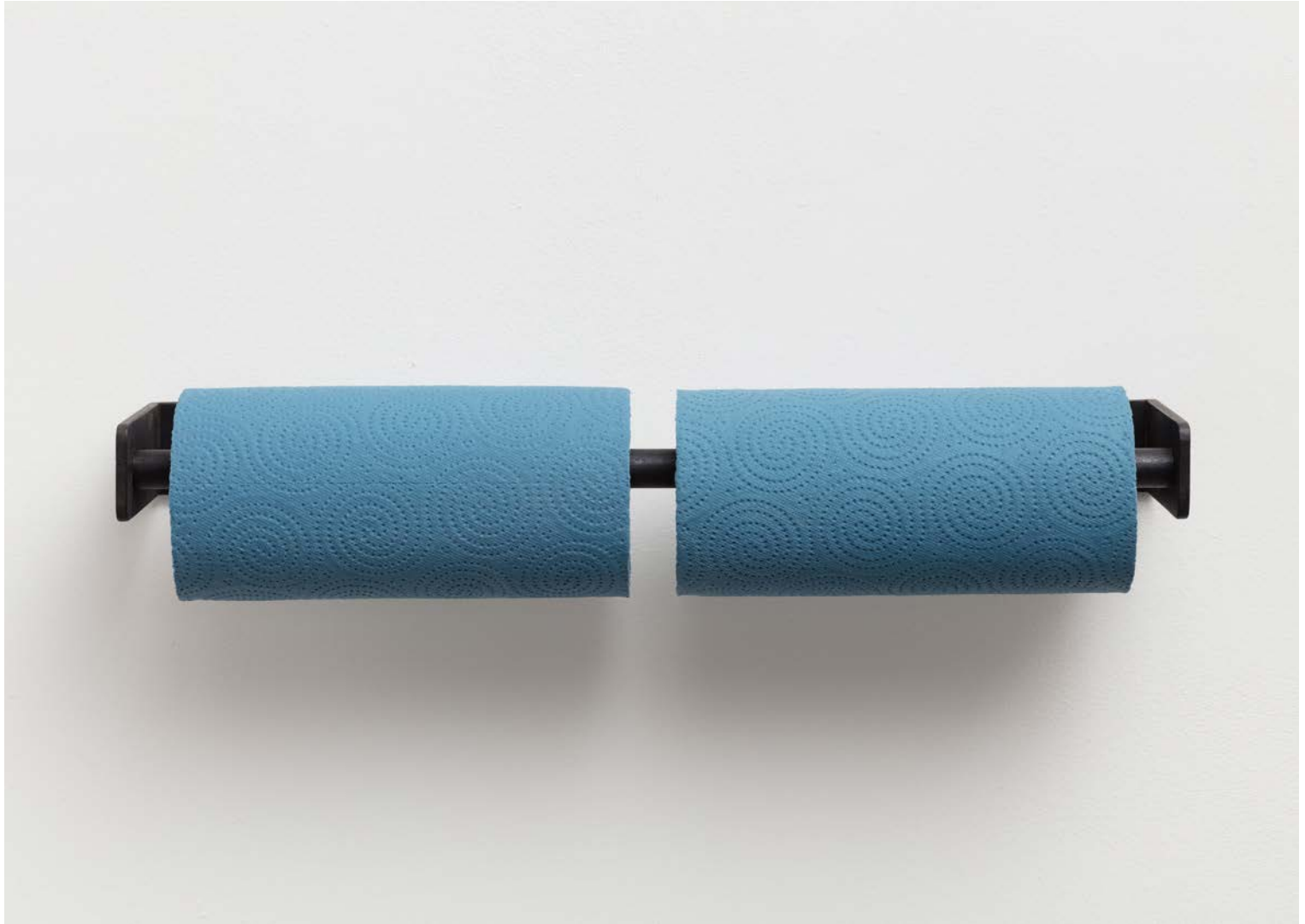
*Your Disco Needs You XXXXI*, 2017  
Digital print on ceramic tile  
17 x 20 cm  
6.7 x 7.8 in



PREM  
SAHIB



PREM  
SAHIB



*Horizons XI*, 2017  
Silicone rubber, steel  
54 x 13.5 x 10.5 cm  
21.2 x 5.3 x 4.1 in



PREM  
SAHIB



## PREM SAHIB BIO

Prem Sahib (b. 1982, London, UK. Lives and works in London) has a refined and discreet aesthetic combining formalism with autobiographical themes. His practice spans monolithic sculptures, paintings, films, and performances unified by their precise, minimal appearance and imbued with personal encounters related to intimacy and sexuality. Often re-presenting physical spaces such as nightclubs and public toilets, Sahib probes architectural values as well as the social lives and desires in these spaces, both prescribed and denied by them. His works evoke the body and human touch and casts a light on the exclusionary politics of contemporary culture.

Prem Sahib received his BA in Fine Art from the Slade School of Art, London, in 2006 and a Post Graduate Diploma in Fine Art from the Royal Academy, London, in 2013.

His work has been shown in solo and group shows internationally, including, most recently: Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2019); Ca'Pesaro Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna, Venice, Italy (2019); La Becque, La Tour-de-Peilz, Switzerland (2019); Fiorucci Art Trust, Stomboli, Italy (2019); Des Moines Art Center, Iowa (2019); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2019); Migros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland (2019); Hayward Gallery, London, UK (2018); Mendes Wood DM, Brussels, Belgium (2017); Kunstverein, Hamburg, Germany (2017); Grand Union, Birmingham (2016); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2016).

Sahib's work is part of a number of public collections including Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo; Government Art Collection, UK; Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania; and Tate, London.



SUNIL  
GUPTA



*Towards an Indian Gay Image, Humayun's Tomb, 1982*  
Archival inkjet print  
Edition of 5 + 2AP  
71.1 x 106.7 cm  
28 x 42 in

SUNIL  
GUPTA



*Towards an Indian Gay Image, Qutb Minar, 1983*  
Archival inkjet print  
Edition of 5 + 2AP  
71.1 x 106.7 cm  
28 x 42 in

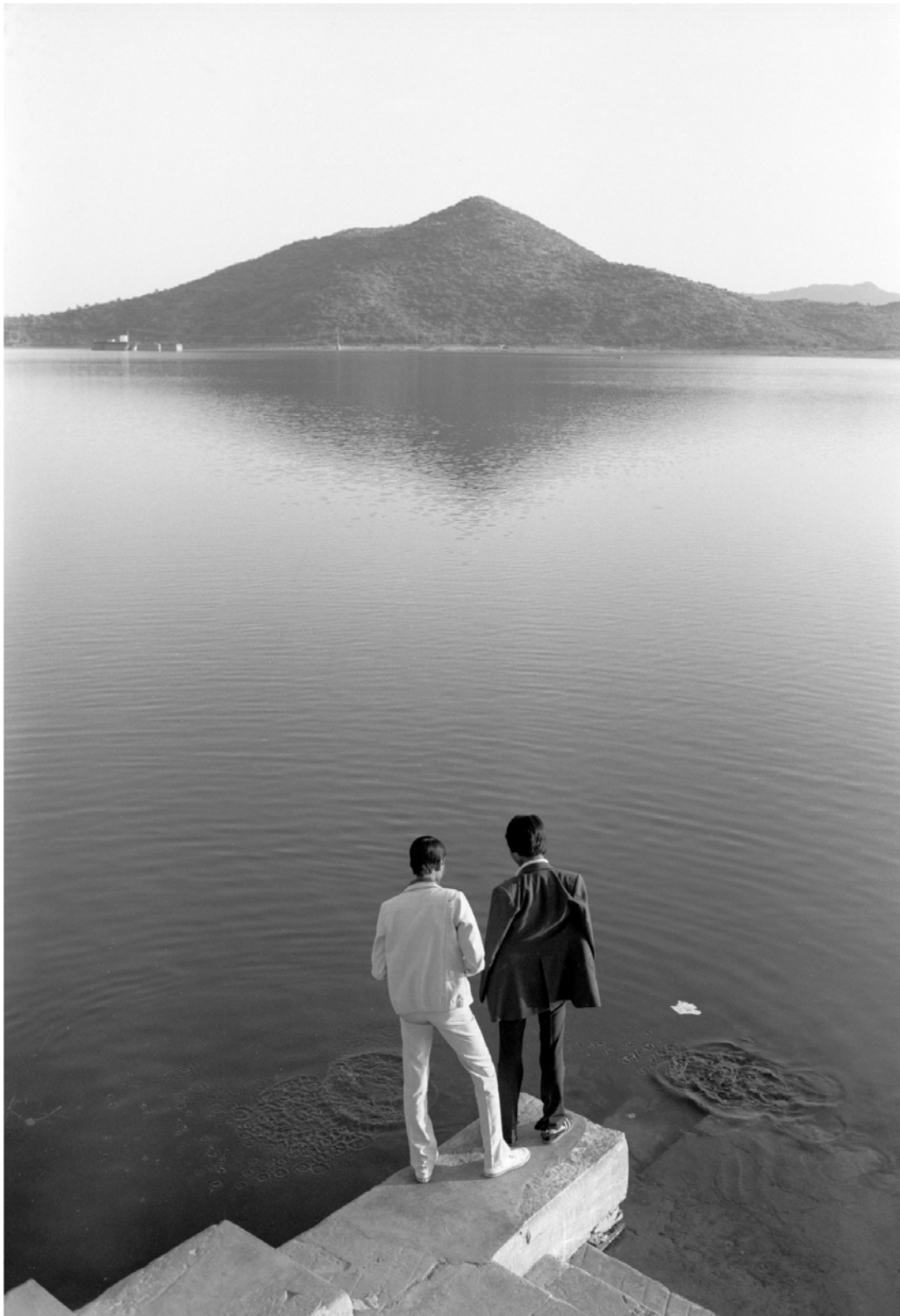


SUNIL  
GUPTA



*Towards an Indian Gay Image, Saleem Kidwai and  
Me, Qutb Minar, 1982*  
Archival inkjet print  
Edition of 5 + 2AP  
71.1 x 106.7 cm  
28 x 42 in

SUNIL  
GUPTA



*Towards an Indian Gay Image, Lake Pichola, Udaipur, 1983*  
Archival inkjet print  
Edition of 5 + 2AP  
106.7 x 71.1 cm  
42 x 28 in



SUNIL  
GUPTA



*Towards an Indian Gay Image, Oberoi Hotel, 1983*  
Archival inkjet print  
Edition of 5 + 2AP  
106.7 x 71.1 cm  
42 x 28 in

## SUNIL GUPTA BIO

Sunil Gupta (b. New Delhi, 1953. Lives and works in London) has been involved with independent photography as a critical practice over four decades, focusing on race, migration, and queer issues.

Gupta's early documentary series, *Christopher Street*, was shot in the mid-1970s as Gupta studied under Lisette Model at the New School for Social Research and became interested in the idea of gay public space. In the 1980s, Gupta constructed documentary images of gay men in architectural spaces in Delhi, his *Exiles* series. The images and texts describe the conditions for gay men in India at the time. Gupta's recent series *Mr. Malhotra's Party* updates this theme during a time in which queer identities are more open and also reside in virtual space on the internet and in private parties.

Sunil Gupta moved to Canada as a teenager in the late 1960s, studying a Bachelor of Commerce at Concordia University, Montreal, before moving to New York and enrolling in a photography course at the New School, NY, USA (1976). He went on to receive: a Diploma from West Surrey College of Art & Design, Farnham, Surrey, UK (1981); an MA from Royal College of Art, London, UK (1983); and a PhD from the University of Westminster, London, UK (2019) with a thesis titled *Queer Migrations*.

Gupta's published work includes the monographs: *Queer: Sunil Gupta* (Prestel/Vadehra Art Gallery, 2011), *Wish You Were Here: Memories of a Gay Life* (Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2008), and *Pictures From Here* (Chris Boot Ltd., New York, 2003).

He has exhibited widely, with solo exhibitions that include Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto (2021, *forthcoming*); Photographers' Gallery, London (2020); Brixton Tate Library, London (2020, 2019); Hales Gallery, New York (2019); Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto (2018); the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2018); Pelz Gallery, University of London (2017); Cardiff Photo Festival (2017); SepiaEYE, New York (2017, 2014); Whitney Humanities Centre, Yale University (2015); Grosvenor Vadehra, London (2010); and Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi (2009). Group participations include Barbican Art Gallery, London (2020); Vancouver Art Gallery (2019); Soho Art Gallery, New York (2019); Leslie Lohman Museum, New York (2019); the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2018); the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2015).

His work is included in many private and public collections, including George Eastman House, Rochester, USA; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Royal Ontario Museum; Tate, London; Harvard University, Massachusetts; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



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