



Tyeb Mehta

Bearing weights
(with the lightness of being)





TYEB MEHTA BEARING WEIGHT (WITH THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING)

The making of this exhibition has been a quiet introspection into the breadth and nuanced depths of Tyeb Mehta's artistic legacy, situating his practice in a time of global unrest. How can Tyeb Mehta help us speak to what is happening in the world today? What new pathways open from his artistic enquiries into humanity?

Foregrounding humanist concerns in a modernist vein, Tyeb Mehta embodied a distilled approach towards the painted image and the world around him. He was exposed to cinema and image-making early on with his family's involvement in the film business. His keen interest in art direction in the formative years made him enrol at the Sir J J School of Art, Mumbai. In 1947, his artistic trajectory took an unexpected turn when Mehta discovered the creative potential of painting as an expressive medium. A revelation that continued to inspire him throughout his life. Belonging to the first post-colonial generation of artists in India, his camaraderie with M F Husain, S H Raza, Krishen Khanna, and the rest of the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay led to a search for a foundational language that would reflect on art and its possibilities in a newly independent India.

Having witnessed and been impacted by several conflicts across the country, such as forced migrations and the Partition of India, as well as the asymmetries and onslaught of daily life, Mehta's painted imagery processed the bearing of such weight with a lightness of being and an inward-looking presence. His pictorial aesthetic transitioned from a visibly frenzied brushwork in thick impasto to a flat, restrained use of color and form. The peculiar configuration of his pictorial space placed figures on a fractured, destabilized ground, alluding to a partitioned land. His protagonists, never securely rooted, are precariously balanced over the edge. The textured surface, encrusted with messy, fleshy paint, gradually receded into a flat expanse of pristine colour and precise form, creating sharp, angular planes of a disorienting geometry. This later led to the diagonal, a visual device that Mehta used to divide and conjoin

symbolic fragments within a compositional field.

Mehta's visual vocabulary embraced duality and ruminated upon the paradoxical nature of reality. His sinuous lines became more measured with his growing emphasis on a condensed composite image. Exuding existential anxiety and bodily vulnerability, his quintessential figures remain entrapped between mass and lines, action and inaction, conjunction and disjuncture, hope and despair, life and death.

Curatorially, this exhibition has been a process of delving into the intricacies of Tyeb Mehta's art and life, beyond the existing narratives around his practice. As viewers, one would encounter intense portrayals of anguished faces with gaping mouths, a tense play of hand gestures (mudras), and often mutilated body parts suggestive of anguish, violence, pain, and endurance, but also a desired resilience. His recurrent protagonists - bulls, rickshaw pullers, birds, and drummers are compelling in their affective charge, as are his mythical and literary figures, such as Mahishasura, Kali, and the Trojan Women. The exhibition also brings together the artist's critically acclaimed film *Koodal* (1970), alongside his rarely shown drawings, photographs, letters, and other archival material.

In his centennial year, this exhibition is a humble tribute to the artist and his practice of five decades that continues to be profoundly relevant to the unsettling realities of our time.

Roobina Karode

Artistic Director and Chief Curator,

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

MEHTA'S PAINTERLY FORM AND ITS MULTIPLE MANIFESTATIONS

Tyeb Mehta's paintings are acts of distillation. Over five decades, he pared his visual language to form, colour, and gesture, refusing ornamentation in favour of figures and motifs that stayed with him. What emerges is a practice that uses the body, whether human or animal, divine or mundane, as the primary vessel through which the artist simultaneously explores containment and freedom.

In 1956, Tyeb Mehta painted his first *Trussed Bull*. In 2007, shortly before his death, he returned to the same subject, the very embodiment of a 'compulsive image'. Fascinated by the bull's plasticity and power, he sketched it repeatedly at the Bandra abattoir. The body became a primary site where personal memory and collective trauma converge, where the seen and the unseen co-exist with fields of lightness and gravity.

The diagonal emerged in the late 1960s as a formal device capable of fragmenting the perceived unity of the canvas, of splitting open reality to access its bare truths. Influenced by Barnett Newman's 'zip' series during his travels to the United States, Mehta transformed the diagonal into a spatial exploration of asymmetries and imbalances observed in the world around him.

Violence, whether mythic or historical, carries palpable weight in Mehta's imagination. The *Falling Figure* series captures bodies suspended mid-air, bearing weight in their weightlessness. These figures evoke a collapse of order while resisting finality. Their descent, held in rictus and charged with tension, remains perpetually unresolved. Similarly, the *Falling Bird* series confronts a contradiction—as Mehta himself observed, “birds don't fall, they fly”—transforming natural impossibility into a meditation on precarity and death.



Diagonal | 1973 | Oil on canvas
| Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art
| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation

Mehta's turn toward mythology in the 1980s and 1990s brought forth Kali and Mahishasura, following his sojourn at Santiniketan. These figures, drawn from folklore and mythology, are reimagined through his visceral, intuitive formal vocabulary. Having lived with the primal image of the goddess Kali for more than three years, he accentuates the essentials: blue body, flowing hair, red devouring mouth. Raw power confronts the viewer, demanding acknowledgment rather than reverence. Mahishasura, the shapeshifting demon-king, appears as a body afflicted, his contorted flesh recalling Francis Bacon's treatment of form under duress.

Whether depicting the anonymous rickshaw puller or the drummer grounded in Indian tradition, Mehta's work invites us into relationships with figures that embody the primordial rhythms of existence. His lines remain measured yet urgent, opening spaces for different kinds of encounters. The return of the bull in his final work, closes a circle that began half a century earlier. Through these lifelong preoccupations, Mehta demonstrated that certain images persist, facilitating time-travel across history, and inexorably bearing witness.



Mahishasura | 1997 | Acrylic on canvas
| Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art
| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation



Mahishasura | 2001 | Acrylic on canvas

| Collection: Family of the artist

| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation



Falling Figure with Bird | 2004 | Acrylic on canvas
| Collection: Family of the artist
| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation

DRAWING AS A PROCESS OF THINKING AND RECORDING

Tyeb Mehta's drawings offer a deep and direct entry into his world. Through them, we can parse the conflicts, negotiations, and questions he grappled with as an artist. His lines are measured, evoking depth and volume with precise tonalities.

Despite Mehta's primary interest in cinema, he demonstrated a strong aptitude for drawing from his school days, where he made copies of images from commercial advertisements and popular magazines such as *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. His admission to the JJ School of Art introduced him to rigorous academic discipline sustained by sketching and studies, laying the foundation for the draughtsman he would become. Throughout his practice, Mehta retained this rigour that can be traced in the blueprints and studies of all his recurrent themes.

A keen observer, Mehta walked the city and sketched in public spaces — railway stations, bus stands, and crowded neighbourhoods in Delhi and Mumbai—capturing fleeting gestures and unguarded moments with remarkable acuity. Faces of men, women, and beasts populated his drawings—many of whom he encountered while sketching his immediate surroundings.

We see a shift in his engagement with drawings over the decades. In the 1950s, they were marked by firm, bold, and defining lines. The figures appeared contorted and engorged, reflecting his early engagement with the language of International Modernism. From this period comes the lithograph *Kultura* (1957–58), coinciding with his iconic rendition of the trussed bull.

Mehta's move to London in the 1960s, followed by his Rockefeller

Falling Head | 1993 | Crayon on Paper

| Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation

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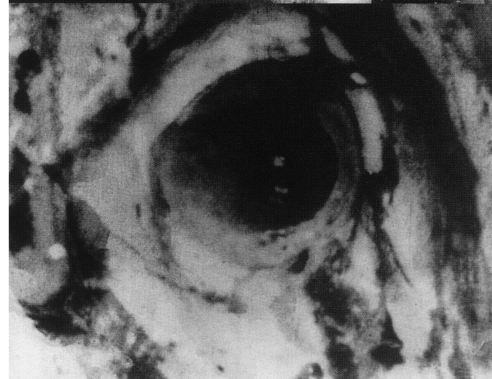
Fellowship in the United States, brought him in contact with works by European and American modernists such as Francis Bacon and Barnett Newman. These encounters had a lasting impact on his practice as his drawings from this period became more introspective. Rigid contours softened and broke into suggestive lines, his figures began to breathe within the compositional space, each line charged with meaning, and his drawings acquired a sparse precision that would become his signature.



Falling Figure | 1992 | Crayon on Paper
| Collection: Family of the artist
| Image copyright of Tyeb Mehta Foundation

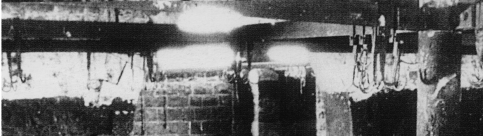
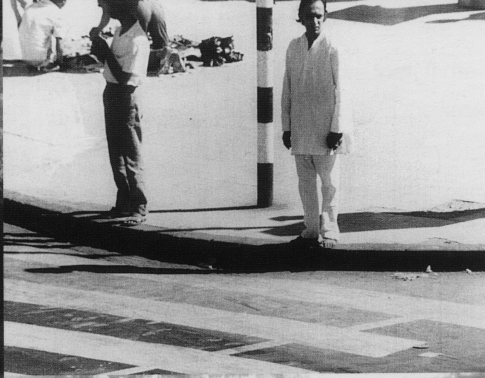
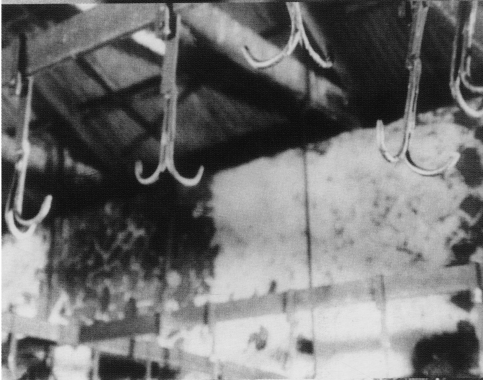
PRESENCE OF CINEMATIC FORM

Koodal in Tamil means a meeting point, the union, as an assembly of images. This 1970 film by Tyeb Mehta is a culmination of the artist's early interest in the cinematic form and its narrative potential. The film explores the moments of everyday life, death, and its various intersections and encounters. It presents a non-linear texture of the artists' observation of public life in its complexities and contradictions. Accompanied by a soundtrack of traditional Carnatic music, the film navigates spaces of temples, rituals, roads, restaurants, and abattoirs. The bull becomes a central motif, both in its everyday presence and in the divine form of Nandi. Alongside is archival footage of M K Gandhi's funeral procession from 1948. The script of the film is an image in itself, for its precision in encapsulating the artist's vision, frame after frame.



Script of the film *Koodal* (1970)

grey - slight movement - a flicker -
underneath
row of human bodies, pressed one against
another - lie asleep.
heads piled vertically - smoke
from the dustbin -
the animated eye -
environment -
plate of rice -
people move in closed street -
the circular movement -
loss of identity -
caught in inactive situation -
helpless-unaware - group of people,
mostly children and elders watch
the mating of bull and cow.
flight of birds -
bull - relax - ruminating - suddenly
the resistance - as if someone has tied its legs -
metamorphosis of fear -
the pull - the friction -
struggle to make loose -
the thud - then bleeding - agony -
silence - the carcass -
meat in the shop -
the flagellation -the dance -
women in windows -
eunuch - the gesture of vulgarity,
the gesture without meaning.
disorderly crowd - march -
the funeral procession of Mahatma -
black-
inside temple -
idols - palanquin -
the procession -
the ritual -
marriage of Shiva - Parvati
late night - burning oil -
the home of Gods -
guarded by Nandi.



ARCHIVE AS A KEEPER OF TIME

The archives from the Tyeb Mehta Foundation reveal the artist as a chronicler of visual thinking. Through letters, diaries, sketches, and annotated books, it charts his sustained effort to build a language that captured the core of his subjects. As Mehta wrote, “A work of art is the measure of space. It is form, and as form it must first make itself known to us.”

The archive also testifies to the ecosystem that supported his generation of artists and critics. Correspondences with art critics Geeta Kapur and George Butcher, theatre director-pedagogue Ebrahim Alkazi, collectors Chester and Davida Herwitz, and artist friends SH Raza, Krishen Khanna, and Paritosh Sen reveal a community bounded by shared inquiry. These exchanges—spanning critical dialogue, financial concerns, domestic life, and health—allowed for a modern vocabulary to emerge organically in India, grounded in mutual support and persistent questioning, which was a salient feature of modernism.

Beyond established historical narratives, the archive opens space for subtleties often overlooked in the larger discourse. The presentation of the Tyeb Mehta Archive at this centennial retrospective invites viewers to gather insights through these vignettes of text, image, and notes. This archive and the library present a repository where meaning is a state of play.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Tyeb Mehta was born in 1925 in Kapadvanj, Gujarat. He spent his formative years in the Crawford Market neighbourhood of Bombay. In 1944 he joined the Fazalbhoj Institute at St. Xavier's College to study cinematography, later joining the Famous Cine Laboratory at Tardeo, Mumbai as Assistant Film Editor. He graduated in Fine Arts from Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai in 1952. During the same time, Mehta became associated with the Progressive Artists' Group. He held his first solo exhibition in 1959 at Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay after which he left for London, where he worked and lived till 1964. Thereafter, he visited New York on a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1968; the same year, he won a Gold Medal in painting at the first Triennial held in New Delhi. It was during this period that the diagonal emerged as a key pictorial element in his work and he started using large areas of colours to represent images. In 1970, he wrote and directed *Koodal* for the Films Division, which won him the Filmfare Critics' Award in 1970.

The Vishwa Bharati University, Santiniketan, invited Tyeb Mehta for a two-year Artist-in-Residence programme (1984 - 86). In 1985, while at Santiniketan he painted the iconic Santiniketan Triptych, which is a response to the Santhal Charak festival. In 1988, Tyeb received the Kalidas Samman award. In 2004, the Government of Maharashtra bestowed upon him the Manpatra award. The same year, Lalit Kala Akademi, celebrating its golden jubilee, conferred upon him the gold medal, presented by then-President APJ Abdul Kalam. In 2007, the Government of India honoured him with the Padma Bhushan. Some of his recent posthumous exhibitions are, *Time Unfolded*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), New Delhi in 2011, *Tyeb Mehta: Triumph of Vision*, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi in 2011, *Crossings: Time Unfolded, Part 2*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), New Delhi in 2012, *Modernist Art from India: Approaching Abstraction*, Rubin Museum of Art, New York in 2012, *Pioneers of Modernism*, Sovereign FZE, Dubai in 2013; *The Drawing Wall*, presented by Vadehra Art Gallery at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in 2013; and *Mnemonic: Partition-Partage*, a Curator's Special Project at Venice Architecture Biennale, Venice in 2023. His works are in major collections across the

world, including Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, India, Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, Glenbarra Art Museum, Japan, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, and Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Tyeb Mehta passed away in 2009 in Mumbai.

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Mrs. Kiran Nadar

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