INDIAN ART

THE BOMBAY BOYS

India's answer to Brit Art comes with an explosion of bold new artists riding the wave of the nation's economic boom

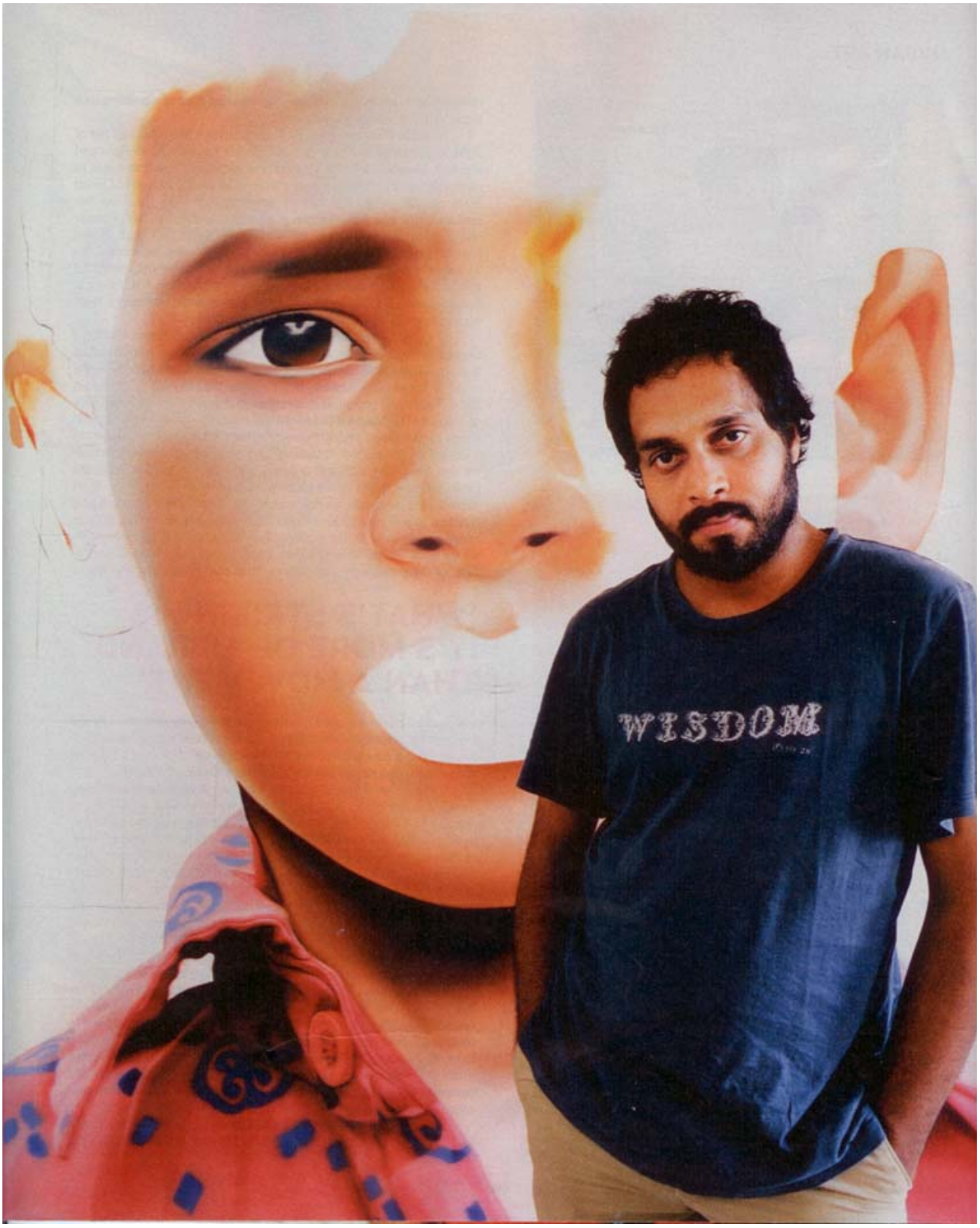
REPORT **JAMES COLLARD** PORTRAITS **GRAHAM WOOD**

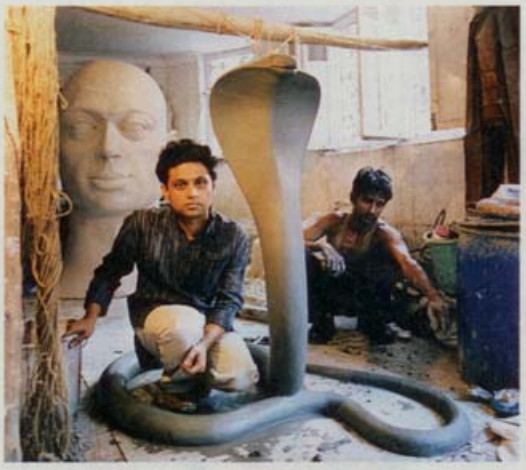
Bombay Boys outside the JJ Art School in Mumbai, where many of them studied: from left, Bose Krishnamachari, T.V. Santhosh, Riyas Komu, V.N. Jyothi Basu and Anant Joshi (above). Komu, in front of his painting *The show must go on, sir*, part of his show at the Aicon Gallery in London (right)

"At the Saatchi gallery?," we ask, incredulously. "There's a Saatchi gallery in Bombay?" We've heard, back in London, that Indian contemporary art might be *the next big thing*. That just as money and art collided in Britain in our Nineties Cool Britannia moment, so a new generation of Indian collectors are spending some of the wealth generated by India's current economic boom on the work of an equally happening new wave of Indian artists. And that savvy Korean dealers – and they're pretty sharp about these things in downtown Seoul – have decided that the *last* big thing, which was Chinese contemporary, is now overhyped and overpriced, which makes its relatively affordable Indian counterpart a promising "real-estate" investment. We've taken all of this on board in a kind of crash course in Indian contemporary art from Mumbai to Kolkata, our eyes occasionally glazing over at at the mention of another utterly unfamiliar but locally illustrious name – and then popping wide open again when we see the quality of some of the art.

Rathin Kanji? Never heard of him, until last month, but what a way with colour. And back then if you'd told me Baiju Parthan was a vegetarian dish from Tamil Nadu, I'd have believed you. Today, I'd say that this Kerala-born, Mumbai-based artist has my absolute respect. But a Saatchi gallery in India? Even given Charles Saatchi's reputation as an early adopter of up-and-coming artists, that's too far ahead of the curve, surely.

"No, the *Sakshi* Gallery," explains artist Riyas Komu, smiling broadly. Komu has shown several times in the Sakshi, one of a cluster of galleries in Mumbai's emerging "art village" in south Mumbai. Now Komu's work can be seen in London – in the first show at the Aicon Gallery, a new showcase for contemporary Indian art in the former Gagosian space on Heddon Street, which is central, prestigious and big enough to display to good effect Komu's mesmerising, large-scale paintings and his fine sculptures in wood and metal. Meanwhile back home, Mumbai's commuters drive past billboards of Komu's work, to the din of car horns: appropriately enough, as these are portraits of the mechanics from the car-repair shop where Komu also has his metal-work studio, currently displayed on the roadside as part of the city's "Mumbai Unbreakable" campaign against inter-communal hatred. But arguably the weirdest place to view Komu's work is in Kolkata, where one of his paintings hangs in a group show of Italian and Indian ››


WISDOM



Above, from top: Adip Dutta working on a sculpture for his upcoming London show, and painter Rathin Kanji, also based in Kolkata; Bombay Boys Baiju Parthan and ceramic artist

Anant Joshi, who lived in the slums when he first arrived in Mumbai. Right: the prolific artist Bose Krishnamachari in his large Mumbai studio with some of his paintings in acrylic

<< contemporary art in the vast, late-Raj wedding cake of a building that is the Victoria Memorial Hall.

In India, most monuments of Empire have been shunted out of sight, forgotten or renamed, just as Calcutta has become Kolkata and Bombay, Mumbai. But "the Victoria" remains pretty much as it was, in all its dotty glory – which leaves a large white marble statue of Queen Mary standing right by Komu's painting, her eyes fixed on her husband, the late King-Emperor, standing across the hall, equally oblivious to this edgy new art all around them. "It's part of our history," says Rathin Kanji, the Kolkata artist showing me around, "so it's important to preserve it." Which is true. Yet somehow leaving all this Imperial kitsch stranded here, utterly irrelevant to what India has become, seems a far more powerful anti-colonial statement than dynamiting the whole pile would ever have been.

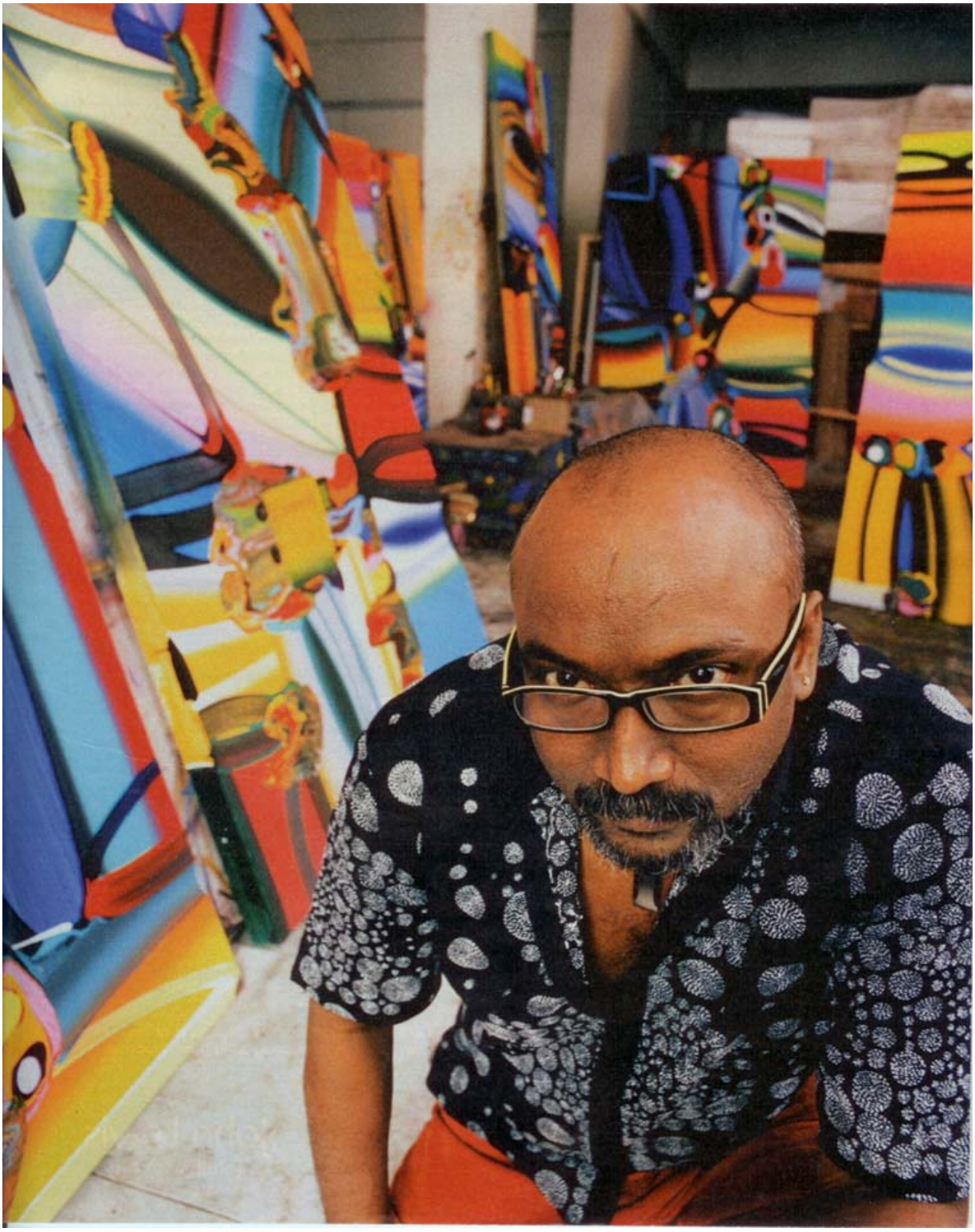
"I think it's gone beyond argument," says Riyas Komu affably, of the change from Bombay to Mumbai, though like many inhabitants of the city, he uses both names interchangeably. But Komu himself seems set to be known as a Bombay Boy for some time to come. For back in 2004, Komu's art appeared in an influential group show in New Delhi of work by 12 Mumbai-based artists entitled *The Bombay Boys*. It seems to have been a fairly throwaway handle for the show. There are successful female artists in the city; there just weren't any in this line-up. But it's a sexy title and it stuck, and while in the long-run, the group identity might prove irksome, just as it can for even the most successful of boybands, for the moment the artists find it amusing, and it seems to work for them – collectively raising their profile, both in India and beyond in the wealthy Indian diaspora, scattered everywhere from Silicon Valley to Park Lane. For as well as the flash new rich of Mumbai and Bangalore's Brahmin geeks, striving for a

'WHAT'S STRIKING IS IT'S MORE OF A BRAND THAN A MOVEMENT'

well-earned rise and a good marriage, the prosperity generated by the free-market reforms of the Nineties has produced a new Indian art-buyer – and a new breed of gallerist keen to sell them not a Hirst or Barney, but something closer to home by a Komu or a Kanji.

"What's striking about the Bombay Boys," declares Abhay Sardesai, editor of *Art India* magazine, as we sip wine at an opening at the Sakshi Gallery, "and so appropriate for this moment in India's history, is that it's more of a brand than an artistic movement." True, at the core of the Boys is a group of friends who support each other and party together in Mumbai's lively social scene. But their characters and art are very different – and they're happy to point up the paradoxes of the "brand". As the ceramic artist Anant Joshi explains, "We're in our thirties or early forties, many of us have got married also, so it's not like we're really *boys* any more." What's more, they're not from Bombay, precisely. Joshi, for example, was born in Nagpur, in central India, while Bose Krishnamachari (generally known as Bose), T.V. Santhosh, Baiju Parthan, V.N. Jyothi Basu and Komu himself are from Kerala, the poor but beautiful, highly literate and historically communist-voting state in the south. But what these Boys all have in common is that like countless Indians, educated or illiterate, in order to make their way in life, they first made their way to this, the Maximum City, where some 14 million lives rub up against each other and compete for space, food, water and success. (That's 14 million and counting, with perhaps another 10 million in the outer suburbs.)

Bose has called Mumbai "an all-embracing space of opportunity and optimism where people come to try to realise their dreams". But >>



<< it's not always been easy for the Boys. Although he describes it today as "one of the most harmonious of cities," Komu, a gentle, lovely man, was dismayed by the bitter inter-communal violence between Hindus and Muslims of 1992-3. Similarly, Joshi's feeling for the place must have been both challenged and enriched by the experience of living for a time in a single room in Dharavi, reputedly Asia's largest slum (which must be saying something). Other Boys faced professional challenges: Parthan, working as an illustrator at *The Times of India*, initially struggled to be taken seriously as an artist. Bose achieved early success, but in 1992, just as the free-market reforms began, some of his bolder works must have seemed a step ahead of the Zeitgeist in India, as one critic recently recalled: "The triumphant trumpet blasts of the YBAs [Young British Artists] received critical endorsement and art-historical approval... By contrast, Bose's catchy ouput didn't find sympathetic, critical counterparts who would read it as reflective of a changing nation and its fast transmogrifying art world."

Today, it's a different story – just as India is a different country, with a generation of Indians for whom MTV seems more relevant than Gandhi or Nehru (whose left-wing, Fabian-influenced economic policies were arguably one of our less useful gifts to India). For many Indians this transformation feels, in a sense, like another revolution, a second independence, bringing with it the freedom to consume – and while not every dotcom start-up is going to produce an Indian Medici, enough Indians, at home and abroad, now have the money and taste to have transformed the Indian contemporary art scene.

"There's huge interest," says Zara Porter-Hill, head of the Indian and South-East Asian department at Sotheby's. "With the growing Indian economy, of course Indian collectors will want to buy art from their country, art with which they feel a particular connection..."

'THE ART SCENE IS PART OF INDIA'S NEW STATUS AS A GLOBAL PLAYER'

Serious Indian collectors are also interested in international art, Porter-Hill insists, a trend likely to continue as the work of international artists – including Mumbai-born Anish Kapoor – increasingly show in the city. But Abhay Sardesai agrees with the suggestion that for a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) living in California, a piece of Indian contemporary art on his wall might also express a pride in how well his country is doing – and a belief in how glittering its future could be – as well as his or her love of art or eye for an investment. "We can't claim modernity through this, exactly, as that can constantly be punctured by what you see in the villages or even here in Mumbai, but the art scene can be seen as part of India's new status as a global player."

Buying up-and-coming Indian art for a hundred grand or so seems a far cry from *swadeshi*, Mahatma Gandhi's policy of boycotting British-milled cotton (which made white homespun the uniform of the new Indian ruling elite for decades). But for an earlier generation of artists, many of whom (in Kerala especially) simply gave up on the idea of being a professional artist, the thought of an Indian gallery setting up shop in London's West End must feel as cheering as Mr Tata buying Corus. Gallerist Projal Dutta's story straddles the divide between the old Indian art scene, underfunded and unglitzy, and the new. In 2002 Projal and his brother, Prajit, both US-based academics, launched Arts India – itself a dotcom start-up, albeit one selling Indian art online. Next they opened a gallery space beside their Manhattan offices, followed by a larger space in the Flatiron district and another in Palo Alto, in California's Silicon Valley. And now Aicon in London: an ambitious statement of where they feel Indian art is heading, apparently justified by sales of Riyas Komu's work, which fetches from £25,000 to £75,000, "mostly to non-Indians," Projal says, "many buying Indian art for the first time". The brothers also run two private equity funds investing in Indian contemporary art. But they grew up in New Delhi, where their father, "a bureaucrat really, running the government fine arts academy, developed a love of art and artists, who were always staying with us when we were growing up. There was no money for artists back then."

"Everything has changed in the last few years," agrees Komu. Joshi says that, "before to be an artist wasn't appreciated, but the money changes things." The Bombay Boys all welcome the emergence of a Western-style art infrastructure, operated by dealers who are prepared to nurture artists for the long term and to promote their work. This enables "more risk-taking," Komu argues, while Joshi claims, "It gives me freedom to experiment, rather than worrying about will this sell or how I'm going to survive for the next two months."

Given that survival – as Joshi knows perfectly well from those months in the slums – is still a daily challenge for many Indians, outside the malls and swanky new apartments with white walls just made for a great piece of art, not everyone sees the new art scene as an unmixed blessing. Soumitra Das, who reports on art for the Kolkata *Telegraph*, asks whether this "isn't just another kind of consumerism, in which the poor get left behind?" Perhaps he has a point. India and China are often touted as the future, but seen up-close they often look spookily like our past, in which enterprise and bold technological innovation existed cheek by jowl with squalor and grinding poverty. Nehru-style socialism wasn't much cop at eradicating poverty, I point out, and Das agrees, but it's still a hard argument to counter: why buy a painting for a few grand when that money could feed a family for years or put a dozen poor children through school? Still, those kind of judgments apply to the rest of us when we buy "must-have" bags or sports cars, as much as they apply to prosperous Indians, even if the Indian kind of poverty isn't something we drive by every day in air-conditioned limos.

Yet what struck me about all of the artists I met in India was a kind of engagement – social or political – that I think would be unusual on the Western art scene today. In Kolkata, sculptor Adip Dutta's studio is open to the street, just like the nearby motor-repair shops, with passers-by staring at his works-in-progress – sculptures which sometimes boldly explore issues of gender and sexuality (and which form the second Aicon show). Santhosh's paintings are beautiful as objects, but scratch beneath the surface and he shows a passionate interest in the victims of both terrorism and the war on terror, while Kanji's paintings might contain graphics about communal violence or ecological destruction. There's engagement; there's also faith, which I don't recall being a major theme for the YBAs. Kanji shows me the Anglican cathedral in Kolkata where he worships most Sundays (with its memorials to long-dead subalterns), and Komu, whose work often features Arabic calligraphy as well as the communist iconography he grew up with, has talked about "a guiding force" that helps him. In Kolkata, artist Debanjan Ray shows me his image of a Hindu god as Superman – the kind of thing that can get you into trouble with Hindu conservatives (who can be as hardline as any mullah on such matters). But do you believe, I ask him. "Yes, of course!" And when pressed – as I'm drawn to such things and have just bought an image of Lakshmi, sitting on her lotus leaf – he patiently demonstrates to me how to pray to this, the Hindu goddess of wealth and wisdom. So perhaps even amid the pizzazz and profits of today's Indian art scene, there are moments when the Mahatma would feel completely at home. ■

Riyas Komu's Other, a joint show with Peter Blake, is at the Aicon Gallery, 8 Heddon Street, London W1, until April 20. Adip Dutta's show, Man – Nam, runs from April 27 until June 5 (www.aicongallery.com)