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AICON GALLERY NEW YORK'S NEW LOCATION
AND ITS INAUGURAL EXHIBITION

THE GHOST OF SOUZA

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

6.00 - 8.00 pm
Cocktails and Opening Reception

8:30 pm
Performance by Indian Ocean
"Indo-rock fusion with jazz-spiced rhythms
that integrates shlokas, sufism, environmentalism,
mythology and revolution"

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THE GHOST OF SOUZA

On view September 18 through October 17
Curated by Alexander Keefe

Featured works by
F N SOUZA
DEBNATH BASU
ADIP DUTTA
MAYYUR KAILASH GUPTA
NEERAJ GOSWAMI
GR IRANNA
RIYAS KOMU
BAIJU PARTHAN
JUSTIN PONMANY
ASHIM PURKAYASTHA
CHINTAN UPADHYAY
MUHAMMAD ZEESHAN

F.N. Souza, Self Portrait, 1949, Oil on plywood, 71 x 37 in.

THE GHOST OF SOUZA

"When I press a tube, I coil. Every brush stroke makes me recoil like a snake struck with a stick. I hate the smell of paint. Painting for me is not beautiful. It is as ugly as a reptile. I attack it. It coils and recoils making fascinating patterns. I am not, however, interested in patterns. Otherwise I'd spend my days watching clouds or women's fabrics. It is the serpent in the grass that is really fascinating. Glistening, jewelled, writhing in the green grass. Poisoned fangs and cold-blooded. Slimy as squeezed paint." FN Souza, Nirvana of a Maggot (1955)

There was something about the modernist discourse on the arts that produced neo-romantic heroes like FN Souza: lone figures struggling against the constraints of society, forging something radically and explicitly new with scant regard for convention and taboo, expressing something intrinsic and essential from within, in powerful, even cathartic images that were as much vehicles for the creation of self as for its expression; looking closely at these monsters of modernity, one sees the emergence of an image of the artist as a scandalous jet-age demiurge, making his own private universes manifest in paint, demanding and devising new ways of seeing along the way.

And there was something heroic about their accomplishments as well. In Souza's case he, together with a loose cohort of Bombay-based contemporaries known as the Progressive Artists Group, made an aggressive break with the misty, indigenizing pieties of the Bengal school, dispensing with its reliance on cliched neo-Orientalist imagery recycled from India's manuscript-painting traditions, and at the same time calling into question the type of cultural nationalism that the artists and theorists of the Bengal school had so ardently espoused. In the first light of post-Independence India, the dreams of a pan-Asian political resurgence that inspired an earlier generation of artists had wilted with the rise and defeat of Japanese fascism in the jungles of Burma and beyond; the mythologizing imagination of the Independence movement's avant garde icon-makers had grown stale and, following the traumatic events of India's partition, was just as likely to evoke cynicism as patriotic fervor. At the same time, the artists associated with the group were consciously and aggressively confronting the academic art institutions that they saw as colonial holdovers, as sites for the production of a colonial, rather than a cosmopolitan, modernity. Souza and his contemporaries intended to create a wholly new Indian aesthetic, at once resolutely internationalist in its influences and at the same time deeply, if problematically, engaged with South Asia's indigenous arts traditions. It was a project that required negotiating a precarious balance between the global and the local, in a new context: independent, post-colonial India. The archives they drew on were heterogeneous, impossible to nail down, and more often than not, transformed beyond simple recognition. In the process, they established a range of possibilities for artists in India the legacy of which is still being felt today.

It is a bit ironic that, at least in the eyes of of young artists on the contemporary Indian scene, a figure like Souza--who always saw himself as an outsider looking in--has come to occupy a position of monumental centrality in the story told about modern Indian art. But there is more to it than irony: the new generation of visual artists in India has just as complex, and sometimes just as confrontational or even dismissive a relationship with the "modern masters" as those same artists once had with their own predecessors. The importance of this developing relationship for an understanding of the specificity, and the specific charms, of contemporary Indian art can hardly be overstated. And this is what makes a show that pushes this relationship to the forefront compelling; Souza's work, so varied in its effects, so powerful and dark and at times grotesque, throws a challenge out to the brash Indian millenials that can hardly help but evoke a mixed, and very revealing, response. There are inevitably continuities-- Souza's internationalism, his refusal to shy away from the grotesque--but just as inevitably there are discontinuities, disagreements, breakdowns in communication. This show creates a map of the relationship, drawing on a wide range of artists and artistic practices from contemporary India, bringing them into conversation with a selection of some of Souza's most powerful canvases. Homages are for dead politicians, delivered by anxious, ambitious upstarts eager to have homages of their own someday; Souza and the participants in this show deserve something far more interesting.

The Progressive Artists group stormed onto the Indian art scene in 1947 with a provocative challenge: "Today we paint with absolute freedom for content and technique, almost anarchic, save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental and eternal laws, of aesthetic order, plastic co-ordination and colour composition." That message was drafted by a twenty-four year old artist named Francis Newton Souza. A brief look at his education is instructive: he was expelled from nearly every school he ever attended, first in 1937, then in 1939 and finally from the prestigious Sir J.J. School of Art in 1945. The young man who wrote the manifesto of 1948 was not given to obedience or compromise. By the end of 1949 he had left India for London, beginning a life of self-imposed exile that would eventually bring him to New York, an itinerary that brought him into contact with the swift, turbulent currents of modernism's many languages on both sides of the Atlantic. Souza's art and biography came to signal something profoundly new in the Indian scene, by leaving India and pursuing his idiosyncratic, Picasso-influenced style of painting and drawing in New York and London, Souza became one of the first Indian modern artists to engage with the international scene, providing a fascinating new chapter in the long, tangled history of South Asian engagement with European and American modernity. At the same time, his visual language fed back into an evolving modern idiom in Indian painting back home, providing a radical retake on the assertions of an earlier generation of artists, whether those steeped in the neo-romantic mythologizing of the Bengal School or the stiff academic oil painters that came out of the colonial arts institutions. Souza was a quintessential outsider, in full romantic dissolution, recasting himself and the possibilities of Indian painting in a furious pas de deux.

- Alexander Keefe












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Located at 33-35 Great Jones Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, the new site consists of approximately 8,500 square feet of space divided into a main gallery that will feature group and solo exhibitions with established Asian artists, and a permanent collection space, featuring modern masters from India. Designed by architect Nobu Arai, the space will be flooded with natural light and have a minimalist design.

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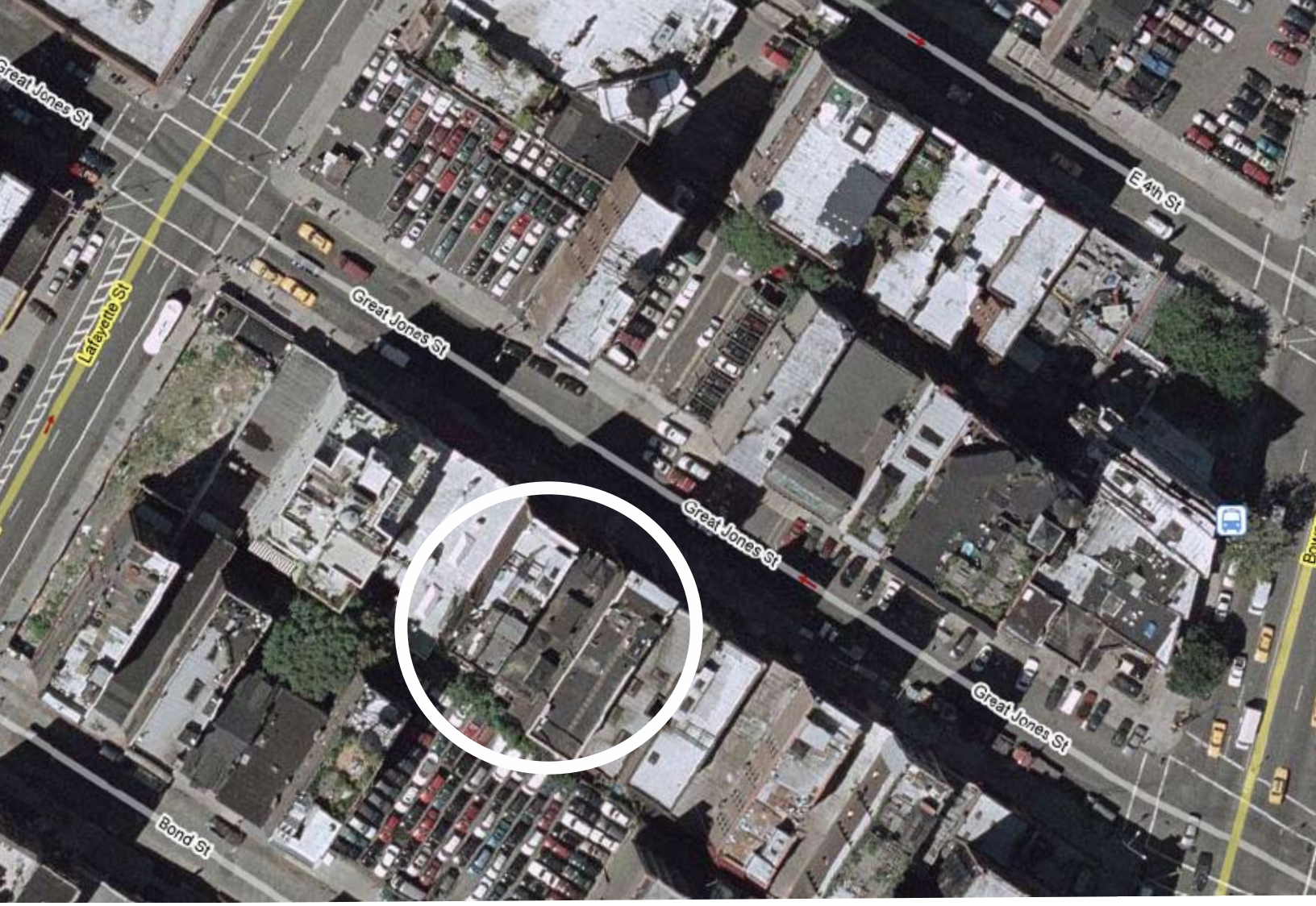

Aicon Gallery has moved to 35 Great Jones Street

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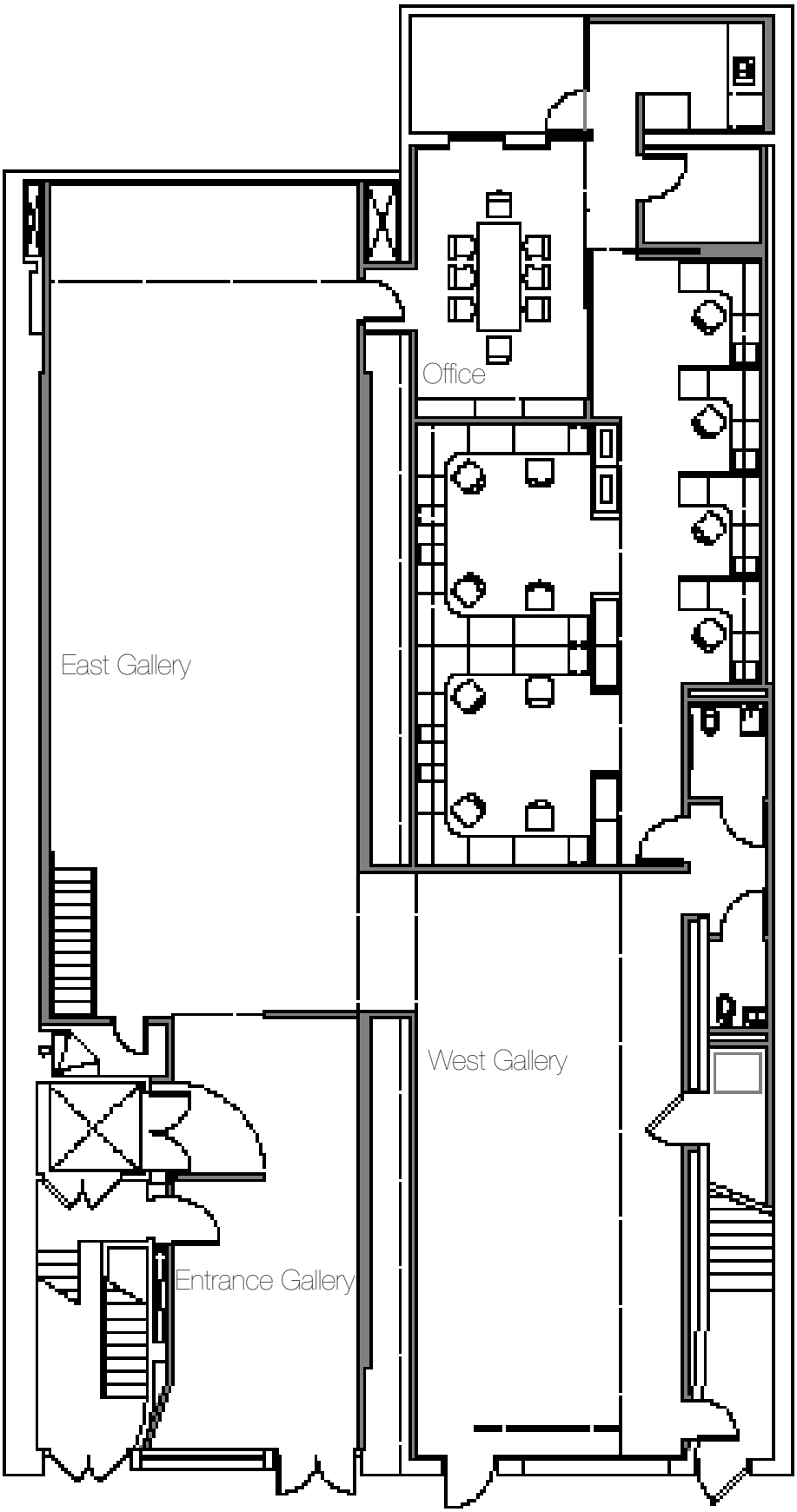

Floor plan

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East Gallery

35 Great Jones Street, 1920


35 Great Jones Street, 2008

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West Gallery looking from the street.

Entrance Gallery looking in toward East Gallery.

September 18th, 2008, Aicon proudly opened its doors to the public for the first time in our new space at 35 Great Jones Street.
Approximately 1000 people visited the gallery over the course of the preview evening and general opening. Curators and press joined us to celebrate the launch, including staff from the Guggenheim Museum, New York Times and Art + Auction magazine.

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The evening concluded with a performance by the band Indian Ocean.
They also performed at the Aicon London opening in March 2007.