

ART

dali's india

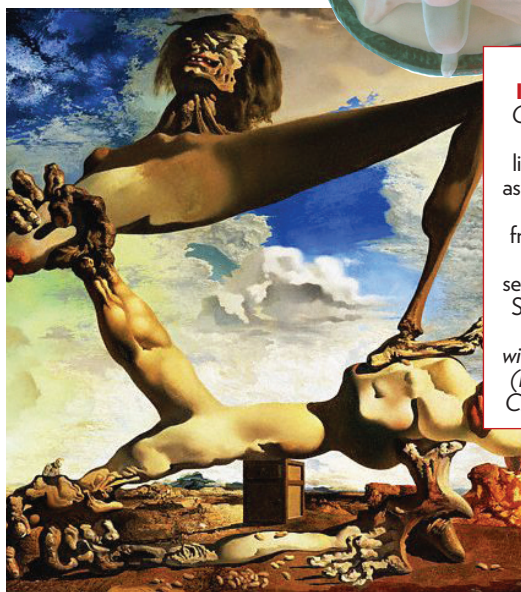
A new exhibition explores Surrealism in an Indian context. ALLIE BISWAS learns more

The artist Salvador Dali, renowned for his *Melting Clocks* and creating paintings, sculptures and films which often depicted the bizarre, is making headlines more than 20 years after his death.

Dali first gained prominence as an artist in the 1920s and '30s through his involvement with the Surrealists, a group of artists, writers and philosophers from Paris who questioned ideas of rational thought and explored juxtapositions and elements of surprise through their work. Few know of Dali's connection to India: in 1967, he was commissioned by Air India to design a limited-edition ashtray (only 275 were made) to be given to a select group of their passengers—celebrities attending the release of Disney's *The Jungle Book* in Madrid. Always one for extreme gestures, Dali is said to have requested a baby elephant as payment for his work. There must be some truth to this story, since Air India did present him with a real elephant, which lived with the artist at his home in Port Ligat, Spain, before being donated to the local zoo.

It is this story that inspired a new exhibition, 'Dali's Elephant', at the Aicon Gallery, London, which features work by a group of Indian artists including Avishek Sen, Sakti Burman, Anjolie Ela Menon and K Laxma Goud. "Elements of Surrealism adapted to Indian vernacular art forms create something totally new," says Niru Ratnam, the gallery's director. "There isn't an equivalent of the Surrealist Movement in Indian art history, but it is the referencing of various ideas from Surrealism that has created the work in this exhibition." The exhibition explores the translation of ideas between Western Surrealism and art from the Indian sub-continent.

Avishek Sen, a Bengali artist from the renowned Kala Bhavan School of Arts in Santiniketan, describes his paintings as "juxtaposing traditional icons from



A MAN OF INFLUENCE

Clockwise from above: The limited-edition ashtray; Salvador Dali; a work from the *Home Sweet Home* series by Avishek Sen; Dali's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936)



In 1967, Dali was commissioned by Air India to design a limited-edition ashtray

DALI AND FASHION

Quirky facts

In 1937, Dali collaborated with Italian designer **Elsa Schiaparelli**, arch rival of Coco Chanel.

This resulted in creations like the shoe hat and the lobster dress.

In 1939, Dali decorated two window displays at the **Bonwit Teller** department store on New York's Fifth Avenue. Shortly before the displays were revealed to the public, the shop manager altered the arrangements. The artist was so enraged, he threw a bathtub through a store window.

Cosmetics guru **Helena Rubinstein** commissioned Dali to paint three panels for her New York apartment in 1942. *US Vogue* ran a feature on her home.

myths, epics and religious manuscripts against the elements of the new, globalised India." Sen's *Home Sweet Home* series demonstrates the correlation of unrelated images, a characteristic of Surrealist art: one painting shows a human figure crouched within a paddle boat, balanced on a giant fish. The fish's tail appears as a gun, on which a human eye is painted. The image of a gun is a recurring motif, also appearing in another work, this time with a small bird positioned on top. The clock was Dali's leitmotif. The eye, employed by Sen, was also a common feature within Surrealist artwork.

When Sen was informed about the exhibition project, he happened to be working with the elephant as a symbol. "So I was really excited," he says. However, he will "leave it to critics and viewers to say whether my works could be related to Surrealism." ■

● Dali's *Elephant* runs from July 23 to September 4 at Aicon Gallery, London. www.aicongallery.com