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Iconic

MASTERPIECES OF INDIAN MODERN ART

II

EDITION 02

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—Kiron Sinha—



If there is one underlying characteristic of the artist who was Kiron Sinha, it could be best summarised in the word *loss*. Kiron characterised himself as 'born under Saturn', being thereafter beset by bad luck and the loss of things and people dear to him. Paradoxically, he displayed optimism and a cheeky sense of humour. In his old age he mourned the loss of his beloved daughter, Bulbul, his eyesight, the paintings and other artworks lost to him at various times throughout his life, and the many personal relationships he had forgone as he became increasingly reclusive and withdrawn.

Throughout his long artistic career, Kiron Sinha worked in many different media, including: sketches in pencil or ink, watercolours, pastels, tempera, and crayon; oil painting on canvas, *chattais*, and wooden objects; murals and frescoes; sculptures and friezes in cement and coloured oxides, wood carving and woodblocks; rock carving; ceramics; textiles. Over many years he had a varied and prodigious output. His choice of medium was governed by the availability of materials as well as the influence of artists he came in contact with on his travels. In turn, he influenced others by using new forms of expression and an unfamiliar colour palette. His oil and tempera colours and other materials were regularly sent from Australia by his wife Gertrude's brother, Leopold Hirsch, whom Kiron referred to as 'my most important patron'.¹

Despite his blindness, in his old age Kiron had a fine memory for the works he had created. Given a simple description of a work, he could talk about the whys and wherefores of its creation and tell whatever story lay behind the image or item. No doubt, Kiron's acute visual memory guided his hands in the formation of *Purnima* and drew upon not only his memory of Purnima—the woman and friend, and the pain and sadness of her loss—but also his memory of the people in the many high mountain villages he visited in his earlier life and who were the subjects of many of his artworks.



Encountering a Friend

————— Lily Hirsch & Verna Blewett —————



KIRON SINHA
(1916-2009)

Purnima

Cement, sand and aggregates, 1984

With base: 94.0 x 29.0 x 27.0 in. /
238.8 x 73.7 x 68.6 cm.

Without base: 87.0 x 29.0 x 27.0 in. /
221.0 x 73.7 x 68.6 cm.

Inscribed and dated in Bengali (base):
'Priyo Purnima-ke Kironda / 19. 4. 84'

This reinforced concrete sculpture, which stands about 2.4m high on its plinth, was built by Kiron Sinha in 1984 to honour a close family friend, Purnima. In honouring her, he was yet again putting the spotlight on loss. Purnima was a close friend of Kiron and Gertrude (who was called 'Ranidi' by Kiron, and therefore, by all others). Purnima helped them out in times of trouble, including during the difficult birth of their daughter, Kamona (Bulbul) in Mussoorie. She died of breast cancer, which saddened them greatly. Kiron was inspired to create this sculpture to remember her. The dedication, in Bengali reads: 'Dear Purnima - Kiron 19.4.84'. It is thought that this was the date of her demise.

The sculpture depicts Purnima, a Pahadi woman, adorned with traditional jewellery from Uttarakhand. In her ears are *kundal*, around her wrists are *pauchi*, and her neck is decorated with a large and ornate *galoband* and a *hansuli*. Employing a pinching effect in the cement, the artist simply and effectively defines the folds of fabric in her flowing *ghagra-kameez*, the *kamarbandh* around her waist, and her jewellery.

Purnima is typical of this later stage of Kiron's oeuvre. In style and form it bears a resemblance to other sculptures from that era, for example *Hill Girl* and *Radha*. By this stage of Kiron's life he was rapidly going blind, seeing mainly shadow and light. As his eyesight failed him, Kiron abandoned his beloved painting and favoured sculpture as a form of artistic expression because he could 'see' with his hands, his hands became his eyes. The texture of the sculpture, as well as the dedication in Bangla, he achieved by pinching the cement between his fingers. Other surfaces he smoothed with his bare hands, a technique often resulting in bleeding fingers.

Encouraged by his teacher Ramkinkar Bajj at Kala Bhavana, Kiron and his cohort of students were versed in the historical temple carvings and architecture of ancient India. These lessons in the style, composition, and form of traditional sculpture—particularly the graceful and sensuous female icons—were reinforced on his travels through Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. Amongst his personal papers there are photographs of these key places in his life as well as photographs of people going about their everyday activities. For Kiron, the human figure was his primary interest and while his subject matter also included landscapes, he remained committed to figuration throughout his artistic career. However, he placed those figures in the landscape, as can be seen in many of his paintings. Much of Kiron's work depicted sensual, full-bodied women, and *Purnima* is no exception. And true to his numerous paintings and sculptures, *Purnima* is not sexualised or objectified but rather honoured as an icon of vigour and strength.

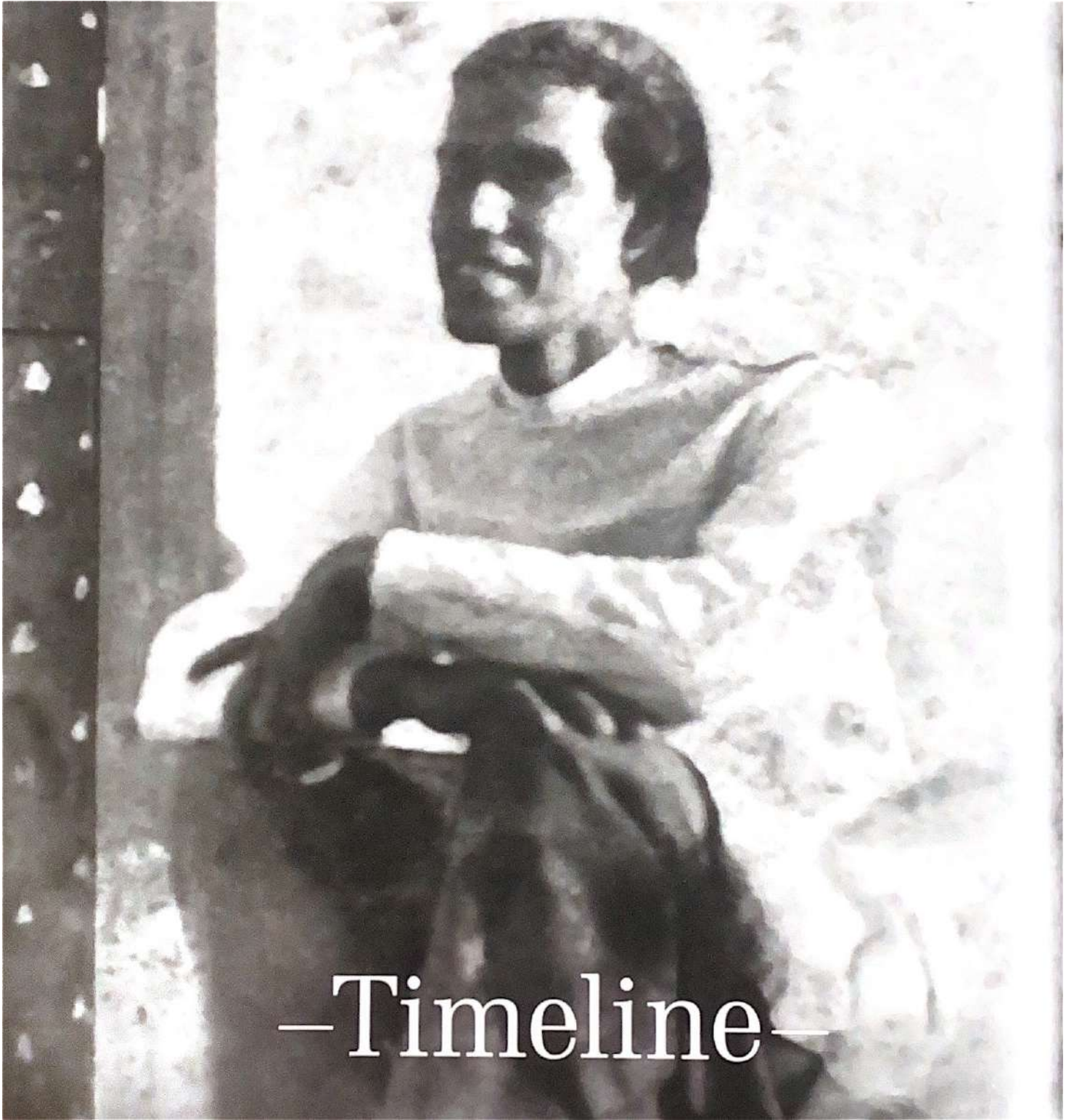
Purnima was built *in situ* in the garden of their home and art gallery. She was placed outside and in view of the living room

window. Her back was to the window as though she had just said goodbye and was departing. *Purnima* stands contrapposto with her left hand placed on her upper thigh and her right hand adjusting her headpiece. Gazing into the distance that is the next life, seemingly at something beyond the viewer's sights, *Purnima* is melancholic but proud, still but almost in motion. The sculpture conveys a sense of the immediacy of life and sorrow and wistfulness at life's loss.



1 Interview with Verna Blewett and Lily Hirsch, January 2008.

ENDNOTES



—Timeline—



1916

Born on March 5 in Khalapara, in modern day Bangladesh. His father is a teacher and his mother, a folk artist. Both encourage Kiron to paint.

1928

Loses his mother, whom he considers his first art teacher, when he is barely twelve years old.

1933

Matriculates from Baradi High School in Narayanganj. Encouraged by his father, joins Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan to refine his artistic talents and learn new skills under the tutelage of fine teachers including Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij (who becomes his good friend), and Benode Behari Mukherjee.

1934

Continuing to flourish in Santiniketan, his work is praised by Rabindranath Tagore when the Nobel Laureate reviews the work of students. A painting, *Mother and Child*, is bought by noted art aficionado from Sri Lanka, Harold Peiris.



1937

Is awarded a scholarship by the Sino-Indian Cultural Society to study Chinese classical painting at Sun Yat-Sen University in Nanjing. Rabindranath Tagore gives him a written blessing. Sadly, he's forced

to flee for his life when the Second Sino-Japanese war breaks out. Returns to India and joins Vidyodaya School, Madras, as 'art master' for senior students.

1938

Takes a job as art teacher at Kalakshetra, Madras. Despite disapproval from his family, marries Gertrude Hirsch, an artist and teacher at Annie Besant Memorial School, Madras, who arrives a year earlier from Vienna. Rabindranath Tagore blesses the couple for a union that would last over seventy years.

1939

Creates the school crest and designs costumes for school productions at Vidyodaya School, Madras. The school crest depicts 'dawn of knowledge', the light of the rising sun illuminating the open book of knowledge.

1940s



The rich, artistic phase of the artist is ably supported by Gertrude, a fine artist in her own right, whom he fondly calls Ranidi, describing her as 'my inspiration, my muse, my most important teacher and the love of my life'.

1941

Leaves his teaching job to work as an artist. During this time produces works such as *Gallery Tamil Women*, *Tamil Restaurant*, *3rd Class Passengers*, and *Catching Sea Crabs*.

1942



Works with Gertrude to create a set of two large wall murals, *Rhythm of Life*, in the students' common room of Women's Christian College in Madras, which can still be seen there.



Birth of the couple's only child, Kamona, affectionately called Bulbul, in Mussoorie. A talented musician and singer, Bulbul, becomes the subject of many of Kiron's paintings, sketches, and sculptures.

1943

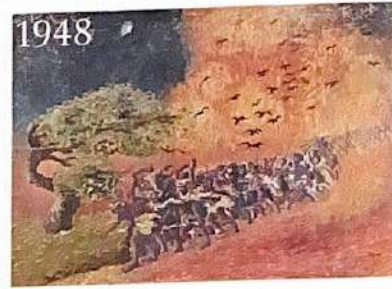
Gertrude accepts a job at the fine arts department in a university in Lahore. Kiron is based in Udaipur and travels throughout Rajasthan. He paints *Jodhpur Women*, *Lakriwallis*, and *Old Mali*, the last work getting sold to the German ambassador in India.

Gertrude's remaining family in Austria are victims of the Holocaust. Her brother, Leo Hirsch, who would become one of the key patrons of the artist, is the only family member to survive by escaping to Australia.



Purchases land in Rattan Palli, Santiniketan, and starts to build a house and studio. Travels between Santiniketan and Lahore to be with Gertrude but flees Lahore in the wake of Partition, taking the last train out with their two-year-old daughter. Gertrude joins them several months later. They lose all their possessions, including paintings. The couple moves to Santiniketan, which becomes their

base for the rest of their lives, though they do live and work elsewhere from time to time.



Using a pointillist style, and painting larger-than-life figures on huge canvases, Kiron paints quotidian life in Santiniketan. *The Storm*, for instance, is described by the artist as 'one of my very early oil paintings' capturing the scenes that the artist sees with 'people running down the lane outside my house, struggling against the wind'. Works such as *New Life* and *Durmush* (now in Nehru House, Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi), would be examples of the artist's phase in capturing the daily sights and scenes in Santiniketan.

1948-51

Joins his wife who works with the state government as an industrial art expert in Assam. This phase sees the artist painting and sketching vignettes of Assam.



Inspired by painter, sculptor, and art educator Asu Dev, carves woodblocks which Gertrude uses to print her acclaimed textiles, especially on dresses worn by the couple's daughter, Bulbul.



Leo Hirsch, patron of the artist, continues to lend support by sending paints and brushes to Kiron in India, given the high cost of purchase of material. The artist, meanwhile, pioneers painting on palm leaf mats (*khejur chatai*), which he obtains from local village women. He discovers the texture adding dimension to works such as *Birth of the Golden Lily* and *Women at the Lily Pond*. Travels to and documents Santhal village life with younger student artists including A. Ramachandran. Begins his foray into sculpture, though briefly.

1950

Participates in a group exhibition at Freemasons Hall, New Delhi. The exhibition is opened by Indira Gandhi.



Participates in the annual art exhibition organised by the Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide, Australia.

Exhibition, 'Kiron and Gertrude Sinha: Paintings and Textiles' is inaugurated by Indira Gandhi at New Delhi's Freemasons Hall.

Completes the first of his many sculptures, *Santal Couple with Dog*, which he makes in the garden of Bulbul Art Gallery in Santiniketan. Standing 2.3 metres tall, the work showing a couple and a dog, is crafted from reinforced concrete and aggregate, and coloured with red oxide.

1955

Exhibits alongside A. A. Raiba at All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi. The exhibition is inaugurated by Lorraine Rowan Shevlin, the wife of the U.S. ambassador John Sherman Cooper.

Makes a very personal, extremely moving sculpture, *Bulbul: A Dedication to Gertrude as a Mother*. Ramkinkar Baij's influence on Kiron's sculptures is clearly visible.

1957

Visits Kurseong where Gertrude works as an art teacher in Dowhill School; creates a series of sketches of tree-lined roads of Kurseong.



'Kiron's Saga on the Santals', an exhibition of Kiron's paintings and Gertrude's printed textiles, opens at All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi.

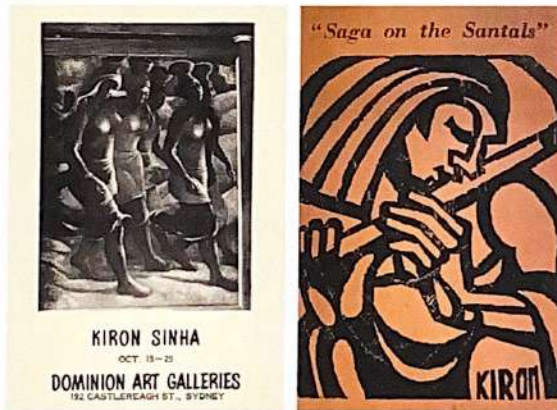


Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a friend of the artist couple and an admirer of Kiron's work, purchases several works to display in public offices in Delhi such as *Teen Murti*, and to give as gifts to foreign dignitaries. *Santal Peasant Couple Harvesting* is presented to the Russian government.



1963

Indira Gandhi introduces the artist to M. S. Randhawa, popularly known as the 'father of Chandigarh', who invites Kiron to spend time in the Kulu valley. The couple then builds a summer house in Naggar and becomes friends with Russian painter, Svetoslav Roerich, the son of Helena and Nicholas Roerich, and his actor wife Devika Rani.



Kiron and Gertrude Sinha's exhibition, 'Saga on the Santals' opens in Argus Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, travelling to other destinations, including Sydney's Dominion Art Galleries, Adelaide and Brisbane.

1965

Exhibition of paintings and textiles in Lucknow inaugurated by Sucheta Kriplani, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.



Late 1960s

M. S. Randhawa purchases Kiron's work for the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh (*Hukka Smoker*, *Women with Apples*, *Golden Bird* and *Kulu Sundaris*). Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta, also purchases *Mountain in the Evening* and *Ganga Boatman*.



Late 1960s-early '70s

The artist's association with Visva-Bharati's Silpa Sadana, in the development of craft-based art, allows him to expand his repertoire and work dedicatedly with ceramics and textiles. He designs and decorates large weavings, thrown vessels, and hand-built objects with the help of students and a visiting Japanese artist.



A sculptural frieze, commissioned by Visva-Bharati, is completed and can be seen in Srimketan.



Bulbul dies a tragic, untimely death when she is twenty-six years old after suffering a fall in the bathroom. In a homage to his daughter, the artist makes a painting, *Departure*, that depicts her entering the spirit world. The tragedy leads to a dramatic change in the artist's paintings with a focus on *Rashtla*, the divine play between Lord Krishna and Radha.

Mid-1970s

Kiron's eyesight starts to fail because of a debilitating eye condition that eventually allows him to only see shadow and light, thus marking his foray into sculpture as his primary form of artistic expression. Over the rest of his life, he creates more than eighty sculptures, many of them large and built *in situ* in his garden.



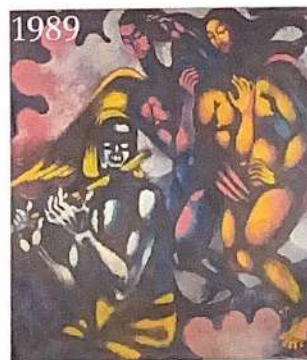
Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visits Studio Bulbul, one of three such visits.



Commences work on a sculpture of Indira Gandhi only to learn, that evening, of her assassination.



Robert Hirsch, the artists' nephew, visits from Australia and photographs, interviews, and creates videos of Gertrude and Kiron. This visit reinforces the Australian relatives' support of the artists. They continue to send letters and packages with supplies for the remainder of the artists' lives.



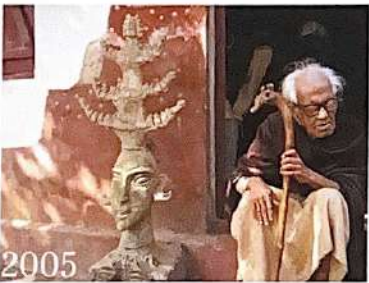
Participates in the group exhibition 'Artists Who Care for Children' at Calcutta's Birla Academy of Art and Culture.



The artist and his wife live with their dog Juma in Santiniketan. They make frescoes on the walls of their home and Gertrude continues to print and wear printed textiles made from blocks carved by the artist. This is a time when a lot of their art is stolen from Studio Bulbul.

1996

A retrospective of the artist is held in Devlalikar Kala Veethika, Indore.



Eighteen paintings are stolen from Studio Bulbul in the middle of the night. Gertrude is injured in the raid. Kiron's blindness and these thefts result in the old couple becoming increasingly reluctant to leave their compound. They become reliant on a few trusted, local people to support their daily lives.



Gertrude's niece, Dr. Verna Blewett, and great-niece, Dr. Lily Hirsch, commence photographing and documenting the artists' lives and work to create a catalogue of their body of work (bulbulart.com).



The artist passes away in Santiniketan. He continues working till the very end of his lifetime.



‘[My existence is] a life of loss.’

