

The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art  
presents

## VIVAN SUNDARAM

**'Step inside and you are no longer a stranger'**

A Retrospective: Fifty Years

Curated by Roobina Karode

**PREVIEW | 8 February 2018, Thursday, 6.30 - 10.30 pm (By invitation only)**

Program: 7.00 pm onwards

Welcome address by Kiran Nadar

Remarks by Guests of Honour, Maria Balshaw and Gulammohammed Sheikh

About the exhibition Vivan Sundaram and Roobina Karode

Followed by cocktails

**EXHIBITION DATE | 9 February – 30 June 2018 | 10.30am – 6.30pm |  
Except Mondays**

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12 Bed Ward, 2008, Installation with steel,

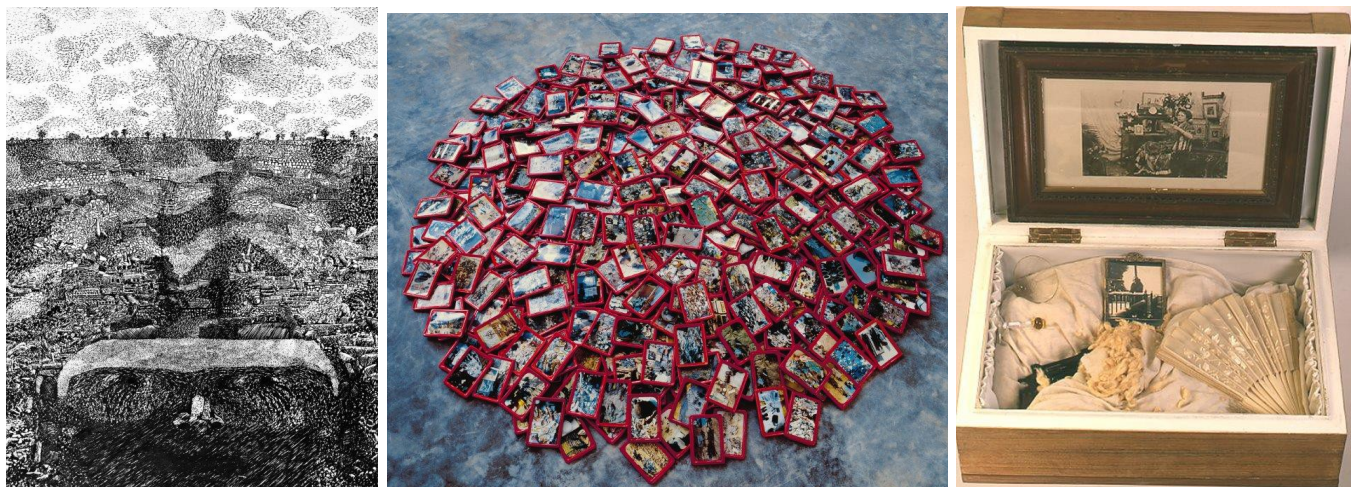
KNMA is presenting this year, the first ever retrospective of eminent artist Vivan Sundaram, one of the most influential artists of his generation in India. This large-scale exhibition is an extensive showing of his multimedia practice, bringing together many of his rare and key works and experiments, reflecting on his take away from Modernism, elements from Pop and Kitsch, moving away from the centrality of painting to take a conceptual turn. There are around 180 artworks on display, which include drawings, paintings, sculptures, collages, photo-montages and installations created over a period of five decades.

With artworks on loan from 42 private and public collections, this is the one of the largest retrospective to be organized by KNMA till date. KNMA has previously organized retrospectives of eminent artists Nasreen Mohamedi, Himmat Shah, Jeram Patel, Nalini Malani and Rameshwar Broota. This exhibition bringing together a large corpus of his works, will provide an unparalleled opportunity to experience his leading, edgy art, and intense engagement across different phases. It will showcase his early works such as the pop-kitsch paintings (1965-66), *Macchu Picchu* (1972) series of drawings, engine oil drawings and installation (1991) to his most recent co-authored projects *409 Ramkinkars* (2015) and *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* (2017). Most of his early works will be in the public view after a gap of almost thirty to forty years.

A variation of thematic and scale outline the exhibition, ranging from the fragile tracings and paper-membranes to the monumental ship of the naval insurrection of 1946; from the political turbulence of the Gulf War and communal violence in 1990s India to the personal meditation on the untimely deaths in his family; from a tribute to artists like Bhupen Khakhar and Ramkinkar Baij to acts of memorializing in The Sher-Gil Archive; from panoramic views of the trash-city to creating house and shelter from Kalamkush handmade paper; from sculptural garments made of discarded objects whose function has been reimagined to a hospital ward made of beds of old shoe-soles. Consciously marking and articulating his position in art making as someone who is “not afraid of being elsewhere” and has continuously pushed the agency of art, Vivan Sundaram’s oeuvre cannot be categorized in any single paradigm. The strong sense of materiality in his work has led him to do tremendous experimentation. He operates with a keen eye/attention of an archivist and a museologist in his assemblages which are dense with references to the past and history, intervening with an artist’s gaze, and meditating upon monuments and memorials.

Titled after one of Vivan’s paintings ‘Step inside and you are no longer a stranger’ which is part of the Punjab University Museum collection, this eponymous exhibition invites a poetic step from the spectator. It is exciting to note that the said painting ‘Step inside...’ was made in 1976, the same year he initiated Kasauli Art Centre for artists’ workshops in his family house in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh.

The exhibition is animated with gestures and narratives that address the topical, the historical and the personal, alongside marking the cusp of significant shifts in the history of modernism in India.



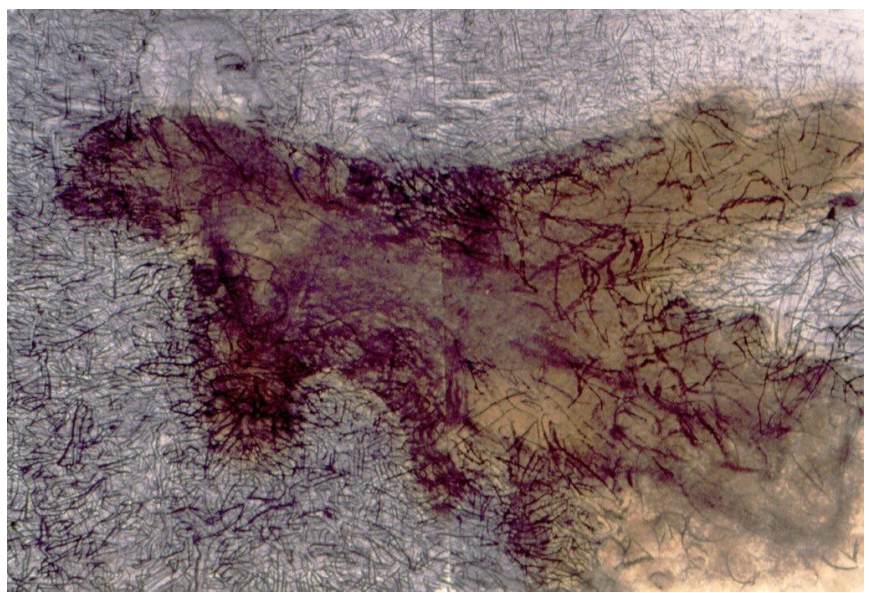
*Macchu Picchu* drawing, Ink on paper, 1972; *Great Indian Bazaar*, 400 Postcard size photographs in metal frames, 1997; *Mother - The Sher-Gil Archive*, 1995

At times, a provocateur seeking participation and collaboration, and sometimes acting as an interlocutor, he has continuously attempted or staged immersive situations and spatial structures for the viewer through his installations. It is the spectator that holds the centre. Vivan's work often echoes elements, figures, influences and playful borrowings from a range of his artists- Amrita Sher-Gil, R.B. Kitaj, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, Jeram Patel and Himmat Shah.



*People come and go*, Oil on canvas, 1981; *The Sher-Gil Family*, Oil on canvas, 1983-84

Vivan is well-known for shifting away from painting to make works in different mediums in early 1990s. In its curatorial design, the exhibition takes one through these different shifts in his practice and explorative artistic approaches. A key highlight of the exhibition are a suite of twelve large paintings made in the 1980s including *The Sher-Gil Family*, *Guddo*, *Two Friends*, *Ten Foot Beam*, *Big Shanti*, among others. He was part of the narrative-figurative school of painting that emerged from the Fine Arts Faculty, MSU, Baroda. Along with the practices of painters like Gulammohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, Sudhir Patwardhan, Jogen Chowdhury and Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram's figures are embedded in the social milieu and the landscape looming with a latent force, and at times with combustive/explosive energy of some cataclysmic event. The spatial arrangement in these paintings allows the eye to hover, as the artist creates different registers of memory, moving between past and present, commanding a certain fluidity, and melting the horizon. Two paintings featuring in this set were first exhibited as part of the seminal exhibition 'Place for People' (1981) – *Guddo* and *People come and go*. Vivan acknowledges that the 'Place for People' gave him the courage to handle the difficult subject of mortality and melancholy vis-a-vis his personal history in *The Sher-Gil Family* (1983-84).



*Approach 100,000 Sorties*, Stitched paper on wall and floor with engine oil in zinc tray, 1991;  
*Imperial Overcast*, Engine oil and charcoal, 1991

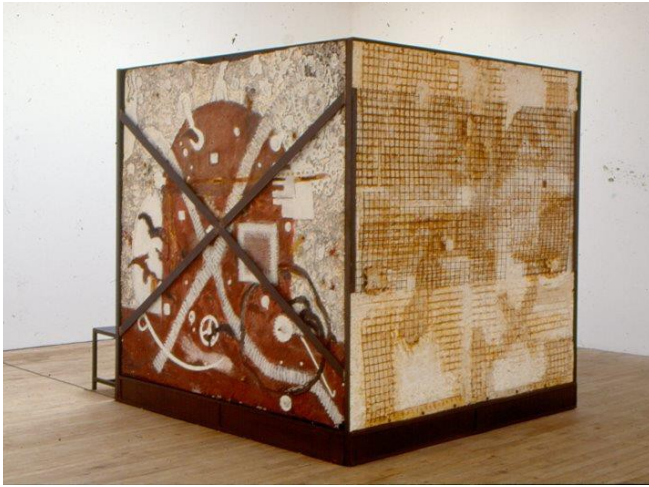
While in London in late 1960s, Vivan attended the course on history of cinema, and later a course on the Second World War which introduced him to many tragic moments of history. A visit to Poland in 1989 gave him a chance to visit Auschwitz, and further an impetus to start the series of large charcoal drawings *Long Night*, also showcased in this exhibition. This was

followed by his Engine oil and charcoal series based on the horrors of the heavily televised Gulf War in 1991, as an artistic reaction to the drama of massive oil spills, and oil fires of volcanic lava like intensity, army squadrons burnt alive in the trenches unfolded. Making the slick of crude oil his medium, he stains the surface of his paper with engine oil. The “dull brown blotch” mixes and obliterates the delicate and at times illegible charcoal drawing, like in the *Imperial Overcast* a shadow or the burnt-up body and the spill becomes one. A major section of this exhibition is devoted to this seminal engine oil series wherein he first began to explore the spatiality of installation art.

‘Step inside and you are no longer a stranger’ brings together around ten of Vivan’s major installations from 1990s to the most recent one in 2017, including *River carries its past* (1993), *House* (1994), *Boat* (1994), *Carrier* (1996), *12 Bed Ward* (2005), *Insurrection 1946* (2017), *Bunk Bed* (1999), *Great Indian Bazaar* (1998) and *409 Ramkinkars* (2015). In these installations he has traversed through the industrial landscape and discards, oil grids, things sourced from local flea markets and second-hand markets to fragile terracotta recasts of modernist-master-sculptor Ramkinkar Baij’s famous sculptures *Santhal Family* and *Mill’ Call*. The exhibition also highlights Vivan’s acts of doubling and re-evaluating. References to journeys through repetition of the motifs of boat and a house as a shelter for the migrants or just the adventurous ones who have ventured far away. With his installations Vivan offers a temporary halt to the stranger he seeks.

Reviewing his series of works *Collaboration/Combines* in 1992, art critic KB Goel writes that it “What is interesting for me is to watch the way Vivan fights against the built-in theatricality when art exists for its audience. Vivan is a committed artist but more than that his is a mind in love with itself, a mind in a permanent state of gestation.” (K.B. Goel, ‘Forms with a hidden dialectic’, The Economic Times Bombay, Monday 9 March 1992)

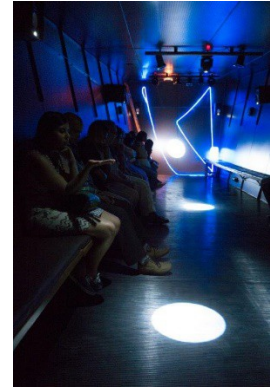
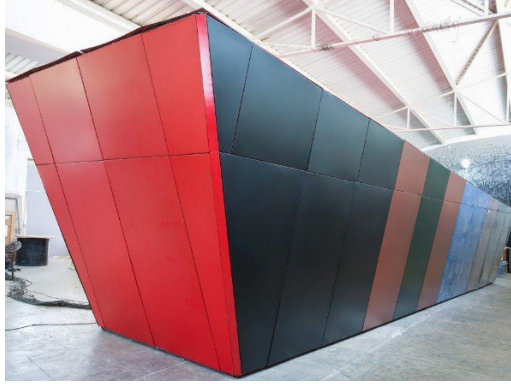
The exhibition also houses a Family Room which consists of *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995), an arrangement of Vivan Sundaram’s personal and family history: photographs of family members juxtaposed with other personal objects such as the handwritten letters by Amrita, old ivory lace, a warped fan, a broken crystal wine glass etc. This room also contains a *Hexagonal Closet*, the video *Indira’s Piano*, a carpet designed by Amrita Sher-Gil which was housed at the Kasauli Art Centre for the last fifty years, and Umrao Singh Sher-Gil’s photographs of Amrita Sher-Gil and self-portraits.



*House*, Installation with steel, kalamkhush paper, video, 1994; *Boat*, Kalamkhush handmade paper, steel, wood, video, 1994

Preparing for his Retrospective exhibition, Vivan Sundaram says: “My practice is marked by breaks and shifts. This exhibition, covering five decades of my work, foregrounds these changes. I began as a painter, and my earliest paintings were in the pop mode – youthful and rude. In London I developed a more sophisticated palette and a form of abstraction that remains distinct in my work. Encounters with anti-imperialist movements and with student politics of the 1960s widened my perspective and drew me into activism. Back in India in 1970, I trained my youthful anarchism towards a Marxist approach. I undertook collective artist projects and, by the 1980s, became part of the figurative-narrative movement, which addressed itself to persons and people in everyday contexts. I was then led to engage with historical material that defines the contemporary. I used the photographic image as document, as evidence of political violence, such as in the elaborate installation, *Memorial* (1992). I enlarged the scale in a site-specific installation, now referred to as *History Project*, staged in 1998 at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta. The historical also leads me to archive memory and that in turn leads to more autobiographical works, such as *The Sher-Gil Archive*. Thematic disjunctures occur at precisely such points, and I again begin to exteriorize, as for example in *Trash*, which configured urban landscapes and human debris through several sets of works (from 2004 to 2013). And then to other large-scale, theatrically staged projects, excavating art-historical figures as well as people’s struggles. This exhibition presents the themes I have engaged with, but it also proposes structures that hold things together in retrospect: via the work, the exhibition layout, and spectator itineraries. ‘Step inside and you are no longer a stranger’: the exhibition’s title reflects the conflicting dimensions of my practice.”

On the occasion Kiran Nadar, Founder & Chairperson, KNMA, says, “Vivan Sundaram’s exhibition marks another major moment in the eight years of institutional presence of KNMA. The retrospective of this scale and kind has led to loans from 42 private and public collections from all across the country and overseas. We are glad to present this rare and extraordinary feat of fifty years of work of this highly celebrated and influential artist, put together for the first time. We have taken up the daunting task of coherently presenting such a prolific and wide ranging oeuvre. It is a show which is going to be remembered for a long time.”



*A River Carries its Past*, Engine oil and burn marks on Kalamkhush handmade paper, oil and water in zinc trays, 1992;  
*Meanings of Failed Action – Insurrection 1946*, 2017, *Meanings of Failed Action – Insurrection 1946* (Detail; inside the boat)

### **Brief Biography**

Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943 in Shimla) is an artist-activist and has been part of many collectives. He was a founding member of the Kasauli Art Centre (1976-90) and *Journal of Arts & Ideas* (1981 – 99). He is a trustee of the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT). He is the editor of a two-volume book, *Amrita Sher-Gil: a self-portrait in letters & writings* (2010). He is the managing trustee, with his sister Navina Sundaram, of the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation (SSAF), set up in 2016.

Vivan Sundaram lives in Delhi. He studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University of Baroda and Slade School of Art, London. Since 1990 he had made installations that include sculpture, photographs and video. Among his major works are *Memorial* (1993, 2014); *History Project* (1998); *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995), *Trash* (2008), *Gagawaka* (2011). He moved to co-authored projects with *409 Ramkinkers* (2015), staged in collaboration with theatre directors including Anuradha Kapur; and *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* (2017), , archived, installed and performed in collaboration with cultural theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha and sound artist David Chapman.

Sundaram has exhibited in the Biennales of Sydney, Seville, Taipei, Sharjah, Shanghai, Havana, Johannesburg, Gwangju and Berlin, and the Asia-Pacific Triennale, Brisbane. He has participated in group shows at Tate Modern, London (2011); Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2001); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2006); International Centre for Photography, New York (2008); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2008), among others.