

NEW YORK

Bari Kumar

Bose Pacia Gallery

India-born, Los Angeles-based Bari Kumar forces us to confront the violence of the world head-on in his macabre, surrealist paintings, which teem with dismembered bodies, haunting eyes and serpentine imagery. Monumental in size and sumptuous in presence, Kumar's paintings overwhelm the viewer with their sensory and colorful vigor, yet successfully avoid a pedantic attitude. Instead, the work has a much more interesting, playful feel as Kumar cleverly juxtaposes images from different cultures to create a fascinatingly quirky mosaic. His paintings present deep, often searing truths about the human condition: The sacred and profane exist side by side; violence and beauty exist side by side; blood and health exist side by side. The body is Kumar's obsession, especially the naked, fragmented body, and religious imagery—with its abundant representations of the dark side and its multiple meanings and associations—dominates his canvas.

A good number of Kumar's images are culled from Christian religious imagery, but his generally dismembered Christ figures can be dark-skinned or have multiple sets of arms like a Hindu God. Kumar also mixes and matches both Christian and Hindu images to create provocative and arousing work. One of his biggest accomplishments is his ability to seamlessly blend a variety of cultural imagery, suggesting the universality of all religions. One of the standouts in the show was a painting titled *Half Truth* (1998), in which the lower half of the body of a cherub is set against a yel-

lowish green background that feels as if it has been set in motion like a whirling cosmos. An image of a headless, legless Hindu goddess with multiple arms is on the top right, a dark silhouetted image with horns on the lower right. On the top left is a green decorative pattern overlapped by a sinuous black shape; the word "Half Truth" is written in Hindi on top of the canvas. This is Kumar's surrealism at its best.

Kumar's work can and has been read as an argument for cultural and religious pluralism; as a deconstructive inquiry into different icons taken from both high and low culture; and as a critique of modern imperialism and racism. In my opinion, however, Kumar's work does not derive its power from its political or cultural commentary, but from the grandeur of its timeless, fantastical vision. In fact, when the political commentary is overt, the work is least effective. For example, in a painting titled *Namaste America* (2003) a blindfolded Indian kneels in front of a skeleton who is about to pierce his heart with a spear. Texts, such as "who gives you the right?" and "are you sorry now that you've found nothing," refer to the plight of the brown immigrant after 9/11, but the literary content seems too simplistic for Kumar's grand stage. Text, in fact, tends to clutter and detract in Kumar's already extremely dense work, especially when there are clichés like "brown is the new black" written next to a pair of brilliantly rendered hands or the phrase "God bless" painted next to a gun. Kumar is a strong artist with real insight into the human mind; however, if he were to streamline his art a bit, it could rise to even greater heights. ■ PRIYA MALEOTRA



Bari Kumar ■ *Half Truth* ■
1998 ■ Oil on canvas ■ 68" x
54"