

## Bari Kumar: Brown is the New Black

Billy Shire Fine Arts

17 SEPTEMBER – 22 OCTOBER

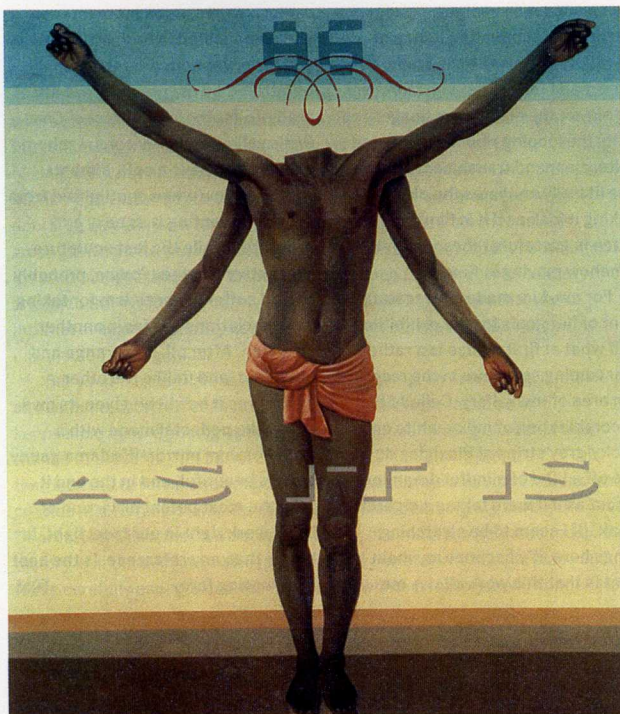
Kumar is an atelier-style figurative painter, a classicist in style and temperament, whose allegorical figures flaunt baroque folds of flesh that are sensual to the point of grotesque and often strike ritualized poses that inhabit the nexus of religion and science. His sepia- and flesh-toned palettes, finely precise line work and affection for the monolithic centralized figure, invite comparisons to Da Vinci despite the overtly modern flavour in his work, which comes from his use of text as an element of composition and from his wry political humour. Perhaps the best example of this hybrid vein is *As It Is* (all works 2005), with its central, headless figure clad only in a loincloth and adopting a Christ-like pose: arms akimbo, feet poised atop a skull. This, however, is a kind of Shiva Christ with four arms on its thin classical torso. Its reserved palette signals a change, an eschewing of florid sensuality, and a forcing of the body into the realm of the mind. This work and several of the others on show are executed on a large scale as though meant to be seen from a distance, but their reserved qualities prevent them from being overwhelming or intimidating despite their gravitas.

Several of the smaller works are installed in corners of the space, the canvases bent and framed at 90-degree angles to slip into marginalized architectural areas. The drawing of attention to normally invisible space operates on a formal level along the lines of a work by Robert Irwin, but also serves as a metaphor for the kind of hybrid existence referred to in the exhibition's title – and experienced by the artist as a native of one hybridized culture (India) and a resident in another (the US). There is a sense that this problematic reverence for his heritage could easily devolve into simple identity politics, but this is ameliorated and supported by Kumar's mastery of western figurative paradigms and the lightness of his touch when it comes to including compositional adornments that are often culled from a lexicon of traditional Indian iconography.

*Swagat* is the most powerful and effective of these corner paintings. Against a billowing backdrop of indeterminate, dusty landscape, another headless figure holds aloft the fat folds of flesh from one of its arms, while the other arm is partly obscured by a plain grey rectangle that hovers, interrupting the flow of naturalism. Above it, flowery eastern script unfurls; facing it, a light sheet drapes luxuriously to form a ground for a skull and crossed knives bearing the inscription 'no more, no less'. A stencilled goddess figure and a few other icons insert themselves into the composition, and the back foot of the main figure dissolves into painted pixilation. Everywhere are signs that a postmodern sensibility has invaded the strict academicism of the representational style, yet there is little tension between idioms; as though the visual cooperation of his various influences were stand-ins for the peaceful coexistence of myriad influences in the human psyche. Kumar strikes the right note, the exact symphonic harmony, of a balanced consideration of the nature of existence distilled into visual form and expressed with high-minded technique and the confident hand of a deep thinker. No more, no less.

Below  
Bari Kumar *As It Is*,  
2005, oil on canvas,  
229 x 183 CM  
COURTESY BILLY SHIRE FINE  
ARTS, CULVER CITY

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