

GURMINDER SIKAND

Early Paintings

16 May – 29 June 2024

Maximillian William is proud to present the first posthumous exhibition in London of artist Gurminder Sikand. Following Sikand's untimely death in 2021 aged 61, and her subsequent inclusion in significant surveys including *Women in Revolt!* at Tate Britain and *RE/SISTERS* at Barbican Art Gallery, this exhibition presents an in-depth view of Sikand's early paintings from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Images of women drawn from Indian mythology recur throughout Sikand's work. Her interest in the figure of the goddess – particularly the Hindu goddess Kali, who both destroys and creates the world anew, and is often pictured with a garland of human heads – is evident in her depictions of women metamorphosing into nature. In Sikand's paintings, women are seeds buried in soil, hang on tree branches to provide shelter, or are even the earth and sky themselves. These amorphous relationships between the figure and nature were further inspired by the Chipko environmental movement, which began in north India during the 1970s, when villagers – mostly women – embraced trees at risk of deforestation, a protest that also highlighted their primary role as caregivers. Sikand's female figures are often portrayed as strong: appearing resolute with multiple heads or acting as protectors over her landscapes. They also remain ambiguous and elusive, echoing the shapeshifting symbolism of Hindu allegories that persisted in her imagination.

Sikand's paintings contain multiple layers of gouache, watercolour and ink, often laboriously made. Her deep fascination with palimpsests – ancient parchments scraped clean and used again, that bear the traces of time – led her to experiment with breaking the surface of her paintings, likely using sandpaper and wire wool as she did in later works, and then repairing the paper in a technique similar to papier mâché. Sikand's works function as pentimenti, where the marks of earlier paintings lie visible underneath the surface. In her acts of erasure and revision, she folded history into her work, gesturing to the unreliability of memory and the tension in the encounter between images from different cultures.

Born in 1960 in the Punjab region of India, Sikand relocated with her family in 1970 aged 10 and eventually settled in the Rhondda valley in South Wales. She attended City of Birmingham Polytechnic and upon graduating in 1983 moved to Nottingham, where she lived, worked, and was deeply active in the arts community for close to 40 years. After being selected by Gavin Jantjes as the East Midlands Arts Prize winner in 1984, she co-founded the Nottingham Indian Artists' Group alongside Said Adrus and Sardul Gill. In 1987, she had her first solo exhibition in London at the pioneering feminist bookshop Sisterwrite. In 1988, she was included in Eddie Chambers' foundational touring group exhibition *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, and her painting featured on the cover of that catalogue. Sikand's work was included in other significant exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s including *The Circular Dance* at Arnolfini, Bristol, alongside Sutapa Biswas and Chila Kumari Burman (1991); *Myth, Dream, and Fable* at Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, alongside Paula Rego and Eileen Cooper (1992); and *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996* at the Caribbean Cultural Center, New York, alongside Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, and Keith Piper, amongst many others (1997). She exhibited less after 2000, although her commitment to her practice remained absolute. Recent solo exhibitions of her work have taken place at New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2012); TG Gallery, Nottingham (2021); and Trace Gallery, Nottingham (2023). Since Sikand's death in 2021, her work has been acquired by collections including the British Museum, London; Nottingham City Museums via the Contemporary Art Society; and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich.