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Art review: *Lancelot Ribeiro: Heads — In and Out of Our Time* (Ben Uri Gallery, London NW8)

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Jonathan Evens looks at the Expressionist work of Lancelot Ribeiro, an artist born in Goa

AS THE Second World War approached and then in the reconstruction following, there was, among artists, a significant focus on Christ's crucifixion as a means of depicting the horror of war and genocide. Francis Bacon, Romare Bearden, Rico Lebrun, Abraham Rattner, Lancelot Ribeiro, F. N. Souza, and Graham Sutherland were among those doing so because, as Lebrun stated, their images told a story of humanity's inhumanity.

"Heads — In and Out of Time" at Ben Uri Gallery and Museum begins with examples of Ribeiro's religious work including two "Crucifixions". Ribeiro (1933-2010) was born into a Catholic Goan family in India, and his early work was inspired by Indian and Goan architecture and the Christian tradition in which he was raised, as well as the work of his older half-brother Souza.

Their complex relationships with their Catholic upbringings when combined with Expressionism resulted in tortured images of the crucifixion into which were fed the horrors of global warfare, experiences of racism in the UK, and the tensions that they felt in India.

Ribeiro's *Untitled (Crucifixion)* (1963), with its Black Christ figure, and his stark image of a robed Christ displaying the stigmata — *Untitled (Christ with Stigmata)* (1961) — recall the wooden icons



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Untitled (Christ with Stigmata) (1961) by
Lancelot Ribeiro



and religious adornments that he saw in the churches among the hillsides of Goa, where his family had their ancestral home, but as images exuding the pain of the torture being depicted.

In contrast, when he is using the motif of the Madonna, a lighter and brighter palette features, as in the pinks, reds, and oranges of his *Mother and Child (Series III)* (1965), which uses thick black lines and semi-transparent colours reminiscent of stained glass as it conveys the strong maternal bond between the faceless figures. The bold blue background of *Rising from the Banks of Main* (1992), which contains traces of the sky and an urban landscape, also has the head of the woman resembling a Madonna, with her facial features merely sketched in.

Ribeiro's development towards greater abstraction and a series of faceless faces also has a spiritual underpinning, one based on Tantra. He described this yogic system as "an evolving system, the study of which has led the conscious mind through stages to a point of total acquiescence and negation of the self" leading, in his work, to the full achievement of "a kind of faceless, self-effacing form".

Interestingly, however, this development in his work seems to show some synergies with poetry that he wrote in the 1950s which may have been inspired by the Dark Night of the Soul: "Upon this dark stair within your mind With no rail to hold Set down your soul, With eyes wide open. And you shall fall Unseeing. As I am falling To no Kingdom And no Dying."

This exhibition, which borrows its title from the artist's own long-planned but unrealised concept for an exhibition, features 20 paintings and drawings focusing on Ribeiro's preoccupation with portraiture and imagined heads from two of the most innovative decades of his practice, the 1960s and the 1990s.

A supporting display in the lower galleries features a display of stylistically diverse and innovative paintings, sculptures, and works on paper of heads and portraits from the Ben Uri collection by artists including Moich Abrahams, Frank Auerbach, David Breuer-Weil, Dodo, Samuel Fyzee-Rahamin, Susanna Jacobs, Hormazd Narielwalla, Paul Richards, and Bruno Simon. The *Annunciation* image by Dodo is a self-portrait in which the artist portrays herself spotlighted by a shaft of light revealing her tears and troubled state of mind.

Those that are closest to Ribeiro's own vision include the interiority and sense of multiple selves seen in Breuer Weil's *Head* and the mysterious reinvention of childlike expressiveness found in Abrahams's *Self-portrait*. While Ribeiro's early works utilised heads, in dramatic close up, as vehicles to explore concepts of power and evil, the later works use dramatic contrasts of colour,

size, and form, which balance materials and motif while disassembling, reimagining, and reinvigorating heads to question notions of identity, belonging, alienation, and the divided self.

In experimenting with heads, shapes, and their dissolution by use of colour and the interplay between human and natural forms, Ribeiro achieves intensity and, as one reviewer put it, “enormous expressive power”.

His achievement is under-appreciated and under-recognised, and yet the thread that runs throughout his work, as identified by a close friend, the poet, Indian translator, and critic R. Parthasarathy, is of relevance to us all: “How does a human being come to terms with multiple histories and in the process achieve wholeness?”

“Lancelot Ribeiro: Heads — In and Out of Our Time” is at the Ben Uri Gallery, 108a Boundary Road, London NW8, until 29 November. benuri.org

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