

WAITING FOR THE SPOTLIGHT

It's time Lancelot Ribeiro is recognized as a painter in his own right and not only as F. N. Souza's half-brother, states **Vivek Menezes**.

There seems to be an unwritten rule that sibling acts cannot share equal limelight in the annals of modern and contemporary art. Individual artists who share cultural antecedents are often celebrated for paintings that are considered interchangeable – think of the profusion of Cubist guitars by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris – but no family or genetic relationship is at play here. Even the UK's much-feted Singh twins cohere to this rule. Their cheeky 21st century miniatures have always been meticulously co-produced, and neither one of them has attempted to make a separate name for herself.

This seemingly arbitrary situation holds iron-clad in India as well. While artists of equal prominence often marry each other without losing their status and audience – many such examples exist – siblings are inevitably subjected to a pecking order. S. Paul and Raghu Rai are both remarkable photographers but it's mainly the latter's work that has attracted collectors and sustained international attention. Even more vivid is the case of the impressively multi-dimensional artist Lancelot Ribeiro (1933–2010), who is perhaps unfairly destined to remain in the shadow of his half-brother, the great modernist Francis Newton Souza (1924–2002).

It was no different all through their lives. Nine years younger than Souza, Ribeiro (born of their mother's second marriage) was just 14 years old in 1947, when his unstoppably ambitious sibling joined Ara, Husain, Raza and others to kick-start the most significant initiative in the history of modern Indian art, the Progressive Artists' Group. Three years later, the teenager joined his brother in London – ostensibly to study accountancy – where Souza was already beginning to make an international reputation for himself. Ribeiro immediately fell into a pattern that persisted for many years – of helping Souza in his studio by detailing his canvases and drawings. Those powerful early influences never left Ribeiro, as extensively demonstrated by the recent large-scale retrospective of his works mounted by London's Grosvenor Gallery in association with Tata, Saffronart and the Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts (SGCA).

The connections with Souza's style were evident right from the 1950s when Ribeiro came back to India, committed to producing art. He was patronized by Homi Bhabha, who recommended him for a major commission to paint a mural in JRD Tata's office at Tata & Sons (then the largest industrial conglomerate in the country). A series of solo shows followed. The young Goan seemed beset by the problem that continues to plague his reception even today. As recounted by his friend, the poet Nissim Ezekiel, from the 1950s on, critics "found it impossible" to assess Ribeiro's merit "without referring to his illustrious stepbrother".

The retrospective I visited in Goa was no different and it further blurred the line between the siblings. Was this to raise Ribeiro's



Lancelot Ribeiro. *Evolving.* Oil and polyvinyl acetate on canvas. 64 cms x 55 cms. 1963.

market value? It was the older brother's name on everyone's lips at the show and Souza's prices were being referenced as an important item of comparison. What is more, the selection of paintings was almost entirely from the early decades when Ribeiro *was* painting landscapes and heads remarkably like his brother. The similarities of line, contour and palette were impossible to ignore, or look beyond.

This selection turned out to be quite unfair because the fine monograph *Lancelot Ribeiro: An artist in India and Europe* by David Buckman (released to coincide with the retrospective) made it clear that Souza's younger sibling did in fact venture on his own from the 1970s onwards. By then he had returned to live in London, but – probably crucially – his brother had moved on to the USA. Ribeiro started to produce work very unlike Souza; there were mesmerizing abstract landscapes and Zen-influenced graphics. There was a decisive turn towards minimalism. His work in the 1990s, in particular, looks strong and absolutely nothing like Souza's.



Lancelot Ribeiro. *Untitled (Night Landscape with Trees and Moon).* Oil on canvas. 77 cms x 85 cms. 1964. Images courtesy Marsha Ribeiro.

This is not to take away from the elegantly rendered paintings from the 1960s which dominated the exhibition, on view from the 19th to the 24th of November 2014 at the SGCA. The show is currently on view at the Grosvenor Gallery, London, from the 15th of April to the 8th of May. Several of the works are striking – there is a fine balance of colours boldly mapped by thick, spiky outlining which also

characterizes Souza's paintings of the period. It was undeniably the output of a gifted, serious, questing artist but the sum experience of the show was rather disappointing. For now, Souza's younger sibling will have to keep waiting for his own individual spotlight to spark into existence.