CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS SERIES

Krishen Khanna

CHOLA MIGRATIONS



Norbert Lynton

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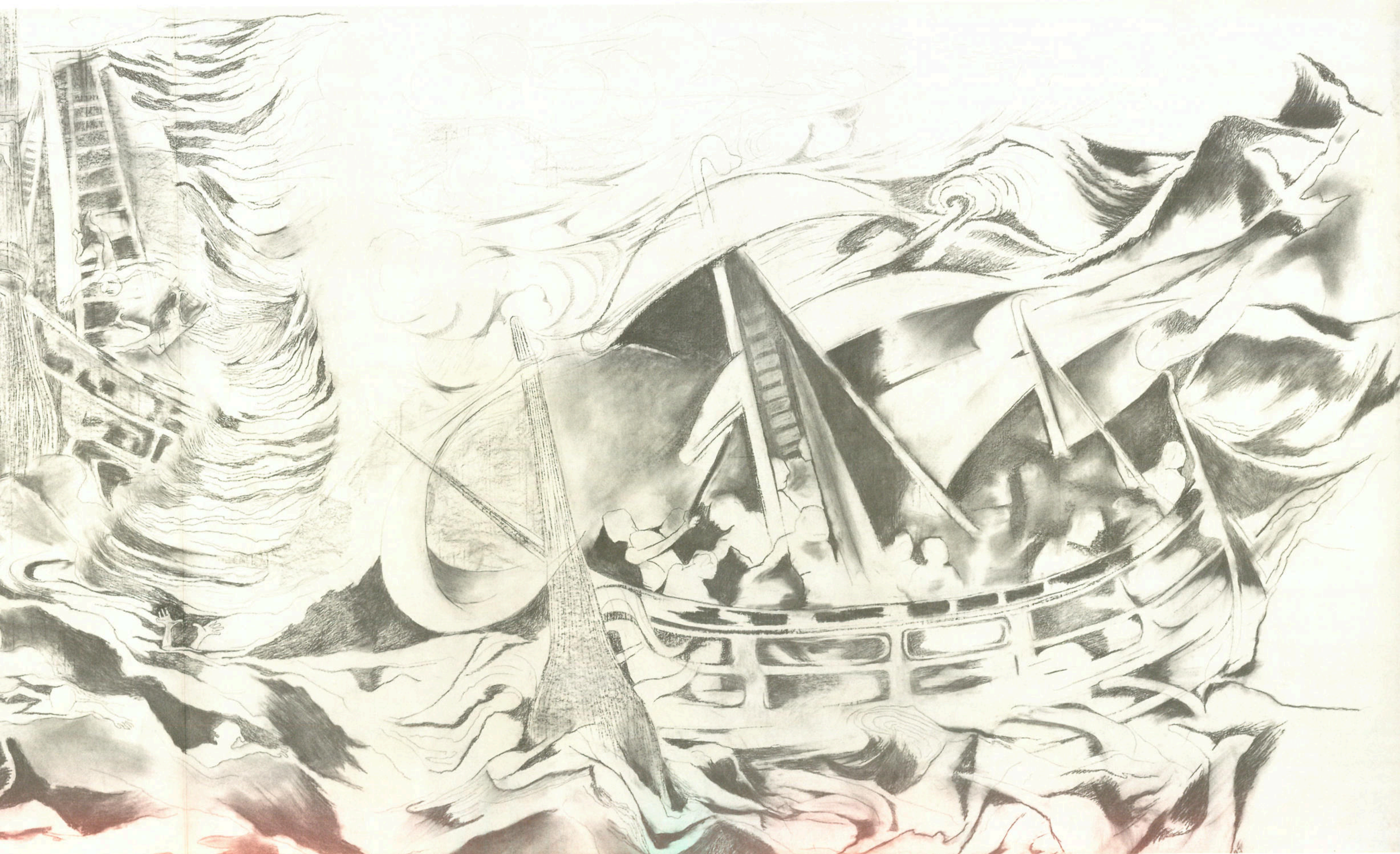
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The Voyage of Migration

Fifty births
And rebirths
Won't make me forget
that crossing.
Long before men sought refuge
in imaginary lines,
passports hadn't been invented
Nor rules, self imposed, or otherwise,
lettered.

Frontiers were mountains as high
as heavens
And waves as high as the mountains.
By dim configuration of southern stars
to guide us,
The going wasn't easy I can tell you.
Climbing through cascading walls of water,
Mad chorus of winds
And serpentine columns of water
Struck like demons.
A terrible retribution for we
knew not what.

And those that didn't find their way
down the sea's gullet or the
ample bellies of fishes,
washed up on distant shores
with a white welcome of sea gulls.
The tumult of wind and water
yielding to the thick silence
of forests.

What quiet —
Silence unfolding
Screetching squirrels at play,
Monkey's chatter,
The peacock's plaint,
Hog's grunts
And the tiger's deafening roar.
Dark patience stilling time.

We wondered that we came
through never ending seas,
And forests holding terror,
Rocks that bleed our feet,
Only to tend mute cattle
And to play the flute.

Krushen Khanna

Foreword

The Cholas were a Tamil dynasty that ruled primarily in southern India from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. They were thought to be descended from the sun and there are many legends about mythical Chola kings. They left behind an enduring legacy and their patronage resulted in some of the most splendid works of art, sculpture, architecture and literature in India.

Krishen Khanna's immense mural, *Chola Migrations* brings to light the history of the Cholas. It is incredible as much for its size as for its treatment of the subject. Rather than bring to mind the majestic architecture or the exquisite bronze sculptures that are associated with the period, Krishen decided to depict the everyday life of the Cholas. In retrospect, his choice of medium—resulting in a carefully composed score of "black and white"—seems fitting.

What is striking about the mural is its scenes of the commonplace—of which Krishen has been a close observer for over six decades—the man playing a flute, labourers, the woman with a baby, animals, the fruitseller. They could belong to contemporary village life in India as easily as life during the times of the Chola kings. Standing in stark contrast is the tension created by the giant waves; the ships guided by stars a reminder of the extensive seafaring activities and conquests of the Cholas that resulted in their prodigious wealth. Do things really change? What of it? Krishen seems to be asking—all this "only to tend mute cattle and to play the flute"?

Chola Migrations is an imposing work that makes us stop and question history, kings and the foundations on which they build their empires. We hope that this superb work that has been documented in this publication will provide a glimpse into Krishen's subtly depicted walk through time.

Tanuj Berry & Saman Malik
July 2007

Introduction

Norbert Lynton

A large mural, 6.75 feet high by 72.5 feet long, done in pencil, a celebration of the wonderful history and achievements of the Cholas of southern India during, roughly, the tenth to the fourteenth centuries: the religion-centred culture they built and enriched in their own lands along the Coromandel Coast, their conquests on the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, and their bold ventures across the Indian Ocean to trade in luxurious goods with the peoples they found further east—but all done on paper in what people call black and white?

It was a bold decision, this concentrating of means to convey such riches. Krishen Khanna set aside the panoply of colours and brushwork that the commission must immediately have brought to mind. He will have hesitated before proposing what must have sounded like an odd renunciation to his patrons of the ITC-Welcomgroup when they turned to him in 1975. Of course, he knew Tamil Nadu, having worked at Grindlays Bank in Chennai (Madras) in the 1950s, while painting part-time. That is where this new hotel had now been built. He knew the colours, the temperature and the tempo of the area. Creating the mural was a way of revisiting a world that had suited him well and had been important to him, while also visiting a past to which Chola art, including sculpture, and the history books give access. He knew the colours, the temperature and tempo of the area. But to portray it in black and white? We cannot think of India without colour.

It is, of course, a much more resourceful option than it sounds. Khanna's pencil worked marvels of tonal differentiation, always to fine dramatic effect. Where the word 'pencil' might

lead us to expect delicate chamber music, he gives us the fullest orchestration laid open to his vision and skill with this apparently so limited instrument. In the best hands, minimal means often produce maximal results. Between the darkest and lightest areas in the mural comes a wealth of lines and areas of tone, spacious here, concentrated and accented there. The effect of his carefully modulated tones struck me as bringing his mural close to relief sculpture. It so happens that Mahabalipuram, just south of Chennai, has the world's largest stone relief, dating back to the time before the Cholas became the rulers of Tamil Nadu: a vast stone frieze, twenty-seven metres long and crowded with deities and other figures, with birds and elephants and other animals. Khanna surely knew this remarkable work. He had, of course, always made drawings on paper, and it is striking that several of his paintings of that early time but also later, come close to being monochromatic, often in dark grey or black oil or acrylic on an off-white canvas.

The theme he chose for his mural is historical rather than mythical, celebrating the outgoing activities of the Chola, not the richness and beauty of what they established at home. He offers us a vision of families and animals on the land, going about their various tasks amid palm trees and rocks, including carrying goods from the ships, and then the ships and the men on them, venturing forth into heavy seas. The ships he studied in a bas relief in Borabadur in Indonesia, converting what he saw into his vivid idiom of light and dark patches, done almost as if the black were there already and he drew over it, or erased it, to create white forms that are the decks of the ships, their masts and even the voyagers themselves. The scenes on dry land show some things pencilled in firmly—a tree trunk, for instance—but many of the figures are delivered in white or smudged pale grey, while the spaces between them are marked with black. (In the carved reliefs that helped Khanna develop his vision, the projecting parts appear lighter in tone than the shadowed spaces between them.) The ships and seas are formed as two great waves of energy and action against a mostly light sky, and it is striking that the scenes on land are also composed in arched units, as though those at home too have their venturesome lives, though in safer conditions.

The figures here are strong, majestic even, once we accept this negative tonal idiom, and notice how the leaves of palm trees, or a dramatic black bird, can give this world its rhythmical cohesion.

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