

ABSTRACT FIGURE
Souza, founder of the Progressive Artists' Movement, was largely shunned by India's art elite

ICON: FN SOUZA

His artwork has sold for millions and hangs in the world's greatest museums. Yet, until his death in 2002, Francis Newton Souza struggled for recognition, and even faced bankruptcy. **Vivek Menezes** looks back on an extraordinary friendship with India's most misunderstood artist

ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 7, 1998, Francis Newton Souza awoke feeling irritated and unsettled. He was used to these sensations, and knew that the precise cause would make itself known before too long. And sure enough, while the morning's sunrays still slanted through the perpetually grimy windows of his tiny, walk-up apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he figured out what was bothering him.

It was what he'd learned the previous evening, in a conversation that had helped the 75-year-old Goan artist make sense of the lead stories in that day's business section of the *New York Times*. Souza realized he was upset about the three smug businessmen who were pictured smiling in the middle of page D1.

Although he examined the *New York Times* closely each day, a habit he'd cultivated after his move to New York from London in 1967, the business section was generally tossed aside. But the day before had been different. In the centre of page D1 was an image of three men who looked extremely pleased

with themselves, under the headline "Setting the Value of Wall St History – If Goldman Sachs Goes Public, How Will It Divide the Spoils?" Next to the picture was another article typical of the booming Nineties. The story, headlined "Jobs Surged by 300,000 Last Month", quoted the chief economist of Merrill Lynch, who said: "The US economy has never performed so well."

Souza didn't care very much about businessmen, but he could read images with a perception that amounted to a kind of X-ray vision. He smelt a rat about these fat cats from Goldman Sachs, and saved that section of the paper to discuss with a much younger friend, who made a routine out of visiting him in the evenings. By 6.30, with the sun still shining brightly outside, the two friends had settled into their usual places on low sofas facing each other across the cluttered living room that the artist had occupied for more than 30 years. It resembled a prehistoric cave, with dozens of his paintings stacked from floor to ceiling and in

every available space besides.

Souza had been full of questions, starting with: how many zeroes were there in a billion? For an hour and a half, Souza questioned his friend about what an investment bank did, about the mechanics of a public offering, and how a limited partnership worked. Even as they talked, Souza's gaze kept moving back to the three smug capitalists on page D1. Then had come his judgment: "They're shameless frauds, and they know it. There's something very wrong about the whole story."

And so, when he awoke unsettled the next morning, the hobbling but still fiercely energetic artist knew precisely what he needed to do to restore his equilibrium. He got out a palette knife and hacked away at page D1. Then he reached for a thick black marker and, his fingers flying over the page, exposed the grotesque souls that lurked behind the respectable veneer of these Wall Street predators. Souza had instinctively recognized the Goldman Sachs investment bankers as vulturous →

fiends, and now they looked the part. Then, moving slower and more ruminatively, he added an orange glow, and skillfully made the text less distracting with daubs of marker and white paint. Now feeling comfortably purged, Souza phoned his young friend. “When you come over this evening,” he said, “you will see that I’ve worked out what I was trying to say last night.”

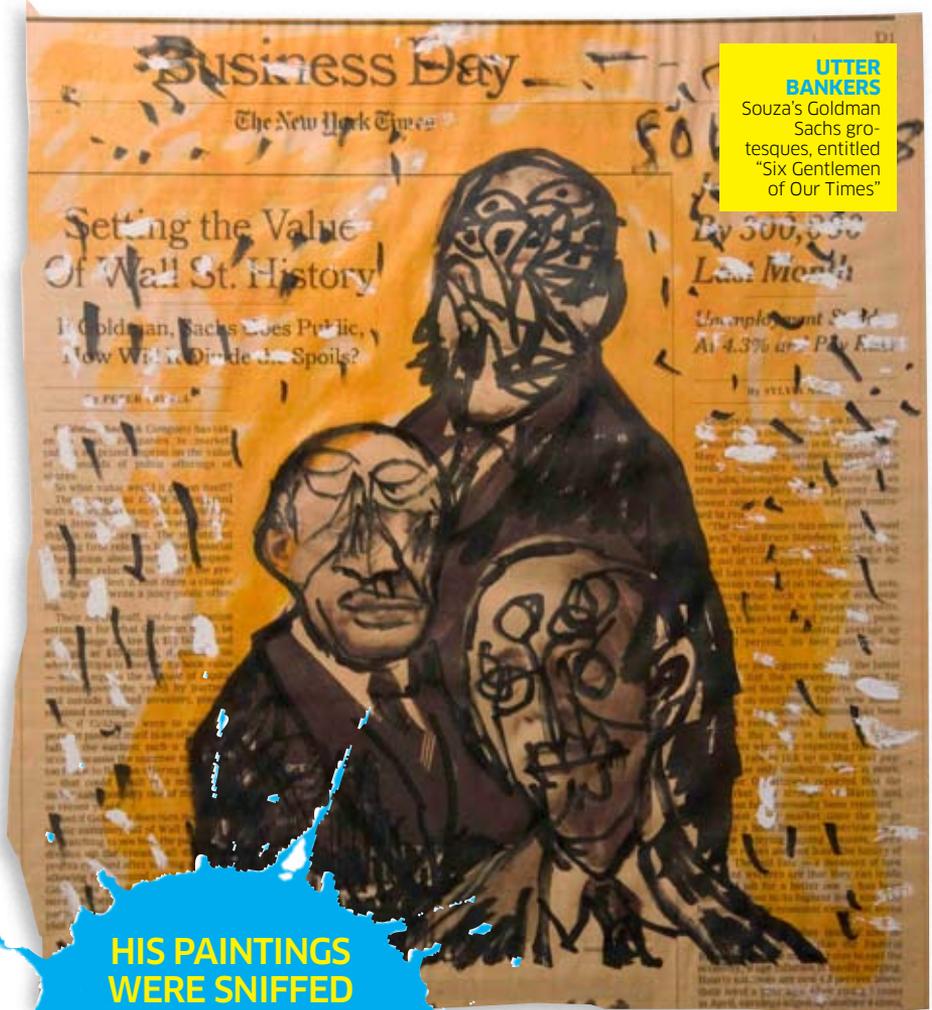
GENTLEMAN MONSTERS

When I walked into Souza’s apartment a few hours later, I lingered as usual at the paintings that lined the entrance corridor, and every other wall, jammed up against each other like so many bathroom tiles. Now years into an intense friendship with Souza, I had learnt not to feel entirely helpless in the presence of his eye-searing, endlessly powerful paintings. The way I coped was to lay myself bare to them one by one, to defeat their paralyzing physical impact on me by digesting them instead. The gnomish Souza alternately blessed and complained about the close attention I gave his paintings each evening. He was secretly pleased, but also always impatient for me to focus on him and his carefully chosen topics of conversation.

I recall, vividly, the exact moment my eyes fell upon the Goldman Sachs grotesques, still drying on the newspaper hacked from the *Times*. I knew immediately that it was an iconic, special artwork. Though Souza hadn’t executed anything quite like it for decades, there was an unmistakable lineage to this political piece that stretched back to the artist’s first years of fame in London.

It’s ironic that this magnificent painter first achieved international notoriety for a piece of writing, an essay he wrote for *Encounter* magazine at the urging of the British poet Stephen Spender, who was an early patron. “Nirvana of a Maggot” was later republished by Villiers (1959) in a brilliant little book of essays and drawings called *Words And Lines*. Some of the drawings in that book were predecessors of the Goldman Sachs grotesques, which Souza had called “Six Gentlemen of Our Times”: self-important men in fine suits, but revealed as afflicted monsters with gnashed teeth and hideous wounds.

Familiar butterflies awoke in my stomach, as I knew that I had to negotiate to buy the Goldman Sachs



UTTER BANKERS
Souza's Goldman Sachs grotesques, entitled "Six Gentlemen of Our Times"

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grotesques. Though I had already made several purchases from the artist by this time, my buying of his paintings remained a sensitive topic between us. In Souza’s oft-stated view, his art was meant to sell for huge sums and hang in the great museums of the world. I was barely out of my twenties, didn’t own my apartment in Manhattan and even a couple of hundred dollars was often beyond my budget – facts which he never failed to mention when this talk about buying his art came up.

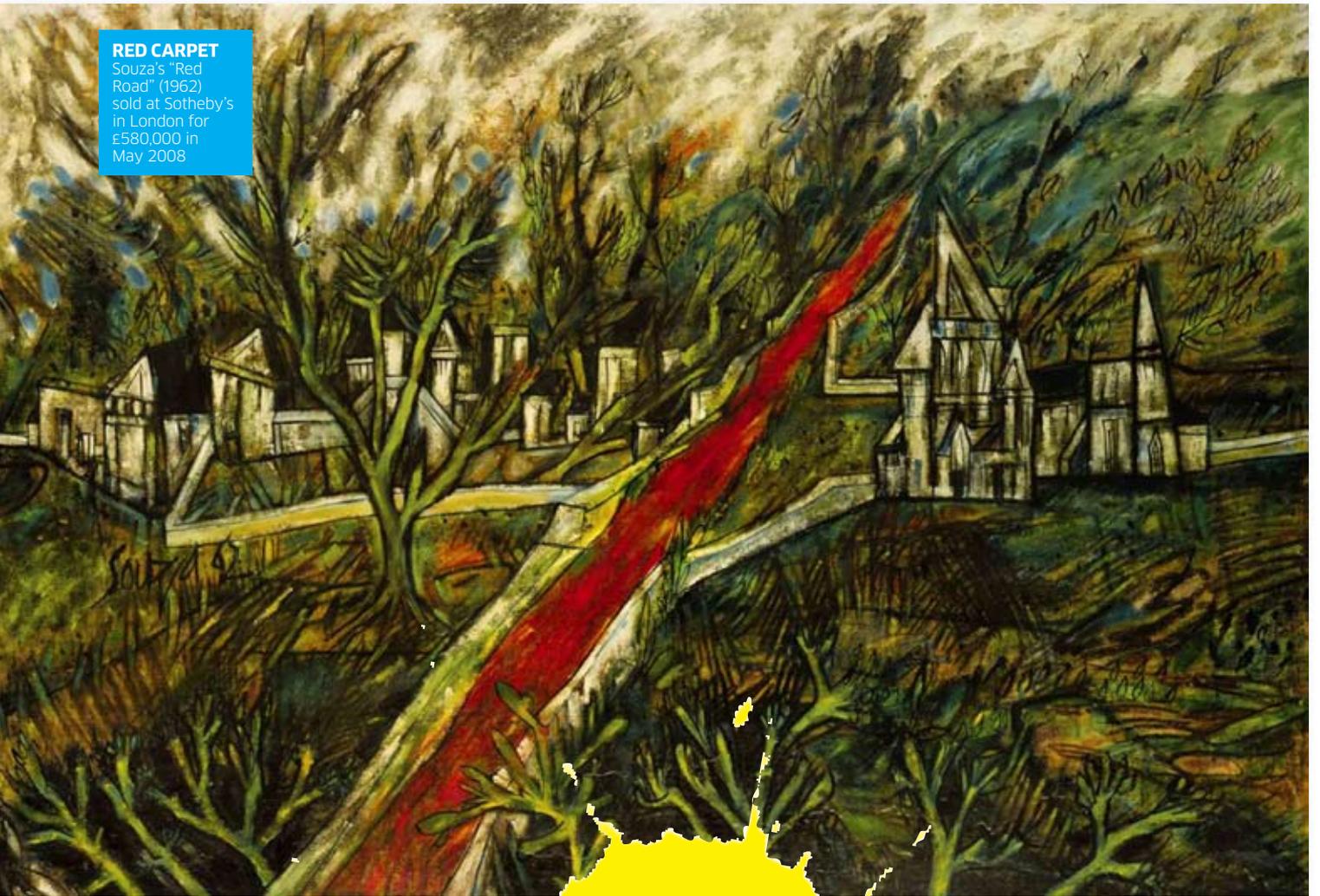
But beyond the posturing, there were basic truths that both of us were aware of, but almost always preferred to avoid mentioning. Souza was perpetually

close to penury throughout the last decades of his life; his bank balance never went above the low five figures. He had made fortunes but lost them all, after three divorces and further travails that cleaned him out again and again. And the other basic fact that never failed to rankle: in his lifetime, Souza was never considered, by Indian collectors, even near the top of the list of desirable artists. Even though he’d been the first Indian to hit the big time in Europe, and was a seminal member of the Progressive Artists’ Movement, his paintings were sniffed at by the same cognoscenti who now pretend they knew his worth all along. The truth is, they did not. In 1998, for the price of any Anjolie Ela Menon painting, you could have bought a dozen Souza masterworks from the Fifties and Sixties.

Until his death in 2002, anyone could walk into Souza’s apartment and take home a spectacular canvas for \$2,000, and often much less. There were huge stacks of drawings and “chemicals” →

RED CARPET

Souza's "Red Road" (1962) sold at Sotheby's in London for £580,000 in May 2008



I KNEW THAT HE WOULD BE GLAD FOR THE SALE. BUT HE WENT THROUGH THE RITUAL OF REFUSING POINT-BLANK

– brilliantly executed alterations of magazine or newspaper images – for the standard price of \$200, with a 50 per cent discount if you bought several. All his life, Souza's exhibitions in India regularly went half-sold or worse, despite prices that stayed stuck under a lakh. The barrenness of the market often left him desperate and hustling for cash, and, therefore, vulnerable to predatory dealers who repeatedly stripped him bare, promising payment that never came for paintings they took away by the van-load.

So, when the time came to express interest in the Goldman Sachs grotesques, I knew he would secretly be glad for the sale. But he went through the ritual of refusing point-blank, of reminding me that I didn't even own a wall, so how could I presume to own another artwork by him? When he finally quoted \$250, it was a bit more than I was comfortable with, but Souza had a knack for making you feel the pinch, of never letting you

take his paintings for granted. I thought ahead to the explanation I'd have to give my wife who, truth be told, was also concerned that we did not have an apartment to call our own. I kept buying paintings for far more than we could afford, when it seemed obvious that they'd never be worth more than the paper or canvas they were executed on.

POST MORTEM

Just four years after I bought the Goldman Sachs grotesques, Francis Newton Souza died while on a visit to Mumbai in 2002. Everything he'd

said about his work came to pass at a bewildering speed. Literally within days of his death, the Indian art world woke up to the value of the paintings they'd sneeringly passed over while he was alive. Souza might have mustered a grim chuckle at how swiftly his paintings smashed the \$10,000 barrier that had never been breached in his lifetime. By the first anniversary of his death, his paintings were changing hands for \$100,000. And in 2005, a Souza sold at auction for over \$1 million, a benchmark that has been repeatedly matched since.

That was also the year I left New York with my wife and two young sons (we have since had another) and relocated to Goa. By then, there was more evidence to back up what Souza had perceived years earlier from a single image in the newspaper – the hugely inflated bubble economy in America was ready to burst, and I decided to return to my homeland to shelter from the →

coming storms. Upon arrival, I installed the Goldman Sachs grotesques above a spare wooden desk, and began a new career as a writer, gaining strength from its analysis of the world I left behind. I wasn't surprised when Wall Street's boom ended in a severe crash and investment banks like Merrill Lynch imploded. Souza had been right, as he had been about the value of his paintings, even as the rest of the world treated him with scorn. To me, he appears like a prophetic and guiding force, even now.

ASBOLUTE FREEDOM

Francis Newton Souza led from the front all his life. The single most significant development in modern Indian art history, the Progressive Artists' Movement, was entirely his creation from its inception in 1948. It is hard to compute the sheer chutzpah of this unknown Goan who, still in his early twenties, rubbished the sentimentality of the art he saw around him and declared: "Today, we paint with absolute freedom of content and techniques – almost anarchic, save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental and eternal laws, of aesthetic order, plastic coordination and colour composition."

But here again Souza was a visionary, and history has proved it. The other members he recruited for the PAM remain the essential Indian artists of the 20th century – Ara, Raza and Husain, and later, Padamsee, Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, Ram Kumar and Krishen Khanna. His first major discovery, Husain, whose paintings soared exponentially above the value of Souza's own during the latter's lifetime, has always made a point of recognizing his Goan mentor's role. "I came into the art world because of him," Husain admitted in sorrow, after hearing of Souza's death in 2002. "He is the most significant Indian painter, an intellectual... an artist whom India should be proud of." His artist peers excepted, Souza's rela-

tionship with the Indian art world was never easy. I heard the slurs associated with his name when I started to look for his paintings in the early Nineties, long before the lure of lucre turned the rhetoric in the other direction. It was partly because of his reflexive stance that the Indian art elite were all beneath him anyway. But the main reason must have been the paintings themselves. Souza never produced showpiece canvases to sit prettily on some drawing-room wall – still the ideal of the Indian art-buying public, no matter how rich.

The disdain he faced from his own people embittered Souza, even as he achieved success in London in the Sixties, where he was often grouped with Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, and major institutions like the Tate Gallery collected his work. He soothed his rage and frustration by taking it out on the canvas. In *Words And Lines* he wrote, "Painting for me is not beautiful. It is as ugly as a reptile. I attack it," and, in real anguish, "Better had I died [after a childhood bout with smallpox], I would not have had to bear an artist's tormented soul, create art in a country that despises her artists and is ignorant of her heritage."

John Berger, the iconic English art →

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Souza's "Birth" sold at auction for a record-breaking \$2.5 million, the most expensive Indian painting ever



historian and critic, was one of the first to understand Souza's singularity, and he championed the young Indian in the London art world of the Fifties. Looking back on that time, Berger wrote: "After 40 years, I still have a vivid memory of Souza's presence, as embodied in both his paintings and his person. If I had to sum up that presence, I would say it was that of a martyr. The confrontation within him between pain and voluptuousness, fury and calm, are comparable, I believe, to those often discovered in martyrdom." This assessment rings true to anyone who knows Souza's oeuvre and the trajectory of his life. He was an artist who suffered for his choices, and the agony is visible in plain sight, on canvas and paper.

I witnessed many of Souza's tribulations first-hand, and it is not easy to bring them to mind, let alone write about them. In the last decade of his life, he became aware that fakes of his artwork were proliferating – crude facsimiles that were being passed off by some of the most reputed gallerists and art dealers in India. He railed against them in letters to dozens of people – and promptly faced a lawsuit for libel in New York, brought by a man who he

had once trusted as a friend. Though he was obviously correct about his claims, the septuagenarian artist could produce no evidence to support them, and had to settle out of court. The hefty settlement brought him perilously close to bankruptcy. It left him a beaten-down old man, with no health insurance and a bank balance that would barely cover his rent for the coming year.

At that point, he decided to sell some of his older paintings, and had an exhibition of them in a New York gallery which was positively reviewed by the fine critic Holland Cotter. But this left his door ajar to rapacious predators. It is horrifying to recall the midnight phone calls; Souza slurring with anguish and too much alcohol: "They came with a van and a bottle of whisky. They've taken so many paintings, I don't even know what. I said no, they would not listen." These particular scumbags are now among the biggest-name dealers in the Indian art world, and they have a great deal to be ashamed about.

JEWEL IN THE DUST

Although the awful memories are indelible, it is hard for me to conceive of Souza as anything other than master

of his own destiny. We now know how right he was about his paintings: they are sold for millions of dollars and hang in the great museum collections in America, the UK and Japan. Just last year, an anonymous buyer (reportedly working for Tina Ambani) bought his stunning "Birth" for more than \$2.5 million, which shattered records. It is by far the most expensive Indian painting ever, and when that record is broken, you can count on another Souza to do it.

But there are other predictions Souza made that have not yet come true, and I think about them often. He told me that his native village of Saligao, in North Goa, would one day honour him in some permanent way. But no acknowledgement is made in Saligao of its great son. He also told me that future generations of Goans would not grow up ignorant of their greatest artist. He believed his major collectors, like Ibrahim Alkazi, would ensure his paintings were hung permanently in Goa, which was always his artistic and cultural lodestone. Souza returned to these themes often in the time I knew him.

As for me, I think I am doing what he anticipated. One evening, as snow fell softly on the streets of Manhattan, I helped my friend clear out some stacks of papers that had accumulated in his bedroom. At the bottom of one pile, we came upon an artwork by a fellow Goan, the genius abstractionist Vasudeo Gaitonde. It had a rip down the middle, but still left me dumbstruck: it was a jewel in the dust.

I looked at the Gaitonde, and Souza looked at me. We saw where it had been signed by his lifelong friend: "For Souza, from Gai." A long minute ticked by, and I was still standing and staring, seeing how Gaitonde had embedded his work with glyphs that recall the earliest art of Goa, Neolithic carvings over 20,000 years old. "You are a hopeless fellow," chortled Souza. "Why are you wasting your time chasing dollars in America? You should be where your heart belongs."

Then, in a spontaneous gesture that still gives me goose bumps, he reached for his marker and inscribed the artwork to me, in turn. From that moment on, wherever I have gone and whatever I have done, it has been my talisman and inspiration. I believe Souza would agree that it means a lot that it now hangs in Goa, our long journey completed. ☺

