



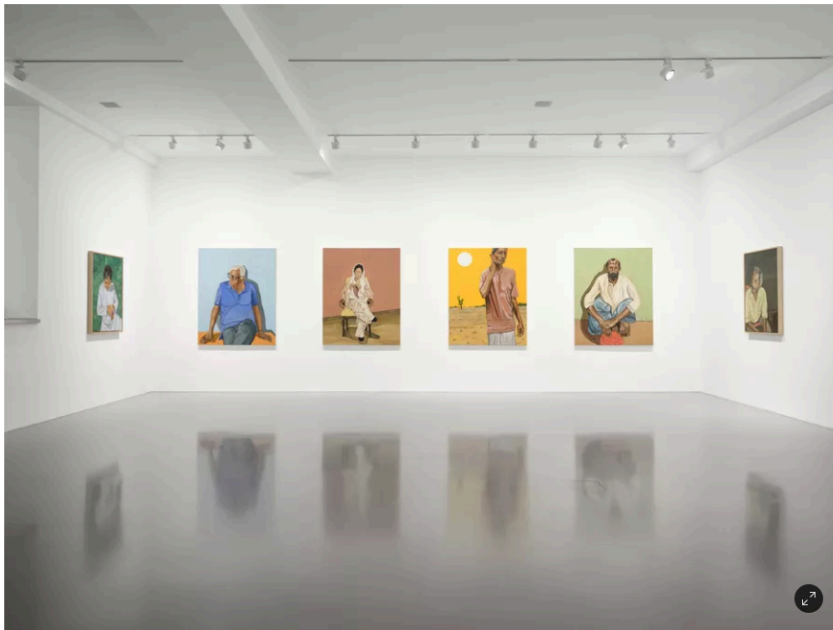
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Art Market

# How Raghav Babbar's Pensive Portraits Have Captured Collectors' Attention

Veena McCoole

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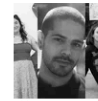
Installation view of "Raghav Babbar: New Portraits" at Nahmad Projects 2023. Photo: Stephen White & Co., London. Courtesy of Nahmad Projects.

Indian artist [Raghav Babbar](#)'s current solo exhibition at London gallery [Nahmad Projects](#), "New Paintings," features portraits of family members and characters in film stills, drawing viewers into his perceptive, psychological portraits. Using thick layers of paint to render expressions and leaving backgrounds mostly sparse, Babbar tells stories of Indian spirituality and heritage through his varied subjects.

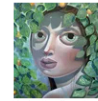
For the artist, painting oil portraits is an especially lengthy process between waiting for layers of heavy impasto to dry, and also articulating the emotional nuance and complexity of his sitters. "It's a great experience when I get to have someone sit in front of me, as I get to know who they are very intimately," Babbar told Artsy. "In India, everyone has their own struggles and life battles, and when I paint their portraits, I focus on emotions that aren't completely resolved."

The results of this process demonstrate an extraordinary

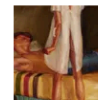
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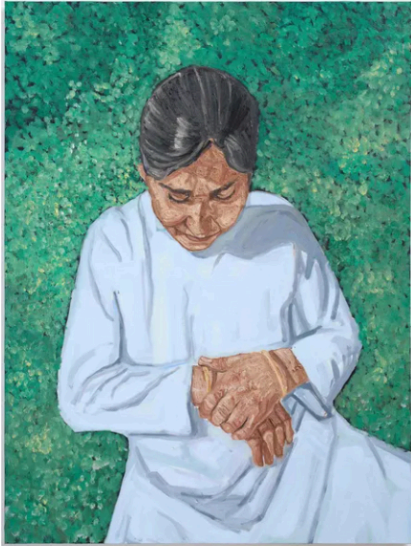


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commitment to documenting the human condition with sensitivity, patience, and empathy, garnering the artist growing recognition even before he completes his MFA at the Royal College of Art this month. Highlight works from the show include *Two migrants on a train* (2023), an arresting glimpse into the movement and color of life in India; and *Dai Ma* (2023), a tender portrait of a woman who lived with the artist while he grew up, gazing down into her hands.



Raghav Babbar  
*Dai Ma*, 2023  
Nahmad Projects  
Price on request



Raghav Babbar  
*Best friend*, 2023  
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The show is Babbar's solo debut in the U.K., and was born from an introduction to Nahmad Projects senior director Lock Kresler by a mutual friend. On view until July 21st, the exhibition attracted around 450 visitors on the weekend following its opening. Nearly all works were placed before the show's opening according to the gallery, and sold £30,000–£200,000 to buyers in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the U.S. Institutional placements in the U.S. and Asia are currently being finalized and future exhibition plans with the artist are already in progress.

Demand for the show resonates with the artist's recent success on the secondary market, with an average selling price of more than 22 times their mid-estimates according to the Artsy Price Database. A number of his works have sold for six figures in the past year, including at auctions in London and Hong Kong. This year, sales include *The Coal Seller* (2020), a record price for the artist and beating Sotheby's estimated range of £20,000–£30,000 (approx. \$25,509–\$38,263) with a final hammer price of £609,600 (approx. \$733,528) in March. At a May auction, Phillips New York sold *Warden* (2021) for \$165,100, more than tenfold its lower estimate of \$12,000.





Raghav Babbar  
*Two migrants on a train, 2023*  
Nahmad Projects  
Price on request



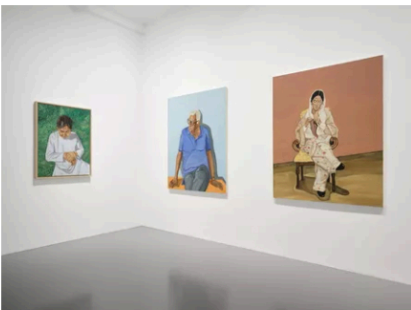
Raghav Babbar  
*The Search, 2023*  
Nahmad Projects  
Price on request

However, Kresler emphasizes the importance of placing works in “great collections, homes, and institutions” to ensure that early-career artists like Babbar minimize exposure to what can be a volatile market.

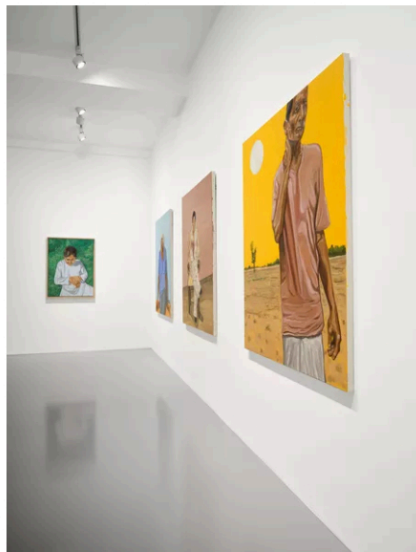
And while collectors are racing to snap up his works and join a waiting list, the artist is far from in a rush. “Everything in my work is about time,” said Babbar. “Nothing works without patience in my practice, since the thick layers of paint that I apply take weeks to dry. In taking my time, I allow the painting to naturally grow and evolve on its own.”

While name recognition with mid-career artists can be a factor for contemporary art collectors, Kresler observed an almost visceral reaction to the artist’s gallery debut from new and established collectors alike, despite his nascent career.

“We were quite taken aback at the amount of interest that came through, and people just seem exceptionally drawn to certain works of his: Someone emailed us about a [work that] reminded them of their grandmother, for instance,” Kresler said. “His [artwork] titles can be somewhat cryptic, and the power of that is enhanced when people walk around the exhibition with [Babbar] and he unveils who the sitter is and why he chose them.”



Installation view of “Raghav Babbar: New Portraits” at Nahmad Projects 2023. Photo: Stephen White & Co., London. Courtesy of Nahmad Projects.



Installation view of “Raghav Babbar: New Portraits” at Nahmad Projects 2023. Photo: Stephen White & Co., London. Courtesy of Nahmad Projects.



Whether it's a portrait of a Bollywood movie star or a former roommate, there is a universality in Babbar's work that resonates with many. "I'm most passionate about the small details in people's faces that most of us don't even notice," the artist explained. "I mix something so quick, like a camera snapshot, with a long process of heavy impasto, and from that, I hope to create something very authentic that can only be achieved through the slow act of paint."

Born near Delhi and having traveled through India's northern states near Tibet and the Himalayas, Babbar's emotional approach to portraiture is influenced by the ancient spiritual beliefs and religious practices—as well as the vivid colors and textures—of his homeland. "The powerful traditions passed on in India really move me to focus on my home," he said. "I want the whole world to look at us and look at who we really are: the positives, and negatives."



Raghav Babbar  
*Moonlight*, 2023  
Nahmad Projects  
Price on request



Raghav Babbar  
*Barati (Groomsmen)*, 2023  
Nahmad Projects  
Price on request

During his time at LaSalle College of the Arts in Singapore earning his bachelor of fine art degree, Babbar focused on painting family members and close relatives. Upon relocating to London, he has become more reliant on secondhand imagery, archival materials, and Bollywood film stills to inspire his work, taking more creative liberties with reappropriating image elements and melding together sources of inspiration. "I spend weeks painting people that I don't know personally, bringing them to life through my painting as if they were family members," he said.

Today, Babbar continues to paint at his Battersea studio in South London, and hopes to challenge his shy disposition by traveling to new places and learning about different cultures. "I hope to go to every corner of the world to be able to showcase the beauty of my country, and hope that people are influenced to visit India," he said. "I want the Indian art world to be inspiring to more artists."

*Portrait of Raghav Babbar* courtesy of Raghav Babbar and Nahmad Projects. ■

Veena McCoole

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