

FINANCIAL TIMES



# how to spend it

JULY 2004

**CAN JAFRI CLEAN UP...  
AND PUT EMIN AND HIRST  
IN THE SHADE?**

NEWSPAPER  
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# COULD SACHA CLEAN UP?

**P**ainters have lost out to fried eggs and formaldehyde in the battle for public attention waged by conceptual artists over the past decade. But not for much longer, if Sacha Jafri has his way.

At 27, Jafri is remarkable. His large-scale oil on canvas paintings – a dreamlike fusion of colour, movement and narrative – command price tags from £15,000 to £60,000 plus; Jafri has also managed to raise \$1.9m for charity through sales of his paintings. His buyers include Prince Albert of Monaco, former jockey Richard Dunwoody and Kevin Spacey, and Arcadia group owner Philip Green paid £55,000 for two Jafri paintings at a charity auction. His private views, meanwhile, attract the likes of Stella

**Sacha Jafri is on a mission to restore painting to the forefront of British art. Could he put Hirst and Emin in the shade, asks Jane Hughes. Photographs by Steve Double.**

McCartney, Kate Moss and Jeremy Irons. Clearly, he's a talented chap who knows all the right people. But while acknowledging the role of the Young British Artists in taking art to a wider audience, Jafri is on a mission to bring the painter back into the limelight. "It's time to move away from an obsession with newness and shock and towards a focus on the transcendent qualities of art," he says. "I'd like my paintings to elevate the senses and seduce the spirit."

Jafri sees himself as initiating a new genre of painting he describes as "magical

realism", a term borrowed from literature. The essence of his pictures, painted in a stream of consciousness, is, he says, to "represent mood and narrative in a real environment but with a magical twist inspired by the world of dreams".

Even though he has plenty to say about the content of his work, Jafri prefers to use the canvas as a mirror to allow people to see what they want to. If his clients want to find out more, he'll invite them back to his studio for a glass of wine.

**Above: the artist Sacha Jafri in his south London studio.**

Cultivating such relationships and retaining his artistic independence are both important to Jafri – he even delivers his pictures personally. He has opened a gallery in a trendy south London street to show his own work, curated by his girlfriend Olivia Hill, a model who has a background in art history, and that of other emerging young painters.

Although not yet a household name, Jafri's agenda to bring about a "renaissance of the painter" has brought him to the attention of Channel 4 and future television projects are under discussion. He's painted in front of live audiences, given talks in schools and looks set to launch an arts arm of the Music Education



# Impress your fridge



Bollinger Grande Année 1996

Consortium, founded by Evelyn Glennie and Julian Lloyd Webber.

Meanwhile, he's got a scoop on his hands. For three months from September, Jafri's gallery is showcasing a collection of rare Andy Warhol original prints alongside his own work. The Warhols, including a sky-blue Marilyn Monroe, sporting icons and Chairman Mao, belong to Austrian art dealer Rudolf Budya.

"I thought that a Warhol-meets-Jafri exhibition would provide a fascinating contrast of methods and styles," says Budya. "The energy and movement in Jafri's paintings makes him one of the more exciting artists around today and, although his work is fundamentally different from Warhol's, it shows the same obsession with colour."

In person, Jafri radiates enthusiasm and boldness. But there's also a rigour to his thinking that belies his easygoing manner and the boyish good looks that secured him work as a model for Diesel and Gucci to fund his studies. Above all, he's an eternal optimist. "My desire to see the bright side verges on the obsessive," he says. "Most of my paintings contain a conflict between the serious and the sense of being uplifted."

According to Chris Townsend, who lectures in contemporary art at Royal Holloway, Jafri is capable of "doing something that would surprise us all". Townsend, who is writing a book on new art from London, says Jafri is doing his best work so far. "Much of Sacha's early work contained too many ideas, but he's started to pare things down and find his own style and direction. He's technically very strong. There's a real battle going on in his paintings to reconcile the tensions between form and narrative. The fact that he's chosen to put himself out there and grow up in public creates a buzz and makes him a very exciting artist to watch."

For Tanya Todd Warmoth, owner of the King's Road and Todd Warmoth galleries where Jafri's work is shown, he has star quality. "Other artists may be equally talented but Sacha has the advantages of being young, trendy and passionate about what he wants to achieve," he says. "His work has moved from realism and highly figurative representations to a more playful, almost abstract concentration on the magical element of magical realism." While cautioning that Jafri still has a long way to go, Todd Warmoth says his latest paintings, such as "One Summer's Evening When Our Souls Danced" and "The Lovers", show "a beautiful treatment of space and form and a great confidence with colour and texture".

Young artists tend to wear their influences on their sleeves and, as Townsend points out, Jafri's work contains elements of Jackson Pollock and Francis Bacon. He's also heavily influenced by De Chirico's portrayal of space and Van Gogh's and Kandinsky's sense of colour and energy. But, says Jafri, it's probably Pollock and the writer William Burroughs who have had most impact on his method.

"I paint from the subconscious and I'm constantly fuelling myself through experience – the people I meet, the architecture I see and the places I go," he says. "I've got severe dyslexia but my visual memory is

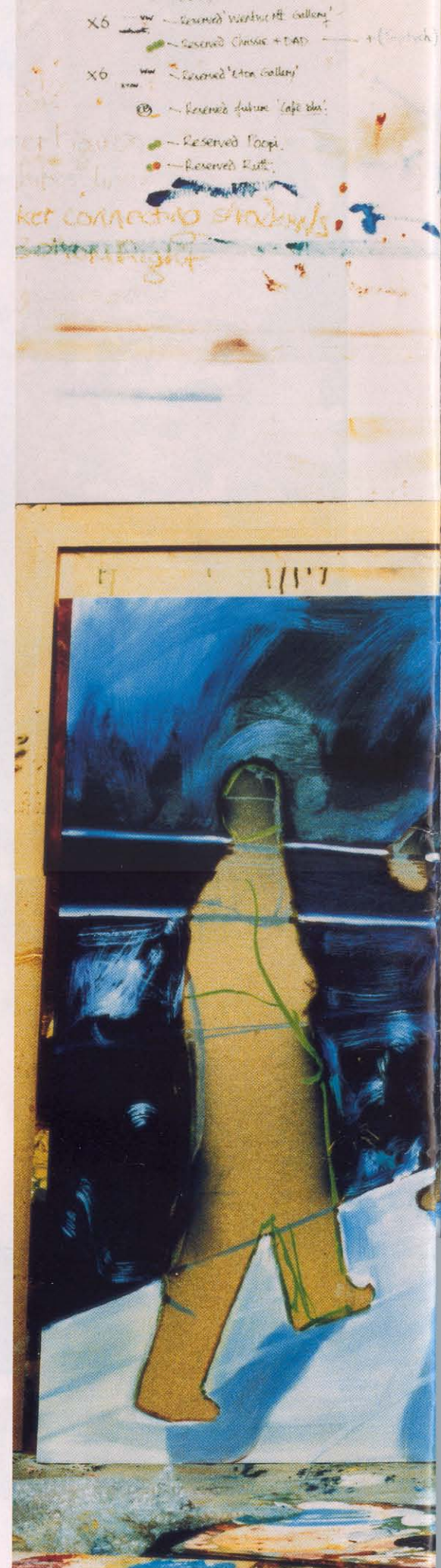
**Main picture: Jafri with some of his unfinished studio pieces. Near right: "Kafka's Waiting Room". Far right: "One Summer's Evening When Our Souls Danced".**

almost photographic. And I can sit in a restaurant and hear all the conversations going on in the room."

Before starting to paint, Jafri sits in front of the canvas and moves things

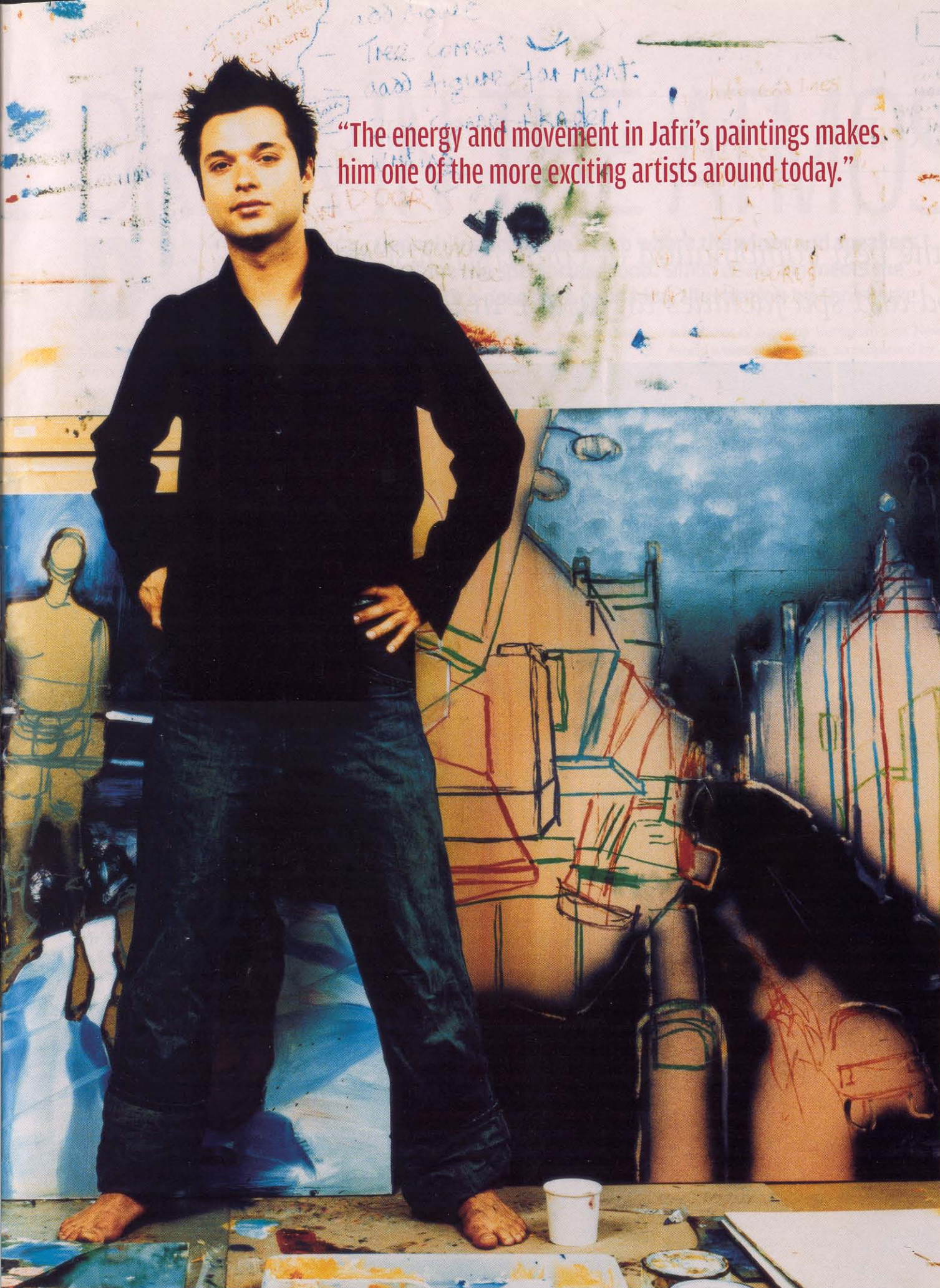
around with his eyes. "It could be eight hours before I begin and then every mark and movement will be exactly as I want it," he says. "There are no rules, I might use a stick or a brush or my hand."

Bearing in mind the tepid reviews that greeted "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida", the show from established YBAs, as well as Charles

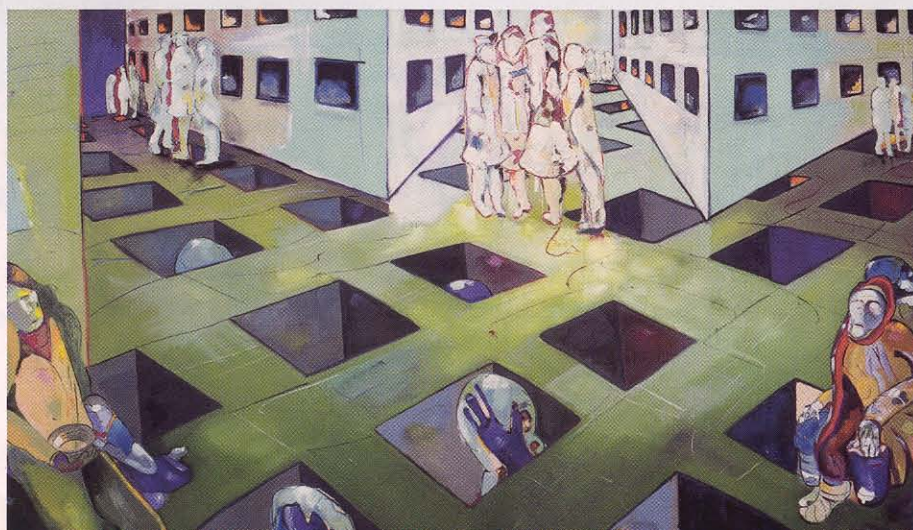




**"The energy and movement in Jafri's paintings makes him one of the more exciting artists around today."**



Saatchi's "New Blood" exhibition, Jafri appears to have a keen sense of timing. According to Laura Bartlett, a freelance curator formerly of the Gagosian Gallery in London, there is a growing sense that painting is coming back into vogue. "It's probably a reaction against the harsh realities presented by Brit Art but a lot of young artists are getting back to the physical and emotional process of painting," she says. "I think Sacha pitches this new spirit very well and the freshness and poetry of his more abstract pieces is impressive. I am slightly sceptical of labels like magical realism but there does



seem to be a dreamlike, narrative vibe emerging in painting now."

Jafri was born in London to a French mother and Indian father, who divorced when he was 15. His father, who helped set up international Holiday Inns before becoming a restaurateur, dabbled in painting. But it was his mother, a nurse turned psychotherapist, who provided the main input into Sacha's early art. "Having dyslexia meant I found it difficult to communicate but my mother helped channel my frustration into creativity," he says. "Drawing and painting was a release but she also encouraged me to make things,



without giving any directions that might have restricted the way they turned out."

Jafri won an art scholarship to Eton and later studied at Oxford University. Since then, he's had commercially successful exhibitions in Europe, Dubai and Japan and has been invited to do a group show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Meanwhile, his openness and sociability take him in unconventional directions. Last year, Prince Albert of Monaco invited Jafri to launch the ATP senior tennis tour in Monte Carlo with a private view. Jafri created a painting over the handprints of assembled tennis stars live on television. It fetched £25,000 at a charity auction.

The idea caught on. Jafri did another charity painting when the ATP tour came to London. More are planned, plus 12 paintings exploring themes around the concept of time and the spinal cord, in aid of Spinal Research. It's not the kind of work that attracts critical recognition but it does expose new audiences to the thrill of painting and Jafri gets a kick out of it: "I love working in front of an audience. It's incredibly energising to produce something within such a limited time. I concentrate so hard that I find myself almost in a trance."

In "Kafka's Waiting Room", Jafri portrays "creatives" as individuals moving through a grid which represents the structure of society, while groups of bureaucrats are held up by the same grid. Yet it's a small group of people at the back, representing explorers and adventurers, who gain fulfilment through experiences that he feels are most free. Clearly, for Jafri, there is more than one way to create a sensation. ♦

"Warhol Meets Jafri" is at the Bermondsey Street Gallery, London SE1 (020-7407 8522), by appointment from September 23. King's Road Gallery, 436 King's Road, London SW10 (020-7351 1367). Todd Warmoth Gallery, 17 Ryder Street, London SW1 (020-7925 2986).