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So much for stereotypes

By Rachel Spence

The India Art Fair drew international buyers – and exploded many preconceptions



'Frida Sits on Double Pepsi' (2013) by Pakpoom Silaphan, at Scream Gallery

"I'm puzzled by the way you hang on to stereotypes of the rest and the west – aren't we beyond that now?" The question, raised by a member of the audience at the Speaker's Forum at the India Art Fair in Delhi last week, was a response to papers – notably by Spanish art historian Estrella de Diego – that had critiqued the west-centric bias of an art world where a show at an institution such as Tate or MoMA is still required if an artist is to be taken seriously on the global stage.

Such injustices are inarguably present. Yet in Delhi last week, both within the fair and in the city beyond, artists overturned cultural stereotypes with imagination, intellect and joie de vivre. Meanwhile the presence of the likes of Tate, MoMA and the Art Institute of Chicago reminded us that those museums need artists from afar just as much as artists need their approval.

As for patronage, contemporary art's wealthiest collectors come from the Gulf, Turkey, China and India rather than New York, London and Paris. So far, they are buying primarily from their own regions – but who is to say that once they have exhausted their supply, India won't

figure on their radar as strongly, if not more so, than art made in Manhattan or Shoreditch?

Not Christie's, that's for sure. This week's news of the closure of Haunch of Venison, the gallery belonging to François Pinault (who also owns the saleroom) not only failed to quash criticism that mixing primary and secondary markets was a conflict of interest it also pointed up that auction houses just might not be very good at nurturing artists' careers and selling works straight out of the studio. This is the arena traditionally left to the galleries and dealers.

Nevertheless, Christie's has entered into a unique collaboration with the India Art Fair. So delicate is its character that Sandy Angus, former owner of Art HK, who together with his partner Will Ramsay bought a 49 per cent stake in IAF two years ago, denied that it was a partnership – until it was pointed out that the press release describes it as such.

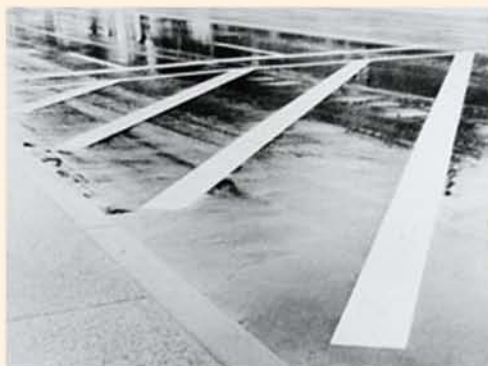
Whatever the wording, the reality is that the auction house invited 30 of its most suitable collectors to Delhi. Including such influential figures as Paula Al Askari from Abu Dhabi and Leyla Alaton from Istanbul, plus others from Mexico, Geneva, Switzerland, the US and the UK, the group was lodged in the Zen-luxurious Lodhi hotel and squired through a glittering whirl of collectors' homes, artists' studios and parties by Amin Jaffer, Christie's Asian art director, whose suave, knowledgeable glamour has made him a celebrity in his own right.

The fact that the auction house is prepared to go to such expense – and risk the wrath of primary market purists – indicates not just the market’s potential but also the widespread anxiety that it might not grow unassisted. “It is difficult to see contemporary Indian art [outside India],” observes Jaffer, as he explains the reasoning behind the Delhi expedition. “By ... visiting the fair and collateral events ... you come away with a good understanding of the range and quality. That’s our objective because for the Indian market to grow, you cannot rely on Indian collectors.”

Indeed, the sharp decline of India’s art market since its peak in 2008 meant that a mood of nervy agitation prevailed in the opening hours of the fair, now in its fifth year. Several major western galleries – White Cube, Lisson and Hauser & Wirth – were absent. Sales tax was at 14.5 per cent and certain gallerists complained of the 20 per cent deposit on their works.

Yet most agreed that the fair was the best yet. “I have been a few times and I was pleasantly surprised,” said Tate’s international art curator Jessica Morgan. “The whole fair felt really professional.” A more spacious layout aided contemplation. The notorious acres of gaudy, platitudinous painting were corralled chiefly into one tent.

Paradoxically, the absence of crowd-pulling international artists (last year, White Cube showed Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Marc Quinn) created space for a host of works by less familiar talent. Much of it exploded the myth of south Asian art as colourful, ornamental and wedded to the figure. Morgan, seeking out works for Tate’s newly formed South Asian acquisitions committee, was taken with 3D models of photographs of his father by Naeem Mohaiemen, who works out of Dhaka and New York, at Calcutta’s Experimenter gallery. Also on that booth was “Aerial Studies”, a series of images taken from a rare map of the Saudi Aramco oil station where the artist, 32-year-old Hajra Waheed, grew up.



Untitled photograph (1970s) by Nasreen Mohamedi

Encouragingly, these works sold strongly, with Waheed’s piece gone by the end of the fair. Sheba Chhachhi’s intense black-and-white photographs of women ascetics sold on the first day at Mumbai’s Volte gallery. Equally rapidly snapped up were Hetal Chudasama’s dusky blue abstracts.

Such work begs for contemplation in a calmer setting. Fortunately, the fair acts as a catalyst for exhibitions across Delhi. Now in its second year, the Skoda art prize was on display in the National Museum of Modern Art in a rare example in India’s contemporary scene of a public-private tie-up. Its four-strong shortlist – Shilpa Gupta, Srinivasa Prasad, LN Tallur, and the collective CAMP – all displayed an imaginative yet unfussy rigour that should be compulsory viewing for Tate’s Turner Prize jury.

Against a discouraging backdrop – the Kochi Biennale was criticised for its low proportion of female artists, and Delhi has been snared in ferocious protests over women’s rights – exceptionally talented women both as makers of art and architects of its structures dominated the week. Nowhere was this more evident than at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Opened in January 2010 by the eponymous collector and philanthropist, its location in a mall in the Saket district is no preparation for what lies within.



Amrita Sher-Gil's 'Self-Portrait with Easel' (1930s), both showing at Kiran Nadar Museum

Mischievous visitors could read "Line of Control", Subodh Gupta's mushroom-cloud of steel pots and pans that is his cry of fury at the tension between India and Pakistan, as the macho gatekeeper to the feminine citadel within. Two immaculately thought-out shows by Amrita Sher-Gil and Nasreen Mohamedi act as a triumphant retelling of Indian modernism, usually a male bastion. From Sher-Gil, a figurative painter who died at the age of 28 in 1941, come nudes and self-portraits that wed a Gauguinesque line to singularly expressive vulnerability. Most astonishing is Karachi-born Mohamedi, who, by the time she died in 1990, had translated the Utopian geometry of Malevich by way of Sufi mysticism into shimmering monochromes. A third, collective show of seven contemporary female artists, including the haunting photographs of Dayanita Singh, announces that today's women artists are in little danger of eclipse.

Mohamedi's estate is in the custody of Deepak Talwar, a gallerist who eschews art fairs on the grounds that "seeing too much art too fast does neither collector nor artist any favours". Talwar's Delhi space is home to another unmissable retrospective by Delhi-based

Sheila Makhijani. From the exquisite grid painted on a wall on the roof terrace to quietly urgent explosions of tangerine Sumi ink and gouache drawings – acrobatic ladders of line and colour – her awesome dexterity reminds one that the best work simultaneously respects and defies its boundaries.

In an art world where borders have never been more porous, that may be a useful lesson for our times.