

From the San Jose Mercury News

The New Art of India

By Jack Fischer

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When Columbia University economics professor Prajit Dutta first contemplated opening a gallery for contemporary Indian art, he remembers with a laugh, his wife was fairly sure he was having a midlife crisis.

That was in 2000, when there wasn't exactly a clamor for the work, some of which dated back to the 1940s and had never sparked much interest among collectors, Indian or otherwise. So Dutta and his brother Projjal, an architect, and their wives decided to start low budget and joined the craze for Internet business sites with www.artsindia.com.

But contemporary Indian art, it soon happened, was no dog food, which led to one of the more spectacular flameouts of the dot-com era.

Thanks in part to the phenomenal growth of wealth among some of their countrymen and to shifting values in the art world, the Duttas found themselves on the leading edge of a global bull market. They opened a bricks-and-mortar gallery in New York City in 2002.

Last year, with local investors, they opened ArtsIndia West in Palo Alto, the first gallery outside New York specializing in contemporary Indian art. Through June 19, it is offering "Ashta Nayak: Eight Pioneers of Indian Art," featuring works by the Progressive Artists Group, formed in the 1940s, around the time of Indian independence, by artists who increasingly are considered the country's modern masters.

Interest in the Progressives has prompted auction prices for work by them and others to skyrocket in the past several years, up as much as 600 percent in some cases, according to those who have studied auction records.

Perhaps more crucially, it is sparking more than a flicker of interest on the part of several modern art institutions, where cultural arbiters' seals of approval are more important than the sometimes-fickle marketplace for long-term acceptance.

The signs of interest in contemporary Indian art are widespread. Consider:

- Next month, the Lucas Artists Programs at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga and the director of its artist residency program, Gordon Knox, will play a leading role in bringing the work of six contemporary Indian artists to the Venice Biennale -- the first exhibition of Indian artists in 25 years at the prestigious gathering.
- In New York, through June 5, the Asia Society and Queens Museum of Art are co-sponsoring "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India," billed as "the first major U.S. exhibition of contemporary Indian art."
- This fall, the Tate Modern in London will open a show of the paintings of F.N. Souza, one of the Progressives showing at ArtsIndia West. It will be the Tate's first solo show of a contemporary Indian artist.

- The April issue of Forbes Collector, the financial magazine's newsletter for art and antiques collectors, dedicated its cover to a story on the "giddy investment fervor" surrounding contemporary Indian art.
- The number of galleries in New York showing contemporary Indian art has grown from two, when ArtsIndia opened its doors, to six today.

Why the sudden interest?

Srinivas Reddy, a professor of marketing at the University of Georgia in Athens and a modest collector who has made a formal study of the emergence of the market for contemporary Indian art, cites three factors: the quality of the work itself; the value, because prices are still low compared with European and American art; and a growing population of collectors.

"The quality is on par with some of the best work you will see anywhere in the world," Reddy said. "It's also in the early stages of appreciation even though it's gone up tremendously in the past five years."

Reddy said that on the very day he was speaking last week, www.saffronart.com, an upstart Web site that has its own New York gallery and is now the leading online auctioneer of contemporary Indian art, sold \$3.7 million of work. That followed a \$2 million auction on the Web site in March. And that's compared with \$5.6 million from all such auctions for all of last year, Reddy said.

The Progressives generally are considered to include M.F. Husain, now 90 and the de facto dean of the group, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara and the late F.N. Souza and V. Gaitonde. All but Ara are in the ArtsIndia West show, which also includes four artists who, while not formally members of the Progressives, were part of the scene: Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee and the late J. Swaminathan.

Predominantly painters, they shared a historic moment in the evolution of Indian art. Flush with the victory of independence from Britain, they wanted to create art that was at once indigenous but that also partook of what was happening internationally. Though diverse in style, they often shared an interest in vivid, Fauvist colors, cubism and both geometric and gestural abstraction.

Younger artists, like the members of the Rags Media Collective, a trio recently in residence at Montalvo that will be among those showing in Venice, work in such new media as computer-altered video. They are represented at the Bose Pacia Modern gallery in New York City, which specializes in emerging Indian art.

The galleries have tapped into a broader phenomenon that is unfolding -- the globalization of art. No longer a market dominated by the whims of New York and European critics and collectors, it is an increasingly multivalent world, with art recognized as important and innovative bubbling up everywhere from China to Latin America to Eastern Europe. Another example: the show featuring contemporary Chinese art that closed earlier this month at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University.

Part of this shift is thanks to the Internet making global communication so effortless, but another part is being driven by the emergence of wealthy patrons from India and parts of the Third World. The most recent Forbes list of billionaires includes a dozen Indians, and Reddy says the more than 2 million Indian natives now living in the United States have the highest levels of education and median income of any ethnic group in the country.

In a way, it is fitting that marketing and economics professors should be so intimately involved in the phenomenon.

Both the Dutta brothers, who are the sons of a noted Indian art critic and the former director of the National Academy of Fine Arts in New Delhi, and Reddy acknowledge that the current market for contemporary Indian art is driven as much by investment as by connoisseurs.

The ArtsIndia Web site includes a presentation on investing in contemporary Indian art that determines the price per square inch of canvas paid for some of the most prominent artists' work and weights the average by the number of transactions for each artist -- not exactly an aesthete's approach.

A significant part of the collector base is motivated primarily by the pleasure taken in the art itself, and in cultural heritage, Prajit Dutta and Reddy say, but that raises another point about the market: It remains dominated by Indian collectors. For the work to become truly mainstream, everyone acknowledges, it will need to draw collectors from outside the ethnic group.

Dutta, who of course has a vested interest in saying so, thinks the embrace of the work by such mainstream institutions as the Tate will lead to broader interest -- as will the rising prices.

``For non-Indian collectors, it's not worth keeping track until it goes up in value," he said. ``But once it gets into the \$100,000 to \$200,000 range, then they may think it's something they can't ignore."

Ashta Nayak:

Eight Pioneers of Indian Art

Where: ArtsIndia West, 535 Bryant St., Palo Alto

When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays

Through: June 19

Admission: Free

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