

# Hunt for a Native Hero

**I**N AN UNPRECEDENTED flurry of activity over the past two years, dealers, curators and artists from across the globe have been criss-crossing India looking for art. And in turn, a busy clique of Indian artists have been going abroad for major shows and festivals. For example, Bhupen Khakhar, a Baroda-based narrative painter, had a solo show at Madrid's prestigious Reina Sofia in May, a first for any Indian artist. And this retrospective was followed by another solo by Mumbai-based Atul Dodiya.

The arts centre in Vienna recently held a show in digital art, video, photography and paintings by 11 Indian artists, padded by seminars and screenings. In Thailand, Project 304, founded in 1996 to bridge the gap between art and society, has invited Indian artists to Bangkok for an interactive show.

Artists going to individual residencies and multi-continental

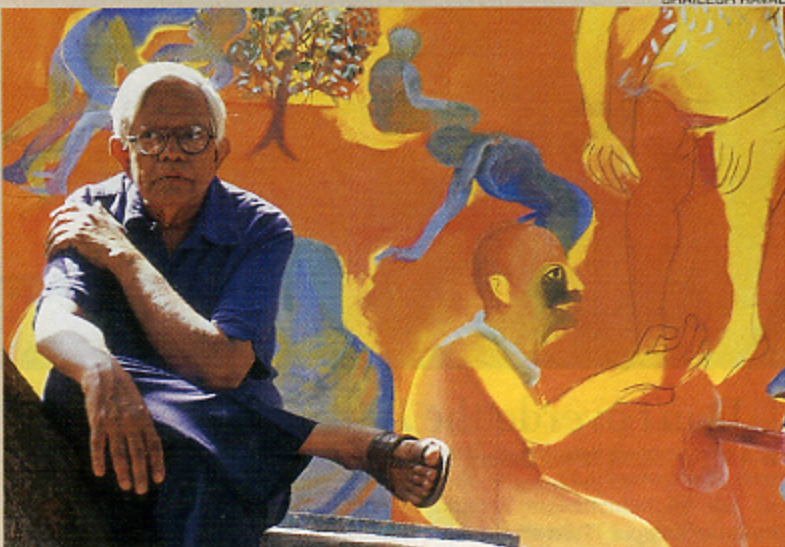
## Even as art curators drop by to scout for new talent, Indian artists are looking out for themselves

group exhibitions abroad are in greater numbers. So why the sudden interest in India? In the new climate of interconnectivity, curatorial endeavours the world over require regional representation in large, mainstream festivals. Another reason could be the hunt for the next Noble Savage of the Asian art world, a search for the exotic other.

"Most institutions and western curators have already dealt with China and Japan and discovered su-

has made superstars of many Chinese, Japanese and other Asian, African or South Americans working in the West. Ranjit Hoskote, an international art curator, discounts the superstar theory saying that the era of "parachute curators" who come scouting for art is over. "Now there is a general understanding local history can't be legislated from outside," he says. "And there is the need to involve regional curators in any kind of effort."

SHAILESH RAVAL



**GETTING THERE:** As they exhibit in prestigious international galleries and their paintings fetch high prices, Dodiya and Khakhar (above) remain in demand

perstars," says Peter Nagy, American curator and co-owner of Delhi's Nature Morte Gallery. "Now they are looking at India."

This implies the recognition of ethnographic images purely on western terms... a Mowgli who adapts comfortably to a curious New York. But most Indian artists feel they cannot be truly successful without western sanction.

"Let's face it," says an artist declining to be named to preserve his reputation with art critics, "I work primarily to impress western curators. I have to balance it carefully so that just the right amount of Indianness comes out and the guy finds it interesting enough."

They have models to follow. A recent delight in diasporic activity

Hoskote himself is engaged in a project called Under Construction of the Japan Foundation that involves eight curators from an equal number of countries in East Asia. Their efforts will culminate in an exhibition in Japan in December. Last year, Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha curated the Century City show at London's Tate Modern.

The Fukuoka Triennial, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and the Asia-Pacific Triennale in Brisbane are also doing their bit to put Indian art on the world map. As Geetha Mehra of Sakshi Art Gallery puts it, the stage is set for India to be a part of the Venice Biennial, the greatest art festival of the world. Could be soon.

—Anshul Avijit in Delhi



HEMANT PITHWA