

FINDERS KEEPERS contemporary indian photography





Indian photography is a nascent and undervalued market that offers an arresting vision of the changing subcontinent. Gareth Harris meets a collector and his dealer. Portrait by Aditya Kapoor.

Leading New Delhi-based art dealer Peter Nagy clearly remembers the first time he met Nitin Bhayana: "I opened my very first show at the Nature Morte gallery in the Indian capital on November 15, 1997. The next morning, this young guy sits down across from me at the reception desk and starts asking me what I think about Gerhard Richter and many other Western artists. He bought one painting by Nataraj Sharma from that very first show and we've been good friends ever since."

At that time, Bhayana was a budding, informed art buyer collecting paintings

(he started collecting photography three years later). Not only had he worked for the leading London dealer Anthony d'Offay in the mid-1990s, but was also the scion of a New Delhi-based family which owns one of India's most successful construction companies. "I run my family business, and collect art for myself and my family," says Bhayana, who tellingly equates his business pursuits with aesthetic interests.

Bhayana's parents, Suresh and Saroj, had also made their mark on the art scene by creating a collection of Indian painting

Above: Peter Nagy (left) and Nitin Bhayana at Nagy's gallery with Singh's *Shiva Text*, circa 2004.

from the late 1950s to the 1980s, including works by members of the Progressive Artists' Group, such as MF

Husain, FN Souza and Tyeb Mehta. "Nitin was buying a substantial amount of Indian contemporary art in the late 1990s," says Connecticut-born Nagy. "But it was almost exclusively painting by the younger generation, such as Atul Dodiya, Nataraj Sharma and Surendran Nair. These painters were supported by the art market within India at the time," adds Nagy.

But the Bhayanas are not unadventurous collectors. Nitin's parents may well have

snapped up works by post-war Indian art stalwarts, but they amassed works on paper by the same artists "which was unusual in India", Nagy stresses.

Bhayana's approach to collecting has been equally audacious with his move into the market of contemporary Indian photography in 2000 – a development prompted by Nagy's early shows at Nature Morte gallery in New Delhi, which combined photography with painting and sculpture. Mixing the media on display sent ripples through the conservative New Delhi art scene, recalls Nagy, who added that "there was virtually no market for photography inside India".

This bolstered Bhayana, who credits Nagy ("a blessing sent from heaven") with transforming how art was sold in the capital. Photography proved to be a natural extension to his collection and in 2002 he started buying multiple prints, concentrating on Dayanita Singh, Sheba Chhachhi and Ketaki Seth. Bangalore-born Pushpamala N, who is in the Saatchi collection, is another favourite with her daring Cindy Sherman-esque images (pictured, above) in which she appears in various guises.

"I debated a lot before collecting multiples in general but Peter was really there to guide me through," says Bhayana. "My repertoire grew significantly – I was able to see the post-liberalised India and its rapidly changing art from a distance, and also from a Western perspective. But it was really difficult at first because



Above: *Circus*, c-type print on metallic paper, taken from the series *Native Types* by Pushpamala N.

artists making photographs weren't particular about the technique, or editioning for that matter. Dayanita Singh changed all that and now a lot of photographers have begun to understand these aspects," he adds.

New Delhi-based Singh, best known for her penetrating portraits of India's urban middle- and upper-class families ("the India that is slipping through the cracks", noted one commentator), has been consistently championed by Nagy and is a cornerstone of Bhayana's collection – he was astute enough to bag a large body of her most important early images "before the editions ran out".

It was a canny move because, as Nagy points out, Indian contemporary photography is "still highly undervalued". Bhayana, who would only say that he owns a "lot" of Indian photography, comments that "general price points are \$1,000 for younger but slightly well

established artists, to \$10,000 for the best of the best." According to Nagy, prices for Dayanita Singh's work in India range from Rs300,000 (about £3,870) to Rs450,000 (about £5,800) for individual prints (depending on size; all of her work is in editions of seven); while a set of 12 large black-and-white prints prices can go up to €45,000. Chhachhi prints fall between Rs100,000 (about £1,290) and Rs300,000 (about £3,870). These price tags are dwarfed by the stratospheric sums paid for Indian contemporary art in the past three years with, for instance, an untitled 2006 oil by Indian superstar artist Subodh Gupta fetching \$209,875 at a Saffronart auction held online in September 2009.

The market may nevertheless be nascent, but since 2000 it has continued to grow. Most New Delhi galleries now incorporate photography in their programmes, while Photoink, a space devoted to the medium has opened in the Indian capital. Other photographers

recommended by Nagy include Bharat Sikka, Gauri Gill, Prabuddha Dasgupta, Pablo Bartholomew and Ram Rahman.

The market is dominated by international buyers, making Bhayana a rare homegrown force on the scene. "It has not been competitive in this arena, and I've been able to think through, decide and choose images quite leisurely. I don't think there has been a best buy for me in the way that there is in paintings or sculpture," says Bhayana. And are there gaps in his holdings? "What would add to the collection is some material from the 1950s and 1960s, which I know exists, but is impossible to get hold of as it's in family trusts and institutions, or not printed properly, or maybe still unpublished."

The last word goes to Nagy: "The international photographers that come in tend to have a very superficial viewpoint and can't get over the *Notional Geographic* hump, whereas the Indian photographers will show you things you'll never get the chance to see in your lifetime." Bhayana embraces this eloquent, often arresting vision of the subcontinent which, for now, remains the international art market's best-kept secret. ♦

FOCUSING ON PRINTS

Aicon Gallery, 8 Heddon Street, London W1 (020-7734 7575; www.aicongallery.com). **Bose Pacia**, 163 Plymouth Street, Brooklyn, New York 11201 (+1212-989 7074; www.bosepacia.com). **Nature Morte**, A-1 Neeti Bagh, New Delhi 110049 (+9111-4174 0215; www.naturemorte.com). **Photoink**, 1 Jhandewalan, Faiz Road, New Delhi 11005 (+9111-2875 5940; www.photoink.net).

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