



ON THE BLOCK

By Amrita Jhaveri

The first Sotheby's Prize for Contemporary Indian Art was awarded recently. It marked a good beginning but there is a lot of room for improvement.

On Saturday, December 12, amidst a gathering of artists, art critics, collectors and dealers, Sheela Gowda was named the winner of the Sotheby's Prize for Contemporary Indian Art. The prize – three lakh rupees plus a citation – is no paltry sum. The sponsors declared that it would be the first time that Indian art and artists would be recognised in this fashion by “an international authority”. With the launch of the award Sotheby's sought to provide “global recognition for Indian artists” and thereby underscore “the international status of contemporary Indian art”.

Despite the high stakes and the best intentions of the sponsors, the award ceremony remained a fairly low-key affair. The artist was absent at the ceremony and her dealer collected the award on her behalf. It is fair to say that, although Sheela Gowda is well-known within the art world, her work was unfamiliar to most of the diners that evening. With an entirely Bombay-based jury and three strong city-based contenders, Gowda's win was completely unexpected.

This is certainly not to say that her win was undeserved. The artist may not have shown much in India in recent years but she has exhibited bold works at important exhibitions overseas such as the 1996 *Traditions/ Tensions* show at the Asia Society, New York and the more recent *Private Mythology: Contemporary Art from India* organised by the Japan Foundation in Tokyo. Using everyday materials such as cow dung, coconut fibre, thread and needles the artist evokes the natural world in a unique way.

If the prize wants to become a point of discussion, the exhibition must be mounted on a grander scale.

There are limited opportunities for artists in India who use non-traditional materials and there is certainly no room for them in the auction salesrooms of Sotheby's and Christie's. Both are entirely market driven and the resistance of the market

to using fragile or perishable materials is well known. The jury, having selected Sheela Gowda, has positioned the Sotheby's prize in favour of new art. In distinct contrast with auctions, the prize is identified with young talent. The exhibition of works by the five shortlisted artists – Anju Dodiya, Atul Dodiya, Sudarshan Shetty and N.N.Rimzon apart from Sheela Gowda – encapsulates recent developments in Indian art.

The press response to the announcement of the prize may have been lukewarm, and the attendance at the opening of the exhibition relatively thin, but there was animated discussion within the arts community about the prize. At a satellite event held at the National Centre for Performing Arts a few days after the prize had been announced, several artists, gallerists and art critics questioned the constitution of the jury, the lack of transparency in the selection process and the changing criteria for choosing a winner.

It is not unusual for prizes like this to be fiercely debated and the debates become crucial to their final formulation. For its format the Sotheby's prize relies on the art world's best-known award – the Turner Prize. Instituted by the patrons of New Art, a small high-powered group interested in contemporary art, the aim of the Turner Prize has always been to bring art to the attention of a wider public. Since its inception in 1984 the Turner Prize has attracted tremendous public debate and the terms and conditions of the prize have evolved in response to the criticism.

For the Turner, the members of the artworld are invited to submit entries from which a shortlist is chosen. Works by shortlisted artists are exhibited at the Tate for a period of a month before a winner is selected by a panel of jurors and announced at a televised



Confidence, humour, subversiveness. Anju Dodiya. Entering the Ring. Watercolour. 1998. 22 x 30 inches.

ceremony every autumn.

The jury for the Turner typically consists of a representative of the Patrons of New Art, the director of the Tate Gallery, an art critic or lecturer and curators or directors of other public galleries or museums. It is usually a jury of five. The jury for the Sotheby's Prize consisted of three members: Saryu Doshi, the honorary director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay; the veteran collector Jehangir Nicholson; and Czaee Shah, who has been collecting the works of young artists.

Credit certainly goes to this jury for coming up with a shortlist that was well balanced and reflected the diversity of contemporary art practice in India. Traditional painting, sculpture and alternative media were all represented in the exhibition of works by the shortlisted artists, which energetically conveyed confidence, humour and subversiveness.

The idea of a shortlist has always been controversial, as it can pit artists of varying age and distinction in the same category. Indeed eyebrows were raised over the inclusion of Atul and Anju Dodiya in the same year. Atul Dodiya has achieved a certain level of critical acclaim as well as commercial success, while his wife Anju has come into her own only recently. However, there were no arguments about the fact that the contenders were balanced in terms of skill and vision.

Where the shortlist succeeded the exhibition failed. Held at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, a cramped and airless room in the NCPA, it was more like a sideshow than an exhibition of any importance. If the prize wants to become a point of discussion, the exhibition must be mounted on a grander scale, in a space that is more accessible to the public. Besides, the failure to provide an educational component to the exhibition gave the whole business the feel of an insiders' affair rather than an event that sought to involve and educate the general public about contemporary Indian art.

While the criteria for the Turner Prize are quite specific – the award is given



Sheela Gowda at work.

to a British artist under fifty for an outstanding contribution to art in Britain in the twelve months preceding the closing date for nominations, the yardstick for the Sotheby's prize is vague and generalised. At one stage the prize was to be given to an artist for achievement over the last five years but, when the jury could not arrive at a decision, it was decided to wait until the exhibits were in place, somehow suggesting that the final decision was dependent on the exhibits.

On the day the prize was to be announced the members of the jury were presented with a marksheet where, as in a Miss World contest, they had to give points on a scale of one to ten to the shortlisted artists on the following criteria: innovation; setting standards; use of media; expression/ conceptual clarity; authenticity/ contemporaneity; originality; international milestones; technique; and composition. The final computation was done in the absence of the jury, so that the first time the jurors became aware of the winner was when the decision was publicly announced!

Since 1991, there has been a close relationship between the Turner prize and the media. The absence of the vital media component in the awarding of the Sotheby's prize was a missed opportunity because, not only would

this have brought art to a wider audience, it would also have provided the necessary exposure to Sotheby's and reinforced its new image as a supporter of cutting-edge contemporary Indian art.

If the prize is to attain the status that it seeks, perhaps it should consider finding a local partner to defray the hidden costs of an extensive preview exhibition, the publicity and various educational programmes. The sponsors might also question the pertinence of using the Turner Prize as a model and try instead to evolve a format that is more appropriate to our cultural milieu. The Sotheby's Prize has made a good beginning and is full of promise. With the continued commitment of its sponsors, it can become an important event in the cultural calendar of India and fulfill its aim of bringing the winner to the notice of international audiences. 17

Art India is aware that having a representative of Christie's write a column on the Sotheby's prize is to invite charges of bias. We did ask a representative of Sotheby's to write about the award as well, but did not receive the article. Having considered the content of this column, we believe it is factually accurate and provides a balanced, if critical, account of the award process and the issues it raised.