



# Walking The Talk

Rajesh Punj moseys around London, chatting to gallerists, dealers, auction house representatives and artists about contemporary Indian art.

SO MANY SHOWS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART ARE COMING TO London that to make sense of them all would be a time-consuming exercise. So, before we embark on our investigation of the Indian art scene in London, let's hear what a few London-based movers and shakers had to say:

"Seven years ago, except for a handful of collectors, it was quite tough selling and introducing Indian contemporary art; now it's another story. Our T.V. Santhosh exhibition in 2005 was poorly received and I had to work quite hard to place all the works in good houses. For our forthcoming show in October 2008, I have given up keeping a list of enquiries as there are so many."

CONOR MACKLIN, OWNER OF GROSVENOR GALLERY, LONDON

"For me, it was a long road not to be shown in slightly parochial contexts, such as South Asian group shows, which in London a few years ago meant exclusion from the best galleries. Strangely, this has changed since my work was bought by [Charles] Saatchi for his show, *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today*, where I am quite happy to be placed amongst friends and contemporaries from India, such as Jitish Kallat, Subodh Gupta and others."

SHEZAD DAWOOD, LONDON-BASED ARTIST

## 1.

There was a time - not so long ago - when any discussion about art from India would necessarily have to include the names of Modernist 'deities' such as M.F. Husain, E.N. Souza and Tyeb Mehta, among others. They belonged to a generation of artists who came to prominence in the wake of India's Independence and became the ambassadors of Modern art from the subcontinent.

For a long time, Indian art consisted predominantly of paintings. There was a market for paintings in India and galleries in the subcontinent were willing to show them. However, with the emergence of a market for Indian art globally in the '90s, Indian art underwent a sea change - perhaps, partly motivated by an interest in capturing new markets.

Previously, in Europe and America, Indian art was viewed as something that merely mimicked outdated Western movements. The current success of contemporary Indian art is linked to India's flourishing economy. Overnight, India, and hence Indian art, gained greater credibility internationally; Indian artists began to be treated with respect. This spawned a new generation of artists and older ones started to experiment with new mediums with great gusto.

"India is the big story really. It has been underexposed and overshadowed and Indian artists are now getting their due. Therefore, we are seeing much more press coverage, more inclusion in museum shows, Art Fairs and Biennales. Also, more mainstream international galleries are looking seriously at representing artists who are India-based. In the past, art centred around mega-cities such as New York, London and Paris but now there is a diffusion of art-related events. Artists do not feel the need to relocate to be a part of the art industry," says Yamini Mehta, Christie's Director of Modern & Contemporary Indian Art.

Around the corner from Christie's London office is Grosvenor Gallery, which occupies a modest three-storeyed building in 21 Ryder Street London. Gallery-owner Conor Macklin, who has collaborated with Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi since 2006 to set up Grosvenor Vadehra, reiterates Mehta's optimistic predictions for contemporary Indian art: "Seven years ago, except for a handful of collectors, it was quite tough selling and introducing Indian contemporary art. Now, it's another story. Collectors and speculators are falling over each other so as not to miss the next big thing."

Both Mehta and Macklin speak eloquently about the market for contemporary Indian art - almost too eloquently. It seems to underscore all their assessments of Indian art's future: the prices that contemporary Indian artists are selling at appear to be fuelling discussions about their aesthetic merit. Hence, it is impossible to discuss 'new art from India' without bringing collectors, dealers and gallerists into the conversation.

New Indian art has benefited from this furore. Once contemporary Chinese art established itself on the international scene, it seemed only a matter of time before contemporary Indian art followed suit. Among those who have grown in stature here are artists like Atul Dodiya, Jitish Kallat, Shilpa Gupta, T.V. Santhosh and, of course, Subodh Gupta. Jitish Kallat has shown at Albion Gallery and is now represented by Haunch of Venison, in whose Zurich branch, he recently (from May to August 2008) held a solo show. London's Hauser & Wirth have signed up husband and wife Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher. T.V. Santhosh enjoyed his first solo in Vienna in 2008.

The success of individual artists has led to significant group shows, which see themselves as surveys of contemporary Indian art, being scheduled at important venues. In December, Co-Director of Serpentine Gallery Hans-Ulrich Obrist is planning *India Calling*, and early next year, Saatchi Gallery will be holding *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today*.

## [Lead Feature]



Installation shot of *New Wave: Contemporary Art From India*, an exhibition at Aicon Gallery, London, from the 19th of September to the 20th of October 2007.

Pooja Sood, Director of Khoj International Artists' Association in Delhi, is thoroughly aware of what lies behind the attention that contemporary Indian art is getting internationally: "The spotlight, it seems, is sharply focused on international exhibitions, the art market and giddy auction prices."

Some argue that this new found interest in everything Indian appears to be led by American and European gallerists, dealers, collectors, curators and art institutions, who feel that they have discovered something 'authentic'. The modern day international curator serves the same function as the ethnographer of old with India being the latest destination for exciting expeditions.

Others feel that cultural difference dissolves in the homogenous international art market. "Contemporary artists are not bound by any particular style or movement. We are starting to see a general international style whereby only the artist's name may throw light on his or her ethnicity. Indian collectors of Indian art will collect works based on quality and who the artist is. [However]...I do see that international collectors tend to want something that is undeniably Indian. This brings to mind modern 'Orientalism', says Mehta of Christie's.

Farah Rahim Ismail, Director of London's Aicon Gallery, owes her success to the number of wealthy individuals who are interested in Indian

art. Ismail - eager, no doubt, to promote her stable of established as well as 'emerging' artists - is convinced that Indian art will remain an intrinsic part of the international art world. She thinks that Indian artists were always doing significant work; the difference is that this sudden spurt of international interest has given them the ability to travel and to show their work outside India. Even as critics bask in the glare of what could be a temporary Indian Summer, Ismail feels that certain artists - like T.V. Santhosh, Subodh Gupta, Shilpa Gupta, Nikhil Chopra and Chitra Ganesh - show long-term promise.

But what will happen to this craze for contemporary Indian art when India is replaced by another country - Pakistan or Afghanistan for example - as the next 'big thing'? Ismail thinks that the current generation of Indian artists must make a lasting impression on the next generation of dealers and collectors in London, Europe, America and, most importantly, in India.

Mehta of Christie's is excited about the next stage in the journey of Indian art: "The future of Indian art is very exciting. The best of Indian art is becoming mainstream and I look forward to seeing major exhibitions and retrospectives that feature Indian artists. I do not think this is too far off." This overwhelming confidence about contemporary Indian art in London has allowed it entry into exclusive venues. In fact, the brilliant future that clued-in observers of the scene have predicted for Indian art might have already arrived.