WHISPERING GALLERY

By D.T.

The biggest powerbrokers, tastemakers and rain-makers (from Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul, Delhi, Mumbai, Paris and London) descended onto New York City in late March for what was arguably the most exciting Art Week ever, as far as all things contemporary are concerned. AMIT JUDGE of the Bodhi Art empire in South Asia looked on as one of his artists, V. S. GAITONDE, broke the one million dollar barrier at Christie’s Dedicated Sale of Modern and Contemporary Indian Art on March 30. The husband and wife duo CHRISTOPHER DAVIDGE and AMRITA JAVAHERI, both alumni of Christie’s, came to their old local haunt together, however, sitting far apart in the salesroom. Meanwhile, RODERICK STEINKAMP, secondary art dealer to the fashionistas of two hemispheres, attempted to secure the SUDHISH GUPTA STAINLESS STEEL BUCKET INSTALLATION on offer, but a close friend of SAKSII GALLERY was determined to bring it home, and did so for US$120,000 plus commission. Immediately after the sale, dealers RENU MODI and KAVETTA SINGH were whisked away in a large town car to inspect private collections of Indian contemporary art in Manhattan. And CONOR MACKLIN of Governor Gallery returned to London with many works overflowing from his suitcase, including the striking fiberglass reeds made head, Woman of Kanyakumari II, by Rivinder Reddy ($140,000 plus tax). The biggest topic swapped among many of the dealers from India was how to crack the American market now that interest in Indian art has soared into the eight-figure zone.

Meanwhile, on March 31, Sotheby’s first sale of contemporary art from East Asia ushered in so many dealers, curators and collectors that it was standing room only at the first session (see p. 23). Dealers were prominent among those bidding on works by stars like ZHANG XIAOGANG and XU BING, whose rarity proved favorable that day.

MAX PROETCHT, JEAN-MARC DECROP of Galerie Kof, and JUNG LEE of Gani Art all sat in the front row, while ETHAN COHEN snapped up a FANG RUIJUN with MIRA RUBEL at his side. STEWART MCGUINNESS worked hard to obtain the only DING YI on the auction block. The avid ink collector, ARNOLD CHANG, sought to outbid his rivals for Xu Bing’s impossible calligraphy. Observing the proceedings with elegant restraint were the lovely ladies of the Upper East Side: ALEXANDRA MUNROE, freshly arrived at the Guggenheim, MELISSA CHU of Asia Society and FRANCE PEPPER of the China Institute. Curiously absent was FRANK ELLSWORTH, president of the Japan Society. That week he was discreetly requested to step down from his venerable role at the Society to make way for a new dawn.

Meanwhile in the background, Korean entrepreneur C. I. KIM has been commissioning very large works by Zhang Xiaogang to cover nearly every square inch of his new BEIJING outpost. Some weeks after, Mr. Kim was spotted on yet another spending spree, this time in INDIA. Armed with his Blackberry, he was personally securing all future works for the next three years by the young darlings of the Indian art scene, including Sudhish Gupta and Jitish Kallat. Another man about town was DAVID ROSS, who recently moved to Bangkok and then days later in DELHI. It seemed to shadow all Mr. Kim as he plotted the territory for future Asian centers of the Artist Pension Trust, which he heads. Specialists from CENTRE POMPIDOU in Paris were also seen sniffing out the Thai art scene after Jacques Chirac’s state visit to Thailand in February.

In Hong Kong, the WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT continues to garner attention. Last week before the District project ground to a full halt, real estate development group SUNG HUNG KAI spent HK$10 MILLION to showcase the monumentally huge, but still B-List PICASSO canvas, Parade (1917), on loan from the Pompidou—incredibly, one of the cultural institutions bidding for a role in Hong Kong’s new museum mall—not out of selflessness, but rather to DISPLAY CULTURAL AWARENESS. If the West Kowloon elephant can be reassembled, competing developers will hopefully appoint real art advisors to help them get an “obscenely good deal.”

And in Asia, auction fever seems contagious as the bird flu is rumored to be reaching BANGKOK in order to start his own. Maybe just like his Superfast movement, he will pave the way for other artists to follow suit.

In the midst of all this bidding for the big bags of money flooding the market, many dealers still seem to have the best intentions at heart. Apparently the friction between YI CHEN and PLUM BLOSSOMS GALLERY only produced heat after Manhattan gallery MARIANNE DOEYRI offered Chen an opportunity to let his talents as a young gifted painter flourish with formal representation, and without the desk job attached. And Bodhi Art seems to be following in similar footsteps—during ATUL DODIYA’s recent residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, AMIT JUDGE flew his own personal chef from Delhi to Singapore to cook for the forlorn artist his favorite home-style dishes.

And after many months of indecision, the SAIGON BIENNALE—under the directorship of PHITHO TUYET MAI, GRIDTHIYA GAWEWONG and NIKKITA TIRAVANTRA—has finally been canceled. However, the funding obtained for the event from organizations such as the Ford Foundation will be spent on a series of art education and development projects in Vietnam over the next two years. Perhaps the erstwhile directors should also address the unsavory practice of buying artworks by BUI XUAN PHAI, NGUYEN TU NGHIEM and NGUYEN THANH BINH, some of the most sought after names in Vietnam. Or perhaps auction houses will hold sales of the best fakes on the market?