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Painting the town red

Giridhar Khasnis
India Art Summit



When you stood in front of Anish Kapoor's concave stainless steel mirror, you saw yourself (and everything else in your surrounding) upside down! It took a while for you to realise that you had just entered a world of magical distortion.

As you moved towards the shiny red circular piece, that world of magnificent deformation changed dramatically with every advancing step. Every small movement or quiver changed that world view even more radically.

As you grappled with the many moments of fantasy and reality, the reflected image suddenly erupted and straightened its stance! The delectable piece of Turner Prize winning artist is both compelling and meditative. It engages the viewer, evokes

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mystery and provokes sensations. Art and science seem to merge in the work; elements of perception and reality collide quite grippingly.

Kapoor's mirror was among the most viewed and discussed artworks at Pragati Maidan, Delhi, during the four-day India Art Summit 2009 (19-22 August).

The Summit managed to present a wide array of art works from India and abroad. The declared intent of the Summit was to provide a world class art fair environment to showcase the very best of Indian art and a platform to bring to India art from all over the world. While the underlying theme was to showcase, trade, network and exchange of art, the organizers also committed themselves to further the awareness, access, and understanding of art amongst the general public.

By the time it concluded, the second edition of India's Modern and Contemporary Art Fair had attracted an estimated 40,000 visitors making it perhaps the single largest showcase of Indian art.

There was a strange artistic vibration at Hall No. 7 which hosted the Summit. In fact, the excitement began even before one entered the hall; at the 600 sq m, open-air Sculpture Park huge outdoor sculptural installations of Ravinder Reddy, Navjot Altaf, Iranna, and Ved Prakash Gupta and others welcomed the visitor.

In the foyer of the hall, Subodh Gupta's celebrated three-piece bronze sculpture Gandhi's 'Three Monkeys' showing gigantic soldier heads made of brass utensils shared space with Nataraj Sharma's towering grid installation of thin metallic wires, with trapped airplanes.

Inside the main hall, 54 galleries, including 18 from Japan, China, USA, UK, Germany, Netherlands, Thailand, Philippines, UAE and Korea vied with each other propping the booths with paintings, sculptures, photographs and videos. Of the Indian galleries, most of them were from Delhi and Mumbai, with token representation from Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata and Guwahati. Works of virtually every well-known Indian artist were on display.

It was clear from the outset that commerce was the principal driving force which prompted many galleries to play safe and display works of saleable artists. One could, accordingly, view a massive body of work of established artists like F N Souza, S H Raza, Vaikuntam, Laxma Goud, Ramachandran, Akbar Padamsee, Anjolie Ela Menon, Arpana Caur, Arpita Singh, Ganesh Pyne, Rameshwar Broota,

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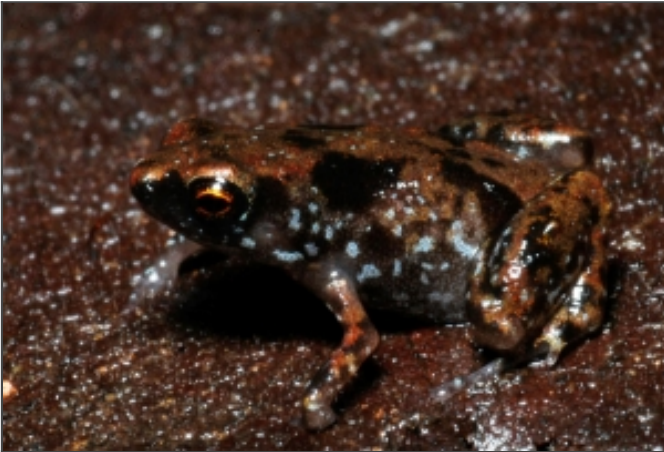
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Paramjit Singh, Jogen Chowdhury and such others; these works were absorbing but quite familiar to art lovers. Several galleries concentrated on contemporary Indian artists like Baiju Parthan, T V Santosh, Jitish Kallat Chintan Upadhyay, Atul Dodiya, Anju Dodiya, Iranna, Gigi Scaria, Jagannath Panda, Riyaz Komu, Manjunath Kamath, and others.

Foreign galleries

Foreign galleries chose to exhibit artists from India as well as other countries. In a superbly controlled display, Arario Gallery (China/Korea/USA) presented Indian artists Jitish Kallat (painting) and L N Tallur (installation) sharing space with some fascinating works by Korean sculptors Osang Gwon and Dongwook Lee.

Sakshi Gallery too had a sprinkling of artists from India (Chintan Upadhyay, Sunil Gawade) and abroad (El Anatsui, Uche Iroha and Isa Ho). The Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui's Black River made of aluminium bottlecaps and copper wire was a stunning exhibit.

London-based Lisson Gallery arguably attracted the largest number of visitors. Besides those stunning works of Mumbai-born, London-based Anish Kapoor, it tastefully displayed the works of Tony Cragg, Jason Martin and Julian Opie.

German gallery, Beck & Eggeling brought in some minor works of, hold your breath, Pablo Picasso. Its main attractions, though, included a painting by Viveek Sharma showing the current US President standing upside down on a chess board, and an intriguing six-piece painting by Pondicherry-based artist Desmond Lazaro.

Aicon Gallery (USA/UK) too was not to be missed with its six artists, including G R Iranna, Anjolie Ela Menon and Jayashree Burman.

There were several relatively lesser-known galleries presenting some very interesting works. The Fine Art Company, Mumbai, showed young artist, Nilesh Kumavats intriguing installation; he had sketched minimally on 32 glass sheets before arranging them back-to-back to complete a stunning work of art. Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai, had looped three videos of Kiran Subbaiah ('Flight Rehearsals'), Nikhil Chopra ('Memory Drawing V') and Chitra Ganesh ('The Rabbit Hole'), each providing a unique visual experience.

Latitude 28, New Delhi, showed Prajiwal Choudhury's tiny matchboxes with artworks going through a sloping conveyor belt. Shrine Empire Gallery, New Delhi, had a captivating installation by Suchitra Gahlot ('One Thousand Tears') in which a

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vintage typewriter found company with a series of tiny bottles filled with artificial tears!

Positive response

The Summit collated various art projects, including Video Art Program, and curated ventures in order to provide a perspective to art in its various forms and an effort to see beyond paintings. The speakers forum attracted a plethora of speakers, including curators, critics, artists, collectors and representative of museums and galleries.

The reaction to the Art Summit was generally positive. “The event has been a tremendous success,” rejoiced Neha Kirpal, associate director of the summit. “We have fulfilled all our objectives. By providing access of art to a large number of people at a public venue; by creating a very friendly and non-intimidating environment, and festival atmosphere, we have attracted not only art-related people but also the general public.

The event has strengthened our view that we in India have a very vibrant base of artists and artworks and art practices; that we have a credible art market which is waiting to be tapped; that with the price correction in recent months, the appetite for good art is only going to grow and expand. This summit is about regaining the confidence in Indian art.”

What about the commercial aspects? “About 250 works worth Rs 26 crore were sold in different price ranges. We are happy to have attracted two particular segments of collectors — the international buyers and first-time collectors. This only added to the regular collectors who came in good numbers from different parts of the country.”

Was the India Art Summit 2009 truly international? The organisers felt so. Getting galleries from abroad proved to be the biggest challenge, recalls Kirpal. “The economic slowdown has hit the West severely prompting them to cut costs wherever possible. It took a lot of effort to convince them about the credibility of the event and Indian art. In the end, we did manage to bring some very well-known galleries, curators, buyers and collectors and that is very satisfying,” he added.

Sharing Kirpal’s enthusiasm was Shalini Sawhney, gallery director, The Guild, Mumbai, who thought that the Summit was like one of the top international fairs.

Once you were inside, you forgot whether this was Delhi, Basel, or New York. Lot of collectors came from overseas, there was a sprinkling of international curators and the global speakers forum was excellent.

Several galleries from abroad, including Aicon Gallery (USA), Thavibu Gallery (Bangkok) and The Drawing Room (Philippines) agreed that this edition of Art Summit was truly international in form and content. Peter Nagy of Nature Morte though felt that we are not quite there yet. Although satisfied with overall experience, he observed, “a few bad galleries got in and should be rejected next year.” He wanted a section for art services booths, such as art restorers, shipping companies, insurance and framers.

“It is not a truly international event,” said Hans Bakker of HBgalerie, Rotterdam. “The Art Summit cannot be compared to any other European art fair. It is a nice easy going fair. The Cappuccino was lovely, but wi-fi went out, when the rains came in!”

Though reaction from the general visitors was quite encouraging. “I haven’t seen anything like this before,” a lady visitor was seen explaining on her cellphone. “I will tell all my friends and family to come and have a look before it closes.”

Another visitor was not so effusive. “There could have been better choice of artists and display,” he grumbled. “Haven’t we seen enough of Souzas and Razas? These galleries are so desperate to sell. Look at that stall showing as many as 15 artists and that gallery displaying paintings in small format. Is this an international fair or fish market? Ask them about their artists, most of the galleries don’t have ready-made bio-data, catalogues or any other information. In any case, the best part of the show were the sculptures, videos and installations by young artists, not those over-hyped paintings which we have seen so often.”

Mamta Singhania of Anant Art Gallery Delhi was taken in by the visual layout of the entire summit, and great viewership. But what irked her was the high cost of participation for the galleries considering that the international art fairs are wooing galleries with discounts. Critical of the high commercial orientation, she says, “The speaker sessions were highly priced; stall rentals were high and cramming up the evenings with six or seven collateral events confused interested people.”

Jorn Middelborg, Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand, was greatly impressed by the smooth conduct of the event. His complaint was not on the summit per se, but

about the customs, import and tax regulations in India which are byzantine in scope and should be simplified to facilitate international display and trade of art.

Projjal K Dutta, partner, Aicon Gallery, NY, was overwhelmed by the attendance — in terms of well known collectors as well as art-lovers across the spectrum. She, however, felt that the physical infrastructure left much to be desired.

Kirpal agrees that there were many learning points and committed herself to developing an even better content during the future editions of the summit. “We will be further refining the choice of participating galleries, and focus on more international participation so that our art and artists get the exposure they deserve,” she says. “We are also going to provide emphasis on art education, educating people and public at large about the importance of viewing and appreciating art be it conventional paintings/sculptures or new media. Next year, we could see a marginal increase in the number of stalls not more than 70 in any case but our focus will be on better quality and content rather than increase in numbers. We will also endeavour to provide a special platform to young, emerging and talented artists.”

One hopes that the success of the summit would not make the organisers complacent. Instead they should contemplate and channelise their energy to raise the bar and take the summit to a higher plane in the coming editions.

Sculpture park

Among the highlights of the Art Summit was the open-air Sculpture Park set outside the main venue featuring the works of well-known sculptors. Iranna's work presented a moving image of a donkey-drawn cart carrying huge boxes falling apart; Navjot's huge work in red showed a couple in an intense moment of love. Reddys wide eyed beauty was predictable yet gorgeous. Ved Gupta's mammoth piece of a cute Dalmatian was another piece which turned heads. Anahita Taneja, Director of Shrine Empire Gallery thought the sculpture park outside the fair gave artists creative freedom and space to produce what they wanted.

The missing man

One gentleman who was missed by many at the Summit was none other than Maqbool Fida Husain. Now on a self-exile from the country, the barefoot Badshah would have loved to be part of the event to celebrate Indian art. Had he been there it would have been a coup of sorts. That was not to be. Sadly, even his works were

not allowed to be hung for security reasons. Going by the press reports and TV interviews, Husain was magnanimous in his understanding of the situation.

Even if the veteran artist and his works were not present at the event, there was a little black and white photograph tucked innocuously on the walls of one of the exhibition halls. The fine vintage photograph snapped by art critic Richard Bartholomew showed a young Husain in profile captured in a classical Rembrandt lighting of more darkness than light. That this little work attracted some appreciative viewership was understandable.

Art of collecting

During a panel discussion, well-known art collector Anupam Poddar surmised that collecting art involved forethought and risk-taking. It is following the heart and the gut. Rajiv Savara, recently nominated on the Board of Trustees of The Barne's Foundation, Philadelphia, has always had a passion to collect the works of pre-modern and modern Indian artists. Savara claims to have travelled great distances because he will never decide about buying without physically seeing the work. He once went all the way to New York for an auction and returned to Delhi the same evening after the seeing and acquiring a painting. "When you see some works of art, you die you die every moment till you acquire it."

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