

insight

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Though traditionally quiet months for modern and contemporary Indian art, April, May, and June were abuzz with activity this year.

The opening of numerous new galleries in Bombay, auctions in Dubai, London, and Hong Kong, and the annual art fair in Basel, where a gallery based in India was invited to participate for the first time, had dealers busy flying around the world, clocking up air miles.

The arrival of ambitious new contender

Bodhi Art in Bombay's sleepy Kala Ghoda art district was just the beginning of the shake up. With a brand spanking new space of 10,000 square feet designed by Rahul Mehrotra, darling of gallery conversions, and a solo show by erstwhile Chemould artist Atul Dodiya, Bodhi entered Bombay with a bang. Business class flights and ocean-view rooms at the Oberoi hotel ensured that artists across India attended the gallery's inaugural party. No expense was spared, and the only visible blemish was the sudden exit, within days of the gallery's opening, of the newly appointed gallery director.

The invasion from Delhi was followed by a conquest from Calcutta. Gallery 88 established an outpost in a former printing works off the Sassoon Dock. In this bold renovation, Mehrotra retained some of the original steel support beams, allowing for a more distinctive space. Project 88 was launched in Bombay with a solo show by the ultra-hip Bharti Kher (also formerly a

Chemould artist), organized in collaboration with Gallery SKE of Bangalore: the space belonged to 88, the show was courtesy Gallery SKE, an arrangement that signals the pattern of things to come, with collaboration and consolidation following rapid market expansion.

Also among the galleries established this summer was The Art Mill Gallery in Byculla, which hosted a motley – but ultimately forgettable – inaugural show. An interesting space and a new cast of dealers, but the question remains: will the gallery's programme match up? And there are still more galleries being launched this Fall – Chemould has awoken, taking on larger premises, as has another long-time collector who has thrown in the corporate towel to follow his passion for contemporary Indian art. So great is the growth, there are rumours about a local Bombay restorer getting in on the act.

But does a surfeit of available space mean there is enough good art to fill it? The answer is yes, if galleries are brave able to identify new talent and brave enough to risk promoting unknown artists. Conversations with dealers indicate that there are exciting young artists to look forward to – with Indian artists finally able to

Amrita & Mallika



Amrita Jhaveri (left)
& Mallika Advani

make a decent living, this is hardly surprising. This is good news for adventurous collectors, who have been left behind by inflated auction prices and dealers who concentrate on increasingly conservative (and safe) exhibitions.

The sheer speed and pressure of a rapidly growing market has forced galleries to compete. In order to keep up, galleries have first to come to terms with new practices. In short, they need to professionalize – to transform themselves from art shops to galleries that follow international norms: a strong programme of exhibitions, a considered placement of artists' works in significant collections, and an acceptable level of presentation. No longer can expensive works of art be stacked against the wall or unrolled on the floor of dimly lit offices.

Already, the cut-and-thrust to secure exhibitions by Indian artists has meant that some galleries are looking to expand overseas while others are exploring exhibitions of non-Indian artists. Vadehra Art Gallery hosted a show of Picasso prints and ceramics earlier this year while Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke hope to show Kiki Smith before the end of the year. The Guild and Bodhi Art are expanding to New York, Vadehra to London, and Nature Morte is introducing its roster of artists at major art fairs, from The Armory Show to Art Basel Miami Beach.

Unwilling to be left behind, auctioneers too are exploring new categories and sale venues. Leading the pack is Christie's, who recently added Dubai to its worldwide sales locations. The inaugural sale in Dubai this May featured Arab, Indian, and Iranian paintings alongside major works by artists like Picasso and Andy Warhol. Of the \$8.4 million achieved, Indian paintings contributed almost \$6 million, setting eight new records. Nine Indian paintings were among the top ten prices of the evening with six of these sold to Indians. The market remains driven by collectors of Indian origin yet the finest painting of the evening, Raza's 1979 *Sourya*, sold for a bargain \$520,000 to a Middle East buyer.

In Hong Kong, Christie's created a new platform for younger Indian artists by including twenty Indian works in a mixed Asian contemporary art sale. Indian artists were presented for the first time alongside their Chinese, Japanese, and Korean peers, and many were previously untried at auction – Hema Upadhyay, Ashim Purkayastha, Thukral and Tagra and Tushar Joag. The results were encouraging: all the Indian artists sold (raising almost \$1 million dollars in total), in spite of the fact that several works struggled to make a memorable visual impact. Young Indian artists were clearly overshadowed by their Japanese and Korean counterparts.

Cross marketing is a term that has become fashionable among auctioneers. While Christie's was marketing to Asian and Middle-Eastern clients, Sotheby's combined modern Indian art with classic Indian decorative art. Sotheby's Indian art sale held in London a day before Christie's Dubai auction, included Anglo-Indian furniture, architectural fragments, textiles, and jewellery. Unsurprisingly, the modern section resulted in £3,035,800 of a total £4,224,120, with Souza, Swaminathan, and Padamsee setting new records.

With Indian paintings now regularly breaching the financial thresholds of mainstream international art, it's only a matter of time before auctioneers include works by Indian artists in their international post-war and contemporary sales in London and New York. In fact, this has already happened – Raza's works appeared alongside works by Serge Poliakoff, Jean Dubuffet, and Sam Francis in the post-war sale at Christie's in Paris earlier this spring. Prices achieved by Raza were among the highlights of the sale, with a fantastic gouache of Carcassonne in his signature early 50s style selling for a record €202,000. Despite Raza's relative anonymity in France, his paintings have become the most expensive of any French artist alive.

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The summer season came to a close with the arrival of the monsoon in India and with the opening of the art fair in Basel. Earlier this year, the director of the fair made a visit to India to discover the budding gallery scene and invited leading gallerists and dealers to attend the fair. They flocked there wide-eyed to see firsthand what the fuss was all about. Some left enlightened but many left bewildered by the art on view. Visitors from India gaped at Subodh Gupta's life-sized luggage carousel at the Art Unlimited section, allegedly priced at €800,000 and sold at \$500,000, while a sublime installation by Julius Popp, consisting of 360 nozzles suspended from the ceiling and projecting a curtain of watery text, was available at just under \$125,000.

Amrita
& Mallika