

The art of the fair

The India Art Fair positions itself as a platform for Indian and South Asian Art

There is nothing new in art except talent. Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. Art speaks to your heart. Little wonder that yours truly makes the annual pilgrimage to Delhi in January (the chill of the city is just right) to soak in the visual beauty that the India Art Fair offers, now into its eighth year.

Digest this – there were about 90 participants connected with exclusive art projects, art institutions and galleries, not just from India, but from diverse countries like Bangladesh, Dubai, France, Italy, Korea, Pakistan, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, the UK and the US. Over 3,000 works of art spanning paintings, sculptures, installations, photo prints, moving image art, etc, were on display. Besides, the Speakers' Forum provided a platform for art lovers to hear and engage with over 40 national and international speakers. BMW, lending a hand as a presenting partner and specially importing a vintage BMW car painted by the Spanish artist, Cesare Manrique, for displaying at the fair, is a coup of sorts.

The presence of a famed institution like Bhau Daji Lad Museum of Mumbai added a different dimension to the fair and brought to fore the importance of art engaging and speaking to the gentry, not just the moneyed. The pre-fair road shows held by the IAF organisers in Tier II and Tier III cities were a good step and the intent clearly was to draw in more crowds and not just keep it an urban attraction.

Footfalls over the four-day affair were estimated to be about 100,000, with about 5 per cent of it being overseas visitors, including delegates/representatives from famed institutions like the Chicago Art Institute, Victoria & Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, etc. The fair, held at the commodious NSIC Exhibition Ground, was well planned and laid out with an ease of entry into and exit from the grounds and easy navigation of the booths inside. Eateries were spread



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out strategically all over and enabled meetings and conversations. A great deal of effort has clearly gone into putting up yet another good edition of the India Art Fair. The effervescent Neha Kripal, founder, IAF, and her team deserve applause and accolades from art lovers.

Zain Masud, international director, IAF, and formerly with Dubai Art Fair, was pleased as punch with the turnout and said that her prime deliverable is to evangelise IAF internationally and attract overseas collectors and buyers to the fair. Wol Balston of Flint PR, an overseas firm engaged with IAF over the past year or so had been on his feet 24x7 to ensure that the event was put up well and managed well and PR was taken care of – so important for a larger affair like this fair. Noelle Kader, again an expat, has been engaged with IAF for over a year now to

ensure regular interface with the VIPs and attending to them at the fair for a glitch free experience.

Kripal's focus this year has been to ensure a platform for not just artists from India, but also from South Asian countries, which otherwise would not have got a forum of repute for their art. She seems to have achieved some measure of success going by the participation of a few galleries from this

region and them eliciting a good response from collectors. She was ecstatic about the fact that young Turks who comprise the YPOs and EOs have bought art at the fair, giving IAF great word of mouth publicity. According to Kripal, there have been a terrific influx of NRIs to the fair and they have been major buyers of Indian and South Asian art. She also observed that the contemporary artists seems to be back in reckoning selectively, going by the galleries' feedback to her.



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Any fair has to be a discovery of some new and promising artists. Fortunately, notwithstanding the fact that most galleries were exhibiting known names of moderns like Husain, Raza, Souza, etc, and contemporaries like K.S. Radhakrishnan, Atul Dodiya, G.R. Irana, Vaikuntham, Laxma Goud, Arpana Kaur, Paresh

Maity, etc, there were some excellent new gems and outliers at the fair – both Indian and from overseas.

Some worthy of mention are – Nantu Behari Das sculpture (Gallerie Nvyia), Vinita Dasgupta (Art Lounge Gallery, Portugal), Seher Shah (Nature Morte), Val sculpture (Redsea Gallery, Singapore), Matthias Bitzer, Michael Kunze and Gregor Hildebrandt (Galerie Isa), Noemie Goudal (Edel Assanti, UK), Alberto Echegaray Guevara murano glass sculpture (Mondo Galeria, Spain), Mohsin Shafi (Taseer Art Gallery, Pakistan). Besides these, the other visual delights and connect with the Indian past were the Pichvai paintings and the Swaraj Art Archive collection showcasing the Company School paintings of yore.

While a few Indian galleries were exhibiting both Indian and a few regional artists, only Galerie Isa of Mumbai was showcasing exclusively international artists – a path less trodden and one, which requires courage of conviction. DAG Modern, as usual, had a huge presence, with a total exhibit area of nearly 20,000 sq ft, showcasing the best of the Indian art of various genre executed

over the last 100 years. A sight to behold in DAG's exhibition was the nearly 80 ft-long scroll work of Bishnupada Roy Chowdhury. The rare sculptures of Krishna Reddy (a famous print artist based in NY), courtesy Nature Morte, and the mammoth Wim Delvoye stainless steel sculpture of a chapel, courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, will also stay etched in the cognoscenti's mind.

The price range of the art displayed ranged from a low of ₹15,000 to a high of ₹5 crore-plus. The type of art and the price points ensured that there was something for everyone, be it a first time buyer or a collector or a corporate or a museum.

While the IAF did serve an art soup for the soul and a platform for all stakeholders to come together, the high cost of participation



SWARAJ ART ARCHIVE COLLECTION SHOWCASING THE COMPANY SCHOOL PAINTINGS OF YORE

seems to be a concern. A participant having a booth of about 250 sq ft incurs a minimum cost of ₹15 lakh as rental, stay and shipping. Gallery owners like Geeta Mehra of Sakshi, Sangeeta Raghavan of Art Musings, Shalini Sawhney of The Guild and Tri-

pat Kalra of Galerie Nvyia are clear that they are looking to expand their canvas of clients and see the high cost of participation in IAF as long-term investments.

Another area of concern, going by Uday Jain of Dhoomimal Gallery, was that IAF still does not have an adequate curatorial feel to it. There could be some merit in it, while in all fairness a fair amount of weeding out to maintain quality has been done by the organisers. While Neha feels that the entry fees of ₹400 per person, is not much, it could well deter higher footfalls. On

other logistic fronts, the poor Internet connectivity, high cost of food and non-functioning swipe machines need to be ironed out in an otherwise well-organised event.

Chinese whispers of Dubai Art Fair eating into the India Art Fair constituents seem to be ill-founded. Yes, every gallery will pick and choose, depending on the costs and potential

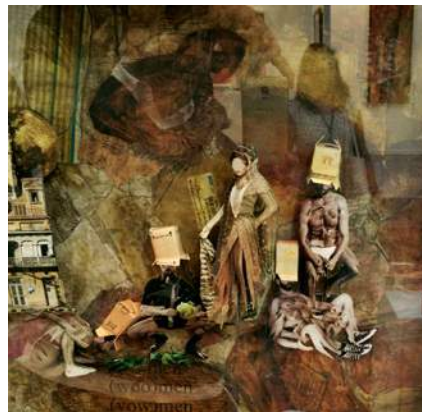
for business. But then, if all art fairs are eventually going to primarily focus on a set of artists from their own regions and Kripal strongly feels so (a moot point here), then there is a clear differentiator to enable the right decision – for the galleries and collectors.

India Art Fair is clearly positioning itself as a platform for Indian and South Asian Art. And that should hold it in good stead, more so as it is based in the land of opportunity called India.

To end the article on an anecdotal note – someone at the fair asked me if art was an investment. In my lexicon, if chosen wisely, it is a two-decade passion play and a four-decade investment. Get the drift? Don't get carried away by auction prices or what the bankers say. High prices seen in auctions are for rare works held over decades. ♦



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