

East is the way for Indian art

Indian art is ready to chart a new geographical terrain. If 2007 belonged to the West in terms of art shows and big buys, 2008 will be the 'year of the East'. Countries like Singapore, China, Japan and South Korea will be the new hotspots for Indian art - along with an exception, Dubai.

'The indications are that Japan, China and South Korea will get to see a lot of Indian art. We are receiving several inquiries from buyers in China and South Korea,' said Sunaina Anand, owner of Art Alive, one of the leading art galleries in the country.

Artists are also keen to exhibit their works in the East.

'You see a lot of Chinese and South Korean artists around the world, but very few Indian artists get to display their works in China. It is still behind the iron curtain, as far as Indian art is concerned. My dream is to show in China,' says 'new wave' Indian artist Baba Anand.

The Gurgaon-based 'poster collage and revival' artist hopes to make it to China this year, if 'he gets a good display space'.

But the biggest event this week which will set the course for Indian art in 2008 is the Dubai Art Fair. It will see almost all the big names from the Indian artists' fraternity and a new book, 'Faces of Indian Art', a photo-documentation of artists at work by ace lensman Nemai Ghosh, who was also filmmaker Satyajit Ray's personal photographer.

'We are going to launch the book there,' says Anand.

The second event in the 'Fall of 2008' that will impact the yearend course of Indian art is the Singapore Art Fair in October.

Impressario Ina Puri - resource person, curator and collector - of the Imami Art Foundation, who left for Dubai Monday, took a cache of works by Anjolie Ela Menon, Lakshman Gaud, Himmat Shah, Paresh Maity, Joyshree Burman and Jogen Choudhury.

'They are some of the biggest names in Indian art and each one of them is different from the other. While Himmat Shah works with organic forms, Jogen Choudhury is a master of abstractions. Despite the hype surrounding the new wave, we have found that the tried and tested lot sells better,' Puri told IANS.

And they may continue to do so this year too, especially at global auctions.

Dubai and the Southeast Asian hubs of Singapore and Hong Kong are the biggest transit markets in Asia. Last year, Christie's post-autumn sale of contemporary Indian art in Hong Kong saw 16 'new and upcoming faces from India' with the highest 'purchase tag' being a little over Rs.3 million.

'This year, too, we expect a lot of bids from India because buyers are curious about Indian art globally,' said Ganieve Grewal, Christie's India representative.

The Fall 2007 edition of the Asia Week at Christie's, which raked in \$44,316,701, relied heavily on

classical and contemporary Indian art, which contributed Rs. 21.7 million. The trend will continue, says Christie's India team.

Art marketing is also changing. 'The year 2008 will see more art-related material and literature like smarter catalogues, new anthologies and collaterals like limited edition prints, sketchbooks and new gallery decor to complement the show,' says journalist-turned-art promoter Poonam Goel.

Art no longer sells by itself. It has to be packaged and marketed, along with the artist because of the changing buyers' profile.

'The bulk of the buyers this year and last year were non-resident Indians who shopped for art during their visits home. Many of them are setting up their own private museums. They do their homework well and like to know about the artist before buying,' explains Puri, who is sourcing work for the Imami Art Foundation and Imami Chisel to be set up later in [Kolkata](#) this year.

Coupled with it is the emergence of new buyers' groups in the Indian metros -- young upwardly mobile professionals in the age group of 25-40 who are flush with cash and love the jazz of big-time art. Hence the emphasis is on 'collaterals' this year, chorus promoters, artists and gallery owners.

The art world has reason to cheer. After a period of doldrums over the last eight months or so - when the sale of Indian art in both domestic and global markets had slackened because of 'artificially pumped up' prices, the entry of unscrupulous dealers who bought on behalf of corporate houses and tier-3 galleries, the surfacing of fake art and insecurity among buyers - the market has stabilised again.

'In fact, the market is slightly bullish because the prices are now realistic,' says Puri. The Indian art market is estimated at Rs.10 billion to Rs.14 billion annually.

The rationalisation of prices is expected to lead to a spurt in investment. 'More people have been investing over the last few months and the coming months will see more of it. Buyers' horizons are also broadening to include photography, sculptures and installations, apart from the traditional mixed media,' says Roshni Vadhera of the Vadhera Art Galley, one of the biggest in the country.

As for the artists themselves, the last quarter of 2007 has set the pointers for 2008. While the senior lot, the Tier Two among the old Indian masters, will fare well globally as the international auctions have shown, the younger ones in the Rs.150,000 to Rs.500,000 category will rule the marts back home. They are mostly contemporary and 'experimental' in their work.

'We have had new wave success stories like Subodh Gupta and Justin Punmani who have moved away from the cliched kind of imagery. We have innovative fads like videoart and photorealism,' says Puri. They are expected to command 'steady niche markets' in 2008.

But it is figurative art, the bulwark of Indian artistic tradition, which will call the shots globally in the coming months.

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