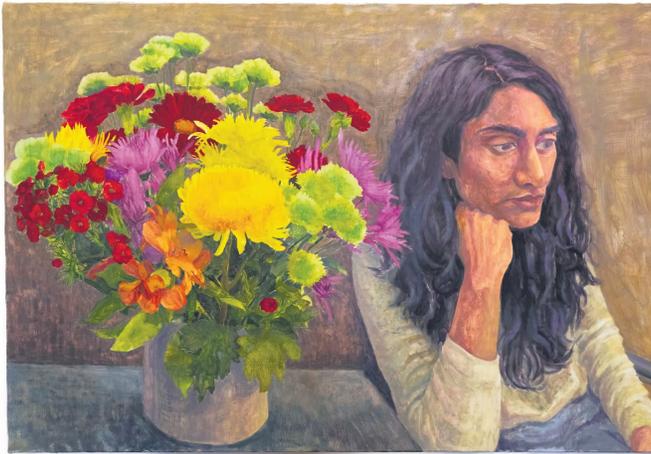


Magazine

United colours of Asia

Indian galleries make their presence felt at the latest edition of Art Basel Hong Kong despite low representation



Beside the Flowers by Eiza Khatri

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Published on: 07 Apr 2024, 5:00 am



It is 12:59 pm, just about an hour after this year's Art Basel Hong Kong (ABHK)—the largest art fair in Asia— opened its floors. Gallerist Roshini Vadehra of Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery (VAG) is in the middle of a conversation with a woman animatedly pointing towards a work by artist Anju Dodiya. Titled Silver Afternoon, the 2021 work executed in the artist's recognisable style, shows a couple resting against a lounge chair.

Painted on fabric stretched on a padded board, it epitomises Dodiya's practice, which is defined by "an emotional theatre of an inner world". "Her shaped mattress paintings are by default objects related to the domestic that speak to the comfort within the tormented bliss of the everyday," reads the wall text at the booth. The gallery, which has works priced between USD 10,000 and USD 50,000, sold 50 per cent of the booth by the second day of the fair. Dodiya's work was placed with a collector in London.

Market Matters

VAG has been participating in the fair since before it came under the Art Basel banner in 2016, and their portfolio has been consistent—their star artists, including Atul and Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Nalini Malani, NS Harsha and BV Doshi. "We always bring artists who are well known in the region. Their works attract substantial interest, and we have successfully placed them in prominent collections and museums in this region. We sold Shilpa's work to the M+ museum many years ago.

Last year, Atul's work was placed with a collector who donated it to the National Gallery of Singapore, and Doshi's work went to a corporate collection in Mainland China. That is why we feel confident about bringing these artists back. But, we also take this opportunity to introduce new names to the audience here," says Roshini. The new entrant this year was American-Pakistani artist Zaam Arif, whose 2024 oil-on-canvas work, Joyas Voladoras went to a collector in China.



Joyas Voladoras by Zaam Arif

While VAG relied on its tried-and-tested formula, Kolkata's Experimenter, true to its name, experimented, and ditched its quintessential somber monochromatic palette for vibrant pieces. There's Bhasha Chakrabarti's multicoloured textile works, Soumya Sankar Bose's dreamy photographs, and Reba Hore's intimate oil paintings. The gallery also brought, for the first time, works by Christopher Kulendran Thomas—a series of playful watercolour paintings. Unlike most booths, which present pieces in isolation, the works at the Experimenter booth are in dialogue with each other. Gallery founder Prateek Raja explains why: "The proposition for the exhibition comes from the late writer Aweek Sen, who had a workshop at Experimenter called, 'What you don't talk about when you talk about love'. All the works are related to the idea of love, but in different contexts. They focus on what doesn't get spoken about—questions of loss, possessiveness or control, and multiplicities of relationships." So, while Chakrabarti's Kinship (Familial & Found) talks about love passed through generations, Hore's works celebrate the mundaneness of familial ties.

For Experimenter, the market is secondary. That is because the gallery is aware of its clientele in the region. "It's more about what works for the booth. The pieces should work with each other. Our market is mostly institutional, and we know what they would like to see," says Prateek, adding, "We sold most works to new collectors at the fair, including placing a significant work from the booth with a museum in Hong Kong."

Low Representation

VAG and Experimenter's success stories at ABHK, however, appear to be exceptions as the number of Indian galleries at the fair has only decreased over the last decade. From nine galleries in 2016, it has come down to four in 2024, even as China (Mainland and Hong Kong) took over the UK to become the second largest global art market earlier this year. "The US maintained its leading position in the global art market, accounting for 42 per cent of sales, while China emerged as the second-largest market with a 19 per cent share. Sales in China rallied against the declining trend, increasing to an estimated \$12.2 billion," notes The Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report 2024.



It's Complicated by Sameer Kulavoor

The reasons have been varied. The Asian art market has seen a mushrooming of art fairs, including Art Dubai, Frieze Seoul and Art SG (Singapore), making galleries pick and choose. Peter Nagy of Delhi-based Nature Morte, which last participated in ABHK in 2018, has said that the Chinese market doesn't warrant much business for them. Other Indian galleries that have discontinued participation include GallerySke, Gallery Espace, and the latest is Mumbai's Chemould Prescott Road, which dropped out last year. Angelle Siyang-Lee, who was appointed the ABHK director in 2023, cites increasing number of applications globally and a competitive selection process as possible reasons, and adds she has plans to visit India to reconnect with the art fraternity here. As part of her efforts to encourage Indian participation, fair authorities stepped in when Experimenter had a Visa snafu. "We experienced a complication while applying for our pre-arrival authorisation in Hong Kong. This was distressing considering it came close to the opening of the fair. The ABHK team facilitated our being in Hong Kong by procuring invitations," says Prateek.

The withdrawal of galleries, however, doesn't necessarily impact the artists they represent. Jitish Kallat, represented by Nature Morte and Chemould Prescott in India, managed to make a splash with his large-scale work—Wind Study (Hilbert's Curve)—which was part of the Encounters section of the fair. Besides that, smaller versions of the piece, as well as works from his Asymptote series, were also part of Paris, Brussels and New York-based gallery Templon's booth.

Small Galleries, Big Picture

The fair has been kinder to younger Indian galleries such as Tarq and Jhaveri Contemporary, which have been regulars at ABHK. Part of the fair's Discoveries sector, their presentations focus on a single, and often, young artist. For them, representation supersedes sales. "The objective is to show the breadth of the gallery's programme. And Hong Kong is open to different visuals.

We were unsure of bringing Nibha Sikander's (anatomical) works last year, but we sold all of them," says Tarq's Hena Kapadia who, this year, has presented a series of architectural paintings and video works by artist Sameer Kulavoor. Priya Jhaveri of Jhaveri Contemporary, which showcased works by Karachi-based artist Fiza Khatri, agrees. "We are thinking about the artists who are in that stage in their career that a presentation like this could benefit them. Fiza has just graduated from Yale, and we showed her works at Frieze, and then more recently in Dubai. Such showcases also help us display our range as a gallery," she says.

With Frieze Seoul, Art SG and Art Dubai, ABHK certainly does not enjoy the monopoly in Asia it did nearly a decade ago. But, Hong Kong's newly elevated status in the global art market indicates that the fair continues to mean business.

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Art Basel Hong Kong

Indian art galleries

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