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The Indian showcase at Art Dubai delves deep into memory

Through this lens, several artists have further looked at ideas of displacement, conflict, identity and gender in their own unique ways



Detail from Jogen Chowdhury's 'Retired Horse' (1964). Image: courtesy Emami Art

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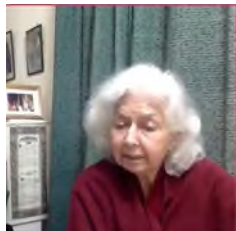
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As the world emerges from yet another wave of the covid-19 pandemic, art shows and fairs are beginning to open up in the physical space again. In Asia, Art Dubai—a platform to see and buy modern and contemporary art from the Global South—is one of the first such events to take place this Spring. The 15th edition, to be held between 11–13 March at Madinat Jumeirah, features 100 exhibitors from 44 countries, including more than 30 first-time participants.

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“This year’s programme will feature newly commissioned site-specific works by internationally renowned artists; a unique new digital section that will act as a bridge between the crypto and art world; ground-breaking group exhibitions; and an ambitious multi-strand talks programme, including the 15th edition of the Global Art Forum,” states the fair note. There is a rather strong Indian representation at Art Dubai this year, with leading galleries such as Experimenter, Tarq, Jhaveri Contemporary, Nature Morte, Vadehra Art Gallery, Latitude 28, and more, bringing in diverse artistic voices.

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The overarching theme of the various Indian shows seems to be memory and identity.

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Khadim Ali, 'Untitled', gouache and gold leaf on Wasli paper. Image: courtesy Latitude 28

Through this lens, artists such as Prabhakar Pachpute, Khadim Ali, Waseem Ahmed, Soghra Khurasani, Aziz Hazra and Sudipta Das have further looked at ideas of displacement, conflict and gender in their own unique ways. One of the highlights is Ali's work from the *Passport Series*, which focuses on migrants' changing relationships with their home country and the place that they are forced to move to. The series, presented by New Delhi-based Latitude 28, emerges from Ali's deeply personal experiences of being born and raised in a conflict zone in Afghanistan, and later living as a migrant in Australia.

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While focusing on a pressing global issue of modern times, Ali looks back at the imagery around legendary warrior and conqueror Rustam, one of the heroes from the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. He shows figures either grappling against waves or stuck in limbo on a ship. “He uses the images of seafarers passing through a heaving tide stuck in limbo, the imagery of these horn-rimmed figures resonates with the plight of migrating bodies to assert the dehumanizing, almost demonizing nature of immigration,” mentions the curatorial note.

While Ali’s work is about movement, Aziz Hazra’s *Chalk Drawings* are about restrictions. In his photographic work, being presented by Experimenter, Kolkata, one can see a pair of feet with chalk boundaries drawn around it. The immediate feeling is of constriction. The artist, who lives and works between Berlin and Kabul, has been addressing the relationship between dual ideas of proximity and distance, war and peace, among other things through his video installations, photos, sound and sculpture. There is power in the simplicity of this photo from *Chalk Drawings* —highlighting how mundane everyday materials can be used by man to deny and restrict basic freedoms to his fellow human beings.

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Yamini Nayar, 'Dual Nature', 2020, silver gelatin print, Image: courtesy Jhaveri Contemporary

Duality is at the heart of Yamini Nayar's practice as well. The New York-based

artist works at the intersection of sculpture and photography. Her monochromatic work, *Dual Nature*, being shown by Jhaveri Contemporary, has been made by photographing constructions of wood and paper in multiple moments on a single piece of black-and-white film. “In *Dual Nature*, there is a buildup and breakdown of form through time, which is made visible through the photographic process. I was very much thinking of duality and how to hold the Opposites,” she states.

Meanwhile, Baroda-based Soghra Khurasani uses the beauty of colours and landscapes as metaphors to address issues of identity, casteism, racism and gender. The series of woodcut prints and etchings created during the pandemic will be exhibited in the Bawwaba section of the fair curated by Nancy Adajania. One of the most striking works is *Fragile 2*, an etching print on paper, featuring swirls of blue and white—there seems to be a blurring of forms and ideas, both known and unknown. Khurasani’s works are being presented by Tarq, Mumbai.

Also on display are works from different phases of artistic careers, again themed around basic human emotions such as power, helplessness or resignation. A must-attend is Emami Art’s booth—marking the Kolkata-based gallery’s debut at the fair—on Jogen Chowdhury’s early sketches and paintings of human figures and animals from the 1960s. One can see his expert use of lines to evoke empathy in the viewer towards his subjects —of children holding on to one another on a railway platform, a girl staring pensively into the distance, and more.

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One can see the influence of his personal struggles — of poverty in the refugee colony in Dhakuria after the Partition— in his work. “Let us dwell on Jogen’s early life studies. These are masterly and vividly expressive representations of human figures, all the more memorable as they were made by him as a student and young artist. He represents his protagonists in repose and action, in pensive and dynamic moods, in a variety of tonalities ranging from incipient curiosity to playful seduction,” writes Ranjit Hoskote in *Reverie and Reality*.

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'King as Manipulator' by Rabin Mondal. Image: courtesy DAG

Memory played a strong role in Rabin Mondal's *King Series* as well. The Bengal famine in 1943 and the Calcutta communal riots of 1946 deeply impacted him, leading him to join the Communist Party. However, for Mondal, art was his strongest tool of protest. The distinctive human figures reflect the abhorrence towards mankind's moral decay. The set of eight paintings show distorted figures set amidst garish colours, showing the inner depravity of those who abuse power. To be shown as part of *The Tyranny of Power*, by DAG, the series will be accompanied by preparatory drawings as well.

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