



Art, basically

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As Art Basel Hong Kong returns to its physical form for the first time since 2019, Indian galleries make a mark despite low representation.



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The biggest edition of Art Basel Hong Kong since 2019.(Photo | Art Basel via AP)

By Trisha Mukherjee

Hong Kong Saga

Moments after the show floors at Art Basel Hong Kong (ABHK) the largest art fair in Asia opened last week, the crowd closed in on N S Harsha's bronze sculpture, 'Eternal Helix'. The work, featuring a monkey and its child, pointing at the sky, is an allusion to Hanuman's langurs, who are "worshipped as resilient messengers with the ability to articulate prophecy".

The piece, exhibited by Vadehra Art Gallery—the only Indian gallery in the fair's main segment—was an instant hit, with visitors queuing up to click pictures while striking the same pose. They also had works by Nalini Malani, Anju Dodiya, Sunil Gupta, BV Doshi, Praneet Soi, Atul Dodiya and Shilpa Gupta.

The fair this year had a total of 177 participants from 32 countries, two-thirds of which were dedicated to galleries from Hong Kong, alongside a strong presence from galleries from Mainland China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

The expanding art fair scene in Asia might be at play behind India's low representation. Since 2022, two additional fairs—Frieze Seoul and Art SG (Singapore)—have cropped up. "There are so many fairs in Asia now that we could be attending a fair every other weekend," Parul Vadehra says, adding they gave Art Dubai a miss for ABHK. With the cost of participation ranging from \$815-960 per sqm, fairs have also become an expensive affair for Indian galleries.

Among those that sat out the fair was Experimenter, which has been a participant since 2015, and also represents one of Hong Kong's leading artists, Samson Young. "We wanted to see the impact of Covid-related rules for international visitors, but it looks like Hong Kong is back with a bang and we look forward to being back too," says Priyanka Raja of the gallery. Other missing names included Nature Morte, and Chemould Prescott Gallery.

Even as participation was lower than 2019, the footfall of 86,000, including private collectors from 70 countries, is proof that Hong Kong has returned to being the leading art market hub in Asia, with ABHK as its crown jewel. "Collectors from across Asia came out in force, and it is exciting to witness the extraordinary growth and vitality of the local art scene. The show reaffirmed its position as the apex cultural moment in the region," says Noah Horowitz, CEO, Art Basel.

Deconstructing Reality

Nibha Sikander's works were brought to the fair by Mumbai's Tarq gallery as part of an exhibition, titled Anatomize. In a stunningly colourful collection, the young artist creates



deconstructed biological specimens of moths and birds. She lives in Murud Janjira—located off the Arabian sea coast—and next to the Phansad sanctuary in Maharashtra, which is where she collects actual specimens to study and then reproduce them using paper.

The recreation is life-like, and tends to have an unsettling effect on viewers, compelling them to introspect about the damage inflicted on the planet by humankind, giving the vanity-inducing hobby of displaying taxidermy animals an intelligently sustainable twist. "This is Nibha's second solo exhibition with us since 2019, and I chose her for the fair, primarily because the number of works—15—in this collection

just seemed right. Also, because her practice is just so in the moment, with everybody talking about the environment and climate change," says Hena Kapadia, founder, Tarq. She adds that the initial interest of fair visitors in the works successfully translated into satisfactory sales.

Nibha Sikander

Art medium: Paper

Artwork: Deconstructed Citrus Fruit Piercer (female)



UP govt strikes caste balance nominations to Vidhan Paris

Etihad Airways flight develop technical snag, circles in skie 1.5 hrs to exhaust fuel, retur:

MP: Namibian Cheetah tours village, hunts two cows and returns to national park after hours

'Paan'ishment: Chewer made clean bus stop floor

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Wrath of the Written Word

Singapore-based Indian artist Shubigi Rao's River of Ink II that was part of the Encounters section is

a reiteration of her 2008 work of the same name. It borrows the title from a survivor's account after the Battle of Baghdad (1258), which read, "On the first day the rivers ran red with blood, and on the second day black with ink", because the Mongols, as an act of power, dumped all the contents of the libraries into water bodies. "The river of ink is symbolic not just of one battle, but the assault on creativity and free expression," says Rao, who curated the

2022 edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The idea of creating a scruffy work—300 "hand-lettered" books destroyed with ink and placed on battered wooden platforms for an art fair—a representation of money and power, in itself seems like an act of rebellion, something that is synonymous with the artist's practice.

Shubigi Rao

Art medium: Wood, ink, paper

Artwork: River of Ink II

Drawing Memory



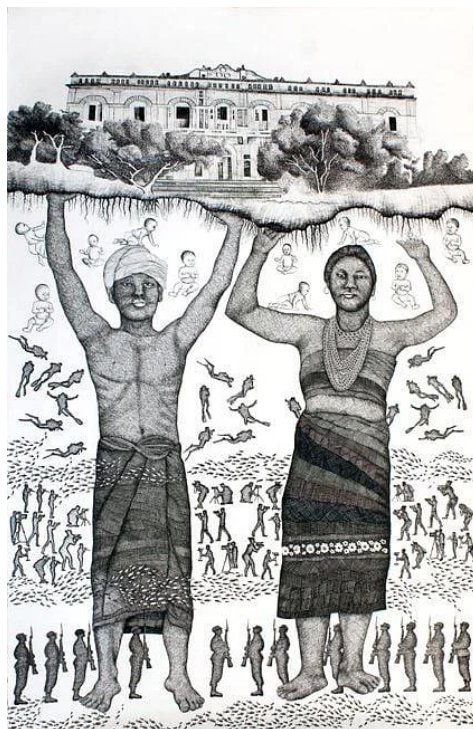
Although the gallery did not disclose details of the sales, Mumbai-based Jhaveri Contemporary's booth exhibiting Bangladeshi artist Joydeb Roaja's works was among the most-packed booths at the fair. Titled Submerged Dreams, the show featured five large-scale ink pen on paper works that retell the 1962 flooding of 400 km of Chakma land in present-day Bangladesh, after the construction of the Kaptai dam. Raja's paintings, which are recollections of the stories he grew up listening to from his grandparents and other elders in his family, feature

indigenous people of the region in locations that are now underwater. "Even the Chakma Royal Palace got submerged," says the artist, adding, "I hope to earn enough money through my art and then go underwater diving to see if I can find the palace." The works are all done in black ink using the cross-hatching technique. The repeated use of lines, in a way, appear to be symbolic of revisiting the memories of multiple people, multiple times.

Joydeb Roaja

Art medium: Ink pen on paper

Artwork: Submerged Dreams



Rustic Routes



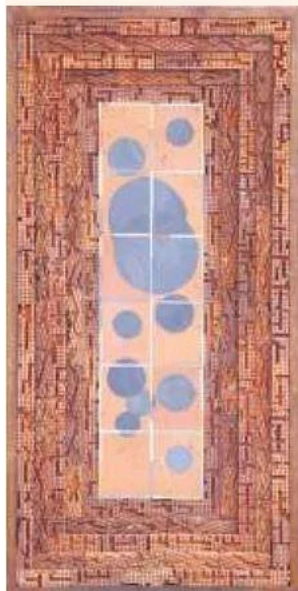
M Pravat's Concrete Dusk, featuring over eight works, was brought to the fair by Pune-based Vida Heydari Contemporary. The geometric yet abstract sculptures created out of fired brick, cut slate, stonedust and metal, draw in the viewer at first glance, thanks to commendable intricacy on the artist's part, especially because of the brittle nature of the material. Pravat creates cityscapes that mimic the cartographic precision of lines to reflect the evolution of civilisation.

"The works build upon a theme I have been exploring for over 10 years now—different expressions of a city under construction. My interest in the subject comes from the lived experience of a city that is in a constant state of flux, both tangible and intangible, negotiating between its masterplan, popular aspirations and the everyday experiences," says the artist, who managed to sell four of his works at the fair.

M Pravat

Art medium: Fired brick, cut slate, stonedust, metal

Artwork: Represented Movement



Home With a View



Presented by Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery, B V Doshi's 35x50-inch wall-mounted metal sculpture, *Overlay of Dreams VII*, was sold the very first day of the fair. The 2022 work, created just a year before the artist-architect passed away in January, is part of a larger series that is a reflection of his minimalist practice combining contemporary architectural aesthetics with the quintessential Indian idea of home. Those familiar with his style will find echoes of his structural designs in the collection that, like the buildings he has created, plays with light and shadow. This particular piece, with steep stairs running across the pyramid-like structure, appears to be a 3D-blueprint of one of the houses in an LIC housing project in Ahmedabad that the architect designed in 1973.

B V Doshi

Art medium: Metal

Artwork: *Overlay of Dreams VII*

