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Indian galleries bring a sense of intimacy to Art Basel Hong Kong

At Art Basel Hong Kong 2024, Indian galleries present the many tactile and visual notions of love, loss, pain and touch



Fiza Khatri's 'A Gathering (Clifton Studio)', 2023, oil on canvas. Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary

By Avantika Bhuyan

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For the past couple of editions, Indian galleries have made their presence felt at Art Basel Hong Kong—which has been Asia's biggest contemporary art fair since 2013. And each year, one has got to see some powerful works by women artists from the subcontinent such as Zarina, Lubna Chowdhary, Savia Mahajan, Anju Dodiya, and more. These strong prolific women addressed issues that were political and pertinent, ranging from the idea of borders to communal politics and identity.

The upcoming edition of the fair, to be held in Hong Kong between 28-30 March is no different. Tarq, Experimenter, Vadehra Art Gallery and Jhaveri Contemporary are part of the 243 premier galleries from 40 countries and regions at the fair this year, which hopes to return to its pre-pandemic scale with a 37 per cent increase in exhibitor numbers. However, one can perceive a difference in tone in the Indian presentations this year. While the galleries are still showing a strong set of feminist artists, among others, the works centre around intimacy. In a world that is undergoing drastic technological disruptions, the idea of touch and love seem to be slipping away. In such a scenario, artists look at the many tactile and visual notions of love, loss, pain and touch.

"The idea of 'staying in touch' is gradually shifting across geographies and generations. While it is easy to stay connected digitally, people in urban and capitalist environments are experiencing higher levels of isolation and loneliness even within families and intimate relationships," says Roshini Vadehra, director, Vadehra Art Gallery, which is part of the main 'Galleries' section along with Experimenter. It is showing a group exhibition, *A Sense Across the Field*, featuring works by Anita Dube, Anju Dodiya, Nalini Malani, Shilpa Gupta, Atul Bhalla, Atul Dodiya, and more.

So, Anju Dodiya's signature mattress works such as *Silver Afternoon* take objects of domesticity and comfort and turn them into symbols of tormented bliss using sharp, albeit sensitive, imagery. "Nalini Malani makes a plea towards humanity through sign language in her work, urging the viewer to listen deeply and understand the language of pain," elaborates Vadehra. Shilpa Gupta has created a set of four works, each featuring one alphabet from the word 'Love'. "Her work, in four parts, is meant to go to a diverse group of collectors and sites, thereby activating a communal need for fulfilment. Each alphabet evokes the absence of the others," she adds.

friends, lovers, animals and plants in domestic interiors, outdoor gardens and bodies of water. As fictions, Khatri's paintings create temporal openings for living otherwise and performing alternative lifeworlds," says the gallery note.

In an email interview, Khatri talks about the many influences that have informed how they think about the relationships between the figure and the environment. "I am influenced by the literary traditions of South Asian Sufi poets like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Amir Khusrau, Kabir and their attention to non-duality, or a porous relationship between the self and the other. I'm excited by the possibility that the figure is not delimited, rather made and unmade in relation to others and the environment," they says. They are also interested in works of painters such as French painter Pierre Bonnard, whose interiors have as much primacy as the figures presented within them, "so much so that sometimes the figure is the last you see," says Khatri.

For galleries like Vadehra Art Gallery and Jhaveri Contemporary, Art Basel Hong Kong is an important platform to showcase new perspectives. "We use the opportunity to exhibit works of artists, who already have established interest in the region as well as artists, who could generate new interest," she says. For Jhaveri Contemporary, the 2024 edition marks the gallery's fifth year at the fair. And each year, the team has brought new work by artists from South Asia such as Bangladeshi-British artist Rana Begum, Ali Kazim from Pakistan, Joydeb Roaja from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, and more.

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"The focus tends to be on marginalised positions — overlooked art historical figures, indigenous practitioners, pioneers of certain methods/processes, or artists set apart by considerations of gender and sexuality," says gallerist Priya Jhaveri. "Fiza Khatri graduated from Yale recently and, over the last six months alone, we've shown their work in different contexts across three cities: Frieze London in October, Art Dubai this month, and a solo display at Art Basel in Hong Kong, where we have no doubt it will be favourably received."

Art Basel Hong Kong will be held from 28-30 March in Hong Kong.

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