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Dispatch: Mumbai: Boom Bubble

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Installation view of **RITHIKA PANDEY's** "Birth of Forgiveness," 2023, nine acrylic on canvas paintings at Chemould CoLab, Mumbai. Courtesy Chemould CoLab.

In Mumbai, growth is the only constant. Along with an expressway being built across the entire coast and reclaimed land being dug up for an ever-delayed metro project, there are so many ongoing construction sites in the financial capital that it periodically ranks as having

some of the most polluted air in the world. Those who can afford it retreat into air-conditioned, purified bubbles, overlooking a distant view of the gnawing haze.

As a sliver of the city's upper class begins moving into newly built homes, even larger than those they previously occupied, residents procure more walls to fill and higher aspirations to meet. Accordingly, Mumbai's real estate boom has brought an onslaught of interior decorators and their clients into commercial art galleries in search of works that can serve as both decoration and financial investments. In fact, there are so many new buyers, gallerists admit that they no longer know them all. Yet unlike previous clients, few return as collectors once their homes have been furnished.

Overall, Mumbai's galleries have witnessed hectic sales since the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing many to clear out their inventories despite a global shutdown. Due to government restrictions on assembly, during that time a dozen galleries, nearly half Mumbai-based, started Art in Touch to take their exhibitions online. Established collectors with little else to do during the lockdowns, and plenty of income at their disposal, thus developed a greater appetite for art sales, a trend that has persisted even after galleries resumed programming.

It is no coincidence then that several galleries have launched second spaces, and dealers from across the country have opened Mumbai branches. After the devastating second wave of Covid-19 in India, 2022 became *the* year of expansion. The city's oldest gallery, Chemould Prescott Road, formed Chemould CoLab, an offshoot dedicated to emerging artists run by Chemould owner Shireen Gandhi's daughter, Atyaan Jungalwala, and Sunaina Rajan. Chatterjee & Lal entered into a partnership with Srila Chatterjee, of the online lifestyle store Baro Market, to open a design-focused gallery called 47-A in the southern heritage village of Khotachiwadi. Kolkata-based Experimenter also opened in the city, taking up the apartment formerly occupied by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, which moved into a larger venue amid offices in Ballard Estate. Tarq Gallery relocated to Fort, nearly doubling its square footage. The following year, in 2023, Akara Art divided its modern and contemporary program between two locations in Colaba, Mumbai's southern art district. Such growth was accompanied by the appearance of new art spaces, such as Gallery XXL, focusing on post-graffiti art, also in Colaba, and Art and Charlie, contrarily housed in a bungalow in the trendy Bandra West neighborhood. The most recent arrival is Delhi's Nature Morte, occupying a whole floor in a building nearby the Gateway of India.

Yet, by far the biggest institution to emerge is the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC), funded by the Ambanis, one of India's wealthiest families. With newly built climate-controlled halls, the NMACC possesses the funds and facilities to bring artists celebrated in the West to India, hosting Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Rooms* in July 2023 and "Pop: Fame, Love and Power," a survey of iconic American artists, such as Andy Warhol and others of his generation, in January 2024. Such exhibitions may not be of interest to Mumbai's elite, who can easily view international art while traveling abroad, nor do they attract scholars of art history, but they have made a breakthrough on social media, with influencers consistently posting about and tagging the institution.

Echoing the rise in buyers, Mumbai's broader art audience has grown exponentially. To the city's advantage, art spaces are largely concentrated within a radius of a couple of kilometers on Mumbai's southern tip, and this proximity allows for initiatives like Carpe Arte and Art & Wonderment to conduct monthly walking tours of exhibitions. Openings are packed with attendees of varying ages and professions, particularly during the Mumbai Gallery Weekend in January, when the most awaited shows are displayed. There, commercial galleries play the same pedagogical role that they have for decades, hosting talks and panels for industry experts and newcomers alike.

But despite these progressions, for artists, nothing can replace the benefits of securing funding from the state or committed nonprofits. Under the present circumstances of unaffordable rent and living costs, gallery-represented artists find opportunities to thrive while others are forced to find alternate professions. Meanwhile, the consolidation of right-wing politics in Mumbai and India at large poses an even greater threat: being targeted for making art that critiques those in power, forcing artists to self-censor for their own safety. For the longest time, it seemed as if contemporary art in Mumbai fell under the radar. It no longer is, for reasons both promising and threatening.

An independent writer and curator, Zeenat Nagree's work has been featured in Artforum, Art India, and Time Out. Her practice moves between art and fiction in Bombay and Montréal. She is currently working on a novel and a book of poetry.

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