

ART

The Lalit Kala Akademi in Chennai houses works by 66 contemporary artists this August

At Chennai's Lalit Kala Akademi and beyond, the third edition of 'Contemporary Now' contextualises the present for a fresh audience.

By Ashwini Banisubramanian

4 August 2024



Saju Kunhan

East Asia to West Asia, 2024

Images transferred, golden acrylic colour, charcoal

and varnish on recycled teak wood

198.1 x 127.0 cm / 78.0 x 50.0 in (Saju Kunhan and DAG)

Four days after accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, a French-Algerian philosopher, at Sweden's Uppsala University, argued that if art isolates itself from society and its moment, it collapses into empty negation, and if it panders to the crowd, it becomes mere entertainment. In this lecture, originally titled 'L'Artiste et son temps' (The Artist and His Time), known popularly among Anglophones as 'Create Dangerously,' he held that art means much more when it's made in a current context and not suspended in some sacrosanct past. While browsing through pieces by the likes of Raghava K K, Mithu Sen, Julien Segard, Chanakya School, Nikhil Chopra, and Dhruvi Acharya, set to be shown at the third edition of 'Contemporary Now' in Chennai, these ideas articulated by Albert Camus rang through my mind.



Amlesh Shrivastava, Translators II, 2017

Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 213.4 cm / 60.0 x 84.0 in

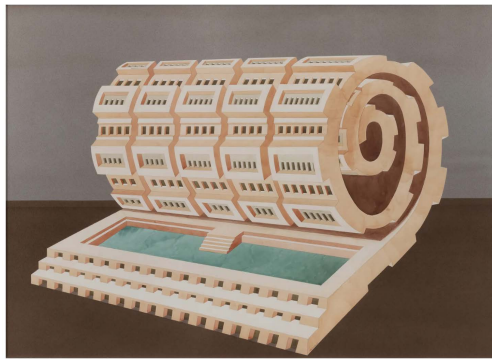


Ajay Mukerjee *Logues, Remnants in the Bazaar*
2024. Oil on linen
17.9 x 91.4 cm / 48.0 x 36.0 in
Vadehra Art Gallery



Atul Dodiya *Hermit I*
2024. Watercolour on paper
37.5 x 27.9 cm / 14.8 x 11.0 in
Chemould Prescott Road

This year's curatorial focus, "Practices in Continuum: Tracing the Present," springs forth from a similar premise, and aims to transmit it to collectors, custodians, and tastemakers of art, especially the ones who've conventionally seen value mostly among the dead and their creations. "Auction houses sell only seventy to eighty artists for decades. That is some serious brand building and reinforcement—it's like the Marvel universe, but everything is still Marvel," says Ashvin E. Rajagopalan, co-director of 'Contemporary Now.' "Nobody's doing that for contemporary [art]," he adds. With about sixty-six artists over twenty days, 'Contemporary Now' has set out to fill that void. Alongside Rajagopalan's Ashvita's, prominent galleries such as [Chatterjee & Lal](#), Tarq, Chemould Prescott Road, [Experimenter](#), Vadehra Art Gallery and Project 88 are all on a mission to spotlight these new-age mavericks at Lalit Kala Akademi in Chennai.



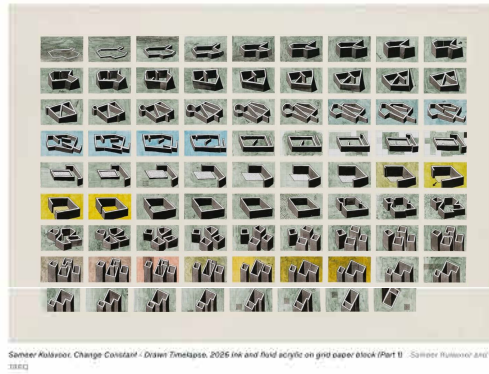
Gigi Scana *Carpet*, 2011 Watercolour and automotive paint on paper, 123.4 x 182.9 cm / 52.5 x 72.0 in Vadehra Art Gallery

While bringing this exhibit and its theme to life, what intrigued Priyanjoli Basu, co-director of 'Contemporary Now,' was the common thread that emerged through the bariolage of unique practices. "They were all addressing overlapping narratives of climate change, ecology, social anxiety, displacement, migration, and war—all very pressing present-day conditions. But they were also all coming from very internal reflections," she tells AD. Basu further illuminates how these reflections are increasingly maintained by female artists within the contemporary scene, too (a demographic that wasn't very well represented within Moderns or before). Rajagopalan has also observed a phenomenal uptick of collectors who are women and interested in acquiring these perspectives. He attributes this sea change to financially privileged families, who have long been patrons of the arts, finally making space for their women to take up the reins, enabling them to wield their monetary sway.

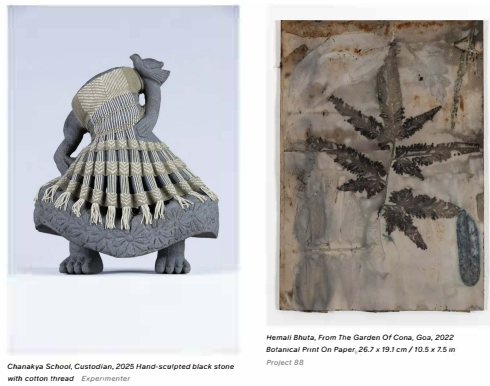


Nikhil Chopra *Lands, Waters & Skies: Zymarg*, 2018
Charcoal on paper, 22 1/4 x 29 3/4 in / 56.5 x 75.6 cm
Chatterjee and Lal

'Contemporary Now' is paramount for the expansion of Tamil Nadu's art industry, as it is for the art industry of the South of India as a whole. "The third edition marks an important moment for the event, as it is firmly established in the region's yearly art calendar," say Tara Lal and Mortimer Chatterjee of Chatterjee & Lal. It is evident that gallerists and curators are excited by the host city. "This initiative helps us place our artists in dialogue with audiences outside the usual Delhi-Mumbai axis," explains Roshini Vadehra of Vadehra Art Gallery. "And it is a wonderful opportunity to see the conversation grow with an entirely different collector base." Hena Kapadia of Tarq agrees. "For a lot of [the artists], this will be their first time showing in Chennai," she chimes in. "It will be exciting to see their work in conversation with peers from across the country."



Lal and Chatterjee believe that 'Contemporary Now' has evolved into a really interesting model—one "which engages not only with commerce but also with learning." The multi-venue exhibit aims to sprinkle the beginnings of relevant dialogues among students, emerging makers, and young entrepreneurs, who will dictate the zeitgeist of tomorrow. Also in the vein of championing innovation, artworks throughout the exhibit are to be essentially label-less, technologically powered by a proprietary app called Eicon, developed by Rajagopalan and his team, which lets the viewer scan the paintings to get specifications and larger context, rather than have them squinting at miniscule text (and, at least in my case, aimlessly taking pictures of them for posterity).



This edition, which Chemould Prescott Road's Shireen Gandhi calls "more robust, sharper and sassier" than the last two, is also to foster partner programmes across the city. One such programme is 'Unruly Bodies,' presented by Avtar Foundation for the Arts showing significant Modern artists like F. N. Souza and S. H. Raza, drawing a thread towards works by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Shilpa Gupta, buttressing it with young emerging talent like Rah Naqvi and Nitheen Ramalingam. All of which, housed at the Alliance Française of Madras, "looks at the way the body is influenced, worked on, and reacts to structures of power," says AFTA founder Jaiveer Johal.



"We might not be able to compete with anything else in the country right now, mostly because they've done it bigger, better, and in a completely different style," Basu says with modesty galore. But that lack of grandeur provides an opportunity for artists to be visible to a fresh, new audience and buyers to meticulously consider what they stumble upon. "What is important to us is for people to engage in one-on-one conversations within environments that are intimate enough as opposed to large settings where you are running from booth to booth, place to place." Basu's words make it emphatically clear that 'Contemporary Now' is about anything but making haste. Instead, it is a portal to future-forward discourses, encouraging investment in the art of the present.

'Contemporary Now: Edition III' will take place at the Lalit Kala Akademi, Chennai, with partner programmes across multiple venues in the city, from 8 to 25 August 2026.