

SMART ART

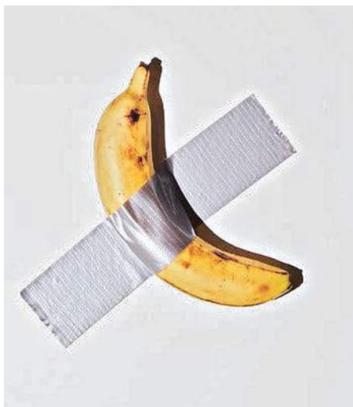


KISHORE SINGH

# Year of the banana?

Art can range from the sacred to the sacrilegious — and has often done — but it is a matter of time before what was considered provocative is deemed acceptable. It can trigger protests, and the last decades have seen Indian artists being subjected to ridiculous acts of censorship. That absurdity can test limits, but what happens when the art becomes absurd instead? Not banal, not mediocre, but plain insulting to the viewing public.

By now everyone knows about the banana on the wall that Paris-based Sarah Andelman paid \$120,000 (₹85 lakh) for, with a second edition snapped up by Billy and Beatrice Cox of Miami. Maurizio Cattelan is a satirical artist known for his hyperrealistic sculptures who went for “real” instead with a duct-taped banana that many are referring to as a new low for art. He created three “editions” of the work, challenging most critics who failed to fathom how a banana taped to a wall could be deemed to be “original” or have any editions at all. Then, a performance artist wandered into the booth where the work was displayed, picked the banana off the wall, and ate it up.



**The farcicality should be obvious to everyone, but artists and art writers can be persuasive about the ‘meaning’ of such work, laying it at the altar of high art**

Goodbye artwork? Apparently not, said Cattelan, who had tagged the third edition by then at a steeper \$150,000 (₹1 crore). Bananas left out on their own decompose, so this was a renewable

work. Buy a new banana, tape it back on a wall — and voila! New (very expensive) artwork. The Coxes plan to donate the “work” to a museum.

The farcicality should be obvious to everyone, but artists and art writers can be persuasive about the “meaning” of such work, laying it at the altar of high art. The Coxes call it “the unicorn of the art world”, as defining as Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans of the 1960s. A case can indeed be made about how the decomposing banana reflects the temporality of life, about nature’s cycle, about death amidst life yada-yada-yada, but there is only so much blah one can impose on any audience.

What it does is codify newer benchmarks that people will pay for something that will headline news around the world — as, certainly, the banana did. While the artist might be duplicitous, what about the complicity of the collector? Art patronage is considered serious business, but here — in paying good money for something ridiculous — the collectors were creating a yardstick for triteness while ensuring a footnote in art history. Mention of the banana will now be forever enshrined, just as, previously, letting a dog starve to death in the name of performance art, fossilising poo, laying down naked amidst a feast of fruits, grafting one’s own bleeding skin as part of mixed media on canvas, smearing semen along with paint, have been attempted in the name of art.

Most of these distractions occur in the West. Markets in the East have been less adulatory about embracing the incongruous. India has great art — just take a peep in the numerous museums and galleries — and while there is bad, hackneyed, clichéd, boring, idiomatic, shocking or pusillanimous art to be found, the absurd doesn’t have a place yet. Indian collectors, no matter how well or ill-informed they remain, would not countenance a banana — or mango, guava, orange or other fruit — stuck to the wall as a work of art. But it should serve as a warning to India’s contemporary artists to stay away from any form of gimmickry that could harm their already subdued market. Such absurdities mark the decadence of art in developed countries; India, instead, should raise the bar by experimenting but not denigrating the purpose — and soul — of art.

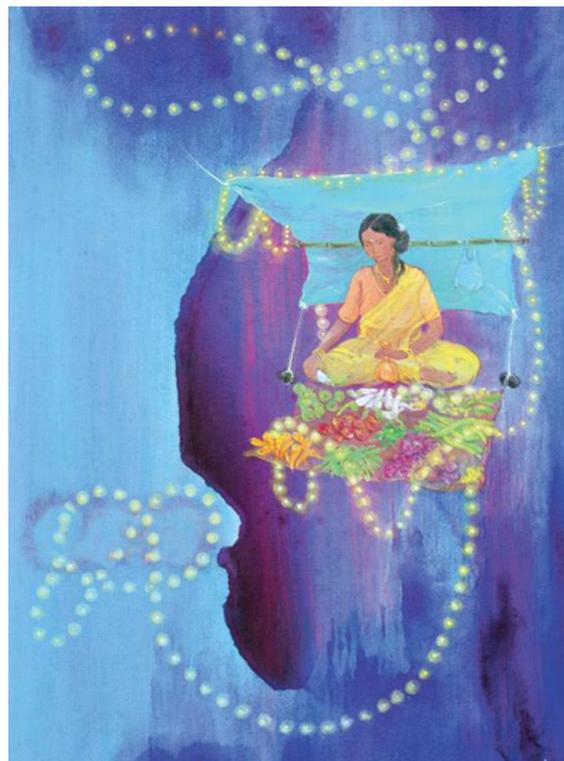
*Kishore Singh is a Delhi-based writer and art critic. These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated*



Party Wall (Bombay Series) by Vishwa Shroff

# Arty WEEKEND

The Mumbai Gallery Weekend will return for its eighth, even more egalitarian edition, hoping to draw diverse crowds to the city’s art district, reports Ranjita Ganesan



Beginning by N S Harsha

Even if you don’t have the budget to book a room at one of the city’s five-star hotels, you can still dip your toe into Parisian glitz and glamour by splurging on one of these on-property experiences.

**Dinner at V Restaurant**

Seated in one of the leather banquettes beneath the romantic stained-glass dome designed by Gustave Eiffel, it’s impossible not to have a pinch-me-I’m-in-Paris moment. With only 35 seats, V Restaurant is a paean to the talents of the chef Richard Robe, a master of French gastronomy who coaxes intense flavour from seasonal products and delights in reimagining historic dishes for contemporary diners. This winter, à la carte highlights include the V pie — a puff pastry filled with a savoury mélange of duck, foie gras and porcini mushrooms — and a modern take on an 18th-century recipe, *Lievre à la Royale*: slow-braised rabbit stuffed with foie gras and a roulade of Parmesan-crust cannelloni pasta brimming with stewed meat and crushed juniper berries. The seven-course tasting menu (₹95) balances richness with lighter, acidic dishes: think crayfish carpaccio with avocado and passion fruit purée, risotto laced with chanterelle mushrooms and chorizo, and “Le Chocolat” puffed pastry for dessert. *Hotel Vernet, 25 Rue Vernet, 75008 Paris*

**Cocktails at the Duc de Morny Library**

A brush with Belle Époque glamour can be had at this mansion-turned-hotel originally built for Napoléon III’s half brother, the Duc de Morny. The bar is one option. But, the splendid library, a jewel-toned nook with coffered ceilings, herringbone parquet floors and deep



## Paris de luxe

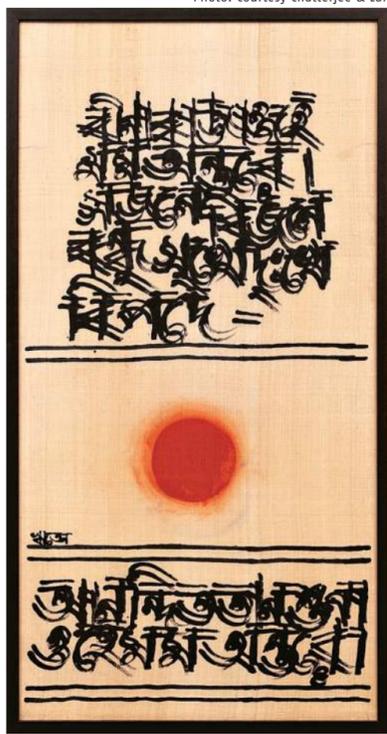
Amy Tara Koch tells you how to have a five-star hotel experience in Paris without booking a room

green furnishings set off by walls lined with 3,000 antique books from the 19th century, offers an intimate ambience, especially if you nab a seat in front of the (original) wood-burning fireplace. Here, you can enjoy a signature cocktail like the *Femme Fatale* — Champagne mixed with lime, cucumber and elderflower liqueur, or the *Bain de Folie*, a sweet blend of raspberries, lime, Hendrick’s gin, Chambord, egg white and fresh mint. *La Réserve, 42 Avenue Gabriel, 75008 Paris*

**Cooking class at the Ritz Paris**

Don a toque and take a half-day course at the prestigious Ritz Escoffier cooking school and

Photo: Courtesy Chatterjee & Lal



Since it was dreamt up in 2012, the Mumbai Gallery Weekend has gone from trying to take art to the people, to bringing people to the art. For its first edition, the organisers — galleries in the Fort, Kala Ghoda and Colaba areas — had gathered in a single hall in Bandra’s Taj Land’s End hotel and pooled their artworks to create a set of exhibitions. What they really needed, however, was to invigorate their own flock of tony South Mumbai spaces with patrons from everywhere in the city. Which is why they switched to hosting a themeless yet somehow coordinated weekend of art previews, shows, talks and performances across venues which people could hop around.

“There are no invitations or RSVPs. The idea is to activate the art district,” says Tara Lal, co-founder of contemporary art gallery Chatterjee & Lal, which is one of the organisers. The same set of galleries came up with Art Night Thursdays, when galleries stay open for longer than usual to welcome working professionals. Rather than quiet meditation on the works, these experiences are about collegiality. Newbies and experts alike drop in to sip wine, judge the art, and disappear into shows happening elsewhere in the neighbourhood. The air is much less stuffy, much more convivial, than at other times.

In keeping with its professedly democratic aspirations, the Weekend is not bound by any one common subject. Participating galleries usually try to time their best openings with the event. This year, visitors will be able to see the retrospective of Sudhir Patwardhan’s works at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Fort. Everything ranging from his preparatory sketches, photographs, early post-impressionist experiments and more recent Escheresque graphic labyrinths which reflect on Mumbai in all its complexity is on display. For the uninitiated, the group Carpe Art will conduct walking tours covering this and other major exhibitions.

The paintings of Mysore-based contemporary artist N S Harsha, which are very often about life in a small town, will return to the big city after a gap of 13 years. To be exhibited at the Chemould Prescott Road gallery, the new selection illustrates his shift away from “multitudes” and “monumentality” to agnosticism about scale and themes. So there are more paintings rather than installations and each individual piece has its own specific concerns. The “artist’s artist”, as Chemould’s Shireen Gandhi describes him, is also seen using vivid colours like pinks and purples that were previously not



Riten Mozumdar and his Untitled artwork (left)

in his oeuvre. Harsha will conduct a walkthrough on the final day of the Mumbai Gallery Weekend.

One of the rarer names that will be showcased is that of the late Riten Mozumdar, who emerged during the post-independence modernist design renaissance in India. It was a time for both historical revivalism and technical modernisation. Santiniketan-trained Mozumdar, for instance, is known for modifying traditional printing blocks to make contemporary motifs. He defied categorisation by creating both arts and crafts. As such, his works rendered in wool, wood, metal and paper, among other materials, will cover the walls of the Chatterjee & Lal gallery. This exhibition draws from ongoing research on the largely forgotten artist by scholar Ushmita Sahu.

Paintings by another Santiniketan artist, Jogen Chowdhury, will be celebrated by the auction house Pundole’s. To be a part of the mix, auction houses including Prinseps and Christie’s have also been dipping into their collections and putting up exhibitions during the Gallery Weekend. Christie’s, which has a South Asian contemporary and modern art sale in New York in

**IN KEEPING WITH ITS PROFESSEDLY DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS, THE WEEKEND IS NOT BOUND BY ANY ONE COMMON SUBJECT**

March, will host a preview of the works which come from a selection belonging to collectors Jane and Kito de Boer. The couple has amassed over 1,000 Indian artworks since they started buying when they lived in the country briefly in the 1990s.

Sonal Singh of Christie’s India says it is not necessarily buyers or collectors but students and young artists who walk into their third floor office over the course of the Weekend. It is not widely known that the space is open to visitors, so the event has helped with outreach for the auction house’s “museum-quality works”. Prinseps, meanwhile, will show a set of Bengal masters including

Abanindranath Tagore and Meera Mukherjee to trace how the movement developed over 100 years to include local folk styles and surrealism.

The Gallery Weekend will also include talks from Women in Design 2020+, an international conference put together by architects Brinda Somaya and Nandini Sampat to discuss what women have brought to the world of design. A full schedule will be available on the website [mumbaigalleryweekend.com](http://mumbaigalleryweekend.com), which is being revamped so that it can carry details of galleries throughout the year.

Lal says the scope of the event is growing. A book launch will be among the offerings this time. Further, restaurants are creating special menus and local shops are participating too. Apparel boutique Raw Mango will host “*Baithak*”, an evening of Hindustani classical music by Chhannulal Mishra and dance by the Manipuri Jagoi Marup troupe. “Organisations in the area are making an effort so that there is something for everyone,” says Lal.

*Mumbai Gallery Weekend will be held across art venues in Mumbai from January 9 to 12, 2020. Entry is free.*

seat cinema and avant-garde artworks installed throughout the hotel, this five-star property (pictured) has firmly staked its claim as the “artsy” one. On Sunday evenings, non-hotel guests can attend a private screening at Katara Cinema (₹40 per person), which includes a glass of Champagne and a cone of caramelised popcorn by the hotel’s acclaimed pastry chef, Pierre Hermé. Or pop outside to the holiday-themed Winter Terrace for a Veuve Clicquot tasting experience in an alpine-feeling chalet. *Le Royal Monceau, 37 Avenue Hoche, 75008 Paris*

**Afternoon tea at Four Seasons George V**

From the moment you strut through the grand wrought-iron door, past the fairy tale floral arrangements (the hotel uses approximately 14,000 blooms per week) and settle into a perch at La Galerie as a pianist plays, you’ll feel the force of swank à la française. With tea or, better yet, Champagne (₹60 per person), you’ll enjoy a selection of scones, financiers, artful pastries and savoury bites like blini with salmon and cauliflower cream. For the holidays, the new pastry chef, Michael Bartocetti, has designed a speciality Christmas tea featuring Candied cédrat pie with lemon caviar, Parisian fland, spiced quince pastry and the pièce de résistance, an orchid-shaped Yule log fashioned of almond biscuit interlaced with a thin layer of crunchy hazelnut with vanilla scented cream (₹95 per person). To extend the experience, sign on for a made-to-measure massage in the glamorous, just-revamped spa (₹130). *Four Seasons George V, 31 Avenue George V, 75008 Paris, France*

@ 2019 The New York Times

