

Trapped in a gilded cage?

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Is India the new China? The global jargon is already in place: Bollywood, the Bombay Boys, the Damien Hirst of Delhi as Subodh Gupta's one-ton skull, sculpted from stainless steel pots and pans, leers out of the Palazzo Grassi courtyard at every passing tripper during this year's Venice Biennale. But is Indian art really ready for an international audience and are we ready for it?

In the UK, its major showcase is Aicon. Founded by Prajit Dutta, professor of economics at Columbia University, it opened London's largest gallery of Indian art in March as an offshoot of successful ventures in New York and Palo Alto. The inaugural exhibition, featuring hip Bombay Boy 36-year-old Riyas Komu, cannily confronted head-on the old problem with Indian art - that it is perceived as too local and self-consciously absorbed in issues of national identity. In a double display with the American Peter Drake, titled "Other", Komu showed world-class conceptual sculpture such as "Tragedy of a Carpenter's Son III" - a large wooden missile inscribed with an Islamic prayer said before a journey, yet not by chance echoing Christian narrative too. Here, as in "Designated March of a Petro Angel", his series of monumental photo-realist images of a bewildered, veiled Iranian woman looking dramatically in different directions, struggling to find her place in society, which are among the strongest contemporary paintings on show in Venice, Komu co-opted an Islamic vocabulary to make work of urgent, international resonance.

The trouble is that there are not many Komus or Guptas around. I found Aicon's next two shows, of the sculptor Adip Dupta and the miniature painters Talha Rathore and Hasnat Mehmood, "Lahore Lovelies", embarrassingly provincial. At the same time this spring, the Indian auction sector got a shock when, after madly rapid rises - from a \$5m market in 2003 to \$150m today - a significant number of works were unsold at Christie's and Sotheby's, whereas Chinese contemporaries achieved record seven-figure sums.

But Aicon is fighting back. From the Vault, a sober, stately exhibition of paintings by blue-chip modern artists, opening next week, offers essential background on the sector and goes to the heart of a crucial difference between Indian and Chinese art. That difference is history, and how western art has or has not shaped it. Powerful nudes; angular figures in a golden landscape; a face at a window that is the picture frame: the first surprise at Aicon is that there is no surprise, so thoroughly are these paintings rooted in modern figurative traditions.

In China, by contrast, there was little western influence until 20 years ago, when Chinese artists gulped down recent trends from pop to conceptualism in one mouthful, spewing out violent, sensational responses to it that resounded with their own immediate political experiences and appeared mostly to ignore traditional Chinese painting. That makes Chinese art fresh, innovative and appealingly distinctive to audiences across the world. Indian art, entangled Raj-like between western history and a fidelity to Indian myths, has to work harder to invent its own language.

No collection explores 20th-century painting from the subcontinent, and its seamless absorption of European styles - the absence of British influence is notable - more comprehensively than that of Chester and Davida Herwitz of Massachusetts. Begun in 1961 when the Herwitzes, fashion accessory manufacturers and owners of Daveys Inc Handbags, visited India looking for supplies, it was sold in 1995 and forms the bedrock of Aicon's stock. Displayed here along with a choice selection of complementary works, it unfolds the Herwitzes' three-decade love affair with Indian art and highlights in particular the intriguing duo of Francis Newton Souza, a Catholic from Goa expelled from art school as a communist activist, whose early flamboyance dwindled under alcoholism, and Maqbool Fida Husain, a Muslim from Madhya Pradesh who began as a billboard painter for cinema posters and chose to stay in India during the partition, becoming a controversial, extrovert figure whose performances have included painting, then destroying, massive canvases before crowds of onlookers. Sharing a vision grounded in the modernism of the Ecole de Paris, this pair were founder members of the Progressive Art-

ists' Movement in Madras in 1944.

This, it turns out, was not very progressive at all. Souza was a cubist and, as the Christian, the one whose overriding interest was manipulation of the human form. His 1950s nudes, with rounded trunks, high breasts and girdles, were influenced by classical Indian sculpture, but by the 1960s the aggression and tough lines owed more to Picasso: monumental figures and bulbous forms, as in the voluptuous "Nude Standing in Front of Brocade"; cruel exaggerations such as the swelling body and breasts rolling into spiky claws for the top-hatted monster in "Untitled, Jester"; black figures almost sculpted into a jewel-like black background in "Couple in the Dark", evocative of the French postwar craze for noir. Demonic, machine-like profiles in "Three Heads" recall futurism; harsh graffiti scrawl overlaying a glossy page torn from a magazine and dissolved using special solvents in "Untitled - Frontal Nude" (1975) is typical late modernist distortion. Then, it seemed grotesque; now, it looks lyrical. Yet "painting for me is not beautiful," insisted Souza. "It is as ugly as a reptile. I attack it. It coils and recoils making fascinating patterns. I am not, however, interested in patterns . . . It is the serpent in the grass that is really fascinating."

Husain, whose paintings are full of serpents - "Untitled - Snake and Crows", pitting the symbolic animals against twisting naked grey figures, is a typical drama of life and death, beast and man - is a fabulist more consciously rooted in Indian life and legend, but formally shaped by surrealism and the dynamic angularities of expressionism. The girl and steed in "Blue Moon", the rearing horses, their bodies fractured among sun, moon, star, in "Victory", the white woman whose head has morphed into a red elephant's round stomach in "Elephant and Woman 2": everywhere broad strokes, billboard scale, robust figuration and primitive heroism edging towards sentimentality bring to mind Husain's origins in popular Indian cinema. Also strong is a debt to experimental western filmmakers such as Buñuel; strikingly absent is reference to those postwar styles - abstraction, pop, minimalism - that came of age during this 91-year-old painter's long career.

Can contemporary Indian art escape a heritage of conservatism? Souza and Husain hold this show because they are palpable influences on all the younger artists in it. The decorative fantasies and delicate distortions of Laxma Goud's pastorals of couples and animals in forest settings; Anjolie Ela Menon's nostalgic gazing figures, with their dead Modigliani eyes and Frida Kahlo-like internal organs prettily sketched on to their skin, in canvases whose ornamental surfaces recall 19th-century Tanjore paintings; the Pakistani artist S. Sadequain's dashing calligraphic nudes with expressionist overtones: this is a sort of Tandoori-fusion modernism whose loyalties to a double set of traditions hold it in a time-warp. How Indian artists break out of this gilded cage will be one of the dramas of 21st-century global culture; Aicon here has elegantly set the stage.

'From the Vaults', Aicon Gallery, London W1, from July 20 to September 2. Tel: +44 (0)20-7734 7575

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