

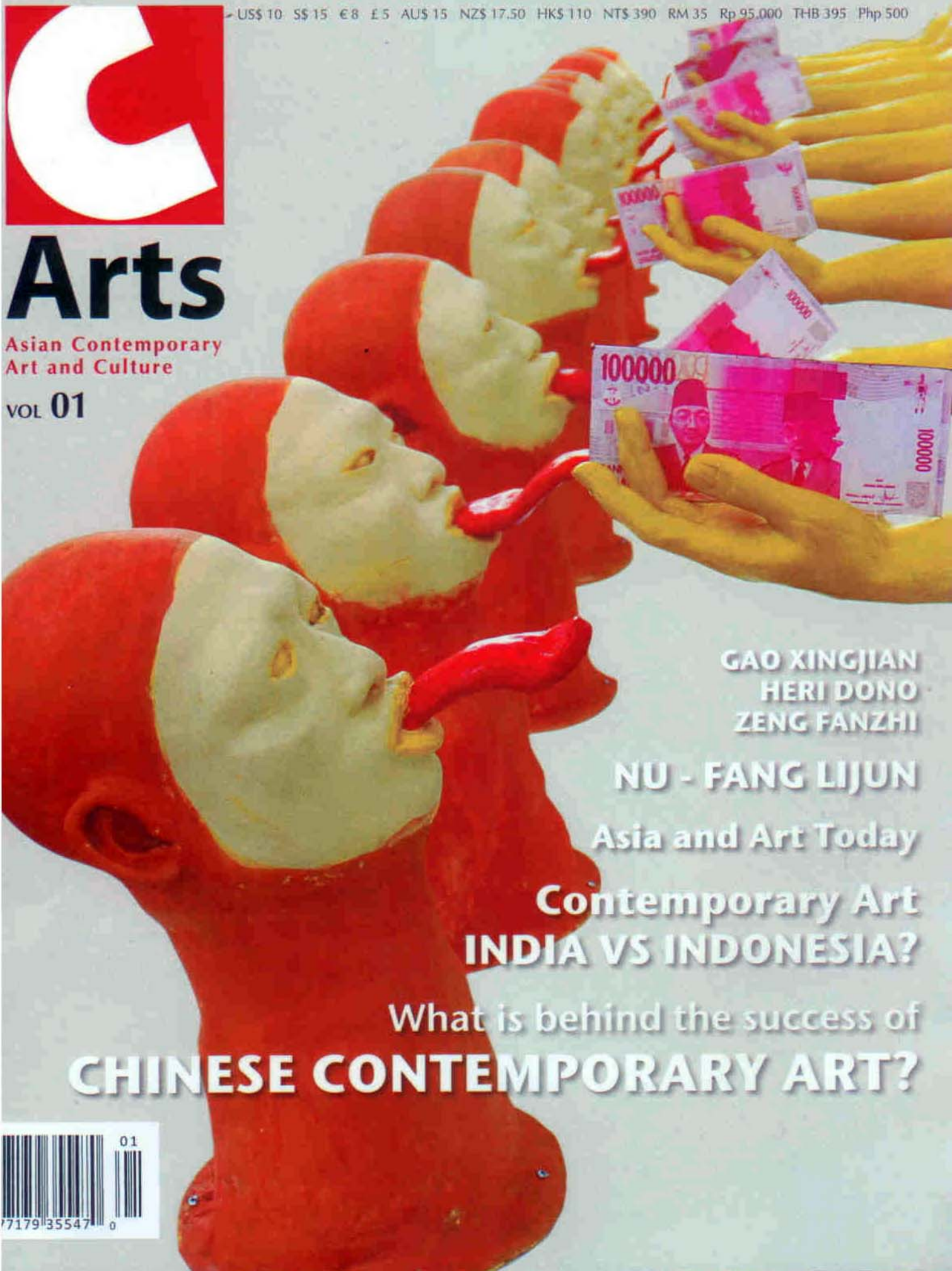


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NU - FANG LIJUN

Asia and Art Today

Contemporary Art
INDIA VS INDONESIA?

What is behind the success of
CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ART?





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Prajit Dutta of Aicon Gallery: PROVIDING AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE for Indian Contemporary Artists

Eddy Soetiryo



▲ Prajit Dutta

Will India become the new China? That is the question today in the world of contemporary art.

Two decades ago, India was known for its poverty; now the country, whose civilization is as old as China's, has become one of Asia's new generation, with an annual economic growth of 9-10%. In the information technology sector, India will soon dominate the world's software market, while China dominates its hardware market.

As well being a veritable storehouse of Nobel prize winners, the country that has given birth to world class literary figures, Bollywood artists, steel magnates, and a wealthy class on the level of Forbes, looks set to have its contemporary art scene burst upon the international stage.

We are now acquainted with the name Subodh Gupta, whose *Very Hungry God* amazed visitors in the Palazzo Grassi as part of the 2005 Venice Biennale: a giant skull assembled out of pots, pans and other kitchen utensils. Subodh was then dubbed "the Damien Hirst of Delhi." Another piece — his stainless steel buckets piled on top of each other to a height of 180 cm, displayed in 2006 at the Jardin de Tuileries, Paris — was auctioned at Christie's, New York, on February 26th, 2007 for US\$ 400,000.

But Subodh is not the only Indian name familiar to an international audience. The list includes artists like Atul Dodiya, Vivan Sundaram, Jogen Chowdhury, Jitish Kallat, and Riyas Komu. Another is Anish Kapoor, an installation artist born in Bombay (now

Mumbai) in 1954. In 1972 he moved to England, and during the 1980s he became known as a high quality sculptor. After he was invited to the 1990 Venice Biennale, his works made the rounds in Basel, Madrid, Ottawa, Brazil, Milan, Bilbao and Kanazawa, and recently at 798 Art District, Beijing, China. The only question remaining was whether his work, always provocative, meditative, and with a strong "Indian aroma," could do well in the market. On November 11th, 2007, the answer proved to be a "yes" when one of his installations brought US\$ 2,500,000 at the Sotheby's auction in New York.

But it is not only the artists who are starting to move — Indian galleries are as well. One of the more visible ones is Aicon (Arts India Contemporary) Gallery. After being established in Palo Alto and New York, USA, Aicon branched out into London in March 2007, where it has prepared the largest stage for Indian contemporary art in England's capital: two levels covering over 2,000 square feet of space, with wall heights of 16 feet and 8 feet.

"We had already been in the US for a few years on both the east and west coasts, so our next natural progression was going to be in Europe, and London at this point is clearly the most focal place. There is quite a bit of interest in Indian art in Europe, and that was pretty much what drew us in terms of thinking about where we were going to open next," stated Prajit Dutta, Managing Partner in the Arts India group of companies that includes Aicon Gallery in New York, Palo Alto and London, as well as Arts India Funds One and Two. He is also a

► Adip Dutta
The Requiem, 2006
Installation

Professor of Economics at Columbia University, where he has taught since 1987.

Aicon Gallery intends to continue spreading its wings to envelop Indian contemporary artists who make good work but still need an international platform in order to become better known to the public at large. According to Prajit, Indian artists such as Subodh Gupta and Riyas Komu are two of the few Indian contemporary artists already known and accepted by the international market. "But I think that is something that will change. At this point in time, Indian art is relatively new on the international scene. I am sure that in five years' time the picture will look quite different in terms of how many artists are widely accepted," Prajit said. "There are a number of artists who are doing wonderful work. TV Santosh is a very,

very good artist. He's the one who does imagery which look like the negatives of a photograph. He is very strong. There's also an artist called Shibu Natesan, who does quite different, very hyper-realistic work but with very strong imagery. I think he is also very good, and his work includes using Chinese-inspired scenes and themes. So, there are a number of artists who have really emerged as being strong artists."

This past November, **Prajit K Dutta** talked with **Eddy Soetrisyono** and **Tjandra Kerton** about the situation of the Indian art market versus that of China, about gallery management, his relationships with artists and collectors, art as investment, and his view of the role art advisers and art critics play. The following are the main points from this conversation:

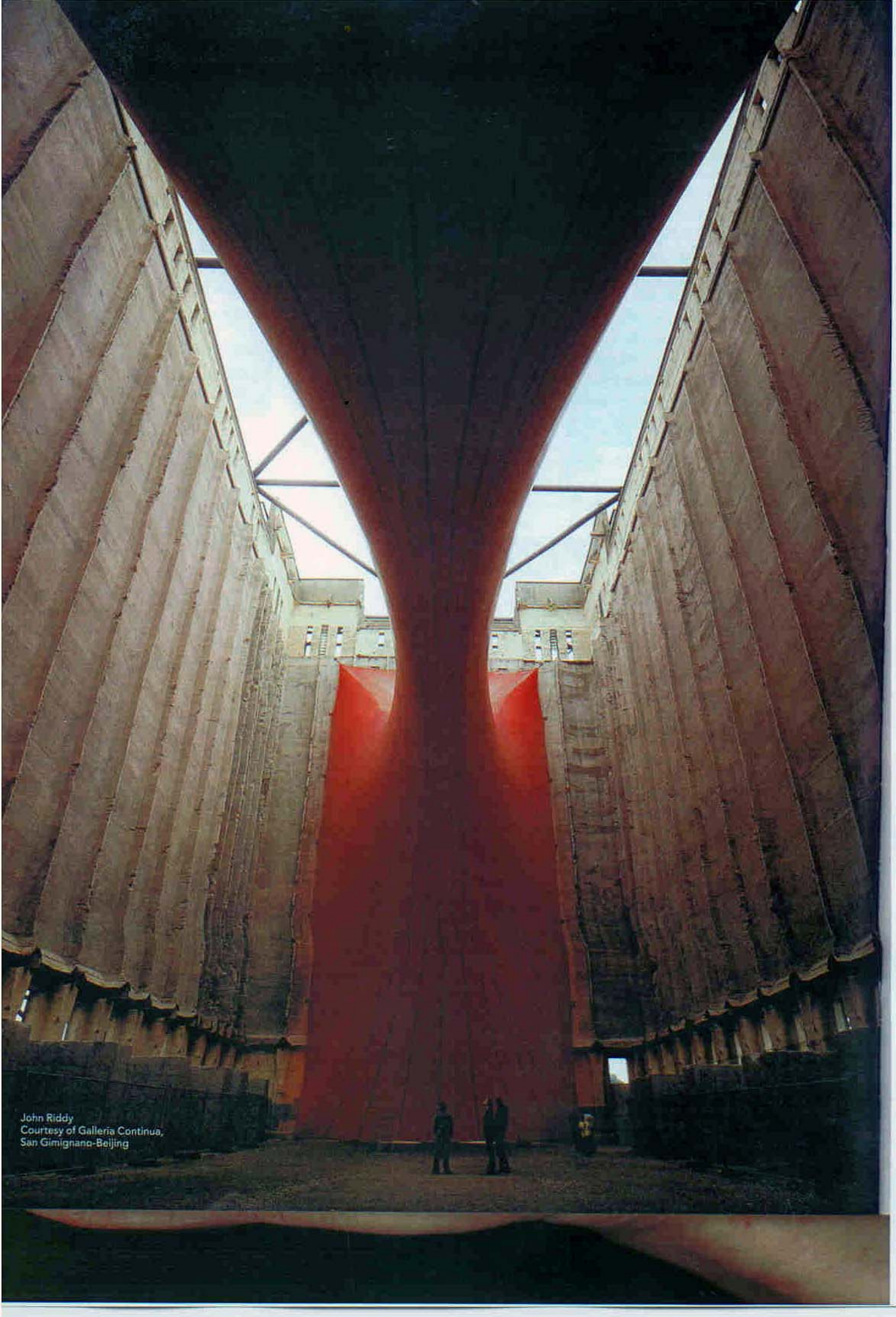
On developing a good quality gallery

I believe it is very important to bring in important exhibitions and show important work. We must show good art, obviously, and work with exciting artists who are doing good work. Also, they must strive to be long term players, and by that I mean, on both the artist's side as well as the client's side, be very clear that what they are trying to build is something which is beneficial for people over the next ten years rather than the next six months or one year.

On the gallery's side, of course, it means working hard to promote the artist in the appropriate places, such as museums or with critics. On the client's side, we have to work hard to ensure that they get good work at fair prices and they are treated decently, and to have a very transparent system in terms

Courtesy of Aicon Gallery





John Riddy
Courtesy of Galleria Continua,
San Gimignano-Beijing

◀ Anish Kapoor
Tarantara, 1999
PVC
Installation

▶ Subodh Gupta,
Untitled, 2006
Mixed media
Life size

Courtesy of Sotheby's Auction House



of how we work, whether a client knows exactly why a certain piece is priced in a certain way. Let everyone have a very clear transparent system to work off of.

The different roles of a gallery and an art dealer

I think the basic difference is whether there is a nurturing of the artist's career. That is what a gallery does because it needs to feel it has to do certain things such as exhibitions particularly if it thinks that the artist exhibited will do well and the gallery feels strongly about the work. To me an art dealer is more like a middleman because whether they are buying work or just showing work, the incentive to sell is higher. A gallery will also engage in certain activities, such as sponsoring a conference, which we've done. We sponsored a very big conference at Columbia University last year, which was on contemporary Indian and Chinese art and that brought together some of the top scholars from all over the world. We did this not because of commercial motives but because we felt this was an activity that was worth supporting.

On selecting artists

I tend to select those artists who are already fairly well known among the art circles. Of course, we still have to make choices in terms of who we want to exhibit and then some of that

comes down to having to choose artists who are consistent with the philosophy of the image we are trying to show. In the New York gallery, we tend to show more of the Indian masters. The challenge there is to be able to deliver a level of service to these Indian masters so they are happy working with you. In London we tend to show more of the younger contemporary artists, but again, people who have had typically national if not international reputations.

On buying artwork

We do sell the works that are exhibited at shows, but buying for the gallery depends on several factors. Whether we buy a particular work depends on whether the artist is willing to sell, or how relatively easy the work is available. If we feel that there isn't going to be enough of the artist's work available in the future, then we might want to buy, and the works go into the gallery inventory. As far as prices go, I'm a big believer in the rationality of markets, so we don't do 'monkey business.'

Who are the collectors of Indian art?

Up to about a year and a half ago Indian art was collected exclusively by Indians either living in India or abroad. Then, in the last year or so, European collectors became interested, especially in artwork done by the younger contemporary artists of India.

What is certainly true nowadays is that while traditionally collectors have been Indians living overseas, increasingly a lot of major corporate houses in India are buying fairly heavily. The Herwitz collection is the best known collection of Indian art, and is currently owned by us. There is also the Jehangir Nicholson collection in Bombay. Currently there is talk of turning it into a museum. Over the years several individuals have built up quite sizable collections.

What is your view of the contemporary art market?

For the Indian market there is a greater degree of awareness and wealth among Indian collectors. There is a greater receptivity to own art today than there used to be, say, fifteen years ago. That also makes for an audience which otherwise wouldn't exist, which is potentially very large.

The Chinese and Indian contemporary art markets share a number of features in that there is a lot of exciting work happening on the artists' side. Because, China and India are being looked on as being two potential powers in various kinds of ways in the next fifty or hundred years, a lot of people who otherwise would not have paid attention to either Indian or Chinese art are now paying attention." The main difference in the two

markets relates to what has been happening with art in these two countries. "In India the art market and the art itself has had, more or less, a continuous tradition going back the last hundred years, whereas China, of course, has gone in fits and starts and especially within the Cultural Revolution there was a break in between, which you didn't see in India. In India, because of this continuous tradition, art has had a much more continuous growth, given that masters are still working and active and have had a stronger influence on what the younger set are doing. I do not totally agree with popular assumptions that Chinese contemporary art is more innovative because the artists were able to break away from the traditional classical mold and absorb elements of pop art and Western conceptual art, while Indian

artists remained mired in traditional art forms. I feel that India's strong art tradition could be an advantage for the artists. The fact that there is a continuous tradition might make for a richer vocabulary, so it's not as if there's nothing to fall back on. I think that both India and China, at the end of the day, are large enough countries and the pool of artists is sufficiently deep and broad that you are going to get a lot of interesting work. I think, more and more, there will be interesting artists who will do interesting things and sometimes they'll draw on tradition, even if subconsciously, and sometimes they'll completely ignore it.

On the globalization of contemporary art

Though it's true that a lot of the imagery tends to be more global, at the same time there is

also a great deal of local color and local culture and politics that are assimilated into the art and I think you can see that in the art work. In the optimal mix there's got to be some of the local color mixed in with the global perspective.

On speculation in the art market

I am aware of an increased amount of speculation on the part of collectors who purchase art that is doing well and then resell it. We typically do not sell to trade, so we try to discourage that practice by not selling to people who we know, for sure, are resellers. But there will always be some people who will hold the work for awhile, then decide to sell it.

Advice for new collectors

For those who really want to get into the art market, such as first time buyers, I advise a

▼
Riyas Komu
Tragedy of the Carpenter's Son III, 2006
Wood and Iron
72 x 210 x 59 inch



Courtesy of Aicon Gallery