



India Shining 1, 2007, painted cast aluminium, 27 x 46 x 30 in.

Art Dubai: Optimism Unbound

The recently concluded Art Dubai (formerly called The Dubai Art Fair) celebrated art from the South East Asian region. India now being the hot destination, Indian contemporary art got an extra focus in this fair. Delhi based art writer and curator Anubhav Nath files a comprehensive story on the fair from Dubai.

Introduction

The major international art fairs are held annually in Basel, New York, Miami, London and Paris. These exhibitions are a meeting-point for artists, curators, dealers, buyers, consultants, critics, museums and art foundations.

Last year was the inaugural year and this year there were many noticeable changes. Firstly, the name; from a not-so-cool "The Dubai Art Fair" to a more savvy Art Dubai. The Swiss Art Basel is the mother of all art events and seems to be the reference point for the evolving Art Dubai.

The fair was held from March 18th to 22nd, mainly at the posh Medinath Jumeira Hotel in Dubai. Compared to last year, the fair has more talks, discussions and programs. This year, the physical space had more than doubled, with seventy galleries from all over the world showing the best of their art.

The event is patronized by HH Sheikh Mohammed Al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai. He inaugurated the fair guaranteeing the attendance of high-profile visitors including prominent members of the royal families. Savita Apte and John Martin are among the main organizers.

Incredible India

With last year's tremendous success, Indian galleries had a strong presence and reported even stronger sales. They were surely envied by other international participants. Last year the galleries focused on modern masters, but this time the flavor was definitely very contemporary.

Gallery Chemould showed exceptional works by Rashid Rana, Jagnanath Panda and Reena Saini Kallat's works made with rubber stamps. Sakshi Gallery exhibited an installation by Zarina Hashmi and sculptures by Sumedh Rajendran and Chintan Upadhyay. Gallery Espace showed works by Manjunath Kamath, Birendra Pani and Amitava Das and put up a solo exhibit of photographer Atul Bhalla's works, the only Indian artist with an individual booth. Grosvenor-Vadehra were the only ones

exhibiting MF Husain and FN Souza.

New York-based Sundaram Tagore Gallery showed minimalist works by Tantric artist Sohan Qadri. Also, Aicon Gallery showed GR Iranna and Debanjin Roy's sculpture of a bright-red Gandhi sitting with a laptop, which attracted much attention.

Interestingly, Italian participant Galleria Continua showed Subodh Gupta's recent work and have an upcoming solo of his in May; London-based Albion showed a few Indian artists including Jitish Kallat and Chicago-based Walsh Gallery showed many Indian works, the most noteworthy was Ravinder Reddy's, Radha a single edition, oversized fiberglass sculpture (200 x 162.5 x 200 cms) with a price tag of \$600,000.

Nature Morte and Bodhi Art, who participated last year were not seen at the fair this year.

To take advantage of the timing most galleries in the city were hosting really good shows. The 1x1 Art Space gallery which extensively promotes Indian art, held two shows simultaneously, curated by Bose Krishnamchari. Prasad Raghavan, Parvathi Nayar, Aji V.N, Jyothi Basu, Minal Dhamani Nandy, Vivek Vilasini, Bharat Sikka, C.K.Rajan, Hema Upadhyay, Sudarshan Shetty, Shilpa Gupta, Riyas Komu, T.V.Santhosh and Anant Joshi were the participating artists in this twin show titled AFFAIR.

Art & Entrepreneurship

Credit Suisse, an investment banking giant has been pursuing art as an investment for a long time. They rolled out their Art & Entrepreneurship program at Art Dubai. This touring exhibition features works of 19 young artists from 16 countries. From Dubai the exhibition will proceed to New York, Berlin, Moscow, Geneva, Milan, Madrid and finally London, with an auction at Philips de Pury on November 24th.

At the exhibitions, visitors are requested to submit "silent bids" for their favourite works. Half of the proceeds will be donated to Room to Read, a non-profit organization and the remaining half will go to the artist.

The participating artists are from all over the world, including the inseparable duo Thukral & Tagra, who were seen walking around Art Dubai wearing colour coordinated outfits at all times!

To know more about the exhibition schedule, artists and bidding process one can visit the website at www.credit-suisse.com/artandentrepreneurship

A Pakistani Presence

Pakistani art was much in focus considering the international attention that they have been getting. Considering the general interest in Islamic art and general bonhomie towards Pakistan, Art Dubai was a good choice for an international Art Fair debut.

The Pakistan Pavilion showed the exhibition "Desperately Seeking Paradise", curated by Salima Hashmi, a noted professor at the Lahore College of Art. Though a decent curatorial effort, the Pavilion definitely did not live up to the hype. The pavilion comprised of two open party-tents, approximately ten feet by ten feet, minus proper lighting or air-conditioning, set up next to an artificial lake, in the hotel compound. Some installations and sculptures were used to punctuate the space, around. At the exhibition, noteworthy works were Farida Batool's photograph titled, 'There's no place like Lahore'; Durriya Kazi's installation titled, 'Witness', Rashid Rana's works which were at galleries also and Huma Mulji's controversial work Arabian Delight (more about this later).

On the whole the Pakistani Pavilion is a noteworthy first attempt, but did leave visitors a bit disappointed and asking for more.

Besides his installation work at the pavilion, Pakistani art's poster-boy, Rashid Rana was represented by Mumbai-based Chemould Gallery and London-based art gallery, Green Cardamom, the only gallery specializing in Pakistani art participating at the fair. Green Cardamom was showing a number of Pakistani artists (many overlapping with the pavilion) and had a steady beeline of visitors, buyers and consultants. There was a distinct high-beat of energy and wide smiles, which ensured that they did well and made some good placements of their works.

The work that got removed

An art fair is not complete without a controversy. And a controversy over a shocking work increases the star-status of a fair. Keeping in mind strict Islamic codes to be followed at Art Dubai, the screening committees are overtly strict with their censorship, often rejecting works (for no obvious reason) to not disturb Islamic or cultural sensibilities.

An oversized suitcase with a taxidermy camel squashed inside, some cotton and fabric was what made Huma Mulji's work *Arabian Delight*, too much to handle for the Arabs. On display at the Pakistan Pavilion, the work was under the radar from day one and visiting Arab dignitaries were not-too-happy with their national animal and symbol of pride, the camel being shown in a way, which according to them was derogatory. "No clarifications please, we are Arab," seemed to be their adopted policy as no clarifications were given.

On the second day of the fair, the coordinators were asked to remove the installation from the premises. Through her work, Mulji wished to attract attention to the import-export of contraband items through personal luggage with probably a reference point to the young boys imported by Arabs to serve as camel-jockeys.

The work had been pre-bought by Charles Saatchi, through an art advisor for about US\$8,000 and by now would be on its way to London, to be shown later in the year at the much awaited Saatchi exhibition, "The Empire Strikes Back."

Videos parked at Art Park

Art videos were literally parked in Art Park, a make-shift video gallery, which normally serves as the underground parking area of the hotel. Considering the importance of videos in Western art, a section dedicated to videos shows the foresight of the organizers.

There were site-specific experimental works with a special emphasis on videos. Among the Indian artists Jitish Kallat's video was on display. Young and emerging Pakistani artist Mohammad Zeeshan's video and interactive installation, commenting on America's said and unsaid position on Islam, captured attention and acclaim from varied audiences.

International Galleries

There was substantial representation from all over the world – Europe, USA, Africa and Asia. The two main participating Arab galleries The Third Line and B21 did phenomenally well with their Arab clientele. Among the exhibits, something that surfaced was that western galleries paid special attention to Islamic artists and some of the exhibited works had a strong Islamic reference point. Paris and New York based gallery Yvon Lambert showed photography based works of Idris Khan, a UK based artist of hyphenated ethnicity. His works explore the different aspects of Islam and he incorporates Islamic ritualism in his works, for example his photograph may be exposed three times to signify the turning- of- the- head after prayer. Besides, the Indian galleries, Korean galleries CAIS, Kukje and Sun Gallery attracted a lot of attention and attracted some serious buyers. Most noteworthy was Sun Gallery's installation artist Seon-Ghi Bahk. He works extensively with charcoal and a member of the extended royal family bought the installation on display.

Unlike last year, this year the galleries didn't flood the fair with Andy Warhols and Damien Hirsts.

Discussions, Talks, Education and Publications

There were many discussions, talks and interviews held throughout the length of the fair. Some were attended by world-famous movers and shakers on the international art scene. Hans Ulrich Obrist of London-based Serpentine Gallery spoke about his ongoing project of video-documenting interviews with artists. He discussed and showed his interview with Anish Kapoor. He is in the process of interviewing a lot many Indian artists and frequently visits India for the same. He was seen taking a keen interest in Arabic art and visited some galleries in old Dubai, leading to speculation that Serpentine will be looking at Arabic art, next.

The Sotheby's Institute held special educative and panel discussions on various topics, familiarizing enrolled participants with the fair and art markets. They held a three day intensive course for a fee of 1,000 British Pounds.

In a special tie-up with The Art Newspaper, London launched a special edition on the art markets in India and the Middle East, focusing on the two most prominent markets represented at Art Dubai.

Art Tactic, an arts research initiative based in London launched their first comprehensive report on Indian Modern and Contemporary Art Market, along with a talk by its founder Anders Petterson. The report is a good introduction point to the Indian art markets with information on key artists, gallerists, curators and important faces in the Indian art scene.

To promote and familiarize the incoming guests with the Dubai art scene, the Art Bus ferried visitors around town, stopping at the major galleries. There was a corresponding Art Map, which enlists all the galleries and will be regularly updated for shows and art events in the city, around the year.

On the whole the fair was well conceptualized, executed and managed, with significant changes from last year. The third edition of Art Dubai is scheduled in the second week of March next year and is a must visit for anyone seriously interested in Indian art. Not only is it a one-stop-shop for the best in Indian and other art, but is also a venue to spot new trends, make contacts with international players, hob-knob with the art glitterati and identify emerging markets on the global art scene.