



Norbert von der Groeben

Basant Bhargava's painting "Untitled IV," left, peers over the shoulder of Aicon Gallery director Shona Dutta.

Fresh visions

Local exhibit features 18 contemporary Indian artists

by Rebecca Wallace

Like wine, art needs to breathe. So it can be a challenge to design an exhibit of work by 18 artists.

In the airy but small space of Aicon Gallery in Palo Alto, director Shona Dutta had to allow all the art in the new exhibit "Middle Edge" to co-exist peacefully. Now the varied colors, patterns and styles — mostly abstract paintings by contemporary Indian artists — take their places under gentle lighting by gallery assistant Oliver Dumlaio.

On one wall, the paintings all share quiet hues and a sense of subtlety. The sweeping ecru strokes of Basant Bhargava's "Untitled IV," for example, neighbor the earth tones of Yogendra Tripathi's "Untitled II." Tripathi finds a range of textures in acrylic paint, giving it the clarity of watercolor or the thickness of spackle.

On the other side of the gallery, Mohan Malviya's acrylic painting "Untitled II" nearly fills its own wall in a bold rectangle of red.

"We knew the work would be huge, and it needed its own space," Dutta said. "There's no way you can put anything on the wall with it."

The 2007 painting is rich with designs: a rippling pattern in the background; white dots forming triangles and wavy lines; circles and half-circles. Like many of the works on exhibit, it incorporates elements

that can be thought of as traditionally Indian, such as jewel tones and patterns that call to mind fabrics and saris, Dutta said.

"I personally see a lot of Indian beadwork and embroidery in it," she said.

In the exhibit catalogue, which was translated from Hindi, Malviya wrote that many of the designs in his work come from his upbringing. The triangles, for instance, reflect the shapes he saw as a child "on the mud-baked walls of my home."

"Incorporating folk elements from my tradition is my innateness ... Dialogue with tradition is hallmark of a civilization," he wrote.

With the exception of fiber artist Smriti Dixit, who has exhibited at Aicon before, all the artists in the show are new to the United States, Dutta said. The other artists are: Arvind Bais, Seema Ghurayya, Ritu Gurjar, Surendra Pal Joshi, Yogesh Kasera, Manish Pushkale, Shabnam Shah, Rafique Shah, Nagesh Sharma, Vandana Shourie. S.D. Shukla, Awdhesh Vajpai, Hukumal Verma and Avadhesh Yadav.

The works in Palo Alto are taken from a recent show at Aicon's larger gallery in New York.

Many of these artists got started in the mid-'90s. All are influenced by the vibrant 1980s Indian art scene, when contemporary art boomed and a new freedom of style spread, according to Bhopal artist Akhilesh, who curated the Aicon exhibit.

"The fire for free expression and free feeling spread within no time and many young artists became a part of it," he wrote in the catalogue.

Reflecting that freedom, many of the works in the current show are untitled, leaving viewers at greater liberty to form their own interpretations. "This exhibit is a celebra-

tion of abstract emotions," Akhilesh wrote.

It's also a dream come true for Dutta, who is new to the Aicon Gallery and had aspired for years to assemble an exhibit. Born and raised in Palo Alto, she's a graphic designer and graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design.

Since the exhibit opened on March 21, the Tripathi acrylic painting has been getting a lot of attention from visitors, as has a diptych by Shukla that is the most representational work in the show. The ink shapes seem to suggest a busy plain and dark skies above, with white and brown slanting lines that look like the long noses of horses.

Shabnam Shah's mixed-media work "The Black A-48" has also sparked curiosity from visitors who say its bold black circles look tribal or African, Dutta said.

Standing before the canvas, Dutta points to tiny markings behind the circles and smiles, offering a different interpretation: "The forms look like grains of rice. It looks Indian to me." ■

What: "Middle Edge," a group show of work by 18 Indian contemporary artists, mostly abstract paintings

Where: Aicon Gallery, 535 Bryant St., Palo Alto

When: Through May 3. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Cost: Free

Info: Go to www.aicongallery.com or call 650-321-4900.



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