

Eight Indian artists in England

Merciless scrutiny

The recent exhibition put these artists, formidable in India, on the mat here, says Gita Piramal in London.



Manjit Bawa

IF AT ALL people in London think about Indian art, they immediately think of its miniature tradition. It's a residue of regular advertising by famous auctioneers such as Christie's and Sotheby's to promote their frequent sales of exquisite miniatures. Few, with the exception of enthusiastic Indophiles such as Richard Burton, the curator of the Occidental wing of the British Museum, realise that there is a lively and active modern art scene in India far removed from its early roots.

In this context, the show put together by Sharan Apparao of The Gallery in Madras was undoubtedly a pioneering exhibition. It was certainly the most important. On view at the prestigious Nehru Centre in the even more prestigious South Audley Street, London's most expensive shopping street, between July 9 and 23, were over 30 canvases. Eight artists—Anjolie Ela Menon, Arpita Singh, Manjit Bawa, Manu Parekh, Paramjit Singh, S.H. Raza, J. Swaminathan and K.G. Subramanyan—have each contributed roughly four canvases.

Even the artists themselves seemed to be aware of the exhibition's significance. "All the eight artists especially painted for this exhibition," says Apparao with obvious pride. But one artist clearly did not feel he could shelve his prima donnishness: M.F. Husain. "I did approach Husain but he suggested that perhaps his should be a separate

show. I cannot do enough for him. In any case, he does enough for himself," says Apparao, without mincing words.

By what criteria did she choose these eight? "The artists had to be senior and well established. I was determined about that. I could have had Tyab, Akbar and Gaitonde, but they would have just fought each

other. Some, like Sanjay Bhattacharyya, were too young."

During the exhibition, the canvases were not on sale, but could be purchased privately later. "The prices were a little more than what each individual artist fetches in India, to cover the cost of bringing the exhibition to London. This was an experiment and we were not really trying to make a large profit out of it," says Apparao.

Considering that pavement artists in London generally sell their canvases for between £150-300 (Rs 7,500 upwards), and that new English artists in established galleries start at £3,000 (Rs 150,000), wealthy NRI buyers could find an Anjolie Ela Menon at between £4,500-5,000 quite an attractive proposition. Some major British artists of Indian origin who have been making waves over the past couple of years charge a lot more.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the recent patchiness in the work of most of these eight artists, the canvases on display were of a fairly high quality. Raza's contributions, for example, were far superior to what is currently available in India through Gallery Chemould. While the Gandhis have to be content with selling small sketches dolled up with paint, in London Raza exhibited geometric full-blooded squares and double frames of the quality which first caught the eye of connoisseurs such as Harsh Goenka.

Similarly, Ela Menon's four new canvases for the Londoner were charming, and a far cry from the boredom visible in her last 'art' (as opposed to 'furniture') exhibition in India. All her four contributions were painted here over the three months she spent in this mecca of museums. Tiny glimpses of the impressions she has imbibed peep through. Though she is still painting blue nudes, the body is slightly more defined. Her *Shroud of Turin* was also vaguely reminiscent of the classical Italian school.

Manjit Bawa's *Narasimha and Krishna With His Herd* were also charming, as were Paramjit Singh's

landscapes, with their play on light, shade, trees and paths. Meanwhile, Manu Parekh continued his dramatic *Benaras* series, which were suitably threatening. K.G. Subramanyan's main contribution was fresh, but the three other watercolours were quickly put together sketches that appeared raw and definitely not up to the quality of the neighbouring works. J. Swaminathan seemed to have returned to his first love: tribal art with a twist of tribal sophistication. The four canvases in their earthy tones



Ela Menon

were meticulously executed, the geometrical layout carefully structured and relieved at times with alphabetic notations.

As the works were not for sale, it was difficult to gauge what Londoners made of this exhibition. All eight artists have formidable reputations in India, but did these live up to the scrutiny of critics brought up on a diet of Picasso and Dali? Did Arpita Singh's canvases appear to them to be the outpourings of an overgrown primary schoolchild rather than of India's bluest blue chip investment? It's an uncomfortable thought, but real nonetheless.

Arpita Singh

Art in Europe is serious business, taught seriously, criticised mercilessly and fostered by bursting wallets. It is not treated as a requisite activity of the well-heeled social climber or the fashionable way to pass the time as in India's four metros.

Even more significantly, European and American art critics and buyers are generally well-informed and aware of the major trends in 20th century art. They can spot plagiarisms, derivative art and influences with an ease which Indians, denied access to the wonderful galleries of the West, cannot hope to emulate.

So far, Indian artists have been spared this kind of merciless scrutiny. By exhibiting in London, these intrepid eight made it clear that they are not frightened of erudite criticism. Now look out for the international reviews.



Paramjit Singh



J Swaminathan



Manu Parekh