



Ayres' *Makar Sankranti*; terracotta sculptures; and (bottom) Battliwala's *Nostalgia I*

SEVENTH TRIENNALE

## A Mundane Mela

Big in size, but rather shoddy on display

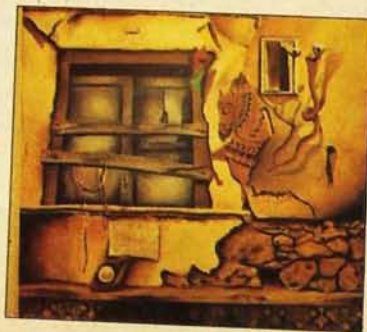
THE Triennale used to be a heady event. The bubbly may not have flowed with champagne bottles popping. Nor have chandelier-eared ladies come and gone, talking about latter-day Michelangelos. But there was excitement in the air—made all the more tangible, pungent even, by controversy. Not since the first one in 1968 has there been a Triennale without the loud sulks of Indian painters left out in the cold, boycotts by “signature” artists, and heated debates about whether modern art. Much sound, fury and paint, and high drama and passion too.

This, the seventh time, however, it's more like a requiem for the Triennale. Critic Keshav Malik even asks: “Shall we hold the Triennale...?” Is the cheque of about Rs 50 lakh, which the Government has to pick up at the end of the day, justified?

Most of the senior painters haven't even bothered to go to the exhibition. “Isn't the fact that I haven't seen it comment enough?” asks J. Swaminathan, brusquely. And painter Krishen Khanna laments the days when the event was taken seriously

by the international community of artists and art impresarios: “We have a lame duck image. We have to make our assertions.”

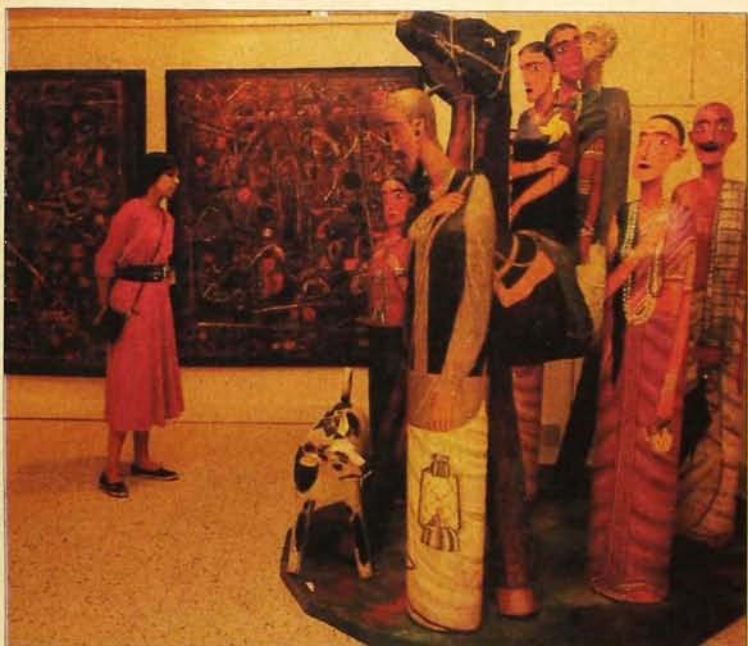
Why the snub? This gargantuan show, with over 560 exhibits from 36 countries, is like a flea market. There are gems, like some of the works by Australian painter Gareth Sansom, the energetic canvasses of British painter Gillian Ayres, an



interesting collography by Cuban painter Belkis Ayonmouso, and angst-ridden lavage works by Michael Morgner, originally from the German Democratic Republic: in fact, for the first time outside Germany, artists from East and West Germany are showing together under one flag. But you have to sift through the clutter of bargain basement *œuvres* to find them.

While much of the international section is mediocre and largely comprises seconds—many of the artists





Jagdish's papier mache sculptures; and (below) Fukuda's *Green Giant*

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happened to be coming this way—the Indian section with 71 works is worse than indifferent. The five Indian commissioners appointed by the Lalit Kala Akademi to select the participants have chosen quantity over quality. And this, despite the Haksar Committee's suggestion that the Akademi should select not more than 10 artists for the Triennale.

In the deluge of mediocrity in what seems to have become a *sarkari mela*, even interesting works by C. Douglas, Murlidharan, Yusuf, Navjot, J. Sabhaval, and sculptor Soman have been swamped. The commissioners' brief—reiterated by Akademi Chairman Ram Niwas Mirdha at the inauguration last month—was to seek out "compara-

tively little-known...artists" and ensure "a regional representation". But "the Triennale is an elitist affair", insists Khanna. Asks painter Vasundhara Tiwari: "In an international athletic meet, would you keep out P.T. Usha to give younger runners a chance?" In fact, some of the artists from abroad have privately said that if the Indians themselves were not going to show their very best, why should the other countries bother to do so.

Unpardonable is the shoddiness of the entire affair. The ad hocism is apparent in this Triennale held after a gap of five years. To begin with, the Akademi didn't send invitations to artists abroad until August last year. As a result, countries were forced to send whatever was ready and available.

And when the Indian Government did get down to business, it was far from professional about it. Rabindra Bhavan is not really equipped for a show of such amplex. And the part of the Triennale which spills over to Bhawalpur House, is displayed in a most shameful way. The floors creak and, in places, almost seem to be caving in, the paintings are badly hung in cramped confines and even the walls are dirty.

An interesting outcome of this particular Triennale is the unusual by-product of the meeting between the East and the West. On exhibit are the works of several artists who have incorporated their Indian sojourn into their canvases. Gareth Sansom has delightful visual puns: Indian advertisements, signs at the back of lorries and scooters, film hoardings and even songs—one of his water colours has *Oy Oy* scribbled in the corners. American painter-photographer Bruce Handelsman has painted over black-and-white photographs of Madura kitchens or utensil bazaars. Italian painter Luigi Ontani has the rather psychedelic outpourings of his colourful kitschy mural entitled *Shivolandharumandrogino*. Norwegian artist Elisabeth Tamuly Medboe has interesting wooden house-like structures, with Indian motifs and figures painted on or inside them.

Ironically, while the commercial art scene has never been more glitzy, with push coming to shove in many cases, the Triennale has become even shoddier, an apology even of its former self. Showing it up all the more is the fact that most of the capital's galleries have put up side-shows: if there are about 70 works of Indian artists within the Triennale, there are almost five times that many on the walls of the commercial galleries. Art with a vengeance. —MADHU JAIN