



**COLOURFUL PALETTE:** Kiran Nadar at her museum of art in south Delhi

# **PORTRAIT OF A COLLECTOR**

A tough negotiator unafraid of taking risks, Kiran Nadar is today rated as an adventurous art collector. But how discerning is her collection? Avantika Bhuyan finds out

**T**ucked away in one of the less popular malls of south Delhi, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, or KNMA, may look out of place, but the idea is to allow people to feel art in public space. Contemporary artworks by Subodh Gupta, Vivan Sundaram, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Navjot Altaf and many others fill its 34,000-square-foot space. While the contemporaries are on display here, at another 18,000-square-foot space at the HCL office in Noida are the modern masters such as M F Husain, S H Raza, Ram Kumar and F N Souza. A third venue, this time a standalone museum, is on the cards. With three venues to display her collection, Kiran Nadar has emerged as the prime mover in the country's art market. There's hardly a big auction where her name doesn't crop up amongst buyers. Her husband is HCL chairman Shiv Nadar, who is worth over ₹50,000 crore.

So, is she the biggest collector in the country? "As a personal collector she is not the largest, but is one of the most significant. Rajiv Savara, probably, has the most unparalleled personal collection," says Kishore Singh, publication and exhibition head, Delhi Art Gallery. "There is soon going to be a race in privately-owned museums. The Shroffs (Poonam Bhagat Shroff and family) in Mumbai are planning one. We are hoping that the Rajiv Savara collection becomes accessible to public and Harsh Goenka has been talking about a museum as well."

Nadar's affair with art started in the 1980s at an amateurish level when she was doing up her house after getting married. "Her specific interest in art happened because of the interaction with Husain when she commissioned artworks for her home," says Singh. "That's when the whole romance of interacting with artists started: of seeing how an artist works, how an artwork develops. Some of Husain's most iconic works like *Yatra* and *Ganga* are a part of her collection. But, many

believe that the nascent interest in art was always there, even during the days when she used to work for advertising agency MCM, which is where she met Shiv who was a client of the agency. "With her background in advertising, there was already an inclination towards the fine arts and graphic arts. Moreover, she was culturally inclined. She and her colleagues used to hang out at Mandi House, have lunch at Triveni Kala Sangam, watch performances there," says Singh.

**P**ost-marriage, as she travelled and visited art venues across the world, Nadar began to pick up art that was considered unconventional for that time, like Rameshwar Broto's *Runners*, a monochromatic work depicting a nude male torso. "She saw it at Triveni and urged her husband to view it too. They both

research on any artwork that she decides to add to the museum's collection. She looks at each artist in depth, buying works of different mediums, series and periods in the artist's journey," says gallerist Roshini Vadehra who has known Nadar for years now, both personally and professionally. Nadar has bought several works by modern artists such as Ram Kumar, Raza, Arpita Singh and Atul Dodiya from her gallery in the past.

Not just an art collector and philanthropist, Nadar is a sports enthusiast as well, sometimes watching cricket and tennis matches more keenly than her husband. She is also an international-level bridge player, having played against Bill Gates in the past. "That was just a one-off thing," she says. She has brought the spirit of competitiveness to her style of collecting as well. "She is a star bidder at auctions even where there is stiff competition," says Neha Kirpal, founder and director, India Art Fair, who first met Nadar five years ago. "Some collectors look at art as an emotional decision. But she is a tough competitor and negotiator. She knows exactly what she wants and will generate the right value," she says.

Nadar is also someone who is not averse to risk. "It's obvious from her collection. Look at *Line of Control*, it's a colossal work that comes with challenges of storing and conserving. But she doesn't rule out collecting such work," says Roobina Karode, director and chief curator, KNMA. Her thoughts are echoed by Peter Nagy, artist and founder, Nature Morte. "She shows art outside the market sphere. For instance, she exhibited a few Anita Dube pieces, something I had shown in my gallery a while back and no one wanted to buy them." He feels that usually collectors go after things that are easy to hang or to resell, but Nadar's collection is more adventurous. "Private col-

lectors don't buy video installations as there is no space to put them up. And yet you see a Nalini Malani video installation at KNMA." It is also said that when Nadar takes a stand, she sees it all the way through. In 2008, when there was a ban on showing Husain's works at the India Art Fair, she lobbied against it vehemently. "She spoke to the police commissioner and got the permissions," says Kirpal. Gallerists feel that Nadar and KNMA have become relevant because of their strong exhibition, outreach and talks programme. "For instance, Karode's panel discussion around Nasreen Mohamedi's work and the exhibition curated by her showcasing rare works of the artist was exceptional," says Bhavna Kakar, director and founder, Latitude 28.

**H**owever, Nadar is not without her share of critics. A South Delhi gallerist feels that she lends support to only the three or four galleries that she buys art from. "She mostly buys from and supports Delhi Art Gallery, Vadehra, Chemould and one or two others. She is also very close to the Christie's people. These are all qualified people whose opinion is worth having but one should follow one's own instincts," she says.

"Also, sometimes one feels that like all big buyers, you need to flatter her and talk up to her." The gallerist cites an example to show Nadar's interest in getting only big brands on board. "She has hired Gayatri Sinha's Critical Collective for the talks at KNMA, some of which really don't make the mark. If she had got an academic from the Jawaharlal Nehru University or a serious art critic, it would have been better. It takes time to find the right people. She should not hire only those who are famous."

Criticism has also been levelled at her for not promoting upcoming contemporary artists, while focusing more on the established ones, something that she has admitted to as well. "I try and see shows of young artists, but personally am not involved," Nadar says.

At the moment, her focus is to get the standalone museum going. She wants the building to be just as important as the art within. "Like the Bahá'í Temple, it should put Delhi on the art map. Look at Bilbao, it used to be a sleepy little town in Spain till Guggenheim came up and made it an international destination," says Nadar. She is currently on the lookout for an architect. The plan is to organise a competition for international architects to showcase their designs. "Indian architects are good but you need a special sensibility to design a museum," she says. With HCL on a roll and the stock markets in the grips of a bull run, hiring the best will hardly pose any problem for Nadar.



(Above) *Kaavad* by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh; (top) A sculpture by Somnath Hore

came in their Fiat and had the same reaction to the work. They decided to take it home and test the waters," says Singh. It was considered a bit of a scandalous purchase, especially to be put within view of her mother-in-law and daughter. Surprisingly, there was no negative reaction at home. It's believed that was when her urge to keep on collecting got stronger. Nadar feels that her collecting style has evolved since she started KNMA in 2010. "Earlier, I would buy a lot on whim. Today, I look at the gaps in the collection; I look at the artists I would like to collect in depth."

Those who have known her say that she is a discerning collector. "She does thorough