

# it's friday!

K. ASIF



Roshini Vadehra of the Vadehra Art Gallery with one of the Raza paintings from her collection. The gallery is hosting a solo show by the artist.

by Archana

## IT'S THE RAZA SEASON AGAIN

As the city gets ready for a show by S.H. Raza, collectors talk about their prized canvases by the Paris-based Indian master

IT'S YET another Parisian spring for the city's cultural calendar. Syed Haider Raza, 88, one of the most celebrated modern Indian painters who made Paris his home more than 50 years ago, is on his annual visit to the country of his birth and the coincidence of his birthday falling around this time — February 22 — gives the city's art frats multiple reasons to fete his famous signature in every conceivable way. However, what makes his present India tour different from the other annual ones is that the Vadehra Art Gallery is hosting a three-week long solo show of Raza's canvases from March 3. The show becomes special because out of about a dozen

canvases on display, three will be absolutely new, which Raza has executed in the few months that he has been in India. There is not much that remains to be known about Raza — the modern Indian master whose art along with those by the likes of M.F. Husain, and the late Tyeb Mehta and F.N. Souza, has spearheaded the flowering of truly modern Indian art, the fruits of which the fraternity began tasting in a big way in the past decade. Born in the Babaria village in Madhya Pradesh in 1922, Raza has gone places — he studied art at the Nagpur School of Art before moving to study the same at the prestigious Sir J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai, and thence at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris in 1950, which had also trained the other famous painter, Amrita Sher-Gil. Raza's tryst with France was meant to last him forever as he has been liv-

ing in Paris ever since he first went there as a student. Now, using the term 'prized possession' for his canvases is an euphemism, especially since he is one of the only two masters of modern Indian art whose canvases have sold for whopping Rs 10 crore plus; the other is the late F.N. Souza. Even in a market still recovering from the impact of recession, his canvases continue to get top billing — several leagues ahead of many others with only Husain, Souza or Subodh Gupta for company (See the box below).

So, with Raza in the art air, we decided to speak to some of the important collectors of Raza's art in the city about their association with the master and their favourite canvases painted by him that they would never part with.

One of the most genial collectors in the category is Kuldeep Kumar Gupta, who is unlike many other high-profile businessmen-collectors who don't want to come out in the open about their treasure

chest of art, fearing IT raids. In fact, those who were invited to Raza's birthday bash on Monday got the opportunity to see Gupta's collection of S.H. Raza paintings on display in all their glory, something that the collector says he will never sell.

"I got my first Raza canvas in 1988," says this connoisseur who has since collected almost a dozen canvases by the veteran master. "It's his philosophy that has affected me the most, and he transports it so beautifully on to the canvases. I'm so much in awe of this man that I've even conducted a business board meeting of my company in Nice, to introduce my team to him," shares Gupta.

It, indeed, is the philosophy of Raza's works, especially of the now well-known Bindu, that arrests any connoisseur of art. It goes without saying that Raza's style has evolved tremendously since he began painting as a professional — he started with expressionist land-

scapes which evolved into geometrical representation of the landscapes. From about 1970s, he started concentrating on purely geometrical forms which began symbolising the deeper tenets of Indian schools of philosophy. It was during this evolution that the Bindu was born — a dot in the centre of the canvas which fans out to represent the cycle of creation. Raza is known to have said that he owes the origin of the Bindu to his elementary school teacher who used to draw a dot on the blackboard to make the distracted child Raza focus and develop concentration. It is his Bindu canvases that attract Roshini Vadehra the most.

Vadehra, who is hosting the upcoming show of Raza's art, says, "Raza Sahab's works from 1970s onwards — the transient period when the Bindu series of works started emerging from his earlier style — are my favourites. As a gallery, we have a special relationship with all modernists and we have old vintage works of Raza Sahab too, in our gallery's collection."

For most of these collectors, it's difficult to part with their Raza canvases, as Sunaina Anand of Art Alive Gallery shares. Anand has done a big body of work on Raza's art in the past few years, through her collector's item book — *A Life in Art: Raza* (2006) and by publishing the English translation of the

famous French book on Raza's philosophy of Mandalas by the French author Olivier Germain-Thomas, last year. Says Anand, "I first saw this flaming orange canvas of Raza Sahab at his studio when I had gone visiting him in France with Ashok Vajpeyi, who was writing our book *A Life in Art: Raza*. I had liked it so much that I told him I wanted it. He suggested that he would give me a canvas bigger than this one but I insisted on getting this one only." Anand says that as a gallerist, it's difficult for her to draw a line between the canvases that she can keep for herself and those that she should sell.

"I've tried to keep a couple of major works, also because Raza Sahab drops hints for some of those, saying, 'isko na becho to aachha hoga' (it would be good if you don't sell these)," she shares. What touches her most about the modern master is the way he "looks at your face when you are looking at his canvas."

Ashish Anand of Delhi Art Gallery, who is in the process of putting together one of the most ambitious exhibitions ever on the erstwhile Progressive Artists Group — formed in 1947 by six artists including Raza — recalls his first Raza purchase. "It was his paper works which I bought in 1999 by H.A. Gade. When Raza left for Paris in 1950, he left all his art work with Gade and that is what I bought. I had a show of those paper works but since then, I have

### WHEN RAZA CROSSED THE RS 10-CRORE BARRIER

When Raza's 1973 oil on canvas *La Terre* (left) sold for £1,273,250 (approximately Rs 10.38 crore) at Christie's Post War and Contemporary Art Evening Sale in July 2008, he became only the second Indian artist to cross that figure; the first one was F.N. Souza. The art market was booming then.

However, even in a recovering market like the present times, a Raza canvas gets top billing. His 2006 acrylic on canvas *Prakriti Purush* (right) is one of the top



priced canvases at the forthcoming Spring Auction 2010 by Saffronart. It's expected to fetch anything between Rs 81 lakh and Rs 99 lakh.





JYOTI KAPOOR

## Where you'll see more from Raza

Delhi Art Gallery's Ashish Anand (seen here with Raza on the master's 88th birthday on February 22) will host one of the most ambitious shows ever of the body of work of the defunct Progressive Artists Group (PAG) founded in 1947 by F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee and S.K. Bakre. Anand will relaunch his gallery's space at Hauz Khas Village with this show. The PAG had hoped to encourage *avant garde* Indian art in line with international trends, an exercise that has borne fruit worth crores in the past decade.

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Sunaina Anand of Art Alive gallery with her favourite Raza canvas, titled *Pancha Tatva* (2006). It caught the collector's attention when she was visiting Raza in Paris for her book on the artist.

bought others too. My most recent buy is a rare art work by Raza, a terracotta vase on which he has painted. It dates to 1990s and I'm looking forward to having it in my gallery," says Anand.

In the Raza season of the city's art circuit, there are many more nuggets on the great artist whose process of painting is universally accepted to be a balmy experience. And none even reflect on the last

year scandal when he was invited to inaugurate an exhibition of his own fake canvases.

As Manish and Kamana Pushkale, the Delhi-based painter couple from Bhopal with whom Raza has been staying during this India trip, say, "He has painted three canvases while he has been with us and watching him paint is an experience that cannot be described. It's absolutely spiritual."

Raza epitomises art as it should be and the fact that he continues to paint even when pushing 90 is an experience to be shared by all those waiting in the wings to earn their artistic spurs in the world market.

— S.H. Raza's show will be on at the Vadehra Art Gallery and Book Store, D-40, Defence Colony, from March 3 to 25, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. archana.khare@mailtoday.in



A shot from the film, *Leaving Home*, with Indian Ocean band members jamming at a dilapidated building on Khajur Road

## STAR BILLING FOR INDIAN OCEAN IN FIRST BAND FILM

by Kritika Banerjee

**O**NE MARVELS at how four middle-aged men who don't sing pop rock but have their roots deep in the Indian folk music, enjoy such a huge fan following among people half their age.

"Their music doesn't seem to age," says Jaldeep Varma, Mumbai-based Journalist-turned-filmmaker, whose film on the band Indian Ocean, titled *Leaving Home*, is being touted as the first feature-length movie made on an Indian music band. It is set for a digital release in the second week of April.

"The movie tells the story of four middle class guys who have stuck together with a fierce integrity," says Varma, but is quick to add that it is not a hagiography.

For those of us who have grown up on the earthy sounds of 'Kandisa' and 'Jhini', the prospect of watching a movie based on the Indian Ocean, which also happens to feature all the four members — the late Asheem Chakravarty, Rahul Ram, Sushmit Sen and Amit Kilam, is nothing but divine music to the ears.

The filming started in June 2006, when Varma, who had been pondering over the idea of making a film on the band for some time, felt confident that "I was finally in a position to attempt an unusual venture on a very low budget".

"I had known the band since 2001, when I used to write for *Gentleman* (the now-defunct magazine)... I had discovered their newly-released album *Kandisa* then," says Varma.

From then on, the band as well as its music has grown over him. And that's perhaps why nearly 60 minutes of the total 115 minutes of the film deal with the music of Indian Ocean, including their 2006 *Silma* concert, which was streamed live on the net.

The film also captures some prized moments like the practise session of the band at an old, dilapidated building on Khajur Road, just off Faiz Road, in New Delhi. The place, where the band has been practising for the last 13 years, is a hot bed of ideas, flights and jamming sessions for its members.



Asheem Chakravarty, the percussionist who died on December 25 last year, in a scene from the film

"The film has us singing *No Comebacks* (a track from their first album which is not available in the market), and I guess, this one was a better version of the original," says Sushmit Sen, the band's guitarist, who is also known for his distinctive vocals. And yes, 'Kandisa' features in the film.

But, didn't the thought of a camera staring at them for most part of the day intimidate the band? "Yes and No," says Amit Kilam, the band's drummer. "Initially we were a little conscious, but after a point it was pretty normal, and some portions have our individual interviews, which were never a problem." Having Kilam's brother Sumit in the production unit helped in breaking the ice between the cast and the crew.

It's inevitable not to mention the looming presence of Asheem in the film, who passed away on December 25 last year. "He was the most supportive of my big screen aspirations," says Varma.

Varma remembers how Asheem often used to say, "Don't be discouraged by the setbacks. Let it (the movie) take its time. It will never be too late for its release."

The shooting for the movie took off with Asheem's interview. Says Varma, "I told him that we'll go chronologically, so I asked him about his childhood... suddenly his face clouds up and he is in tears; and the shot is there in the film." It sounds like a moving experience.

kritika.banerjee@mailtoday.in