neglected'. In his book *Progressive English* (1918), James C Fernold thundered his own broadside against this alternative diction: 'Slang ... saves the trouble—and the glory—of thinking. The same cheap word or phrase may be used for any one of a hundred ideas ... Slang is the advertisement for mental poverty'.

So, is slang in fact the spoken equivalent of a labour-saving device, breeding mental and verbal laziness? Or is it like a Swiss army knife, capable of multi-purpose and inventive usage? It depends on your point of view, or rather, the point you wish to make with your vocabulary.

Though Green does not mention it in his book, there is a telling anecdote about Rajneesh, the Indian 'godman', who later called himself Osho. When asked by a disciple what he thought of the word 'fuck', the self-styled sage of sexuality replied, without batting an id, that it was the most beautiful, expressive and versatile word in the English language. It could be used as a noun, or as a verb, both transitive and intransitive. Suffixed with 'about', it meant to play around or dally. Followed by 'off', it was an injunction to go away. It could be used as a participial adjective to connote exhaustion. Or as a simple adjective expressing scorn or contempt, or, on the other hand, great approbation. It could be utilised both as an adverb or adjective to denote a superlative, or as an expression indicative of surprise, consternation, delight, wonder, anger, disgust, dismay, elation and discovery. It could also be used as a purely meaningless qualification, merely for the heck of it.

ANIRBAN GHOSH

What is the genealogy of this most-used four-letter word in the English language? Green tends to disagree with those who have suggested that the word derives from the Italian 'futuo', 'used specifically with a client copulating with a whore', and suggests instead a derivation from 'fottuere', also of Italian origin, which a 16th century Anglo-Italian lexicographer, John Florio, gave as one of his synonyms for the Anglo-Saxon term, the French equivalent being 'foutre'. Playing it safe, the magisterial Oxford English Dictionary begs the question with a terse 'Origin unknown'.

Despite its long, if obscure, lineage and its common usage in everyday speech, the f-word remained taboo in print, with rare exceptions such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which with its self-consciously pedagogic naming of body parts and their functions reads like a biology textbook for middle-school children. As late as 1948, in his *Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer had to resort to the three-letter substitute of 'fug' for the real four-letter McCoy.

But the ramparts of prudery—the bastion of the archetypal censor, Miss Grundy, who would enforce a chastity belt on language to protect its illusory virginity—were rapidly being breached by writers like Henry Miller and William Burroughs who sang the body electric, playing their dark music on the hidden chords of the libido. The 300,000-odd fans who flocked to the open-air music festival at Woodstock, USA, chorused the anthem of the Age of Aquarius when they followed the lead of the singer who urged them to give him an 'Eff', a 'You', a 'See', and a 'Kay', and they thundered their response, blowing the socks of Miss Grundy.

However, while the f-word has proved to be what might be called one of the 'hardy perennials' of slang, weathering many changes of years and seasons, many if not most slang expressions wither away with time, to be replaced by new terms. To be at the cutting edge of language, slang has to constantly reinvent itself.

Green traces the evolution of this parallel language through medieval England; the slave plantations of the southern states of America; the two World Wars; the growing politicisation of the American college campus, particularly during the Vietnam War; and Afro-American gangsta rap and Ebonics, which some claim is a distinct language by itself, with a vocabulary totally impenetrable by the uninitiated.

But, as Green notes, even when it shrouds itself in secrecy, English slang has always been a promiscuous strumpet. The approximately 125,000 terms and phrases the author has collated on his database can be traced to no fewer than 19 languages, starting with French, Italian and German, and including Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Hindi (thanks largely to the British Raj and Kipling), Yoruba and Zulu.

Green concludes with the observation: 'Slang long since took to itself the lexis of humanity's emotional and social downside. Our less admirable but absolutely unavoidable selves... It has always been needed. It still is. It always will be.'

Slang is spontaneous; it is extempore. Slang is what happens when language breaks into jazz. Green plays an accomplished riff to that catchy rhythm. Which is what makes his book such a fucking good read. Or, for the sake of any residual Grundys still out there, a fugging good read. ■

SR/LA

For the Love of Common People

Art collector Kiran Nadar's museum project aims to break barriers of art appreciation by attracting popular interest

DEEPA BHASTHI

AT TIMES, a story insists upon being placed within the contexts of time and ambience; it isn't enough to merely start where it begins and with whom. That's why what surrounds the cream sofa on which I sit to speak with art collector and patron, Kiran Nadar, begs to be described. Each work around us is as much a part of her story as what she will tell me over the next hour or so.

A large LN Tallur piece guards the entrance to the section of her plush South Delhi house "where all the art work on

ASHISH SHARMA

DISCERNING EYE Kiran Nadar in front of MF Husain's *Mahabharata* (1990) at her residence

display is". Just opposite that are a series of personal photographs perched on a mantle. An FN Souza, an Amrita Sher-Gil—of elephants in a pond—flank the entrance to her office into which we are ushered. We are a tad early, and I use the few minutes we have while waiting to peer around the room. A painting from Shakti Maira's *Within* series overlooks a tall standing statue of the Buddha next to a table. In the alcove on the opposite wall is an Anjolie Ela Menon painting, surrounded by books and curios. From Frederick Forsyth's *The Fist of God* to tomes on Amrita Sher-Gil annotated by nephew Vivan Sundaram, to catalogues and something on alternative healing, the books are an eclectic mix. The shelves also have family photographs: of holidays, candid shots of a much-younger Kiran Nadar with her husband Shiv Nadar and his mother, a sepia-toned college snapshot of the HCL founder from his Tiruchirappalli days.

Elsewhere in the house is a very large MF Husain, and his horses look ready to spring up and gallop away in the light streaming in from the French windows close by. Ravindra Reddy's figurative woman braids her hair on the other side of the room, while a work of Shibu Natesan overlooks smaller artefacts and more candid photos of Nadar collapsing with laughter on her husband's shoulder, and of daughter Roshni with her mother.

That hot Delhi summer afternoon, Kiran Nadar and I sit across from a 30-odd-year-old Rameshwar Broota oil-on-canvas, "one of my earliest collections", she says, as she explains how she turned art collector. "It was more of an accident. We were building a new home and I bought a few pieces to decorate the house," she says. Those few pieces soon became a lot of pieces of art, and she found her wall space fast filling up. A 'collection' began to take shape, dominated by Indian Modernists who she has always been partial to. Nadar's treasures include many Husains, FN Souzas, Manjit Bawas, Nasreen Mohammedis and other usual suspects among the Moderns. They grace office walls, her homes and a couple of museum spaces.

NADAR SPEAKS of how she has refined the way she goes about collecting art. "I still buy something I like, but the overall process has changed. I look at gaps in my collection and try to fill them now." She has a group of people who help her. Among them is Roobina Karode, chief curator at Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), which she set up four years ago.

Nadar remains actively involved at the acquisition stage, though. While she is not unduly concerned about the market value of the piece she is considering, she tries to research the artist and his/her practice. Largely, it's about the art's intrinsic appeal. "I am a little more instinctive," she says. Would an art critic's opinion of an artist influence her decisions? "I go by what I like," she says, "Though I read a critic's opinion, I am not influenced by it."

The art market in India has been precarious, of late; the one for contemporary art, especially moody. After the

slump a few years ago, there has been little recovery, and Nadar wonders briefly if collecting contemporary art through those years might have been a bad idea. "But then, I have never looked at collecting art as an investment. Maybe the contemporary artists I have will appreciate [in value] in the coming years. These days one has to buy intelligently," she says.

Art hasn't been an 'investment' as such, but is 'brand worthiness', the big bucks that some artists command, an important factor? Nadar admits she has a reputation of being a big bidder at auctions, an image she's been trying to play down. "The work is important, not the money part. It is very stressful being at auctions, but I cannot have anyone else bid for me. They will have to check with me over the phone, and that would be more stressful."

Not just her private collection, even KNMA's permanent collection includes 'senior contemporary artists' such as Amar Kanwar, Shilpa Gupta, Ranjani Shettar, Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta. She is picky about the younger lot in her collection. She only wants those she thinks show promise. Artists from beyond the Subcontinent don't get a look-in either, for that's another league altogether, Nadar says, though she picked up three Richard Mosse photographs recently. "It was a one-off purchase; I'm not looking to build a collection of works of foreign artists."

She won't name her favourite artist, insisting each work and every artist has a special significance. Is her husband an art enthusiast too? She shakes her head and says all he does is monitor her budget; what works she decides to collect is entirely her decision.

The KNMA was started when her walls began to get crowded and she figured it was time to throw her collection open to public viewing. Four years on, drawing people into the museum's two spaces—on the HCL campus in Noida and the other within a plush mall in Saket—is still her biggest challenge. The art fraternity does come by, with the museum having proven itself an attraction for artists and art buffs, but getting spontaneous drop-ins by people at large is not easy—and it is their appreciation that she's looking to arouse. We discuss art receptiveness in various metros. "In Kolkata and Mumbai, people go to museums and galleries," she says, "In Delhi, the nature of the city is such that culture isn't something people do."

To change that, the KNMA periodically organises outreach programmes—talks, seminars, courses—apart from retrospectives and performance art shows. "We have programmes for school and college students to inculcate art appreciation in them," she says.

To widen the museum's appeal, a bigger independent space is under planning. The Shiv Nadar Foundation, which sponsors the KNMA, is currently in the process of buying land in Delhi to build a new space for it. "We want to build a 'destination', like the Bahai temple, where the structure itself is a destination," says Nadar, "Museums have to be designed differently from other buildings. We will look for a foreign architect with experience in designing a museum."

Kiran Nadar admits she has a reputation of being a big bidder at art auctions, an image she has been trying to play down. "The work is important, not the money part," she says

That may take three or four years to come up. For now, the KNMA within HCL's tech park in Noida grants its visitors an intimate acquaintance with art, away from the city lights. The works currently on display here offer a contextual history of Modernism in the country. Graphite-on-paper drawings of Eve, Rain, September reclining/standing from FN Souza's sketchbook, vignettes from Husain's year in Prague, and his *Toys*, Richard Bartholomew's study of fellow artists Nasreen Mohammedi, Ram Kumar, Manjit Bawa and VS Gaitonde, and Madan Mahatta's black-and-white photographs that match the modernist architecture that was shaping a new Delhi, apart from a few works of Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee—all these are on view as part of a show entitled *An Unfinished Portrait: Vignettes from the KNMA Collection.*

The show at the museum's Saket wing is bigger. Subodh Gupta's *Line of Control*, a mushroom cloud of steel utensils—his signature style—occupies the lobby outside. Inside the museum, a Nalini Malani retrospective is on. Alongside, clubbed as *Is it what you think?*, a show curated by Roobina Karode has works like Shilpa Gupta's *Someone Else: A Library of 100 Books Written Anonymously or Under Pseudonyms*, Idris Khan's *The Devil's Wall*, Zarina Hashmi's meditative work with paper, and other works by Rumanna Hussain, Himmat Shah, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, Atul Dodiya and Shirazeh Houshiary among a total of 16 contemporary well-knowns.

While going through Sheikh's concertina format books, I am reminded of how my conversation with Kiran Nadar ended the previous day. I had asked if she sees herself in the role of a patron to contemporary artists. Shaking her head, she said that wasn't so; she's not a patron of individual artists. "I see myself as a patron of the *arts* instead." A regular attendee of biennales across the world, the Basel Art Fair is her next stop. She squeezes time out for many other interests as well. She is a professional bridge player, and a self-confessed sports enthusiast, regularly taking in cricket, golf and tennis.

During the photo session, I spot a lovely photo of Shiv and Kiran Nadar's only daughter Roshni with her young son. Does she collect too, I ask just before leaving. "No," Nadar replies, "She buys art for her house but is not building a collection." That, I am reminded, was exactly how she'd said she herself had started. ■