

■ *The first big show of contemporary Indian art in Singapore may not have set the cash registers ringing, but it did give the big names a firm foothold in a burgeoning market, says PREMA VISWANATHAN*

Singapore SURPRISE

ONE can hardly call it an upsurge. 'Awakening' is a better word to describe the burgeoning interest in contemporary Indian art in South-East Asia, best exemplified by a recent show in Singapore, and another to be inaugurated in October.

The rich heritage of ancient Indian art has become part of the region's collective inheritance — as evidenced in the murals and sculptures that embellish the temples of Bangkok, Bali, Borobudur and Angkor Wat. But contemporary art is another canvas altogether. The region's exposure to it has been minimal, if at all.

It was gratifying, therefore, to witness the crowds that squeezed into the Substation Gallery in Singapore earlier this month to take a look at the work of India's top contemporary artists. And not all stood and stared. A number of them walked away with the paintings, paying \$S1,000-\$S19,000 (Rs 25,000-Rs 5 lakh) for the prized Husains, Anjolie Ela Menons, Swaminathans, Arpana Caur and Arpita Singhs.

Of course, this is small change compared to the \$S1-3 million that the works of an Indonesian master fetched at the Christie's and Sotheby's auctions in Singapore some time back. But the scenario could well change, since the Substation show is only the

beginning. Exposure is the key to patronage, as Singapore's art aficionados have begun to realise.

And exposure is the idea behind the next show on these lines being planned in Singapore. The vitality and the range of contemporary Indian art will be showcased once more for the South-East Asian audience when close to 100 by 52 artists will be put up at the newly restored Singapore Art Museum in October. This joint effort by the museum and the Calcutta art gallery CIMA will not only be a much bigger show than the Substation exhibition, where some 30-odd works were on display, it'll also last longer — close to three months.

Unlike the recent exhibition, which aimed primarily at marketing Indian masters, the Art Museum show, to be titled 'Tryst With Destiny: Art in Modern India', will be purely an aesthetic initiative, all the works being on loan for a limited period. And the canvas will be much wider than the one at the Substation, covering almost the entire history of



post-Independence Indian art. And besides paintings, there'll be sculptures by contemporary artists like Meera and Mrinalini Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij and Rimzon.

Explains Karen Lim, Assistant Curator of the Museum who's overseeing the exhibition: "Our intention is to expose the people of this region to India's rich output of contemporary art. The fact that this is the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence makes it appropriate that India should be featured."

The golden jubilee also provided the rationale for the timing of the Substation's recent three-day show titled 'The Searching Spirit'. It was an entirely private initiative, mounted by the Singapore-based Shades International in collaboration with Le Gallery

of Chennai. The roll call of artists featured could well be the who's who of the Indian art scene. It included names like Husain, S. H. Raza, F. N. Souza, Anjolie Ela Menon, Jehangir Sabavala, Ram Kumar, Manjit Bawa, Arpita Singh and Arpana Caur.

Despite this new-found celebration of contemporary Indian art — best exemplified by the full-page feature *Time* magazine recently devoted to the subject — the market for it in South-East Asia has been negligible. Even the Herculean efforts of Japan's Masanori Fukuoka, whose collection of Indian paintings adds up to a formidable 4,000, haven't percolated to the ASEAN region, nor triggered an awareness about India's modern masters in this cash-rich part of the continent.

It is against this bleak backdrop that the Substation exhibition assumes significance. According to Sherna Danani, who has founded Shades International along with Umama Mulla-Feroze, "what is most encouraging is the fact that eight of the paintings on show were bought even before the doors opened." Of course, most of the buyers of contemporary Indian art are from the expatriate or Singapore Indian community, but both Danani and Mulla-Feroze are making every effort to broad-base their clientele.

"This can only happen when we have created an adequate awareness of Indian art in the region," points out Mulla-Feroze, whose tryst with art dates back to the time when she was publicity manager for the Taj group in Mumbai. Her passion is shared by her partner, Danani, an art mart veteran with a wealth of experience acquired both in Chennai and in Singapore.

Danani says Shades International had taken a well-considered decision not to mark up the prices beyond a certain point, so as not to put off potential buyers. "We realise we first need to build up an awareness about contemporary Indian art in this region before we can expect it to fetch the kind of prices it deserves to command," she explains. 'The Searching Spirit', she hopes, may prove to be the first step in Indian contemporary art's long journey for recognition in a region that is so near geographically, yet so far removed culturally. The faster this chasm is spanned, the louder will be the ring of cash registers.



Photograph by CHERIAN THOMAS

■ Singaporean collectors paid \$S1,000-\$S19,000 for the works of Manjit Bawa (top), J. Swaminathan (middle), and Anjolie Ela Menon, but it was small change compared to the \$S1-3 million they shelled out for the canvases of an Indonesian master some time back.