

# Art for art's sake

Eminent painter S H Raza's recent announcement to retire professionally raises the question of whether it's possible for artists to hang their boots

**A**t 87 Raza is exhibiting his last show in London. Ironically enough with good friend MF Hussain, 94, who seems in no hurry to hang his boots. Reportedly, the France-based Raza believes he has "said what I wanted to say as a painter," and has grown weary of dealing with the complex and high taxation system in France. Does this mean that reaching saturation point compounded with taxation may drive more Indian artists into a similar state?

With Raza deciding to end his painting career but not quite, as he will continue to paint for himself, is there a case for retirement for artists, unlike those who have jobs?

Reena Saini Kallat, a painter who equates painting with living itself, is not surprised at Raza's decision since "sharing your work lies in the public domain". It's a personal choice and it's possible for an artist to decide not to show his/her work, she rationalises, adding, "We all pay huge taxes, but as an artist your work means



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—Anjolie Ela Menon



S H Raza

something else to you and can't be put in the same basket."

But, does this go against artistic expression being essentially for display or showing your work? Startled by Raza's decision, Bengaluru-based artist SG Vasudev feels that "artistic pursuit is intrinsically tied to showing your work. The pleasure you get from your work, you want to share with others, therefore you show." Dismissing high taxation as a factor in Raza's case,

he says, "It's a practical problem."

Artist Sisir Sahana shares a similar view. "It is natural for an artist to continue with his artistic pursuit and not be concerned about public viewing." Attributing Raza's decision to anger and with the commercialisation of art, Sisir says, "We know this can't be stopped, but it is not natural for an artist to stop exhibiting. Any artistic pursuit is for public viewing."

While the artistic compulsion maybe strong and unstoppable, do age and a long innings become overriding factors in taking such a decision? Painter Surya Prakash thinks so. He asks, "Raza has crossed 80. If he displays, people will keep buying. What will he do with the money?"

Clearly, there is a case for preserving an ageing artist's works and stop showing and selling beyond a point. Anjolie Ela Menon, one of India's leading contemporary artists in fact sees age as a major factor in Raza's decision and exclaims, "We are all coming to that and I'm 20 years younger!" She adds, "The taxation system is no less heavy in India. We lose 33 per cent to tax! But we need to do a body of work which we want showcased in public spaces. Raza is old and realises that what he

does now is significant and not to be dispersed." Pointing to the fate of many artists' works, she says, "Work disappears into private collections and nobody sees them."

While high taxation maybe a non-issue since the only choice is to pay up, beyond a point, preserving art for posterity is the real issue that Indian artists need to pay heed to, taking wisdom out of Raza's book!

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