

Prized and priced

26.12.93

There's this gentleman who drops by from time to time, and we discuss art. The other day he came with his wife. She sat with us but did not join in our conversation. Nor did she pay much heed to what we were talking about. Suddenly, after a restless half hour, she asked me: 'When will you give me one of your paintings?' Now that really upsets me. Obviously she wanted the painting not because she values art but because she thinks it will add to her social status, or perhaps for the handsome amount it can fetch her, when sold.

That was Ganesh Pyne's experience. Perhaps every other of our contemporary masters will bear him out. For, Indian art has, in recent years, been viewed more as investment than for its intrinsic aesthetic value. In fact, a gentleman in the cement trade is known to have observed that art today ranks as the fifth investment in the country, after the traditional land-property-gold-shares.

But the concept is still quite new in a country where for centuries art was not even for acquiring, let alone an investment. The temple sculptures, the paintings adorning the mudplastered dwellings, the ingeniously crafted items for everyday use — if they were expressions of artistic aspiration, it was free for all to admire. Yes, the times have changed and people are acquiring art with an eye on the profit that could accrue when it is resold. But where are the resales? And who are the primary buyers?

That is not to say, as some did last year, that art sales have come to a virtual standstill. But nor are we back to the boomtime of the happy '80s that preceded the dip in sales in the wake of the scam. Yet, without any auction, Sotheby's or otherwise, the galleries sold evenly round the year. And going through their records we find that while the masters

stood their ground and even gained some, the young did not fare too badly.

M.F.Husain, K.K.Hebbar, Sankho Chaudhury, Ram Kumar, J.Swaminathan, Satish Gujral, Krishan Khanna, Bimal Dasgupta, Manjit Bawa, F.N.Souza, Jehangir Sabavala, K.S.Kulkarni, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharya: the year had almost every major name exhibiting in the Capital. Some, like Sabavala, reportedly sold all the works displayed. A few did not get such a heartening response. But in terms of price? None could complain. The stars of Indian contemporary art — even when they exhibited in groups, as did Tyeb Mehta, R.Brouta, Manu Parekh, Arpita Singh, Sunil Das, Bhupen Khakhar — all crossed the lakh mark with

their larger works. Even when they are modest, they are going for 60,000 and more. Except when, like Prof Kulkarni, they make a conscious effort to keep the tag at half that price or even lower.

The younger lot that showed and sold in the course of the year includes Arpana Caur, Vivan Sundaram, Bulbul Sharma, Paresch Maity, Neeraj Goswami, Sanjay Bhattacharya, Babu Xavier, Subrata Kundu, Dharmendra Rathod, Probir Gupta, Narendra Pal Singh. Padmanabh Bendre in Bombay — no longer young in his late '40s — showed for the first time this week and sold most of his 'pointillist' landscapes. If some, like K.P.Soman, did not record any sales, it certainly was not for want

of merit: Soman's installation was perhaps the most striking expression of a social malaise — rural migration — one has come across in recent times. Such artists can take heart in the fact that while earlier such ensemble work could not expect any monetary gains, now these too have a market — albeit limited — as proved by the sales of Vivan Sundaram's work — on photographs, or of Ratnabali Kant's sculptures.

Perhaps the real good news for contemporary Indian art is that it has found acceptance among sections other than the NRIs. Masanori Fukuoka, the businessman-director of the Glenbarra Museum in Japan, is a regular buyer on the list of Indian galleries. Madame Schöo of Netherlands is another booster for our artists. A private sale in Dubai in the year that saw all 11 of the artists represented being bought — by locals and foreigners as much as by NRIs. Various other artists, while travelling in Europe and America, have found keen collectors for their work. And, if the Graphics show at Husain Ki Sarai is taken as an indicator, it should be possible to dent the East too: Like the Indians, those from Bangladesh and Nepal were priced from Rs 2,500 to Rs 10,000, while the Singaporean was closer to the Western prices when he tagged his work Rs 50,000.

Indicating the health of contemporary art was another barometer: controversies. They ranged from trends in art movement to communalism and fanaticism. And, as in other years, Husain continued to be at the centre of most of them. The year began with the National Gallery of Modern Art opening its door to a private show — of Husain's works, naturally. If that was questioned by many in the arts fraternity, Husain himself — along with several of his contemporaries — questioned the National Museum when it presented Raja Ravi Verma as the first proponent of modernism in Indian art. Husain again was at the core of the controversy triggered off when Satish Gujral, in his

autobiographical writing, criticised his peer for not seeking inspiration from his own religion or culture. The year also had some fanatics objecting to Arpita Singh's contemporary representation of goddess Durga.

The most recent of the controversies was, again, triggered off by Husain when he issued a caution notice warning people against the sale and purchase of copies of his work. By pointing out that such works were violating the Copyright Act of 1957, the master has opened a Pandora's box. Lesser artists are producing works that are substantially similar to paintings by Husain or Bikash. If this is wrong, can we condone the practice — of producing substantially similar works — in a big name? The pointed reference was to Satish Gujral's bird-woman imagery which reminds viewers of the series Gogi Saroj Pal exhibited last year. In her recent works Gogi, on her part, used the eye imagery which was seen this very year in the Nathdwara-based works of Ashok Hazra.

The same copyright issue came to the fore with Vivan Sundaram's use of a photograph by the *Times of India* photographer Hoshi Jal. Practitioners of this contemporary art form objected to several things: the violation of the photographer's paternity right through such acts as bleaching, overexposing and under-exposing of a photograph (as distinct from a published print); the denial of credit to the photographer; the sale of works based on the photograph... Considering that photography is only just coming into its own — with the National Gallery of Modern Arts devoting a wing to this art; with the Max Mueller Bhavan deciding to exhibit only photographic art; with the Sanskriti Awards for visual arts going, for the first time, to a photographer; with several artists exploring the boundaries of creative photography — this discussion is likely to continue in the months if not years to come.

Ratnottama Sengupta

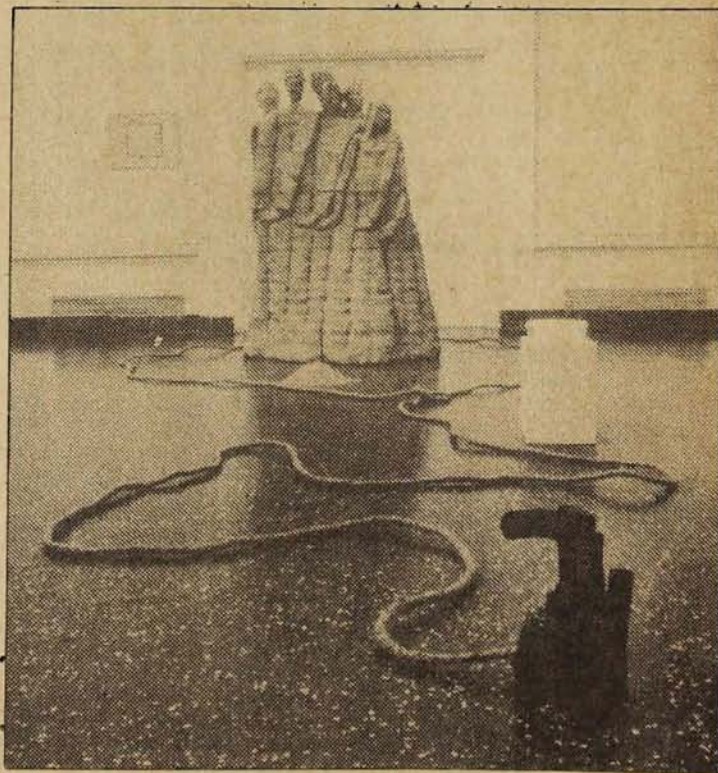


Photo: Satish Sharma

Comment on rural migration: Soman's Installation

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