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Issue 16 • May 2019

SETTING THE AUCTION STAGE ALIGHT

In many ways, Spring 2019 will go down as a seminal moment for Raja Ravi Varma's works. Over the last decade or so, interest in his paintings have increased exponentially and it was with a view to explore the auction house route that gallery g moved into a territory it hadn't ventured into earlier.

The experience of being part of an auction sale, and being connected with a reputed art house is different, and it does get unique when the auction happens to be purely of an online version. Back-to-back sale of two Ravi Varma works, one at a live bidding followed by the second on an online platform made the whole process surreal.

It was exciting, enticing and enchanting – just like the great artist's works. The two works in question – *The Maharajah of Travancore Welcoming the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos* which went under the Saffron Art hammer on March 26 and *Hanuman's Discourse*, a rare work by the artist, and specifically put up on the online platform (March 27-28) did the expected.

It whipped up frenzy in the art world given that it isn't often that two Ravi Varma works come up for sale in such a short span of time. The beauty of the two paintings is that they are intensely different: the subjects, the detailing and the significance of both are stunning.

Hanuman's Discourse (17" x 20") is indeed a rare, beautiful work by the artist featuring Ram, Sita, Lakshman with all of them listening attentively to Hanuman, ostensibly reading from a scroll. While the wizened Hanuman is a deviation from the norm, Sita's arm around Ram is a rarity.



Hanuman's Discourse (17" X 20")

The Maharajah of Travancore Welcoming the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos (57" x 47") is starkly different in its characterization, subject and surroundings. Yet, in both the cases, the genius of the artist comes to the fore with his immaculate eye for detail and his ability to impact the viewer.

It's indeed arguable that if the two works had come up for sale (online or otherwise) at different junctures, the end pricing may have been distinctly different given that the larger canvas was listed under the tax recovery tribunal. Yet, gallery g's strategic and bold decision to have *Hanuman's Discourse* immediately come up for sale following the live bidding is an ode to the great artist.

The combined sale of the two paintings, a little under

Rs. 24 crore, not only justified the buzz surrounding the event, it also set the stage for future sales of the artist's works. Over the years, Ravi Varma's works – *Radha In The Moonlight* (Pundole's, 2016), *Damayanti* (Sotheby's New York, 2017) and *Tillotama* (Sotheby's, New York, 2018) have fetched great prices as single entries.

This double offering of Ravi Varma's works in the Spring auction sale reiterated the belief that his paintings are priceless, immensely valued and hugely sought-after by the discerning art collectors. If anything, it's an indication that the artist rules the roost and layered in that is a feeling of deep satisfaction that the vision of promoting and preserving the artist's works and his legacy is on the right path. ■

- Ravi Chakravarthy

SEEING GOD IN NATURE



Nature has always been a pure fascination for artists - a setting onto which inner feelings and progressive ideas can be translated through new aesthetic language. Exploring the shifting light and investigating the perception of colour, nature has been a starting point for major achievements which have forever changed the face of art.



SECOND SPRING – a series of 61 works by **Ganapati Hegde** unveiled a delightful world of thick forests in the artist's personally accentuated style. Inspired by the natural environment that bursts forth with colour, creatures and lush vegetation, Hegde created a world of his own that evolved from a highly creative imagination and allegorical ideologies.

Hegde is an artist whose work flirts through the realms of natural terrain with a strong affinity and admiration for flora and fauna. He creates fantastical territories comprising trees, flowers, living creatures and abstract thoughts. His works are not only expressive, but are images which act like a map of the inner workings and thoughts running through the artist's mind.

Born and raised in Kumta (Coastal Karnataka), Hegde's love for fine arts was influenced and instilled in him very early on by his maternal grandfather, himself an artist. As a child he did plenty of drawings and paintings. Realising his creative potential, his parents supported him whole-heartedly in his art-centric journey.

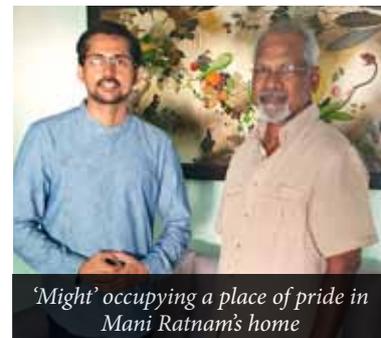
A bird, a bee, and the wind which propels them; depiction of plants and other living beings that in some way relate to human behaviour – the stories he tells through his art are partly influenced by Indian short stories and fables. There was always an underlying story that enlivened and empowered each canvas on display.

Clusters of iridescently hued vegetation camouflaged a plethora of living creatures that take new form in their painted abode.

Through this exhibition the artist attempted to convey a message of oneness, the symbiosis between all forms of nature, in a holistic manner through his work. The intricate, deep and indispensable connection of different forms of life, their dependence on each other for survival was seamless, and typical of Hegde's style.

Of the 61 works on display every single one from his series **Gods & Nature** (there were 25 works in this series) was sold. Buyers specifically appreciated the subtle manner in which Hegde juxtaposed foliage with form to give life to a deity through his brush. Using sections of a pumpkin to form the *tumba* of the veena for Goddess Saraswati (*above - inset*), red hibiscus flowers that are used to worship Lord Ganesha to form his head and trunk; his use of floral imagery is subtle, yet outstanding.

Popular film-maker and director Mani Ratnam was so taken in by the artist's rendition of Hanuman in a painting titled *'Might'* (which he purchased from us) that he personally invited Hegde to Chennai to meet him and understand more about his style and composition. Hegde presented him a pencil portrait (*below*).



'Might' occupying a place of pride in Mani Ratnam's home

With an obvious affinity for his subject, the artist cleverly weaves natural elements together into ecstatic collages, never disturbing or diverting their innate strength and charm, arranging these natural excerpts into artistic compositions on canvas. ■

DANCE OF THE

BULL

MOHAMMED OSMAN

A 'gangireddu' or decorated ox, commonly known as the *basava* in Kannada, forms the crux of his artistic subject. **Mohammed Osman** has no story to tell through his art, he painstakingly attempts to capture the beauty of this lavishly decorated beast, often ignored by people, in the best possibly manner on his canvas.

'*Gangireddu aata*' is an age-old tradition practiced till date in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Osman, who hails from the region, uses his canvas to capture scenes from this forgotten tradition, explaining its various nuances and acts with his brush.

Having spent more than 20 years living the rural life in a small village outside Hyderabad, Osman's palette is bright, gleaming much from the colourful garments and lifestyle of the village folk. His visual language is strong, his strokes bold and sure.

"To me the story behind a painting is not important," he explains. "It is the message the painting relays that is more important to me."

The artist says he has been fascinated by the 'gangireddu' as it forms an intrinsic part of life as he saw it when he lived in the village. "The kinds of feats a 'gangireddu' can perform are stunning. The ox can dance to the tune of its master's *nadaswaram*, it can nod at his command, it can shake its head in denial, kneel down and prostrate, bow down when asked to and even open its mouth and stretch out its tongue like its singing.

"Often you will see the 'gangireddu' stand on its master's chest and bow down, looking at him adoringly, as he sings the praises of a patron who has given him some money or food. These beasts are dedicated to their masters, and are possibly one of the least appreciated cultural phenomena in our country. Capturing them in all their glory on my canvas is nothing but my small tribute to them," Osman explains.

The artist has painted a number of canvasses showcasing this fascinating subject. He has painted them alongside Lord Krishna and Radha



and now, for his latest series of work titled 'Dance of the Bull' he has created a special series showcasing the feats they perform. ■

- Archana Shenoy

(The works will be on display at gallery g from 17th to 31st May 2019)

A MELANGE OF DIFFERENT ART AND HUES

Antonio Santin's surreal carpet



The 11th iteration of the India Art Fair was held at the NSIC grounds in Delhi, between February 1-3 with 75 galleries from India and abroad. Touted as India's pre-eminent art show, the exhibits were spread across three large halls with works by established progressives like Souza, Raza and Hussain and post-impressionists such as Amrita Sher-Gil. A-list international artists this year included Ai Weiwei, Icelandic Danish artist Olafur Eliasson and Idris Khan among others.

It was a melange that varied from realism to abstract, pop art to surrealism, photography, sculpture and performance art with over 1000 artists represented. There were also spaces for curated talks with artists, writers and gallerists as well as institutions showcasing museums and foundations.

"Art" is many things to many people and there was no better place to showcase this than the India Art Fair. Compared to its bohemian cousin, the Kochi Biennale, the IAF was positioned for the serious

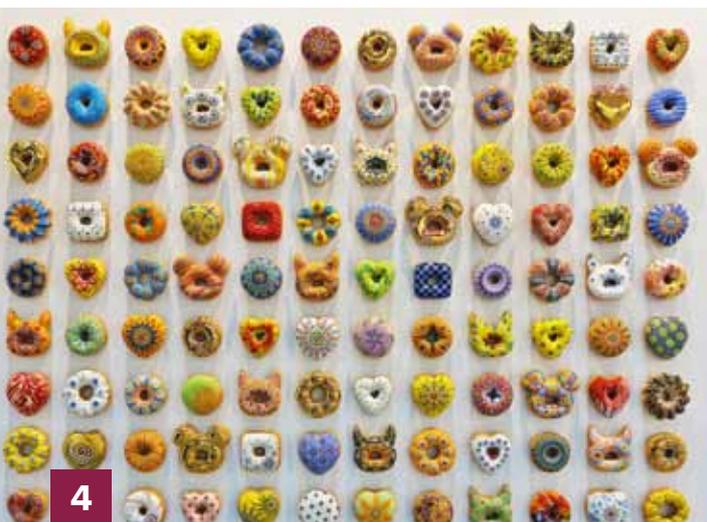
art aficionado/collector and set up to reflect a more commercially upscale ethos. If you are an artist of merit, you would want to be represented at this event. Rather than being overly critical, I am of the opinion that events like these help bring awareness to both visitors and participants.

We may certainly be subjective of our preferences but one cannot deny the diverse nature of art, from the mundane to the shocking. However, there is such a thing as being fatigued by excessive art and one has to be careful to avoid trying to take in more than one can, for fear of unjustly criticizing a piece that otherwise may not have earned your ire.

Edith Devaney, curator at the Royal Academy London, and Thomas Girst, head of Cultural Engagement at the BMW Group were in discussion about the artist David Hockney at the start of the first day at the Forum. Hockney recently exploded into the limelight when Christie's sold his painting at a record price



Abir Karmakar's realism
Below: *Donut Madness* by Jae Yong Kim



Dhananjay Singh
Untitled
26 x 18 x 27 inches
Stainless steel and bronze | 2018



Dhananjay Singh's works in Stainless steel and bronze



of \$90.3 million, becoming the most expensive work of art by a living artist sold at auction. Devaney, who has represented, curated and sat for Hockney, spoke of the artist's creative process, the time when he dealt with a low period in his life by inviting his friends to lunch and sit for him as he painted their portraits. Devaney was one of the people he invited to sit.

When I asked Devaney about how one puts a value to a painting, she answered



Vanity Fair by Tayeba Begum Lipi

with a shrug, "I really don't know. It's anybody's guess. It's something that artists themselves are not able to grapple with." Once the figures go as high as \$90 million for a painting, then, even when the same painting is finally sold at 100.2, that difference becomes somewhat irrelevant. In the end it is just an arbitrary figure like the \$450 million for the Salvator Mundi by Leonardo da Vinci, purchased after a telephone war by anonymous buyers. But in this case Hockney did not get any of this money, which seems unfair. There's a movement now to ensure that the artist is also benefited when a sale of such proportions happens, she said.

BMW's Art Car, an 8-series BMW painted by Hockney, was on display at the India Art Fair. Sequestered next to the BMW VIP lounge, it was fenced off by acrylic sheets. When he was first approached by BMW to paint the car, Hockney is said to have taken his time to decide. But when he finally agreed to do it, the imagery on the car shows his fascination for perspective and use of non-associative colours.

One artist's work which drew a lot of attention was Antonio Santin's surreal carpet, displayed at Galerie ISA. The painting stood out not just for its three dimensional appeal but also for the large crowd gathered in wonder: was it real or was it a painting? We were told the Madrid-born artist creates these carpets with art syringes connected to an air compressor



Miniature sculptures by Sudipta Das

Jay Varma is a gifted artist who combines a dramatic sense of colour with extraordinary detail and is equally brilliant at photography



machine, which squeezes out the paint using variable pressure. Like icing cones which create cake art, Santin creates an illusion of its warp and weft, right down to the tasseled fringe. The gallery representative told us he took four months to finish the 'painting' and that it was sold for Rs. 48 lakh to an Indian buyer.

That realism has a draw was reiterated in Abir Karmakar's work. The artist had his canvas stretched in the shape of a box, with a doorway cut into the centre. Realistic paintings of house interiors on either side of the doorway included a mirror reflecting a bedroom, a hand basin, an AC, a door with clothes hanging from hooks, the entry to a kitchen, all looking so uncannily realistic and which became selfie backdrops for students and visitors alike. And tucked away inconspicuously in a sidewall was a large watercolour by Hemendranath Majumdar done in the 1930's. Call me old school but it's still refreshing to see a well executed representational painting.

Bruno Art Gallery's pop art on display had quite a steady stream of visitors, who stopped, stared and took selfies. David Gerstein's layered metal laser cut-outs painted in bright and happy colours were a hit as was Donut Madness by Jae Yong Kim represented by Aicon Gallery, and Dhananjay Singh's "You Are Within Me-1" in copper, stainless steel and bronze.

'Vanity Fair' by Tayeba Begum Lipi, a Bangladeshi artist, had a suitcase, tank top, stilettos and boots made from stainless steel blades. She called it a comment on the commodification of art, fashion and the female body.

There is an opinion that most people don't know what art to buy or what is good vs. bad: they usually go by what the gallery promotes. Only a few informed collectors know what they want and stand by it. There were a few instances of it at the IAF, said a gallery representative, who was always ready to take prospective buyers on a walk through. ■

- Jay Varma



MUCH-VAUNTED, MUCH-VAULTED

The Nizam's Jewellery exhibition at the National Museum, curated by Sanjib Singh is a truly glittering visual treat, comprising about 173 pieces belonging to the Asif Jahi dynasty, dating back from the 18th century to the early 20th.

The collection was part of the last Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan Nizam's Jewellery and Supplemental Jewellery Trusts that he started as custodian of the family wealth, when Hyderabad joined the Indian Union. It was bought in 1995 by the Government of India for Rs. 218 crores, after much legal wrangling that began in 1972, as part of a process to acquire what the government considered as national treasures. When it finally did, the jewellery was moved to the Reserve Bank of India's Mumbai vaults.

This exhibition has been a huge draw, with Delhiites, out-of-towners and tourists flocking to see the display, if not as long as they'd probably like, since you're allowed only half-an-hour within the gallery's confines. The accompanying captions aren't the most user-friendly, though the foyer does have posters with archival photographs and more informative text that do provide context before you go in, an idea of what it must've been like to live in such blue-blooded opulence.

GILDED CIRCUMSTANCE

The pomp of court life then and, certainly, the jewellery's sheer magnificence was of a level that rises above the excesses we're confronted by now, which is more about scale rather than the discernment and the finesse which define the Nizam's collection.

The splendour is immediately compelling: the glittering stones, both precious and semi-precious: Golconda diamonds (the star of the show, the Jacob diamond, is South African), Colombian emeralds, Burmese rubies, and spinets and pearls from Basra, the latter also from our neighbouring Gulf of Mannar. Their settings are flawless, using among others, *minakari* and *kundan*, and the fastenings too, like the clasps, and, slightly later, the claw type.

On view are sets with *sarpeches* (turban ornaments), necklaces (including, the unmissable one with seven strings of pearls), belts and buckles, a pair of bracelets and bangles, earrings, armllets, toe rings, finger rings, pocket watch and watch chains, buttons and cufflinks. There are also 22 unset emeralds, almost worth a visit on their own.



WORTH ITS WAIT

When you look at the Jacob Diamond, all 184.75 carats (or about 37 grams) of it, a slight sense of unreality is inevitable. Purportedly twice as big as the Kohinoor diamond, there's very little else within our everyday frame of reference to compare it with. To heighten the storied outlandishness of it all, the diamond was apparently stored in a, hopefully otherwise unused, slipper, and the Nizam himself, Mir Osman Ali Khan used it as a paperweight. Even through the thick glass that encases it, what's as compelling as its sheer size is its radiance: all glacial facets lit as if from within, what Charles Revson, founder of Revlon Cosmetics, once called fire and ice.



With the Nizam's jewellery exhibition itself, though, it's been more a case of fire and cold storage, with the collection having been in the RBI vaults except when it was exhibited in 2007 and 2001 at Hyderabad's Salar Jung Museum. Exhibitions like these, typically, as historico-cultural showcases of an epoch's extravagances and refinements, throw contemporary preoccupations into relief. Apart from which, it's something of Halley's Comet as a viewing-op which, especially in our excessive, and excessively self-regarding times, makes this exhibition a must-see. ■

- Sonny Abraham



MALLAAHS

THE UNKNOWN STORY OF KUMBH

It was the February of Twenty Nineteen and the city of Allahabad opened its arms out to the millions who came to the Ardh Kumbh Mela during this month of the Aquarius (called Kumbh in Sanskrit).

Having only had a deep historical interest in religion, and not much by way of practice or belief, my travel to the Kumbh was a chapter of learning and of reconciliation. Simply put, the Kumbh Mela is the celestial time and place to purify oneself at the confluence of the three holiest of the Indian rivers. According to legend, the rivers wash away one's worldly impurity, like only a sacred river can.

A horizon of a sea of humanity, sighting one of the largest gatherings of people anywhere on earth, is easily overwhelming or as in my case, somehow magically isolating.



Shibu Arakkal is an award winning photo-artist who has practised his art for over 20 years, having exhibited extensively abroad and in India



Very soon, my knowledge on the subject seemed below par as I realised that the Saraswati, considered in Hindu mythology to be the holiest of all three rivers, doesn't physically exist anymore, although the confluence (of the three rivers) is still called the Triveni Sangam.

It is also believed that the river's only physical presence is a stream beneath a well existing inside the Allahabad Fort, which runs underground to join the Ganga and the Yamuna. Being present, in arguably, the most philosophic place on earth at that worldly time, I found myself drawn to the rivers, and profoundly to the people who traveled on it everyday.

A community of people called the Mallaahs, who for several hundred years have been the boatmen on the Ganga and the Yamuna and have handed down reins of their trade from father to son. Mallaah is derived from the Arabic word which means motion of moving like a bird's wing.

I was intensely drawn to the purpose of their lives, to ferry people back and forth on these rivers. These men: almost married to their boats. To live most of their lives on these wooden vessels, cooking food on it to washing their clothes, bonding with the menfolk and not to forget, sleeping countless nights on them.

It is almost as if they are born on these boats and just as possibly might breathe their last on it, all the while being away from their families and children!

My series of photographic artworks revolve around these very Mallaahs and a journey that is so relevant to the Kumbh story and that of these rivers. It is a reality I trace in relation to my own response and understanding of these people and to not try and interpret something that I might never understand.

My endeavour is to create from their very stark reality and present it from a sociological perspective that is complex, yet as much rooted to this land and waters as the sages themselves and the faith that binds them all. ■

*- Shibu Arakkal.
Summer, Twenty Nineteen*



Kumbh Mela (the festival of the sacred pitcher) is the largest peaceful congregation of pilgrims on Earth and plays a central spiritual role in the country, exerting a mesmerising influence on visitors. The event encapsulates the science of astronomy, astrology, spirituality, ritualistic traditions, social and cultural customs and practices. Held in four different cities – Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik every four years by rotation, it is a culturally diverse and spectacular festival.

Sandeep & Gitanjali Maini Foundation partnered with photo-artist Shibu Arakkal to record and preserve a slice of the Kumbh Mela that forms the crux of India's intangible cultural heritage.

ART TRENDS

INTRIGUING DEVELOPMENTS IN ART WORLD



A nude Mona Lisa, a lost Caravaggio, a once-in-a-lifetime experience at the Louvre and a London art gallery's bid to promote and celebrate a 100% women artists' exhibition. Well, Spring 2019 is turning out to be intriguing in the art world.

For years, art experts have been inconclusive about whether a particular drawing of a nude woman, bearing a striking resemblance to the Mona Lisa,

is a Leonardo da Vinci original.

The Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France (C2RMF), following a series of tests, has concluded that that the charcoal drawing identified as 'Monna Vanna' or the 'Nude Mona Lisa', is the work of great artist himself. Initially, it was believed to be his students' work, but this new finding puts to rest all speculation.

Meanwhile, researchers have proven that the left-handed da Vinci was actually ambidextrous. The Uffizi Gallery in Florence conducted an in-depth study of da Vinci's earliest known drawing, a 1473 landscape of the local Arno river valley and Montelup castle, and their findings has laid to rest questions about the Renaissance master's handedness. Researchers noted that the drawing features text that slants from right to left as well as left to right, indicating that the artist wrote equally well with both hands.

HIDDEN TREASURE

A chance discovery in an attic in a Toulouse home five years ago has revealed it to be an art treasure. The painting, dusty and damaged by water leak, has been identified as Italian artist Caravaggio's 'Judith And Holofernes'. Paris-based art appraiser Eric Turquin believes the work to have been completed in 1607.



The Caravaggio painting will go under the hammer in Toulouse on June 27 and is expected to fetch up to \$171 million. "This is the greatest painting I've ever found," said Turquin. "It's very violent. It's almost unbearable."

The legend goes that Judith was a widow from the city of Bethulia, under siege by the army of Assyrian general Holofernes. To save her city, she seduces the general in his tent before beheading him, as Caravaggio's intense painting depicts.



WINE & DINE AT THE LOUVRE

More from Paris. And yes, you don't have to be Beyonce and Jay Z to enjoy Mona Lisa's exclusive company.

The Louvre and Airbnb have teamed up to offer two lucky winners a private sleepover party at the museum. An exclusive dinner and drinks with Mona Lisa for company is part of this extraordinary deal. The once-in-a-lifetime offer is being given to a pair of guests who will spend the night in a pyramid-shaped bedroom beneath the real one at Paris's most famous museum. The two guests will dine beside the Venus de Milo as well as get to enjoy the Mona Lisa.

The special offer is part of the Louvre's celebrations of the 30th year of the inauguration of the pyramid entrance designed by the Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei. Though deemed an eyesore by many in Paris at the time, it has gone on to achieve iconic status.

100% WOMEN

Lack of female representation in the commercial art world isn't new despite the fact that women far outnumber men in art schools. In its annual report, the Freelands Foundation found that in 2017, women accounted for just 28 percent of the artists represented by London's galleries, and that only 5 percent represented men and women equally. Also, only 22 percent of solo shows in the city's non-commercial galleries were dedicated to female artists.

The Richard Saltoun Gallery in London is taking this issue head-on. The gallery launched a yearlong initiative called '100% Women,' for which it will dedicate the next 12 months of its exhibition to works by female artists. This includes art-fair presentations and a robust series of public events, including artist talks, film screenings, and digital exhibitions on the gallery website. ■

- Ravi Chakravarthy



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