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From New Delhi: India Art Fair

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From New Delhi: India Art Fair

By John Zarobell

February 26, 2013

Reviewing the India Art Fair provides one an opportunity to examine the ties that bind in the global art world. Fundamentally commercial enterprises, art fairs should be adaptable to any context. The trappings of the 2013 India Art Fair were very much the same as those held in New York or London, though there were strong regional trends running through it. As developing economies become an essential part of the now-global art world, the notion that they bring something new to the mix is obvious; the question is whether new dynamics of artistic production and experience are created, and through what particular means.

With almost one hundred booths occupying three tents, the India Art Fair resembled just about every other art fair that I have seen. Including numerous collateral events and a series hosting a parade of international speakers, this fair seemed nothing less than au courant, ambitious, and well organized. My favorite booth was Lakeeren, which presented a wonderful centerpiece by Nandita Kumar, *pOLymORpHic hUMansCApE* (2013), composed of a glass bottle housing an eco-utopia inside—half city, half nature—including a pair of very small video screens, each playing a daylong loop. The booth also featured Anita Dube's corner installation of assembled ceramic eyes and an array of artists represented by works in various media, including collaged text fragments. Another prominent contemporary booth, Nature Morte, boasted perhaps the strongest stable of artists, including Raqs Media Collective, Subodh Gupta, and Manisha Parekh, represented by a standout abstract painting, *Moments of Nostalgia* (2013). At Latitude 28 Gallery, a memorable drawing by the Pakistani artist Mohammed Zeeshan, *Silence Copy Copy* (2013), comprised a 10-foot-wide assembly of butterfly tracings in ink on paper so intimate and engaging that I forgot Damien Hirst ever took up the subject.

One novel aspect of the fair was the strong presentation of Indian modernist art at galleries such as Crayon Capital Art and Delhi Art Gallery. While I have seen a similar interest in modernism at other contemporary art fairs (such as Zona Maco in Mexico City last year), the number of key works at the India Art Fair by a range of masters, such as Ram Kumar and S.H. Raza, and the presentation of a curated retrospective of work by Jamini Roy at Dhoomimal Gallery were exceptional offerings at an event primarily devoted to contemporary art. The fair also included installations inside and out, creating a welcome range of experiences that broke up the repetitive rhythm of gallery booths. Many art fairs

have employed this strategy, but here Mahbubur Rahman's installation, composed of a massive pile of empty army boots and a car clad in repurposed boot leather, offered a particularly potent and complicated meditation on history and locality. Rahman's materials suggest a destructive experience of modernity—perhaps that of the artist's native Bangladesh, which only became independent in 1971 after a prolonged war with Pakistan. This brings one back to the question of what differentiates an Indian art fair from others, and the answer partly hinges upon historical contingency. What is India's particular history of modernism, and does this offer a new perspective on the art fair? As I left the fair grounds at the end of the day, the air was thick with smoke from the fires used for cooking and heating in Delhi; seen through the smoke, the fair invited reflection on the multiple and divergent paths to modernity.

Kiran-Nadar



Installation view, *A View To Infinity*, 2013. Courtesy of Nasreen Mohammadi and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

Kumar_polymorphic

Nandita Kumar. *pOLymORpHic hUMansCApE*, 2013; copper, acrylic, PCB components, raspberry pi, sensor, LCD videos; 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Lakereen Gallery, Mumbai.

The dual focus on modern and contemporary work brought to light not just India's strong painting tradition but also a culture in which modern pictorial impulses filter through other traditional practices, be they Buddhism, Hindu epics, or traditional craft.

Coinciding with the fair, a pair of exhibitions titled "Difficult Loves" and "Seven Contemporaries" at the Kiran Nadar Museum explored the legacy of Indian modernism and its relation to contemporary art. Temporarily housed in a mall, the museum was a serene haven, and its exhibitions were carefully wrought and beautifully installed. "Difficult Loves," organized by the director and chief curator Roobina Karode, included two exhibitions. The first was devoted to Amrita Sher-Gil, who was Frida Kahlo's almost exact contemporary and whose self-portraits equally challenge the dynamics of female self-representation and stake out new territory for artistic self-discovery. The second part was a comprehensive retrospective of Nasreen Mohammadi, an artist active in the 1960s and '70s, whose abstract drawings and photographs stand out as a flash of bold clarity and rich aesthetic experimentation, placing her well beyond her contemporaries in India. Paired with these works, "Seven Contemporaries" assembled a group of works by seven contemporary female artists. The exhibitions were revelatory—

elucidating and expanding existing conversations about the complexity of female experience.

An exhibition and series of performances at Khoj Workshop, titled “Auditions,” also took place that weekend, marking the culmination of an international residency. Set amid a lively neighborhood full of street vendors and buildings in various stages of dissolution, the organization was devised by artists as a platform for international collaboration in India. Artists from India, Taiwan, Italy, Poland, and South Africa presented sound installations and performances derived from their experiences living together in Delhi. Abhijeet Tambe incorporated conversations he had overheard and taped while walking around Delhi, while Malose Malahleha explored sounds produced on handmade Indian instruments. Both artists then remixed these sounds and used them to produce, in the first case, a black-box installation and, in the second, an installation of objects and video, featuring recorded noises. Tambe and Malahleha bring Delhi to life through innovative digital techniques that intersect with analog experiences of the city. Such frameworks allow both artists and viewers to discover how this particular context gives rise to another form of modernity, and indeed another kind of contemporary practice.

The India Art Fair took place from **January 31 through February 3, 2013** at the **NSIC Exhibition Grounds in Okhla, New Delhi, India.**

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