



IS ART HAVING AN

Unlike the Chinese, Indians have always spent big money on their own art. Now it's exciting collectors, galleries and museums around the globe, says Pernilla Holmes.



Main picture: Jitish Kallat, one of the new stars of the Indian art world, with his *Aquasaurus*, shot at Gallery Maskara in Mumbai. Inset: Raqib Shaw's *The Garden of Earthly Delights V*.

The journey from the centre of Mumbai to the suburb of Bandra is an education in the haphazard rhythms of the city. Impressive colonial buildings give way to acres of shanty slums, with street hawkers weaving between cars in the gridlocked traffic, and everywhere cows – Zen beings amid the chaos – wander free and snack on large piles of garbage.

All of which contrasts sharply with the smart, gated community my brightly painted old Ambassador taxi pulls into, in which Jitish Kallat (pictured left), one of the stars of the most vibrant, exciting new scenes in the contemporary art world, lives. With a big smile and the two-cheek kiss favoured by the art world, Kallat welcomes me into a subtly lit flat of breezy contemporary design, serves up a perfectly chilled white wine and sits down to eloquently discuss issues of identity and the “old India versus new India” conundrum he captures in his work.

“I think most artists working in so-called ‘enriched’ or ‘contaminated’ cultures like India thrive on the chaos,” says Kallat. “You have stimuli from all over, and this large gene pool of references plays out in the work.”

Educated, well-travelled and highly successful, Kallat is one of the new generation of Indian artists – led by key figures such as Subodh Gupta, Riyas Komu, Sudarshan Shetty and Bharti Kher – that the art world has honed in on as the next big thing. Over the next year in the UK alone the Serpentine Gallery, the new Saatchi Gallery and the so-called “Saatchi of the North” collector Frank Cohen will all or have all had major group shows of new Indian art, while solo shows by Indian artists are taking place at top commercial galleries such as Albion, Hauser & Wirth and Haunch of Venison in Zurich. The UK is but a microcosm of a major international trend – with collectors, galleries and museums as far-reaching as Beijing, Seoul, Dubai and New York all following suit. If Britart was a phenomenon in the 1990s, followed by the more recent craze for Chinese contemporary art, India is the next place onto which the international contemporary art world is collectively setting its sights.

“The Indian scene has grown dramatically,” says Francis Outred, senior director of contemporary art at Sotheby’s in London which, like Christie’s, has this summer included contemporary Indian artists such as Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher in its evening sale – an indicator of the auction house’s belief that prices will be rising (indeed, its July 1 sale saw Gupta’s *Untitled* from 2005 reach over £600,000 – more than double its highest pre-sale estimate). “The key issue here has been the sudden growth of European collectors such as Frank Cohen, Saatchi, Bernard Arnault and François Pinault,” says Outred. Sharmistha Ray, director of sales for India and Europe at India’s biggest and most affluent gallery, Bodhi Art, agrees: “Unlike the market for modern artists [artists now in their 80s and 90s] that was driven primarily by non-resident Indians living in America and elsewhere abroad, the contemporary market is being propelled by European collectors, with Chinese, Koreans, Japanese and Americans now coming into the fold.”

The broad international demand has led to rapid inflation in the prices of leading contemporary Indian artists. According to Ray, “Present prices for works by certain artists have multiplied by 50 times since 2000. The market went from being small, intimate and local to big, ambitious and of international focus. The prices are an indicator of the massive and sweeping changes that also mirror India’s place in the global economy.” As such, a work by Subodh Gupta – who has been referred to as the Damien Hirst of New Delhi – that cost €25,000 five years ago “would be worth about €250,000 now,” says Katie Rashid, director of Gupta’s New York gallery Jack Shainman. In private sales, Gupta’s larger-scale works have recently reached

the \$1m milestone, and he recently signed on to work with Hauser & Wirth gallery in London.

Inevitably, such a surge of interest brings speculation to the market. Even during my own short visit, foreign collectors and art advisers, keen to discover the next Hirst, were heavy on the ground, making studio visits and lurching gallery directors to ensure being offered works. Both New York’s Museum of Modern Art and The Guggenheim had sent trustee groups over in that week alone.

According to Cohen, a well-established collector who recently held a much-lauded Indian contemporary show at his Wolverhampton-based foundation, “There are so many people chasing this art. If you get offered a piece you have to be quick, or they’ll sell it to someone else. My guess is that the prices are going to go through the roof.” Probably owing to the newness of the market, few truly major works have yet come up at auction. Nonetheless, there have been some impressive sales. In 2007, a painting by Raqib Shaw (who now lives in London and is represented by White Cube) fetched a record-breaking £2.7m at Sotheby’s, London. In May of this year Gupta’s painting *Saat Samunder Paar VII* (2003) achieved \$825,000 (about £422,000) at Sotheby’s New



York, a record at the time for the artist at auction against a pre-sale estimate of \$500,000-\$700,000.

Gupta may be India’s brightest star now but he has competition at home. His wife, British-born Bharti Kher, also achieved a record for her own sales when her painting *Landscape (triptych)* (pictured overleaf), executed in 2007, fetched £198,500 against a pre-sale estimate of £40,000 to £60,000 at Phillips de Pury in London. Jack Shainman Gallery also represents Kher and, according to Rashid, retail prices for her work reach “several hundred thousand euros”.

So why India? Certainly, the growing importance of the country in world economics has drawn new attention to all aspects of Indian culture but, beyond that, it seems to be the political views and socioeconomic shifts in the country, as articulated by its artists in a broad range of media, that have collectors and curators so intrigued. Many of the artists deal with the vivid contrasts between the crumbling old infrastructures of the country and its rapid economic modernisation. According to Kallat, “In a way, it’s this chaos that has come to symbolise this nation, and art comes from those moments of infrastructure breakdown, where anything can happen.”

“There has been a seismic shift in the art world,” says Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions and programmes at London’s Serpentine Gallery and a highly influential figure among international curators. “In the international context, some of the most interesting work being made today is coming from India.” According

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to Julia Peyton-Jones, the Serpentine's director, "We were impressed by the political activism in the works we have seen, and with how artists are negotiating the past with the rapidly changing present."

A case in point is Kallat's *Aquasaurus* (pictured on opening page) which was recently exhibited at Haunch of Venison's Zurich gallery – a life-size reconstruction of the sort of water-tank trucks that drive around both cities and the countryside of India giving out drinking water in times of drought. Kallat's version is a skeleton of resin bones, dramatically spotlighted as if in a natural history museum to indicate its rapid antiquation in the fast-changing culture.

But it's the artists whose works most readily translate to other cultures that so far are most successful. Kher is best known for her swirling, abstract paintings which she constructs out of bindis, the traditionally red dots painted on women's foreheads as a signifier of class and marriage, now mass-produced in a variety of colours in stick-on form as a trendy accessory for young Indian women. Ripe with feminist and social critique connotations, the works rival Hirst's *Butterfly* paintings in terms of sheer beauty. Kher's sculptures are equally eye-catching. At Art Basel in 2007 she exhibited a life-size sculpture of an elephant, covered in bindis and lying down on the floor (pictured on next page) – either dead or sleeping, depending on your interpretation. "The elephant is like a symbol of old India," says Kher at her Delhi studio, "weighed down by the consumerism of the new."

Examining identity from a more personal perspective is Mithu Sen, who currently has a show at Albion Gallery in London (until August 15), where her works sell from £5,000 to £30,000. Sen's studio in Mumbai is packed with paints, pencils, photographs, glitters and stuffed animals – which she introduces as her family. Since all perceptions of the world "are subjective anyway", she has decided to reconstruct a new and more fantastic reality through her work. "When I was growing up my skin was darker than my mother's or sisters', and darkness was considered ugly," says Sen, hinting at how her reconstructions began. "Now I've chosen to see things differently." Most exquisite, despite their streaks of violence, are her works on paper,



in which hand-drawn or painted figures are embellished with magazine clippings, photos and other trappings.

Also particularly hot at the moment are artist team Thukrul & Tagra, represented by the Nature Morte gallery in Delhi, who mix design, video, furnishings and paintings together in their work, often highlighting social issues. Their 2007 New York show, for example, was devoted entirely to the subject of Aids. Other noteworthy artists include Sudarshan Shetty, Jagannath Panda, TV Santhosh, Atul Dodiya, Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Chitra Ganesh, Raqs Media Collective and Riyas Komu – a multimedia artist represented by The Guild Gallery in Mumbai, who recently exhibited a series of sculptures and paintings of the Iraqi football team, who were dispersed around various Arab nations for their own safety after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

With all its striking new talents and investment possibilities, the Indian market is often compared to the Chinese art boom that began in the late 1990s, and for which prices have now reached up to \$5m. But the differences are significant. Unlike China, where artistic development was effectively put on hold for 50 years during the Communist regime,

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India has a rich and proud history of visual arts in the 20th century. In particular, the market for the modernists – such as Husain, Raza and Souza, who began making their names in the 1950s – has exploded in recent years, with prices regularly reaching into the dollar-millions. Unlike in China where the market was and still is driven almost solely by foreign collectors, Indians, both resident and expat, have always spent big money on art. But works by Indian artists are now attracting increasing global interest.

And with the current economic boom, many more can now afford to. According to *Forbes*, there were just nine Indian dollar-billionaires in

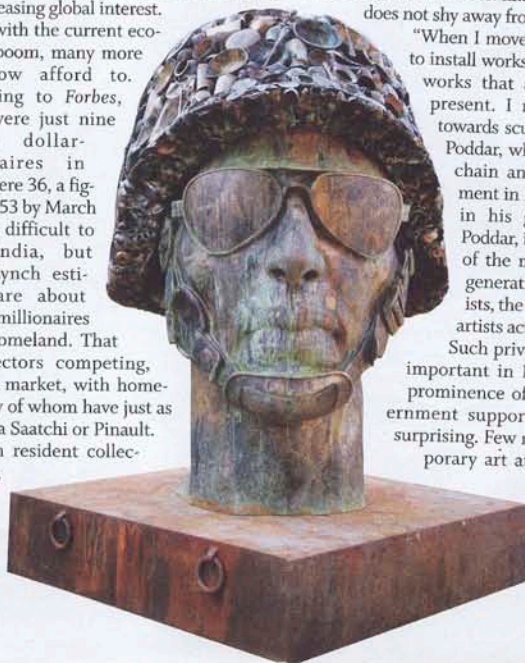
2004. By 2007 there were 36, a figure which had risen to 53 by March this year. Figures are difficult to estimate within India, but Capgemini/Merrill Lynch estimates that there are about 150,000 Indian dollar-millionaires living outside their homeland. That leaves western collectors competing, unlike in the Chinese market, with home-grown collectors, many of whom have just as much financial heft as a Saatchi or Pinault.

Chief among Indian resident collectors is Anupam Poddar, whose sprawling modernist estate in a wealthy suburb of Delhi would impress

even the richest denizen of Beverly Hills. One room is filled with a full-size sculpture of a car by Sudarshan Shetty (who is represented by the Guild Gallery, Mumbai), while another houses a cow-dung shack built by Subodh Gupta – the sort of house that poor villagers live in. On his vast, dark-wood dining room table is a 13-part sculpture, *Blood Wedding*, by Anita Dube, which is made of human bones covered in red velvet and made to look like decorative pieces. Clearly he does not shy away from difficult subjects.

"When I moved back to India, I was looking to install works that were of my generation – works that articulated concerns of the present. I realised that I leaned more towards sculpture and installations," says Poddar, who owns the Devi Garh resort chain and studied business management in London. Collecting is perhaps in his genes. His mother, Lekha Poddar, is renowned for her collection of the modern Indian artists of her generation – the Bengal School artists, the Progressives and other Indian artists active in the 1980s.

Such private patronage is exceedingly important in India. Given the mounting prominence of its artists, the lack of government support for contemporary art is surprising. Few museums show any contemporary art at all and India was offered a National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, but declined to participate. (Venice is like the Olympics of



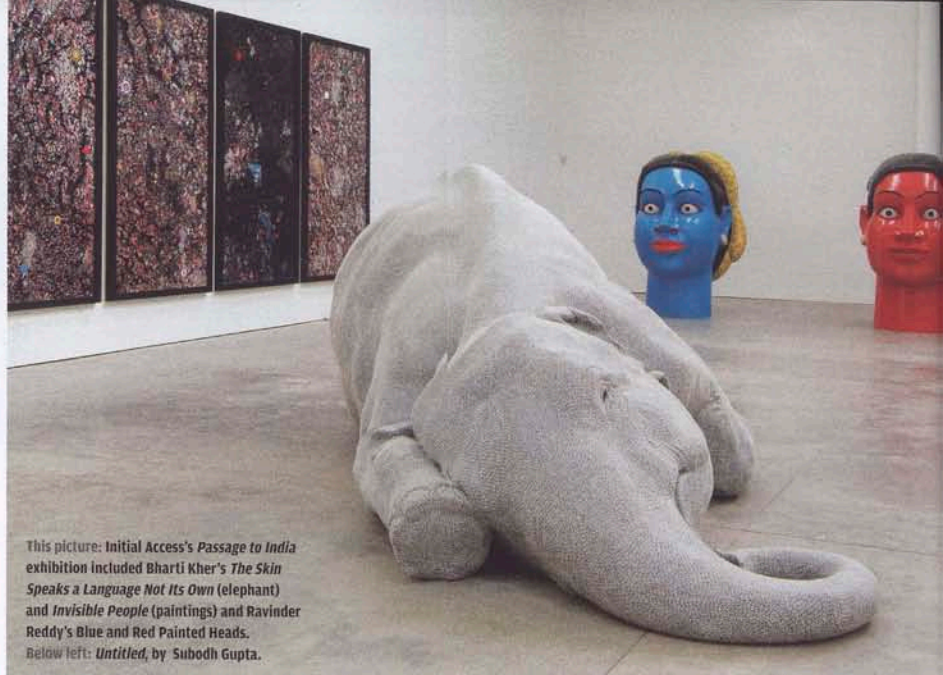
the art world – even relatively small countries such as Albania and Lithuania have pavilions.)

“There is definitely a dearth of public institutions that are supported by the government to promote young artists,” says Poddar, who this month opens his own museum, the Devi Art Foundation (the inaugural show *Still Moving Image* opens on August 31), aimed at supporting emerging talents. “We will be the first not-for-profit foundation in India created for this purpose, but we hope many more will join the field.”

In the meantime, the influence of international money is being felt. According to Mortimer Chatterjee, co-owner of one of Mumbai’s hippest young galleries, Chatterjee & Lal, “There are concerns in some cases about artists seeing what collectors like Saatchi are buying, and then mimicking the styles so that he’ll buy their work too.” Poddar agrees: “While attention on the Indian art scene means that artists are forced to push the boundaries of their practice, it also means that often work begins to look repetitive or formulaic in an effort to garner international recognition.”

Indeed, it’s often the case in art that for every original and outstanding voice, there are many more imitators, though both may be bought by speculators in a feverish market. Picking the right artists can be tricky, especially for collectors buying from jpeg images thousands of miles from where the art is being made. To avoid mistakes, many are enlisting the help of art advisers renowned for their eye and with expertise in the Indian art world, such as (in London) Amelie von Wedel and Arianne Levene. “Proper research is essential,” Wedel advises new collectors. “One must travel there to really understand and get a feel for the work. Also there are a number of internet sites now which will help give guidelines as to correct prices.”

Visitors to India will find a thriving, if relatively small, gallery community for contemporary art centred on Delhi and Mumbai. Among the best in Delhi are Nature Morte (widely considered the best respected), Vadehra Art Gallery and Gallery Espace. Mumbai’s more vibrant scene includes the Chemould gallery, Chatterjee & Lal,



This picture: Initial Access's *Passage to India* exhibition included Bharti Kher's *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own* (elephant) and *Invisible People* (paintings) and Ravinder Reddy's *Blue and Red Painted Heads*. Below left: *Untitled*, by Subodh Gupta.

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Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, the Sakshi Gallery, Project 88 and The Guild. Bodhi Art, which is somewhat like the Gagosian of the Indian art world, has galleries in Mumbai, New York and Singapore, and has just opened one this spring in Berlin.

But how are sales reacting to the current economic climate? For, despite dealers' and auctioneers' rigidly fixed smiles and protests to the contrary, recent downturns are inevitably creating jitters in the until now ebullient contemporary art market. However, the situation is not comparable to, for example, the early 1990s, when the exorbitant prices being fetched for western art were for works sold to a relatively small pool of American, European and Japanese collectors. Fuelled by a broad and international range of artists and collectors, today's art market might be more favourably compared with property: one area can be climbing in value while another drops. “Indian artists are still relatively undervalued compared to artists of the western market,” says Yamini Mehta, head of modern and contemporary Indian art at Christie's London, “and just looking at the demographic of potential buyers, there is so much wealth in that region and they want to support their heritage.”

So for now at least, the Indian contemporary market appears to be on the up. Peter Nagy, owner of the Nature Morte gallery, sells out all shows of his well-known artists “about a month in advance of their exhibitions,” and has waiting lists of those wishing to buy works. And interest from all factions of the art community appears to be growing. Nagy grumbles (though one suspects with some satisfaction) that the number of international curators, museum trustee groups, collectors and press parading through artist studios is getting out of control. “I mean, honestly,” he says with exasperation, “when are the artists supposed to make their work?” ♦

STARS OF INDIA

GALLERIES IN THE UK/EUROPE: **Aicon Gallery**, 8 Heddon St, London W1 (020-7734 7575; www.aicongallery.com). **Albion Gallery**, 8 Hester Rd, London SW11 (020-7801 2480; www.albion-gallery.com); for Mithu Sen (exhibition until Aug 15) and Jitish Kallat. **Haunch of Venison Zurich**, Lessingstr 5, 8002 Zurich (0043-422 8888); for Jitish Kallat. **Hauser & Wirth**, 196A Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7287 2300; www.hauserwirth.com); for Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher. **Initial Access**, Frank Cohen Collection, Units 19 and 20 Calibre Industrial Park, Laches Close, Four Ashes, Wolverhampton WV10 7DZ (01902-790 419; www.initialaccess.co.uk). **Saatchi Gallery**, The Duke of York's HQ, King's Rd, London SW3 (www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk). **Serpentine Gallery**, Kensington Gdns, London W2 (020-7402 6075; www.serpentinegallery.org). **White Cube**, 48 Hoxton Square, London N1 (020-7930 5373; www.whitecube.com); for Raqib Shaw. **DELHI:** **Devi Art Foundation**, Sirpur House, 10-11, Sector 44 Behind Apparel House, Gurgaon, Delhi 122001 (009111-4166 7373; www.deviartfoundation.org). **Gallery Espace**, 16 Community Centre, New Friends Colony, New Delhi 110065 (009111-2632 6267; www.galleryespace.com). **Nature Morte**, A-1 Neeti Bagh, New Delhi 110049 (009111-4174 0215; www.naturemorte.com); for Mithu Sen, Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta, Thukrul & Tagra, Raqs Media Collectives, Jagannath Panda. **Vadehra Art Gallery**, D-178, Okhla Phase 1, New Delhi 110020 (00911165-474 005; www.vadehraart.com). **MUMBAI:** **Bodhi Art**, 28 K Dubash Marg, ITTS House, Kalaghoda, Mumbai 400001 (009122-6610 0124; www.bodhiart.in) and branches; for Riyas Komu, Atul Dodiya, Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Reena Saini Kallat. **Chatterjee & Lal**, 01/18 Kamal Mansion, Floor 1, Arthur Bunder Road, Colaba, Mumbai 400005 (009122-6521 5105; www.chatterjeeandlal.com). **Chemould**, Chemould Prescott Rd, Queens Mansion, G Talwalkar Marg Fort, Mumbai 400001 (009122-2200 0211; www.gallerychemould.com); for LN Tallur, Jagannath Panda, Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta. **The Guild**, 28 B Pipewala Building, 58/70 Shahid Bhagat Singh Road, Colaba, Mumbai 400005 (www.guildindia.com); for Sudarshan Shetty, TV Santhosh, Riyas Komu. **Mirchandani and Steinruecke**, Sunny House, 16/18 Mereweather Rd, Colaba, Mumbai 400001 (009122-2202 3030; www.galeriems.com). **Project 88**, BMP Building, NA Sawant Marg, Colaba, Mumbai 400005 (009122-2281 0066; www.project88.in). **Sakshi Gallery**, Tanna House, 11a Nathalal Parekh Marg, Colaba, Mumbai 400001 (009122-6610 3424; www.sakshigallery.com); for Riyas Komu, Shilpa Gupta, TV Santhosh. **NEW YORK:** **Jack Shainman**, 513 West 20th St, New York, NY 10011 (001212-645 1701; www.jackshainman.com); for Subodh Gupta. **AUCTIONS:** **Christie's**, www.christies.com; New York sale of South Asian Modern & Contemporary Art, Sept 16. **Phillips de Pury & Co**, www.phillipsdepuryc.com; London selling exhibition of Contemporary Indian Art, Nov 24-13 Dec. **Saffron Art**, www.saffronart.com; contemporary Indian art. **Sotheby's**, www.sothebys.com; New York sale: Modern & Contemporary Indian Art, Sept 18, Indian & South-East Asian Art, Sept 19. **ART ADVISERS:** **Amelie von Wedel**, 020-8964 2277; www.wedelfineart.com. **Arianne Levene**, www.newartworld.co.uk.

