

Standing Tall

This year at the buzzing Art Dubai, we use the South Asian presence as a marker to reflect upon events which have just elapsed and to weigh in on the promise of those to come.

Art is often grouped under a regional head: Middle Eastern, African, and most recently, Central Asian. At this year's Art Dubai, there was no demarcated zone for South Asian art, but for reasons I talk about later, the regional angle was frontal in my mind, so I decided to look at it from that lens. Participating countries were India and Pakistan, with a total of around thirty artists, numbers divided equally between both, shown by galleries from across India, Europe and USA. For Karachi-based Art Chowk, the only gallery at the fair which was physically based in Pakistan, this was the first year at Art Dubai. Madrid-based emerging space Sabrina Amrani is the first gallery in Spain representing Pakistani artists, for the moment, working with a roster of three, building on.

Art Dubai has been remarkably savvy in its business strategy, innovating year after year for optimal participation and return. This year, in addition to the usual Contemporary section, there was a Modern section which displayed works by modern masters from Middle East and South Asia. The genre is not standard art fair ware, so it was a welcome addition, adding perspective to the fair's timeline. Out of the eleven galleries in the Modern section, four showed works by sub-continental heavy weights, namely Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Anwar Jalal Shemza, Rasheed Araeen, Syed Sadequain and M.F.Hussain.

In the Contemporary section, the range of works ran the whole gamut, from Anish Kapoor's shiny metallic concaves to works of sobering poise by Waqas Khan, scaling the checklist of expected names like Shazia Sikander, Rashid Rana and Naiza Khan. Among the classiest ones was Kolkata-based Experimenter Gallery's solo of Montreal-based Hajra Waheed, raised in Saudi Arabia and of Indian extraction. The series is called 'Sea Change': an under-stated, imaginative curation of sets of souvenirs and memorabilia. Fictitious characters go beyond their destiny to unknown territories of being, and report back through the physicality of found objects, dreamscapes, and penned words presented as viewfinders, collages, and framed love letters. This year, the range of abstract geometric compositions made a convert of me; I could no longer walk indifferently past them, and I learnt to appreciate the deep quiet at their core. There were works by Waqas Khan, Bharti Kher shown by Gallery SKE, Sara Salman by Dubai-based Grey Noise. Waqas Khan, also a nominee for this year's Jameel Prize at the Victoria and Albert Museum, was a breath of fresh air. Still green, and new to the etiquette of the art world, he hasn't yet taken on the ego-bruising postures of industry veterans. With a mixture of pride and disbelief, he accompanied me to the Krinzinger Gallery's booth, where his black and white work was in great company, sandwiched between the self-portraits of the celebrity trickster Marina Abramovic and the diaphanous photograms of the Saudi artist Maha Malluh.

Another artist who struck up consistent excitement was the USA-based Simeen Farhat whose wall-mounted sculptures of speech tumbles in Urdu, English and Arabic were shown by London-based Kashya

Hildebrand. Words, phrases, and speech fragments in three languages are sculpted in resin, and then attached atop one another, held in place by button-like screws in an arrangement resembling a careless tossing together of whispers. The final piece sits on the wall like a protruding batter-fried word ball, but looking prettier than it sounds. India's Tasveer had a stunning range of photographs by Maimoona Gueressi, an artist who converted to Islam following a trip to North Africa. Composed in a palette of deep colours, the pictures were woven around mystical themes, shot through with leitmotifs of Sufi symbols. Two galleries from India, Chemould Prescott Road, and the husband-wife venture Chatterjee and Lal both showed four works by Rashid Rana from the series 'In Transliteration'. The works were in Rashid's usual idiom of post-modernist style deconstruction and reconstruction. Four seminal works by Renaissance masters were digitally deconstructed and the pixels reconstituted in a strange new continuous image but with an inverted balance of the actors in the picture, the visual perspective and perhaps, very subtly, of the hegemony of Western art as a vantage point for 'seeing'.

To sum up the impact of the South Asian presence at Art Dubai, then, there was nothing predictable or deductible about the range of works on offer here. The works stood dignified, assured and secure in an artistic practice coming of age in a post-Google world where geography and boundaries become increasingly morphous and fluid.

Looking Ahead: A Growing Regional Dynamism in South Asian Art

A little more than a month before Art Dubai, two art events had wrapped up elsewhere in South Asia: the Dhakka Art Summit in its second edition, and the Colombo Art Biennale in its third edition. Both events had a strategic importance for two reasons: they both had a sharp regional focus, and they both challenged the narrow representation of South Asia, doomed so far to being a trio of players. There are countries from South Asia which have, quite literally, never raised their heads out of water in the art scene, like Nepal, and Myanmar, and remain conveniently absent from view and thought. However, this year at the Dhakka Art Summit, galleries from Nepal and Myanmar participated. Too often, not just the international media, but South Asians themselves are guilty of reducing the value of the region to the three better known players in a frustratingly predictable hierarchy. Time and again, it has been proved that South Asia's biggest problem is not a lack of talent, but access to better exposure.

Sure enough, countries which have been under-represented so far await just a timely connection to set themselves off. Post-Dhakka Art Summit, Bangladesh has received a nudge in the right direction. In terms of content and drive, Bangladesh's scene has some interesting initiatives cooking. There are several artist collectives of the DIY genre, better known among them the Britto Arts Trust. In the words of Rajeeb Samdani, founder of Samdani Foundation which organized the Dhakka Art Summit, 'What you see in mainstream media coverage is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many Brittos that the world doesn't know about yet.' In comparison, the scene in Sri Lanka is 'still very nascent', to quote Annoushka Hempel, founder and director of the Colombo Biennale. 'Art is still regarded as a very low activity. The

only serious interest at the level of curiosity and collection is shown by expatriate Sri Lankans, who understand the value of art because of their exposure abroad, and then return home to show their support in some manner.' Unlike in Bangladesh, where photography has long held roots and conceptually, the works are intense and engaging, in Sri Lanka, the engagement with art is still very rudimentary. The country's long drawn civil war came to an end after twenty-six years in 2009, and only for the third edition of the Colombo Art Biennale this February, the Ministry of Culture showed support through funding, a feat the organizer hadn't expected to achieve until the 2016th edition. But there is little or no grassroots activity or other creator-driven action, the real fuel of a country's creative engine.

To add to the regional fever gaining force, there was a buzz at Art Dubai about upcoming biennales in Lahore and Karachi. Rumours about the first remain unconfirmed, but we caught up with Art Chowk's Camilla Chaudhary who is involved with the planning of the Karachi Biennale. She has recently been hopping continents and is fresh off participating in a string of international art fairs with lessons learnt, resolved to 'get the world to come to Pakistan to experience the Karachi Biennale. There is phenomenal work being done in creative pockets. It is small in quantity but huge in quality. I want to showcase that to counter the drab media coverage that Pakistan routinely receives.' Reactions among gallerists, artists, and audiences to rumours of the biennales ranged from barely disguised skepticism to guarded expectancy. Will she pull it off? As ambitious as it sounds, a cultural landmark like the Biennale would not be without precedent; the Literary Festivals of Lahore and Karachi have lessons in vision, execution and sustainability for those who're willing to heed.

Looking away from mainstream events to alternative coalitions, creative collaborations exist between member countries of South Asia. At the Dhakka Art Summit this February, a book was launched by the SANA (South Asian Network for the Arts). The book is the culmination of a 6-year collaborative project between artist-led initiatives (all members of the Triangle Network) from four member countries: Britto Arts Trust, Bangladesh; Theerta Artists Collective, Sri Lanka; Khoj, India and VASL in Pakistan. More than what we saw of South Asia this year at Art Dubai, it's exciting to think about what we're about to see very soon, and how this space will grow in the coming year or two. Although the distance covered by regional events and initiatives preceding Art Dubai wasn't reflected fully in the region's presence at the fair yet, the most important steps have been taken: an ownership of the representation of the region, and the shift from a passive mindset to an active and empowered one.

- *Naima Rashid*