

BOOMBAY

The explosion of the megalopolis that aspires to become one of the most important theatres of contemporary art in Asia and not only... a journey inside its art galleries.

By Maria Teresa Capacchione

Walking around Bombay (or Mumbai) is a unique experience, be it good or bad, but anyway unique. It is as if one were both Alice wandering around in Wonderland and Dante being led into the inferno. If you take just a few steps down any street in the centre, perhaps passing the stately Taj Mahal (the hotel), you have the feeling that you are walking around on the set of *The Name of the Rose*, or *The Fifth Element*: from scenes of abject misery you pass to corners of modernity, all within metres of each other.

The same thing may happen when you enter the contemporary art galleries: you encounter endless problems when looking for one - the taxi driver may succeed in taking you to the complicated address that you have given him, and when he lets you out of the car you think... 'no, this must be wrong, the gallery I'm looking for can't be here!' You may find you are in a street full of potholes lined by crumbling buildings with dangerous stairs, but when you arrive in front of an imposing door, you open it and ... a miracle: Bombay possesses some of the most beautiful, sophisticated and charming galleries in the world!

Of course, we are talking about 20 galleries in a megalopolis of 20 million inhabitants, (the metropolitan area of Bombay is one of the most densely-populated places on the planet), but only talking about the statistics does not do justice to the complexity of this "maximum city"*.

Just think that up to six or seven years ago there were half this number of galleries and four more have been opened in the last year. This gives an idea of the rate in which Bombay is growing: driven by relentless economic growth, especially since the opening up of markets in 1991 that has made the city the economic capital of India, Bombay generates 5% of the country's GDP, accounts for 25% of industrial output, 40% of maritime trade and 70% of capital transactions in the Indian economy. Not to mention the Bollywood industry that generates 2 billion euro a year. Incredible development indeed, paralleled by the urban growth after the construction boom in the 70s'.

Thus, in the last ten years, Bombay has radically changed its appearance and though it has always been a city in great economic as well as cultural ferment, today this ferment is even more tangible.

The reasons for the changes and rapid acceleration the art world has undergone should not be seen in economic terms alone, as one might be led to think, but also in political and cultural terms. **Shireen Gandhi** - one of the most authoritative actors on the Bombay art scene and owner of the beautiful *Chemould Prescott Road* gallery which was inaugurated in 2007 at its present site, an evolution of one of India's historic galleries, the *Chemould Gallery* which was created by her parents in 1963 – speaks of how the demolition of the Babri to Ayodhya Mosque in 1992, which led to riots in which over 2 thousand people died (mostly Moslems), has influenced the Indian contemporary art scene and that city in particular. It was such a devastating and violent event that it made the artists reconsider the way in which they expressed themselves, driving them to look for more powerful media and forms which were better suited as a language for contemporary life. In this way, artists began to use new media, experimenting with photography, video and installations. Until we come to 2004-2005, the years that

were to mark contemporary art “surpassing” modernism. Also in terms of the *Progressive Artists Group* founded in 1947 by [K.H. Ara](#), S. Bhakre, [M.F. Husain](#), [H.A. Gade](#), [S.H. Raza](#) and [F.N. Souza](#), Bombay has been the epicentre of this transformation.

Another change that has consolidated contemporary art in Mumbai - and which differentiates it from New Delhi - has been the spontaneous creation of a “contemporary district” in a circumscribed area in the south of the city. For a megalopolis and its enormous traffic and transportation problems, this was a keenly felt necessity and a turning point. Over the last few years, galleries have been concentrated between the areas of Colaba and Fort and they have supported each other reciprocally. Another characteristic of the city is that gallery owners do not see the founding of new galleries as a threat and increased competition, but - as Shalini Sawhney, the owner of the *Guild Art Gallery* sustains - an opportunity to aid the growth of collecting. After all, in a city with a dearth of museums and public institutions dedicated to art, especially contemporary art, galleries also have the role of filling a vacuum, becoming meeting places and almost museums themselves. In fact, at openings there are more and more lectures being held, an occasion for artists, the public, collectors and critics to meet and discuss art. As Arshiya Lokhandwala – the owner of the *Lakeeren* that, after being closed for six years, reopened in 2009 moving from the north of the city to the new contemporary district – sustains that the social role of galleries in Bombay is fundamental in supporting and maintaining the work of artists.

Some of the newer galleries have been founded logistically prepared for this: it is the case of the brand new *Volte* gallery (founded in September 2009), that is in a beautiful loft in the same building as the *Guild* and which boasts a cafeteria and space to hold meetings and debates and the *BMB* that, besides a bookshop and cafeteria, has a space dedicated to conferences.

Amongst the new galleries there is the recently inaugurated *Matthieu Foss Gallery* owned by the Frenchman Matthieu Foss who had already moved to Bombay in 2005 to open a space that was exclusively devoted to photography. Matthieu has seen the artistic scene of the city totally change over these last five years: “when I came to Bombay, there were very few photographers and my position was considered a niche, today many galleries exhibit photographers too and there is a much more widespread sensibility toward photography even amongst young people.” In Bombay today there is a flourishing array of young collectors that actively follows the city’s art scene and has given a boost to contemporary art.

Following the evolution the programming of galleries has undergone over the years is also interesting and it may be seen as a sign of the changes happening: if it was very rare for a Non-Indian artist to find space in Bombay up until three or four years ago, today there are many galleries that alternate exhibits of Indian artists with exhibits of artists from neighbouring countries - for instance, there is great interest in the Pakistani art scene, for obvious reasons - and that of the West. Although it is true that Indian collectors are proud to support their own artists, there is increasing space for foreigners and some galleries – like the fascinating *Gallery Maskara* that stands in a cotton ex-warehouse and the sophisticated *Sakshi* - stimulate the comparison and exchange between artists coming from all over the world.

* *“Maximum City. Bombay città degli eccessi”* is the title of the book by Suketu Mehta published in Italy in 2006 by Einaudi.

Photos and description



Chemould Prescott Road



Gallery Maskara

Information about galleries cited:

Chemould Prescott Road

Queens Mansion | 3rd Floor
G. Talwatkar Marg
Fort, Mumbai 400 001
Email art@gallerychemould.com
www.gallerychemould.com

Gallery BMB

Queens Mansion
GT Marg, Near Cathedral School
Fort, Mumbai 400 001
Email info@gallerybmb.com
www.gallerybmb.com

Gallery Maskara

6/7, 3rd Pasta Lane,
Colaba, Mumbai 400 050
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www.gallerymaskara.com

Lakeeren

6/18, Grants Bldg, 2nd Floor,
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Matthieu Foss Gallery

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Sakshi Gallery

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The Guild

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