

## THE CHEMOULD, LOOKING GREAT AT FIFTY

SEPTEMBER 2013 THE CHEMOULD, THE HISTORIC INDIAN MODERN ART GALLERY, IN PRESCOTT ROAD MUMBAI IS CELEBRATING FIFTY YEARS. SHIREEN GANDHY TELLS THE STORY

*by Maria Teresa Capacchione*

This story is one that needs to be told because it is a love story; a story about the love of the art, the artists and the culture of a country. To tell us about the journey is Shireen, the heir of the historic Gandhi family of Mumbai, as the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the gallery by her parents, Kekoo and Khorshed, gets underway.

The story actually has even older roots; in 1941 Kekoo Gandhi was the owner of the Chemical Moulding Manufacturing Company (which later became the Chemould), which produced picture frames. Even then, his passion was not limited to making frames for works of art: he loved discovering young talent, to meet new artists, inviting them to his house, and buy their works when they were still completely unknown in order to support and encourage their work. This was how, for example, he ran into a young artist whom he saw painting seascapes on the seafront at Bandra in Mumbai and bought six of his paintings for 600 rupees. The young painter was SH Raza, the future founder of the Modernist movement in India.

Kekoo and his wife Khorshed therefore have been a crucial link between artists and collectors, critics and patrons since the 40s. Thus, in 1947 - the year of India's independence – when the Avant-garde Movement was founded in Mumbai by the artists FN Souza, MF Husain, SH Raza, KH Ara, S Bakre and HA Gade, which goes by the name of the Bombay Progressive Group, considered as being "anarchist" and criticized by many, the space Kekoo Gandhi provided became the only place where many of them could exhibit their transgressive art.

It was in this context, in 1963, where there were hardly any public or private spaces dedicated to art in the subcontinent, that Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi decided to open their gallery; a small space only measuring 300 square metres (of which only 180 could be used for exhibitions) located on the first floor of the Jehangir Art Gallery in Kala Ghoda, at the very centre of the metropolis's cultural life. When the Gandhys started down this road, their vision was to create a place that celebrated the art of their time, promoting young talents to show art that would touch people and become an integral part of their lives. This was, and has remained, the spirit of the Chemould during the first half-century of its life.

In 2007, Shireen Gandhi – who had joined the gallery in 1988 after gaining a degree in art management from City University in London and would go on to become its director - took the important decision to transfer the gallery from its small premises to the nearby Queen's Mansion

building in Prescott Road, renaming it the Chemould Prescott Road Gallery. The space was quintupled; from the 300 sqm of the old gallery to the 1,500 sqm of the magnificent premises in the Fort neighbourhood.

It was the period of the economic boom and the gallery needed to keep pace with the times, the works of art themselves made change necessary as experiments with new media needed larger spaces that were ductile, malleable. But the gallery's vocation was still the same: a deep love for Indian art, with no dogma to any form of artistic expression and an eye for young artists and experimentation. With only one "condition": that it only exhibit contemporary Indian art.

An important decision and also a very demanding one: when the financial markets took a downturn and everyone was searching for a haven in the safety of Modern Art, the Chemould, faithful to its commitment, continued to propose young talent and contemporary Indian art. One exception was made in 2011 with the "Passageway" exhibition of the German artist Wolfgang Laib, for his deep involvement with Indian culture and mysticism. But for the rest of the gallery's programming has entirely focused on the artists of the subcontinent.

In recent years, the global crisis has also involved Indian art: those who had bought for investment have disappeared and the number of collectors has diminished. In this scenario the Chemould has continued, despite all the difficulties, producing exhibitions and participating in international trade fairs (the Chemould Prescott Road was one of only two Indian galleries at Art Basel Miami Beach last December), an investment that paid off as new collectors from all over the world were able to get to know the gallery that had, until then, mainly attracted the attention of buyers in India.

To celebrate the first half century of the Chemould, Shireen Gandhi has organized a series of five exhibitions that will take place from September 2013 to April 2014 entitled "Aesthetic Bind" with Geeta Kapur as the curator, during which there will be exhibited old and new works of established Indian artists such as: Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Jitish Kallat, Pushpamala N., Gieve Patel, Sudhir Patwardhan, Srinivasa Prasad and Nilima Sheikh.

An event to celebrate contemporary Indian art in all its strength and especially in all its complexity.



Shireen Gandhi *courtesy Chemould Prescott Road*



Wolfgang Laib - Passageway - 2012 - Display view *courtesy Chemould Prescott Road*



Shilpa Gupta - Someone Else - Display View *courtesy Chemould Prescott Road*



Shezad Dawood - Cities of the Future - 2010 - Display view *courtesy Chemould Prescott Road*