

CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE "LEAST BORING COUNTRY IN THE WORLD"

A few years after the first big international Indian contemporary art exhibitions, many are wondering whether we are seeing the umpteenth flash in the pan and whether the art of the Subcontinent will actually survive the present crisis.

by Maria Teresa Capacchione

Over the last ten years some artists of the Indian Subcontinent have gained the status of "big stars" on the world stage, yet contemporary Indian art still struggles to find its place amongst art dealers and western collectors, in particular amongst those in Italy.

A curious anomaly if one should compare India to China. Although the two countries both have great economic growth - only recently showing a slowdown due to the world economic crisis - "Cindia" is in reality a giant with two diametrically opposite souls. And what is happening in the world of contemporary art confirms this.

The interest for the art of so-called emerging countries is primarily dictated by the demand of the western world for an "injection of a cultural tonic", as the Indian art critic Gayatri Sinha sustains. One may wonder why contemporary Chinese art has had immediate success, while Indian art has gained much slower results.

First of all, the collectors.

For a long period after independence, India closed its frontiers to exchanges with other countries, only opening up in 1991 thanks to a series of reforms that liberalized the economy. Since then, a real social revolution has occurred in the country leading to the amassing of great fortunes and the affirmation of a previously almost nonexistent upper class, a bourgeois that is now estimated at about two hundred million people.

This new social class - though still limited in terms of percentages to only 17% of the population, is enormous in absolute terms and has a purchasing power of one hundred billion euros a year - has favoured the birth of a new set of collectors. As was said by the New York

art dealer Peter Nagy – the first foreigner to have opened a gallery in Delhi: in 1997 -, the art market in India is completely “indo-centric.” A market that is not only composed of Indians who are resident in the Subcontinent, but also of those who are defined as NRIs (Non-Resident Indians), the Indians of the “diaspora” who moved overseas mainly to England and the United States to make their fortunes.

This strong Indian background of collectors has meant that ties to the artistic traditions of the past has slowed many artists’ process of experimentation - in terms of language and media – something that has only started in the last ten years. The opposite of what has happened in China where the interest of international collectors immediately stimulated experimentation.

The profound differences in the cultural situations in the two countries have obviously played a fundamental role in the evolution of art in both countries: if the new generations of Chinese artists have grown up in the shadow of the cultural revolution in which “the new man” was the point of reference and ancient cultural traditions a taboo, Indian artists have followed a more linear path cultivating, integrating and even contesting their own culture with other cultures that have been brought by the continuous foreign incursions over the centuries.

The value of the works

The indo-centric nature of the market explains why works by Indian artists who are still young (between 30 and 40) and not particularly well known arrive in our markets at a high price. In reality the artists in question are often already names in India, having exhibited in Bombay and Delhi, and perhaps even in London and New York too where, as we have said, the presence of Indian collectors justifies the choice of many museums and art dealers to devote significant space to the artists of the Subcontinent. It seems, however, that this is not enough to give credibility to an Indian artist or justify the prices reached. So what else is hindering the art of this country in our markets?

One of the strengths of Indian artists is not always rewarded by the market: Indian aesthetics remains easily recognizable and has not yet bent - and we hope it never will - to the western market. In a globalized world that tends to make everything similar, this should be a prized.

We are able to see that a common thread exists, specific characters that differentiate most of Indian contemporary art production: the use of colour, the hyperdecoration (that often

becomes extremely kitsch), the reflection about the condition of women, ties with society, the echoes - also as a reaction and protest - of the cultural and religious traditions of the country. All this makes Indian artistic production recognizable and original. We are not only talking about everyday objects that have become a part of an internationally acclaimed artist's work like Sobudh Gupta, but also about the shapes and colours of Punjabi culture that the duo Thukral & Tagra cleverly mixes with more modern forms of language, or the colourful statues by Ravinder Reddy's, who revisits the traditional Hindu sculpture in pop style, or the echoes of the tradition of miniatures in the narration by Dhruvi Acharya. The list goes on.

Indian galleries

Yet things are rapidly changing and there has been a complete revolution in the last ten years: India has undergone an economic boom and has opened up more and more to a western world that is hungry for new economic and cultural markets. On the one hand this phenomenon has led to an increase in Indian collectors who, going to galleries and international fairs more and more often, have begun to appreciate the new forms of communication their artists are using (photography, installations, video); on the other hand, it has enabled these artists to measure themselves against their colleagues, especially European and American ones, injecting new vital energy and experimentation into their work. The proliferation of galleries and the birth of the first museums in the Subcontinent is just one of the signs of this vitality.

To the historic spaces like Chemould, new galleries have been added like Chatterjee&Lal, Sakshi, the Gallery Maskara and Project 88 in Bombay, the Palette Art Gallery as well as the better known Nature Morte in Delhi, the Anant Art Gallery in Delhi and Calcutta.

In August 2008, the collectors Lekha and her son Anupam Poddar, opened the Devi Art Foundation in Delhi, the first Indian museum of contemporary art.

A private organization that tries to make up for the shortfalls of the State (another difference compared to China where, in the last few years, the public sector has bridged the gap in respect to the private sector) that has only recently begun to make inroads: in Calcutta, a joint venture between the government of West Bengala and a private company is realizing

the first Indian museum of modern art (K2oma - Kolkata Museum Of Modern Art), designed by the Swiss architects Herzogs & de Meuron, that will open in 2013.

Another sign of the changes taking place is the India Art Summit: celebrating its second year this summer (Delhi 19-22 August), it is the first fair of modern and contemporary Indian art. An important event because it is the first time that India - at least on paper – has opened its market up to foreign art dealers who have been almost entirely absent until now. Except for rare and illuminated exceptions such as: Thomas Erben and his collaboration with Chatterjee&Lal, Matthieu Foss who, in Bombay, has specialized in photography and the pioneer Peter Nagy.

In Italy...

In Italy the Indian new wave has imposed itself gradually. In the last three years Milan, Turin, Rome (though to a much lesser degree), San Gimignano and even Casoria (Naples), have devoted various exhibitions to contemporary Indian art in both public and private spaces that have kept up with the great European exhibitions.

Although Italian collectors are still rather diffident and - especially in the moment of crisis we are going through - it seems they are not inclined to venture out on the discovery of new forms of communication that they still find difficult to understand, in art as in the economy, India is proving to be less incisive in its penetration, but also more solid for, as has already been said, it can also count on an increasing domestic demand which is also cultural.

India, so complex and full of tension, can but produce literature, cinema, art - strong and stimulating culture that overcomes mere fashions and makes it today "the least boring country in the world."