

Photography in India: “The Decisive Moment”

Tanya Gyani

Art is kept alive by multiple institutions: commercial galleries, museums, foundations, and auction houses- with a whole cast of actors from gallery owners to curators to dealers. These characters provide the engine, and the fuel of the system is the contemporary artist; yet ultimately it is the market that essentially drives the whole system. None of the characters could do what they do if it were not for the market of contemporary art. Within this market, this article focuses on a special area – photography and developing economies’ growing interest in the medium; especially, the Indian art market and the gradual assimilation of photography into mainstream visual arts.

Though photography has been an integral part of the art scene in Europe, it is just catching up in India as a valuable and defining expression of modern art and culture. As the art boom in India leads to the establishment of a mature market of connoisseurs, it seems natural that art history will repeat itself in that the new market will follow with the appreciation of modern artists, and exciting contemporary collecting trends.

To elaborate on the history of collecting in India: During the pre-Independence era, the main patrons of art in India were the aristocracy. Post-Independence, the drive to collect art was spearheaded by institution heads and a small portion of the Indian Diaspora in the West. Now, driven by hype and high prices, the art hoarders in India are today’s expanding class of businessmen, lawyers, doctors, real estate speculators and stockbrokers. To be known as an art collector is to proclaim social status; and art has become like any other asset, whether equity, bonds or gold. The market for contemporary Indian art has been burgeoning, along with the expansion in the Indian population in

the United States, England, and the Diaspora. This indeed is the reason that galleries highlighting Indian contemporary art are proliferating all over the world. Fuelled by the interest generated in the market, and by the high prices Indian artists fetch at international auction houses, there is a frenzied drive to collect works in anticipation of price rises. At present, this is true also for Chinese artists.

Alternative investments in art are quickly finding their way into corporate and individual financial portfolios in India’s developing economy. Several indicators truly define what the scenario in India is in the present day: Corporate sponsorship of art galleries; events which showcase artists’ added value; the recent establishment of several art funds; and as well as the Economic Times in India having a special index that tracks the art market.

History illustrates that photography has followed traditional mediums such as becoming a significant investment and collectible within established markets, but this has happened gradually. For the art to be appreciated, museums, educational institutions and galleries must lay foundations for the public to learn about it. In effect the market, will be a combination of timing, and a maturing generation of collectors, culturally conditioned and grounded in art that help launch the market for photography in India.

In hindsight, even in the United States, the market for photography is largely believed to have opened up only in the 1970s. Many of the great photographers were being collected then, but as a movement it was just beginning to gather momentum.

In 1954, with the opening of the Limelight Gallery in New York City, Helen Gee launched the modern era of photo galleries by setting a precedent and establishing



a model by which future galleries would function. It was the first ever photography gallery and during its seven-year run, Limelight helped shape the scene of photography art through 70 exhibitions that featured almost every recognizable photographer in the history of the medium. Though it had a short life span and closed in 1961, Gee managed to put the contemporary market boom in shrewd perspective. A Robert Frank photograph that sold for \$25 USD at Limelight exhibitions would now auction for over \$100,000 USD. Pioneering by nature, Gee kept the gallery afloat by running a café alongside it; the idea being that coffee would subsidize the gallery. In her time, Helen Gee successfully championed the works of photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Walker Evans. Her example is relevant in illustrating what is happening in India now.

India has recently seen a rise in the number of exhibitions dedicated to photography. There is also a renewed interest among museums in photography as an expression of the broader revolution taking place in the visual and graphic arts; a recognition which can be seen as colleges and universities teach photography as deserving of its own history and asking for students' deeper study and analysis within the context of modern art.

The famous Osian's Art Fund in India, run by connoisseur Neville Tuli, just acquired 45 original, silver

gelatin prints by Henri Cartier-Bresson, which are a collection of photographs of Mahatma Gandhi. Aside from a 17.5 percent custom duty to bring these artworks into India, Osian's paid £80,000 GBP to a London dealer for this acquisition, which is the highest price paid by a private institution in India for a collection of photograph work. What matters to collectors is the historic, emotional, and aesthetic value of a photograph. This particular collection brings together two famous people. By capturing important historical moments, it validates the power of photography to communicate and tell stories with artistry and compassion.

At the moment, both photojournalism and fashion photography are worldwide collecting trends. In today's collectors' market, photographers whose works were essentially photojournalistic by design are purchased and appreciated for the same reasons as works were primarily artistic in intent. In considering the impact of photojournalism in creating a greater awareness and appreciation for photography, it is clear why Osian's spent a small fortune in acquiring the prints, and how the market for photography in India is experiencing a quantum leap with a new generation of people who are visually literate and galvanized by the idea of investing in art.

Indian photojournalist Raghu Rai has exhibited twice in the span of five months. The exhibitions are

notable because his last exhibition was a decade ago. Five years ago, a photograph of Mr. Rai's that fetched \$100 USD in India is now being valued at \$10,000 USD. While many believe that traditional mediums are reaching saturation, photography is still relatively affordable to buy and does not intimidate the investor as much as the price of a painting.

Works of photojournalism demonstrate that "artistry" resides as much in the photographer's intent and sensibility as it is does in content. While photographers in India experience a new interest in their work from the domestic market as well as overseas, it is largely up to galleries and curators to be visionaries and leaders in increasing the depth of knowledge among the general public. This knowledge combined with recognition by artists and art institutions of photography's broader potential and significance within the entire field of the visual arts are critical support factors for the emerging marketplace.

This article is written with the intention of rekindling Helen Gee's spirit and bringing to light the fact that photography in India is on a rise, and to express passion for the art form. This has led to the start of a gallery that is exclusively dedicated to photography, The Phi Oscura Gallery. It now becomes part of the visual art culture in India that will soon produce some of the world's most revered and collected photography talents. §