

KUMAR GALLERY

Business Standard

Golden oldie

Kumar Gallery in Delhi turns 55.

For an institution, 55 is not much of an age. But for a modern Indian art gallery to have been around for that long is no mean achievement. After all, the history of “modern” art — if you count the Tagores and Amrita Sher-Gill as the pioneers in this field — is itself only around a hundred years or so. So Delhi’s Kumar Gallery can justifiably pride itself on reaching the milestone.

Sunit Kumar, brother of Virendra Kumar who set up the gallery and currently a director, does not want to dwell on the past, however. “I think we ought to concentrate on the present exhibition,” he emphasises, referring to Celebration 2010, a group exhibition that’s now become a fixture on the gallery calendar. “This is the third ‘Celebration’ show we’ve put up,” says Kumar, “to coincide with Republic Day, as a kind of celebration of the magnificence of Indian art.”

Celebrations 2010 features around 65 works curated from the gallery’s collection, and “a few that have come in from artists,” says Kumar. The works on show, the range and significance of the artists included — everyone from the Bengal School masters such as Gopal Ghose, Sailoz Mukherjee, Jamini Roy, Pradosh Dasgupta, to the Progressives, MF Husain, FN Souza, Shanti Dave, and others like GR Santosh, Arpana Caur, AP Santhanaraj and even a few acclaimed contemporary painters like Seema Kohli, Paresh Maity and Ashok Bhowmick — are testimony to the gallery’s importance in the evolution of modern and contemporary Indian art.

The setting up of Kumar Gallery by Virendra Kumar, a private collector in October 1955 is significant not just because it marked the launch of an art market in the capital, which helped to tilt the balance of Indian art away from Kolkata, but also for the patronage he provided to the band of talented painters then just starting out — the Progressives — who were to change the idiom of Indian art in the years to come.

Souza, Husain, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, Dave, KS Kulkarni, A Ramachandran — all received their early sustenance and platform with solo and group shows at the Kumar Gallery. Many a tale abounds of how some of these artists were retained by the gallery for a fixed stipend in the 50s and 60s.

Kumar Gallery was also one of the first to forge connections with arts institutions abroad — something that's common now. Some of the more significant of these were a (co-sponsored) group show of Jamini Roy, Husain, NS Bendre, and others at the New York Library in 1956; the first one-man show of Husain abroad at the gallery Hanna-Bekker Vom Rath, Frankfurt, in 1961 and another travelling exhibition to Australia, in alliance with the Gallery Kim Bonython of Adelaide in 1966. It also brought in a few international artists — Americans Paul Jenkins, Irving Kriesberg, and Ernst Van Leyden all had solo shows in '65 and '66 — trying to expose viewers in India to contemporaneous trends in painting.

In recent times, of course, Kumar Gallery, has lost some of that edge. There are around five shows held a year, mostly large retrospectives of early, long-forgotten Bengal School masters such as Prodosh Dasgupta (last year) and Maniklal Banerjee (in 2008). The gallery has not really expanded its list of artists to the younger lot.

“An art gallery was not a very viable career option in the early years after independence,” Kumar says. “My father was a commodities trader, a business where the returns were immediate. Art of course was a completely different ball game then.”

But what about today — after all, many of the paintings here from that era are worth crores, and even an upcoming name like Bhowmick is priced at Rs 5-6 lakh. “Is there a queue of people lined up outside waiting to buy? How many do we manage to sell in a year? Barely a few,” Kumar says, dismissing all the hype surrounding “investors” and “buyers”.

“People who spend time to view art are the only real ‘investment’ worth talking about, in the final analysis,” he concludes. There's no arguing with that.

Celebrations 2010 is on at Kumar Gallery, 56 Sunder Nagar Market, New Delhi, between January 25 and February 9