

Express India 31 January, 2012

A LIGHTER SHADE OF RED

By Vandana Kaira and Pallavi Pundir

People are going nuts”, said a representative of the Karen Woodbury Gallery at the India Art Fair (IAF), which was overrun by art enthusiasts even on Sunday, when the curtains came down on the annual art show. While many gallerists echo this Australia-based gallery’s sentiment, there are others who are giving the fourth edition of IAF a thumbs down in terms of sales figures and crowd management.

Bhavna Kakar, director of the red-dotted stall of Latitude 28, is among the jubilant lot. She has sold out an entire booth showcasing the works of Dilip Chobisa. “His works received a great response last year as well but I did not expect a sell-out this time,” says Kakar.

Celebrated Indian names like Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher, displayed by London-based Hauser and Wirth gallery, have also made major sales, and contemporary artist Rashid Rana’s works have reportedly been sold to Bangladeshi collectors Rajeed and Nadia Samdani. Also popular with buyers was controversial British artist Damien Hirst, whose works were exhibited by London-based Other Criteria gallery. According to a statement released by IAF, “Eighty per cent of galleries reported sales, bookings, serious interest” and there were “strong sales” in Indian and international contemporary art, where the price of individual works “ranged from Rs 55,000 to over Rs 60 lakh”.

Two years back, Malini Gulrajani, owner of the Dubai-based 1x1 gallery, had sold all works of Kolkata-based Chittrovanu Mazumdar, but this year she returns home disappointed. At her booth, she had works of Ravinder Reddy and Rameshwar Broota, alongside those of five Iranian artists. “There are a lot of galleries but the sales have been very dismal. We had artwork for Rs 10 lakh upward, but it did not find too many takers. A lot of people inquired about the works, but no one bought anything,” says Gulrajani.

Kakar says that she noticed that “collectors’ interest was less than last year’s” though she was impressed with the new venue, the vast NSIC Ground in Okhla, south Delhi (previous editions of the fair have been held at Pragati Maidan in central Delhi). “Organization-wise, the fair has expanded and has touched international standards,” she adds.

Shefali Somani of Shrine Empire Gallery in Delhi feels that “as exhibitors, we are happy with the quality and structure. Even the booths and aisles this time were more open, and there was more viewing space. Though the footfalls were good, last year’s sales were better. There were a lot of first-time visitors and inquiries, but these materialise into sales only after the fair. Maybe it was because there were so many galleries, 98 of them, that the sales got divided across the broader spectrum which could result in every gallery making fewer sales.”

Sharan Apparao, director of Apparao Galleries, saw a problem with crowd management. "There were people touching the artwork and walking too close to them, which was a concern for us," she said.

However, Tushar Jiwrajka, director of the Mumbai-based Volte Gallery, who sold works by Ranbir Kaleka and Sheba Chhachhi, is looking ahead with optimism. "Last year, we had a 300 sq ft booth. This year, it was 600 sq ft. Next year, we're planning on 1,200 sq ft booth. This is how confident we are," he says with a smile.