

Why see ART?

The abiding reason is that a lot of the art on display in our galleries tell us something about the world we live in



Designated March Of A Petro-Angel (or Desert March), a 2006 work of oil on canvas by Riyas Komu.

Art intimidates the public. Have you ever imagined the art gallery to be a cold, rarefied space with inscrutable objects and canvases hanging under crisp spotlights? You are not alone. Occasionally, we get news of an anonymous person spending a phenomenal sum of money at an auction held somewhere far away for a painting by an Indian artist who lived many years ago. But what exists in the art gallery, what is mounted on its walls every couple of months, year after year, next to our office space, is gobbledegook.

Around 15 years ago, when I started on the art beat as a reporter because an editor thought I could be good at it, art show openings scared me. The scene seemed impenetrable, and at times it still seems so. I pursued the beat and continue to love writing on it often because early enough, I opened my eyes to the art in the art gallery—and looked beyond the structures of its presentation.

Do it, it won't disappoint you.

We have not grown up with the culture of seeing art. Our children don't queue up to see art, in museums or galleries. Most Indian towns don't have museums or art fairs, forget private galleries. Art education in a majority of Indian schools is rudimentary, and it ends with painting "still life", which basically requires looking at a decorated object placed in front of the class and reproducing it on thick art paper as faithfully as possible.

The contemporary art scene perhaps add to its esoteric character. It is a narrow and opaque scene. Around 15-20 art galleries in big cities decide what is important or new wave, and usually media and form rather than the artist's subject or world view determine curatorial preferences. Auction prices are often an index of personality rather than content—and many new collectors consume and purchase Indian art solely as investment. There are not enough patrons, which also includes critics and the media, who encourage diversity in art. Painting, decorative art, new media and photography don't coexist in our art galleries. Curators are often concerned with an artist's place in the history of art, or for his conformity to global trends in art practice rather than his language or politics.

So why make the trip, why enter a world so smug and self-serving?

The abiding reason is that a lot of the art on display in our galleries tell us something about the world we live in. Political animals still thrive in the art world, and get paid for it. Form and media are mostly derivative in our contemporary scene—borrowed from what's in vogue in the West—but painting in the classical sense get space too. A few months ago, I met Sosa Joseph, a painter from Parumala, Kerala, who was in Mumbai for her solo show. Through vivified scenes from her neighbourhood, Joseph makes sophisticated and subtle statements against patriarchy in Kerala.

Nowhere else in the world of the arts will you encounter more passionate engagement with the world outside, with the telltale events of our times, other than in the art gallery—the Emergency, communal riots, censorship and offence, lost communities, gender discrimination, unbridled urbanization have fuelled works of so many Indian artists, from **Bhupen Khakhar** and Gulammohammed Sheikh to Anita Dube, Abir Karmakar, Nataraj Sharma, T.V. Santhosh, Shilpa Gupta and Shine Shivan. Art collectives like the Raqs Media Collective in New Delhi, Mumbai's Clark House Initiative and the Desire Machine Collective in Guwahati have provoked as much as they have theorized. In the world of instant and instantly destructible opinion, contemporary art opens up crafted, sustained dialogues, and once you walk into a gallery, they become easily accessible. And galleries don't charge money to see art.

Talking of diversity, don't miss the paintings of N. Parsharamulu currently on display at Mumbai's Gallery Maskara (www.gallerymaskara.com). He is an artist in his early 30s, and has been painting with small means on the outskirts of Hyderabad for more than 10 years. It is his first solo show and the gallery's first show of paintings after four years. He is remarkably provocative, and you will meet him in our Culture pages soon.

Political Animals is a fortnightly column on the intersection of culture and politics