

ARTFORUM

DIARY

STAYIN' ALIVE

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Asim Waqif and Chandrika Grover. All photos: Meera Menezes.

“WHEN I EAT, I EAT MY OWN DEATH,” proclaimed a pile of bright green stickers, injecting a gloomy note into what otherwise promised to be a lively opening. However dour, artist Atul Bhalla’s warning was not going to keep me from India International Centre’s famed samosas and a cup of hot tea on a cold winter’s day. Curated by Arshiya Lokhandwala, the site-specific exhibition bore the sanguine title “We Are Still Alive: Strategies in Surviving the Anthropocene.” I spotted the statuesque Shalini

Passi, collector and founder of MASH (My Art Shalini, a digital platform that sponsored the project), chatting with Nature Morte's Peter Nagy before she posed for shutterbugs under Asim Waqif's crumpled car installation, *Collapse analysis: Mayapuri*, 2019, which hung from a tree. I then decided to trail Lokhandwala as she shepherded art patrons Tarana Sawhney, Radhika Chopra, and Anupam Poddar around Arunkumar H.G.'s *Timeline of Backwash 1*, 2020, and Ravi Agarwal's installation *Evening has come with Sangam Dialogue (sound piece)*, 2016. While Arunkumar's faux trees set up a lively conversation with their real counterparts on the lawn, Agarwal's beached boat seemed out of place—perhaps that was the intent.

“We Are Still Alive” was just one of a slew of satellite events that orbited the annual India Art Fair. A few days later, I went gallery-hopping in South Delhi's tony Defence Colony. My first stop was Shambhavi's show “Bhurukuwa/Dawn” at Shrine Empire, where husk, cotton pulp, and clay creations paid homage to the artist's rural roots. I decided not to linger over wine and made my way in the unseasonal drizzle to Vadehra Gallery to inspect Atul Dodiya's assemblages of shuttered shrines. I was delighted to meet his wife, fellow artist Anju Dodiya, whose perspicacious Instagram posts I follow closely to keep tabs on the Mumbai art scene and her own practice. “Are you coming to Rimzon's opening at Talwar?” enquired artist Anjum Singh. Unless I cloned myself, there was no way I could attend another art opening and also make it to the French Embassy reception—for which I was already running frightfully late. The event was being held in honor of the visiting French Minister of Culture, Franck Riester, who had just hours earlier inaugurated Gérard Garouste's solo show “The Other Side” at the National Gallery of Modern Art. It was clear that I had missed all the speeches, so I headed for the bar to snag a glass of chilled champagne, intentionally cocking a snook at another of Bhalla's dire warnings: “When I drink, I drink my own death.” My nearest quaffing companion turned out to be the fair's director, Jagdip Jagpal. Just as we were getting into a deep discussion on whether the weather gods would play spoilsport and rain on her parade, the French Institute's Alice Brunot whisked me away, eager to introduce me to Monsieur Garouste. We wove our way through a troupe of French performers who banded black umbrellas and

whispered sweet nothings into the ears of guests through long black tubes. When we finally found Garouste, he was ready to leave, but not before I subjected him to my broken French as I valiantly tried to recall what I learned decades ago at the Alliance Francaise.

A few days later at the fair's sunny preview, I saw Jagpal posing for photographs with her team. She was attired in a bright yellow striped silk jacket by the fashion brand Raw Mango. "Tomorrow we will be wearing Pero," she whispered. Entering the main tent, whose facade was dotted with vignettes of urban street life by upcoming artist Sameer Kulavoor, I paid a mandatory visit to Gallery Chemould's booth. There I found owner Shireen Gandhi explaining the finer points of Atul Dodiya's large painting *Domestic Scene*, 2019-20—a depiction of Howard Hodgkin buried behind a newspaper with a work by Bhupen Khakhar hanging above him—to local collectors. The Guggenheim's Sandhini Poddar breezed in, as did independent curator Girish Shahane, whom I spotted studying Mithu Sen's tongue-in-cheek installation *BYEBYEPRODUCTS BUYBYPRODUCTS*, 2019. Prateek and Priyanka Raja, who run Experimenter Gallery, were beaming when I met them—they were pleased to see me or had just made great sales, or both. In all, eighty-one modern, contemporary, and institutional exhibitors had a presence at the India Art Fair this year, including blue-chippers such as David Zwirner and Neugerriemschneider. The latter's booth, which featured Olafur Eliasson's glass sphere installation, *Deep cosmological constant collective*, and Ai Weiwei's gigantic, iron, root-like sculpture *Martin*, both 2019, proved to be a real crowd-puller. Though they mimicked natural phenomena, these two Instagram-worthy artworks drew attention to their own artifice, as if to remind us that there's nothing like the real thing.

— Meera Menezes



Peter Nagy and Shalini Passi.



Jagdip Jagpal and Gautami Reddy.



Prateek and Priyanka Raja.



Atul Bhalla.



Umah Jacob, Rohit Raj Mehndiratta, and Jagdip Jagpal.



Priya Jhaveri.

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