



COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND TARQ



COURTESY EMAMI ART

Milestones in the art world

2024 was the year of milestones for leading modernists and galleries. While it ended on a high note with a spate of important events, certain issues slipped under the radar

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It would be hard to look at 2024 in isolation. Threads from 2023 have woven their way into 2024, at least within the arts ecosystem. The mode of expansion continued, with existing galleries and institutions moving into fresh spaces, and newer names being added to the contemporary arts community. 2024 was a landmark year for leading galleries as well as artists with the centenary of K.G. Subramanyan, F.N. Souza, Ram Kumar, V.S. Gaitonde and Mohan Samant. The second half of 2024 began like a symphony but ended as an overdone crescendo with December being absolutely packed with cultural events, including new additions such as the Bengal Biennale.

Invisible histories of marginalised communities became more visible, with work by artists such as Vikrant Bhise, Siddhesh Gautam and Sajjan Mani being showcased. However, some felt art could have served as a braver lens to contemplate conflict in Gaza, Ukraine and closer home in Manipur. Barring a few examples, there was a certain degree of silence, which Mumbai-based cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote found inexplicable. "It's hard to believe that Indian art has nothing to say on something as cataclysmic as the ongoing genocide and wars. Previous generations of Indian artists would have responded to these events for sure. This startling absence of response, an inward-looking approach, and withdrawal from a broader public exchange has been rather disappointing," he says.

As a new year dawns, *Lounge* looks back at the hits and misses of 2024.

WOMEN AND BELONGING

Certain trends that had been in the making for the past two to three years, achieved a certain degree of maturity in 2024, and that included the feminist gaze on the lives of women. The female figure from everyday scenes had been long missing from the canvas. Artists like Varunika Saraf, Soma Das and Baaraan Ijlal have documented everyday experiences—big and small—in women's lives, be it their response to politics, grief, leisure, or community.

This year, there were more showcases of the theme. For instance, Sujata Setia's *A Thousand Cuts* addressed patterns of domestic abuse in south Asian community, at G5A, Mumbai, while *He/Hem* at Vida Heydari Contemporary, Pune, featured works of six artists including Debasree Das, Kanan Koteswar, Mayuri Chari and Monali Meher. They stitched thread on to paper, seeking to erase lines between high art and skill-based crafts, "while engaging with tropes of identity, care, body and ecology". In fact, textile, involving embroidery, stitching and used clothing, became a stronger part of artistic practices to create narratives around belonging and identity.

AN EXPANDED ECOSYSTEM

2024 saw not just fresh editions to existing fixtures such as the Madras Art Weekend, Chennai Photo Biennale and Serendipity Arts Festival, but also the debut of newer events such as the Bengal Biennale. Curated by Siddharth Sivakumar, this series of events, themed around *Anka Banka—Through Crosscurrent*, is spread across Kolkata and Santiniketan. The idea



is to present the state's cultural heritage alongside contemporary voices that are shaping its art ecosystem.

November also brought back Art Mumbai—a young fair that is rooted in the context of the Maximum City—with 71 participating galleries and three foundations. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale rounded out the year with the announcement of its new curators, artist Nikhil Chopra and HH Art Spaces, for its sixth edition, to take place between December 2025 and March 2026.

SPACES AND PLACES

2024 was the year of milestones for art spaces—new ones opened up for niche themes while existing ones celebrated landmark years. Sarmaya Arts Foundation, a not-for-profit founded in 2015 by Paul Abraham, a Mumbai-based banker and arts patron, moved its archive into a newly-restored space. This rich repository of art and artefacts opened up within the 146-year-old Lawrence & Mayo Building, which is part of the "Heritage Mile" on Dr DN Road. The new space is accompanied by curated programming of talks and events in a bid to make the archive accessible to people from all walks of life.

Artist-curator Bose Krishnamachari came together with entrepreneur Sreejith Pathangalil to start Gallery Dtale ARCHIST in Bengaluru in October. The white cube space, spread across 3,000 sq. ft, hopes to tackle the intersections of art, architecture, design and technology. "Dtale ARCHIST trusts that everyone could be an artist, designer, architect or a scientist. We are exploring works of practitioners, whose thinking sensitises us to the 'other' while also inculcating a better understanding of the self," writes Krishnamachari in an email interview.

Delhi-based GallerySKE and PHOTO-INK ended the year with an announcement about moving to a new space—the location still under wraps—in 2025.

This was also a landmark year in the journeys of leading galleries such as Tarq, Experimentier and Gallery Espace. Each marked the moment with exhibitions and events that showcased its evolution while

(clockwise from top, left) Soghra Khurasani and Saju Kunhan, 'Untitled' (2024); K.G. Subramanyan's 'The Reaper'; Vikrant Bhise, 'Rise of Protest', at Exhibit 320's art show, 'Unhoming: Fragile Belonging'; and The Singh Twins, 'ELIZABETH I—The Golden Age' at Art Mumbai.

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COURTESY EXHIBIT 320

also laying out the vision for the future. New Delhi-based Espace, for instance, marked the occasion with shows such as *Memory Fields*, featuring artists such as Amit Ambalal, Manjunath Kamath and Nilima Sheikh, who have been part of the gallery's journey.

Tarq, Mumbai, which celebrated 10 years, showcased dialogue between its artists through collaborative prints created by artist pairs such as Sameer Kulavoor and Vishwa Shroff, Pratap Morey and Philippe Calla, Garima Gupta and Nibha Sikander, and more. The exhibition looked at the ethos of collaboration and the sense of community that has defined Tarq's programming over time.

Meanwhile, Experimentier, on turning 15 at the cusp of this year, curated events that highlighted the manner in which the gallery functions across multiple spaces, while having a politically charged programme featuring diverse practices.

REVISITING ARTISTIC LEGACIES

It was not just art spaces but also well-loved artists—K.G. Subramanyan, V.S. Gaitonde, Mohan Samant, Himmat Shah, Ram Kumar and F.N. Souza—who had landmark years. A series of exhibitions unfurled across the country to offer newer perspectives on their practices. Progressive Art Gallery, Delhi, hosted *Creating the Century: Four Iconic Artists*, curated by Yashodhara Dalmia to celebrate the birth centenaries of Souza, Kumar, Subramanyan and Gaitonde.

"When India was still under colonial rule, these artists started, each in his own distinct way in art, to grapple with a non-revivalist modernity, the irrepressible reality of Indian plurality, both of life and expression, traditions and ideas.... Their art, in its specifics, complexity and indi-

viduality, is plural, Indian, and modern," wrote Ashok Vajpeyi, managing trustee, The Raza Foundation, whose efforts brought the show to life.

The legacies of these artists continue to be pertinent for their approach—outward-looking, progressive and responsive to the sociopolitics of the times. Unfortunately, for some like Souza and Akbar Padamsee, censorship of their work continues beyond their lifetimes. Last year the Mumbai customs department had seized seven artworks by the two as "obscene material". In October, this year, the Bombay high court passed a restraining order, preventing the department from destroying the works. Through repeated events, one can only hope that the non-conformist approach of these artists continues to be highlighted.

Subramanyan was the other artist, whose life and times were celebrated throughout the year. Cultural theorist Nancy Adajania and curator R. Siva Kumar offered newer readings of his work. In *A Forest of Many Suns* at Arthshila, Delhi, the latter looked at Subramanyan's multifaceted career, including his role as an educationist, and at another exhibition at Vadehra Art Gallery, he focused on the last decade of the artist's career.

Prior to that, in May, Adajania looked at ways of making the artist's legacy relevant for the next 100 years in the show, *One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting K.G. Subramanyan*, at Emami Art, Kolkata. "I decided to focus on K.G. Subramanyan's political philosophy by highlighting his pluralist vision, and his belief in conviviality over conflict...." Adajania had told *Lounge* then.

For Hoskote, both *One Hundred Years and Counting* and *Handprints*, one of the two-part retrospective on Gulammohammed Sheikh, featuring his print works and curated by artist Pushpamala N, stood out as rereadings of artistic legacies. These were not just significant in their scope, but also offered an insight into different ways of creating meaningful curatorial frameworks. "What distinguished both these shows was that they were deeply researched and went into the actual nature of the artists' journeys. *Handprints* is situated within Gulam's engagement with visual arts, literature and the larger public sphere," he adds.

Similarly *One Hundred Years* resituates K.G. Subramanyan in context of his politics, and spotlights the philosophy informing his illustrated children's books, which were earlier seen as minor works, thereby creating a far more complex portrait of the artist.

"These remind us of what Indian artists have been at their very best—cultural organisers, writers, public intellectuals and political thinkers. Both Gulam and K.G. Subramanyan are luminous exam-

ples of what having an artistic imagination means—to not be confined to the studio, but to create a bridge between the studio and the world, articulating experimental curiosity for a medium, and serving the difficult mandate of critical citizenship," says Hoskote.

Meanwhile, Sheikh himself turned curator for his late friend, Bhupen Khakar. Titled *Bhupen in Goa*, and shown as part of the Serendipity Arts Festival, one could see over 150 works—paintings, drawings, ceramic plates, sculptures—from Sunil Kant Munjal's private collection and the Swaraj Art Archive established by Vijay Aggarwal. "I have selected 164 works out of over 207 in the collection, choosing a variety of mediums Bhupen was adept at," Sheikh told *The Indian Express*.

This celebration of milestones will spill into the next year, with modernist Krishen Khanna and the late Satish Gujral marking their 100th birth anniversaries.

MARGINALISED HISTORIES

Various artists and collectives have, over time, tried to extract histories of Dalit and other marginalised communities, long buried within the mainstream narrative. This year saw a greater dialogue around these new forms of history making.

Sajjan Mani—who had his first major solo in India, *The Multiple Legs of Historically Wing-Chopped Bird*, at Shrine Empire, Delhi—wanted to look beyond the post-colonial approach, which focused on "Brahmanic history, royalty and related clothes and ornaments, but never on the people who made these and suffered through the social systems", as he mentioned in an interview. Through his drawings and videos, Mani has tried to wrest his community from historical obscurity.

Vikrant Bhise, a Mumbai-based artist, whose practice is rooted in Ambedkarite politics, Dalit histories and people's movements in resisting caste discrimination, showed his work at different platforms throughout the year, starting with the Anant Art Gallery booth at the India Art Fair and moving on to Experimentier-Colaba for the two-person exhibition, *We Will See*. He is now part of the ongoing group show, *Unhoming: Fragile Belonging*, at Exhibit 320, Delhi, about displacement and human suffering, specifically in the context of Gaza. Bhise's work spans both large multi-panelled paintings and smaller ink works, and looks at narratives of resistance and resilience.

Meanwhile, the calendar for 2025 already seems to be coalescing with major solos and fixtures like the Mumbai Gallery Weekend returning. Perhaps, for art enthusiasts, the turn of the year could act as a brief interlude to reflect on the practices that engaged with realities of the world in flux, and readings and responses that we would like to see in 2025.