

# Expanding horizons

We must break through our dependence on words and rely on direct sensuous experience. Only then will works of art reveal themselves to us for what they are

One of the most eminent critics in the city, Shanta Gokhale separates the best from the banal on Mumbai's culturescape



Leo Steinberg's sympathetic and illuminating essay 'Contemporary art and the plight of the public' published in 1962 was probably one of the first to engage with the problem viewers have with contemporary art. He interprets the common complaint — we don't understand modern art — as "the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment, or the anger, or the boredom which some people always feel, and all people sometimes feel, when confronted with an unfamiliar new style." Familiarity is the crux of the matter. Once you become familiar with a new style, he argues, bewilderment subsides and the work of art begins to look more accessible.

Artist Sudhir Patwardhan has been much exercised by the indifference most Marathis show towards art that diverges from the decorative/representational/narrative stream popularised by Raja Ravi Varma. During a recent discussion which formed part of his three-pronged project, 'Expanding horizons, contemporary Indian art,' he categorically stated that he wished to communicate with the public through his work, but felt thwarted by this indifference. 'Expanding horizons' is his way of addressing the problem.

The project comprises an exhibition by Patwardhan, which traces the journey of modern art from the time artists first broke with the conventions and subject matter of academic painting to contemporary times when artists are increasingly using media other than paint, like photography and video, to make art. The works are accompanied by copious explanatory text that introduces the viewer to historical and painterly aspects of the works. Films on artists and their work are screened to deepen insights



Prabhakar Kolte (centre) with (l to r) I Karnik, V Kapadia, J Thacker and S Kulkarni who read from his essays at the release of his books at the Experimental Theatre, NCPA

gained through the exhibition; and discussions are held to allow the public to question and comment.

'Expanding horizons' is doing its bit. But a one-off encounter of this kind is simply not enough. As Prabhakar Kolte states in his essay 'Sanskriti ani Kala (Culture and Art)' to feel comfortable with art, we must make it a vital part of our lives. When we are comfortable, we must take the next step. We must free up all five senses so that they become 'highways rather than byways to the mind.' We must break through our dependence on words and learn to rely on direct sensuous experience. Only then will works of art reveal themselves to us for what they are.

By a curious coincidence, a collection of Kolte's essays on art and artists, 'Kalekadun Kalekade (From art to art)', was released just a few days before Patwardhan launched his project. Beautifully produced by Jesal Thacker's Bodhana in Marathi and English, the essays contain much for the public to mull over.

Kolte and many others see our over-reliance on words as the chief stumbling block in the way of understanding art.

Our belief that only words can produce meaning, limits both our understanding of a work of art and the work itself. Tom Lubbock, art critic for *The Independent*, puts the blame squarely at the door of artists. They encourage the belief that works of art have meanings that can be verbalised, he says. In a recent article entitled, 'Is art running out of ideas' he writes, "What we're up against are two of contemporary art's guiding imperatives. Rule 1 — Justification by meaning: the worth and interest of a work resides in what it's about. Rule 2 — Absolute freedom of interpretation: a work is 'about' anything that can, at a pinch, be said about it. In short, meanings are arbitrary, but compulsory. And this double bind holds almost universal sway."

Where does that leave the public then? Susan Sontag proposes an answer in her essay 'Against interpretation'. She writes, "Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back on content so that we can see the thing at all." So, 'seeing the thing at all' is the point.