



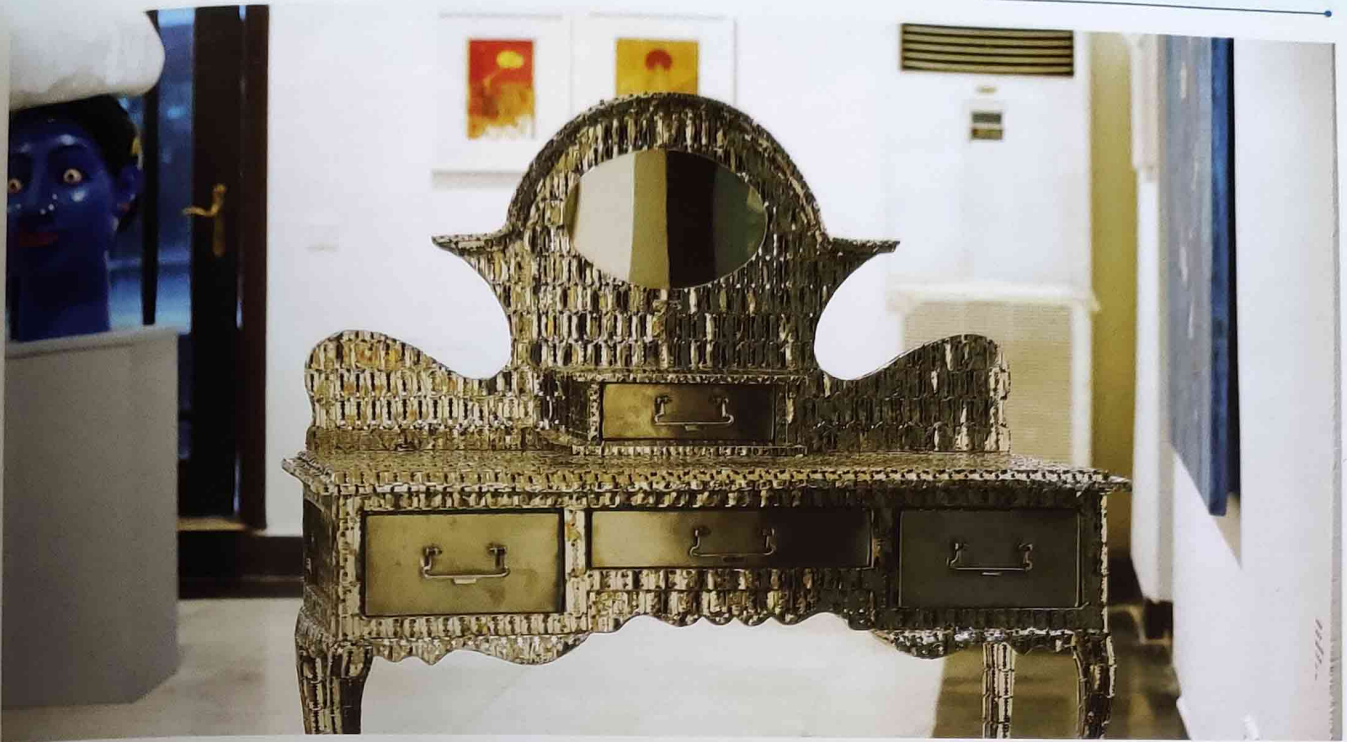
SHRINE EMPIRE GALLERY'S TENTH YEAR ANNIVERSARY

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This article focuses on Shrine Empire Gallery and its sister company Prameya Art Foundation. Their tenth anniversary celebration in 2018, personally caught my interest towards their collaborative efforts since the year 2008, the year that the art market was acutely hit by a global economic inflation. Moreover, this was one of the first galleries to nurture young art writers through awards, grants and residencies, promoting a younger arts community over the years through collaborative projects. A conversation with Shefali Somani and Anahita Taneja explored further perspectives, to help me write this article.

In September 2018, Shrine Empire Gallery celebrated its tenth year of sustained efforts towards contributing to the contemporary art scene in India. Shrine Gallery and Empire Art were separate entities until 2008, individually having been established much earlier. Participating in the first edition of the India Art Fair (India Art Summit as in 2008), the two galleries had still not integrated, yet collectively showcased artists in the same booth. Having collaborated on the first few projects in this manner, the galleries decided to merge to form the Shrine Empire Gallery in 2009. For the founders Shefali Somani and Anahita Taneja, the collaboration and partnership has been about dialog, discussions and more often similar sensibilities. Situated in the basement of D-395, Defence Colony, the gallery moved from its former location at New Friends Colony in 2017.

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The year 2008 was the year that the global economy crashed, acutely upsetting the Indian art market. What brought the two galleries together with this enterprising collaboration in times so dismal, arouses curiosity and interest. The founders and gallerists Shefali Somani and Anahita Taneja, having already had spent a number of years in the art scene, experienced the worst of the market during this phase. Yet, they decided to venture out and begin from scratch, not without encountering unprecedented risks and challenges.

acutely upsetting the Indian art market. What brought the two galleries together on this enterprising collaboration in times so dismal, arouses curiosity and interest. Shefali and Anahita, having already had spent a number of years in the art scene, experienced the worst of the market during this phase. Yet, they decided to venture out and begin from scratch, not without encountering unprecedented risks and challenges. With a downward spiralling art market, the next two years observed a number of accomplished galleries and institutions undergoing major tremors and setbacks, eventually closing and leaving artists to fend for themselves without the support of the regular buyers and collectors, who otherwise largely considered art as an investment. In the absence of the mediating bodies of galleries and institutions, the gap aggravated further between the artists and their collectors.

It took sometime before the markets could be revived. In contrast to the former situation where commercial art was being mass-produced and churned out to meet the high demands of the buyers - in the process ignoring talented artists, the economic condition suddenly pushed buyers to become more selective, as a result compelling the galleries to showcase only 'good' art. Quality over quantity slowly began to pick up, and around this time with the onset of the digital medium, a gradual turn towards new media art was being felt. Yet, the market for conceptual and experimental art, and large-scale installations was minimal. Gradually, institutions were being set up to support these emerging practices, themes and artistic productions through studio and monetary provisions, easing the situation for the artists.

At this point in time, Shrine Empire Gallery

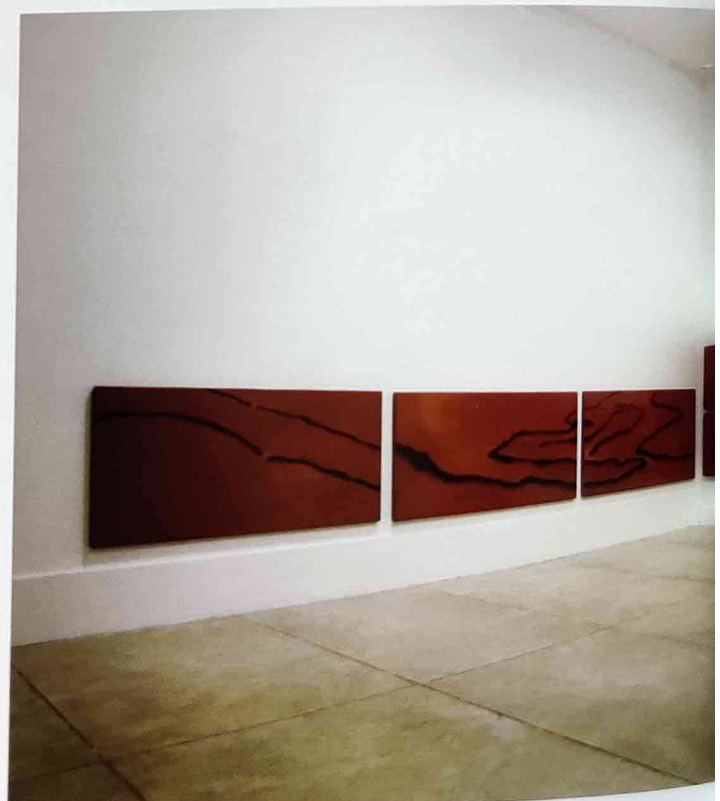


^ *The Edge* - installation view

determined to support and encourage artists, proceeded to acknowledge the changing patterns in artistic production. The gallery began exploring new approaches in showcasing young artists, conceptual art and experimental productions, nurturing them in the process to expand and realize their artistic careers.

Shefali and Anahita explain how galleries play a crucial role in furthering the careers of young artists within a demand-supply structure of the art market. Mentorship takes up an important role—from encouraging artists to participate in the right exhibitions; putting them in good collections; getting them to have a regular dialogue with the curators; to receiving feedback from the viewers. Yet, this cannot overwhelm the practice of the artist, one has to give the artist the freedom to articulate in their own manner. One can only guide the artists away from getting too complacent about their own work, and face a setback in the creative process. This exchange between the artists and galleries, keeps a check on the sensitive relationship they share, and plays a crucial role in nurturing them.

The most challenging and ambitious projects constantly referred to through the conversation, were two of their very first exhibitions 'Home' (2009) curated by Anupa Mehta and 'Notes on the (Dis) Appearance of Real' (2010) curated by Meena Vari and Arvind Lodaya. While the former exhibition was installed in the Travancore Gallery across its many rooms that were transformed to accommodate new media works, the latter probed an auditorium like setting at the Stainless Art Gallery in New Delhi-



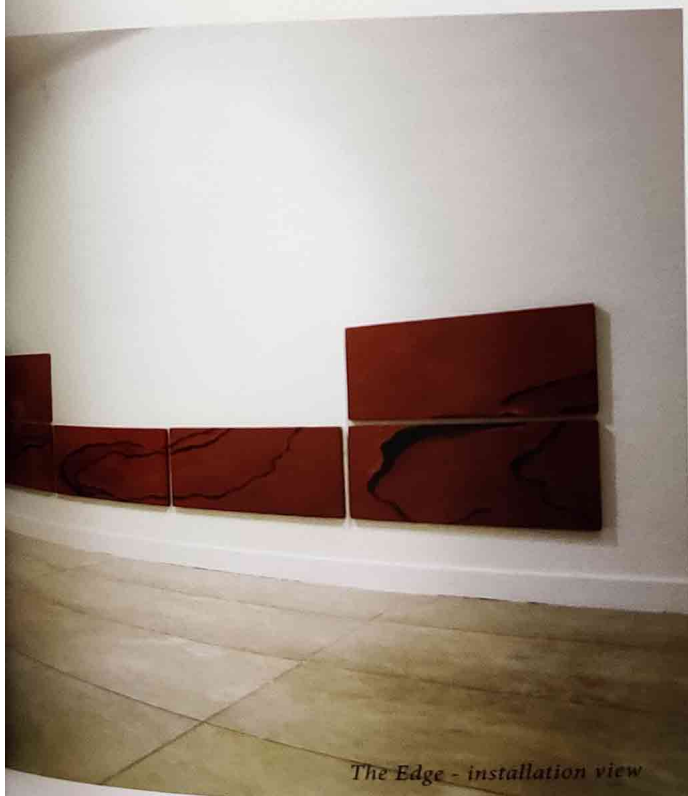
Conventionally, art writing and curation in India has not been the focus of the curriculum at higher academic levels, yet art writing is what is generating a dialog and building a platform for the arts though its varied perspectives. This segment of the community was largely being ignored until recent times. The gap remains wide to this day, yet there is a relatively larger readership than there was before, thanks also to new mediums of dissemination and interactive elements over social media.

both exhibitions were put together at an unnervingly ambitious scale. These exhibitions encompassed conceptual art, experimental art, large-scale installations and video-works, unlike what galleries were otherwise promoting in these times. Installing 'conceptual art' shows during the lull period that the art market was then undergoing, proved to be an expensive affair with very high production costs and minimal or no commercial returns. At this point, neither were these exhibitions able to entertain many viewers nor did India have enough institutions that could invest in this form of art.

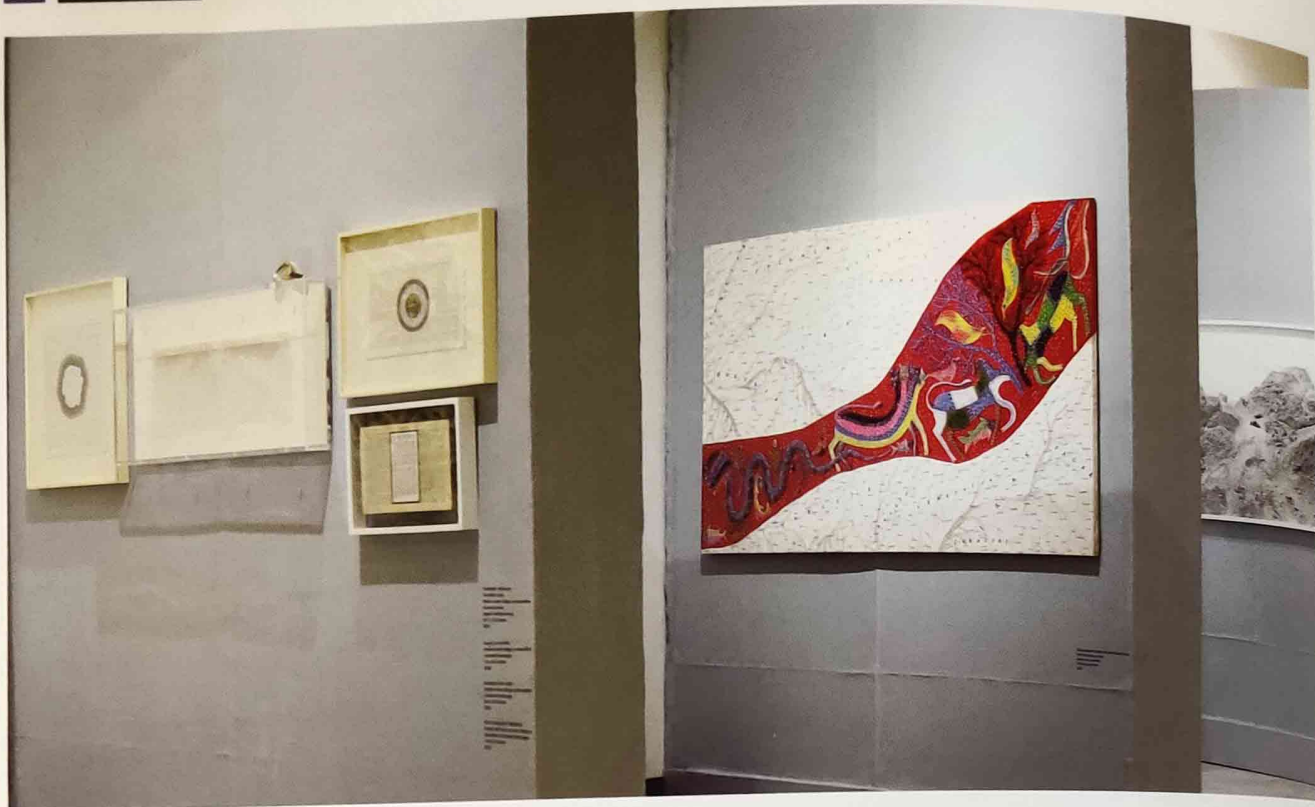
In addition to their highly resourceful pursuits, Shrine Empire Gallery initiated the Art Scribes' Award in 2013. This was the only gallery at the time giving out writers' awards and grants in support of writers and researchers with a mentored international residency, to develop their skills in art writing, critical thinking and curatorial projects. With the initiation of the Prameya Art Foundation in 2017 that developed as an independent organisation to promote young and emerging artists, writers and curators, the educational programming modules which were initially part of the gallery, were brought under the Prameya Foundation, to better suit the purpose.

Prameya in Sanskrit means 'knowledge' and the intent behind this initiative is to provide a space that encourages and supports the careers of writers and curators with an aim to pursue their interests, explains Anahita. Prameya intends to grow as a space for dialog, in order to deconstruct the structure of an intimidating gallery space. The foundation over the two years has also expanded to start providing grants to promising young artists. The programming involves educating the local community, in order to create exposure and maintain a dialog through collaborative projects.

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The Edge - installation view



these curators and giving them exposure, as well as continue their work. We don't stop at the award, but give the participants further opportunities to grow within the local community."

Prameya has been hosting projects, workshops, open days and discussions, alongside showcasing stimulating international content and collaborative exhibitions. From ambitious shows to maintaining very strong content, Prameya is involved in the various spaces to bridge the gap between individuals and communities. Moreover, the awardees return to closely work with the organisation and plan projects, after their larger interaction with the international arts community. It is one of the only organisations regularly showcasing international art, ideas and proposals. Their most recent exhibition, 'Private/Public/Lives: Paul Wong' curated by Anushka Rajendran brought the Canada-based artist to India through this collaboration, and organised a month-long interactive session across the cities in the Indian subcontinent. Prior to this, 'Caressing Histories' a group exhibition curated by Adwait Singh, showcased Indian and international artists, who explored 'the possibility of a sensuously queer-historiography' through body as the medium. In this manner, contemporary Indian art is creating a dialog in parallel to the international art scene, where one is able to notice similar narratives that tie them together.

To mark its tenth-year anniversary, Shrine Empire opened its doors to the exhibition titled 'The Edge' curated by Yashodhara Dalmia and hosted at the Bikaner House in September 2018, that showcased seventeen artists from across the South Asian

subcontinent. The underlying theme to the exhibition made significant reiterations on the current socio-political structures cutting across region, religion, identity and nationality.

Their second show marking their tenth-year anniversary recently opened (April 2019) at the Shrine Empire Gallery. Titled 'Shadow Lines: Experiments with Line, Light and Liminality' and curated by Meera Menezes, the exhibition showcased

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11 artists who have been, over their practice, exploring the possibilities of line and light, to draw from experiences and suggest emotions. Revisiting artist Vasily Kandinsky's essay 'On Line', curator Meera Menezes explored through the concept of the line, the various worlds it composes, through light and shadow and its undefined limitations. The range of works showcased bring to the fore the artists' desire to explore its various possibilities.

The works spanning across generations comprises artists like Nasreen Mohamedi's untitled series of line drawings, and Zarina Hashmi's woodcuts titled 'Delhi Series', to Shobha Broota's untitled geometric compositions structured from soft wool and woven motifs. While more contemporary artists like Parul Gupta through her series uses ink to create crisp planes with lines, Prashant Pandey installs a large-scale curtain composed of glass slides, each complete with images created using holy ash transferred onto glue drawings on the surface of the glass, reminiscent of prehistoric drawings and hieroglyphs. While Manisha Parekh with 'Is It Me or Is It You?' constructs three-dimensional cage-like structures installed on the wall, Tanya Goel uses compressed concrete fragments and marks the surfaces with purposeful diagrams created using aluminium, lead and silver foil. Therefore, the concept of the line is explored from its simplest form to a networking of the same, generating more complex designs in the process.

The remaining months of 2019 will have Shrine Empire Gallery along with Prameya Art Foundation bring to its audience a number of stimulating exhibitions and projects, to mark its year-long anniversary.

