

Q&A

The business of art

By Zehra Shigri

Sameera Raja is the founder and owner of Canvas Gallery – one of the leading art galleries in Pakistan. Born in Karachi in 1966, Raja was trained as an architect from the National College of Arts in 1991. In 1998 when she was expecting her son, she founded Canvas Gallery to pursue her passion for contemporary art and showcase the work of young artists. Within a span of 15 years, she has made a mark in modern art by expanding her business and collaborating with a number of galleries abroad to promote Pakistani art.



Q. How do you see the business of art in Pakistan?

A. Anything that you do as a business, if you do it right, will give you what you want out of it. Art all over the world is a business because it involves different parties – artists who are selling, people who sell their collections and then those who buy their collections.

In Pakistan, art has become a thriving business. There's a huge market for it because there are so many outstanding artists.

Q. It's commonly believed that artists make a lot of money. Is it true?

A. Art is not something that's going to make you a millionaire overnight. It makes good money but it's a lot of hard work. What people fail to comprehend is that

there's no quick fix in art. It's something that you have to feel for and is not something that you can disconnect with.

The commodity over here is a human being and the art produced is by a person. The artist can't be treated like, let's say, a company stock. Having said that, there are artists who make a living just by the art that they sell. And then there are those who not only sell art but they have to support their income by teaching or writing. The monetary returns depend on the quality of work and the perseverance shown by an artist. If you work diligently and are devoted to what you're doing, eventually the work will pay off.

Q. Why should people invest in Pakistani art?

A. Pakistani art is on an upward swing right now. Not only is it high quality art, it's also diverse. Why shouldn't the local market invest in it when the international market is so interested in Pakistani art? There has to be a reason for that and the local population should also invest in Pakistani art.

If we are able to deal with the usual hurdles faced by all kinds of businesses, such as the law and order situation, more people will invest in Pakistani art.

Q. Where does the market stand right now?

A. It's a developing market and has reached a mid-career kind of stage and is going up.

Q. How do you curate your collections?

A. I listen to my gut. I don't look at whether someone is an emerging, a mid-career or an established

A. Of course, the prices have increased but so has everything else, including roti, atta, electricity and such. When all such prices have risen then why are we expecting the price of art to remain as it was 30 years back? Another reason why prices have increased is because awareness has increased manifold.

Q. Who is your favourite artist?

A. Too many of different genres.

Q. Which book changed your life?

A. None. We are the architects of our own lives. I do read a lot and I think that at a particular point in life a certain book may connect with you. You may be reading into it with what's happening in your life and you may take from it what you want. But, I honestly can't say that a certain book changed my life.

Q. Three words to describe yourself?

A. Passionate, compassionate and a believer.

Q. Biggest risk you have ever taken?

A. Taking the first step to start my own business.

Q. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

A. One of my strengths is that I'm passionate and committed. So I'll give my 200 percent in whatever I do, if I believe in it. My weakness is that I give too much.

Q. Your plans for the next five years?

A. To keep on displaying better and better work and improving the image of Pakistani art.

Q. First painting you ever bought?

A. It was a fellow student's thesis work.

Q. Who are your creative influences?

A. As I'm an architect, I'm always surrounded by people who are in the creative field. Whether they're an artist or a writer, my mainstay are people who are creative.

Q. What does success mean to you?

A. Living life on my terms.

Q. Your advice to emerging artists?

A. Work with commitment and passion and be true to yourself. ■

The writer is a staff member.