

Starting up



Gas station "Art not F..." by T Venkanna



A slow art market means more space for young artists like T Venkanna, says **Deepanjana Pal.**

In the Mumbai art world, January is generally a good month. The season, which kicks off between September and October, reaches its peak in the first month of the year as gallerists, audiences and buyers return from their Christmas holidays. This year, however, gallerists have been forced to recalculate and many have chosen to cautiously present less high-profile shows. For Vadodara-based artist T Venkanna, this is good news because he'll have less competition when he makes his debut this fortnight with a solo show at Warehouse at 3rd Pasta.

When the American financial meltdown struck last year, the world economy was left looking a bit like Pompeii after Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79CE. For gallerists in India, it meant that the average NRI banker, whose purchases have been key to the ram-paging Indian art market, was

staring unemployment in the face. A little more than eight weeks after the first of the American investment banks went bankrupt and as Colaba puts itself together after the November terrorist attacks, the city's art world is braced for the inevitable downturn in business. Among those who have restructured their calendars are FSCA, Project 88 and Bodhi Art, which decided to cancel an exhibition of works by painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel and instead stick with a modest group show. Recent auctions that have shown the big names aren't bringing in the record sums. Instead, it's younger and lesser-known artists, with cheaper works, who are being bought.

Gallerist Abhay Maskara is less perturbed than many in his fraternity. He opened the Warehouse at Third Pasta last year for the express purpose of showcasing artists who weren't big names in India and therefore wouldn't belong to the category of "commercially viable". He's decided to exhibit T Venkanna, the first Indian artist to have a solo show at

the Warehouse. Maskara first introduced Venkanna to Mumbai in the group show *Loosentiefirst*. However, the exhibition is made up of drawings, which are more modestly-priced than paintings, and one sculptural installation.

After specialising in printmaking at MS University, Vadodara, for his MA, Venkanna has been making paintings, collages and installations. For *Loosentiefirst*, he showed a series of collages exploring ideas of sexuality using images from comic strips. "I like seeing what a material can do with a subject," he said. "For me the idea is very important. From the idea, I decide what material to use."

Venkanna's installation for his solo is largely composed of two crowns, one enormous and the other small. "The concept behind this work is power," said Venkanna in a telephonic interview from Vadodara. "The big one is made from papier mache so even though it looks huge, it is made out of something that is not of much value. The little one is made of gold but because it's so small, it's also useless." Venkanna

is interested in the idea of power and its signifiers. "I find it interesting to see how we react to things, like how we tend to think if something is big it must be powerful," he said, referring to the impracticality of having a crown that's 20 feet wide.

The drawings are all from the past year. "They are all instinctively done," said Venkanna. "I like the quickness and energy of drawing." The titles he's given the works are cheeky like "Nutty Nighty Night" and "Art not F..." which shows a man lying down, emitting a cloud of creativity from his rear end. Like his collage works, the drawings mostly explore the idea of sexuality. Erect penises abound and sex turns out to be sometimes darkly humorous and sometimes violent. "It isn't about having a message but just having an expression of an idea," said Venkanna. "Sexuality is fun but what is there behind the sexuality, I don't know. That's why I'm drawing, to try and find out." See *Warehouse at 3rd Pasta in Exhibitions.*