

Among the winding streets of South Mumbai, a supportive stronghold of serene art galleries offers respite from the city's chaos and, say gallerists Mortimer Chatterjee and Tara Lal, an insight into India's cutting-edge culture.

# The Mumbai Art Walk

For all that Mumbai fulfills a textbook description of a metropolis in constant flux—with its frantic construction and hyperactive energy—the city has a lot to offer that is enduring and timeless. The undulating cornice of Marine Drive, for example, or the city's architectural heritage—a curious mix of styles ranging from Gothic to art deco. The city also has deep ties to art, and peace can be found in the serene contemporary galleries that cluster around the South Mumbai cultural delta of the Fort, Colaba and Kala Ghoda neighborhoods.

Prominent among them is Chatterjee & Lal. Located beyond the iconic Gateway of India, on a street curving away from the sea, it occupies space in two buildings that were originally built as warehouses under British colonial rule in the 1850s. “The city’s art history goes back to the early twentieth century, when the Bombay Art Society and the Artists’ Centre sprung up,” explains Mortimer Chatterjee, who cofounded the gallery along with Tara Lal.

The duo, who met in 2001 while working with auction house Bowrings, set up their venture in 2003. “Neither of us had particular links to the city, but we believed Mumbai was conducive to visual arts,” he recalls. Colaba—with its dramatic art deco buildings and credentials as the city’s cultural outpost—seemed like the place to be, given that it was already home to

several significant galleries. “The establishment of the Taj Art Gallery and the Jehangir Art Gallery in the 1950s, followed by Gallery Chemould [now Chemould Prescott Road] and Pundole’s in 1963, cemented the area as an art hub,” he says. It is also home to storied institutions such as the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Museum.

When they set up shop, their objective was twofold: to provide a platform to artists working in installation, video and performance art, and to contextualize contemporary works in a larger historical trajectory. “We wanted to rediscover practices from the mid-twentieth century—before what we understand now as the contemporary moment. For us, it was always this mix of contemporary with historical material,” says Chatterjee. A recent exhibition, *Simple Tales*, reflected these twin interests, “looking at the idea of storytelling and how artists have engaged in mythology through time periods in Indian history.”

Chatterjee & Lal’s founding coincided with considerable changes in the city’s art scene. “In the late 1990s, when there were fewer galleries, the concept of representation, where an artist has an exclusive relationship with a gallery, hadn’t caught on,” says Chatterjee. The 2000s brought change, when



the increasing numbers of individual collectors became the driving force behind the art market. There was also an uptick in international interest in South Asian art, which had a catalytic impact on the domestic art scene, leading to the creation of a more organized structure for cooperation between galleries. “In the last decade, galleries have come together to speak as one rather than a multiplicity of voices,” says Lal.

A unified approach, certainly, but one that still hinges on galleries retaining distinct identities through their diverse programs. So while Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke works with young artists expressing themselves in their medium of choice, from oil on canvas to drawings on Chinese rice paper, somewhere like Project 88—housed in a century-old printing press—covers the gamut of visual art, from fashion photography to graphic novel art. Chatterjee also appreciates the diversity of works on display. “If you visit six galleries, you get six very different art experiences because of the sheer variety,” he says.

The spectrum is wide, but organized endeavors like Art Night Thursdays help art lovers to traverse it. “This occurs every second Thursday of the month in Colaba; galleries

stay open until 9:30 pm,” explains Chatterjee. “We try and have as many previews as possible.” Another time to see the art district in full swing is at the Mumbai Gallery Weekend, held citywide each January, when galleries put on their biggest exhibitions of the year, offer walk-throughs and host parties. To help visitors navigate, the Mumbai Gallery Weekend’s website offers an online list of show timings and an art map, which comprises a smattering of spaces farther inland than Colaba, including the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum in Byculla—the city’s oldest museum, opened in 1872.

These initiatives to gently nudge people into art spaces are just one of the elements that make Mumbai so welcoming and distinctive. “There is something quite organic about the art scene here. There is a sense of discovery in navigating Mumbai’s lanes and byways, and suddenly coming upon a gallery in what looks like a commercial complex. It adds to the experience,” says Chatterjee.

That the art district dovetails with tourist hot spots is a nice benefit. “You can shop, sightsee, eat a great seafood meal and then tour the galleries,” says Lal.





#### Opposite

— Mortimer Chatterjee and Tara Lal, the husband-and-wife founders of Chatterjee & Lal—a contemporary gallery within walking distance of Mumbai's iconic Gateway of India monument.

#### Above

— Mumbai has the world's second-largest collection of art deco buildings, surpassed only by Miami. Most are clustered in the city's southern tip, along Marine Drive and in the blocks surrounding Oval Maidan park.





Above Left

Chatterjee and Lal often bring together contemporary and historical works, as in a recent exhibition when wooden masks from Arunachal and Himachal Pradesh were placed alongside current video works.

Above Right

The large, loftlike interior of Chemould Prescott Road in Fort. Established in 1963, Chemould was one of the first galleries in India to focus on modern and contemporary art.

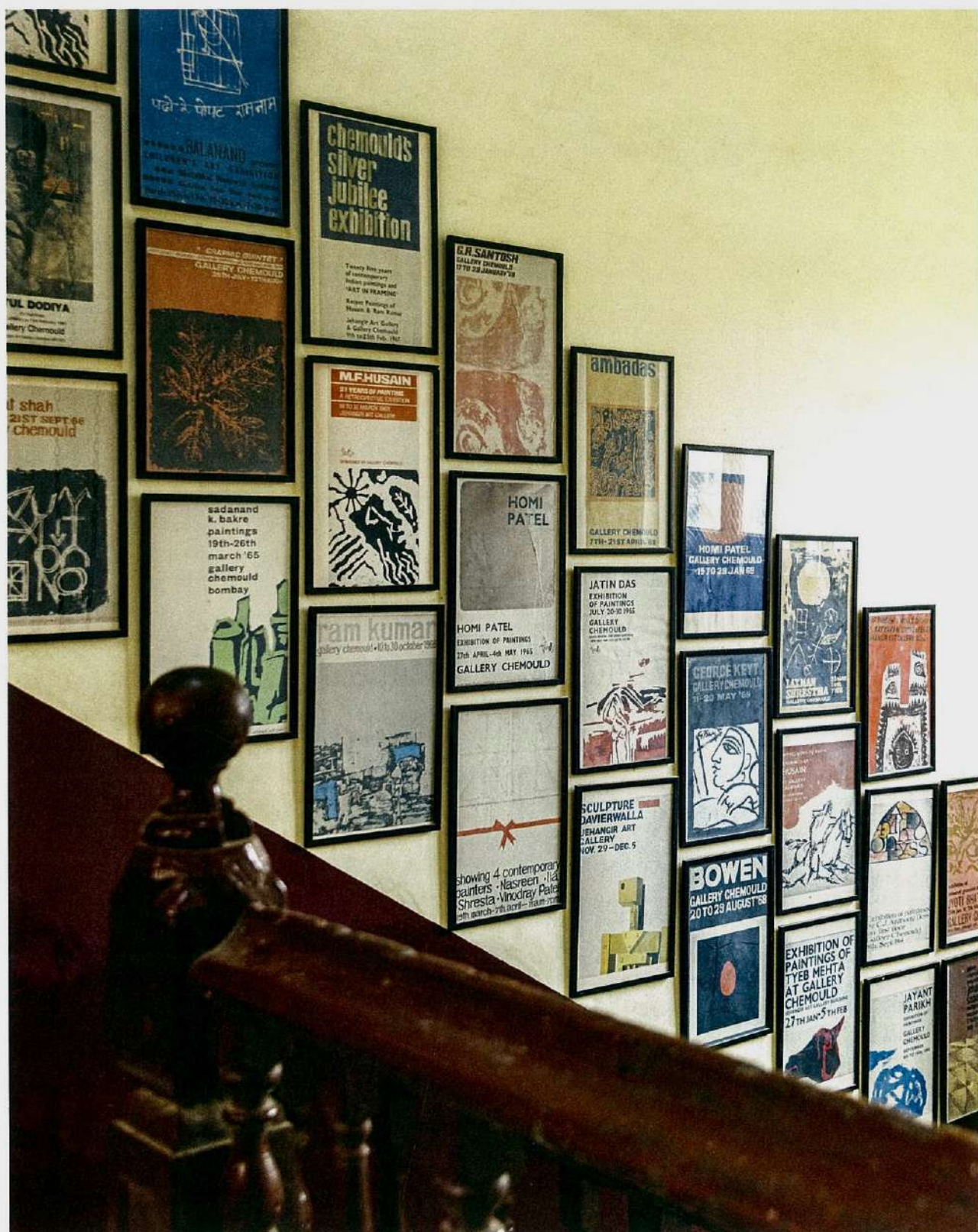












#### Opposite

Chatterjee & Lal has a reputation for unearthing India's most exciting emerging talent. It was among the first to host performance artist Nikhil Chopra, who has since graduated to residencies all over the world, including at the Met in New York.

#### Above

Vintage exhibition posters line the stairwell at Chemould Prescott Road, which has championed some of India's leading artists in the early stage of their careers, including Tyeb Mehta, Bhupen Khakhar and Anju Dodiya.