When the heart precedes art

Indian artists have wholeheartedly given their support to a unique movement to help mentally ill destitutes, notes Minakshi Raja

The roster sounded like a who’s who of the Indian art world. Painters who normally might not be seen dead with certain other painters readily agreed to be seen at the current Shraddha Samarpan exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay. By the end of the first day about 40 paintings had already been sold.

From Paris, S H Raza painted the aptly-named Compassion for the show and promptly sent it by courier mail. Mr. Raza, who lives in Toronto insisted in painting something new rather than have his Bombay gallery deliver one already in the city; Prafulla Mohanty from London donated his work Shradha as a gift, and so did Narayan Akhtar, Satiki Burman, Lalita Lajmi among 15 others.

The rest of the 139 artists retained 30 per cent of the price they themselves had fixed, which were already lower than their normal prices.

What brought together these “pictures at a exhibition” that seemed to overflow from the gallery? The thought behind the process came jointly from Sunil and Bharat Vatvani, both psychiatrists who practice from their own Shraddha Nursing Home in suburban Borivali, next to Bombay with another psychiatrist, Dr. Ghanashyam Bhiman.

“We both came from less privileged backgrounds,” Dr. Bhiman explained. “I lost my father at an early age and money was scarce. I used to pay for my education by selling paper trays during Diwali and going from door-to-door selling books for the rest of the year. Later, I won a national scholarship given to the 100 best SSC students in Maharashtra, which helped me through college where I met my wife.”

“Because of our own backgrounds,” Dr. Bhiman continued, “we are aware of the extent of illness in our families; there are people who are unable to look after themselves, they are unaware of the extent of their illness, there is an element of neglect here because they have to depend on someone else to take them to a doctor for treatment.”

Psychiatry is an expensive treatment that can be afforded by rich people, though it is an unfortunate fact that mentally ill people also inhabit our streets, penniless and uncared for.

It is these people that the Vatwans began to notice on their Sunday morning walks until one day, they took their first destitute patient back to their nursing home. The man was schizophrenic with delusions of a separate life from his real one. The Vatwans bathed him, fed him and treated him with psychiatric medicine. As he regained sanity they repeatedly questioned him and eventually got his former address, and finally they were able to relocate him. Of the 200 such patients treated so far, about 70 per cent have recovered and the remaining few may have suffered a relapse because they stopped taking their medicine too early, and in this illness medicine is of the essence.

“Out-of-Bombay patients,” commented Dr. Bharat, “are easier to re-settle with their families than local patients. In the city where urbanisation has taken its toll, the family sees the former patient as another mouth to feed.” A city family will look suspiciously at us at the time of rehabilitation, thinking they’ll have to pay a hefty fee for the prodigal’s return, while in the rural areas we are treated as living gods and the entire village will turn out to welcome us!”

One such patient is actually responsible for the present exhibition. A former student and lecturer at the J J School of Arts, Hemant Thakare was a good medalist, but was removed from the school staff after a mental breakdown. His students worried for him and artist G S Adikarav, also formerly a J J student spoke to the Vatwans, “Can you help him?” They took him in, making him part of the family while his treatment was going on. After he was fully recovered, Dr. Bharat decided to tackle the bureaucracy and after four months of hard work Thakare got back his old job.

Hearing about his recovery others took an interest and agreed to collaborate with the idea of exhibiting which art, and it is this simplicity that seems to have appealed to each painter as he or she responded to the letter each of them received.

From Krishen Khanna, Angelo Elsa Meenon, Vivan Sundaram in Delhi; Akbar Padamsee, Badiynarayan, Navjot and Altaf Mohandie and B Prabha in Bombay; Amit Ambalal and Hake Shah in Ahmedabad; Ganesh Pyne and Bikash Banerjee in Calcutta; Ghulam Sheikh, Bhupen Khakkar, Rekha Rodwitiya in Baroda; and from Paris, London, New York and Toronto paintings were on show. Prices were fixed and the forewarded and dreaded haggling did not take place.

“Who spoke after the sonnet was over” by Rekha Rodwitiya

“The painters responded unbelievably well, even though they don’t know us personally. The biggest names gave us their works; they were all very sympathetic and one must never underestimate the decency of the artists...”

“Their artists’ sensibility and responsibility towards these patients in very high,” said Thakare, “and it is rare to see so many painters, 139 in all, exhibiting together.”

“It’s for a good cause,” asserted both Prafulla Dabare, and Mario Miranda separately, and finally it was this cause that mattered. The Vatwans themselves admitted to being totally ignorant about the painters’ responses, but they were happy about the results. They would take the first eight destitutes that they have befriended on their walks. One such person was looking up a potter’s wheel with a sprinkler in the rain in the village, when a friendly arm went around him with an invitation to a hot cup of tea. It was also an invitation to recovery and freedom from mental illness.

The proceeds of this exhibition in which paintings are priced between 15,000-30,000, will go towards expanding the Foundation’s activities with a separate 4,000 sq ft centre in Bombay’s Dahisar. The Vatwans always limit their treatment to psychic destitutes and do not accept drug addicts or alcoholics. The idea, they say, “is to treat patients for illnesses not of their own making.”

There are too many painters with a conscience individually, but both famous and lesser-known names have risen to the cause with an enthusiasm and generosity that is rare today: it is a heart-warming endorsement...