



What's in a zine?

Once the flagbearer of counterculture and now the gateway art object of choice for new collectors, zines have made a comeback, making art accessible to all. By **Gautami Reddy**

‘UNFUCK YOU’ exclaimed a zine that was my Secret Santa present two Christmases ago. It was a small independent publication by Bombay Underground, an open collective for artists, made using A4 papers neatly folded and stapled to make a 30-page booklet. Flipping through, I found each spread more captivating than the last as it cleverly communicated ideas spanning feminism, caste and class politics in a raw and unique way. And yet, it was afford-

able enough to find its way into Secret Santa’s sack, and powerful enough to draw in any appreciator of art. I couldn’t help but wonder, could zines ever find a place next to important works of modern and contemporary art?

FAIR PRICE

Fast forward one year and we [Reddy is the head of digital & communications, India Art Fair] opened the 2020 fair with an all-new section dedicated to the medium. It contained how-to guides,

self-help zines, music zines, collective zines, comic zines, political-manifesto zines and inspirational zines, plus silk-screened prints, picture books and informational zines. It was one of the buzziest corners of the fair.

Fair director Jagdip Jaggal feels that zines can help immensely in accessing art and artists. “I have been collecting zines in a variety of formats since the ‘80s and find it fascinating to see contemporary artists continuously push the boundaries of the medium. Without question, it is yet



COVET LIST

Clockwise, from above: *Blueed Book* by Bombay Duck Designs; *Unfuck You* by Bombay Underground; *Unfolding The Saree* by Kadak Collective. Opposite: Marcel Dzama's *A New Revolution*

another form of art-making," she says.

In agreement is Bhaane's creative director Nimish Shah, who considers zines to be original works of art. "I have been collecting zines since I was in college. I think they make fantastic gifts. I love the versatility, portability and adaptability of the medium. Some may be as tiny as Polaroid prints, while others pull out into large posters. I think it is a great outlet for creatives." It's true, everyone can make and own a zine, and it is this accessibility and affordability that makes the DIY of zine

culture so incredible.

Collector Saloni Doshi is another strong believer in promoting them as an art form. "Zines represent stories being told by people, in the way that they want to tell them. These are new, not-so-perfect unfiltered voices that burst with life," she shares. It is no surprise that zines caught the eye of many a millennial buyer at the fair, many of whom seem to gravitate towards unusual materials and the contemporary sensibility that young artists are in tune with.

NEXT IN LINE

But while this medium may have come to be associated with social justice and grassroots movements, often with an anti-authoritarian message, zines are no longer strictly counterculture. Today, diversity is reflected in publications like *Priya's Shakti*, which narrates the stories of sexual abuse survivors; the deeply sarcastic *Adarsh Balak* series by Priyesh Trivedi, a commentary on parenting; and *Unfolding The Saree* by Kadak Collective, which captures the essence of Indian feminism in print, all for ₹275.

Next are the digitally-edited flip books and zines produced by Sameer and Zeenat Kulavoor of Mumbai-based Bombay Duck Designs that are fast becoming a collector's favourite. Sameer says, "I enjoy working with this medium as it allows complete freedom of thought and expression in ways that would not be possible had I been with a major publisher."

The spark of another trend seems to have lit the zine world, where established artists are creating zines and making their work accessible to a much wider audience. Take, for instance, internationally celebrated artist Marcel Dzama (collectors of his works include actors Jim Carrey and Brad Pitt), who released a set of 200 limited-edition zines titled *A New Revolution*, specially commissioned for India Art Fair. Architect Rohit Raj Mehndiratta recalls being mesmerised by the illustrations of the three-eyed woman, which he came across at David Zwirner's booth, so much so that he decided to purchase it in the form of a zine for a modest ₹5,500. "I saw it and I wanted it. It is priceless," he says.

The artist too is thrilled with the overwhelming response. Dzama says, "A zine is a time capsule, a reminder of an artwork made for a show or fair after it ends. There is also something very satisfying about being able to hold it in your hand and have that intimacy with the work, unlike a digital file. Some of my favourite objects I own are artist zines."

If there were any doubts left about these objects opening up the art world, the mix of young and experienced collectors, art students and artists, including Nikhil Chopra and Gagan Singh, all spotted waiting patiently in Dzama's zine-signing line, seems to hold the answer. ■