

Bringing street art into the gallery space

A new arts space in Mumbai, Gallery XXL, is displaying works by practitioners known for street art—in a gallery



Senkoe, 2023, Spray paint on canvas stretched on plywood, 41 x 57 inches.
Image: courtesy Gallery XXL

Myriad imagery, drawn from a range of inspirations—Brutalist architecture, superhero comics, social messaging and the postmodern art movement of superflat started by Takashi Murakami—can be seen within the Kalanje Bungalow in Colaba, Mumbai. This century-old house has transformed into an exhibition space for the new Gallery XXL, which is being hailed as the first gallery dedicated to urban contemporary and post-graffiti art.

That's not the only unique thing about it. Its inaugural show, *Outsiders*,

offers a rare view of creations by 24 artists and collectives, who are otherwise known for their public and street art, inside a gallery space. So, you have vibrant works by the Mexican artist Senkoe, which, in his signature style, offer a reinterpretation of pre-Hispanic aesthetics, textiles and the mystical, mixed with pop culture references. Then there are the cheery black and white characters of an Amsterdam-based collective, The London Police, and a reimagining of Frida Kahlo in an Indian context by the anonymous street artist Guesswho.

The founders of the gallery—Arjun Bahl, Hanif Kureshi, Giulia Ambrogi and Thanish Thomas—helped establish the St+Art India Foundation, an institution which has become synonymous with support for urban and street art over the past decade. “We have closely worked with a community of artists in the past 10 years—many of whom are not just public art practitioners but also have a thriving studio art practice. Their identity runs across both these aspects. However, in India, so far, there has been no concentrated effort to look at the latter, especially from a gallery representation standpoint,” explains Joe Cyril, the gallery director and CEO.

This idea is in sync with the name of the gallery—the “XXI” denotes going beyond the usual. While acknowledging the scale and visuals of street art, it offers an intimate space to engage with an art form usually enjoyed from afar.

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The show has been curated by Amitabh Kumar, a Bengaluru-based visual artist, designer, comix publisher and faculty member at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, who has seen the street art ecosystem grow. He says image-makers in the urban ecosystem have witnessed an expansion of ideas and mediums, be it through publications, comics, urban art or material practices. “The time is right to acknowledge such practices. Often, artists have to work within a network of stakeholders

—the government, the residents of the neighbourhood—while creating public art. However, artists have creative impulses outside of these as well, which need to develop and be given a platform,” says Kumar.

The exhibition also helps the viewer trace the evolution of the artists’ own visual vocabulary during the half-century of the global street art movement based on the ideas of politics, identity and urban spaces. “Outsiders allows you to reflect on the beauty of this movement, while also being forward-looking,” adds Kumar.

The gallery’s founding team had been scouting for the perfect location for six-eight months, till it chanced upon this old Jewish bungalow. “We wanted to bring the community together in a place which was not a white cube. It also needed to reflect the growth of street art—for instance, in Europe, it evolved from industrial spaces and in the US from the subways. In Mumbai, we were looking for a place which was raw and magnanimous,” says Cyril.

Gallery XXL doesn’t want to be confined to one location; rather, it is looking to be part of travelling shows. “We want to take Indian urban art abroad and vice versa. This exhibition is a reflection of that,” adds Cyril.

Outsiders is on view till 21 May, 11am- 7pm (closed on Mondays).

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