

iconoclastic works were made in the 1950's, and buyers today will pay a hefty premium for works from 1955, 1956 and 1957, considered by many as his most productive and best.

Where were the buyers when the “best” works by Souza were being made, when he was 31, 32 and 33-years-old? When the works were radically charged and the prices were ridiculously low? They were sitting in London and New York. They did not need to rely on *false proxies* to recognize his brilliance, that eludes many even today. Where are the buyers, now that the prices have exploded into the million-dollar stratosphere? It is likely that they are sitting in farmhouses in Gurgaon and in penthouses in Mumbai.

While artists like Picasso and Souza may be a rarity, every generation has radical and brave voices making great works of art in some of the most unlikely places around the world. Their work may appear different and difficult to the eye. They may be works that go against public taste, works that create fission in the mind, and get unnoticed or even dismissed. So the next time you find yourself rejecting a work of art, ask yourself “why”?

PROXY BUYING

A proxy is created when you appoint someone else that you trust, to make decisions or take some action on your behalf. Voting by proxy is a popular application of this term. I use it in art parlance to illustrate how people employ proxies to make critical decisions and choices in art. They actively look for validation, and rely on perception or an intermediary past experience as a key decision-making aid.

There is a *complex system of validation* in the art world. Established galleries validate young artists, established artists validate young galleries, art fairs validate the galleries, auctions validate the price, the price validates the purchase, critics validate the artwork, the artwork validates the artists, collectors validate the market, and museums validate everybody. This is the pecking order, and the way everyone in the art world lends a hand in the validation process. It all seems quite effortless, but let's pause and think about this for a minute. Ponder over every link in this validation chain and see how reliable and strong each link really is. And let's examine some of the *false proxies* that get created as a result.

Established gallery proxy

Established galleries validate young artists. They have a halo effect and pass on some of that hard-earned aura to lesser-known artists. People assume that a gallery with former heavyweights will likely nurture a future champion as well. Few nimble galleries are successfully able to make the transformation and profit from the experience, while many others falter. There are enough examples of established galleries which dealt successfully in modern art, but didn't succeed quite as well in the contemporary art arena. The rules, the engagement, the commitment is quite different across different categories in art and naturally require a different response. Most galleries are unable to straddle seven or eight generations of creativity and it is unreasonable to even expect them to do so. How do you think your grandparents, who may have grown up listening to ragas by Ravi Shankar, would relate to Lady Gaga? Even be exposed to her persona,

let alone understand and appreciate her music? Chances are they would recoil at first sight, let alone the sound. However buyers are comforted and easily impressed by the fact that some established galleries, which may have played a pivotal role many decades ago, will continue to translate their understanding, experience, skill set and commitment to new art. Unlike science, art does not necessarily follow a linear pattern of knowledge accumulation. The understanding and intuitive response to art is not built block-by-block. All things being equal, you are likely to hire an accountant with ten years of experience, go to a lawyer with twenty, a doctor with thirty, but in art the same rules just do not apply. A veteran is as much of a novice as a newcomer. Things in art are constantly changing. That is its character and its beauty. And there is no such thing as too much experience or too little. Both ways, it is a *false proxy*.

Established artist proxy

Established artists validate young galleries. Rather than build the gallery program from the ground up, startups and younger galleries are over-keen to work with tried-and-tested works. They spend big money and pluck established artists like low-hanging fruit – even modern masters who are long deceased, all in an effort to win credibility and clients. It is a stale formula, but unfortunately it still works in a market so desperately seeking signatures. Finding and nurturing new voices in art is not easy, it requires perceptive eyes, takes a lot of time, and the risks are high.

Art fair proxy

Art fairs validate both established as well as younger galleries. The best fairs expend considerable energy in soliciting applications from galleries from around the world, and then carefully scrutinizing them for quality. However, fairs have their own politics of selection and sometimes the criteria defies all logic, so do not get blinded by the fair proxy.

Galleries pay a small fee to apply to fairs, and a panel of committee members - comprising the fair management and prominent gallerists of repute, usually screens all applications. However, ability to pay does not always win you a ticket to the weekend party. The odds are stacked heavily against the galleries, with the ratio of applications to available slots as high as 5:1 in places like Art Basel and Frieze. The final decision on who stays in the fair, who is invited and who is wait-listed - depends on the fit between the gallery, its program and the credo of the fair. It is also partly dependent on who you are and whom you know.

Some marquee fairs in the west that are looking to expand eastward, may be more lenient to accepting galleries from specific countries. Others, which are just starting up, may offer carrot deals to established galleries, to raise the reputation of their fair. With art worth hundreds of million dollars changing hands over five days, major fairs - such as Art Basel - draw the best collectors and do the maximum business, so naturally have greater clout. Once you get into Basel - or any of the big four, it is a much easier entry into the smaller fairs.

Auction proxy

The auctions validate the price. Public auctions mean public prices that are supposed to be governed by the free market of demand and supply. The media loves to flash them, dealers love to quote them and buyers love to flaunt them. But these prices do not always give the true picture and are prone to manipulation by savvy market-makers, so be aware of the auction proxy that is detailed later in *chapter eleven* of this book.

Price proxy

The price validates the purchase. Why is it that the moment a work of art reaches a particular price, it suddenly becomes that much more desirable? The answer to this question can be found as much in psychology as in art. This is a phenomenon called fixed-action pattern, which involves an intricate sequence of behaviors based on certain triggers. *Expensive = Good* is one such trigger that we commonly use as a proxy for quality. From an early age, we have been conditioned to think in this stereotypical way and we make choices and decisions accordingly. It is yet another shortcut that new buyers are tempted to use. That is why I advise new collectors to react to the work itself, before paying attention to the price tag. Many great works are ignored because the artist has not yet reached celebrity status and prices are still relatively low. The price proxy is the mother of all proxies in the art world. It is a paradox that I understand, but find particularly disturbing and amusing at the same time.

An exception to the great price proxy, is the *reluctant buyer* who finds an excuse to stay away from the art at any

price. When the price of art is low they quip, “*Where is the artist going?*” In asking the question, they are unsure about themselves and their response to the art. They are more interested in watching the price and the career graph of the artist, so finds an excuse to keep a distance from the art. In the meanwhile, the artist does his/her thing - which usually involves making great works of art, and the critics do their thing, the markets do their thing, the auctions do their thing, the museums do theirs...You get the drift? And naturally the prices go up in tandem with the growth of the artist. The reluctant buyer now mumbles, “*The art is too expensive.*” They are too embarrassed to admit defeat, and cannot stomach paying three or four times what they could have bought the work for earlier, finding another convenient excuse to stay away.

Critics proxy

Critics validate the artwork with their words, and scathing reviews count for some of the worst nightmares for artists and galleries. However, critics are not infallible and have been known to falter. Many great artists and important art movements from Impressionism to the modern day were rejected at first, only to be celebrated many decades later once a fuller understanding of their art was acquired. Critical reviews invite debate and thought, so by all means read as much as you can. But remember, chances are that something *really important* is happening right under your nose, but no one has got a whiff of it yet.

Artwork proxy

The artwork validates the artist and amply rewards familiar images and objects. If an artist has gained notoriety for making monochromatic stripes, the market wants the artist to keep making stripes. He or she can draw stripes, paint stripes and sculpt stripes – make them bigger, smaller, darker, denser. It is of no concern. Eager buyers will lap it all up. But what if the artist dare deviate and do something different - add colour or make a new shape? “The artist is lost, confused, unsure,” says the market. What will happen to my stripe painting? Is it not important anymore? The buyers become insecure. At age 23, Frank Stella had already become a household name in New York. His all too famous “black pin stripe paintings” were shown in 1959 at the Museum of Modern Art, alongside art stars such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. As a result the demand for “pin stripes” and similar work quickly accelerated. It became Stella’s hallmark style and he became a hero. By the mid 60’s, Stella had found something more exciting in a series of 44 new “Irregular Polygon” canvases that were full of colour. In a recent interview with the Telegraph in London, Frank Stella said, “...but by ‘65, I was already working on the Irregular Polygons, which to my mind were among the best paintings I ever made” But it was too radical a departure from his trademark pin stripes, and left many in the art world dazed and disillusioned.

Most new buyers are habituated and trained to look for an instantly recognizable signature style above all else. While some artists are able to successfully stay for a long time in a chosen medium and style, a very narrow signature style

inhibits growth and creativity. People seeking garden-variety work, misread visual repetition employed by artists who are too apprehensive to upset the apple cart. This is how visual cliché gets valorized and validated.

Collectors proxy

The collectors validate the market and approve works of art by voting with their wallets. Worthy works find homes while the rest are shipped back to the artists' studio. Many are destroyed due to lack of storage space and with it gets lost key moments from history. It is now commonly known that Vincent van Gogh sold only one work in his lifetime and died a pauper. Financial and emotional support came exclusively from his brother and art dealer Theo van Gogh, and the artist gained fame and fortune posthumously. There are many other examples of works by great artists that only sold five or ten years after they were made. So much for applying the collector proxy for what has enduring value in the marketplace

Museum proxy

Museums validate everybody and everyone loves museum shows. It somehow feels right. These monolithic shrines stand apart from the art market and are seen as the ultimate validator. Even a group show at an international museum of repute, is enough to get the art world's adrenaline flowing. Of late we have had our share of glory, with shows like *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* mounted at the Pompidou Center in Paris from 25th May to 29th September 2011. This was the most recent blockbuster India show that read like something that has made it to a predictable Top 40 billboard charts list. Like

most shows in mega museums, this one too was designed to be a crowd pleaser. Footfalls and ticket sales are among the top-most important metrics for any museum. National group exhibitions and big thematic shows, no matter how mind-numbing the offering, more than adequately fulfil the objectives. Even though museums are supposed to be above the market, they are getting to be less and less about the art and more and more about the celebration of commercial success. So don't reach for your wallet just because a work adorns a museum wall.

Granted that some of these examples are outliers that are not regularly repeated. But then again, there is nothing "regular" about great art either. Moreover, this is mainly to get you to think about all the stereotypes that inhibit building your own relationship with excellent works of art, and say goodbye to false proxies.