ART in the residence of the Belgian ambassador in NEW DELHI
Artistic architecture of Satish Gujral
updated

The Belgian embassy, a compound with residence of the ambassador, residences for the employees and the embassy, was designed by the Indian architect Satish Gujral. Gujral won the architectural competition in 1980. Meanwhile, the building complex has been listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. The architecture is inspired by the round domes of Indian Muslim architecture, such as mausoleums and mosques from northern India. This characteristic architecture, in octogonal form, surrounded by greenery, is an instrument for cultural diplomacy.

In order to make this function even more visible, it is advisable, in the context of the renovation of the buildings, to start viewing the integration of works of art from a different angle. Gujral is a child of his time, but how can we update this in 2017 to a lasting interesting fact? How can we integrate works of art that reflect current trends, contemporary society, that promote intercultural dialogue? How can we ensure that there are meaningful works of art that stand on their own, that form a dialogue with the other works of art present and that do not detract from the architecture, but, on the contrary, will let it speak even more?

The art selection: Ode to young artists and promotion of intercultural dialogue

A selection of 34 works of art by 18 different artists, including 9 Indian, Oriental and 9 Belgian artists, is presented here. Particular attention is paid to young artists and also a gender equality is almost atteined. The attention to younger artists has multiple reasons. One of them is that younger artists can take a fresh look at reality, bring other things in a sharper angle. In the context of India, this is also interesting in the light of the so-called “demographic dividend”. In contrast to Belgium and a large part of the Western world where the phenomenon of an ageing population is constantly increasing, in the East, e.g. in India and China, there is a population growth and above all an increase in the number of young people in their twenties. This phenomenon is a richness and a thread.

Other themes that are addressed are gender issues, religions and spirituality, frameworks of reference including the canon of art history, science, environmental issues, etc. The booming of the Indian art and IT market, the cheap textile industry and labour force and numerous other topics are not discussed, or only indirectly, but “India is not a country, it is a continent” so an exhaustive story is almost impossible.
The choice of selecting Belgian and Indian artists arouses curiosity and allows interesting interactions to take place that might go beyond art, countries and nationalities. It wants to create openness and inspiration.

The art collection of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

The selection of the works of art was made through prospection in India and Belgium, including a visit to the India Art Fair, the Kochi Muziris Biennale, museums, galleries and international art events. The specific architectural site and the functions the several rooms in the residence also played a role in the selection of the specific artworks.

The art collection in the residence in New Delhi is part of a larger art collection of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spread around the world. This collection started to grow since the creation of Belgium in 1830 and especially after the Second World War with the opening of the international postings. The art works always had the aim to embellish the buildings, residencies of the ambassadors and the chanceries, to represent the national art scene and to create a dynamic work context. This collection contains at least 4500 art works, historical and modern tapestries, paintings and sculptures. More recently, the collection was enlarged by newer media, such as photography, mixed media and videoworks.

The collection is not very well known, as it is worldspread and not permanently visible for the large public. Nevertheless, the MFA has the wish to create transparency about the art collection, to be a liable partner for loan and a mecenas for artists. The MFA is proud of her collection as a strong mark and will continue to improve intercultural dialogue and to explore the connections with the local art scene.
Vivek Vilasini (1964) knows how to put works of art from the Western canon into an original Indian style. He raises issues such as identity, translation, the role of photography, the overall picture and interpretation. “The ambassadors” was painted after a work of the same name by Hans Holbein The Younger (1497/98, Augsburg-1543, London), kept in the National Gallery in London.

The role of ambassadors is represented in Holbein’s painting by the presence of certain attributes. A globe and some astronomical elements indicate that the diplomat must be a man of the world. The interpretation with characters from the Kathakali, with the masks etc. is interesting and typical without becoming stereotypical or caricatural. It retains a touch of humour towards a possibly larger and more extensive conversation topic.

Vilasini also made a work of art after “The blind leading the blind” by Pieter Brueghel The Elder. He placed this scene on a footpath in New York.
The work of Kaif Ghaznavi invites multiple interpretations. The fifty works show close up pictures of women’s heads and especially of their hair. There is a focus on long women’s hair and a dividing line (= Maang). This can refer to the beautiful long hair of women from the region. Ghaznavi is an artist from Pakistan. In that sense the demarcation line can also refer to “the Partition”. The separation of India and Pakistan has had a major impact on the lives of the average citizen. This also applies to Satisj Gujral, who has completed his training in Lahore, which is now in Pakistan. Belgium also has to deal with separations in all kinds of forms, such as language, community, national borders, etc. Nav Haq, a Pakistani-British curator in the Muhka in Antwerp, also pointed this out. It was not until 2017, 70 years after the partition, that a museum was opened in New Delhi about this historical fact.

Ann Veronica Janssens (1956) often works with sensory elements in her installation, including smoke, water, etc. She has built up a consistent oeuvre in this. Some of her works also include free play with reflection and light, including this ‘corps noir’. The work of this artist will, however, also be recognisable to an Indian audience. They may think initially that this is a work by the Indian-British artist Anish Kapoor. Janssens’s work is not a ‘black whole’ but this ‘corps noir’ gives, through reflections and mirroring effects, a lot back to the space.
Patrick Carpentier
Stack 4 & 5
2016
Ceramics
H 76 & H 77 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
Throughout the residence there are several brick niches. These were not really used before the renovation and lost their function. In order to add cachet to these architectural forms and to attract attention to them, a selection was made of a number of sculptures that are also composed of various architectural and sculptural elements. This concerns the work of the Belgian artist Patrick Carpentier (1966).

Two large niches do not show abstract objects, but anthropomorphic figures. These are torsos of young men, heroes. From a western point of view, they could look like images from Egypt or classical antiquity, such as the Kouros sculptures. This concerns the national heroes of the Santhals, especially the two brothers, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu. They were leaders of the Santhals who revolted against British and higher caste landowners in 1855.

These legless terracotta figures were made by Boran Hansda (1972). Hansda is one of the few Santhals who has received formal training. He studied at Shantiknietan's art academy, which is part of the university complex created by the Bengali writer and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, and is located in the area north of Calcutta. Tagore wished to bring development in this “tribal” region. These images were acquired by the M HKA as a result of the exhibition “Santhal Family: Positions around an Indian sculpture” in the M HKA in 2008. Two of them are on show in the residence.

Boran Hansda
Sidhu Portrait
2008

Sculpture; terra cotta
H 105 x W 50 x D 40 cm
Art Collection of the M HKA
Flemish Community
The combination of the work of Marcel Berlanger (1965) and of Anish Kapoor (1954) appears to be very successful. The work of Berlanger an sich and the combination with Kapoor evoke a number of references to science, physics, astronomy and spirituality. It is also interesting to know that two Indian and one Belgian scientists have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics for astronomical discoveries. In 1930, Chandrasekhar Raman (1888, Tiruchirappalli - 1970, Bangalore) received it for the discovery of light scattering, the so-called Raman effect. In 1983, Subramayan Chandrasekhar, in short, Chandra, (1910, Lahore-1995, Chicago) won the noble prize for a discovery concerning the structure of the stars (white dwarves). He also contributed to the mathematical theory on black holes. He received the prize for a discovery he had made as a young student around 1931. In 2013, the Belgian François Englert (1932, Etterbeek) received the Nobel Prize for his work on elementary particles.

As a Westerner you sometimes have the impression that the reference frameworks in India are lost. Their image of human beings and of the world view is very different from ours. Nevertheless, there are also some landmarks and references, such as these discoveries in the field of astronomy. So there is definitely also a work by Anish Kapoor in the residence, creating a wink and dialogue with the work of Ann Veronica Janssens in the entrance hall.

Marcel Berlanger
La disparition des lucioles
2016

Acrylic and oil on fiberglass
H 227 x W 118 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
The works of art by Stefan Serneels (1968), Shreyas Karle (1981), Dilip Chobisa (1978) and Hadassah Emmerich (1974) draw attention to both the architectural space and the works as such. Maybe a small suggestion that there is not necessarily a break or distinction between art and architecture?

While in Serneels’s work, made with Indian ink, there are mainly architectural elements based on perspective interwoven with a cinematic suspense, the architectural element in Karle’s work returns in a spiritual way.

The material of his work perfectly complements the lighting elements. In the work of Dilip Chobisa there is also a mystical touch between the inner and outer worlds. Hadassah Emmerich, living in Brussels and having Indonesian, Chinese and Dutch roots, uses graphic techniques to create unique works. Her work also includes movement and interplay of lines. References to Marcel Duchamp, pop art and (western) art history are not far off.
Stefan Serneels
The passage
2012

Acrylic on aluminium
H 50 x W 60 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
Shreyas Karle  
Ascending Descending  
2016

Brass  
H 20.3 x W 39.4 cm  
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA

Stefan Serneels  
The hall  
2014

Collage on Paper; East-Indian Ink  
H 55 x W 75 cm  
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA

Dilip Chobisa  
There inside…5  
2017

Colour Dust, Graphite on Paper  
Painted wooden frame and acrylic glass  
H 61 x W 6 cm  
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
Johan Muyle
Aum, Nullus est deus nisi ad imaginem hominis
2009

Impression with handmade retouches
H 60 x W 40 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA

Johan Muyle
Pierrot Gourmand
2013

Impression with handmade retouches
H 60 x W 40 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
In the 1990s, Johan Muyle (1956) divided his time between Valenciennes, where he taught, Kinshasa and Madras. In the context of Europalia India (2013/2014), this artist was further discovered during a solo exhibition in the Brussels Electricity Centre. There, large installations were shown with all kinds of ingenious interventions and constellations that also contained a certain amount of kitsch, according to Western standards. A large installation was also shown during the exhibition @yourservice in the Egmont Palace during the summer of 2015. It concerned a three-part arrangement including moving eyes, music and water that was sprayed into a swimming pool at regular intervals. This work was also shown at the São Paulo Biennial.

Anish Kapoor

Light Show
2013

Print, 39 copies
H 72.4 x W 96.4 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
The combination of the Jef Geys’ (1934) cows’ passports with a work by Reena Saina Kallat (1973) seems appropriate here. Cows are a special feature of Indian culture anyway. Saina Kallat, on the other hand, makes many committed works, often linked to environmental problems. Air pollution and environmental issues are topical issues, worldwide, but specifically also in India.
Jef Geys
2 Cow passports
From the sixties
Photograph and colour study
H 67 x W 46 cm (framed
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA

Reena Saina Kallat
Hyphenated Lives (Sun-poe)
2016
Gouache, charcoal, ink and
electric wire on Deckle-Edge
handmade paper
H 104 x W 71 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
In the guest rooms, works by Roger Raveel (1921-2013), Carole Vanderlinden (1973) and Jan Van Imschoot (1963) are on display. The works of Carole Vanderlinden are often disarming and show a sense of belonging to art history. They are very rich, but at the same time very simple. Vanderlinden participated in the Kathmandu Triennial in 2017 with Philip Van Cauteren as the chief curator.

Carole Vanderlinden
Oza
2016

Suite of 3 prints
H 73.5 x W 53.3 cm
Art Collection of the Belgian MFA
Berlinde De Bruyckere’s frail portrait of a woman (1964) is presented here in combination with a rather sharp image, a broken knife. It evokes connotations of women’s vulnerability, the precarious situation of women, violence against women in India.

Shilpa Gupta (1976) is an internationally renowned and committed artist. Each work of art questions the way of life, conviction and place in the spectator’s society. She is represented by a gallery in Brussels, Dvir Gallery, and has had a solo show in the Muhka in 2008-2009. This work was acquired at a gallery in Paris, after being shown at Art Brussels in 2016.

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<tr>
<th>Berlinde De Bruyckere</th>
<th>Shilpa Gupta</th>
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<tr>
<td>Knit together</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>H 60 x W 40 cm</td>
<td>Edition, 11/30</td>
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<td>Offset</td>
<td>H 15 x W 30 cm</td>
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<td>Art Collection of the Belgian MFA</td>
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C. K. Rajan (1960) uses amongst others collages to convey his ideas and reflections. By associating photos from various newspapers and magazines, a whole is created that is often composed of opposites. He combines images with western accents with images from his own culture. In doing so, he reacts to Western supremacy and the inequality between rich and poor. The Muhka showed this series in 2008 during the exhibition “Santhal Family: Positions around an Indian sculpture” and subsequently acquired this series. A selection of these images is shown in the residence.
CK Rajan, Kerala Radical Group

Untitled

1992-1996

Collage, Paper

6 works of H 21 x W 29 cm

Art Collection Muhka, Antwerp
Colofon

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