

STATE OF THE ART

A new generation of Indian artists is transforming the country's cultural landscape. Anupam Poddar has become one of its most prolific collectors, and is helping to showcase the work of emerging talent via an innovative foundation. Shoba Narayan reports

fifteen years ago, Anupam Poddar, who is now arguably India's most important contemporary art collector, was a university student in London. As he was cramming for his computer exam, a news item caught his eye. The Yves Klein show that he had been longing to see at the Hayward Gallery was closing that day. Poddar chose to forgo his exam and took the tube into town to see the show. When he got to the gallery, he realised that the show was actually closing a month later.

"It sounds funny now to recall all this and say that my priorities were still with art, even as a student," he says, "but at the time I was terrified of telling my parents that I had missed an important exam to see an art show."

Poddar, 37 and from a well-off family, is sitting in the living room of his sprawling estate in Gurgaon, outside Delhi, built in muted shades of slate and wood. Dressed in a self-designed cotton shirt and jeans, he is friendly, casual and boyishly charming. All around are sculptures by the artist Sudarshan Shetty that epitomise the kind of kinetic, playful, cutting-edge work that Poddar loves and collects. Large wooden pallets bang on tables. Translucent Perspex shoes roll on motorised wheels. Glasses are lined up on a table that moves from side to side.

"My poor father has just returned from London and I promised him that all the banging would stop after a few minutes," Poddar says, laughing, and instructs the hovering manservant to switch off the installations.

In the adjoining dining room are the skeletal remains of Anita Dube's *Blood Wedding* made of human bones wrapped with velvet and sequins that span the length of the dining table.

"The piece came out of a great personal journey of hers," says Poddar. Dube's ageing physician father was dying of cancer. She got the bones that her father had used to study anatomy and turned them into art. The piece is now on loan to the Paris-Delhi-Bombay show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Poddar acquired it in the early 2000s when he bought works by then unknown artists including Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Atul Dodiya, Gigi Scaria, Ram Rahman, Mithu Sen, Jitesh Kallat, Vivan Sundaram and Shilpa Gupta – all now marquee names in Indian contemporary art.

"I was lucky because I began collecting at a time when artists who had seen the world had come back to India and were trying to do exciting things," Poddar says. "It was the first moment when the next generation of Indian artists was coming into their own. They were trying to figure out how to take their ideas forward and I was interested in their work. They were my friends; the galleries were my friends; we were all one big happy group in it together. I happened to be the right person at the right time in the right place."

Although Poddar tries to make his art addiction sound like a happy accident, the size and the scale of his collection – 3,000 works and growing – belie this nonchalance, and have landed him on Power 100 list and on CBS News's and *Apollo*