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A contemporary response on the history of Chemould, Mumbai's first ever art gallery

An exhibition of archives and artist responses shows how Chemould Prescott Road has been integral to Indian art history since its founding in 1963.

by Urvi Kothari | Published on : Oct 25, 2023

"If you let the moment pass, history may not understand you"—a line from a letter Khorshed Gandhi wrote to Nayantara Sahgal in 1978.

This above statement, written by gallerist Khorshed Gandhi to the Indian writer Nayantara Sahgal, holds true for a moment in the past when the frame moulding company Chemould transformed into **Mumbai's first ever art gallery** in 1963. In Jerry Pinto's book about the gallery entitled *Citizen Gallery* (2022), the filmmaker and documentarist Behroze Gandhi says, "When [Chemould gallery] opened there was this great energy in the air. Everyone seemed to be involved, everyone had a role to play. Part of this was my father's (Kekoo Gandhi) energy I think; he had a way of making you feel you were part of everything that was happening. But it was my mother (Khorshed Gandhi) who made sure the energy was focused and went in the right direction." Nurtured by husband and wife Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, Chemould became a melting pot of cross-cultural dialogues for independent **India**. Since 1988, it has been helmed by their daughter Shireen Gandhi and renamed **Chemould Prescott Road** (CPR). The institution recognises the art frame moulding company as the genesis of this gallery, which in turn has been a catalyst in moulding Indian **art history** and its contemporary present.



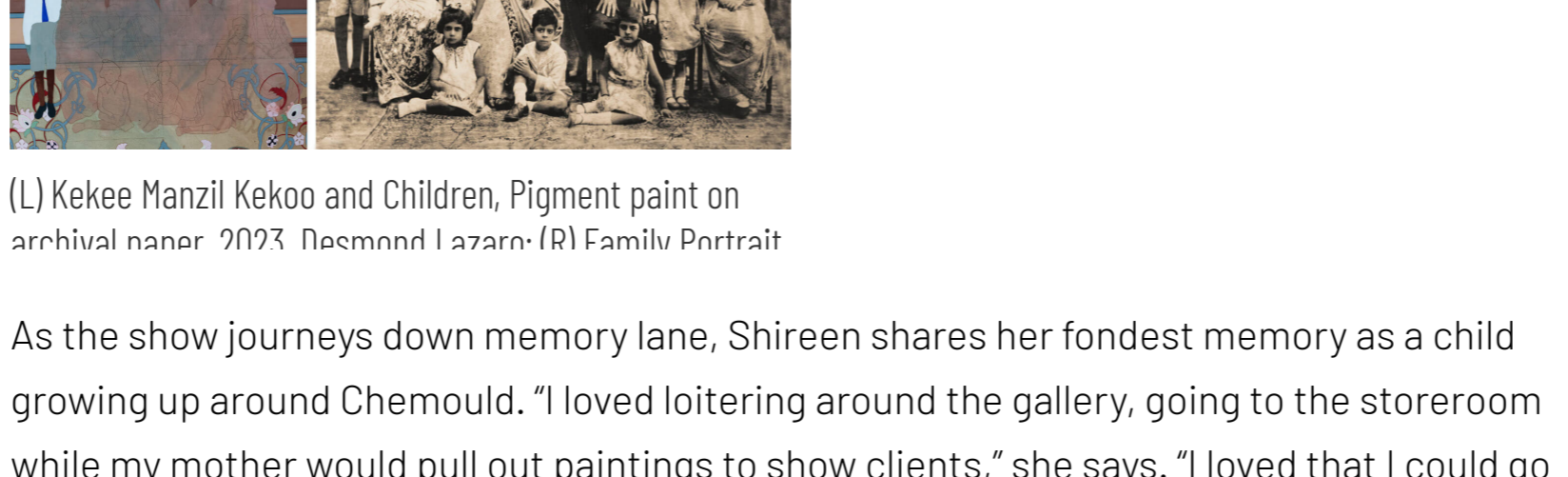
Opening of gallery Chemould (September 16, 1963). L to R: K.K Hebbler, Laxman Pal, Gal Arya (Architect), Slaxes Chandan and Galtonde, other members of the family and staff
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Archives

Delving deep into more than 15,000 items from the archives, the **curator** Shaleen Wadhwa and her team looked at CPR's rich history spanning six decades of Indian modern and **contemporary art**. The resulting two-part exhibition, *CheMoulding: Framing Future Archives* (Part 1: September 15-October 22, 2023), is much more than just records of a glorious past. Over 30 of Chemould's current artists—including **Jitish Kallat**, **Shilpa Gupta**, Atul Dodiya, Varunika Saraf, Nilima Sheikh and Meera Devidiyal—have responded to personalised curatorial prompts from the archives. Their works are surrounded by archival memorialisation of veteran artists ranging from **Tyeb Mehta**, K.H. Ara and Bhupen Khakhar to Rummana Hussain and Jangarh Singh Shyam. This curation is a **retrospective** reflecting on the gallery's public institutional role and its internal everyday idiosyncrasies vis-à-vis its contribution to the Indian and global art movements.



Clockwise from L to R: Photograph of Khorshed Gandhi at Kekee Manzil, Ram Rahman; Photograph of Kekoo Gandhi inside Kekee Manzil, Ram Rahman; Installation view of *Time and Memory*, Reclaimed wood, 2023, Ritesh Meshram
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Archives

Connecting with the gallery's roots, the framing shop and the Kekee Manzil, Gandhi's residential mansion, proved to be major curatorial prompts. Situated in **Bandra**, the Kekee Manzil is a landmark on its own with high-beamed ceilings, an expansive view of the ocean and an impressive collection of Indian **modernists**. The artist Ritesh Meshram reflects on this so-called "House of Art". The door installation makes one feel the urge to walk into the centurion mansion, Desmond Lazaro echoes a similar sentiment as he responds to the Gandhi's family tree with a painted family portrait posed outside the house at an altar below the grand staircase. A special highlight is a painting of a young Kekoo Gandhi.



(L) Kekee Manzil Kekoo and Children, Pigment paint on archival paper, 2019, Naemond I azari- (R) Family Portrait

As the show journeys down memory lane, Shireen shares her fondest memory as a child growing up around Chemould. "I loved loitering around the gallery, going to the storeroom while my mother would pull out paintings to show clients," she says. "I loved that I could go to the cafe Samovar and order a coke without having to tell my parents and sign for it. I loved going across the road to Rhythmic House where we could borrow records, enter a room and listen to music for hours. Coming to the gallery was about all of that too!" Described in *Citizen Gallery*, "Samovar was a cafe on the ground floor of the Jehangir Art Gallery. For decades it was where the art community went to meet and talk... Now it's a narrow passage without a soul which pretends to be a gallery from time to time."



L: Photograph of Salmal Anhad Gotje, Artists Against Communalism Mural at Marine Drive, Mumbai, 1993, Ram Rahman; R: The Longest Revolution, Embroidery on textile, 2023, Varunika Saraf
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Archives

The Chemould archives—which includes letters, price lists, catalogues, invites, newspaper articles and much more—shed light on the artistic sensibilities in India's evolving contemporary art world. One of the many themes is an emphasis on the active involvement of **Indian artists** in the socio-political pulse of the time. A very crucial corner of the exhibition, titled "Room For Resistance And Resilience," responds to the political involvement of the art circuit in post-independence India. This includes political movements such as the Year of Barricades (1968), Artists Against Communalism (1990-93), amongst others. "It is a crucial room that is the beating heart of this exhibition, responding to the past and future. From **Vivan Sundaram's** installations detailing his political participation through the Year of the Barricades 1968 to (the artwork) *A Touch of Brightness* made in response to banning of a play of the same name which highlights the lives of sex workers in **Bombay**," shares Wadhwa. This is contrasted with Varunika Saraf's hand-embroidered installation, *The Longest Revolution* (2023). The artwork title is inspired by psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell's groundbreaking book *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1971). Saraf's images bring to the fore the often overlooked aspect of female participation in social justice movements. Saraf pays homage in her recreation of a photograph by **Ram Rahman** depicting Khorshed's active participation in the Artists Against Communalism movement at Marine Drive, Bombay.



Installation view of *Room for Resistance and Resilience*, Mixed media, 1966-2016, Vivan Sundaram
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road

While exploring the archives, another major gap turned out to be the inadequate representation of **women artists** in post-independence India. "Shireen Gandhi responded to that as she took the reins in 1988. The late 1980s were a definitive turning point for female artists gaining more visibility, which is also reflected in the changing gallery roster with gender equity. But the overarching concern will always be for how much work needs to be done for all types of representation of marginalised communities and minorities," says Wadhwa. Gigi Scaria's installation, *Framing the Unframed* (2023) bookmarks some pivotal historic moments within the gallery-artist-family ecosystem. " Amidst many personalities from the Chemould family, we meet the artists Pilloo Pochkhanawala, Nalini Malani and Rummana Hussain, who have led visibility for women artists within the **Indian art** circuit," she says. Sheetal Gattani's sensitive, muted and textural **painting** pays homage to the gallery's old friends and colleagues **Zarina Hashmi** and **Nasreen Mohamedi**.



Four Painters, Four Directions, Installation of four wooden cabinets treated with polyester putty and zinc powder with photographs, sculptures, and found objects, 2023, Atul Dodiya
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road

While walking around the space, I realised that the show noticeably includes works by living **contemporary artists**, except Sundaram, a maestro who passed away early this year. "Vivan was busy with his **Sharjah** work and a book for Kasuli, so I knew I would have to have a special moment when we could actually break down what he could do for this show. Keeping his fragile health in mind, I would talk about this exhibition without stressing him. I knew when the moment came—the kind of artist Vivan was—he would be able to put his mind to bring something that was both relevant and pertinent. Sadly, he left us mid conversations. The discussions (about the artwork titled *Year of Barricades* (1968) and *A Touch of Brightness* (1966) continued with Geeta (Kapur), his wife, and the Shergil Sundaram Art Foundation," shares Shireen.



Installation view - L: Intervention with archival timeline, 2023, Jitish Kallat; R: Framing the unframed, Photograph and watercolour on paper, 2023, Gigi Scaria
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road

Geeta Kapur's presence is also felt in Dodiya's installation, *Four Painters, Four Directions* (2023) titled after the exhibition of the same name that was presented in gallery Chemould in 1979. Presented within his classic wooden cabinets, Dodiya uses Kapur's original catalogue essays as artistic prompts to journey down memory lane. Through memento photographs, paintings, clippings and objects, Dodiya invites us to meet his old friends and senior contemporaries: **Akbar Padamsee**, Gieve Patel, Bhupen Khakhar and Tyeb Mehta.

After visiting the intensive archives, Kallat opted to present a radical architectural intervention that imprints the past within the present. Kallat constructed a curved wall, a structure similar to the original Gallery Chemould on the first floor of Jehangir Art Gallery (1963-2007). This wall, a testament of time and the evolving generations of Indian art, is used to present the *CheMoulding* timeline—an intensive collation of Indian art history punctuated by key historical moments from 1857 until now. There is a conscious attempt to extend the timeline into the future up to 2050.

By adding the present continuous suffix "-ing", to make Chemould a verb, the exhibition positions the gallery as an actor that is "created" a feasible space for artistic freedom since 1963. This show transports visitors into a time capsule punctuated by various historic moments that have shaped India's art scene, as well as a look into the future. The poignant intersection of the modern and the contemporary offers a sense of homecoming for those familiar to the original space and as invites newcomers to immerse themselves in a tactile encounter with history.



Witness, Installation with LED lights and video, 2023, Mithu Sen
Image: Courtesy of Chemould Prescott Road

An extension to this show, a week-long exhibition entitled *Remembering* is set to open on October 30 at the place where this journey literally began: the **Jehangir Art Gallery**. The curation includes works from collectors who were seminal to the support and existence of the nascent venture when collecting art was a rarity in India. This includes Homi Bhabha, whose collection would later become part of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research; Jehangir Nicholson, who went on to make a major collection; or Devinder and Kanwaldeep Sahney, who bought their first painting from the gallery in the 1980s, which was by Mehta, and paid in installments in denomination of Rs 100, for the Rs. 800 (S8.40) artwork. Shireen says, "This show will be a nostalgic walk down the memory lane, where we can unravel stories of people who come, collect memories, show art that triggers memories, converse about art shown during that time and enjoy a week of making notes about the past to feed the future."



CheMoulding: Framing Future Archives
Image: Courtesy of Inside the White Cube, Urvi Kothari

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Urvi is a writer and curator based in Mumbai, India. She is the founder of Inside the White Cube, a digital collection of art reviews, shows, and general commentary pertaining to the South Asian art. She has contributed to multiple platforms such as *TakeOn Art Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Design Pataki*, and...

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