

Vibrant and colourful

The British painter who has captured Queen Elizabeth II and several British Olympians on canvas talks about the optimistic Indian art market



GARGI GUPTA

There's something happy about British painter Jeremy Houghton's canvases, recently exhibited at Delhi's Visual Arts Gallery. It's the colours, perhaps — bright, cheerful blues, sunny yellows, placid pinks and vivid greens. Or it's the fact that Houghton paints from nature, more specifically the large colonies of flamingoes and other birds that he saw thronging the waters of the lakes in South Africa, where he lived and taught art for five years. "I have yet to find any other natural phenomenon which

British painter Jeremy Houghton against one of his works at the Visual Arts Gallery in Delhi. Houghton captures the large colonies of flamingoes and other birds which throng the waters of lakes in South Africa

offers such a kaleidoscope of creative choices," says Houghton.

What's also pleasing to the eye is the way Houghton paints them, in an abstract expressionist, almost pointillist style using blobs of oil paint and spreading them randomly with his brush so that they run into each other and form into discernible shapes only when you step

back a bit. It's a style marked by spontaneity and impulse, which does not focus on delineating the plumage or features of each bird, but on conveying the sense of dynamism, of movement of the birds which are known for their communal behavior. As if to underline this social aspect, Houghton gives funky captions to his paintings — "Painting the town red", "One night stand", "Pool party", "Living on the edge", and so on.

Houghton, only 37, is one among a growing flock of international artists who are beating a path to India, attracted by its growing art market. Look at the number of galleries in Delhi that are showing foreign artists now — "Whose history? Whose sto-

ries", a collaboration between Shrine Empire and Stainless Galleries has five artists from South Korea; "Narratives of Resistance" at Gallery Espace has three senior ones from Sri Lanka; Seven Art has three Australian artists as part of an exchange programme with a gallery from Down Under; ongoing at Latitude 28 is a three-artist show which includes

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Frenchman Julien Segard; and coming up later this month at Vadehra Gallery is an exhibition of recent works by American photographer Briana Blasko. As for Houghton, this is his first exhibition in India, indeed his first trip to the country. Young as he is and unknown here, Houghton has gathered some acclaim and a few important institutional buyers such as Buckingham Palace, The Royal Collection of Luxembourg, JP Morgan, and Lloyds International Private Banking. He was one of 12 BT official Olympic artists for London 2012 — the only painter among them — in which capacity he was commissioned to paint British Olympians. The result of the two-year

project was 200-odd watercolours in black and delicate sepia-tints depicting rowers and equestrians which were exhibited at Olympic venues all over Britain.

In 2009, Houghton was also commissioned to paint Elizabeth II, the result of which now hangs at St James Palace. How was it to paint the queen? "Every year, the palace commissions a few artists to paint her. Obviously it's a far bigger deal for the artist involved than it is for her," says Houghton, making light of the honour.

As for the connection with India, it came about after a Delhi-based media owner saw Houghton's present suite of works at a show in London and liked them enough to pick one up. "I have sold several of his works in Mumbai and Delhi," says Ushat Gulgule, his dealer here. The paintings are priced rather moderately between ₹2.7 lakh and around ₹11 lakh which, says Gulgule, is a deliberate strategy given that this is his first show here. On his part, Houghton professes to being "very happy" to be in Delhi. "I can feel the good energy, the dynamism and the optimism, which is such a refreshing change from the gloom that envelops Europe now because of the recession," he says.