



Smiling with Flamingos

British artist Jeremy Houghton, who has painted the Queen and London 2012 athletes, makes his debut in Delhi with a collection of happy, upbeat artwork

DIPANITA NATH

In a stark white room of Visual Arts Gallery, where multiple rows of lights glow brightly overhead, the only promise of colour comes from the canvases spread out on the walls. Step closer, and you enter the world of Jeremy Houghton, where the shades come from every bottle of the paintbox and beyond, and the shapes are an army of chaos — from squiggles, stripes and spots to quivering lines and angular blotches. Either the paintbrush had gone berserk or the artist was having fun at work. Or both.

"I'm not trying to convey too much hidden meaning in these works. I am more concerned about the simple pleasure of seeing," says the artist about his first exhibition in Delhi, titled "The Flamingo and the Phoenix" that ends today. "I had heard that people from Delhi are full of life and colour, so I chose a collection that was optimistic, energetic and hopeful — qualities that make you smile," says the 37-year-old.

These works are different from those that have contributed to Houghton's fame — in 2009, he was commissioned to paint Queen Elizabeth II for the 500th anniversary of the oldest royal regiment, Gentlemen at Arms. Earlier this year, he painted London 2012 athletes as the official painter for British Telecom. His royal collection is displayed in Buckingham Palace, Highgrove House and

other famous houses of the UK, yet Houghton, a collectors' favourite, would rather his flamingos hung on these walls.

While many contemporary artists obsess over concept, Houghton bothers more about the visual impact. The works in "The Flamingo and the Phoenix" — with their free strokes and dabs of colours — are a celebration of aesthetic freedom. "The flamingos are tools that let me experiment with shapes. When I begin, I have no pre-meditative



Jeremy Houghton (top); his work titled *Crown Jewels*

thought of the shapes and colours, I paint because it is liberating. Sometimes it doesn't work out, sometimes, I paint over a painting to create something new. Of course, it's important to know when to stop," says Houghton, who has worked in oil for this series.

These studies of nature have an underlying humour reflected in urban titles such as *Girls Night Out*, in which reddish-pink flamingo forms are gathered

against a cream-yellow backdrop. "Funnily enough, a group of flamingos does resemble a group of girls out in town," says the artist. This analogy to street life in his wildlife works is also reflected in *Painting the Town Red*, which has flying and standing flamingo forms against a predominantly blue backdrop. The painting flutters with the energy of hundreds of birds in action. "I must have been feeling strong and confident when I made this work," he says.

The oldest canvas in the exhibition was made three years ago and the flamingos appear as representational forms in red and pink. The more recent paintings — some where the oil hasn't dried on canvas — are, in contrast, abstract. The artist says that he first came across flamingos in Cape Town when he was around 30 and was fascinated by the "flash of colour in the distance as they flew". He adds, "They were like a shimmering mirage in the horizon and I kept going back to the subject. When they fly over water, the reflection and refraction makes them even more interesting studies." Not surprisingly, there is no shade of black or grey in this collection. Monochromes, he says, are reserved for his other works, such as one of old photographs. With the flamingos, he believes in flying and having fun.

The exhibition is being held at Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, till today. Contact: 24682001