ARTS

'I want to be the force for change in the UK'

Philanthropist and collector Aarti Lohia is taking a lead role at the National Gallery in London. She talks to Cleo Roberts-Komireddi

After living in five cities around the world, the collector and philanthropist Aarti Lohia is ready to put down roots in London. She has been on the move since the age of 19 when she got engaged to Amit Lohia, now vice-chair of his family's Indorama Ventures, one of the world's largest petrochemical companies. Having built up an art collection that reflects her family's peripatetic trajectory, Lohia is now poised to plant her flag in British cultural life in a particularly high-profile fashion.

The SP Lohia Foundation, which she heads, will later this month become the National Gallery's leading philanthropic supporter for its modern and contemporary art programming for an initial period of a year — a commitment that has customarily been the preserve of corporations. Lohia says she was impressed by the National Gallery's choice to award its first contemporary fellowship, a two-year programme supporting the research, development and exhibition of new works, to the Indian video artist Nalini Malani.

"For me, engagement with the South Asian community in London is of primary importance," Lohia says. "The artist is number two."

Lohia, 44, is spearheading the foundation's involvement with the arts and dashes off ideas she would like to help realise: public sculpture projects, residencies, conferences that reflect her global experience of art. Her most pressing priority, however, is building her collection. This week's Frieze Art Fair, she says keenly, will be her first port of call. Whatever she buys will be "for the sole purpose of loaning . . . to museums. We're still fine-tuning it. With our [business] presence in so many countries, we are considering, how do we represent art from everywhere?"

Above: Aarti Lohia, shot for the FT by Tereza Cervenova. Above right: works from her collection include Gabriel Orozco's 'Suisai LI' (2016) and Antony Gormley's sculpture 'Another Time XVIII' (2013)
© Antony Gormley/Stephen White & Co

Lohia's relationship with art has been the triumph, she concedes, of the heart over the head. "I wasn't extensively researching anything or anyone," she says. "I wasn't good enough to say, 'This is what I loved.' But I knew what I didn't like and was able to choose what could never be part of my collection as opposed to what could be part of my collection."

Lohia, who studied design and multimedia at LaSalle College in Montreal, persists with this approach. She has no adviser and her collection comprises 200 pieces that she chose because they resonated with her family life. Having spent years as a "chess mum", training her 13-year-old son and trailing him around international championships, she recently acquired works in keeping with the theme: a Gabriel Orozco painting with patterning evocative of opening chess moves, and a large Martin Parr photograph of men playing chess in a Hungarian thermal bath. These works add to pieces by Dayanita Singh, Shilpa Gupta and Rithika Merchant — "very unlike anything I own" with its watercolour collage style.

The National Gallery will not be her first patronage. She has also donated and fundraised for Tate, the V&A, the Serpentine and the British Fashion Council, as well MoMA in New York, and these commitments augment her activities in India, her birthplace. There she is deeply involved with the foundation's Indian entity, Indorama Charitable Trust, and supports the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the India Foundation for the Arts.

Does she believe that the art world, belatedly shaken into action by demands for inclusivity in representation, has genuinely changed? Lohia says she is "optimistic". Then, noticing my scepticism, she illustrates the transformation with her own experience. "In a roomful of heavyweight collectors in New York, who are 20 years older than I am, if I'm speaking they will give me that respect, and pause and listen to what I'm saying, perhaps even write down the names of artists I mention. Would this have happened 10 years ago to me? No!"

It doesn't seem necessarily representative. "I recognise how unique this situation is," she says. But she remains hopeful that "the things I say shake things up a little". "There have been periods when people have spoken about inclusivity, in the 1970s and 1990s, but it dies down," she says. "This time, as a foundation, we want to follow through with more long-term partnerships."

Philanthropy can be scandalous — witness the institutions which have removed the Sackler name from their wings and courtyards. And it is an awkward moment for British cultural institutions who accept money from donors linked with fossil-fuel and petrochemical companies; activists have protested against institutions accepting money from BP.

The foundation, Lohia says, is keenly alert to scrutiny. In consultation with their wider family, which includes the billionaire Mittal branch, the Lohias have decided to act as sole funders of projects in which they are involved. The reason is not "because we want recognition for ourselves", Lohia says. "It's basically to protect ourselves." Though the family and foundation have nothing to hide, Lohia says, "there were some experiences in India where the other party was being investigated."

Being a patron of the arts in the UK is rarely simple. "It's been a bit of a struggle for me to find my feet in London in terms of the foundation," Lohia says. Whereas in the US, she found comparable family trusts willing to open up, "I find everything in London very hush-hush." She wishes "there was a way for me to exchange ideas because it's lonely".

Not that this has deterred her from setting ambitious goals for the foundation. "I want to be the force for change in London and in the UK," she says. "I'm very much on a mission to get the South Asian art scene taken seriously."

nationalgallery.org.uk
splohiafoundation.org

ARTS ONLINE

Celebrating Black History Month
A collection of stories focused on black artists, writers, musicians and performers in Britain

ft.com/arts

The joy of butchering classic tunes

GAMING

Tom Faber

Surely there is only one rational response to hearing a neighbour playing the trombone loudly and badly for hours on end: seethe silently until you can stand it no more, then go over there and give them a piece of your mind. Yet, as I comprehensively murdered Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on rhythm-action game *Trombone Champ*, producing a sound distinguished only by its tuneless flatulence, I was surprised to find myself surrounded by an ever-growing group of admirers. Housemates and visitors poured in. They laughed joyously at my efforts and clamoured to be next to have a go.

There was a time when music games were everywhere. In the late 2000s, many of my friends' living rooms had a corner dedicated to piles of plastic instruments used for *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. We had some good times — there was nothing quite like feeling it was your own deft fingerwork tearing multiplying opportunities to mess up and emit discordant parps and squeals. The difficulty is deliberate. Developers Holy Wow, who are husband and wife hobbyists, have made a game where failure sounds so funny that it is as enjoyable — if not more so — than success.

The song catalogue offers familiar tunes such as "The Entertainer", "Hava Nagila" and the British national anthem. The real stroke of genius, though, is to offer the humble trombone — an instrument that rivals the didgeridoo and the triangle for inherent comedic potential — the main melody in every song. It will come as little surprise that fans have already built their own custom controllers to play the game, some based on kazoos, others on actual trombones.

> As I murdered Beethoven's Fifth on 'Trombone Champ', I was surrounded by admirers

The second example in the return of the rhythm game could not be more different. *Metal: Hellsinger* is a first-person shooter heavily inspired by modern *Doom* remakes. Its twist is that instead of soundtrack. Once you wrap your head around the concept, the genre hybrid works fluidly. I found that blasting demons to a beat got my blood pumping to metal as it never had before.

Indie developers have found ways to insert rhythm gameplay into all manner of genres in recent years. In *Crypt of the Necrodancer* you can upload your own MP3s to battle through dungeons with a custom soundtrack, or you can surf soundwaves in abstract puzzle-platformers such as *Ynglet* and *Onde*. One of the most charming is *Rhythm Doctor*, in which you play a medical intern whose rhythmic defibrillator is the only viable treatment for patients with an array of zany cardiac complaints.

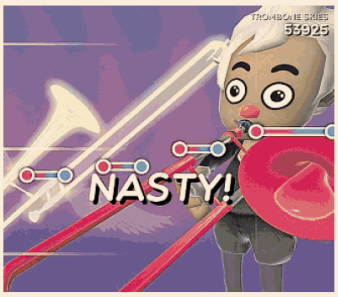
It's thrilling to see how many ways indie creators can twist a genre that once felt stale. All these fresh combinations remind us that deep down every action game is about rhythm, from the dexterous combos of *Street Fighter* to the carefully timed dodges of *Elden Ring*. The perfect synthesis of music, visuals and action can beckon gamers into that heady flow state where their eyes unfocus and they feel connected to some greater pulse beyond themselves — even if it's only for the sake of butchering the "William Tell Overture".

up Slash's solo in "Sweet Child O' Mine" — but the music game market reached saturation by the decade's end and never quite recovered.

Part of the issue was that those games took themselves too seriously. Earlier music releases had shown gaming at its most psychedelic and irreverent, from the hip-hop soap opera of *PaRappa the Rapper* to the neon futurism of *Rez*. Today, indie developers are returning to the genre in droves, reaffirming how joyful and eccentric games can be when music is placed centre stage.

The first case in point is *Trombone Champ*, which in the past few weeks has gone viral, largely because it prioritises comedy over musical chops. The set-up looks familiar: notes scroll along from the side of the screen for you to hit on time using a standard computer mouse, but instead of buttons, you can slide across the instrument's entire scale, blasting demons into chunks of viscera at whatever cadence you choose, you do it to the rhythm of a gnarly heavy metal

'Trombone Champ' is out now on PC; 'Metal: Hellsinger' is out now on PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S and PC



'Trombone Champ' has become a viral hit