

saloon

the takeaway technology

A little application in Dubai

How can a company with a long track record of delivering innovation first – in a sector that favours revolution over evolution – not be considered the best in market? How can a corporation that outsells its closest rival by more than six to one be written off as a fading force? Both these questions hang wearily over Nokia, the mobile phone giant, which once laid claim to 40 per cent of the worldwide market for mobile handsets.

In truth, the company's predicament is far better than the gloom and doom-mongers would have you believe. Nokia outperformed analysts' profit forecasts earlier this year and its market share remains at 29 per cent. The company sold a creditable 108 million handsets in the first three months of 2011, a long, long way ahead of Apple.

But these figures mask some unsettling realities: Nokia's best-selling products are both low margin and lost-cost, while in the key smartphone segment the company has been overrun by BlackBerry and Apple. And no wonder. BlackBerry's proposition values an admirable functionality above all else, while Apple delivers both form and function. And Nokia? It is hard to say. Their products have lacked a "killer-app" for some time – business has suffered accordingly.

All of which should make the forthcoming Gitex Shopper exhibition a decent spectacle.

The consumer electronics show, which opens in Dubai tomorrow, will play host to an intriguing event in its Nokia Lounge on Tuesday. It is there that today's visionaries will be attempting to create the products of the future in a "pitch your app" competition.

The rules of the contest are simple: you have two minutes to sell your idea for a new Nokia smartphone application, which must have relevance to the GCC market, to a panel of experts. And you must do so with enthusiasm, rather than attempting to blind anyone with science: presenters are forbidden from using any electronic aids during their pitch (oh, the irony of such old-school rules in a high-tech competition). In return, Nokia will provide three winners with a package of cash and technical assistance to help coax their dreams into reality.

Apps, of course, are almost wholly the preserve of Apple, so it's nice to see Nokia playing the opposition at their own game.

Apple has built its business and, indeed, its handsome profits, on consistently being the best, rather than first, in market. The introduction of the iPhone in 2007 marked the moment when sales of Nokia smartphones began to slip into sharp decline.

Apps too, were not the invention of Apple, although they were popularised and monetised by the brand. Ditto the tablet sector,

foretold by the Palm Pilot, commercialised by the iPad. But is this last product about to be overrun by a better and significantly cheaper alternative?

Last week, Amazon unveiled the Kindle Fire, its next-generation, colour-screen offering. Like Apple, Amazon is perceived as an innovator. The company reinvented the books business, is credited with creating a viable online retail model for the entire internet and later, via its first tablet, helped millions carry vast quantities of books in the palm of their hands.

The new Kindle Fire will give its owners access to an unrivalled resource of digital content – not just books, but movies, TV shows and music, too. Only in its apps store does its commercial proposition significantly trail its rival.

But will this be enough to topple Apple? Will we be talking about the Cupertino giant as the "California patient" in a decade's time, just as we wonder about the future of Nokia today? That seems farfetched, although the post-Steve Jobs world of Apple appears open to challenge, a fact underlined by Tuesday's fumbled launch of the latest iPhone.

What is certain is the Fire will take the fight to the iPad and that is a good thing. Competition breeds innovation – you'll see that at Gitex this week – and commercial challenges help foster creativity in the marketplace.

★ Nick March



Illustration by Sarah Lazarovic for The National

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this week's essential reading

{ '2011 Nobel Prizes'
by Brian Handwerk,
National Geographic

Art lovers rise to the challenge

Auction of contemporary Pakistani pieces raises thousands for grassroots charity

The chatter is deafening at Bonhams' sale room in London's Mayfair. Snippets of Punjabi and Urdu pepper the conversations of the well-heeled at an art auction that will see the hand of charity reaching from this exclusive enclave in England's capital to the poorest pockets of rural Pakistan.

This is philanthropy fuelled by canapés, by the generosity of the next generation of Pakistani artists and by Pakistan Rising, a grassroots charity.

Matthew Girling, Bonhams' managing director and tonight's auctioneer, quietens the crowd using his trusty gavel, before coaxing bids from the audience using a blend of wit and persuasion.

The list of 10 artists who've donated their work for tonight's sale reads like a "Who's Who" of Pakistani art. The highlight is undoubtedly Rashid Rana's abstract piece *Dead Bird Flying Series II*. It's the runaway success of the night, sparking a bidding frenzy, before eventually selling for £16,000 (Dh90,320).

There's also a simple screenprint from Shezad Dawood, a former Abraaj Capital Art Prize winner at Art Dubai.

Faiza Butt's *The Mouth of Your Eyes* is a digital print mounted on a light box but looks like a hair-dryer encrusted with tiny shells and precious stones. It sells for £3,500 (Dh19,750).

The triptych, *Altarpiece: Em-tombment of the Imam*, is small

enough to fit into a carry-on suitcase and draws curious looks. Its medium of oil and gold leaf on wood has all the hallmarks of an exhibit in the Medieval Italy wing of London's National Gallery or New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

But all is not what it seems, because Komail's trademark is to use the vocabulary of western religious art to discuss Islamic history, mythology and contemporary culture.

Nurjan, a 23-year-old artist with British, Turkish Cypriot and Pakistani heritage, blends the principles of ancient Islamic art with the modern world in her piece *Declaration*. The silhouette of a kneeling figure is created using Arabic script crafted from thousands of tiny Swarovski crystals mounted on jet-black slate.

The result is a simple but beautiful showstopper that takes pride of place on the podium on which Girling holds court.

Its new owner is Aisha Caan, an artist who is also the wife of James Caan, a multimillionaire businessman and one of the stars of *Dragons' Den*, a UK television series.

"I bought Nurjan and Shezad Dawood's pieces because I like their work and I know the artists personally. It's also for such a good cause," says Aisha.

The sale room is filled with a mix of serious bidders and those who are simply keen to show their support for Pakistan Rising.

Wasabi as a wake-up call, beetles that mistook bottles for mates, and failed doomsday prophets were among this year's research beneficiaries, writes Handwerk



Guests view contemporary Pakistani art on display at a charity auction held in London this week. Matt Crossick for The National

Most people stand at the back of the room to avoid the broad sweep of Girling's glance, which passes like a searchlight over those in the front rows.

Zainab Ali is one of those avoiding his stare. She has a more personal reason than most to be at the auction.

Nahid Raza, her mother, has donated *Symbol of Strength* to the sale and Zainab has brought her two children Salmaan, 14, and Aniyah, 8, to watch their grandmother's work go under the hammer.

"It's past the children's bedtime, but I've let them stay up late so they can see their granny's work on sale. My mother was an artist [and] a single parent. She taught in the day and painted through the night throughout my childhood. She has worked hard all her life and now her work is on sale here. I couldn't be more proud," says Zainab.

Bonhams, founded in 1793, is

one of the world's oldest and largest auctioneers of fine art and antiques, but the cause being supported tonight could not be further from that rarefied world.

Poor and illiterate children from some of the most remote and impoverished parts of Pakistan will feel the benefit of the goodwill and cash generated from this sale.

Some of the money raised will go towards building classrooms at the six primary schools that the charity supports in Pakistan's remote areas – five in the Swat Valley and one in southern Punjab. Further proceeds will go towards the construction of an art room at each of these schools.

"We are talking about educating underprivileged children from very poor and rural areas. These are three to 12-year-olds who walk to school without lunch or books and have limited, if any, literacy," says Nuria Rafique-Iqbal, one of

the co-founders of Pakistan Rising. Persuading 10 of Pakistan's foremost artists to donate artwork and an auction house to give up a sale room (and its managing director) for the evening, was not as difficult as Nuria first thought it would be.

"Pakistanis are incredibly generous people and we found a lot of people who wanted to do something to help their country. It was hard work setting the auction up, but I was amazed at the generosity shown by the artists," says Nuria.

"It's a wonderful way to promote Pakistan and to make the point that [this nation] is not like the Pakistan you hear about in the media. It's a chance to showcase the talent in Pakistan.

"There are some brilliant Pakistani artists and the thing about art is that there's no language barrier. Each work shows you a little bit about the people and the culture," she adds.

Not unsurprisingly, Nour Aslam, Bonhams' Pakistani art specialist, is in agreement.

"It's pretty fantastic to get all these artists together. It's like hanging out with the Andy Warhols of Pakistani art. The Pakistani art scene is rising and the artists have been winning awards and international prizes.

"In my opinion, Faiza Butt is the one to watch. The track she's on right now takes in gender and political issues. And although she lives in the United Kingdom, her heart is firmly in Pakistan," says Nour.

The businessman Faisal Mani is responsible for more than his fair share of the £32,200 (Dh181,750) total raised at the auction, having snapped up Rashid Rana's *Dead Bird Flying Series II* and Iqbal Hussain's *The Brothel* for £1,800 (Dh10,160).

"There were one or two pieces of

art I was interested in, so I was always in the running. I've bought a few things at auctions before, but I wouldn't say I've got an art collection quite yet.

"I am interested in supporting emerging artists. I buy a piece because I like it, but it's also an investment too."

Sale over, no one seems too eager to depart into the muggy London night. In fact, the volume goes up a decibel or two as the successful bidders congratulate one another and charity supporters hug one another in celebration.

"It's been a great night," beams Nuria.

"Everyone has pulled together to get behind Pakistan Rising. I'm so proud of what we've achieved and I am looking forward to going back to Pakistan and putting this money to good use."

★ Mary Murtagh