

is reinforced by the design of the central exhibition space: the informal, secular and fundamentally modern improvisations of the maze and its object-spaces are superimposed on a formal, sacred and unmistakably traditional plan reminiscent of the *kund* (temple tank) or *mandapa* (pillared hall), as embodied in the central courtyard-like space.<sup>16</sup>

Access to this walled and sunken courtyard, where a number of deeply disquieting and deeply moving artworks are concentrated, is controlled by a collapsible gate rather than by the ceremonial archway of tradition. Passages or corridors stretch along either side of the courtyard, simulating the alleyways of the big city, where strange and even sinister encounters could take place. These conduit spaces are punctuated by the 60 small watercolours that make up the *Body/Wash* suite (cat.no.21),<sup>17</sup> miniature visions of the body and its various destinies. In one of the passages, *Myoo I* (cat.no.39) and *Myoo II* (cat.no.40), metal cutouts fashioned into guardian deities,<sup>18</sup> rear up to halt the unsuspecting visitor. Unexpected presences, they might reassure or unsettle the viewers: this ambivalence of effect reinforces the anti-Arcadian aspect of metropolitan existence.

And at the farther end of the exhibition space is the "Ramakrishna room," which marks a transition to an experience of spiritual awareness, simultaneously an overcoming of material limitations and a withdrawal into meditative body-centred inwardness. Again, in true Dodiya fashion, the intensely private rapture experienced by Sri Ramakrishna, the mystic and ecstatic worshipper of Kali, the Great Mother, is interwoven with the public narratives of urban history as recorded in the *Honeycomb Triptych*.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, we reach the awesome but tranquil icon of the *Sword of Kali* (cat.no.38), an emphatic free-standing nine-foot-high iron sculpture with fiberglass bones attached; and behind it, a large photograph of the artist's daughter. At the end of our dramatic and polychromatic explorations, we come to a charged silence. Curiously enough, our movement as viewers through "Labyrinth/Laboratory" is not unlike that traditionally undertaken by pilgrims in a Hindu temple: through layers of multiple appearances to the one essence at the centre. Kali's sword is a symbol of that transcendent knowledge which cuts through ignorance. But ignorance, in the spiritual tradition, signifies our ambiguities, vulnerabilities and secret motivations—in other words, all that constitutes our humanity. Can we truly savour such a symbol of transcendent knowledge as Kali's sword, when it would cost us the sacrifice of all that makes us human? And so we turn back, and re-enter the maze of action, extending our awareness more gradually, through the half-glimpsed epiphanies and the probing reflections on collective life that Atul Dodiya's theatre of surprises offers us.

Bombay, May 8, 2001

I take this opportunity to express my thanks to the Japan Foundation Asia Center for inviting me to guest-curate this exhibition. The experience has been a challenging as well as an enjoyable one. I wish to record my special gratitude to Ms. Yasuko Furuichi and her patient and dedicated team, without whose tireless efforts this project would not have been realised.

#### Notes

1. For an account of the earliest phase of this transition in Dodiya's art, see Ranjit Hoskote, "Interim Reports: Recent Paintings by Atul Dodiya" (exhibition catalogue essay; Gallery Chemould: Mumbai, January-February 1995).
2. The implications of this predicament for art practice as well as the altered relationship between artists and their viewership are analysed, and the varying responses with which younger generation Indian artists have addressed these changes are examined, in Ranjit Hoskote, "In the Public Eye" (*The Art News Magazine of India*, Vol. V, Issue IV: Mumbai, October-December 2000).
3. The first four roller shutter works that Dodiya executed were shown at the exhibition *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis* (Tate Modern, London, December 2000-February 2001), in the section devoted to Bombay and guest-curated by Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha.
4. For an account of Dodiya's melding of the aesthetic and the political into a critique of the postcolonial Indian nation-state through the creation of a contemporary iconography, see Ranjit Hoskote, "Tearscape: Recent Watercolours by Atul Dodiya" (exhibition catalogue essay; The Fine Art Resource: Berlin, May-June 2001).
5. For a detailed phenomenology of Dodiya's politicisation of the art-viewing experience, see Ranjit Hoskote, "Experiences Parallel to Beauty: Some Reflections on Atul Dodiya's *Man with Chakki*" (under publication: paper presented at "Saundarya," international conference held at the India International Centre, New Delhi, November 2000).
6. For a concise history of the origin and development of Bombay as a British colonial metropolis, see Gillian Tindall, *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, rpt. 1992). For an exhaustive history of Bombay from the earliest times to

- the present, accompanied by maps and photographs, see Rahul Mehrotra and Sharada Dwivedi, *Bombay: The Cities Within* (Mumbai: Eminence Designs, revised edition 2001).
7. The Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party coalition government of Maharashtra took this decision in the mid-1990s. Intended as a populist measure, it was widely regarded as a retrogressive step: perhaps the government had not taken into account the increasing acceptability of the value of "cosmopolitanism," even among its own traditionalist support base.
  8. Dodiya was awarded a French Government Scholarship in 1991, and was attached to the Ecole des Beaux Arts under its terms, although he received permission to pursue his own course of work and extramural study.
  9. See Ranjit Hoskote, "An Autobiography in Fifteen Frames: Recent Works by Atul Dodiya" (exhibition catalogue essay; Vadehra Art Gallery: New Delhi, March-April 1999).
  10. For a detailed study of Bombay's informal-sector economy, and the complex place and role of the shanty-town within it, see Kalpana Sharma, *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000).
  11. For a study of the collapse of Bombay's textile-mill economy and the city's move towards the so-called "sunrise sectors" of the consumerist economy, see Darryl D'Monte's forthcoming study, *From Mills to Malls in Mumbai: Urban Crisis in a Global World* (provisional title). The beginning of the collapse of the textile mill industry may be dated to the total strike called by the influential trade union leaders Dr. Datta Samant, in the early 1980s; the mill owners responded with a lockout, and no subsequent negotiation could resolve the deadlock. The principal effect of this crisis was that thousands of mill workers were rendered unemployed, and their families forced into petty enterprise or crime; the large "reserve army" of resentful youth that grew out of this predicament was recruited, less than a decade later, either into the Shiv Sena, the strong-arm localist outfit that re-invented itself as a militant Hindu right-wing party, or into one or another of the city's criminal mafias. Over the 1990s, as real estate prices in Bombay climbed steeply to rank among the highest in the world, the mill lands in the heart of the metropolis fell into ruin. They became, nonetheless, the centre of conflict among mill owners, the long-time residential population of mill workers, real estate developers and criminals extorting "protection money" and offering killers-for-hire to settle disputes outside the purview of the law. The government, called upon to arbitrate, failed to adopt policy measures to resolve the crisis; housing experts and visionary architects who had proposed solutions were ignored; and mill owners eager to sell these blocked assets began to adopt extra-legal approaches to land re-sale. At the time of writing, no clear policy has been adopted to resolve the issue, but the mill lands are being leased out piecemeal, informally, to developers establishing high rent apartment blocks and office premises.
  12. For a careful study of the role played by "mythological" television serials in sustaining the Hindu right-wing upsurge of the 1990s in India, see Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
  13. The Bombay Stock Exchange bore witness to two major scandals involving the manipulation of the market and the consequent ruination of many investors and share-market adventurers: the first was masterminded by Harshad Mehta over 1991-1992, the second by Ketan Parekh during 2000-2001. For a detailed account of the nature, causes and effects of the first, authored by the financial journalists who exposed the scandal, see Debashis Basu and Sucheta Dalal, *The Scam: Who Won, Who Lost, Who Got Away* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 1993).
  14. For the vital role of autobiography in Dodiya's art, see "A Dialogue," an introduction cast in the form of letters by Bhupen Khakhar to Amit Ambalal, with an accompanying clarificatory note by Dodiya (exhibition catalogue introduction; CIMA Gallery: Calcutta, February-March 1997).
  15. For a detailed account of Dodiya's fascination with Mahatma Gandhi, and the body of Gandhi images that he has produced since the early 1980s, see Ranjit Hoskote, "Re-imagining Bapu: A Response to Atul Dodiya's An Artist of Non-violence" (exhibition catalogue essay; Gallery Chemould: Mumbai, February-March 1999).
  16. I wish to express my acknowledgement, here, to Dr Apinan Poshyananda's gallery plan of the Heri Dono exhibition, 2000, which was the first in this series of Asian Contemporary Artists' Solo Exhibitions. Since the sub-history of the spatial choices made by curators takes its place in the larger history of a series of exhibitions held at the same site, I have phrased my own gallery plan for Atul Dodiya's exhibition as a response to Dr. Poshyananda's is innovative and even subversive deployment of the Indonesian *pendopo* (Skt. *mandapa*) or traditional pillared hall (see Apinan Poshyananda, "Heri Dono: Bizarre *Dalang*, Javanese *Bricoleur*, Low-Tech Wizard", in *Heri Dono: Dancing Demons and Drunken Deities*, exhibition catalogue; Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Center, October-November 2000). I hope that this choice will be seen as an attempt at an inter-cultural dialogue and the accentuation, however subliminal, of cultural linkages now subjected to the strain of distance and mutual estrangement.
  17. See Ranjit Hoskote, "Body/Wash: Recent Watercolours by Atul Dodiya" (exhibition catalogue essay; Gallery Chemould: Mumbai, April-May 2001).
  18. These figures are inspired by the *myōō* (Skt. *vidyārajas*) or "radiant wisdom kings," who are a class of divine protector figures in the Japanese Buddhist pantheon. The specific impetus for these works came from Dodiya's reading of *Myōō: Buddhist Deities of Wrath and Love* (illustrated catalogue of a special exhibition mounted by the Nara National Museum, April-June 2000; with a Foreword by Hiromitsu Washizuka). On a personal note, I should add that the artist and I bought copies of this catalogue at the bookshop of the Tokyo National Museum, while on a visit to Japan in November 2000.
  19. For a compelling and sympathetic biography this 19th-century Bengali saint, which situates him in the social and intellectual context of an India febrile with religious reform and political revolution, see Romain Rolland, *Ramakrishna the Man-Gods: A Study of Mysticism and Action in Living India* (trans. E.F. Malcom-Smith, 1929; rpt. as *The Life of Ramakrishna*; Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992). For a succinct social and psychological delineation of Indian ecstatic devotionalism, emphasising the dynamic relationship between structure/play, order/transgression and contemplation/action, see Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Since being asked to write this essay, I have been wondering how to proceed. I am still uncertain. What I am having difficulty deciding is what *style* of writing to use, not in terms of technique but in the broad sense of reflecting the writer's viewpoint and its fluctuations. This perplexity could have been expected since I only have a smattering of knowledge of the nation of India and the life of its people and know nothing of its contemporary art. Because of this, I started out thinking that if I could put the process of my wondering into words, I could produce a different type of text than that of a professional expert. This was in fact what both the organizers and I expected at first. However, my perplexity led me into a maze that was more complicated than I had expected. And now that I am beginning to write, my thinking has changed. What makes it most difficult is that I am unable to find a firm place to stand in this labyrinth. This sense of the ground shifting under my feet did not come from abstract self-reflection. Rather, it is the result of my actual experience of India, which has begun to undermine the premises of my thinking. The main purpose of this journey was to directly observe Atul Dodiya's art, but in addition to that I came into contact with many different kinds of people and landscapes there. The memories of these things worked on my mind, irrespective of my intentions, continuing to arouse fragmentary and confused thoughts. Therefore, I will present here some brief notes on how I was affected by this experience and how it resisted unification.

#### Kitsch

I first saw Dodiya's work through reproductions. Upon looking at a large number of his works all at once in catalogs of past exhibitions, the word that first entered my mind was "kitsch." I believe that this would be a common reaction of many people both inside and outside of Japan. In fact, the concept of kitsch seems to have currency in India as an idea filled with critical possibilities, and while I was there, one of Dodiya's works, *Tomb's Day* (cat.no.2) was included in an exhibition called "Kitsch Kitsch Hota Hai" being held at India Habitat Centre in Delhi.

The concept of "kitsch" has been treated negatively throughout the history of modernism, especially in the well-known essay by Clement Greenberg, as a form of pseudo-art that distorts and degrades the avant-garde. This trend began to change with the Pop and Camp of the 1960s, and kitsch was viewed quite positively in the 1980s, the chaotic heyday of Postmodernism. Supported by the methods of appropriation and simulation, kitsch began to be used strategically as a category in diverse areas and sites of cultural production and consumption. In this cultural atmosphere, Japanese stars like Morimura Yasumasa and Mori Mariko began actively showing internationally. The play of "quotation" that characterized the work of these artists became established as a general grammar of art-making, so much so that it can no longer be seen as something new.

The 1980s was also a time when "globalization" was a catchword in the contemporary art scene while much attention was given to what was happening in Asia, Africa, and South America. Kitschified copies of Western art flourished in these regions as they were inundated by belated waves of modernism. Artists who were surrounded by these forms of art saw the shift to Postmodernism, and the tendency to revalue kitsch, as opportunities to reexamine the latent possibilities in their own art. The fact that an exhibition on a theme like "Kitsch Kitsch" can be welcomed in India today is due to the atmosphere created by Postmodernism.

What I learned from Dodiya's works and plans for this exhibition as well as from experience of cities like Bombay and Calcutta is that there are multi-dimensional twists and turns and nuanced shades of meaning in the seemingly simple category of kitsch. Many works of art with kitsch elements that have emerged from the Postmodernist movement in Japan and the West appear flat in the sense that the quoted images they are composed of are all processed into signs of equal value to be cut out and pasted together on the same plane. Dodiya's paintings are more textured and layered, producing a tactile sense of discord. The interest of kitsch since Postmodernism lies in its defiant presentation of quoted and juxtaposed images, whether taken from past works of art or present popular culture, all placed together on the same plane/field of exchange as consumer culture materials (or properties), but this does not explain Dodiya's strategy of quotation. His work has a quality that exceeds or transcends this superficial

"sampling" or "play of the surface," to borrow clichés from the postmodern discourse of the 1980s, which is motivated by an ideological indifference to the meaning of the images. In retrospect, the resistance I sensed to assimilation into this discourse was what made me want to analyze Dodiya's works more carefully.

#### Difference

It is obvious from a look at Dodiya's works that they are pervaded by a radical, relentless eclecticism. Images from many different sources overlap on the same plane, creating a new synthesis (if it can be called a synthesis). However, why does his eclecticism go beyond the surface of the picture plane, solidly conveying the nuances of his lived world?

One reason is the character of the images the artist chooses to combine. The images that first strike the eye—Gandhi, the heroes and heroines of the Indian mass media, and maps and landscapes of India—have obvious associations with contemporary Indian history, even for a viewer who is not particularly knowledgeable of all its ins and outs.

These images are mixed with self-portraits and images of relatives, Indian and Western artists who have had a profound influence on the artist, and ancient Indian gods and legends. There are also well-known political figures like Clinton and Putin and images of a quite different kind, media images of disasters such as floods, prisons, and suicides by hanging. This dazzling and disparate array of images does not provide the viewer with a single comprehensive message, but it is possible to grasp threads in the tangle that link certain ideas together. At the end/origin of these threads is the artist's life in the violent existential chaos of the city of Bombay, including his involvement in its political and social dimensions.

In viewing Dodiya's art, one is jarred into a new sense of the multi-dimensional depth and breadth of the concept of "difference" that has been associated with postmodernist thinking. The postmodern idea of difference has called into question the systems of values that were embodied in modernism, performing the critical function of revealing their fictional character. It has liberated the text from the author, formerly considered to be its ultimate source. And it has led to the reexamination and resetting of the boundaries of previously fixed categories like art and popular culture. In spite of this critical role, however, the idea of difference often resulted in simply fusing categories that had previously existed in a hierarchical relationship, creating a situation in which they were stored up as interchangeable units of image capital under the name of "visual culture." In the postmodern context, difference always ran the risk of dissolving into a concept or perception of simple stylistic or formal/textual difference. When the concept of "play" first came into operation, it contained suggestions of critical transgression, but it was eventually defanged and domesticated as a sign of mere entertainment. In retrospect, the risk it suggested turned out to be real.

The viewer is obviously made aware of "difference" in Dodiya's work through the juxtaposition and contrast of images that appear in the format of individual paintings and the assembly of paintings presented in an exhibition. In this array of images, he consistently presents political motifs and images of tragedy in Indian life. In this exhibition, they are brought together in an overall composition that helps the viewer perceive a "vertical" difference that resists reduction to stylistic difference on a leveled field of image exchange. The three-dimensional coexistence of diverse images makes it impossible to recover "chaos" as a style—another name for homogenization of difference—and gives a palpable reality to the real differences created by political and economic inequality.

However, this palpable, tactile quality of diverse difference is not just a result of "what is quoted" as imagery. It is inextricably linked to the materials and techniques used to depict the images and the method of presentation. In this regard, it is important that Dodiya prefers to paint and to make the supports with his own hand. His works are highly finished but without the slickness that the viewer might associate with computer graphics. At the same time, they are devoid of the fetishistic brushwork that emphasizes the existence of the artist. Dodiya avoids these extremes while incorporating elements reminiscent of cheap signboards and posters found on the street or such attributes of the space of everyday life as doors and furniture. Considered

in terms of the function of the picture plane, his work emerges from a network of negotiations and differences between four main sites—the computer screen, the wall of the museum, billboards in the city, and the interior of ordinary rooms. To this we might add a fifth site, the pages of books, since most of his appropriations are based on images reproduced in books. Dodiya's experiments with the support are fueled by a desire to create the space of his paintings in the gap between these five sites. He adds legs or handles to the canvas, "alienating" it in the Brechtian sense by making it into a furniture-like object; uses varied formats such as the triptych, which recalls ritual space; paints his own images directly over the reproductions on the pages of a book; and executes paintings on the kind of roll-up shutters found on Bombay stores, even painting images behind a shutter so that they are revealed when it is raised. Painting on novel supports that might be seen as "impure" is a way of producing chance encounters between objects that prevents the artist from becoming absorbed or immersed in the act of painting as such. It makes his practice labor-intensive. As a result of this sort of negotiation with already socialized space, the support gives concreteness to the sense of difference suggested by the jumble of socialized images, making them tactile.

### Bombay

The sense of three-dimensional difference that I read out of Dodiya's paintings was greatly influenced by my experience of the city of Bombay. Although I was only there for two days (out of my nine days in India), the memories of visiting Dodiya's family home, my firsthand experience of Bombay streets flooded with diverse people and images, and my exposure to the mass media of India altered my way of perceiving the paintings.

For example, I saw many shutters of the type Dodiya employs in his art actually in use in the storefronts of the city. All of the shops lining the streets had entrances of the same size fitted with the same kind of shutter. These shuttered entrances continued on endlessly on many of the streets, and I imagined how the rows of closed shutters must have added to the tension of the Bombay riots in 1992 and 1993. It would be easy for anyone who has seen Bombay to imagine such a scene. It is significant that Dodiya has painted images of missing children based on childhood portraits of his sisters and brothers. Although not directly related to the Bombay riot, they nevertheless reverberate with the memories of the children lost in the riot, the artist's own childhood in the old city of Bombay that is now lost. In other works, the shutters are opened to reveal tragic images of the history of conflict between conservative Hindus and Muslims. An example is the portrait of Ritwik Ghatak, the film director who sought refuge in Calcutta when Bangladesh gained independence. Since I have only a superficial knowledge of contemporary Indian history, I am not qualified to speak of the historical background of the painted images. This information is best provided by Dodiya himself and Ranjit Hoskote, the critic who helped curate the exhibition.

For my part, I would simply like to report my own impression of how memories of the city of Bombay resonate forcibly with the experience of seeing Dodiya's art. In addition to the shutters, Dodiya also uses ladders in this exhibition that automatically recall the steel staircases leading directly from the street to the second floor of houses in Bombay. The existence of such connections does not mean that an experience of Bombay is a necessary prerequisite to an appreciation of Dodiya's work, but it indicates that the fundamental structure of the work refers to the urban space of Bombay and historical incidents that took place there. It is significant in this context that the structure of the work suggests that it should be read like cinematic montage. Compared to Dada photo-collages, for example, it is clear that all Dodiya's quotations obey the rule of being "readable" semantic units that can be recognized for what they are—even if they are fragmented or layered. Also, the sequential process of viewing suggested by the frequent use of the series format or the physical movement of climbing up and down a ladder urges us to produce narrative readings. These structures bring the experience of Bombay reality and the images in Dodiya's art into an interactive relationship in which they energize each other.

The environment which provides the setting for contemporary art in Bombay, indeed in India as a whole, is very different from that in Japan. An example of this difference is found in

the name of Bombay itself. I had naïvely thought that the currently official name, Mumbai, was more “politically correct” because it expunges the memories of the colonial past. However, when I went to India I found that the matter was not that simple. It is a true that the name Bombay was a British modification of local pronunciation that eventually became the internationally accepted name, but the change by the regional government to the more genuinely local Mumbai reflects the literally “reactionary” policies of the Hindu right who had taken over the local government. Therefore, the names Bombay and Mumbai represent a choice between the poles of memories of colonial rule and a rigid nationalistic response to the past, so most artists and critics, who dislike the connection with reactionary nationalism—as embodied in the Hindutva slogan, “One nation, one people, one culture”—prefer to use Bombay, since it suggests connections between diverse cultures.

I was surprised to find that India is a land where everyone is unavoidably assigned a position in political space, even when choosing what to call their city. But I was even more surprised at the extent to which politics has become a popular spectacle. The phrase, “world’s greatest democracy,” often crops up in discussions about India. What was surprising to me is that this refers to the fact that voter turnout is especially high in India and not just that it has the largest number of voters of any democratic country in the world. This high turnout is caused by the problems of social inequality, as exemplified by the old caste system. Elections have a major function as an avenue of political participation and protest for the lower classes. While this is one of the ideals of democracy, it has brought about a downgrading of politics and the use of spectacle to appeal to the masses. It is well known that there are many ex-actors in Indian politics, and the media, especially films and television tend to treat political differences as elements of drama. Thus, the use of spectacle in politics is advanced by both the politicians and the media. During my short stay in India, I had the impression of being continually bombarded with melodramatic political films as well as the words and images of politicians painted on signs and walls all over the city (for some reason, there are more painted images than photographs).

What happens when these political spectacles created through mass propaganda are tied to the religious divisions slumbering in the old strata of memory? One would guess that the Bombay riots were caused by a chemical reaction of this sort, but this sort of thing defines the contemporary culture of India on an everyday level. Another thing that I did not realize until going to India was how frequently the word “secularization” is heard in conversations of artists and critics. It is difficult to understand how important this concept is in Japan where everything in everyday life is thoroughly secularized. Obviously, it is a concept that opposes the conflict and discrimination arising from the absolutist religious doctrines of the Hindus and Muslims throughout contemporary Indian history. Although I thought I had an intellectual knowledge of this, I became aware that I had no idea of the urgency contained in the word “secularization” as it is used in India.

In one actual example, a demonstration was held to protest the solo exhibition of a Muslim artist, M.F. Husain, in a Hindu-dominated region, and his art was damaged. Dodiya has produced paintings that run the same risk, such as *Man with Chakki* (cat.no.17) in the collection of the CIMA Gallery of Calcutta, which appears in this exhibition. Above a map of India and Bangladesh, constructed with many small round mirrors and enamel paint, the squatting figure of a man turning a stone mill is shown defecating all over the map. The curator of the gallery told me that this painting can be shown in Calcutta, where there is relative freedom of expression, but he said that Dodiya had been concerned about the reaction to it. If it were shown in Bombay or Delhi, it is possible that it would be attacked by Hindu conservatives. In a milieu where the pressure that can be put on artistic expression by religious factions is a real, everyday concern, the idea of secularization is much different from that in Japan where the situation is more relaxed (except for works dealing with images of the Imperial family). Because of my previous ignorance, I was amazed at how much positive hope was invested in this word.

Considered from a different angle, however, it is doubtful that Indian religious conflicts, or any of the religious conflicts in the world, are based purely on doctrinal grounds. They necessarily involve secular conflicts and discrimination, and there may be situations in which

secular issues are fundamental and religious differences are employed simply to justify or hide the real problems. Trouble between two factions may be stirred up into simple religious or class conflict by the process of spectacularization.

With such considerations in mind, we might be able to appreciate Dodiya's radical eclecticism, with its kitschy appearance and structure arousing the desire of the viewer for a reading, as an attempt at artistic intervention from inside a social environment inundated by spectacles. This art is not just proposing cultural tolerance by juxtaposing images of different origins, but freshly foregrounding the fact that spectacles are actually formed, always and already, of complex entanglements of eclectic images. Paradoxically, kitsch can lead people to a purified faith in spite of its mongrel origins. Kitsch has the greatest effect when it leaves behind the impurity of kitsch and is elevated into an emblem (as seen in the strategies of new religious groups in Japan.) Dodiya's works take the opposite course, raising people's awareness that the real cultural power of kitsch lies in its essential impurity.

Dodiya's art should not be understood in terms of the simplistic concepts of globalism and multiculturalism. The former always has the tendency to unify concepts of difference into style as capital. The latter risks falling into the trap of advocating co-existence of discrete cultures on the premise that their differences are absolute, and each culture is monolithic and internally fixed. The lesson of Dodiya's work lies precisely in its opposition to the pressure from both these extremes. It urges us to grasp the concept of difference multi-dimensionally. The blending of different elements continues to act as a source of nutrients for the nation of India and the separate communities that have emerged within it, reminding us of the ever-present possibilities for crossing boundaries that always and already exist.

Postscript: In writing this essay, I relied extensively on the ideas and views of many people I met in India. The following individuals in particular served as guideposts to my thinking: Atul Dodiya himself; Ranjit Hoskote, the critic and poet who worked together with Dodiya in organizing the present exhibition; the critic Geeta Kapur, who kindly agreed to an interview in Delhi in spite of her busy schedule; and the painter Bhupen Khakhar, who provided sincere answers to my questions at the home of Vadodara (Baroda). I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to them.

(translated by Stanely N. Anderson)

1.

When a terrain is strewn with signposts, glass-framed maps, enquiry offices and eager guides, it is an adventure to decide to go out on an adventure. Atul Dodiya's paintings are products of a defiant mind and exploring hands. They present a new site for interrogation and integration. Not unlike the *Upanishadic*<sup>1</sup> philosophers of dissent, the rebel poets of *bhakti*,<sup>2</sup> and Gandhi—on whom he has done a series of watercolors—Dodiya suggests that thorough interrogation is true integration. In and through his paintings, Atul Dodiya enquires into the many dimensions of his own self, of life around him, and also the art of painting and its tools and strategies. The structure of his paintings shows that sites of interrogation, if constructed as open houses where the process of interrogation and the person of interrogator are questioned before the interrogated is, become sites of integration. Dodiya's early work has been seen to have photorealism in it, and critics have seen autobiographical narratives in several of his paintings. A closer look at the subsequent phases of his work shows how his art embodies multiple, often tense and mutually contradicting realities of contemporary India and is a critical biography of its culture.

2.

Born in 1959 at Bombay in Gujarati-speaking family, Atul Dodiya's location in art and culture of India is that of an insider who feels free and capable of negotiating all kinds of boundaries. The dynamics of the journeys of perception and interrogation extend from inside to out, rather than from outside to the inner spaces. He is an explorer, not an intruder. The family, the city and the culture constitute his home-site. He interrogates them intimately: affectionately in the early phases of his work, and, in later phases, in desperation and anger. Paintings like *Crucifixion* (1994) and *No Fresh Lesions* (1994); *Iceberg* (2000) and *Shipwreck* (2000) show this continuity and shift.

But none of these three locations is his confinement. Starting from his journey to Europe and stay at Paris (1991-1992) on a French Government Scholarship, extending to a five-week artist's residency at the Civitella Ranieri Center in Umbria, Italy (1999), he has been moving into the territories of several other sensibilities, styles and strategies of painting. Stranger enough in his homeland and at home enough in strangers' lands, Dodiya has interacted, with purpose and power, with self and with the other. Starting with the boyishly mirthful self-portrait, *The Bombay Buccaneer* (cat.no.3), in which the images of David Hockney and Bhupen Khakhar are superimposed on the shiny dark glasses of the Dodiya James Bond, extending to the *Body/Wash* series of watercolors done in 2000-2001(cat.no.21), in which Dodiya has superimposed his watercolors on the reproductions of pale black and white watercolors by the German painter Gotthard Graubner, Dodiya has continued a conversation with several other artists and art-traditions. As Dodiya's self-portraits show, his own location varies: he moves from the mythic lotus emerging out of Vishnu's<sup>3</sup> navel, to the historic group sharing Gandhi's joke about post-dated check, to the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in front of a René Magritte illusion. While omnipresence is a divine prerogative, multiple presence is a right that an interrogative artist like Dodiya claims for himself. The restless movement corresponds to a growing anxiety of the artist as he watches the changing social, economic, political conditions of society around him. He is desperately looking for adequate strategies, as he moves from site to site, city to city.

Among these cities, native and foreign, is city of Dvaraka,<sup>4</sup> founded by Krishna himself—the City of Gold. Dodiya's *Palace Guest* (cat.no.16) shows the glitter of Dvaraka. Sudama, a learned but poor Brahmin, a childhood friend of Krishna, has just arrived, unannounced, uninvited, in search of survival. The Lord and the Lady of the Palace welcome him warmly, wash the guest's feet with obvious respect. But the semiotic space of the painting shows rigid figures of soldiers, in present day uniform, with rifles in their hands, on three sides of the new arrival. A spiral staircase, with its base superimposed on Sudama's chest, leads nowhere at its upper end. On the upper left corner is the image of a drawn down roller shutter. This shutter in Krishna's palace is the earliest roller shutter in Dodiya's paintings, indicating its antiquity! It is interesting to note that Bombay is popularly known as the Gateway of India, and the name of the ancient city of



Dvaraka also means "the Gateway," in its case to ancient India.

But those who come to Dvaraka/Bombay/Mumbai, do bring a few things with them. Sudama of the *Bhagavata Purana*<sup>5</sup> brought a handful of puffed rice as a gift to the Lord of the Golden City. Those who arrive by trains and buses today, bring what is named by an intimate Gujarati word, *des*, i.e. a homeland. *Des* is not to be confused with *desh* or *svadesh*, country or nation, a formal entity of political power. *Des*, a word from common speech, is an informal, personal entity, never lost on any external battleground. In just a few places Dodiya gives a glimpse of this abstract notion. *Letter from a Father* (cat.no.4) is one such place.

The Island City of Bombay is also a city divided. Through its railway stations with overcrowded trains entering the city over long bridges, the city is connected with the hinterlands of India. Through its seaport filled with cargo ships of its present day and the passenger liners (as in Dodiya's watercolor *S. S. Rajputana*, 1998) of yesteryears, and through its airports, domestic as well as international, the city is linked to a world which is external in more than one way. In this sense, it is a twin-city, two places with one name. Not many of its residents live in more than a fragment of this problematic totality. To have a single address in the twin-cities is a challenge that many authors, painters and performers have shied away from. They prefer to live in south Bombay, and write on colonial/postcolonial India in English, and keep an epistemological distance from the vernacular areas north and east of the city. Dodiya's paintings interrogate the immensity of pre-colonial and extra-colonial India, as well as the immediacy of the colonial and postcolonial India. In the tradition of Indian epic narrative, a heroic warrior is described as *savyasachi*, i.e., capable of using weapons with both of his hands, and as *ajanabahu*, i.e., with long arms reaching down to the knees of his legs.<sup>6</sup> The adjectives are applicable to Atul Dodiya as an artist, for compositional control over various modes of presentation and for the range of his perceptions and sympathies.

Many of Dodiya's paintings use the written language as a structural, visual element. The language that is seen in his paintings on Gandhi, as well as in *Letter from a Father*, is his mother tongue, Gujarati. It was also the mother tongue of Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote extensively in Gujarati, translating his books later into English when needed. Gujarati was also the mother tongue of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan. Jinnah lectured and wrote in elegant English. His wife was from a Parsi<sup>7</sup> family, of the Zarthroastian community. The Parsis speak Gujarati as their mother tongue and have contributed greatly to Gujarati literature and theater. Earliest travelogues in the language are by Parsi authors. Gujarati Diaspora is centuries old, spread over Africa, Europe, America and Asian countries to the east and west of India. It has been, mainly, a Gujarati-speaking diaspora.

A renowned Gujarati poet, Umashankar Joshi, once asked through a poem of his: "what sort of Gujarati is he, who is only a Gujarati?"<sup>8</sup> To be a Gujarati, the poet says, you have to be other-than-Gujarati also, and to be Indian is also be other-than-Indian.

Dodiya uses Gujarati script in his paintings to bring into play the multiple reality of the language operating in its many semiotic sites.

### 3.

To be alien enough when among one's own people, and to be native enough when among aliens, to function as a critical insider and a fresh interpreter of one's identity— such an ontological mode enables an author, a painter, a performer to be a major presence within his own culture. Atul Dodiya's relationship, as a person, with Gujarat, Bombay and Europe and, as an artist with traditions of art nearer home and away from home, has enabled him to be such a presence in India.

He is able to see life around him differently, see it more clearly and see it more completely. India is not exhausted for him either by its postcoloniality or by its glorious antiquity. As a major artist of his time, he attempts through all techniques and strategies of his art, inventing newer ones with urgency and rare energy, to understand, interrogate and integrate into images a seemingly fragmented, "wounded," scattered reality of personal and social life around him. Having observed the artist's relationship with his mother tongue, it might be useful to trace his

journey as a painter through some of his works which present images of women: sister, wife, mother, daughter, goddess, actress, she-devil or mad woman. It is in itself a telling fact that there are so many such women inhabiting and controlling the visual space available in Dodiya's paintings.

The women come to this semiotic space from everywhere: from home, from hospital, from heaven, from history, from mythology and from desperate worlds of contemporary politics and economics. Nayna is one of the earliest and closest. She is Atul's elder sister. There are two paintings on her: *O Nayna!* (1994, fig.1) and *Heroic Fiddling* (cat.no.5). They present images of pain, loneliness and confusion of the family when she was hospitalized for months, suffering from a crippling pituitary tumor.

*O Nayna!* shows only a bare hospital bed, gray-striped bedcover, occupied only by some instruments of carpentry. There is no one nursing, nor anyone to nurse. Two coconuts, with deep cuts of a sharp knife on them, accentuate the situation. The pillow cover, with its hand-embroidered rose, has clearly been brought for the daughter from home. A *raksha*, traditional protection-thread, which a sister puts around her brother's wrist, is visible on the bed. But nothing renders Nayna visible. The institutional, public speech has muted the personal and familial voices. The painting gives a close up of invisibility.

*Heroic Fiddling* shows Nayna, weak and lonely. A few matchsticks thrown into the space below the woman have now replaced the hardware of the earlier work. Nayna is now visible, but she does not look at anyone. She is looking out of a balcony. There are three more figures: two boys and a young man. The younger boy is seen at the lower left border of the canvas. He is playing with his shadow. The older boy is at the right border of the canvas. He is standing, apparently near the playground of his school with basketball poles. But his hands are limp against his legs. The shadow of his body extends in a direction that is different from the direction in which the shadows of the basketball poles extend. The third male figure, only a bent back of his head and part of the back visible, is seen at the fourth border of the canvas. The skill of the artist enables the viewer to know that he is the brother, the maternal uncle, the painter himself. A family fragmented through pain and helplessness, each in his/her own dim light, with their faces partly or fully invisible. But in the center is the figure of a woman whose face is fully and dramatically revealed and instantly recognized by all the viewers, without any help from a skilled artist: the face of "Mother India," the actress Nargis in a blockbuster Hindi movie of that name. The only patch of bright color on the canvas is her light red sari. Her right hand has been raised in a public and publicized gesture of defiance. For all this, Mother India of the movies is a "shutter" on personal grief of a family.

In contrast with the theatrical acting out of pain and defiance, are the gestures of apparent insanity of the *Woman with Chakki* (1999, fig.2). The film actress was using her arm to lift a plough; the skeletal female figure is doing a more practical work: she is working on a grinding stone, the traditional *chakki*. In this she is much more like the hardworking, famine-struck women of India. The grin on her bone-and-teeth face might look sinister but could be a simple, eager smile of a woman in rags who has finally found some grain, (which she desperately protects between her legs), to feed herself and her children. The colors around her are warm gold and yellow, a black, twisting branch with a few leaves weaving through her and around her. She could live with it—for now. All her attention is centered in seeing to it that the grains do not fall out and go waste. But there is ambivalence in this image. The grinding stone is a traditional symbol of death. Is she a crazed mother, the real Mother India, desperate to feed her children? Or is she death herself, nobody to be saved from the turning wheel of her grinding stone? Is *Woman with Chakki* a companion piece to *Sour Grapes* (cat.no.9) or *Gangavataran: After Raja Ravi Varma* (cat.no.11)? Or does it replace them now in Atul Dodiya's world—and ours?

#### 4.

From 1999 to 2001, Atul Dodiya has painted and shown four groups of paintings: *An Artist of Non-violence* (1999), *Body/Wash, Tearscape* (1999, fig.3), and the series of paintings on roller shutters and canvas (2001). Each of these has compelled the viewers to muster their inner

fig.1 (p.28)  
*O Nayna!*, 1994

fig.2 (p.29)  
*Woman with Chakki*, 1999

fig.3 (p.29)  
*Tearscape* from the *Tearscape* series,  
1999

resources, emotive-intellectual-moral-active, to the utmost. Their impact has been deep and disturbing and widespread. A passage of time is required to see fully the internal relations among the paintings of these four series. The images of men, women, children, animals, birds and trees—the basic pictures of life, have been given in such varied, contrasting, clashing colors, forms, compositions and contexts in these four groups, that viewers who try to juxtapose them would know with a disturbing immediacy the urgency, desperation, anger and sorrow which is being conveyed to them. It is this that confirms and reinforces the authenticity and strength of Atul Dodiya's presence as a major artist within Indian society today.

Images of basic life forms have shifted their residence from homes and community neighborhoods to a terrain that is pre-culture/post-culture. The human body, in desperate erotic state, leads not to life but to death. Dodiya's colors shapes and compositions suppress and erase any possibility of rebirth that might have existed in Graubner's gentle black and white watercolors. *Rose* and *Mother* spell jointly the end of the political and economic power of *Kama deva*, god of desire, the Indian Eros.

Life images have been changed into images of subhuman and extra-human beings of Indian mythology in the paintings of *Tearscape*. The woman, the mother seems to have changed into a demonic female, a *dakini*, *shakini*, *bhairavi*. But, though, in *Iceberg* (fig.4) the skeletal woman in the boat merely looks at an almost fully drowned India (only the top fragment of its map visible over the primitive waters of the deluge, the title of the painting as well as the look in the woman's eyes—not indifferent to but fixed on the sinking culture) leaves some room for "rebirth." She could look like the female angel of death, but she might well be the mother crazed by pain and desperation. Govardhanram Tripathi, a great 19th century Gujarati novelist, has, in his novel, *Sarasvatichandra*,<sup>9</sup> described India through an image of *Panchali*, i.e. Draupadi, the queen of the Pandava princes in the epic *Mahabharata*,<sup>10</sup> lying semiconscious on her bed, with huge monkeys sucking milk from her breasts, while her human children are crying with hunger some distance away.

It is the series on Mahatma Gandhi that alerts the viewer against publicly sold packages of hope and plans of action. Dodiya has tried to reach out to some personal moments of Gandhi's life, as in *Gau-Raksha Meeting* (1998, fig.5),<sup>11</sup> which shows Gandhi reading from some papers in his hand before the meeting. Of the handful of people of the collecting audience, two seem to be looking not at Gandhi but at the viewer outside the painting. And in *The Post-dated Cheque* (1998, fig.6), the painter has, as a painted figure, entered the group of figures smiling at Gandhi's joke. Such painterly devices seem to suggest a possibility of living contact with Gandhi and his times. The title of the painting, however, opens up a chilling possibility that the joke has been made not only by Gandhi but also by Dodiya. The bank of the political, economic and social institutions on which Gandhi wrote a post-dated check has, says Dodiya with a Gandhian smile, gone bankrupt. Nonetheless, the flowing grace and authenticity of human bodies in action, seen in *Chancellor Gandhi* (1998, fig.7), shows that there is still some counter-weight to the soon-to-follow despair.

The most recent group of paintings is the one with roller shutters which, in a way, pitches the activity of painting against the mindless commerce of the market place and pervading politics of society today. *Mahalaxmi* (cat.no.24), a 9ft x 6ft painting been painted on a real roller shutter, as used in the market place to close a shop. Painted on it is a calendar art picture of Mahalaxmi, "great goddess of wealth" in golden, red, deep blue and snow-white oil colors. The popular iconography is complete on the shutter: the goddess, the lotus, the swan, the elephant and all the jewelry. A generous shower of gold coins falls from the open palm of one of the four arms of the goddess. Her full body, complete with the iconographic details has been painted on the open shutter. But her head, with jewelry and golden yellow has been painted on the fixed upper encasement of the shutter. When the shutter moves a little, the head loses its synchrony with the body, giving impression of a rolling doll. As the viewers roll open the shutter, using his arms and back to push it up, they see a canvas stretched underneath the shutter with iron hooks. On this canvas they see, painted in acrylic, are the figures of three sisters, daughters of the Shahu family of Kanpur. Because they could not bear their father's agony at his inability to

fig.4 (p.29)  
*Iceberg*, 2000

fig.5 (p.30)  
*Gau-Raksha Meeting*, 1998

fig.6 (p.30)  
*The Post-dated Cheque*, 1998

fig.7 (p.30)  
*Chancellor Gandhi*, 1998

pay the groom-price, dowry for their marriage, the unmarried daughters had killed themselves, hanging their neck from the ceiling. Dodiya has here initiated a kind of civil war, painting contra painting, in a kind of last ditch attempt to fight the Chancellor's University, Gandhi's India. Indian families like to call their daughters *lakshmi* at their birth and their daughters-in-law *griha-lakshmi* (*griha* is home) after marriage. The civil war is between *Mahalakshmi* and *Grihalakshmi*. There is another shutter-and-canvas painting: *B for Babu* (cat.no.26) Gandhi is fondly called "Babu," i.e. "Father" by millions in India. *B for Babu* shows, on canvas, Gandhi weakened as if after one of his long protest fast. It seems to have just ended, and he is shown taking a sip of some liquid food, perhaps honey-and-water, as was his practice. There are some honeybees on the case of the shutter. They look too monstrous to be bringers of honey. The roller shutter here has a grill surface and when shut looks like a prison door over Gandhi. Gandhi taught his followers importance of physical labor and demanded active involvement from them in the struggle for freedom. The artist expects the viewer to use their body, arms, shoulders, back, to open the shutter from over the canvas, from over the Shahu daughters, and from over the Bamiyan Buddha,<sup>12</sup> which was destroyed in the name of religion. Gandhi is, once again, perhaps, nourishing himself for action. The viewer is expected to open the prison gate of the grill shutter enclosing him.

#### Notes

1. Ancient Indian thinkers, who, in works generically called *Upanishad*, argued against ritualistic action and for critical contemplation of self and reality. The term, *Up-ni-shad*, means, literally, "sitting down close to" a teacher, for dialogic learning.
2. Medieval Indian poets of devotional literature, who challenged unjust traditional socio-religious practices and composed poetry in over fifteen regional Indian languages, including Gujarati. The term, *Bhakt*, means, literally, "divided," "separated" from the origin, God, and desirous of unity with it.
3. In Indian mythology Vishnu is the God of Sustenance, Brahma, of Creation and Shiva, of Destruction. However, Brahma has been given a subordinate position to Vishnu from whose navel he has been seen to emerge, seated on a lotus flower. Shiva has been associated with an originary moment, the time of the descent, *avatarana* in Sanskrit, of the heavenly river Ganga (or Ganges) on earth. See, Dodiya's *Gangavataran*.
4. *Dvara*, in Sanskrit, means "a door" or "a gateway." The city of *Dvaraka* or *Dvarika*, a seaport on the western coast of India, in the State of Gujarat, is said to have been founded by the Yadava clan led by Lord Krishna. It was called *Suvarna Dvaraka*, Golden City of Dvaraka, indicating its prosperity.
5. A semi-historical narrative, in Sanskrit, *Shrimad Bhagavata Paurana* narrates events of the life of Krishna as a child, prince and divine being. Its tenth chapter, the *Dashama Skandha*. The story of the two childhood friends meeting years later is given in its Sections, *Adhyaya*, 80 and 81. (Tagare, 1978, 1752-1763.) This has been told and retold in many Indian languages, including Gujarati. Sudama is called *Kuchaila*, i.e. "ill-attired" or "one whose clothes are inferior" in the *Dashama Skandha*.
6. *Mahabharata*, Indian epic, repeatedly describes the matchless warrior prince, Arjuna, with these two adjectives.
7. Gujarati community of Persian origin. Followers of Zarathrostan religion. Their ancestors reached the coast of Gujarat near the town of Sanjan in southern Gujarat, by sea-route from Persia, after Arab invasion, to escape extreme religious tyranny, in the 9th century A.D.
8. Joshi, Umashankar, 1981, p.701.
9. Tripathi, Govardhanram, 1901, pp.639-657.
10. *Mahabharata*, one of the two epics, along with *Ramayana*, of ancient India which continue to profoundly influence Indian psyche through different historical periods till the present one.
11. *Gau*, meaning Cow. *Raksha*, meaning Protection.
12. Destruction of statues of Buddha at the Bamiyan region in Afghanistan by the ruling Taliban militia in 2001.

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