

# Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

ATUL DODIYA  
ARTFORUM, december 2011

MUMBAI

Atul Dodiya  
CHEMOULD PRESCOTT ROAD

"It's just like being back in school," a gallery-goer muttered grumpily, upon entering Gujarati artist Atul Dodiya's latest, much anticipated

solo show, "Bako Exists. Imagine." The syntax of the title simulated that of an exam question, with the imperative "imagine" standing in for "discuss," while the gallery, with its set of nine wooden cabinets and what masqueraded as eleven blackboards crammed with chalky English script, also created the impression that we had entered a room in a provincial schoolhouse—much like the one that Dodiya must have attended when growing up in Ghatkopar, a suburb of Mumbai. The white text on the "blackboards" (actually oil, acrylic, and marble dust on canvas) recalls the super-neat handwriting of a child, each letter isolated from the other. Since Dodiya went to a "vernacular school"—that is, one that did not use English as a primary language—he was taught to write English in this way. Yet "Bako Exists" referenced not only the artist's upbringing but also India's coming-of-age.

The blackboard paintings presented an English translation of a story by Gujarati poet Labhshanker Thaker, in which a young boy, Bako, meets Mahatma Gandhi (known as Babu—"father" in Hindi) in his sleep. The canvases record their dialogue, interspersing text with child-like doodles of trees, a football, a dark blotch that replicates Gandhi's silhouette, and so on. Babu and Bako speak about drawing, spinning, and fiction. In the panel titled *Shadows*, 2011, Bako asks Babu if he would mind having his shadow wrapped up. Lurking beside the text is a white rabbit, the kind we expect to emerge from a magician's hat. Babu might be lauded as "The Father of the Nation" (capitals mandatory), yet if the average Indian student is inundated with lectures on Gandhi's deeds and philosophy (his struggle for independence, his espousal of nonviolence, his celibate lifestyle), Dodiya seems to suggest that Babu's lessons, like most things learned by rote, are easily forgotten. Is the Gandhi we encounter on coins, on stamps, and in the classroom merely a shadow of his former self, an apparition conjured by dirty politicians? Pushing this point further is the appearance of the god Vishnu as a gaudy clay statue in one of the nine cabinets that comprise *Meditation (with open eyes)*, 2011. As Divine Preserver, the deity prompts viewers to ask what part of Gandhi's legacy should be conserved.

For those expecting accessible installations and immediately seductive paintings, "Bako Exists" was a letdown: It was hard work. How clued in viewers had to be to decode the contents of the cabinets in *Meditation* remains an open question. Even with eyes wide-open, some visitors might have found it tough to interpret the ostensibly random assortment of fraying photographs, decrepit paintings, ghostly white sculptures, and garish icons with which these display cases are stuffed with. Does it make a difference in our appreciation if we know that the trembling stack of yellow chalkboard dusters, another component of *Meditation*, is significant because it resembles Constantin Brancusi's

View of "Atul Dodiya,"  
2011. Left: *Thump!*  
*Thump!*, 2011. Right:  
*Meditation (with  
open eyes)*, 2011.



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*Endless Column*, 1938—a sculpture Dodiya references regularly to point to the precarious position of modernism in India? Or that his inclusion of scaled-down versions of Piet Mondrian’s geometric paintings alludes to his own *Cracks in Mondrian*, 2005, a series Dodiya made after visiting the Tate Modern’s *craquelure*-ridden Mondrians in 2001? Since the artist’s trip to London coincided with the earthquake that traumatized Gujarat (Gandhi’s birthplace), leaving it as dry and desolate as a flaking canvas, the visual quote contains personal, aesthetic, and national resonance; likewise Dodiya’s cabinets become repositories of multilayered memories. If doing this kind of deconstruction makes you feel inordinately conceited—like a new member of an elite club—you might wonder whether Dodiya wishes to corroborate that sense of superiority or mock it. Perhaps he too believes, in the words of his erstwhile mentor, the late painter (and prankster) Bhupen Khakhar, “You can’t please all.”

—Zehra Jumabhoy