

Galerie Daniel Templon

Brussels

ATUL DODIYA

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, 13 septembre 2015

Bapu Exists. Imagine

Atul Dodiya on his new exhibition and the link between Gandhi and modern art.



Atul Dodiya with works from his current show

Atul Dodiya, 55, grew up on tales of the Mahatma. Like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, his roots are in Gujarat's Kathiawar region. The Mahatma has featured often in his artwork — as the man who built the foundation of independent India, the disappointed father of the nation and the grandfather next door. In his ongoing exhibition “Mahatma and the Masters” at Galerie Daniel Templon, Brussels, the Mumbai-based artist juxtaposes two histories — India's freedom movement and the modern art movement that started in France in the early 20th century. In this interview, he talks about those connections, why Gandhi features so often in his work and why celebrating Nathuram Godse as a patriot is a travesty. Excerpts:

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Why do you draw a parallel between India's freedom movement and the modern art movement in Europe?

I have always been interested in the freedom movement and art history. In the early 20th century, when India was fighting for independence, Europe too was undergoing a revolution, with artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse developing a modern language for art. In this exhibition, I have attempted to bring together the history of the nation with a movement for creative freedom in another part of the world. The paintings of the leaders, primarily Gandhi, are hyper-realist, with scenes depicting photographs from different periods — Gandhi at Sevagram Ashram in 1934, with colleagues at his Johannesburg office in 1905. The photographs of the works of art placed were taken by me during my several trips. For instance, the oil of (Jawaharlal) Nehru announcing Gandhi's death at Birla House in 1948 is on display with a photograph of black-and-white horizontal bands, details of a work by Dutch artist Piet Mondrian. There is another canvas depicting Gandhi taking a walk with his family on Juhu beach in 1944, put next to a work by French artist Henri Rousseau. Doodles by Rabindranath Tagore also appear on some canvases.

One of your earliest works on Gandhi, *Lamentation* (1997), too, had brought together Gandhi and Picasso.

It was a work I did for an exhibition that marked 50 years of independence. I was asked to create a commemorative piece. For me, one of the most significant and disturbing images of those 50 years was the breaking of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent riots and blasts in Bombay. *Lamentation* was a large painting divided into two. The first showed an image of Gandhi with his back to us, walking along a railway station with his hand on a young boy's shoulder. I juxtaposed it with a Picasso painting of a little girl with wild Kali-like eyes.

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Since then, the Mahatma has become an integral part of your work.

I started studying Gandhi, particularly his pictorial images. There are images of Gandhi everywhere. Every second street is named after him, his face is on stamps, on currency, in government offices, but his spirit is nowhere. His thoughts and ideals provide a solution to several problems that exist today. We see killings, communalism, violence, disputes and then his thoughts on these come to mind. Gandhi was a simple man who understood his surroundings. I am interested in certain aspects of his philosophy, his emphasis on peace, love, non-violence and tolerance. As I reflected on him, I began to realise that Gandhi had much in common with the new art technique called conceptual art. His ideas were highly conceptual, for instance, the sheer act of picking salt at Dandi. I moved away from my usual oil on canvas to paint watercolors, which were minimal and seemed more appropriate to his philosophy, for example, in *An artist for non-violence* (1999).

Your family has its roots in Saurashtra. Was Gandhi an important part of your childhood?

I moved to Bombay many decades ago, but I still have close links with Gujarat. My sister lived in Porbandar and we visited her often. As a young boy, I was told about the freedom struggle, the heroic role played by Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Maulana Azad. We did not wear khadi, or follow Gandhi in an absolute sense, but there was emphasis on things like not wasting food or clothes. Of course, we saw Gandhi's photographs; even my school, Gurukul Vidyalaya in Ghatkopar, had a statue of him right at the entrance. In my teens, my mama gifted me Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiments With Truth*, in Gujarati. It is beautifully written, the language is so clear, precise, bringing out his commitment to honesty. I am an artist and every time I read it, I visualise the landscape and the people. Over the years, I have collected several cuttings and photographs of leaders during the independence movement and I keep referring to them.

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Did you see yourself in Bako, the young boy who was the protagonist of your series Bako Exists. Imagine (2011)? You had the young boy in a dialogue with Gandhi, not playing the father of the nation, but a person next door.

This series was based on Bako Chhe. Kalpo, a work of fiction by Gujarati poet Labhshankar Thaker. It has a young, imaginative boy called Bako, who meets Mahatma Gandhi in his dreams. Their conversations seem ordinary but raise important concerns. When I did the series, I was thinking to myself that there's so much violence, terror and hatred in the world right now. Gandhi's ideology would be so useful at a time like this.

What are your thoughts on BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj hailing Nathuram Godse as a "patriot" and the Hindu Mahasabha celebrating January 30, the day Gandhi was killed, as "Shaurya Divas"?

There cannot be anything more ridiculous. What Gandhi did is known to the whole world. How can one celebrate a murder anyway? It is not justified with regard to any killing, not just Gandhi's.

Written by Vandana Kalra