

TEMPLON



ATUL DODIYA

ASIAN ART, April 2019

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By Olivia Sand

Atul Dodiya (b 1959, Mumbai) is from the group of the very first contemporary artists from India to gain visibility and recognition abroad. Primarily known as a painter, he is also known as an installation artist, drawing his inspiration from everything that surrounds him – people, objects, ideas, as in his opinion, art and life are inseparable. In addition, Atul Dodiya is a strong believer in the power of art, never ceasing to raise questions through his work and not shy to take a position on the issues he is addressing. After 30 years in the art world, he discusses his latest work with the Asian Art Newspaper whilst looking back on the milestones in his career.

Asian Art Newspaper: Your latest show in Paris at the end of 2018 referred to the painter Morandi (1890-1964).

What started you in this direction? Was it a special affection towards Morandi's work rather than the film *La Dolce Vita* that features his paintings, which you also addressed in your pieces?

Atul Dodiya: As you rightly point out, it is not because of the film, but because of the painter Morandi, whom I have been fond of since my art school days. I admire the decision with which he painted, completing simple still lives on a small scale format. Regardless of what was

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Atul Dodiya. Photo: Anil Rane. All images courtesy Galerie **Templon** Paris & Brussels

NEWS IN BRIEF

continue his meditation. He came to an understanding of the 'middle way', where one neither over indulges or mortifies one's body on the spiritual path.

PRITZKER PRIZE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Japanese architect Arata Isozaki has been awarded the Pritzker Prize, considered architecture's highest honour, for a lifetime of work that found global resonance while mining local traditions. The 87-year-old's works range from the Palau Saint Jordi, built in Barcelona for the 1992 Summer Olympics, to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, his first international commission. His hometown of Otai, Japan is a showcase of his early work, including a medical hall and annex, and a prefectural library. Isozaki is the 46th Pritzker laureate and the eighth Japanese architect to receive the honour. Winners receive a bronze medallion and US\$100,000.

Last year, the Pritzker Prize was awarded to 90-year-old Indian Balkrishna Doshi.

UNESCO INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE LIST

March marked the anniversary of the start of the war in Syria, which has now raged for eight years. The country has a long and rich history of shadow puppetry but modern technology and years of war has seen the art form suffer from serious decline, the UN's cultural body has warned. Now the ancient form of

storytelling has been added to Unesco's list of cultural activities in urgent need of saving. The last shadow puppeteer left in Damascus is Shadi al-Hallaq. He fled Syria after the conflict erupted in 2011 and crossed into Lebanon where he worked for several years as a construction worker. His mobile theatre set, as well as 23 hand-made characters, were lost to violence, however, he now works with two traditional characters, the naive Karakoz and his clever friend Aywaz, to tell the story of unscrupulous traders based in the old city of Damascus. Shadow puppetry grew in popularity across the Middle East, particularly Turkey, Egypt and Syria, during the Ottoman era and for centuries, puppet theatre has also captivated audiences, retelling classical epics and folk dramas across parts of south-east Asia, China and India.

THE PALACE FOR PROLONGING HAPPINESS, BEIJING

Shan Jixiang, the director of the Palace Museum in Beijing, has announced that the former concubines' residence, once severely damaged by fire will be restored to its full glory. The Palace of Prolonging Happiness, or Yanxi Gong, in the east of the palace complex, was used as the concubines' residence during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. It was engulfed by fire in 1845, which destroyed the entire courtyard,

except for its front gate. Thanks to a 100 million yuan (US\$15 million) donation from the Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation, based in Hong Kong, the courtyard will soon be renovated. The director of the museum went on to say that the Yanxi Gong area will be turned into an exhibition space displaying foreign cultural relics among formal royal collections, to reflect Sino-foreign cultural exchanges. About 10,000 cultural relics out of the 1.86 million artefacts being housed in the Palace Museum are of foreign origin. The most important collection is 1,500 antique European clocks that were given as gifts or bought by Qing emperors. The complex is expected to open in 2020.

ARTES MUNDI PRIZE

The film maker Apichatpong Weerasethakul from Thailand has been named as the winner of Artes Mundi 8, the UK's leading prize for international contemporary art. Weerasethakul has been chosen from a shortlist of five of the world's most important artists to win the UK's biggest art prize, and is awarded a sum of £40,000. In 2011, he was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. Reflecting upon the past and the present, the artist creates installations and films that are often non-linear and embedded with a strong sense of dislocation. His work meditates upon the dark underside of the political corruption occurring in Thailand today, where self-

censorship has become automatic and where ancient animism coexists alongside hyper-capitalist modernity. Through the manipulation of time and light, Weerasethakul constructs tenuous bridges for the viewer to travel between the real and the mythical, the individual and the collective which can be seen in his Artes Mundi 8 entry, his film *Invisibility* from 2016.

SERPENTINE GALLERY, LONDON

The Japanese architect Junya Ishigami, celebrated for his experimental structures that interpret traditional architectural conventions and reflect natural phenomena, has been selected to design the Serpentine Pavilion 2019. Ishigami's design takes inspiration from roofs, the most common architectural feature used around the world.

BOLLYWOOD FILM MUSEUM, MUMBAI

From silent black-and-white films to colourful blockbusters bursting with song and dance, the evolution of Indian cinema is now traced in a new museum in the home of Bollywood, Mumbai. Costing 1.4 billion rupees (US\$19.6 million), India's first national film museum is spread across a stylish 19th-century bungalow and a modern five-storey building in south Mumbai. Film-mad India produces around 1,500 films a year, dwarfing Hollywood's output.

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happening in the art world, he kept painting his still-lives that always conveyed a sense of solitude. Seeing these paintings has always given me a lot of pleasure. Beyond Morandi, whatever I like or admire comes into my work and I do not hesitate to approach these images, ideas, or paintings – regardless of the artist who completed them. For example, I have often painted Gandhi because I admire him so much. Another example is precisely the film *La Dolce Vita* that also appears in my work. In the film, there is a dialogue where the host is expressing fear for the future, as he has doubts whether the world would remain a peaceful one. The dialogue emphasises that the world is beautiful, but how long it will remain that way – we do not know. With the gesture of one mad man, everything could be destroyed. Basically, it is this dialogue that provoked the whole show, essentially the dialogue between Marcello and Steiner in *La Dolce Vita*.

AAN: Other works also seem to address that specific question about the course our world is taking?

AD: Of course, the same questions could have come up in another film, or in literature, but since the dialogue in this particular film took place around a Morandi painting, I felt that painting the film stills would in itself be a different exercise in painting. As I would be using an existing art form for my painting, I was wondering how I would transform it and what would be the challenge if I painted from a photograph or from the film stills? I started working on this in 2017. Initially, I did not know where this would go, but I thought about how my pieces would look if I were to include objects and people I admire in one single show. So that is precisely what I have been doing.

AAN: Is the quote you refer to in *La Dolce Vita* a view and a fear that you share, considering the state of the world?

AD: Exactly, mainly because over the past 25 years, India has itself gone through a great deal of violence. There are a lot of communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims that have generated many killings. In India, we often noticed that they were politically motivated. For example, back in 1992, a mosque was demolished in the North of India and after that, there was a subsequent riot in the whole of the country and in Mumbai, where I live, there have been several bomb blasts. There was this feeling of pain and sorrow when you see innocent people getting killed. Then, 9/11 happened in New York with the Twin Towers being destroyed. Also, there was the rise of terrorism over the past 20 or 35 years, not just in India, but all over the world. Actually, it has recently been 10 years since the attack took place in the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai – with the pain and the wounds still alive in peoples' hearts. I also remember the terrorist attack in the South of France on a national holiday when many people were killed. Although I am far away from these places, I read about the things that happen all over the world, or see them on television, this triggers a profound feeling of pain.

The world is beautiful, life is beautiful, people are beautiful, but then, what is going wrong and why is it going wrong? Since I am not a historian, sociologist, or politician, I cannot say much about it. I am a painter and creativity is something



Black Petals - I (2018) by Atul Dodiya, oil, epoxy putty and laminate on marine ply, 183 x 122 cm. Photo: B Huet-Tutti

In one sense I may be considered a politically conscious artist - it is my responsibility to address these things

that matters to me. Of course, in my approach and in my practice, there is the context of the social political situation that I am thinking about: how can I tackle and address these situations, or what I have been feeling, through my painting?

AAN: It seems that you are taking your responsibility as an artist very seriously, even more so today than perhaps 20 years ago?

AD: Yes, certainly. I am an artist who is interested in artworks and I was very much influenced by the great masters like Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns. In India, we do not get to see the original works of these artists, but we study them in art school. As an art student, I was imagining their work and much later, around 1991, I was a French government scholar living in Paris. I studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and there, for the very first time, I saw many original paintings. My head was filled with the works of great masters, with great ideas in art from the pre-Renaissance to the post-modern period. However, because all kinds of violence took place in my own country with bomb blasts and people getting killed, my thoughts turned to Mahatma Gandhi, who was one of the greatest leaders for the Freedom Movement of India: he was committed to non-violence, refusing to adopt an 'eye for an eye' motto which,

according to him, would only make the whole world blind. The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence is still of great importance today, acknowledged with roads named after him, or being featured on rupee notes and stamps. However, the implementation of the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence is somehow missing. In 1997, India was celebrating 50 years of Independence. I felt it was a good thing that we were celebrating, but so many problems are still there: poverty, lack of great leadership, hatred amongst different cultures in the community, intolerance. Therefore, I was forced to think of Gandhi because of the political social situation in India and in other places. In that sense, I may be considered a politically conscious artist, but I think it is my responsibility to address these things. I may not make a documentary, or write articles in the newspapers, because I am a painter.



Endless Column (2018) by Atul Dodiya, oil, epoxy putty and marinate on marine ply, 61 x 46 cm. Photo: B Huet-Tutti

The challenge I am facing is how to deal with this whole situation through creativity while continuing to paint.

AAN: You have often stated that you are very fond of films. Coming back to your recent show in Paris, is this the first time that you are alluding to film in such a direct manner?

AD: In the past, I have often used cinema and still images separately in my paintings, from 1990s onwards. Therefore, it is not a new process, but in a way, you are right: it is certainly the first time I am directly relying on the film stills and showing them in a sequence of 10 to 12 paintings. I am now also planning additional pieces. More specifically, the show I recently had at my gallery, Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai, was called *Seven Minutes of Blackmail*. It is a film which was made 90 years ago in 1929 by Alfred Hitchcock, a filmmaker I admire. The film

features a sequence where a painter tries to seduce a girl and, in fact, tries to rape her. Incidentally, because she just wanted to get rid of him, there was a knife and, accidentally, she kills him and runs away. This particular situation happened in seven minutes within the film. When I am watching movies, I am taking lots of photographs in order to have create my own stills and, in this case, *Blackmail* led to an entire show of 36 paintings.

AAN: Taking existing images as a source, any kind of appropriation can be extremely tricky because it has to be done in a smooth, subtle, and constructive way. Is it a very challenging undertaking?

AD: You are absolutely right it is challenging, even risky, to approach a master like Hitchcock, Fellini, or Indian film makers. Why is it challenging? Because it is already an established film and people already know about it. Then, it is difficult to create something, or take references from the existing art world: if you are unable to give it another meaning (apart from specific film stills or cinema sequences), you have to give another dimension to the whole piece. In that sense, it is challenging, but it is also exciting. As I mentioned earlier, because I have been admiring the work and if you like someone, you want to embrace it, take it, and you do not consider it as not being yours.

One of the concepts in Hindu philosophy is about acceptance. Frankly, I feel that what I see and what I like somehow belongs to me. Sometimes, when I ask myself for whom Picasso painted all those great paintings, my answer is that he painted them for me. I see them, enjoy them, and they are so much part of me. It is not only admiration, it is also a kind of association between what you see and what you



Still from La Dolce Vita X (2017-2018) by Atul Dodiya, oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm. Photo: B Huet-Tutti

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admire. I do not hesitate and want to go about it in a very humble way. It is not a critique or a comment: on the contrary, it is just sheer love and compassion. This is my approach. A homage is a beautiful thing, saluting someone for whom you have respect. It is all about the need to go closer to those works, thinking about them and trying to understand them. In that context, I would also read about the situation any artist was working in and the context. Ultimately, I would say it comes down to a little bit of knowledge, interest, and a lot of joy.

AAN: You mentioned that your scholarship in Paris represented the first opportunity to see the actual masterpieces of the artists you admired. Did seeing these works change your practice?

AD: I think it gave me a tremendous amount of freedom. I was staying at the Cité des Arts in the Marais, close to the Picasso Museum, enjoying the benefits of a national pass for many museums. What I noticed from Cézanne to Matisse, Picasso and Duchamp, for example, is essentially about how to liberate yourself: you start with something and if you create what you wanted to do, then there is a certain sense of accomplishment, while also discovering in the process the things you did not know. After seeing these great masters, I realised that it is all about freedom. We say that as a human being and as an artist we are free. I am free. Absolutely free. However, some invisible forces, like success, dealers, collectors, auction houses, selling paintings, may directly, or indirectly, affect your real thinking because there is a demand in one field. If there is a demand, then, there is a tendency to continue producing the same works. Succumbing to these demands means death for an artist, in my opinion.

Another message I learned from the great masters, like Picasso or Matisse, is not to remain stuck in one particular way of painting: they would shift and do something very different, always surprising themselves. I relate to this approach simply because if I am not baffled by my own works, then, people will not be able to see those elements of surprise. My feelings in various contexts always change, particularly if living in a country like India, where diverse situations coexist

In a nutshell, I juxtapose the extreme personal and the universal

simultaneously. Therefore, I cannot just have one single point of view – I want to remain free.

When I returned from Paris in 1992, I thought I would stop painting all together. I called myself a figurative painter, but such profound work had already been created within the figurative genre. After seeing the great paintings in the museums in Paris, I felt my work was mediocre which made me sad and nervous. However, I knew what I could do and what I should be doing without fear. Paris gave me fearlessness and after three years, when I started working again, I did all kinds of things. If I felt like doing landscapes, I would just do them regardless of what was happening in the art world. If there is an inner need, then, one should follow those instincts and this is exactly what happened when I went home after Paris.

AAN: It seems Paris was a highly productive and inspiring time and served you well for the rest of your career. You also had a fellowship in Nantes in 2017. What was that about?

AD: Nantes has the Institute of Advanced Studies, which invites scholars, historians, writers, architects and social scientists to go there. People apply for it and they provide you with studio and residential space. You are with about 20 fellows from all over the world, living together, sharing ideas and presentations. When I was invited, there was an Indian artist who had lived for almost 60 years in Paris, SH Raza, a senior artist in the Indian modern painting movement, who passed away in 2016 at the age of 93. There is a foundation bearing his name and the foundation created a chair in Raza's name. The Institute of Advanced Studies in Nantes accepted it because Raza lived in France for such a long time. The idea of the Raza Foundation is to encourage artists, filmmakers, poets,



Tsunami (2012) by Atul Dodiya, enamel paint on metal roll, steel hooks and copper letters, 274 x 183 cm. Photo: B Huet-Tutti

painters, so I was an invited fellow and I had the honour of being a Raza chair holder in Nantes. It was absolutely fantastic with wonderful people from all over the world and this, of course, enabled me to produce some good work, too.

AAN: In the paintings at your most recent show in Galerie Templon in Paris, and as in previous works, you seem to be alluding to Brancusi and his Endless Column. Is there more meaning to this, or is it sheer coincidence?

AD: I often used Brancusi's Endless Column in the past. Whatever the size of the structure, it is endless until it ends at some point in space. I always liked it and it also reminds me of the time when we were young kids in Mumbai, as the label on some medicine bottles for the daily doses of the liquid had a similar shape to the actual column. In addition, the column bears beautiful aesthetics, also appearing as a kind of iconic totem. To me, it is very spiritual, creating a very tense situation, figuration or subject matter. Sometimes, I would use it as collapsing, or it getting destroyed, as

it then bends and moves. After a point, it loses its identity and becomes a pure abstract pattern or an abstract form. As a result, there are two or three reasons for me to have this Endless Column.

AAN: Coming back to something you said earlier – that you considered yourself a realistic painter after your studies. Would you still say so today, or is your work slowly moving towards abstraction?

AD: I am moving towards abstraction. In my case, I noticed that if there is a certain technically required imagery, then I may do abstraction, but I simultaneously also may do very realistic paintings, or figurative paintings as well. It all depends on the particular theme, on my mood and on what I want to do. If I am attempting things for a longer time with a certain imagery combined with a certain treatment for the imagery, then I may feel I explored it enough. Again and again, I want to discover myself and find out what I would like to see from me. Today, there is much more freedom in my work which translates in the form becoming quite loose in terms of treatment and appropriation. Therefore, what you noticed about abstraction is true.

AAN: Especially for the big paintings, there is a very 'fresco-like' feel in terms of texture and colour. Would you agree?

AD: Yes. As I said earlier, I admire and have seen a lot of early Italian frescoes. There is a whole story and how in the course of 500 or 600 years everything ultimately goes away, gets lost and people forget. How long do we remember things and how much do we actually remember are questions I constantly have in my head. I thought it is visually interesting when I see the frescoes partly damaged and partly restored remaining quite proper. To me, this itself is a kind of lead and trigger to attempt things. Suddenly, I would have a head and then, some abstract patches falling on it. It is not the full experience of one thing, it is partial. You experience a bit, but then, in the middle of that whole experience, unexpectedly, something else comes and it gets distracted. We are constantly distracted as we are

living in the time of social media and the internet, overloaded with so much information. Of course, my work is very much based on information as well, but when I am watching television news, within that one single news, someone is speaking and living serious things and suddenly, an advert pops up. Things are overlapping. That is something I like. I think the frescoes as a device is very helpful to me in my way of thinking.

AAN: As you say, we get to see many images on a daily basis. As an artist, how do you try to make people pause and make them look and pay attention to what you are doing and saying?

AD: It is a challenge, because there are so many things that are given to a viewer and today, people do not have time. How can one hold their attention? I try to provide them with something they know, combined with something that is autobiographical and very personal. In a nutshell, I juxtapose the extreme personal and the universal. However, I do not like attention grabbing, I do not believe in making too much noise, when you shout for people to look at you. The 'look at me' syndrome also presents dangers. How to contemplate, how to concentrate, creating a mix, that is the challenge. Ultimately, it all depends on what you want to say and how you are saying it.

AAN: Exhibition after exhibition, you keep experimenting ...

AD: Every show is different. In my last show, there were all kinds of subject matter, treatments, and renderings in terms of small scale work, on paper, on canvas, on laminate. I attempted all kinds of things resulting in a very diverse oeuvre. Sometimes, even I get very confused: I wonder whether I am on the right track, or whether I am someone who is utterly confused? Should I have one single style and follow it like Morandi? Probably, but I cannot do that. I have given up staying with one single way of thinking as there are too many ways of approaching a situation, or subject matter. I cannot help it. I have to live like this and I am just happy with that.



With colleagues - outside the Johannesburg office, circa 1905 (2015), oil on canvas and acrylic mastic polyester and oil on galvanised steel, 213 x 381 cm. Photo: B Huet-Tutti