

Atul Dodiya. *Cracks in Mondrian – Awadh.*
Acrylic with marble dust on canvas hinged on a pvc drainage pipe. Canvas size: 93" x 72".
Pipe size: variable. 2004 – 2005.

Atul Dodiya. *Cracks in Mondrian – Gujarat.*
Acrylic with marble dust on canvas hinged on a pvc drainage pipe. Canvas size: 72" x 69".
Pipe size: variable. 2004 – 2005.



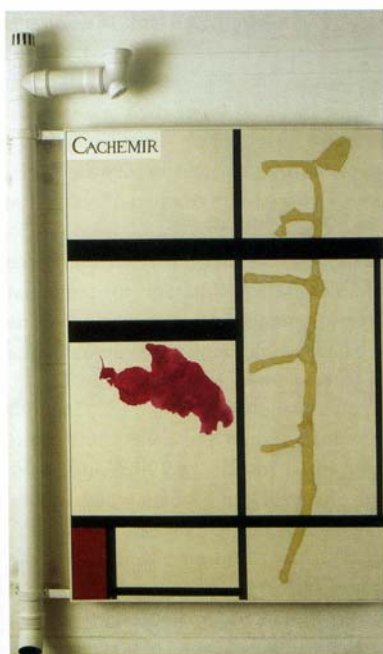
GAINED IN TRANSLATION

KARIN MILLER-LEWIS LOOKS AT HOW ATUL DODIYA RESPONDS TO THE MATURE, DYNAMIC RHYTHMS OF PIET MONDRIAN'S COMPOSITIONS AND ASSESSES HOW HE EXPLORES THE PAST INFLECTING THE PRESENT

AT FIRST GLANCE, YOU NOTICE THE OPPOSITIONS THAT ANIMATE *CRACKS in Mondrian*. Atul Dodiya's new works at the Bose Pacia Modern, New York (from March 3rd to April 16th), set inconstant, allusive forms against white planes and thrusting black lines. While smooth, flat brushstrokes describe these fundamental geometric forms, the viscous and crusted textures of the indeterminate shapes evoke thoughts of bones, the cracked beds of ancient rivers, or the rough patching of a concrete façade attacked by pollution and extreme climates. Another group of mysterious bodies, contraposed with primary-coloured quadrilaterals, stray or spread depending on the qualities of their mottled tones. Some are livid, like a rash or raw flesh; others, as ephemeral as a twilight cloud.

To prepare the series, Dodiya added expressionist marks to his own recreations of some of the most rigorously minimal of Piet Mondrian's pictorial researches. He also borrowed contour maps prepared by an 18th century Frenchman in the employ of Shuja-ud-daula, Nawab of Awadh. Each pink splotch is in fact a district, or *suba*, ruled by the Mughals in the fractious, waning years of their empire. Transcribed by Dodiya in the upper left hand corner of each work, the foreign cartographer's strange transliterations identify the region depicted, and name the canvas: Bengale, Avad, Cachemir, Gouserate.

Others have seen *Cracks in Mondrian* as Dodiya's critical response to abstraction's idealizations and withdrawal from the lifeworld. There's reason to consider the interpretation. It's customary to associate Mondrian's work with purity, an aesthetic will to law and order, and Modernism's claims to universality. In contradistinction to Mondrian's oft-repeated aim to destroy particular form and free art from individual



Atul Dodiya. *Cracks in Mondrian – Kashmir.* Acrylic with marble dust on canvas hinged on a pvc drainage pipe. Canvas size: 83" x 55". Pipe size: variable. 2004 – 2005.

misrepresentations and omissions, his works also engage in historical mistranslation and distortion. Whether these activities are unintentional, or unselfconscious, I do not know; but the results are convincing. Dodiya's revisions enable the subjects of his canvas to be reconstituted in closer connection with each other and his own point of view.

The pleasure he and the viewer derive from the fanciful place-names so delicately inscribed on the canvases may be the first indication that the inevitably faulted attempt to translate the Other is not to be entirely dismissed.



Atul Dodiya. *Cracks in Mondrian – Bihar.* Acrylic with marble dust on canvas hinged on a pvc drainage pipe. Canvas size: 82" x 68". Pipe size: variable. 2004 – 2005.

states of feeling, Dodiya's abstracted forms – metamorphic, multivalent, and derived from subjective, emotive experience – recall specific Indian locales and their histories of human suffering. The artist's expressive treatment of the *subas* also gives the lie to a map's claim to neutrality. Their impasto aggregations insist that we come to know a place through our senses, through our bodies. The common drainage pipe that Dodiya uses to support each canvas may extend this argument for art's reliance upon and responsibility to real time and space. In a gesture both transgressive and utterly civil, a pristine length of plumbing supersedes the white strip frame that girds each canvas, and lifts the work off the gallery wall towards the viewer.

Atul Dodiya also tends to hold close what he interrogates. Sadness and longing for recuperation, more than alienating horror or damning rage, attended the relics of *Broken Branches*, his exploration of communal violence and the threat of cultural disintegration in 2003. He has frequently reviewed his multiple points of origin to consider what he has taken with him. Ten years ago, Dodiya created *Treelover for J.J.* The work, a kind of homage, embraces the diverse projects of B.B.Mukherjee, Jasper Johns, and Piet Mondrian. Literally, a metal band stretched across the canvas binds the three together.

Cracks in Mondrian continues this effort to determine the cultural and personal relevance of the past for the present, and his mature methods involve something riskier and more productive than staking out his own ground. If Dodiya quotes the colonial map and high Modernist abstraction in order to oppose and correct their misrepresentations and omissions, his works also engage in historical mistranslation and distortion. Whether these activities are unintentional, or unselfconscious, I do not know; but the results are convincing. Dodiya's revisions enable the subjects of his canvas to be reconstituted in closer connection with each other and his own point of view. His additions to Mondrian's compositions, moreover, respond to the Dutchman's dynamic interplays of line and colour. In *Cracks in Mondrian – Gujarat*, the province's quivering and bifurcated red body, shadowed by scraped taupe and silvered blue patches, hovers in equilibrium above the glowering square of blue that claims the near-center of the canvas's bottom; a desiccated stream of white paint links the two. Dodiya also makes changes to Piet Mondrian's work. Even as he admiringly recreates the forms, he alters the sizes and proportions of the master's canvases, the tonalities of the primaries and the materials originally used.

More significantly, he modifies Mondrian's framing system. Mondrian always applied a slim, recessed strip frame around his small canvases from which the painting projected into the viewer's space. He augmented this effect by placing the work on a sub-frame, a kind of vertical, wall-mounted pedestal. "In this way," Mondrian explained, "I brought [the painting] to a more real existence."

Dodiya clamps a conventional white strip frame around his canvases; subtle enough, but it has the effect of obscuring Mondrian's work. As a result, the lines terminate at the canvas's



Atul Dodiya. *Cracks in Mondrian – Delhi.* Acrylic with marble dust on canvas hinged on a pvc drainage pipe. Canvas size: 72" x 72". Pipe size: variable. 2004 – 2005.

edges. The white and coloured areas look like squares and rectangles rather than contingent things dependent upon dynamic interrelationships, as the artist intended. "Rectangles are never an aim in themselves but a logical consequence of their determining lines which are continuous in space," Mondrian had explained. "They appear spontaneously through the crossing of horizontal and vertical lines."

Indeed, by sealing off the artwork from the space around it, the frame makes it harder to see what Mondrian was after. Mondrian did not particularly value purity, order, and balance – although the promoters of a particular kind of Modernism were ecstatic, and wrong, about the cleaner, purer variety of painting they thought he advocated. Mondrian sought the means to express concretely the essential quality of the lifeworld: movement, change, instability; in his own word, vitality. "It is natural for human beings to seek static balance," Mondrian had told James Johnson Sweeney of the Museum of Modern Art near the end of his life. "Balance is of course necessary to existence in time. But vitality in the continual succession of time always

destroys this balance. Abstract art is a concrete expression of such a vitality."* Dynamic rhythms (not squares and rectangles as such) brought into syncopated equilibrium (not rigid order) were the aim of Mondrian's abstract expression.

I am not interested in accusing Dodiya of getting the great Dutch Modernist wrong. I am interested in the Indian artist's sensitive response to the particular and variable dynamic rhythms of Mondrian's compositions. His additions enrich and shift and complement the rhythms; they do not upset or efface them. I am interested in Dodiya's replacement of Mondrian's framing system, because as an adulteration, it invokes Mondrian's intentions to "bring the work into reality." Intuitively and deliberately, the mistranslation echoes Mondrian's nascent experiments to extend his pictorial ideas into architecture, to affect social space. Significantly, as well, Dodiya expresses his own concern for art's engagement with the world by lending the pipe to the terms of Mondrian's visual world. He treats the white pipe as a linear form as well as a thing. The black holes at its open ends, the capped stumps echo the painting's tonal polarities, its halted or interminable lines. Moreover, the pipe Dodiya uses is pure; it has never been used; it speaks of an ideal, it speaks of a repaired world – a possibility that is rather tenuous.

Atul Dodiya's adulterations, substitutions, and integrated additions to Mondrian's pictorial researches underscore a fundamental question that the two artists share. Might the work of art become a means of transforming history? Atul Dodiya knows that art is greatly limited by its separateness – as a language, as an experience – from the world that concerns it. But that separateness also bestows upon it a unique opportunity, even a responsibility that both artists value: to be a contemplative, integrative medium, abstract and concrete at the same time, visionary and clear-sighted.

The ways Atul Dodiya vigorously distinguishes himself are impressive enough. But for me, his enormous potential as an artist derives from both his square confrontation of the lasting wounds inflicted when differences are perceived to be irreconcilable and his profound search for connection. Upon sustained looking, *Cracks in Mondrian* thrives on the paradoxes involved in forging the links that must prove common enough to hold us all together.

* "Many appreciate in my former work just what I did not want to express, but which was produced by an incapacity to express what I wanted to express – dynamic movement in equilibrium," Mondrian went on to tell his interviewer. James Johnson Sweeney was one of those who celebrated Mondrian for delivering "a cleaner universal basis of expression...of the classicist" than anyone before him. Funny that such direct expression met such uncomprehending ears. Sad that the tenacious misinterpretation has made it so hard to distinguish the artwork from the uses to which it has been put.