



Sudhir Patwardhan speaking about his work in Aurangabad.

Drawing from Life

In 2008, Sudhir Patwardhan had two shows in Mumbai – *Citing the City* at Sakshi Gallery presented paintings and drawings while *The Crafting of Reality* at The Guild Art Gallery featured drawings. Moreover, with *Expanding Horizons* (2008-09), Patwardhan turned curator. Featuring works of 30 leading post-Independence artists, *Expanding Horizons*, sponsored by Bodhi Art, was a touring show that visited eight cities of Maharashtra. In this conversation with **Abhay Sardesai**, Patwardhan discusses his experience of conceiving a grand group show and the critical realisations that are changing the nature of his own art.

ABHAY SARDESAI: WAS *EXPANDING HORIZONS* A WAY OF TAKING contemporary art, which is essentially urban art, to a rur-urban audience?

Sudhir Patwardhan: Well, the places we went to *were* cities. Kolhapur, Nagpur, Nasik, Aurangabad, Amravati, Pune and Solapur have their own traditions and histories.

A. S.: Yes, but they are non-metropolitan centres. The canon that you presented did not feature any local heroes from these places. Were you conscious that a non-metropolitan audience was being presented with, as usual, metropolitan art?

S. P.: These were questions that I was exploring for quite some time. In fact, every time I visited these places. I was very clear about one thing – I was going to introduce people to the best in contemporary Indian art. Also, many people

from cities like Kolhapur and Nagpur, leave aside a cultural centre like Pune, look up to urban artists like V.S. Gaitonde and S.H. Raza. Many modern artists have a huge following in smaller cities as well.

A. S.: So, you were not willing to fall prey to the politics of representation with all its tokenisms.

S. P.: No. But, of course, one can have a show incorporating artists from these regions and it will make a valid curatorial project. I conceived *Expanding Horizons* as a way of increasing awareness – about the history of Indian art, its leading lights, the variety of styles in operation. This was the first time audiences from different centres in Maharashtra were going to see such art and so, they had to see the best practitioners. Viewers can question the quality of the art displayed but for that they have to see it first.

A. S.: So, you were conscious that you were presenting a tried and tested canon? Any inclusions that you feel uneasy about now? Or any exclusions that could have been remedied? M. F. Husain's absence was obvious; so was Sheela Gowda's, among others. Some works were quite unexceptional – Ram Kumar's abstract, for instance.

S. P.: I started out with this question when making a choice – has this artist definitely contributed to the development of Indian art? I found that there were quite a few who had. The next questions were: How do I fit him or her in a narrative about the last 60 years? Are his or her works available? How do I represent the distinct decades – from the '50s to the first decade of the 21st century? What about the experiments with different media? And the various genres? Unfortunately, it was not possible to accommodate all the artists I wanted or liked.

A. S.: How did the audience change from place to place? And what about their responses? It would be interesting to trace the character and temper of a city by assessing the reactions of the people to the art on display and to the project as a whole.

S. P.: It was an instructive experience for me. In Amravati, for example, it was absolutely the first time that contemporary art of this quality was being shown. It was quite overwhelming for many people. Not all of the art could be 'figured out' by the visitors but there were instances where you could see positive reactions. One sculptor who had not worked for the last 20 years was inspired to explore the genre after seeing works by Atul and Harsha; in fact, he came to Nasik to show me some of his new works! In Nagpur and Pune, there is a lot of art happening – these are cosmopolitan centres. But unfortunately, there is no infrastructure. This show gave viewers a context – they could learn what the connections between the art forms were. Kolhapur and Nasik have vibrant art-making traditions. Kolhapur, for example, is known for academic realist portraits and landscapes. And though many feel that art cultures in these places perpetuate old practices, I do not think it is a disadvantage. Their exposure to generic works has sensitized viewers in many ways. You can see it in the quality of their responses. In no other city in Maharashtra is there so



A view of the works at *Expanding Horizons* in Mumbai, 2008.

much respect given to an artist as in Kolhapur.

A.S.: Of course, there is always the thrill of connecting with an audience that is very different from the one you know, especially if you come from Mumbai or Delhi. The greatest joy for me when I spoke in Solapur was that of writing the lecture in Marathi. In the wake of the dent that the image of the cosmopolitan Maharashtrian or Mumbaikar has suffered because of the attacks against North Indians in different cities in the state, this was, for me at least, a way of staking a claim on Marathi as a language. Getting artists and critics to speak about art-related issues to complement the exhibition at all the eight venues also seemed like an enabling pedagogic model.

S.P.: We planned the exhibition as a review show – modern and contemporary art in 30 frames. A kind of a condensed course. Atul Dodiya, N. S. Harsha and Alex Mathew gave excellent presentations about their work in Aurangabad, Amravati and Nagpur respectively. There were, in all, twenty-two lectures and eight panel discussions during the tour, and twenty documentary films were shown. What was exceptional was how some people actually followed the show around three or four venues to be able to catch these different programmes.

I totally agree about Marathi – to distance oneself from the language because it has got identified with divisive politics would be suicidal. In fact, people doing theatre have been responding critically to such issues for quite some time. Even experiences like censorship, which have been troubling visual artists of late, have been dealt with by theatre-persons for the last five decades in the state. They have also been taking plays to audiences in small towns for a long time. Getting inputs from them, before I set off, was very valuable.

A.S.: Any plans to tone up the scale – to take the show to places elsewhere in the country?

S.P.: Not really. It has been a fulfilling but an exhausting experience. It took around three years to get the project off the ground. I remember initial conversations with Sudhir Bedekar and Rahul Srivastava. A team of six people was formed – Deepak Ghare, Gieve Patel, Ranjit Hoskote, Dilip Ranade, Padmakar Kulkarni and myself. It was quite tough but also quite exciting. At each venue, friends and colleagues joined in, and helped the cause.

A.S.: We spoke of Mumbai's cosmopolitanism under threat a moment ago. Your paintings have consistently looked at the dangerously altering landscape of the city. Quite a few of the works in *Citing the City* have this preponderance of violent imagery. If this is a shift you acknowledge, does it disturb you?

S.P.: Yes, I did notice a difference. In my works in earlier exhibitions, the violence always seemed like an aberration – things went wrong but the conditions always returned to normal. There was this assumption that people were generally nice to each other and a riot or a conflagration was only a passing phase. In the last few years, the mindset of people has changed. The 'normal' standard of behaviour that existed some years back is no longer valid. How have things changed so drastically from 1992-93 to 2002? I am reminded of Vijay Tendulkar's proposition that man is basically a violent animal and civilisational processes only hide this truth. For me, this has been a major realization – a big change. I was earlier always a firm believer in human beings and their essential goodness.

A.S.: There are new architectural landmarks in many of your newer works – the flyover has replaced the railway overbridge, to put it a little facetiously. With the post-Industrial landscapes come the urban regeneration projects and all the acts of confrontation and re-conciliation between politicians, mill-owners and tenants. Whereas earlier there was an attempt at slowly capturing dramatic movements in a landscape (the nullah water rippling with a quiet menace or people caught in a cross-fire of glances at and around railway stations), in many recent works like *The Clearing* (2007) and *Untitled I* (2006), one finds the tedium of everyday life getting normalized – in spite of the alternation of kuccha and pucca buildings, the shanties and the skyscrapers, the landscapes seem to uncomplicatedly and peremptorily settle inside their skins. Even the man being beaten up by the goondas in *Bylanes Saga* (2007) doesn't seem to affect anybody else. Is this the new numb Mumbai that you see looming large before you?

S.P.: I use the device of the fracture to articulate a range of things. The different perspectives with their invisible fracture-lines provide a structure that allows for complexity. In a work like *Untitled 2* (2006), the question I am asking is: will the city survive? Or will it break apart? *Bylanes Saga* (2007) has been conceived almost as an altarpiece. If a person is being killed in a corner of your locality and if no one around seems to be bothered by it, what does it tell you about the attitude of the people? What is life-changing for one person is trivial for another – I find this aspect quite epic in its scope.

A.S.: One sees people continuously interacting with their social spaces and architectures in many of your works. As architecture in all its anonymous make-shiftiness develops a personality and a kind of character, men and women talking, walking or working assume the status of elements in an architectural urbanscape. It's interesting to see suggestions about people getting circuted through the landscapes they belong to and suggestions about an environment getting circuted through the people it serves as a context.



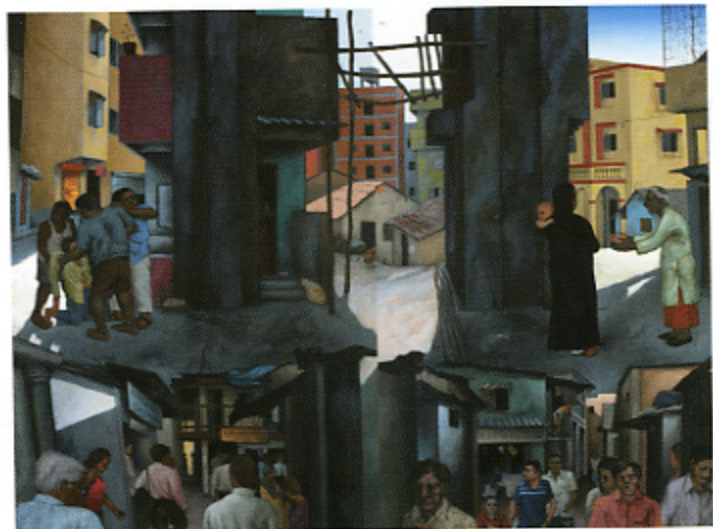
Schoolgirls at the Kolhapur show; At the back are works by **F. N. Souza** and **Tyeb Mehta**.



Three old women staring at *The Second Orgasm* by **N.S. Harsha** at Amravati.



Sudhir Patwardhan. *The Clearing*. Acrylic on canvas. 54" x 72". 2007.



Sudhir Patwardhan. *Bylanes Saga* (Diptych). Acrylic on canvas. 72" x 96". 2007.
ALL IMAGES COURTESY SUDHIR PATWARDHAN.

S.P.: Very true. I remember referring to Pico della Francesca's view of Arezzo in a talk and commenting on how a group of people is a group of people and a group of houses is a community. For example, as you drive up along Khandala and you see a cluster of buildings, you immediately start imagining different people leading different lives there. Houses thus acquire a kind of character, as you say.

Now that *Expanding Horizons* is over, I would like to go back to drawing. I like to draw from photographs. I was sketching some buildings from Ram Kumar's *Benaras* paintings and I realized some things about drawing from life and drawing from photographs. A photograph captures each house as a separate building. So, when you draw from it, you already have a detailed reality to sift from. But, when you draw from life, you have to take recourse to stereotypes. The balance between the particular and the generic is what

every artist needs to negotiate.

Different things start operating in your mind as you draw from photographs. I work from my own photographs. There is a sense of location, a sense of memory that is present in photographs. A photograph of a group of girls that I had taken made me aware of a person walking behind them when I looked at it. I had not registered his presence when I took the photograph. So, there is memory with an element of surprise.

Earlier, I used to bend and catch my reflection in the mirror and try and capture it in a sketch, say, about lifting an object. This seems easy but it is not. Because even as you are drawing, you are deciding how to bend, how much to lean, among other things. In drawing from life, you have to add complexity, whereas in drawing from a photograph, you have to distil what has already been captured.