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Indian Artists Comment on a Booming Economy While Helping to Fuel It



Fawzan Husain for The New York Times

The artists Atul and Anju Dodiya at their studio in Mumbai. Their work is included in two auctions this week.

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MUMBAI — In a humble suburb, past storefronts splashed with soap-powder ads and banners splashed with the faces of local politicians, sits a narrow row of tenement flats, in whose courtyard sits a woman, sari hitched up to her knees, washing that morning's pots and pans. With a nod of her head she directs you two doors down, to where some of India's most critically acclaimed contemporary art is being made.



Sotheby's

An untitled 2000 watercolor and charcoal work by Anju Dodiya.

A large white door opens into the studio of Atul Dodiya, whose large, biting commentaries on what vexes his country embrace all that can be found on these streets and more. His canvases swallow everything, from the garish everyday India to high art from all over.

Around the bend, splash-splash through a puddle that rises to the ankles after barely an hour's rain, is the corner studio of his wife, Anju, whose quiet, sometimes whimsical play on the self-portrait seems to eschew the noise of the city. (The city cannot always be kept out of her studio: the monsoon floods, thanks to an overflowing courtyard drain, have forced her to postpone temporarily some paintings on mattresses, her latest canvas.)

The couple, who met in art school here 20 years ago, are among a generation of contemporary Indian artists who chronicle the gestalt of an India on the boil, offering both mirror and commentary on issues ranging from its exuberant economy to the kitsch and disquiet of its daily life.

The artists themselves are part of the economic boom. A painting by a relative newcomer, Surendran Nair, 40, for instance, fetched an unusually high amount, \$250,000, at the online Saffronart auction this month. Their work is also attracting attention abroad. Sotheby's and Christie's are both holding auctions of Indian contemporary art, including work by the Dodiya's, with estimated prices as high as \$220,000. Christie's sale is Sept. 20 and Sotheby's is Sept. 22..

The couple and their Indian contemporaries — Mr. Dodiya, at 47, is among the eldest and a widely acknowledged leader of this generation — tend not to be attached to a signature style or even a medium, and certainly not to a singular cultural reference. A great many images, jokes and references populate the work, some seemingly Indian and some not.

Their preoccupations range from the failure of Gandhian nonviolence to outsourcing to that rare gem in this country, privacy.

“It’s a globalization-era India, with all of its confidence and anxiety,” Ranjit Hoskote, a curator and critic, said of this group of Indian artists. “There’s a seething energy that you feel. There’s a plurality of references.”

They work in multiple mediums. Subodh Gupta’s installations offer cow-dung patties, kitchen fuel for millions of Indian country homes, recast in brass. Jitish Kallat has reworked the iconic monkeys who hear, see and speak no evil to comment on what he calls “our political predicament.” Baiju Parthan’s multipanel pieces use digital code.

“There’s a soul-stirringness about it,” said Yashodhara Dalmia, another critic and curator. “The excitement and pain of the new age and its reverberations in India is evident in their work.”

Among the works in the Sotheby’s sale is Mr. Dodiya’s 2002 “Mirage,” painted on a storefront shutter, of a kind that virtually every small shop in India uses as its front gate and its advertising billboard. On Mr. Dodiya’s shutter is a grinning Gandhi trailed by two grinning British security officers. Behind the shutter, on canvas, are rats scampering along a rendering of Brancusi’s “Endless Column” tower.

Mr. Dodiya said he was drawn to Gandhi because he is both ubiquitous and somehow ignored in India. “I wanted to scrutinize that failing — that fabric of society that never practiced what he spoke about or wrote,” he is quoted as saying in the Sotheby’s auction catalog.

A solo show of works by Mr. Dodiya opens on Sept. 20 at Bodhi Art in Chelsea, and he and Mr. Kallat will speak there on Sept. 22.

Mr. Dodiya’s studio, in the suburban Ghatkopar neighborhood, is the apartment where he and six siblings grew up. His father, he said, was a building contractor who gave him the freedom to paint, and his mother was deeply religious. Bright Hindu calendars papered the walls of their home and became part of his artistic vocabulary.

[Jasper Johns](#) and Edward Hopper were among Mr. Dodiya’s earliest influences. The first painting he ever sold — in 1985, for the equivalent of \$50 — was a sign for the Ghatkopar railway station, rendered “in the Johns way,” as he put it. His pictures have always been packed with a swirl of subjects: film stars, his siblings, political icons, characters from Hindu mythology. A portrait of Johns sits above his desk, just behind Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god. Portraits of his parents and the Indian filmmaker [Satyajit Ray](#) are also part of the pantheon.

“I’m not bothered about Indianness,” he said, drawing a distinction between his generation and the Indian painters (“my seniors”) who preceded him. “I can quote [Picasso](#) or Johns. I will do it without hesitation.”

Indian cataclysms, particularly spasms of Hindu-Muslim violence, have transformed his work, he said: for at least a decade his concerns have been wide-ranging and explicitly political — without, as Mr. Hoskote puts it, “descending into social realism.”



Christie's

"In Jatayu's Forest," a 2004 watercolor by Atul Dodiya.



Sotheby's

Atul Dodiya's "Mirage" (2002), enamel paint on a metal shutter.

Marriage aside, you find little mutual influence in the works of Atul and Anju Dodiya. He welcomes the sensory bombardment of his country; she is a dedicated student of the interior. It began for her as a nightly exercise, standing before a mirror and drawing self-portraits in her sketchbook, one after the other.

Why not assimilate these into your paintings, her husband once suggested. She did — she had been foraging for a subject to paint — and the experiment led to the self-referential oeuvre that the Christie's auction catalog calls her “fictive alter egos.”

She recalled, “It became a record of a person alone, a kind of meditation on solitude.” Then it became her central preoccupation, whether on paper or fabric, sometimes borrowing a riff from a 1930’s lingerie ad, sometimes a Japanese ukiyo-e print.

“I somehow made a virtue of not knowing what to paint,” she said. “It became my subject.” On her easel was a watercolor of a young girl, with pencil in hand and plaintive eyes that appear to ask: Now what do I write?

Originally a collage artist, Ms. Dodiya remains a hoarder of faces, particularly those in states of extreme emotion. A box of clippings in the lower reaches of her bookshelf includes news photographs of mourners, bombing victims, tennis stars in victory and defeat. She also confesses to staring shamelessly at faces on Mumbai’s commuter trains, a boon for any artist in pursuit of extreme expression.

If she burrows into the private, Mr. Dodiya questions the blurred line between public and private. The shutter paintings are sometimes deeply private on the outside, loud and boisterous on the inside. In Ghatkopar, as he well knows, the two realms are rarely sacred. Nothing is really private.

In fact, he said, his neighbors would probably interrogate him later about the day’s visitors, demanding to know why they were taking photographs and asking questions. “I’ll have to explain everything,” he said.