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# The Moral Economy of the Street

## The Bombay Paintings of Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan

Karin Zitzewitz

*I pick my way  
Step by ginger step between  
Muck, rags, dogs,  
Women bathing squealing  
Children in sewer water,  
Unexpected chickens  
And miles of dusty yellow  
Gravel...<sup>1</sup>*

- 1 Gieve Patel, 'City Landscape', *How do you withstand, body?*, Clearing House, Bombay, 1976
- 2 In a special issue of the Indian monthly *Seminar* considering the crisis in the city, see Gerson da Cunha, 'Decline of a Great City', *Seminar*, 528, 2003, available online at <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/528.htm>, 13 September 2007
- 3 P K Das, 'Manifesto of a Housing Activist', *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, eds Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1995, pp 170–84
- 4 Arvind Rajagopal, 'The Violence of Commodity Aesthetics: Hawkers, Demolition Raids, and a New Regime of Consumption', *Social Text* 68, 19:3, autumn 2001, pp 91–113

The street is the primary space of experience in a city like Bombay (Mumbai). Not just thoroughfares connecting one place to another, Bombay streets are the quintessential space of the social. They are places of residence and business, of religious experience and social confrontation, where the individual faces differences of gender, caste or any other meaningful distinction. As Gieve Patel's poem describes, Bombay streets are also often stages for the exhibition of the private, for the display of domestic intimacies conducted in and around trash. They are also a theatre of the abject, making visible that which is difficult to see. A turn around the corner might just turn your stomach.

Anthropologists, social activists and public intellectuals attempting to represent urban space in Bombay approach the topic from a sense of accelerating crisis; their accounts are often written in an activist mode.<sup>2</sup> In a city in which sixty-five per cent of the population lives in slums occupying only eight per cent of the land, the space of the city is itself conceived of as a site of contestation, or, more informally, as a problem.<sup>3</sup> While much of the discussion of space concerns housing, debate swirls around the space of the street as well. The question of how to conceive of the streets themselves – whether they should contain street hawkers or religious shrines, for instance – pits the interests of the adequately housed and employed middle class against those of the rest.<sup>4</sup> The problem of space is quite obviously political, economic and social. But it is also, and at times overwhelmingly, grounded in moral and

aesthetic concerns over what a city should be like and what sort of life its residents are entitled to. Arjun Appadurai's theorisation of the struggle for the production of locality in the era of globalisation has provided a frame for studies of the problem of space in Bombay.<sup>5</sup> The most insightful of these accounts have drawn upon his holistic view of 'place' to unite social concerns with moral and aesthetic ones developed under the sign of 'experience'.<sup>6</sup>

In his theory of the urban experience, Walter Benjamin found in the street a privileged space for analysis. For him, the experience of the street is one of social flux, in which social control gives way to a series of sensory possibilities that are mediated by the material life the street contains. In his essay on the poetry of Baudelaire, Benjamin wrote of streets as containers for the crowd against which the individual – the poet or artist, for instance – defines his other experience of the city. For Baudelaire and his contemporaries, the mass is not really a class or a collective, but is rather 'an amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street'. In Benjamin's theory of the city, the sensory experience of the urban crowd is 'imprinted on the creativity' of the poet, constituting his artistic work as well as his artistic self, which is a product of deliberate self-fashioning.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's writing first engages squarely with the effects of modern life on the classical terms of aesthetic theory and then speculates about what role that aesthetic plays in creating new forms of ethical life. Although his essay on Baudelaire is most often read for its original insights into the phenomenon of shock, it is also a major consideration of the attempt by an artist to understand his place in the modern city. This paper will examine how Benjamin's framework prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between an aesthetic engagement with the city and questions of moral self-fashioning.

Using Benjamin's insights into the challenge that the modern city presents to the artist, this paper finds in the work of Bombay artists Sudhir Patwardhan and Gieve Patel an intriguing model for linking aesthetic and moral concerns. In paintings produced since the late 1970s, the artists have sought to represent the everyday social space of the city. Their projects are complementary rather than collaborative, but both have made the street visible as a site of contestation in which the central tension is between the individual and, variously, the crowd, the material world and the risk of overwhelming sensory experience. Especially when first exhibited, their paintings took a fresh approach to pictorial form by adopting the point of view of a person standing or walking through the streets. Painted figures are shown head on, at the height of the viewer, rooted in their surroundings. Their subject matter was the everyday life of the street, in scenes that alternately brim with the energy of the crowd or capture a brief moment of an individual at rest. Their overwhelming concerns, as I will argue, are to represent the internal life of the individual within the canvas and to incite a particular set of aesthetic and moral responses from the viewer. The artists explore the capacity for aesthetic contemplation to endow those involved in the act of painting – the painted figure, the artist and the viewer – with a sense of dignity built out of a full appreciation of the autonomy of the human subject.

The painters developed this view of the city at a moment of rapid historical change, during which Bombay's identity as the centre of the Indian textile industry was beginning to give way. Marked by the devastating

5 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, especially pp 188–99. Appadurai has followed up his more theoretical work with more ethnographically specific studies of locality, including his 'Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai', *Public Culture*, 12:3, 2000, pp 627–51 and 'Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics', *Public Culture*, 14:1, 2002, pp 21–47.

6 See Rajagopal, 'The Violence of Commodity Aesthetics', op cit, Radhika Subramaniam, 'Urban Physiognomies', in *Sarai Reader 2002: The Cities of Everyday Life*, Sarai, New Delhi, 2002, pp 8–13, and the informally published projects associated with PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research), a centre founded by Appadurai in 2001 to sponsor action research projects in Bombay. Available at <http://pukar.org.in>.

7 Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1977, p 163

- 8 For an account of the strike, see Hubert van Wersch, *Bombay Textile Strike, 1982–3*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992
- 9 Patwardhan's comment was shown in K P Jayasankar and Anjali Montiero's documentary film, *Saacha (The Loom)*, as cited by Anne Rutherford, "“Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter”": Mimetic Visuality, Transience and the Documentary Image', *Third Text*, 20:1, January, 2006, p 30
- 10 Kalpana Sharma, 'Chronicle of a Riot Foretold', in *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, op cit, p 272. The riot in question occurred in 1992–1993, in a staggering local response to a national communal crisis brought on by the destruction of a mosque in the North Indian city of Ayodhya. Weeks of rioting in which the Muslim community suffered disproportionately were followed by a series of bomb blasts at crucial city institutions allegedly arranged by the Muslim underworld don, Dawood Ibrahim.
- 11 The impact of that aesthetic can be felt in more recent artistic treatments of the city, including *Saacha*, a documentary film in which the textile strike is the basis for a juxtaposition of Patwardhan's work with that of the Marathi Dalit poet Narayan Surve and the film-maker's own approach to the city. In her analysis of the film, Anne Rutherford associates the aesthetic experience with mimesis, concluding that far from a lyrical account, their film shows the city through its physical form. She writes, 'spaces and objects are not neutral but are imbued with memory and feeling...'. Anne Rutherford, "“Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter”", op cit, p 28. By including Patwardhan in their film,

eighteen-month textile workers' strike of 1982–1983, the social solidarities promoted by the Left began to lose their economic foundations in the late 1970s.<sup>8</sup> As Patwardhan has said, by the 1990s, the fragmentation of the workers' movement meant that the Left could no longer provide an 'integrative grand narrative within which to frame the city and its people'.<sup>9</sup> Instead, fragmentation itself, or the shift away from industry and social solidarity – now manifest in the remodelling of textile mills into upscale shopping malls – has become the most important framework for understanding the present-day city of Bombay. For one author attempting to account for the startling communal violence in the city a decade after the strike, deindustrialisation 'converted a once stable and efficient metropolis into a powder-keg ready to explode into sectarian violence'.<sup>10</sup> Patel and Patwardhan recognised the impact of deindustrialisation on individual human beings as it was happening. More than just illustrations of city life, however, their artworks have provided an aesthetic framework for understanding social change.<sup>11</sup>

The paintings represent everyday scenes in recognisable urban spaces. In so doing, they resonate with a generalised 'Bombay' experience, forcing the viewer to contemplate the city as a shared space, regardless of social position. Despite this, Patel and Patwardhan also subvert the notion that the visual experience of the city is shared by finding within it subjects that are socially marginal to the point of being invisible. As activist author Sandeep Pendse described recently, the marginal worker, whom he calls the 'toiler', is characterised primarily by social invisibility, rather than his caste, class or occupation.<sup>12</sup> Beyond simply representing marginal people, however, the artists insist upon their dignity, even or especially when that dignity is stripped away in poverty, sickness or death. By dignity, the artists mean a consideration of another human being as a fully autonomous subject; while this requires the artist to assume the other to have an internal life similar to the artist's own, to recognise the other's autonomy is to allow him or her the privilege of difference.<sup>13</sup> The paintings therefore do more than describe the city and its denizens. The aesthetic they provide deliberately challenges the urban experience, confronting the relatively privileged viewers of their paintings with sights that could be visible to them just outside the doors of the gallery, if they chose to see them. The paintings are controlled and controlling, forcing viewers to contemplate the dignity and indignities of less prominent residents of Bombay. By pairing an aesthetic imperative of contemplation with the moral concern of dignity, the paintings imagine an alternative moral economy of the Bombay street. They imagine a normatively egalitarian vision of city life that stands in opposition to the stark inequalities of the real city of Bombay.

### THE VIEW OF THE STREET

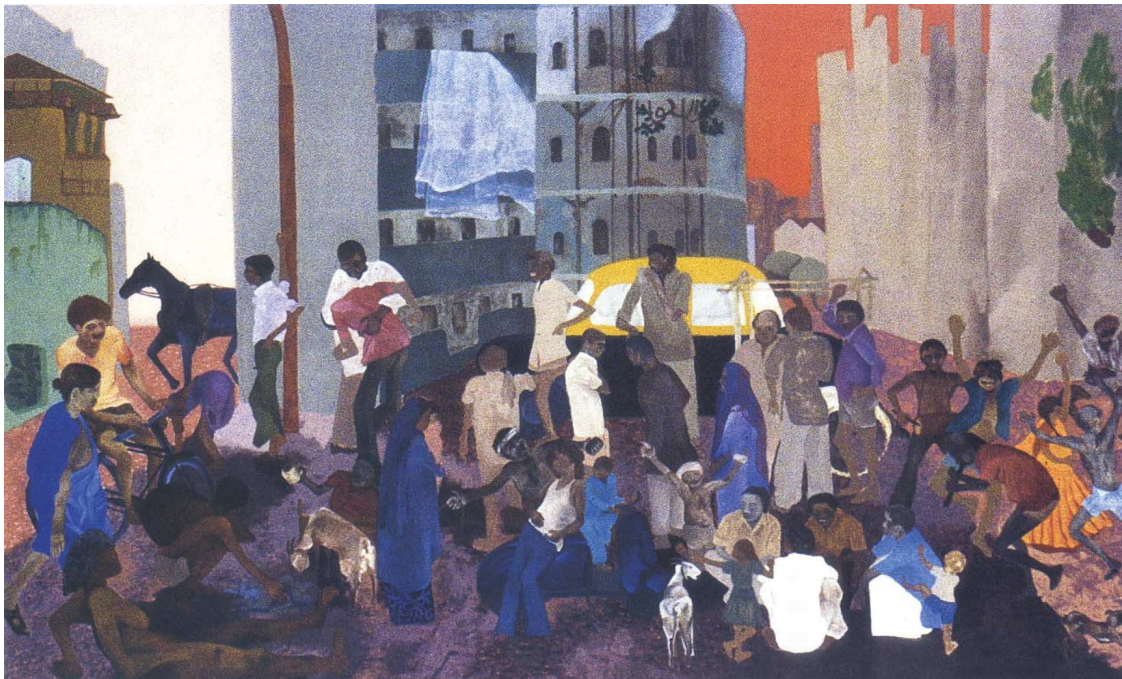
Much of the effect of Patel and Patwardhan's paintings derives from a single formal device: point of view. Although their paintings often contain the mythologised spaces of Bombay – whether mills, monuments or other recognisable buildings – the point of view of the painting does much to disturb the sense of mastery that such spaces might provide. Instead, the street-level point of view is privileged. While this view is

the film-makers  
acknowledge their debt to  
his aesthetic.

- 12 Sandeep Pendse, 'Toil, Sweat and the City', in *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, op cit, pp 3–5
- 13 I follow Charles Taylor in tracing this relationship between autonomy, dignity and recognition back through Hegel to Kant. See his 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994.
- 14 Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', op cit, pp 170–2

repeated in many paintings of the period, Gieve Patel's *Off-Lamington Road* (1983–1986) is perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of how this formal device conditions the content of the painting. Patel's painting is a study of the crowd from a very short distance away. In a kind of balancing act, the artist is able to observe without being overrun, but despite his distance, he does not view the crowd as a mass. Instead, and in a manner similar to a story by Edgar Allan Poe discussed by Benjamin, Patel looks at the crowd as if through a café window.<sup>14</sup>

Patel shows an alleyway off the main street that serves as both thoroughfare and stopping place. Shown in the purplish shadow of a building, people walk through or stand in groups of two or three, playfully fighting or deep in conversation. The street is about to be filled from the right with a group of dancing young people, a procession, perhaps, accompanied by flute and drum. It is a chaotic scene – you can just hear the noise – but the subjects are mostly shown as relaxed and joyful. Only when the viewer notices the more difficult sights of the two bandaged leprous beggar children or the inexplicably nude woman lying in the gutter in the foreground does the scene begin to seem other than cheerful. With these elements, the street seems to be less of an easy community than a chaos of individual actions that may dissolve in conflict. As Benjamin reports it was for Poe, the crowd here is not at all a mass, but is rather a collection of people. But as for a group of writers including Poe, Baudelaire and Friedrich Engels, that collection of people is itself a spectacle that inspires an ambivalent, uneasy response. Patel's painting is ultimately less celebratory than manic; it brims over with the excessive and, importantly, unfocused energy of daily life in Bombay.



Gieve Patel, *Off-Lamington Road*, 1983–86, oil on canvas, approx. 9 feet × 4.5 feet, collection of Mick Yates, image courtesy of the artist

As Patel describes it, ‘for once, [the crowd] tumbled out of my brush in an apparently spontaneous mayhem of relationships’.<sup>15</sup> He represents the street as a temporarily shared space, the meaning of which is constantly changing. He shows how street spaces are governed by continually shifting relations of dominance and social distinction. The dress of the women, for instance, marks the crowd as communally mixed, with a woman in a blue sari tied in the Marathi style at the left and two women wearing the veils associated with the Muslim community approaching each other in the centre. The far larger numbers of men vie for dominance in a variety of ways, from playfully wrestling in the background to showing reluctance to give way to the dancers coming in from the right. But such distinctions are not meant to be didactic or artificial, nor do they dominate the painting. Instead, what this crowd is most clearly characterised by is fluidity and transience. It is as if the painter wishes to show that the street will not look this way again, not exactly, but it will always be similar.

The crowd that is the subject of the painting is ringed with larger buildings on three sides, ranging from various styles of apartment buildings to what could be a vague intimation of skyline in the distance. The calm, still buildings in the background contrast strongly with the crowd in the foreground. To one who knows Bombay, they are each recognisable, from the pitched roof and balcony of the carefully wrought early twentieth-century building on the left to the art deco apartment building in the centre to the peaked roofs of the mills peeking out on the right. The architectural mix places the scene as squarely as the title, which refers to an important road in Central Bombay that happens to contain the clinic in which the artist, a doctor, works every day. This static and recognisable city frame emphasises the fluidity of Patel’s crowd, contrasting the apparent anonymity of the figures with the known physical landmarks. Despite the emphasis that Patel places on the crowd, the very disjuncture between the known physical city and the transient human population prompts the question of how people can create an enduring sense of place in a city. As we shall find, that question was constitutive to both artists’ approach to representing the problem of urban space.

### DIGNITY IN THE CROWD

In Patel’s painting, the viewer is shown the crowd without actually being part of it. Sudhir Patwardhan’s 1981 painting, *Overbridge*, however, places the viewer within the crowd, as a pedestrian on the bridge. Sudhir Patwardhan, much more than Gieve Patel, was committed to representing the mill worker in his moment of crisis. Rumoured to be the only ‘card-carrying Marxist’ among contemporary artists, Patwardhan was at this time directly engaged in class critique. In the 1970s, he focused on studies of the working-class body which he ‘distorted’, in his word, in order to simultaneously endow him or her with physical and moral strength.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1980s, Patwardhan had begun to question his own ability to act as advocate for a class of which he was not a part. Far from abandoning the project, the artist developed an aesthetic agenda in which he sought to balance what he called the ‘distance’ he maintained

15 Gieve Patel, ‘Contemporary Indian Painting’, *Daedalus*, autumn 1989, pp 198–9

16 Interview with Sudhir Patwardhan, July 2003

from his subject. While a representation of the working-class figure depended on the artist's involvement with him, Patwardhan wished to maintain enough distance from the figure that it would not become a 'projection' of the artist's own middle-class self. As he wrote in 1985, 'a fuller understanding of another's life is also dependent on distance. It depends upon the acceptance of the other's autonomy'. Ultimately, Patwardhan sought to balance his distance from the working-class subject so that the figure would retain its sociological interest while being shown 'close enough to be sensuously full-bodied and disquieting'.<sup>17</sup> The distance that is left is what I will discuss as the space of contemplation. The aesthetic problem that Patwardhan describes – and even the terms of its solution – is strikingly similar to that which Walter Benjamin sees structuring the poetry of Baudelaire. Ultimately, in question for both are the choices that modern life offers to the artist and the strategies that artists can devise in reply.

- 17 'Near and Far', introduction to *Sudhir Patwardhan: Paintings*, Centre George Pompidou, Association Français d'Action Artistique, May 1986



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Overbridge*, 1981, oil on canvas, 51 × 57 in (129 × 144.8 cm), Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, Peabody Essex Museum, 2006 E301218, courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum

The central figure in Patwardhan's *Overbridge* demonstrates the artist's ideal. The main subject of the painting, a man in a blue shirt, stares out of the canvas straight at the viewer with a defeated expression. His poverty is obvious from his gaunt face and hollow chest; he looks even thinner with his arm folded behind his back. A recent reading of the painting suggests that the cause of his despair is his dismissal from the mill shown in the background, with its characteristic peaked roofs and windows for ventilation.<sup>18</sup> Patwardhan shows this man in the crowd crossing the bridge, where he has presumably just squeezed by the couple of much heftier men whose backs are shown. One of those men, his arm around his friend, gazes back at the passing figure. We see only his eyes, but can imagine compassion in his look. A third figure in the painting's foreground is a beggar taken from a careful study Patwardhan made of a leper.<sup>19</sup> She glances downward, absorbed in her own situation.

The feature of the crowd that animates this painting is its effect of social isolation. Each of the three fully articulated figures is a true portrait, a representation of an autonomous individual for whom the viewer can imagine some sort of personal history. In constructing his painting, Patwardhan shows the city as characterised by the collision of their individual situations, as each is shown with a different mood and imagination of the moment. In the space of the painting, the three figures – the despairing man, the passing man and the beggar – are shown momentarily to share a location with little meaningful exchange. The bridge hosts their meeting, but only as a stage for their shared isolation. At its base, this painting is a representation of the failure of the city to provide true sociality. Like the passage by Engels cited in Benjamin's essay, the painting shows the crowd as 'something abhorrent to human nature itself'.<sup>20</sup>

It is the viewer who breaks this isolation and makes *Overbridge* work by unifying its composition and bringing its subjects into meaningful relation. As the viewer meets the eyes of the despairing man, the brief moment of his passing is frozen into a connection. The returned glance is an everyday feature of the street, but here it is brought into the contemplative space of the gallery. While he hardly prompts a sexual gaze, the man can still be said to resemble Baudelaire's figure of the *passante*. The viewer is placed in the role of the poet, for whom, in Benjamin's words, 'far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates'.<sup>21</sup> In the moment of the glance, the distance between the passer-by and the viewer is suddenly eliminated. In the city, that glance is fleeting – providing love at last sight rather than a chance of a real connection. But in the gallery, and as long as the viewer contemplates Patwardhan's painting, the city dweller can experience an intimacy that cuts through the isolation that constitutes urban life. The other two figures further serve to keep the balance of distance that Patwardhan values: the passing man has himself just experienced a similar collapse of the distance between himself and the despairing man, while the beggar woman continues her isolation from the other figures in the scene.

Benjamin's writings on the crowd, like his writings on aura, emphasise how features of modern life force a collapse of the distance between

18 Susan S Bean, 'Gateway Bombay', *Gateway Bombay*, exhibition catalogue, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA, 14 July 2007–7 December 2008, p 17

19 The drawing, 'Leper', is published in Ranjit Hoskote, *Sudhir Patwardhan: The Complicit Observer*, Sakshi Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2005, p 166.

20 After introducing Marx and Engels's critique of the crowd, Benjamin later links the shock effects of city life to the repetitive gestures of the worker. 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', op cit, p 167, 174–6.

21 Ibid, p 169



subject and object that has been thought to be necessary to facilitate contemplation. In place of the contemplation that, in the case of Patwardhan's painting, allows for a real engagement with the individual misery of the painted subject looking out at the viewer, Benjamin finds that modern life and its media, like photography, provide only a likeness rather than a gaze.<sup>22</sup> Like Baudelaire and Engels, Patwardhan sees the collapse of distance ultimately as a loss of sociality. His desire simply to represent the disconnection felt in the crowd is balanced with an imperative to make urban subjects visible as contemplative objects. For the space of contemplative engagement between the viewer and the viewed would ultimately address his political concern with the moral economy of visibility. As Patwardhan expresses in statements about his work, a mere likeness of the urban poor would not come close to fulfilling his responsibilities as an artist which, as he saw them, were simultaneously to represent and to subvert the social isolation of the urban experience and the invisibility of the poor.

### THE ABJECT URBAN BODY

Like Patwardhan, Patel is also concerned with the individuals who make up the crowd. *Off Lamington Road* emerged, Patel has said, alongside a series of portraits, and one can see in the canvas a dozen individual studies. In a published interview, Patel says, echoing Patwardhan, 'I had this feeling of space, each individual head could have a canvas to themselves, also this idea that man must be both part of the crowd and by himself...'.<sup>23</sup> The studies were portraits of his patients, whom he saw as a general practitioner in his clinic on Lamington Road. In interviews, Patel describes how his medical work brings him into constant contact with the sick or damaged bodies of the impoverished. First in his poetry and then in a series of paintings ironically titled *The Gallery of Man*, Patel has focused on the suffering body.<sup>24</sup> His painted subjects included the sick, the dead and victims of trauma. While his contact with trauma is increased by his work as a doctor, the opening quote from his poem 'City Landscape' reminds us that, for Patel, coexistence with the abject is an inescapable aspect not only of medicine but of the city itself. As he writes, 'I work in a land of continual underlying violence – of human beings against animals, adults against children, men against women, the strong against the weak.' He finds little comfort in the thought that such violence occurs everywhere, for 'we are all accountable to the place from where we function'.<sup>25</sup> The scenes of the abject that Patel paints are, therefore, most often distressingly everyday, rooted in their surroundings – the bloated body of a drowned woman or the human remains of a car accident.

Staged in this way, it is clear that Patel's subject is not only the suffering of the body, but the stakes of making that suffering visible. Meaning that his focus is not just on the presence of death in the street, but also on the viewer's reaction to that sight. As an artist and a human being, Patel never wants to be habituated to such things, so he repeatedly makes them visible in his paintings. Patel forces the viewer – and himself – to look long and hard where he would normally withdraw his gaze. In a society in which abject conditions are at once tolerated and rendered

22 Ibid, p 188

23 Neville Tuli, *Indian Contemporary Painting*, Harry N Abrams, New York, 1998, p 350

24 The medical gaze was the subject of poems published in his first volume, *Poems*, in 1966, and the body itself was the subject of his second volume of poetry, *How do you withstand, body?*. For a brief discussion of the impact of the body on his work, see Mary Archer, "'Working with Images is not Enough": An interview with Gieve Patel', MSS, artist collection (later published in *Uomini E Libri*, 124, Milan, September–October 1989).

25 Gieve Patel, 'Contemporary Indian Painting', *Daedalus*, op cit, p 199

invisible to middle-class eyes, Patel's insistence upon representing the abject is confrontational. He bases his position on two grounds: on aesthetic grounds, asking what effects such sights have on viewers; and on moral grounds, asking what sort of society would allow such sights to go unseen and unacknowledged. As he says, unless one is willing to give in to a trite or pat way of dealing with death, 'the only alternative is to keep your eyes and your soul open to it, not to shut anything out'.<sup>26</sup>

One of Patel's most subtle treatments of his moral and aesthetic questions comes in his *Crows with Debris* (2000). The painting focuses on two crows picking at the bloody tyre track left by a car running over a small animal. The death of the animal – a rat, perhaps – is shown in almost forensic detail; if you look hard, you can see that the car came from left to right, smashing the animal first and then leaving a bloody print of its tyre. The animal was split in two on contact, and a pool of blood collected under its torso. The crows, one of a number of scavenger bird species that fill Bombay's streets and skies, have only begun their job of cleaning up. Unlike in Patel's paintings of dead or diseased human beings, the moral question here is not prompted by the fact of this death; his goal is not primarily to comment on the injustice of road kill. Instead, this painting narrows the question to that of visibility. To Patel, to see has most value when it is a particular form of sight, the slow and reasoned engagement associated with contemplation.<sup>27</sup>

Patel commented in an interview that one thing he values about Bombay over the antiseptic cities of the West is that it does not hide its dead, so that death can remain a part of everyday life experience. 'There is something positive in a situation that doesn't shut away suffering as though it were a blemish that one shouldn't lay one's eyes on.'<sup>28</sup> Patel's view of suffering is unusual, opposing the much more common view that the outward presence of death in the city is a political and moral scandal, or at least an embarrassment, reminding the middle class that comparisons with Singapore are premature at best. But for the artist, the square confrontation with death is a challenge to the self that has positive moral effects. His strategy is to 'internalise that degree of cruelty or violence or darkness and then to watch and see if there may not be a corresponding force within me that could stand before this and survive'.<sup>29</sup> The possibility of moral renewal trumps the danger that to contemplate such a scene from too safe a distance would be to aestheticise suffering. To counter that possibility, the paintings of the abject that Patel has produced are outstandingly disciplined in their treatment of distance, striking a similar balance to that outlined by Patwardhan.

But Patel's attachment to these images of suffering has prompted a rare public disagreement between the two painters. In a 1984 article, Patel accused Patwardhan of editing away the squalor of the city. Patel writes, 'Our familiar sewage and sludge is there all right, but with some one element removed from it, and could that absented element be despair?'.<sup>30</sup> Answering his question himself, Patel acknowledges that Patwardhan has sought to provide a 'view that has corrected some of life's disappointments', one in which, critic Ranjit Hoskote continues, art can enable 'people to lead their lives with hope and reason'.<sup>31</sup> Their divergence, then, rests on the question of for whom a moral life is imagined. For Patel, the question of morality is in the eye of the beholder. His experiments with the abject pose moral challenges to himself, as a painter, that

26 Archer, "'Working with Images is not Enough": An interview with Gieve Patel', op cit, p 4

27 On the form of his look, see Sudhir Patwardhan, "'Gieve Patel: Looking into a well"... beyond Metaphor', *Art India*, 8:4, Quarter 4, 2003, pp 86–9.

28 Archer, "'Working with Images is not Enough": An interview with Gieve Patel', op cit, p 4

29 Gieve Patel, 'Dialogue', *Art India*, 5:1, Quarter 1, 2000, p 47

30 Gieve Patel, 'On Sudhir Patwardhan's "Town"', *Sunday Observer*, Bombay, 30 December 1984

31 Ranjit Hoskote, *Sudhir Patwardhan: The Complicit Observer*, op cit, p 18



Gieve Patel, *Crows with Debris*, 2000, oil on canvas, 33 × 28.4 inches, collection of Bodhi Art, Inc, photo: courtesy, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York

also extend to his viewers, charging them with the task of contemplating death. For Patwardhan, however, the moral challenge is in the city itself, in its cruel moral economy that perpetuates suffering. His task as an artist is to imagine a better city in which such suffering does not have to exist. Despite this difference the mode they propose for obtaining that possible

moral life is the same: to embrace an aestheticised urban experience by providing a space of contemplation.

### THE CITY AS A SPACE OF CONTEMPLATION

In his consideration of the aesthetics of modern life, Benjamin's most enduring point is that contemplation is a type of aesthetic experience made impossible by the shocks of the city. Benjamin's description of 'aura', in which the aura of nature is 'the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be', corresponds to the relationship between subject and object that, in post-Kantian aesthetics, makes contemplation possible.<sup>32</sup> He finds in Baudelaire a figure of profound ambivalence, one who realises the effects of modern life on the lyric aesthetic he holds dear, but remains committed to retaining the limited aura his poetry can provide. So, too, Patel and Patwardhan have both asserted that the maintenance of such distance is necessary to their projects, which, as we have seen, have both aesthetic and moral aims. The moral programme is fairly straightforward: in order to preserve one's own dignity and to respect that of others, the social space of the Bombay street must be seen for what it is, as a stage on which human beings conduct their lives in isolation, but also alongside one another. Each of those human beings is autonomous and deserving of dignity; even their death and suffering should be shown the respect of being visible. Only then could the street be imagined as a properly moral social space. The struggle to maintain these moral principles is the principal challenge of urban experience. While the artists propose contemplation as an aesthetic answer to that challenge, they do so in forms that are anything but disinterested. In so doing, they question the longstanding critique of contemplation as aestheticisation, through which the artist escapes from any social responsibility.

In a recent painting, Patwardhan has shown how the city of Bombay continues to increase the difficulty of achieving those moral aims. *Flyover* (2005) shows a construction project in which an elevated highway is partially finished. Such flyovers are now a ubiquitous sight in Bombay in which increasingly fast car traffic is lifted over the streets populated by the crowd. Such projects are demanded by and disproportionately serve the needs of the middle-class car driver; the poor generally travel by train or by foot. In the middle of the picture, the head and shoulders of such a pedestrian are shown just above piles of what may be gravel or construction debris. In contrast with the graceful curve of the massive highway, the figure seems to be impossibly small, swallowed up by the city. If in earlier paintings the street was shown as a site of contestations over space, here, the battle of this man to assert himself within the landscape seems already to be lost. Indeed, what is really missing from this painting is the notion of the street itself: the highway is no longer a social space at all but is, rather, mere landscape.

With this painting, Patwardhan raises the question of whether the struggle to retain individual space within the city is a lost cause. But what we can also see in this picture is the unusual emphasis on struggle within the form of contemplation that these artists have developed. For both, the project has been to make visible the spaces of contestation that

32 This more fully developed definition occurs in Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, op cit, pp 222–3, but he quotes himself in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p 188.



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Flyover*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 18 in, photo: courtesy of the artist and Bose Pacia Gallery, New York

actually exist in the city as a mode of providing a new strategy for coping with those contests themselves. To focus on the street has been to suggest it as a space with a moral economy of its own. They insist on the morality of this space even though they see the street as a container for an amorphous crowd in which interactions are only ever fleeting and social isolation is the rule even in times of human suffering. In so doing, they have generated a strong aesthetic and moral vision of the city that answers the dilemmas that Benjamin identified for the modern artist. They have also informed recent sociological analyses of the city even though, by retaining their strong focus on aesthetics, they have refused to collapse their representations of the city into ethnographic reportage or ham-fisted social critique. Instead, they have insisted upon the continued relevance of painting, of all things, in public debates on the principal 'problem' of the city: space.