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## CULTURE & SOCIETY

### MOSAIC OF GAMBLER

With **Atul Dodiya's** latest exhibition putting some of his most adventurous collages on view, **Chandrabhas Choudhury** profiles this quintessentially Bombay artist



Nishkant Gamre





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As Atul Dodiya takes three dozen or so viewers on a walk-through of his latest exhibition at Museum Gallery in Mumbai — a set of collages called “Saptapadi: Scenes from a Marriage” — the word ‘working’ pops up often in his speech, almost always accompanied by a snap of the fingers. Most of the time Dodiya says ‘working’ not to refer to the process of labour — as in “I was working” — but as a kind of shorthand for aesthetic success: “I looked at it and thought, is it working?”



**At work (top):** Dodiya at his Mumbai studio  
**Arati, Charu, Karuna** (from left above)  
**Couple with coffee pot** (at far left)  
**Devi and the sink** (at left)

It might be said that the most striking feature of Dodiya’s two-decade-long career is the startling variety of modes and media in which he has worked, and how, more often than not, he has made them work. “Most artists are actually at their most experimental in art school,” he laughs. “As students, they willingly try out all kinds of styles. But once they start exhibiting their work, they become more rigid. I’m happy not to have an identifiable style. I’ve always felt that different themes demand different styles, different media — each time you start afresh. You might say that I like to take risks.”

Certainly Dodiya’s rambunctious new collages — with faces painted in a photorealistic style jostling with gaudy street imagery on store-bought laminates with preexisting patterns — are worlds removed from last year’s show “The Wet Sleeves of My Paper Robe (Sabari in Her Youth: After Nandalal Bose)”, which were made from paper pulp, charcoal sticks and T-shirts among other things. These works follow naturally from Dodiya’s earlier experiments. In his 2002 collection, “ET and Others”, metal store shutters with popular imagery could be lifted up to reveal a second image, often suggesting some kind of relationship with the first. For the 2004 exhibition, “Broken Branches”, Dodiya put together human bones, old photographs, rusted tools and representations of birds — birds and bones appear frequently in his work — to evoke the horror of religious violence.

**‘I’m happy not to have an identifiable style. You might say that I like to take risks’**

Just as striking is the range of reference in Dodiya’s work, the way it draws harmoniously from both East and West, classical myth and street culture. He gestures around his studio in the unfashionable suburb of Ghatkopar, which was also his childhood home. The walls are now a pristine white, but he remembers them as lined with Raja Ravi Varma oleographs during his childhood. “My first exposure to painting was through oleographs and film hoardings. I remember vividly a hoarding for the film Kachche Dhaage, with Vinod Khanna and Kabir Bedi depicted as dacoits in garish reds and greens, the paint applied thickly with a palette knife.”

Dodiya’s early work, made in the late 1980s, was in a classical realist style. “I spent a year in Paris on a French government scholarship,” he says. “It took

me several years to absorb all that I saw there. But after Paris I became more fearless, more keen to push the boundaries of my work. I realised there was no contradiction involved in putting Ravi Varma and Marcel Duchamp into the same work.” A recent example of work exemplifying Dodiya’s catholic tastes is Sabari Shaking Mondrian, in which the figure Sabari from the Ramayana is pictured shaking a tree, its thick black line and the adjoining rectangular patches of colour quoting visually the work of the Dutch abstract painter Piet Mondrian.

Lined up along one wall of Dodiya’s studio are a series of new paintings that resemble the signboards of shops, each advertising a different man and a different business. The men these paintings memorialise are, variously, friends and lovers of Bhupen Khakhar, for a forthcoming exhibition called “Shri Shri Khakhar Prasanna”, Dodiya’s homage to a close friend. Dodiya considers Khakhar a big influence on his work. “From him I understood how to use elements and details from daily life that were conventionally never used in painting,” he remarks. “I also admired Khakhar’s boldness and his humour. I learnt that painting did not always have to be serious — it could also be witty and irreverent.” As with Khakhar, Dodiya’s works are often welcoming of a range of disparate elements within the same frame. Khakhar has also appeared earlier in Dodiya’s work, most memorably in Three Painters, in which Dodiya and Khakhar stand with their backs to the viewer looking at a Magritte painting.

Dodiya has also shown a remarkable facility for fusing history and autobiography, the memory of the self and that of the nation. The figure of Gandhi, for instance, runs constantly through Dodiya’s work from the 1990s onward as an emblem of a vision of India under siege. In 1999, he produced a series of watercolours on Gandhi called “An Artist of Nonviolence”. “Canvas and oils are very sensual, heavy, physical,” he says. “Watercolours are more spiritual, delicate, almost ethereal — I wanted that kind of effect for the series.”

**Striking for his range of reference, Dodiya draws from East and West, myth and street culture**

One of the best works in that series was the utterly beautiful The Painful Resolution. In it, Gandhi stands at one end of a lineup that includes Nehru, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Vallabhbhai Patel and Maulana Azad. While the others look up, Gandhi’s gaze is lowered; his exposed chest looks almost wooden, and his stick-thin figure communicates sadness and vulnerability. Few works have communicated so powerfully the mood of darkness and light that marked India’s step into nationhood. But in other works of the series, Dodiya mischievously inserts himself into history by depicting himself alongside Gandhi, peeping over the Mahatma’s shoulder in one, and putting his own signature alongside that of Gandhi on a bill for the sale of khadi in another.

The exuberant colours and demotic imagery of Dodiya’s current phase lie practically at the other end of the spectrum from the understated beauty of his earliest work, such as The Room (1989), the brooding stillness of which recalls the work of Edward Hopper. We see a room with a door leading out onto a view of the sea, and the only object in the frame that suggests a human presence is a doormat. All is still, yet, as the critic Gieve Patel noted, the bars of the window and the balcony railings, “like the tightened strings of a musical

instrument, set the space reverberating”.

Dodiya is quintessentially the Bombay artist, raised in a middle-class neighbourhood, trained at its leading art school, proud of the city’s cosmopolitan culture, perfectly at home on its streets heavy with sound and spectacle, and happy to raid its ever-proliferating stock of images and sensations for his work. “The constant change and movement of Bombay...” he muses, “as if something is after us.” And he himself, of course, is after that.

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