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review



Anju Dodiya. *Cloud-Hunter*. Acrylic on mattress.  
78" x 46" x 7". 2005.



Anju Dodiya. *Island of Greed*. Acrylic on mattress.  
78" x 46" x 7". 2004.

## TEXTURES OF PAIN

MEERA MENEZES DISCOVERS HOW ANJU DODIYA'S NEW WORKS EXPLORE THE SELF AND ITS MANY NIGHTMARES

ANJU DODIYA'S WORKS DON'T LOOK AS IF THEY FLOW OUT: they look as if they are wrung out. In her solo show at Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery (16th February to 15th March), her acrylics on mattresses and her watercolours carry the marks of this painful birthing. Reflecting the tortuous anguish of the artist's soul, her works are laced with melancholy, with the black charcoal dust threatening to obliterate life-forms with its very tenebrity.

A narrow reading might categorise these works as a series of self-portraits, with the artist reinventing many personas for herself. Dodiya however uses the device of self-representation not to talk about the 'true self', but about the 'artist's self'. What emerges then is a series of allegories, which refer to the creative process,


and deal with the agonizing churnings that go into the production of art.

The urge to use the head as a formal device has been with her since her college days. She keeps a 'night diary', in which she records herself in various *avatars*. Dodiya depicts extreme violence in most of her works, and chooses to position herself within this theatre of savagery. However, there is an exquisiteness of presentation, which robs the actions of their sting at times. She often turns to the Japanese ukiyo-e prints, revelling in their pale colours and elegant lines, as well as in the ambiguity they proffer, with their combination of the erotic and the violent. While she sometimes lets her figures be "shamelessly Japanese", the themes and concerns are very much hers. In her acrylic on mattress,

*Cloud-Hunter*, she constructs a complex narrative to talk about her hunt for abstract truths. While the Japanese protagonist clutches a burnt twig in her mouth, her hands clasped as if in prayer, a second figure aims her arrow at the sky, perhaps in search of rain clouds to bring down a shower of inspiration. In both cases, the figures are hunting for sources that replenish their creative well-springs. The twig works as a visual pun – referring both to the artist's stick of charcoal, as well as to a weak idea that the artist clings to, before trying to develop it into something more substantial.

For Dodiya, facing the white canvas or the paper is a "terrifying" experience. Perhaps, that is why she has found working on mattresses such a liberating experience. The tapestry itself suggests a gamut of images, which she can work and play with. Besides this, the mattresses offer her an unusual surface to produce 'paintings' which are puffed up, almost 'pregnant' in the literal sense of the word.

Dodiya has culled imagery from biblical sources for her *Island of Greed*. Working on the concept of the 'Seven Sins', which leads people to make their confessions, she tries to lay bare the demons preying on an artist's mind. As in many of her works, she takes pot-shots at her self, making an ironical dig at her own failings as she sees them. In this work, the real self is rendered in a nondescript manner at the bottom, while 'the artist's self' is depicted with a fishing rod, hunting in the ocean of images for the right ideas. Dodiya points, in conversation, to her sin of slothfulness as well, thanks to which she takes many years to put up a show. Even this solo comes six years after her last showing in Delhi.

The sin-theme also finds an echo in a work like *Savage Gardener*, where a ream of white paper with a skull on it seems to indicate who her nemesis is. Dodiya is very conscious of how history is going to judge her as an artist, and she is highly critical of both her person and her process. Perhaps, this is why her figures cultivate a certain detachment from the events that unfold around them: she posits herself outside of them to make self-critical asides. In this work, the artist in her might, flashes a leg to showcase her prowess and attributes, but there is also the critic there, waiting to write her epitaph. Dodiya also skilfully uses the fabric she works on as a metaphor. While the figure depicted might appear beautiful, the texture of the material makes her skin look parched and wrinkled. Dodiya uses this to make the point that while ambition might drive her, she needs to recognize her mortality and the transience of the world around her. 



Anju Dodiya. *Savage Gardener*. Acrylic on embroidered fabric. 73" x 45". 2005.

Anju Dodiya. *Pale Mourner*. Watercolour on paper. 30" x 20". 2004.

