

Showcasing Broken Lives

Nancy Adajania discusses Atul Dodiya's latest show, which offers a serious meditation on the contemporary human condition and critiques the national politics of hate.

It may seem strange to the reader if I propose that Atul Dodiya's work, which opens out like a maze of referential minutiae, a richly eclectic, almost baroque image-architecture, hinges on something as minimal and austere as a door. Dodiya's oils of the early 1990s, which showcased the quotidian middle class interior, depicted the door as an ambiguous invitation. By the mid-'90s, the artist had begun to render the painted surface as a simulation of a wooden door complete with knotted grain, clasped and barred, but on which was superimposed a very personal iconography of references, embracing Benode Behari Mukherjee's *Tree Lover* as well as Mondrian's grid. With this in-your-face close focus, Dodiya bridged the distance between emotional restraint and the festivity of

sentiments. This tendency peaked in *Honey Comb Triptych* (2000), executed in enamel on laminate board and cut to resemble a cupboard with metal handles, to accentuate the illusion. The door, un-openable though it was, strongly suggested the possibility of entry into another dimension.

In the same year, Dodiya's extension of pictorial space found active expression in the incipient series of roller shutter-paintings with inside panels. The painted shutter became an interactive device, a door which revealed paintings portraying open-ended social collages, or playful yet knowing heroic tweakings of popular culture. These works played on the theme of memory with monochrome childhood portraits of the artist and his siblings contrasted with polychrome frames of political heroes

and screen villains. But these shop-front shutters also carried ominous resonances of closure on the breath of a rumour, the call for a riot.

With Dodiya's most recent works, exhibited under the evocative title *Broken Branches*, at New York's Bose Pacia Modern, the door opens into a wall, contains and is contained. Locked cabinets showcasing depictions of political and personal catastrophes function as an ironic take-off on the 19th-century *Wunderkammer*, the cabinets of curiosities that held colonial hauls of native lives and objects. By exhibiting these cabinets in New York, Dodiya plays on the ostensibly colonial and museal form of display, but inverts it by contemporising the content. The objects in the cabinets – crutches, artificial limbs, skulls and bones –

appear as bewitched showcases of a limping society that cannot fully heal itself but can only survive through prosthetic ingenuity. Prosthesis has taken on a new meaning today, it rides under the name of "reconstruction". Witness, for instance, its ambivalent role in the lives of millions of victims of violence, maimed and displaced by the imperialist wars of the early 21st century: the destroyers return as donors of limbs and infrastructure.


Broken Branches is staged against the backdrop of recent cataclysms, whether tragic spectacles such as Ayodhya 1992 and 9/11, natural disasters such as the Orissa cyclone and the Kutch earthquake, or the humanitarian crises of Afghanistan and Iraq. But Dodiya does not include images of "official" reconstruction carried out by rapacious global and local brokers; instead, he privileges the symbolic gestures of Gandhiji, who envisioned an architecture of world peace. The artist places a bare bone on his father's open ledger, the page for 6th December 1992 bearing no entry: this silent record of the Babri Masjid's destruction by Hindu militants is counterpointed with an image of Gandhiji trowelling a fresh plinth, a new foundation. Dodiya measures out hope by modelling these cabinets precisely on the vitrines in the Gandhi Memorial Museum in Porbunder, Gujarat. He juxtaposes the stumps of the contemporary spirit with a workman's humble tools of redemption – calipers, hammer, adze, trowel – tools also associated with his father's construction trade.

At a more intimate level, the cabinets replicate the form of the middle class Indian showcase, an index of its mounting aspirations, changing values and insecurities. The artist uses the device of additive juxtaposition of fragments to dramatise an urgent history of loss and renewal. Striking a series of visual off-rhymes, he juxtaposes fragments from popular culture and national history with family lore. A tight close-up of a woman's luscious mouth devouring grapes, a voluptuary detail from a cinema hoarding, appears on the same shelf as an array of bones from a graveyard, a negative epiphany of

mortality. This interplay of sensuality and renunciation enacts a fundamental push-pull within Indic culture, that between *shringara* (erotic pleasure) and *vairagya* (ascetic withdrawal), twin responses to experience.

Dodiya's incorporation of the body of the potential yogi in the large watercolours accompanying the cabinet installation is an attempt at exploring the nuances of *vairagya* in the wake of 9/11. A male with an idealised physique performs various yogic *asanas* balancing the twin towers of The World Trade Center on his limbs. This acrobatics of the spirit is performed against the deeply disturbing cycle of global violence, of terror and counter-terror. So while the objects and images in the cabinet-installation are invested with the burden of personal and historical memory, in the watercolours, the *sadhak*, the would-be yogi, strives to divest himself of the onus of history and obligation, to achieve a state of monadic stability and equipoise towards the world.

The black blocks representing the twin towers, bare and elegiac, are invested with yet another nuance of *vairagya*: an echo from the paintings of Malevich in his Suprematist phase, which magnificently embodied the transcendental element in the modern, aspiring to a pure reality beyond all form, while yet remaining within the materiality of art-making. Seemingly unattainable in a spiritual sense, the twin towers also have a menacing secular meaning here: they could be viewed as doorless edifices in a paranoid security environment where all openings exist only to be sealed off.

In one of these watercolours, the *sadhak* bends to touch his toes: is this yet another self-purificatory *asana*, or is it, as the title implies, a punishment that malefactors are subjected to by the disciplinary forces of law and control? Or could this be an idiosyncratic twist, by which Dodiya produces a self-portrait as *sadhak* who ignores the physical key suspended above him and seeks a key within, even as continents crack, come unplugged, and zephyrs poison the air. 



Exhibits on view on one of the cabinet-shelves include bones, a prosthetic limb, a birds-on-tree lamp and a ledger. (Facing page) A view of the larger exhibit, which includes cabinets, chairs, hand-coloured framed photographs, used artificial limbs, tools, found objects, billboard paintings and a teepoy.



Exhibits on view on a cabinet-shelf include photographs (hand-painted and otherwise), prosthetic limbs, a pair of chappals, a trowel and other objects.



Atul Dodiya. *The Yogi and the Towers (Sleep, Smoke, Sky)*. 70 x 45". Watercolour, acrylic with marble dust on paper. 2002.

