



ATUL DODIYA
PALIMPSEST / FORCEFIELD

by Deepak Ananth



Left ■ **DELHI** (2004-2005) Acrylic with marble dust on canvas, hinged on pvc drainage pipe, pipe size variable, 72 x 72 in., Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.
Right ■ **KASHMIR** (2004-2005) Acrylic with marble dust on canvas, hinged on pvc drainage pipe, pipe size variable, 83 x 55 in., Courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia, New York.

Atul Dodiya's paintings vouch for the artist's delectation in the possibilities inherent in the medium, the more to serve the complex representational tasks he sets for himself. For the history-conscious Dodiya, born in 1959, the achievements of the art of the past establish the standards for his engagement with the present. A virtuoso of art-historical quotation, he has elaborated a corpus that could well be called "The Nation and its Fragments," to borrow the title of Pharta Chatterjee's recent Indian historiography. Dodiya's enduring romance with painting has proceeded in tandem with an acute feeling for the vicissitudes of urban life as reflected by the heterogeneous visual culture of the megalopolis Mumbai, where he is based.

Dodiya's paintings are forcefields of incongruous mixtures, both in terms of style and iconography. **THE DEPICTIVE GIFTS AT HIS DISPOSAL ENABLE DODIYA TO QUOTE MALEVICH OR PICASSO OR A READYMADE BY DUCHAMP OR A SCULPTURE BY BRANCUSI WITH THE SAME EASE AS A PEDAGOGICAL CHART FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN,** the naive vernacular of calendar illustrations, kitsch bazaar icons, a billboard for a Bollywood blockbuster. He thus suspends the familiar polarity of high art and popular culture, but in a spirit rather different from the proclaimed eclecticism of postmodernist painting. For what is at stake in Dodiya's work is an allegorically recoded configuration that underscores the critical

use-value of the quotations.

On one level the paintings are allegories of the overcoming of "the anxiety of influence," to borrow Harold Bloom's famous paradigm of the ways in which "latecomers to the canon" creatively misread or distort the achievements of their predecessors in order to make a place for themselves as artists. By going against the grain of the "foreign" quotation even while seeming to mimic its vocabulary, Dodiya claims to visit the Western heritage on his own terms, something that was precisely anxiety inducing for earlier generations of Indian artists.

At the same time, the new context into which Dodiya inserts the quoted element allows for an allegorization of his own relation to the image-world of contemporary urban India, in which he intervenes as an artist-citizen, in much the same way that RB Kitaj's quotations of the modern masters in his early paintings function as an allegory of exile and diaspora. Walter Benjamin's idea of the estranging function of the quotation is thus taken up by Dodiya as a means of foregrounding contradiction as such (a word we shall take to subsume all the usual suspects of contemporary theory: global/local, center/ periphery, metropolitan/ subaltern, among other antinomies), and whose figural representation is that allegorical form par excellence, the palimpsest.

Dodiya's paintings ask to be read through the superimposition of multiple images, rather in the manner of Francis





Picabia's "Transparencies," begun in the 1920s, or Sigmar Polke's variously layered surfaces from the post-war period to the present. Dodiya's procedure, unlike the nihilism of the former or the Pop irony of the latter, can also serve as a moral exemplum, notably in the recurring figure of Dodiya's hero, Gandhi. The image superimposition is given a rather different turn in his "Shutter" series of mixed media installations by the recourse to rolling metal shopfront shutters as support for painting, the very opposite of the translucency of watercolor (which Dodiya has frequently resorted to) or the transparency of the glass cabinet (which features in an ambitious recent installation). **THIS IS ANOTHER KIND OF CULTURAL PALIMPSEST: IN ONE WORK, DODIYA APPROPRIATES THE VERNACULAR ICON, IN ALL ITS GAUDY RESPLENDENCE, OF MAHALAKSHMI, THE GODDESS OF WEALTH, THAT OFTEN ADORNS SHOP FRONTS AS AN AUGURY OF GOOD FORTUNE.** However, he does so with a view to revealing—when the shutter is raised—a starkly opposed image behind it: a painting (after a grisly newspaper photograph accompanying a fait divers of a kind all too frequent in the country) of a collective suicide by young women provoked by their inability to pay the dowry demanded in exchange for marriage.

This street-level view of contemporary India (the grating sounds of shop shutters coming down at closing time

are ubiquitous) finds a complement and a contrast in a recent series of nine works entitled "Cracks in Mondrian" (2005). In each of these paintings, the lucid, austere grid format of Mondrian's Neoplasticism (as quoted by Dodiya) is "contaminated" by the contours of a map of one of the Indian states as drawn by a French diplomat and cartographer of the 18th century. The modernist grid and the colonial map—two contrasting ways of imposing order—are thus conjoined, but the space framed thereby can only attest to the unrealized utopian potential of the former and the imperialist carving up of the world by the latter. Needless to say, the map of India would be redrawn many times over, culminating in the bloody partition of the country in 1947. One of the works from this series refers to Kashmir, the state whose territory is the object of dispute between India and Pakistan to this day—the two countries have fought three wars over it. So the "cracks" of the title are not only the *craquelures* that might, with time, afflict the surface of a painting, but also an allusion to more tenacious historical fissures. In this light the vertical drain pipe to which each painting is attached in the manner of a hinge or a swivel must appear as a rather ambiguous conduit of the "dissolution of art into the environment" that Mondrian had once projected as a utopian possibility, albeit in the distant future. **END**

Left ■ E.T. (2002), Enamel paint on metal shutters, acrylic 9 x 6 ft. Courtesy Walsh Gallery, Chicago.

Right ■ MAHALAXMI (2002), Exterior: enamel paint on metal roller shutters; Interior: acrylic and marble dust on canvas with metal hooks. 9 x 6 ft. Private collection.