

## Renaissance plan

Gieve Patel is a physician, poet, playwright and painter all rolled into one. A retrospective show this fortnight, made up of his sketches, sculpture and paintings from the 1970s to 2007, tracks the trajectory of his art. He tells **Janice Parlat** about ships, Mumbai, and why, when it comes to art, he is in no hurry at all.



### **Your early sketches are minimal pencil impressions of Indian women. What inspired those?**

These have been done from newspaper photographs in the '70s. They're of women in mourning, women who have faced a terrible tragedy in their lives – the loss of their husbands or something close to that. I don't remember now, as it was long ago, what the exact cause was, but I think it could have been a Kashmir tragedy.

These newspaper photographs were recording something important and I wanted to re-record them in a certain kind of way. It's like reiterating it. And you'll notice that sometimes there are three or four versions of the same picture. Each time you draw it, you're reinforcing the acknowledgement of the tragedy. Each one of them is differently done.

### **Your more recent paintings have been touted as “little slices of life”. What are they inspired by?**

They are things that I have seen, but I do not paint them till they have been with me in my memory and repeatedly come to my consciousness. Sometimes, over a period of several years. That is the test of the importance of the image or the importance of what it stands for. For example, there's “Sending a Letter Home”. I saw this man taking dictation from another person for a letter, in one of the streets of Bombay, say four or five years ago. In that period, the image kept coming back to my mind because it stands for an important point in our civilisation. And then finally, I feel at a certain time that I'm ready to put it down as a painting.



Quite clearly the city you live in also inspires your work. “Ship Building”, for instance.

Shipbuilding is something that happens in the south of Bombay. It's a little fishing village which has claimed the shore area... And here, in the middle of a bustling city, you have this rather strange thing happening. I have the actual shipbuilding depiction and, in the foreground, there are four large figures who are standing like four pillars. They're not having any obvious discussion or interaction but they're not alienated from each other. Bombay particularly has this sense of intermingling of people, which takes place naturally, unlike many other cities in the world or even in India. In the trains you have a lot of people who are very close to each other and they're not talking to each other, they have nothing to do with each other, yet their presence together is not that of strangers.



**Could you tell me a little about your sculptures that will be on display?**

The sculptures are all on two themes. One of them is Eklavya from the Mahabharata, the tribal prince who sacrificed his own thumb. The other is the story of Daphne, from Roman mythology, of a forest nymph who turns into a tree. There are some Daphne bodies and heads as well as Eklavya's hand.

**You're a physician, poet, playwright and painter. How do you feel these practices feed into each other? Or do they?**

[Laughs] I've often been asked this question and to this day I don't have an answer! One thing is for sure, I'm not a multimedia man. I would never try to mix all these things together into one evening of performance or whatever you'd like to call it. I address each of these areas one-to-one and give my complete professionalism and attention to each.

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