

Vishnu meets Picasso

Art India inaugurates a new column devoted to analysing one important contemporary painting in some detail in each issue. In the first of these analyses, **Girish Shahane** discusses Atul Dodiya's 1997 canvas, *Sour Grapes*.



Atul Dodiya. *Sour Grapes*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 1997. 69 inches x 48 inches. Photo courtesy the artist.

It is a scene familiar to most Indians: Vishnu, the god of preservation, reclining on Sheshanag, surrounded by devotees and supplicants. Prominent among these are Garuda, looking distinctly parrot-like, and Indra in his cursed state. The creator god Brahma is seated on a lotus which emerges from Vishnu's navel. But there are two startling variations on this familiar theme to be found in Atul Dodiya's painting *Sour Grapes*. First, a white self-portrait of Dodiya is superimposed upon Brahma, who is relegated to a back seat on his favoured flower. The style used for the self-portrait is completely unlike that utilised in the rest of the painting. Second, the ornate golden arch on the bottom right, normally home to the consorts of the represented gods, frames instead the folk-tale of the fox and the unreachable grapes that gives Dodiya's canvas its title.

Is the canvas merely an elaborate joke? Certainly one of our first responses is laughter at the sight of the cubist Dodiya's unexpected appearance, effacing Brahma. Then one realises that the combination is appropriate in two ways. At the most obvious level the artist is asserting his status as a creator, like Brahma. But there is an interesting stylistic pun here as well. Brahma, thanks to his many heads, can see in all directions at once. Cubism, too, is involved with multiple perspectives, looking at an object from many or all sides, and Dodiya's self-portrait reflects this sort of vision.

Dodiya's composition plays on the contrast between two traditions of visual representation. The first is calendar art, which can be considered the most characteristic popular mode of representation in twentieth century India, but is derided by most students of art history for its garishness and sentimentality. Opposed to this is cubism, the paradigmatic movement of modern art, which is derided by almost everyone apart from students of art history for being incomprehensible and ugly. One accusation which has dogged 'modern' artists through the present century is that they paint the way they do (and 'like anyone's five-year old daughter could') because they lack the technical means to depict

scenes realistically. This is where the title of Dodiya's painting becomes relevant. For the layperson the modern artist suffers from sour grapes, pretending to reject conventional portrayal because it is unachievable given the artist's meagre talent. For artists, on the other hand, the "I can't understand this, therefore you are an idiot" attitude of the public is itself an example of sour grapes at work.

If any Indian contemporary artist could counter the accusing public it is Dodiya. His work has, from his early paintings which had close affinities with photorealism, been celebrated for the compositional control and virtuoso draughtsmanship apparent in it. In *Sour Grapes* Dodiya shows that he can paint in traditional styles as well as the best in the business, while simultaneously paying a tribute to the greatest master of non-traditional art in this century, Pablo Picasso.

The homage to Picasso is particularly appropriate because the Spanish artist was himself a great draughtsman in the traditional manner. In fact during the First World War, following his analytical and synthetic cubist phases, Picasso, at least partly as a response to attacks on his stylistic experiments, painted many traditional portraits. These works, reminiscent of academic portraiture and the paintings of Ingres, were Picasso's way of saying, "I can do this as well as anybody", probably the first instance of a modern artist showing up the sour grapes attitude of traditionalist critics.

When Picasso returned to cubism after the war, he began experimenting with ways of depicting multiple perspectives while retaining a sense of a whole body, which had been dissolved in the early cubist period. These experiments continued for the rest of his life, and it is this style of 'bodied' cubism that Dodiya uses in his self-portrait.

Dodiya's painting, then, is much more than a joke, and accordingly he does not use the calendar art style merely for amusement. On the contrary he crafts a canvas whose figures are aesthetically valid on his own terms. *Sour Grapes* radically alters the calendar composition on which it is based.

Rather than a long shot of the reclining Vishnu, we have a truncated composition which heavily foregrounds the god. While Dodiya hints at the gaudiness of calendar art through Vishnu's golden clothes and the crimson flowers which adorn the god, the marvelous rich, deep blue of Vishnu's skin, which absorbs light while being itself luminous, dominates the whole canvas. If there are minor flaws in the painting they lie in the central section, in the uncertainty of the connection between the cubist self-portrait and the lotus and in the ungainliness and slight misproportion of Vishnu's wrist and palm. There is an element of mockery in *Sour Grapes*, but the positive statement contained in the canvas outweighs this. The painting proves that inclusiveness can be a stylistic strength, that popular Indian sources as well as experimental European art can serve as an inspiration for the contemporary artist.

All this is quite a distance from the unity of the work with which Dodiya first rose to notice in the eighties. A stay in Paris in 1991-92 not only brought him close to European modernism, but also changed his view of India. On his return he wanted to allow more of the world to seep into his paintings. The first post-Paris phase involved the inclusion of biographical details in personal, almost sentimental works which utilised a subdued palette. *Sour Grapes* is much more playful, working with disjunctures rather than a unity of mood. It can be seen, retrospectively, as an important transitional painting since Dodiya has gone on to produce more interesting juxtapositions of mythic scenes and art history.

Ask Atul Dodiya about the self-portrait he has produced and he is likely to point to the bottom-right of the canvas and say, "Actually, *that's* my self-portrait, I am the fox". This is a modest, even uncharitable view of himself. But it balances perfectly the vision of the artist as creator god, and provides a canvas full of dualities with its final pair of opposites. It is an indication of the envy and frustration which are an artist's lot as much as the joy of creation and accomplishment. 