

## **ART IN AMERICA**

February 2004

Atul Dodiya at Bose Pacia Modern

In this confident New York debut, Bombay artist Atul Dodiya proposed a long list of gritty questions, both enormous and intimate. His primary vehicle was a series of tall showcases. Instead of collections of natural wonders, these contemporary Wunderkammers contained evidence of human hopes and nightmares. Dodiya intended that their contents refer directly to the religious massacres and maimings that occurred after Indian partition in 1947, as well as to the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in his native Gujarat.

The vitrines, modeled after the display cases in the Mahatma Gandhi museum in New Delhi, were carefully arranged with used artificial limbs, rusted construction tools that belonged to the artist's father, tinted photos, human bones and representations of birds. Questions seemed to emanate from the vitrines. Can the artist transcend the horror evoked by the discarded prostheses to make a broader artistic statement? Who wore these arms and legs? Which side of the riots were they on? What does it mean that some of them are clearly homemade? Who decided to paint delicate veins and ivory colored nails on the plastic hands? Just what has happened to the owners? Who is being maimed in the wars currently being waged? Can political art today be neither obvious nor bombastic? Dodiya weaves a potent tapestry that allows our minds to entertain real-life questions normally held far from our usual gallery expectations. The exhibition offered a fully formed, unique view of the world, a vision permeated with compassion, horror, disgust, and ultimately, acceptance.

The cabinets remained strangely warm and painterly despite their chilling subject matter. Chromatically, sepia and dust, the faded colors of old photos and nostalgia, dominated. As earthbound and sad as the limbs were, the many images of birds referred to both spiritual and physical freedom. The elegance of the juxtapositions, presented with utmost tact and finesse, allowed associations to seep into our minds almost unbidden.

The artist is no naïf, and he clearly knows his art history. The pieces recalled the boxed works of Cornell, Beuys and even Koons or Hirst. But the power of this show was its tightly controlled emotional impact. Dodiya seduces us with melancholy beauty, before delivering the aching blow: the human condition reduced to its most brutal basics. The exhibition recounted the hopes and dire failures that accompany wars, a message that bears repeating at this juncture in time.

ROBERT KUSHNER