

Game of Love

Girish Shahane found Atul Dodiya spiritedly exploring the institution of marriage and its myriad contradictions in some of his latest works.

A CHANGE IN AN EXHIBITION'S location can lead to an even bigger shift in meaning. This was demonstrated by Atul Dodiya's *Saptapadi: Scenes from Marriage (Regardless)*, displayed at Bombay's Museum Gallery before it moved to the split-level Vadehra Gallery in Delhi from the 2nd to the 26th of March. In its first station, *Saptapadi* felt like the most hilarious solo ever mounted by a major Indian artist. It was laugh-out-loud funny in a way paintings almost never are. Hanging the same two dozen works at Vadehra (with one addition), the artist chose to place the jokiest ones (involving the Clintons, and actresses Sridevi and Bindu) at the far end of the upper floor, allowing a range of subtle emotions to surface before slapstick took over. A wistful, poignant note emerged, enhanced by sombre lighting on the lower level.

A number of individual works appeared altered in the new context. A good example was *Angelina*, a portrait of the artist's wife Anju, standing in front of Roy Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*. The girl in Lichtenstein's iconic canvas, on the verge of being overwhelmed by waves, thinks to herself, "I'd rather die than call Brad for help." Dodiya

highlighted his own initials, 'AD', within 'BRAD', thus alluding to his own marital relationship as well as that of the media darlings Pitt and Jolie. At first viewing, the multiple references appeared purely whimsical, a stab at a kind of meta-pop. In Delhi, though, the fact that the thought bubble of the drowning girl is extended by means of barely visible dots to connect with Anju Dodiya became crucial to a more substantial reading of the painting. Now, it seemed a wry confession of the male ego's need to be a pillar of strength, and its perplexity at finding the lover unwilling to play the weak and vulnerable role. Certainly, Anju Dodiya's posture and expression set her entirely apart from the teary-eyed comic-book girl Lichtenstein utilised.

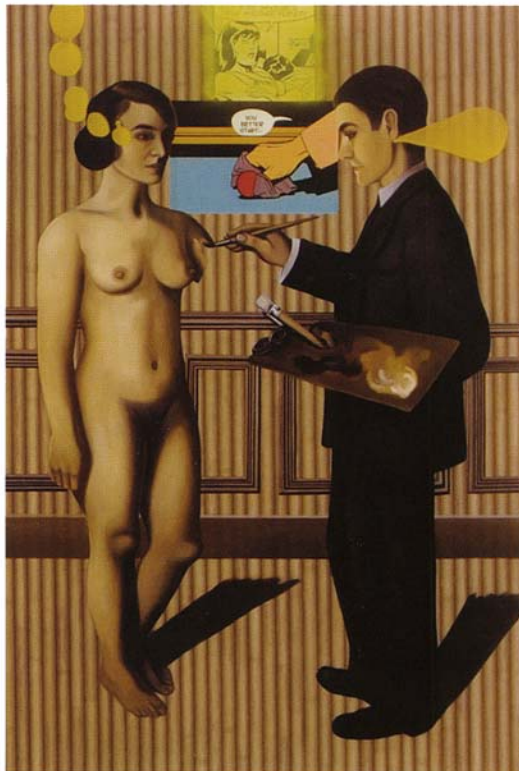
In close proximity to *Angelina* was a reworking of Magritte's *Attempting the Impossible*, in which a painter (a likeness of Magritte himself) endeavours to create the

ideal woman. However, as Eliot wrote in *The Hollow Men*, "Between the idea and the reality... falls the shadow". *Saptapadi* was replete with hollow men and beautiful, lonely women picked from the annals of history, art, cinema, and Ripley's *Believe It Or Not*: Marcello Mastroianni from Antonioni's *La Notte*, shaken from complacency when his wife Jeanne Moreau announces she no longer loves him; Satyajit Ray's Charulata, feeling a growing distance between herself and a husband concerned primarily with political developments in England; Amrish Puri and Om Puri from *Ardb Satya*, the first, a wife-beater, the second, a son who feels impotent for being unable to protect his mother. The *Ardb Satya* image was placed on the top left of a painting



Atul Dodiya. *Angelina*. Enamel paint and synthetic varnish on laminate, 72 " x 48". 2006.

[Review]



Atul Dodiya. *Impossible Attempt*. Enamel paint, synthetic varnish, and acrylic epoxy on laminate. 72 "x 48 ". 2005-6.



Atul Dodiya. *Pringle Mala*. Enamel paint, synthetic varnish, and acrylic epoxy on laminate. 72 "x 48 ". 2003-6.

dominated by Gandhi and Kasturba sitting at a physical and psychological distance from each other, a reference, perhaps, to the Mahatma's oath of celibacy, taken without consulting his partner.

A few of the pictures foregrounded togetherness, but this came in quirky forms. *Pringle Mala* depicted Shridhar Chillal showing off the fingernails of his left hand, which he grew to a world record length. His obsession rendered that hand dysfunctional, leaving him dependant on his wife for simple tasks. Next to this was a portrait of a serial polygamist posing with wives 17 and 18.

Dodiya used enamel paint on laminates, often sheets, which had conventional table-top patterns on them, speckled, striped, grained, or plain. With its many pop culture references and glossy medium, the show risked looking tacky or gaudy. Instead, it offered a rich, layered play of colours and tones that one could stare at with pleasure for long periods without even considering meanings. There was enough happening in purely visual terms to keep even those viewers intrigued who might have been mystified by the surfeit of quotations.

The artist made a special appearance as a bonesetter Dr. Albert Kumar D in *Donald, Dona and Dr. D*, and again as a baby in one of the show's highlights, *Family Tree*. Between a photograph of his parents, and

his own infant self coming into the world crying 'Zindabad!', he sprawled a nude painted by Picasso on 20 January 1959, the day of Dodiya's birth. The disconnect could hardly be greater between the conventional photograph of the couple haloed by a studio moon and the unsparring vision of the arch-modernist. Yet, as the title of the image asserted, both had contributed to the making of the artist.

Dodiya's transparent reverence for the masters is at variance with the prevalent stance that the art of the past, and particularly the output of white, heterosexual males, must be questioned (or, to use the preferred jargon, 'problematised'). The same fine disregard for intellectual trends enabled him to conceive a sequence of paintings exploring the marvellously unfashionable subject of marriage. It resulted in the most successful of his three recent solo shows.

CORRECTION

In her report about the *Elective Affinities* seminar in *ART India*, Volume 12, Issue 1, Beth Citron mentioned I employed a contrast "between Bharat (as rural, authentic nation) and India (as newer, urban nation)". In actuality, I stated that the mercantile culture of the Indus Valley preceded the establishment in the Deccan of relatively self-sufficient villages dominated by caste. I used this historical fact to interrogate widely held beliefs about cultural authenticity. - G.S.