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CENSORSHIP AND THE ARTS

**INTERVIEW
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ANJU DODIYA**

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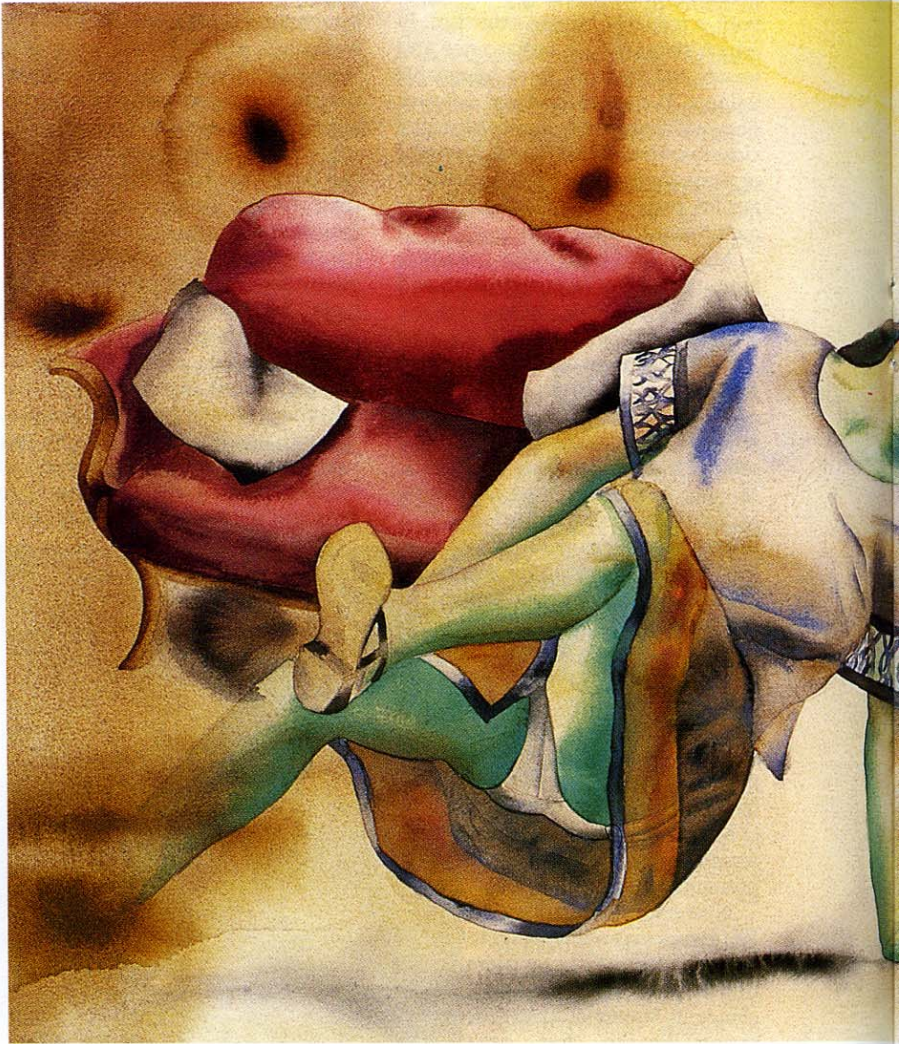
**COLLECTOR
PHEROZA GODREJ**

G.P.: A number of your figures carry your own physiognomy. They are recognizably Anju Dodiya, and yet they are not what one might call self portraits, merely. They seem to have extensions of exploration in other directions as well.

A.D.: When I was in art school, all of five years, I did very abstract collages. But all the while my sketch books would be filled with drawings of the self. After art school, I had reached a dead end with collages. I wanted to return to the figure, and it was a very desperate need. That was when I thought these sketch books might help, and, I started painting "myself". I found that I was getting interested in specific situations in a very special kind of way — private moments, these private moments, mostly an artist's private moments! The private discourse that goes on within oneself when one is alone.

G.P.: Did you try other images besides the self, and did you find them unsatisfactory?

A.D.: My first show in 1990 was a fictional autobiography: the self in various situations, descriptive situations, like the girl holding her eyebrow, and it's just that you know, she is holding her eyebrow! There are all kinds of props, furniture, and curtains — twisted curtains. But after a while I felt saturated. I felt I must come out of this room with a girl. I told myself I must go out and sketch on the road, at the railway stations. But nothing came of it. And then I finally



The Stumble. 1996. Watercolour. 22.5 x 30 inches.

An Allegory of the Creative Process



Anju Dodiya's recent show in Mumbai left much of the artistic community spellbound. Painter and writer Gieve Patel, in conversation with Anju Dodiya, delves further into her artistic psyche.

— thought I must repeat myself, that's my choice — to do just that! It was difficult.

G.P. A number of your contemporaries here in India would share this feeling very strongly with you, that it is not the contemporary art of the West that most grips us, but the earlier periods, the Renaissance, pre-Renaissance.

A.D.: Actually, I am not so sure. I can only vouch for my own experience. When I returned to Bombay I saw a lot of art being done here, conceptual art mainly — young people seemed to find it mandatory either to move out of the picture-frame, or to reject the use of a pure medium like watercolour or plain old oil paint. Collage, or mixed media, was the done thing. You had this word "interesting" thrown around to support actually second-rate work. I was upset. I wasn't convinced by these choices. It isn't that I disapprove of conceptual art per se. But the authentic process, the search, should be reflected in the work. And this isn't seen in much work of this kind, both here and in the West. (Pause)

I had to tell myself, well, maybe I am the kind of person who will always go for Giotto and Masaccio and Florence and Mughal miniatures. I was full of these and I couldn't relate to current trends. Atul, my husband, on the other hand, when he came back, his work had changed a lot and I think he was deeply shaken by contemporary painting. It did affect his work in a positive way. It pushed him into thinking differently. But I wasn't moved, and that worried me. I thought

I should be moved. But the fact is I wasn't. And I have to listen to my own inner need.

G.P.: You used the word "props" while talking about your first show — the props with which your figures are surrounded — and the word comes straight from theatre. What is the effect of theatre on your work?

A.D.: More than theatre I think the word has come out of looking very intently at furniture catalogues.

G.P.: One doesn't use the word "props" in that context.

A.D.: That's true. I have always loved cinema. Maybe it comes from there.

G.P.: Say a little more about cinema — and about furniture catalogues.

A.D.: Right from early on, when I was doing collages, I have been crazy about collecting junk paper — it could even be ads. Maybe all young people do it, but I had suitcases full of the stuff and I loved it. I think strange furniture, strange design, has always interested me. The faces in my painting are not highly expressive in the sense that I would never wish to paint a screaming head. But often, I use furniture or, say, a curtain or a door to speak instead, and that's what I mean when I say "props", because I think that's how they are used in theatre, and in cinema also.

G.P.: Indeed, I have always felt that the twisted curtains in some of your paintings, or the wet cloth that your figures are wringing, stand for a person wringing his own hands in despair — that suggestion is very subtly but very

— PRAKASH RAO



In conversation: Gieve Patel and Anju Dodiya.

potently present.

A.D.: Yes, this happens in many schools of Indian miniature painting too. The *abhisarika* is frightened, but her walk is straight, almost elegant; only, there is a snake on the ground!

G.P.: Can you give more examples of things used in this way?

A.D.: It happens in Bergman sometimes, as in the film *Silence*. I always remember the scene in the corridor of the hotel when the dwarfs come in. It has nothing to do directly with the main narrative, but the strangeness of the experience of those two women inside the room, is what Bergman is really talking about — the appearance of the dwarfs happens by the side, but it adds immensely to the main drama.

G.P.: Give us a parallel example from your own work.

A.D.: Well, the *Leda* painting — the chair the girl is sitting on is early art nouveau — a swan-like form. It's a very strange chair. And this child with an adult's face is sitting on it. I don't know. I can't talk about it, because for me it often isn't a parallel and literal kind of metaphor. I take an association to a point, and then I leave it. I enjoy the mystery. I like to keep it that way.

G.P.: One doesn't want to play it out, verbally, to the death — something done

These problems, the issues women are facing, are very genuine, very, very genuine; but they are not my concern as a painter. There are many issues the world faces today — poverty, things like that, but they are not my concern as a painter. I am extremely concerned with the problems of being a painter, an artist; that has been my major concern, in fact that is the content of my work almost.

all too often on the art scene.

A.D.: I agree.

G.P.: Incidentally, that particular painting of *Leda* and the girl-woman. I don't know if you are aware that the girl-woman resembles Alice — from *Wonderland*.

A.D.: Yes, I became aware of it after I finished the work.



The Magician. 1991. Watercolour. 15 x 11 inches.

G.P.: It's an intriguing combination of associations.

A.D.: And there's a sculpture, too, behind the girl and the chair — a post-modern sculpture!

G.P.: Yes. (laughter) Since these are self-images, at least for a start, and since you are a woman, do the problems facing women in this decade, and the struggle of women, and feminist culture in general affect your work?

A.D.: These problems, the issues women are facing, are very genuine, very, very genuine; but they are not my concern as a painter. There are many issues the world faces today — poverty, things like that, but they are not my concern as a painter. I am extremely concerned with the problems of being a painter, an artist; that has been my major concern, in fact that is the content of my work almost.

G.P.: Yes. One can see this, starting from *Monday Morning* and how to face the empty piece of paper in front of you and the burden of it...

A.D.: ... And the joys.

G.P.: And the joys and triumphs.

A.D.: Well, I've often thought about this you know, the feminist agenda. I thought I'd rather not talk about these problems, in my work. I would rather, I know it will sound pompous, I would rather be a great woman painter and contribute in that way, in a very direct way. I'd rather attempt to jump over, and overcome the problems. That suits me better.

G.P.: Sure, yes. But there are those who would say that they are impelled to speak on behalf of the deprived, even if they do not see themselves as deprived.

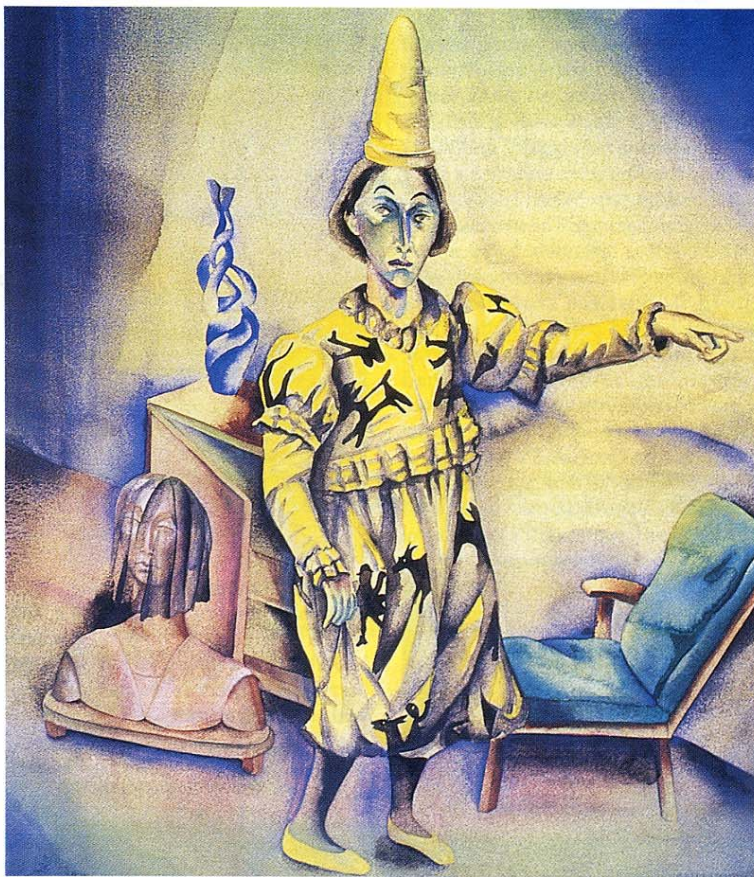
A.D.: You have to do what's important for you. (Pause) One thinks of Goya.

G.P.: Yes, one does. It depends, in the end, upon the artist, but I think it depends also upon the moment in history.

A.D.: Okay, yes.

G.P.: The moment at which you are working. A particular moment might allow the combination more fruitfully than another.

A.D.: That makes sense.



Light Would Kill Her. 1996. Watercolour. 22 1/2 x 19 inches.

G.P.: I've often felt, for instance, that journalism being such a powerful force in the contemporary world can and does shoulder many of these issues of deprived groups, and this could set the artist free, or if you wish to see it from another viewpoint, deprive the artist of the missionary position.

A.D.: Yes, there is a lot of so-called art that slips into journalese...

G.P.: There are some things that a good journalist can handle so much better and so the material becomes redundant in the hands of the artist. There is the danger also, isn't there — again a very contemporary danger — of getting on to a fashionable bandwagon, whenever you take up an all too current cause.

A.D.: With the kind of work I am doing with this woman figure, so often repeated, I was afraid that a lot of people would take it as having to do with the "Woman Problem". Which is not my manifesto. It is very important to me to be individualistic, even in decisions regarding simple technical devices like overlapping — a device too

easily used in a lot of art, currently. I make a positively conscious decision then not to use such a device.

G.P.: Can you elaborate on this?

A.D.: Well, the way David Salle does it, you use an image from Gericault, and an image of you sitting in a chair here, and overlap the two. You can come up with interesting images. But it is the kind of thing I try to avoid doing. I feel it is an easy way out.

G.P.: I think what you have just said seems to imply that you do try to purify your means of expression by making conscious choices. Many people have remarked on your consistent effort to produce a well-done work. One senses a rigour which says that you value clarity, and a good finish.

A.D.: You are talking about refinement?

G.P.: Yes

A.D.: It has a lot to do with choice of medium. I chose watercolour — it demands concentration, precision. And I appreciate elegance. The slow working out of a painting — that's very important. I even thought I was being

subversive by using watercolour. The situation around me seemed to say that watercolour is a minor medium. That it is not possible to produce significant art without resorting to more "interesting" media. Stubbornly sticking to watercolour was my way of rebelling. I was going to structure my work. I was going to work it elegant. I was going to use watercolour transparent, and do all those things which are not to be done. I was going to be, Oh! old-fashioned you know, and conscious about it, and enjoy it!

G.P.: Wonderful! As a result of your being so fruitfully angry we have a unique thing in your work, the hand wringings of a creative person, the story of her creativity sweated out before our eyes, and yet it is work which has been handled with extreme refinement and elegance. A tension is set up between the emotional content of the painting and the cool approach to it. There are periods in history when things like this have happened, and it gives a specific felicity to the work. In Flemish painting, for instance, scenes depicting excruciating torture are painted with an almost finicky refinement. It's an interesting balance — not taking the obvious course of painting a tormented thing in a tormented way.

A.D.: I often use a very hard edge

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— the linear structure is very hard edged, and then there's a softness with the colour. (Pause) When I start a painting it's almost like I am a slave, when I draw it's real hard work — structuring the painting — I am frightened often. It's only when I come to colour I drive the slave out of me and I am an artist. But through a lot of the way I feel I am a slave, and maybe all that labour shows. Chekhov said this

— about working till you squeeze the slave out of you drop by drop, and then the human being emerges. For me, I work like a slave till the artist emerges. It's when I come to a certain state with the colours that I feel Oh, something's happened, the magic, so to say, is here.

G.P.: *To come now to the sources of some of your images.*

A.D.: I have been looking consistently at Japanese prints over the past five or six years. Also, I use newspaper images. The source for the painting *Garden* is a Malkhamb gymnast image. *Monday Morning* uses the stance of a Noh actor. I love these sources, and I sometimes feel that if I hadn't found them I'd have had to invent them — that's the kind of need I have for them.

G.P.: *There is obviously a specific*

your work.

A.D.: It is like reinventing oneself every time. And there are different reasons for doing so each time. Sometimes it starts with a costume which interests me visually, and then I come to the character, and then a story starts building up. When I say "story", it's like the character. The two take over and the self is forgotten. I saw a late-nineteenth-century photograph of a clown. I liked the costume and I thought I could paint it. Artists have traditionally painted clowns, entertainers, so on. But I also had something building up inside my head, about what happened to the clown when cinema came in. I was thinking about this whole contemporary myth of the poor painter in the age of installations (laughter). It's very funny

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Two Orioles. 1996. Watercolour. 19 x 22 1/2 inches.

selectivity operating in your choice of source material. Give us an example of a source image you rejected — that will enable us to understand your process of selection better.

A.D.: It doesn't work that way. I don't reject. In the sense that, when I select, it's very intense. It's in my head — a certain kind of feeling or a situation ... and ...

G.P.: *I understand. You do not "look around" for images. In fact, you know what you want to use; and by the time you do use it, it has become very much a part of your inner life.*

A.D.: I would say that.

G.P.: *One of the devices you use is the creation of personae. There is Salome, there's the Japanese Samurai, there's Alice. Say something about the presence of these fictional characters in*

to put it so, but it's very personal and I carry the story within me.

G.P.: *What did happen to the clown when cinema came in?*

A.D.: Oh! He just became an endangered species! (Laughter). Yes, it's very personal. (Pause). People wondered why I painted Salome. Well, I have been painting heads consistently, so I was asking for a head in return. My creative process revolves so much around heads - I ask and I receive.

G.P.: *So, almost each of these works seems to reflect some aspect of yourself as the creative person - the painter's problems, and personae.*

A.D.: Yes, it's all an allegory of the creative process. All the work, in a sense.

G.P.: *The figures with the two orioles?*

I often use a very hard edge — the linear structure is very hard edged, and then there's a softness with the colour. When I start a painting it's almost like I am a slave, when I draw it's real hard work — structuring the painting — I am frightened often. It's only when I come to colour I drive the slave out of me and I am an artist.

A.D.: They are both "Selves". The illusionist, or the hypnotist has the faith which enables the other subject to levitate. That's how it all happens, the magic of it. There is another painting with two selves, one of them pulling the other. It's the inertia within oneself one needs to fight against to become an artist.

G.P.: *And the Paper Eater?*

A.D.: It's a picture of fear and frustration but it's very tightly structured, very hard edged. It's almost as if the more strongly the fear is structured, the more fearless I may hope to become.

G.P.: *Would you say something about your first show in 1991 in relation to the present one?*

A.D.: I think there's a greater freedom now, and I feel more open about sources. The earlier show was more descriptive. Now I think I allow myself to ... well ... levitate, and I think of course this time the work is more defiant.

G.P.: *The '91 show had a larger number of domestic images and the "artist-magician" was restricted to one or two images of a woman holding a pencil almost as though it were an instrument to work charms with; and she was dressed in a costume, the way a magician would be.*

A.D.: In a robe. (Pause). There were two kinds of work in that show, stemming from a self which was in the studio and a self which was at home. Now there is another interior to explore — the mind, it's like I am also telling stories of the self within.