

## Atul Dodiya *Walking with the waves*

Turning the corner after entering New Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, visitors encountered a painting of St. Francis standing his ground as the elements press against him in a dynamic swath of ochre and brown. Symbolizing strength, the image is one of the 365 watercolors Atul Dodiya made during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, and is dated March 22, 2020, three days before India's first national lockdown. With a selection of 135 works from the series, Dodiya's solo show "Walking with the waves" was partly a public calendar marking shared time and partly a diary recording the artist's inner life during a time of isolation.

The exhibition's movement between the relatable and the inscrutable was reflected in its wall texts, which took the form of a dialogue between Dodiya and the show's curator, Roobina Karode, about symbolic and stylistic choices.

ATUL DODIYA, *Untitled*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 41.9 × 29 cm. Courtesy the artist and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.



For example, the exchange, "RK: the book, the page, the empty space/AD: like a mirror occupy my gaze" accompanies a sequence of paintings showing a variety of characters who recur through the show—monks, women, fishermen—holding a white square. While the artist's oeuvre is renowned for its magisterial citational complexity, this void suggests a sense of introspection rather than quotation.

Of course, the art historical past is never too far from Dodiya's practice. Pastoral scenes recall the Bengal School's romantic paintings while bold colors and expressive lines imbue his landscapes and seascapes with a kinetic charge reminiscent of expressionist painting. Additionally, besides reiterating a retreat into interiority, the tree hollows, perforated mounds, cave entrances, and hooded faces of his work carry hints of the rictus from Edvard Munch's iconic painting *The Scream* (1893), and the subtly open maw in Munch's later oil-painting *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu* (1919), which memorializes the time Munch contracted influenza during the 1918 pandemic.

Despite the vigor of Dodiya's paint application, his use of watercolor is meditative, as the hues blend into each other, sheer against the paper. He started making watercolor paintings in the late 1990s, with the first of these being interpretations of Mahatma Gandhi, displayed in his 1999 exhibition "An Artist of Non-Violence." Describing his process in a 2011 interview with critics Ranjit Hoskote and Nancy Adajania, he said: "When you lay water on paper and it evaporates, leaving its trace, there is something spiritual about that experience, the delicacy with which the image is born."

Similarly embodying a contemplative and ethereal quality, "Walking with the waves" was punctuated with religious imagery. Apart from St. Francis, the suffering Christ makes an appearance. Another sequence depicts the Hindu deity Krishna, his blue, yellow-oinclothed body a streak that organizes the earth, water, and sky around it as Krishna enacts the role of vanquisher, savior, and idler. Other visuals contained more indirect evocations of Hindu and Christian figures: for example, a protagonist dressed in a habit standing against a backdrop of mountains brought to mind the monk in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 film *Andrei Rublev*. Religious iconography inspired by proto-Renaissance painters and Indian calendar art has long been part of Dodiya's work, often in response to the politicization of faith. In this show, mythological episodes had a spiritual effect, as though these revered figures might be a source of comfort during the pandemic.

The most affecting part of the show were the seascapes, comprising bright scenes busy with waves, boats, nets, octopuses, and fishing workers in action. These snippets of life carrying on, with communities of humans and marine animals, counter the upended rhythms of the pandemic. In one painting, a solo boatman rides a towering surge of green sea, while, in other scenes, multiple figures cooperate to survive. Made during a time of endangered sociality, "Walking with the waves" treated the self as a place of refuge and rediscovery, at the risk of becoming cryptic. It was in its renditions of social and ecological bonds, when the self opens out to the world, when the artist walks out from the gaping cave, that the show soared.

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