



Down the Rabbit Hole

Gieve Patel, who straddles the worlds of painting, poetry and medicine, on his preoccupation with wells, questions of death and suffering, and having confidence in his work

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IT'S TEATIME on a Tuesday, and Gieve Patel and I are sitting in the quiet office of Galerie Mirchandani+Steinrucke in Colaba, Mumbai. Works from the recent multi-artist show that marked the gallery's 10th anniversary are still up on its walls. Patel's works, which will go on display in an exhibition titled 'The Footboard Rider',

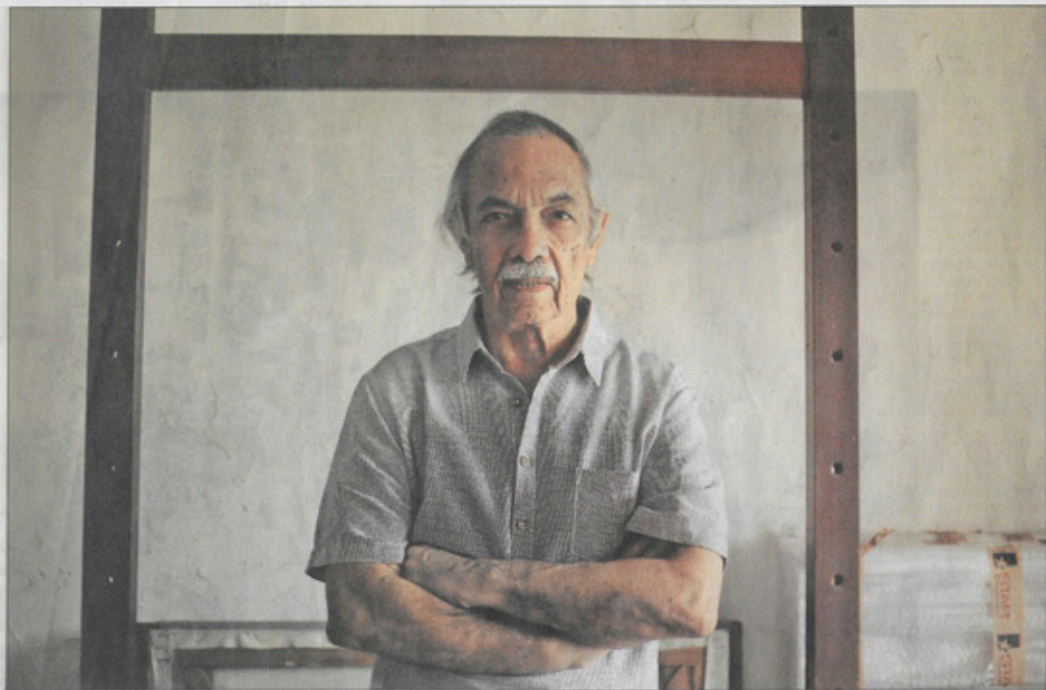
are just arrived from his Malabar Hill studio. One of these is a massive 8ftx8ft canvas called *Looking into a Well: A spray of blossoms*, depicting the reflection of the sky and a flowering tree in a well that, with its oddly convex surface, might as well be a lens turning the gaze back on the viewer. The work is among the latest in Patel's 'Looking into a well' series, the first of which he painted in 1991. "My parents come from a small village in Gujarat called Nargol," he says, sipping his cup of tea. "It's a seaside village, and has a lot of wells. These are not huge step wells, but are smaller, more modest wells. In the monsoon, they fill right up to the brim. As a child, I spent quite a lot of time looking into them and that habit hasn't quite gone. Even now, whenever I pass a well, I feel compelled to look into it."



Superficially, the 'Looking into a well' series — comprising 25 works in all — seems very different from the figurative works more popularly associated with the 76-year-old painter and poet. The artist himself describes the well works as his "more transcendental, meditative paintings". But those familiar with Patel's oeuvre are bound to wonder if looking into a well — the act itself and the resulting work — is, on some level, an extension of his determination to, as he puts it, "look life in the face". Patel's works

are powerful precisely because they gaze unflinchingly into the deep wells of the human condition, hauling out from the depths and presenting before us the frailty, suffering and mortality that the rest of us would rather not acknowledge.

"I don't see this as morbid. I'd say that comes more from a desire to not evade things which might puzzle one or frighten one," he says. "By not evading them, you have a certain degree of freedom from them." Look, for instance, at the figures in his *Four Meditations on Old Age*, with their blotchy, bloated faces and unseeing eyes, which will be on display at 'The Footboard Rider'. Or read the opening lines of *Post-Mortem*, published in his 1966 collection, *Poems*: "It is startling to see how swiftly/A man may be sliced/From chin to prick." "That the human body might merely be a fragile and de-



Nirmal Harindran



DIFFERENT STROKES

(Clockwise from above) Gieve Patel's works *Mourners I*; *Looking into a Well — A Spray of Blossoms*; *Footboard Rider*; the artist at his studio in Malabar Hills, Mumbai



lay-prone mass of flesh, blood, and bone and not the vessel for an immortal soul, is a possibility that Patel has been drawing to our attention for the last five decades.

While it is tempting to see in his preoccupation with mortality and suffering a connection with his former day job as a physician, the artist himself gives no weight to this speculation. The engagement with such questions has been lifelong, he says, adding half-jokingly. "If I may, with some humility, say this, all great writers, poets and painters have thought it necessary to deal with these themes." It is just as easy to imagine a great dramatic conflict in his early career, as he pondered whether to be a doctor or to pursue his passion for poetry and art. But this, says Patel, only lasted till he was 17. He soon realised that happiness lay in pursuing all paths simultaneously, juggling the exigencies of the medical profession with the claims of a family and the whims of the Muses may have overwhelmed others. But not Patel, who, even as a practicing doctor, made sure to keep aside a few hours every day to paint. Being productive is one thing and producing genuinely great work is another. "In the beginning, there were no questions in my mind about the commercial value of my art, because I knew no one would buy it," he says. "If there was any doubt, it was more about whether I would be able to do something useful."

There's no denying the importance of the work that Patel has produced over the years. Along with artists such as Bhruven Khakhar and Sudhir Patwardhan, he is recognised as

part of the group of artists who, in the 1960s, unlike their immediate Modernist predecessors such as FN Souza and Tyeb Mehta, did not mythologise and isolate the human figure in art. "Later artists like Gieve were more preoccupied with looking at the figure in a local habitation, within the intimacies of a neighbourhood," says poet and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote. "This was a generation of artists who wanted to speak to their location." Gallerist Ranjana Steinrucke says, "The greatness of Gieve's work lies in the fact that he has no trouble with themes of suffering and human indignities. There is a rawness and immediacy in his work which is very appealing."

This year will also see the release of a book by Patel, which will have his old as well as new works. The book would have been ready two years ago, but he had to start working on this solo. "I'm a slow worker," he says. "It's not a question of the size. Even if it's a small work, I take three to four months, sometimes more."

Other things, however, have changed. For instance, Patel's confidence over the commercial viability of his work has grown over time. "Confidence is a strange thing," he muses. "One can be very confident and utterly vulnerable at the same time. Today, I don't feel vulnerable. Earlier, when I would produce work, if somebody I respected said that it wasn't good, I would go into a great depression. That doesn't happen anymore. I know today, with absolute confidence, that if I make a work and I know it's fine, then the whole world might say it's bad, but I won't give a damn."