

The Mumbai local: Another train of thought

As Gieve Patel — poet, painter and Bombaywalla — prepares for his next exhibition, a look at the artist who evoked the Indian railways like no other

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IN A memorable poem published in 1991, Gieve Patel evokes the experience of the Saurashtra Express preparing to chug out of the station. Titled From Bombay Central, the poem records the veritable assault on the senses that comes with train travel in the city — “the odour of human manure” is just one of those things that hit you. Then, there is diesel oil, newspaper ink, human sweat, dung and urine. Yet, Patel does not begrudge these odours; he stubbornly welcomes that train journey, as only a Mumbaikar could perhaps, as “the beginning of a meditation on the nature of truth and beauty.”

Patel — poet, painter and former physician — is not one to mix his creative outlets. He

avows that there is a time lag, if at all, between his verses and his canvases; themes from his poetry may turn up a decade later in his paintings. The Indian railways, however, continues to seize Patel, who prepares for his upcoming solo exhibition. “The Indian railways has always been one of my favourite themes. For many people, who have no option but to travel during rush hours, the local train is literally a source of torture,” says Patel, adding, “But, if you have a choice, like I do, then train travel can be a pleasure.”

Patel is walking us through select pieces of the exhibition, which opens on January 18 at Galerie Mirchandani + Stehruecke in Colaba. He explains that at 26, he continues to traverse both the Western and Central Railway lines — from Churchgate to Vihar whenever

work or friends beckon, or from CST to Thane, to meet his dear friend and fellow painter, Sudhir Patwardhan.

The title of the exhibition is borrowed from an acrylic on canvas work, Footboard Rider. The painting draws on the familiar sight of men at train doorways, holding on for dear life or relishing the thrill of literally living on the edge. In Patel's painting, a passenger sleeps by the window, blissfully unaware of the footboard rider who hangs right outside the window. “I was

thrilled by the idea of danger that a person puts himself through and the exhilaration of risking something,” continues Patel.

The amount of visual imagery that the mega Indian railways has bred can only be outdone by its own vastness. The familiar motifs of pregnant compartments, passengers in waiting and trains chugging down the tracks have populated our visual culture. However, in Patel's work, the iconic footboard rider, like the rest of

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Footboard Rider, 2006, acrylic on canvas by Gieve Patel.
PIC./GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEHRUECKE

the painting, works by way of suggestion. The crowd is but three people, the train is but the bars of the window. Cultural theorist and curator Ranjit Hoskote, who is writing an essay for this show, agrees, “Gieve's project is not to represent an everyday scene in a merely realistic manner. His concern is with taking up a quotidian moment that everyone is so familiar with that they no longer notice it, and

to make it mysterious and radiant.”

Dramas of space

The exhibition of 12 works follows on from Patel's preoccupations over the last 50 years of his artistic practice. In the 1970s, Patel brought empty platforms to canvas in a series of paintings, popularly referred to as the railway station series. Footboard Rider is a far cry from that series (Patel describes it as “atmos-

pheric”), and Hoskote notes, “The railway station has always played an important role in Gieve's works, whether it is his painting or his poetry. From the 1970s onwards, his great works of the empty railway stations — the vacant platforms or the single figure of the porter — have shown that this is literally the stage where existential dramas are played out and transience is to be found.”

The remainder of the works in the exhibition belongs to Patel's reputed Looking Into A Well and the Mourners series, and a new set titled Four Meditations on Old Age. While the singular Footboard Rider painting may leave visitors pining for more such, there are also three drawings of Joan of Arc, inspired by the 1928 silent film by Carl Dreyer.

Even as Patel prepares for this exhibition, he says there are two concerns for the future. One, an impending book of poems, scheduled to be published mid-year. The last volume, Mirrored, Mirroring (From Bombay Central was part of this collection) was

published in 1991. We can't help but think that his new set of poems will draw from the exhibition, especially the portraits in Four Meditations on Old Age. Patel laughs, “Once you are past 60, you better start thinking about it. I am past 70!” He then adds, “The concern with possible transcendental experiences — like the wells — has always been in my poetry. Or thinking about death and puzzling over it. And these are no unique to myself. For all artists, these ultimate questions are of importance.”

But, of immediate concern is the case of a work in progress and a decision whether to show it or not. “I have three confidantes in the art world — Sudhir, Anju and Atul Dodiya. We often see each other's works. Sudhir thinks I should show the work... I take my time with my paintings and I can't say, for instance, I have a month and I will finish it. That way, if I push myself, the work gets messed up. I could venture a guess but no more,” he says.