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TRAIN OF THOUGHT

As an artist, poet and playwright, Gieve Patel has closely observed the evolution of the city. Ahead of his exhibition, he speaks about juggling disciplines, his fascination for railway stations, and his memories of Bombay in the '60s

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We meet artist, poet, and playwright Gieve Patel (77) at his residence in Cusrow Bang, the Parsi enclave in Colaba. His minimalist bedroom is also his studio (he has another one at Napean Sea Road). Aside from a floor-level bed and a desk-cum-bookshelf, there is an empty wooden easel next to the wall. A table on wheels has big splotches of oil paint, spilled periodically so the surface seems to have crusted, while the paint beneath is wet.

A man of few words, Patel is nevertheless generous with his smiles. He admits, "I am social with a certain number of people." We tell Patel that we studied his 1966 poem, *On Killing a Tree*, in school. He isn't surprised. "It is just the one poem that is brought in the syllabus again and again. I have no quarrel with it," he says, adding that it is now being taught in Britain. He tells us the story behind the poem: "I was 20, and studying medicine at Grant Medical College (Nagpada). One morning when I went to the college compound, I saw a beautiful tree uprooted by the storm. I sat down and wrote the poem."

WALL OF FAME

Patel has made his mark across the arts. He has three books of poetry to his credit — *Poems* (released by poet and playwright Nissim Ezekiel in 1966), *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976) and *Mirrored, Mirroring* (1991). He also wrote three plays — *Princes* (1968), *Savalka* (1981), and *Mister*



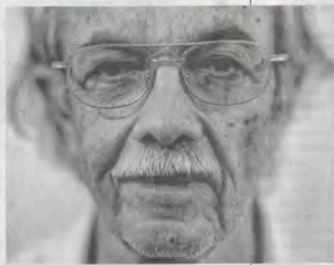
Behram (1988) — that reflect his Parsi roots. And his oil and acrylic artworks have been exhibited in the Menton Biennale, France (1976), and Royal Academy London (1982), among other places.

Patel did all this while juggling his vocation as a general practitioner (GP). "At the age of 17-18, I felt that I had to make a choice. Soon, I found that I needed [all] these disciplines, and if I use my time well, I could practise them," he says. He reveals the secret to his multitasking: "It's a question of being focused, so that when you are doing something, you are not doing anything else."

Patel continues to paint frequently. *Footboard Rider*, his latest exhibition at Galerie Mirchandani + Steirnuecke, features 12 oil and acrylic works made over the last decade, and on display for the first time in Mumbai.

BACK IN TIME

Untrained in art and poetry, Patel often had doubts and sought advice. "I never went to art school, but I showed my early works to artist Akbar Padamsee. He informally became my teacher and a good friend," he



says, adding, "In terms of literature, we are all self-taught."

Patel's recollections of Bombay in the '60s are of artists gathering at each other's studios and offering feedback. "Jehangir Art Gallery used to be a regular haunt," he says. Similarly, he would often meet fellow poet Adil Jussawala at his home. "Nissim Ezekiel was an institution, and we would

meet him at the Indian PEN office (Ezekiel edited the publication).

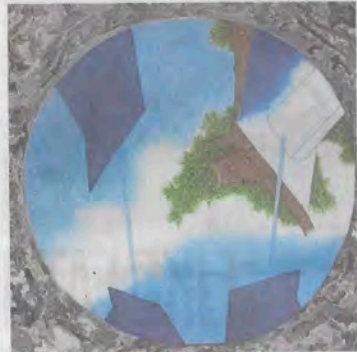
THE ARTIST AND HIS MUSE

The city he grew up in, figures prominently in his poetry and art. His poem, *From Bombay Central* (1961), evokes the sights and sounds that assail a commuter at the station. In the early '70s, Patel also made a series of paintings on railway platforms.

"Initially there were no human figures. The subject matter was the immediate environment of a railway station," he recalls. The current show, *Footboard Rider*, depicts a man asleep at the window, while the head and shoulders of a dangling commuter are visible outside. "Anyone who travels by local train is familiar with the sight. There is a sense of danger as well as exhilaration," he says.

Patel still travels by train, especially for long-distance journeys. Within the city, he travels to Chhatrapati to meet his artist friends Atul and Anju Dodiya, or to Thane to meet artist Sudhir Patwardhan.

Train journeys go back to his childhood as he would travel to his ancestral village in Gujarat for vacations. The village inspired his *Looking into a Well* series of paintings



MUMBAI GALLERY WEEKEND HIGHLIGHTS

>>When: January 21, 10.30am
Project 88, BMP building, Colaba
Exhibition: *Gallerists as Interventionist: Collaboration as Strategy*, featuring works by Manjit Bawa and Saheb Rahal
Walkthrough led by gallerist director Sree Goswami.

>>When: January 21, 11.30am
Lakersen, Grants Building, Colaba
Exhibition: *Profiles*
**Collaboration as Strategy, featuring works by Manjit Bawa and Saheb Rahal
Walkthrough led by curator Arshiya Lokhandwala.**

>>When: January 21, 12.15pm
Chatterjee & Lal, Arthur Bunder Road
Exhibition: *Squeeze Lime In Your Eye* by Kausik Mukhopadhyay
Walkthrough by Mukhopadhyay.

>>When: January 21, 4.15pm
Chemould Prescott Road, Fort
Exhibition: *Fold/Unfold* by Sonia Khurana
Walkthrough led by art critic Maya Koskova.

(Clockwise, from left) *Footboard Rider* by Gieve Patel, 2016, acrylic on canvas; *Looking into a Well-Four Pillars* by Gieve Patel, 2015, acrylic on canvas; the artist
PHOTOS: AALOK SONI/HT (PROFILES), COURTESY: GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEIRNUECKE

(the exhibition features two such works). "There were small, humble wells but they were beautiful. They would fill up in the monsoon," he says, adding, "Wells have fascinated many artists. Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney composed poems on it. And in Kerala, they say the well is the navel of the earth."

Apart from paintings, the exhibition features drawings of Joan of Arc. "In August, last year, I came across the 1928 silent film — *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. It had a great impact on me," he says. Patel's other passions are of listening to Western classical compositions by Bach and Henry Purcell, and Hindustani classical greats such as Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Kesarbai Kelkar. He also loves reading classics: the last book he read was Leo Tolstoy's final novel, *Resurrection*. After this exhibition, Patel will turn his attention to poetry. Later this year, he will release a collected edition of his poems. "All my previous books are out of print. So, the new book will bring them together and feature new poems as well," he says.

ART FOR THOUGHT

Footboard Rider is on view till March 18

2, Sunny House, 16/18, Merewether Road, Colaba
622023030

As part of Mumbai Gallery Weekend, a walkthrough will be held at Galerie Mirchandani + Steirnuecke at 2.45pm on January 21 by gallerist Ranjana Steirnuecke