

CULTURE

Footboard Rider: Of Life and Death in Gieve Patel's Art

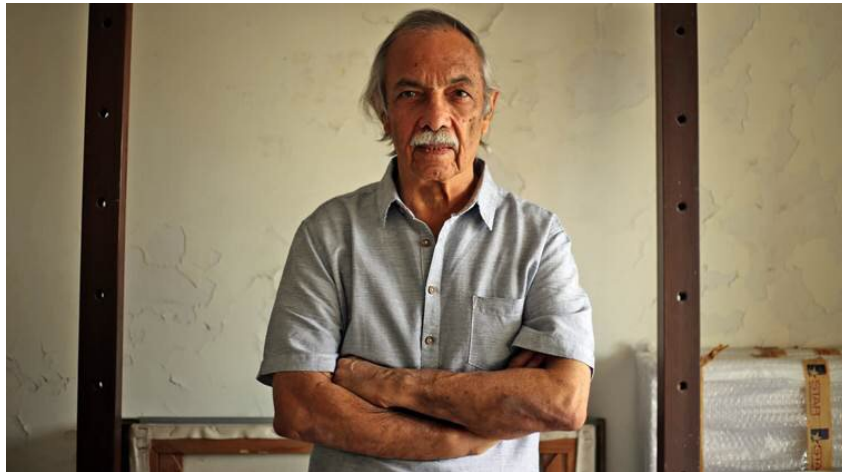
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Gieve Patel's art celebrates and delineates the human condition, though at the same time, it also provides a window into the ravages of death.



Gieve Patel. Credit: Twitter

A conversation with the artist Gieve Patel cannot be limited to referencing his art. The rigour with which his work has celebrated and delineated the human condition over decades, the effortless way in which death has been made meaningful – not sensational or gratuitous – and his own wonder at what that last journey might involve...these ideas dominate a Sunday morning meeting with the painter, poet, playwright and physician at his Cusrow Baug residence in Mumbai. One expects to see a life-sized model of a human skeleton hanging about casually, as his work is famous for its intimate and violent expression of the body. Instead, a wooden frame languidly stretches out over a wall – or maybe it's the wall that is actually the frame. His latest exhibition of art works titled 'Footboard Rider' is to show at the Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai, starting January 19.

Patel's paintings and poetry dance between the profound and the profane, but his demeanour is gentle and unassuming. We sit in a room that doesn't give away much. There is an empty easel, a few cushions and chairs to sit upon and some books. The 76-year-old Patel is not as reticent. He speaks in evenly-measured tones that occasionally have hints of laughter. He could be talking about science-fiction or reality or the space connecting the two. But always, there is a twinkle behind his gaze.

While the city runs a marathon outside, Patel is doing what he likes to do on a day off – watch the world go by. This is the skin he is most comfortable in – that of an observer, a witness to the truth and beauty of humanity. The new show contains 12 works, both old and new, that journey through his preoccupations over the decades. 'Footboard Rider', the single acrylic on canvas from which the show gets its name, is as much about the commuter asleep inside the train as about a man, awake, and hanging out of the window. A second painting titled 'Looking Into A Well' again presents the travel between inner and outer spaces and is not just about any one way of looking at the world.



'Footboard Rider', 2016, acrylic on canvas, by Gieve Patel.

Patel says, “People who see my set of paintings titled ‘Looking Into A Well’ often remark that they feel they are looking up at the world through the mouth of the well. For me, I would say it is the same experience – inner and outer are the same.” It is this notion that gets expressed across his works, inviting viewers to take a second look. Taking the thought further, he says, “One of the greatest discoveries of the 20th century is that thoughts are actions and that there is no difference between the two. When you conceive of something in your mind you are creating an action, though not literally. I have created an action in my life which I have to deal with.” Patel shies from using the word *karma*. “At one time we used to believe that thought has no substantiality but today one would have to reconsider that.” For Patel, this does not mean an attempt to discipline one’s thought. Instead he calls it a freedom. Acknowledging the existence of a thought and taking responsibility can be liberating, he says.

Patel’s art is known for its unapologetic embrace of sexuality and violence. But he feels that the social context he endows upon his works differentiates them from being sensational. For instance, the canvas ‘Mourners’, from an older series, displays mourning in progress and yet there is no vicarious grief to be had here. He says,

“I have been teaching poetry at Rishi Valley School annually for more than two decades. One of the poems I read with 15-year-olds is called *Villon’s Epitaph* by a 14th century French poet, Francois Villon. He was something of a rebel and his friends were thieves and murderers, people hanged for petty thefts and that is what

this poem explores. It's very graphic, describing the process of hanging, how the rotting body is attacked by birds and how eyes and hair are pulled out. But what prevents it from being merely sensational or exploitative is that the emotional life of these thieves is explored in the course of the poem. This gives the violence of the poem a human and social context. One of the things I discuss with the students is whether or not this is a beautiful poem. Many say that the subject is not beautiful but the way it is handled is."

While so much of his work delves into the human condition, it is also a deep-dive into death. 'Four Meditations on Old Age', an oil work on board, is an ongoing conversation that the artist has been having with himself. But his works do not represent an obsession with death, he says. "I attempt to present life in many of its aspects and death is one of them. I also present fellowship between humans, life on the streets, a kind of celebratory view of looking at nature in the depths of a well. So... to do all this and then leave out death would be living in denial." Patel is reminded of a quote from the Mahabharata, which he is currently reading. He says, "Amongst the many questions asked to Yudhishtir by the spirit of the lake is this, 'what is the strangest thing in the world?' And his reply is, 'the strangest thing in the world is that human beings see death every day and yet think that it does not apply to them'."



His medical background has meant he is able to see the ravages death affects, up close. But Patel has not been desensitised by that. Quite the opposite, he says, “Maybe it is because death is so earth-shaking... You can’t help feeling that you are going to face this at some point and wonder how you will deal with it. I suppose all of us want to die quickly and quietly but this boon is not given to all of us. I suppose like anybody else I am worried about old age and illnesses. After-life doesn’t bother me at all... I may have occasional moments of belief and disbelief but I don’t have a fixed view.”

It is this play of avatars which the artist flirts with that makes him involved and yet removed from the world around him – he is the puppet and its master, all at once. And while witnessing the life unravelling around him, Patel shares his intensely personal drama. A short extract (from his book of poems *Mirrored, Mirroring*) illustrates the point with a subtle vividness.

It Makes

I am a bead.

Sorted,

thumbed,

threaded,

strung,

fingered (did you say) by

threads of all hues,

riddled through,

happily.

An exhibition of Gieve Patel’s paintings opens at the Galerie Steinrucke Mirchandani in Mumbai on January 19 and will run till March 18.