

ART WORLD

In Gieve Patel's new exhibition, you can see the vulnerable figure on the sidelines of society

Despite their seeming recognisability, the figures in Patel's 'Footboard Rider' remain enigmatic.

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GIEVE PATEL, *Footboard Rider*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in

“The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand.
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.”

— Nissim Ezekiel, *'Urban'* [1]

1.

The fourteen works gathered to form Gieve Patel's current exhibition, *Footboard Rider*, offer renewed testimony to the artist's lifelong preoccupation with the marginal, vulnerable or extreme figure, taken from the sidelines of society or from unbearable intensities of experience, and set at the centre of his paintings. Whether it is the man struggling against the rain, the maimed beggar, the eunuch, the mutilated body on a beach, or the martyr at the stake, Patel's figures are clothed in the robust specificity of their social milieu or historical circumstances. They are modelled on individuals the artist has encountered in the street, the public garden, the clinic, or the wharf; or else, they have been culled from his intense engagement with the history of painting and cinema. Despite this seeming recognisability, Patel's figures remain enigmatic. They are never so distant as to be alien to us, of course; yet they are never so close as to be neutralised by familiarity. And while they can sometimes be insistently material and present, they can also be spectral, suggestive of apparitions.

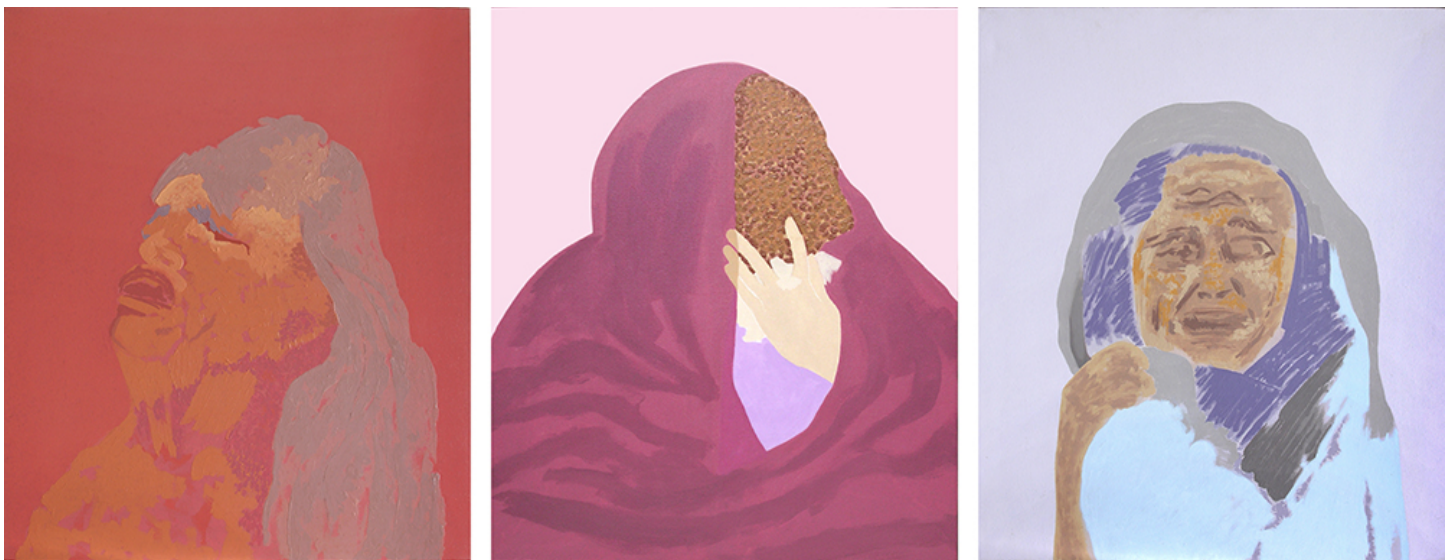
The protagonist of this exhibition's title painting is one of Patel's more spectral dramatis personae. He inhabits a threshold between the contained interior of a commuter or long-distance train – a mobile habitat familiar to the denizens of the artist's home city, Bombay – and the landscape seen outside its window, all red hills and orange sky. Are we inside the train, looking out at the footboard rider, we ask ourselves? Or are we outside the train, looking in? The construction of the painting subtly disorients our viewerly certainties.



Installation view.

In the same way, Patel's long-term fascination with the moment of looking into a well, and with the passage of clouds in the sky, opens us to cosmic intimations. In these works, the artist pulls away from the figure, hinting at a transcendence of the bodied self; or perhaps, more accurately, at the *possibility* of such a transcendence. For Patel's wells are sensuously conceived: his haptic attentiveness embraces the textures of stone, brick, loam, vegetation, water in flow and at rest; he does not isolate his wells, miraculous as they are, from the cycles of human activity and utility indicated by the winch, well head or other architectural features that are occasionally reflected in their surfaces. It is possible, also, to read the floating world of the well as an image of the mind, with thoughts, sensations and impulses striating and succeeding one another on its mercurial surface. Equally, it might suggest the millennial cycles of gathering and dispersal through which the universe maps its life cycle.

In this sense, Patel's wells bear a considerable affinity with his graphite, charcoal and ink studies of clouds: natural ephemera approximated through the graphic gesture, which remind us of the interplay between mortality and eternity within which we shape our lives. Patel's artistic project is that of taking up a quotidian moment, so naturalised and rendered routine that it no longer attracts attention, and to visit a transfiguration upon it: to make it mysterious and radiant, marked by an otherness that invites us to look more closely at all that remains unexamined in our lives.



GIEVE PATEL, Mourners, 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 93 in

II.

In theatre, an actor finds his or her place on stage through a script, or through a sequence of moves plotted and blocked, or even, in more experimental situations, through evolving relationships with other actors sharing the experience of performance. By contrast, Patel often declines to offer the protagonists who people his paintings a definite script, or to orchestrate the precise relationships that hold them together. As viewers, we find ourselves reaching intuitively for the currents and sediments of affect in his obliquely told tales. We gauge the

degrees of familiarity and estrangement from the everyday that he layers into his art, as we attempt to interpret the true inwardness of his tableaux. Our interpretations are, of course, subject to change; they shift as our perceptions shift to accommodate allusions, shades of meaning, undercurrents, the utterances and the silences of these paintings and drawings. Elsewhere, I have written of how “Patel’s paintings often feature groups that are the interwoven sum of unspoken privacies” and the “content of Patel’s compressed narratives remains unspelled-out, withheld as in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, whom he admires”. [2]

In this spirit, let us approach *Footboard Rider* and *Embrace* (both 2016). The first work thrums with the momentum of an expanding metropolis and a sprawling subcontinent; it takes its place in a decades-long itinerary of paintings in which Patel has invoked the environs of the train station, the deserted railway platform, the figure of the porter, and the early-morning train ride. In some of these paintings, especially of the early and mid-1970s – *Lighted Platform* (1974) and *Figure in Landscape* (1976) come to mind – space was as persuasive a protagonist as any human figure. The second work is inspired by the newspaper photograph of a pivotal moment in a soccer match. This, too, may be contextualised within a research and preparatory practice of the artist’s, which involves the use of media photographs, seen to particular advantage in a series from the late 1960s and early 1970s devoted to the figure of the politician, including *Dead Politician* (1969) and *Conference Table* (1972).



GIEVE PATEL, *Embrace*, 2016, oil on board, 24.8 x 31 in

Footboard Rider is dominated, visually, by the eponymous wraith-like figure: he seems to be hanging out of the train, his hair punked by the wind, his stance and aspect those of a highwayman boarding a stage coach or a duellist challenging invisible powers to combat. Inside the compartment of the train, heading either to Bombay’s suburbs or to distant hinterland towns, are other figures, one of them lost to sleep; outside the window, the vista is resplendent with the colours of dawn or twilight. The painting holds out multiple surprises. The orange and red of the landscape are projective colours, played against the grain here to recessive effect; meanwhile, the brushy mustard-gamboge surface of the train interior shades off into darkness. The longer we look at the painting, the more we are drawn into its reverie-like mood, and the less certain we grow of our bearings. The train’s interior begins to resemble its exterior; we cannot tell where sunrise ends and dusk begins, or where inside passes into outside. And the footboard rider: is he real, within the framework of the painting, or is he simply a phantasm in a dream that has possessed the sleeping figure?

Embrace is a deeply moving, even holy work – and I use the latter adjective advisedly. In the first instant of viewing, we sense that we stand in the presence of a drama larger than ourselves: a drama at once unfolding in the moment and perennial in the manner in which it is likely to repeat itself in a universal structure of events. What do we feel, when we look at these two male figures, both strong: one, in orange, apparently falling or struck down, gesturing for attention as he communicates something of urgency to the other, in blue, who holds him tenderly, offering comfort or consolation, bending to hear him so that their cheeks touch? There is a tragic heroism to these figures, veined with an unabashedly masculine solidarity that could be read, perhaps somewhat reductively, as homoerotic kinship.

I describe the atmosphere of this painting as holy because it is charged with a sense of exaltation, of communion, of intimate exchange transmuted into sacred moment. Are these men, perhaps, a martyred saint and his apostle? Has one been betrayed, and is the other the only survivor from the shipwreck of trust? Are we bearing witness, here, to a rite of succession? Is the man in orange pointing upward to indicate an annunciation of things to come, a revelation of what has been occluded, or a last word of counsel?

Embrace is resonant with intimations of the Trecento in the tenor of its subject, its tonality, its exaltation, and the importance of gesture. Here, as elsewhere, in his oeuvre, Patel demonstrates the fascinating extent to which he has internalised the legacies of the Italian Primitives, the Dutch and Flemish masters, and the pioneers of the Northern Renaissance. To him, Giotto, Rogier van der Weyden and Matthias Grünewald are not merely references to be plucked for citation; rather, with their capacity to invoke an entire lifeworld or habitus of emotions, they have become indwelling and definitive elements of his artistic temperament.



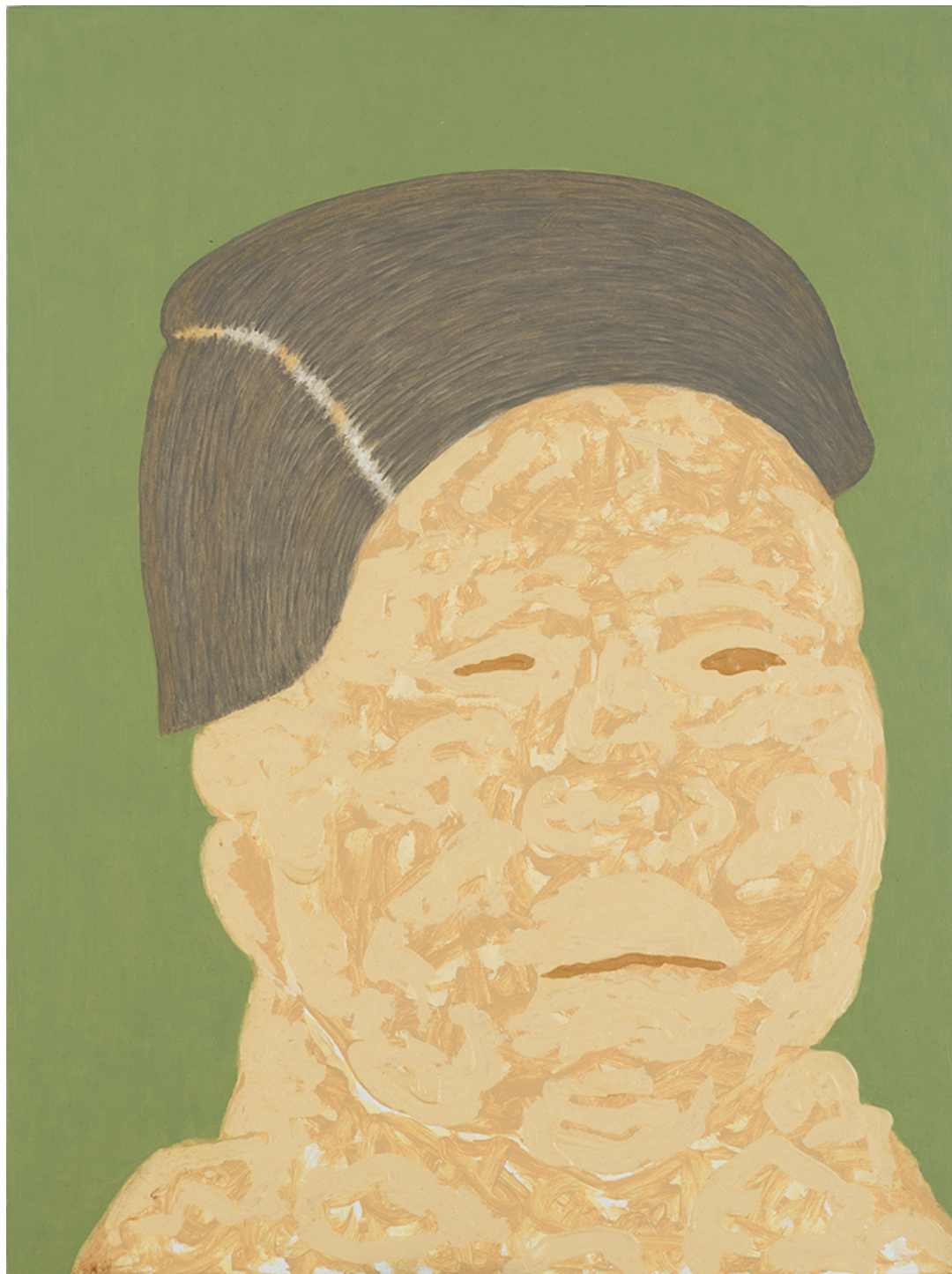
GIEVE PATEL, Dawn Elegy (work in progress), 2017, acrylic on canvas, 43 x 78 in

III.

The figure assumes varied avatars in Patel's work; and as I write that sentence, I correct myself, stop myself from setting an idealist misconception afloat. For there is no *a priori*, archetypal, universal template from which Patel develops his particular figures; on the contrary, it is from the materiality, the diverse granularity and specificity of his protagonists that we may establish, following Wittgenstein, a 'family resemblance' which connects them through gradations of overlap rather than unvarying identity. [3] If *Footboard Rider* attends to the phantasmal figure and *Embrace* to figures in a state of exaltation, another grouping of works in this exhibition articulates the artist's continuing engagement with the body as hostage to time, to the processes of attrition, decay and extinction that time enacts on the flesh. *Meditations on Old Age* (2013), a group of four paintings, *Mourners* (2005), a group of three, and *Dawn Elegy*, a work that is in progress at the time of writing and which Patel wished to share with his viewers in its transitional form – all carry into the present that preoccupation with the vulnerable, wounded, abandoned, ravaged and heartbreakingly *mortal* body which lay at the core of Patel's 'Gallery of Man' series, inaugurated in the early 1980s.

In these recent entries in the catalogue of the *Gallery of Man*, we – or, at any rate, I – detect an intriguing shift of attitude. While formerly, as with *Crushed Head* and *Drowned Woman* (both 1984), the gravitas of the portraiture evoked our sorrow, pity and horror, it seems to me that Patel's studies of ageing and of lamentation now communicate a complex tension between two apparently mutually contradictory responses to the human subject. The first chromatic reality that hits us, when we look at *Meditations on Old Age*, is that these are *bright* paintings, defined by an almost DayGlo palette of yellows, purples, and greens. Is that an apparatchik from Mao's China, or a man in a wig with a very marked side part? Is the man with glasses set in a purple frame an ageing rock star, or was he merely caught in strange cross-

lights? And that body with its luminous yellows and shades of pink, a riff on Patel's *Battered Man in Landscape* (1993), why does it indicate vitality even as it seems to have suffered untold deprecation?

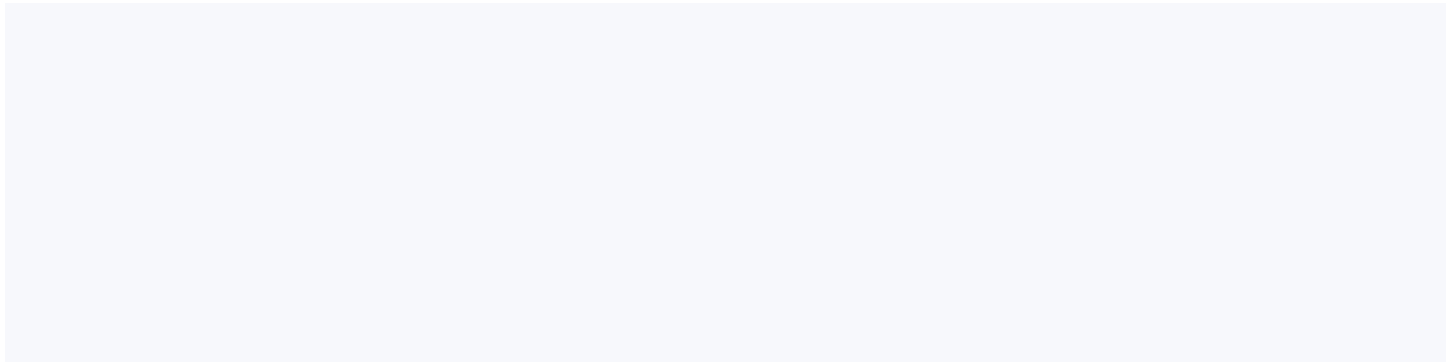


GIEVE PATEL, *Meditations on Old Age (4)*, oil on board, 24 x 18 in

One answer may well be that Patel has chosen, now, to present a collision between inevitable decline and resurgent vitality, taking a cue from Dylan Thomas's ringing demand that old age should not "go gentle into that good night", that it should "rage, rage against the dying of the light". But the chromatic sumptuousness of the *Meditations*..., and the palpable vibrancy of their brush strokes, so festively at odds with their ostensible subject matter, could also indicate another clash of instincts: on the one hand, the artist's long-standing philanthropic releasement of the self towards others, through empathy; and on the other, a previously less evident misanthropic impulse, alert to the foibles of the precariously perched survivor, asserting itself through gentle, carnivalesque mockery.

In *Mourners* (2005), three paintings whose putative sitters suggest the members of a dispersed chorus, it is the philanthropic impulse that prevails. Based on graphite studies made by Patel in 1971, these paintings communicate various registers of grief, from the first moment of seemingly insuperable shock to the stylised manifestation of loss almost as rapture, as threnody, as song. Empathy, again, is the deep-welling ground note of *Dawn Elegy*, a work that has not yet been sealed into its final shape: it is a group portrait strongly imbued with the mythic freight of a Deposition, translated into the demotic ordinariness of a city street, with a dead man lying on the asphalt while his family surrounds him. The lives of the group have been shaken forever by an event of catastrophic proportions; that is the focus of this work, and not the lightly implied truth that the cycles of metropolitan life, as embodied by the pedestrians standing about, will continue regardless.





GIEVE PATEL, Meditations on Old Age, oil on board, 24 x 18 in

IV.

With the graphite and charcoal triptych, *Joan of Arc (after Carl Dreyer)* (2016), Patel wrestles with the larger-than-life figure of the martyr, the heroine turned victim, the saint burned at the stake as a blasphemer and heretic. Here we have the figure in extreme conditions, visualised as, successively, under threat of imminent extinction, violently extinguished, and then reduced to ashes. The artist's point of departure, for this triptych, is the silent-era black-and-white cinematic classic, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), directed by the Danish filmmaker Carl Theodor Dreyer. *The Passion* was noted for its remarkable lighting, which harshly contoured the actors' features and the architecture of the concrete set that represented the mediaeval prison in Rouen where an ecclesiastical kangaroo court presided over Joan of Arc's trial in 1431. Dreyer's film emphasised the use of close-up and low-angle shots, imparting a disquieting emotional intensity to his narrative and the experience of viewing it.

Patel's electric line – familiar from his continuing series of drawings of clouds – is pressed into highly effective service here, to achieve a variety of effects evocative of the solitary figure of the dissident being stigmatised and offered up as human sacrifice, the charred body memorialised in residues of ash and calcinated bone while the seemingly evanescent spirit endures as aura, as the afterlife of story. *Joan of Arc (after Carl Dreyer)* reminds us, also, of Patel's lifelong preoccupation with finding painterly or graphic solutions to the formal question of how to represent plasma and lamina: fire, water, smoke, and steam.



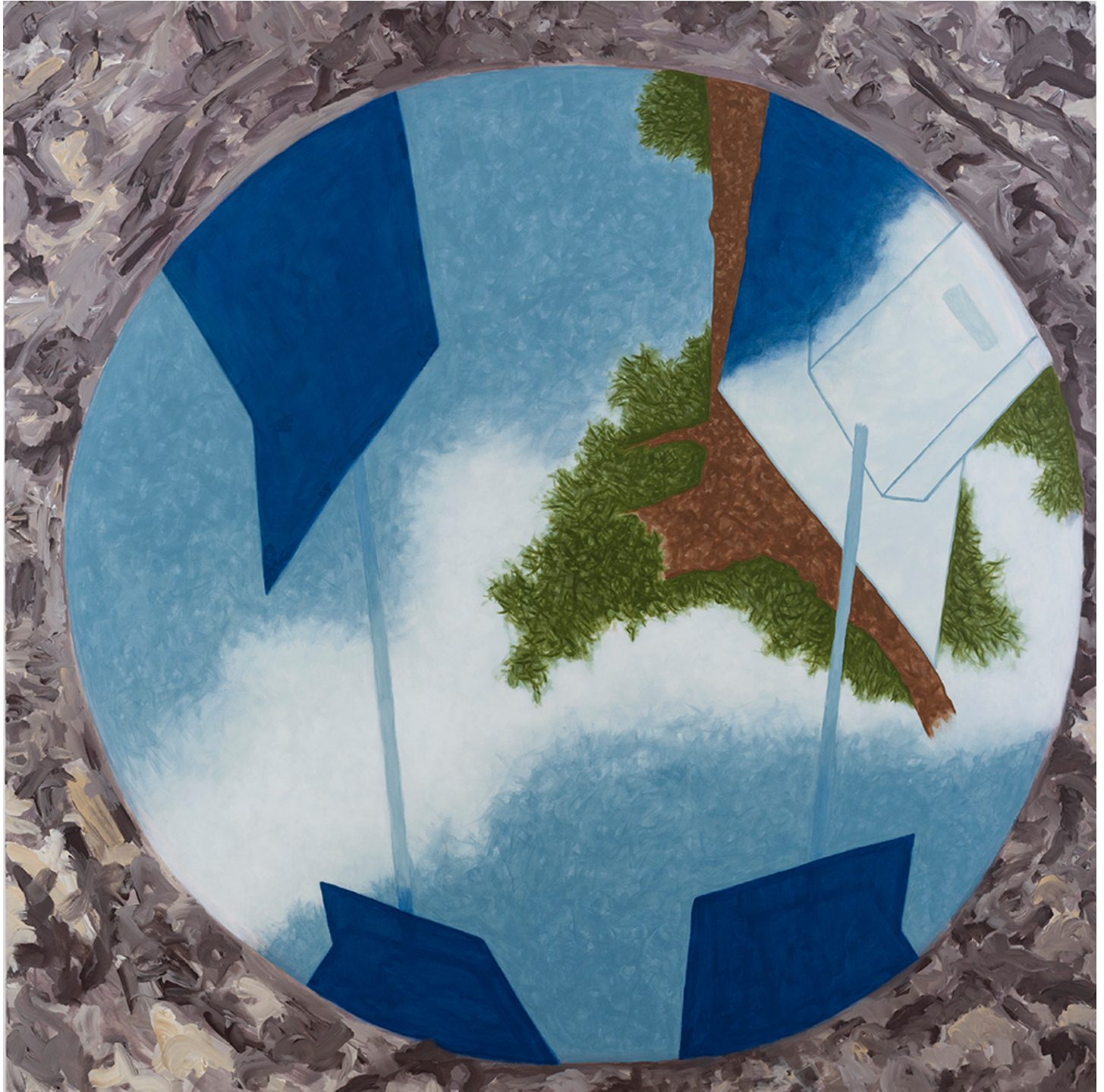
V.

Patel's fascination with the problem of painting water – how to render transparency by palpable means? – animates his continuing series of paintings titled *Looking into a Well*, of which there are now nearly 25. Formally, these wells enable Patel to express his abstractionist energies; at the related conceptual level, they permit him to voice his receptiveness to a numinous transcendental vision that embraces yet exceeds the conditions of material existence. Elsewhere, I have written of how, in such works, his “preferred texture, a quirky, mottled tapestry, signifies a myriad teemingness redolent of microscopic life while also suggesting a fluid connection among all beings and things”. [4]

The temporality of Patel's wells varies between the momentary scale of ephemeral effects and the geological scale of eternity. These wells invite us to undertake journeys into other worlds: *Looking into a Well: A Spray of Blossoms* (2010) is an atlas in microcosm, with the drifting, iridescent forms of flowers ablaze across it; *Looking into a Well: Evening Dazzle* (2014) invites us into the life of algae, moss, stone and exposed brick at sunset; *Looking into a Well: Four Pillars* (2015), with its trailing chain of clouds and the architecture reflected in its water,

prompts us to dwell on the nature of reflection, on whether we are looking at a mirror or a channel here. Significantly, we realise that we always look *at* rather than *down into* Patel's wells: an experience that would have been perpendicularly oriented in life is framed parallel to us in art. Might we regard these wells as portholes that make us intimate yet distanced witnesses to another domain? Or do they sometimes act as mandalas, cosmic images, restful yet alive to the world's unease?

Like the protagonist of Nissim Ezekiel's *Urban*, which gives this essay its epigraph, Gieve Patel has nurtured close, productive relationships both with the city and the small town or village; with the realm of natural forces and the realm of human relationships. No captive of a banal either-orism of illusory choice, his blood is quickened both by "beach and tree and stone" as well as by "kindred clamour close at hand". This gift for straddling apparent paradoxes, indeed for treating paradox as a bridge to be crossed, sustains his art, imparts to it a distinctive and memorable richness.



GIEVE PATEL, Looking into a Well - Four Pillars, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in

Notes

1. Written in 1959, *Urban* appeared in Nissim Ezekiel's fourth collection of poems, *The Unfinished Man* (1960). See N Ezekiel, *Collected Poems 1952-1988* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 117. Ezekiel was a mentor, in different generations, to Gieve Patel and to the present author.

2. Ranjit Hoskote, 'The Startling View from the Studio: Recent Paintings by Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan', in *Gieve Patel | Sudhir Patwardhan* (New York: Bose Pacia/ BP Contemporary Art of India Series Vol. 28, 2006), p. 9.

3. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

4. Hoskote, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



Ranjit Hoskote's catalogue essay for Gieve Patel's exhibition, Footboard Rider, is reproduced by courtesy of the author and the gallery, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.