

Past Forward– Akbar Padamsee

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Launch of publication written by Nancy Adajania :

One cannot categorize Akbar Padamsee or confine him to a period or category; he occupies a very experimental space of his own.

- Priyasri Patodia

The Horizons of an Artistic Practice:

Proximate and Distant Encounters in Akbar Padamsee's Art

Nancy Adajania

When viewing an exhibition of recent work by a young artist, one might legitimately expect evidence of a new turn, experiment or direction. However, one brings a very different expectation to the viewing of recent work by an artist such as Akbar Padamsee, whose magisterial practice covers more than six decades. Here, one does not look for the trace of the new; rather, one retraces the mysterious processes of renewal that continue to propel and inspire an artistic quest.

Akbar Padamsee's practice is based primarily on a meticulous revisiting of three genres: the nude, the head and the landscape. This revisiting is a recursive, additive, dynamic process; when I ask Padamsee how he views the concept of repetition in relation to his art, he replies: "It is change of the kind that does not abolish everything that went before." The artist's chosen genres are not closed formulae so much as they are inexhaustible tropes that deal with the notions of the seemingly at-hand but in fact always out-of-reach body, the enigmatic presence of the Other, and the urgent proximity yet terrifying distance and unknowability of nature.

Repetition is, in any case, a complex gesture. As Deleuze argues, it is necessarily an enrichment, a recursion, an occasion for making choices in approaching or representing the object or objective that was the focus of the first attempt; every repetition marks a further unfolding of that which one is in quest of. Accordingly, while a banal commonsense account may suggest that repetition is the deliberate negation of difference, the opposite is true: the energy of repetition lies in its constant production and calibration of difference.

Extracts

Extract from an essay by Nancy Adajania for the publication 'Past Forward' Recent works in oil on canvas ,2013s

-Nancy Adajania

Past Forward

“Art has always been an elitist activity... an appreciation by the elite for the elite... Common people don't really enjoy art. When we were in the PAG [Progressive Artists Group] we arranged exhibitions in dense labour areas like Parel. We did it for the fun of it. Finally, the response was from those with money.” [5]

F N Souza's reminiscences of art as an 'elitist activity' would find consonance with Padamsee's own preoccupation with the pursuit of art as an autonomous language in a newly independent India. However, Padamsee who was an associate member of PAG did not share Souza's discompassionate view of the world. Also, while Souza's account baldly acknowledges the ascendancy of the market and implicitly celebrates the patron as privileged viewer, Padamsee has a far more complex and nuanced understanding of the fluctuating relationship between the market, taste and the autonomy of art—he knows that, historically, “those with money” have not always or necessarily been supportive of art's autonomy; they have usually needed to have, alongside wealth, an appreciation of the often temperamental unpredictability and intransigence of art.

In the modernist manifesto of the Progressive Artists Group [6], Souza -- its spokesperson – denounced 'leftist fanaticism' and declared that he and his colleagues would 'paint with absolute freedom'. Anarchist as they were by temperament, the laws that governed their practice were not those of the nascent State or any other political authority. Instead they were guided by the “elemental and eternal laws, of aesthetic order, plastic coordination and colour composition”. [7]

As Souza admitted, the Progressives had at best flirted with leftist ideology. In this, they could not have been at a further remove from the Progressive Writers Group (on whom Souza had modelled the group's name) which had, through its contributions to literature, theatre and cinema, fashioned a popular language of revolution—perhaps, in hindsight, one should say revolutionary sentiment—as well as establishing concrete modes of solidarity with the politically conscious and organised working class and its representatives in the Communist Party of India. By contrast, the Progressive Artists Group was preoccupied with the project of an aesthetic formalism; they tended to emphasise their growing affiliations with the bourgeoisie, and certainly made no effort to achieve solidarity with the industrial proletariat [8].

The Progressives belonged to diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. What brought them together was the euphoria of independence and the possibilities of crafting the language of modernism. Soon after their exhibition in 1948, Souza left for London; in the early 1950s, Padamsee and Raza travelled to Paris. Padamsee has always been unabashed about his elitist background. Unlike Raza, who received a scholarship, Padamsee bought his own ticket to France; his brother Nicky had already introduced him to Freud, Sartre, Camus, and he had read a great deal about the Surrealist movement well before he ever set foot in Paris, and specifically, in Montparnasse—a name that spelled magic for the Bombay artists, who perceived it to be the refuge, laboratory and playground of the School of Paris artists.

With books as his talisman, Padamsee spent his childhood in happy isolation. His father did not allow the boys to socialise after school hours lest they fall into bad company. The artist recalls how, as a child, he had seen an advertisement in the Illustrated Weekly about a musical instrument, the beautiful shape of which caught his eye. He ordered it by post; but when it arrived at the General Post Office in Bori Bunder, he had no notion of where this locality was. His only geographical coordinates were Napean Sea Road, where he lived, and St Xavier's, his school.

This was before independence, of course; but even after independence, Padamsee was not exercised by questions of regional location or national identity. When I ask Padamsee about Nehruvian India and its inclusive culture, he quickly retorts, "Nehru must have dreamt it from the top. But we

were living with people who were not of the same kind. I was mainly concerned with my work. And I did not think of India or being an Indian painter. I was thinking: What is the meaning of painting? What is the meaning of line? Later when I went to Paris I discovered Paul Klee's book, Thinking Eye." [9]

5. F N Souza, interview with S Balakrishnan, Illustrated Weekly of India, Bombay, 21 May 1989. Reprinted in Centre for Contemporary Art Annual, New Delhi, 1990-1.

6. The founding members of the PAG were F N Souza, S H Raza, K H Ara, M F Husain, H A Gade and S K Bakre.

7. Quoted from the catalogue of the Bombay Progressives Art Exhibition held in 1948.

8. In any discussion of the inception of the PAG, M F Husain is often singled out as an artist of limited means, with the further suggestion that he belonged to a proletarian milieu. In fact, Husain belonged to the lower reaches of the middle class. The only member of the PAG who emerged from an identifiably subaltern background was K H Ara. While Ara seems to have been happy to become an honorary member of the bohemian fringes of Bombay bourgeois life, it must be remarked—to his credit—that he retained a keen sympathy for subaltern colleagues such as the women who modelled for life classes at his Artists Aid Centre on Rampart Row, Bombay.

9. The artist, in conversation with the author (October 2010).

