



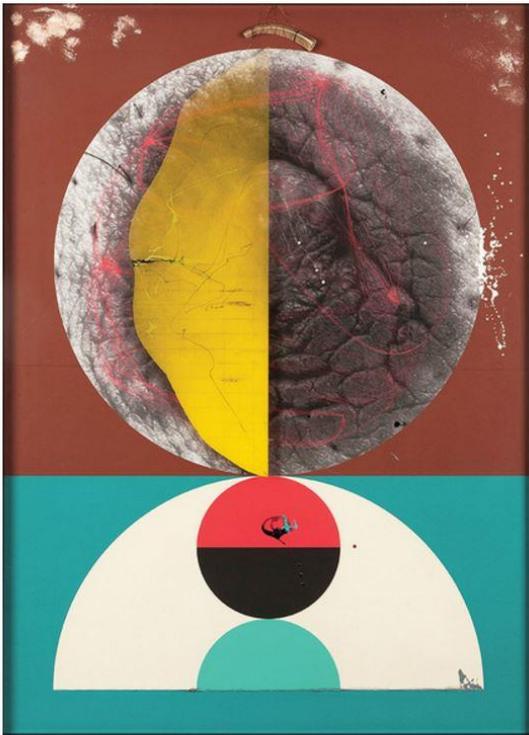
CONSTRUCTED CHAOS

ADITYA PANDE

PROFILES BY GEMMA SHARPE FROM NOV/DEC 2016

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ADITYA PANDE, *Half-Life Form III* (detail), 2012, mixed media on archival paper, 152 x 114 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.

It was a coincidence that Aditya Pande was in the gallery when I visited his solo exhibition at New York's Aicon Gallery in May. A regular visitor, I greeted the staff and mentioned that I was planning to write a piece about the artist. At this news he was dragged over and responded to my introduction with a modest incredulity that was quickly put aside as we ran through an impromptu tour of the show.

A survey of his recent work, "All of the Above," comprised four series that combine digital, hand-drawn, collaged and photographed images, and revolved around his core interest in drawing and intermedial formal experiments. The show opened with a collection of abstracted prints, "Ring Road Drawings" (2014), capturing in long exposures the inner and outer ring roads that surround Pande's home city of New Delhi. Upon the subsequent whips of colored light are added circles and stripes that in their deliberately crude arrangements imply faces, to which Pande adds names of historical liberationist figures including Nelson Mandela, Lala Lajpat Rai and Mahatma Gandhi.

Over the phone a few weeks after our tour, Pande emphasized the centrality of drawing to his work. He said he draws "obsessively," subjecting his practice to strategies of "feedback" and pushing his sketches through variant forms of media and levels of control. In composing the absurdist political portraits of the "Ring Road

Drawings," for example, the independent, uncontrolled movements of vehicles in the night provide raw abstract material. Reasserting control over that material, Pande derives figures from the simplest of means: faces emerge from circles and stripes as if they have always been there.

Playing with computers and basic programming in his youth, Pande describes in his work today a symbiotic relationship between his drawing practice and the digital interface, which opens up a spectrum of possible expressions but also produces a kind of intentional discomfort. He refuses to become too at ease with either drawing or computer-aided work: the early series "Vector Drawings" (2005) was his first attempt at this crossover. Utilizing a vector program to produce renderings of animal and fossil forms, Pande became taken by the "strange action that tries to occupy the gesture of drawing on the computer, which turns drawing in on itself but also opens it up to the digital interface. It can be deleted, copied and rescaled—strategies that don't exist in drawing." Vector renderings would continue to appear throughout his practice, eventually finding company with collage, found photography and handmade gestures, producing complex forms of aesthetic structures.

Collage is especially important to Pande's strategy of losing and regaining control over medium and form. Alongside this is his ability to create recessional spaces that open his works like windows through which we, as viewers, can visually and imaginatively plunge. The artist creates depth through an intricate play of layering, however, instead of resuming the tradition of the picture-frame-as-window by stressing perspective. His 2012 series, "Half Life Forms," for example, combines bold color fields and fragments of found photography with hand-painted and digitally rendered drips, streaks and splashes. Assimilating their structural supports, Pande adds abstract shapes and images onto the underside of the clear acrylic frontages of each piece. At a distance, these almost sculpturally detached fragments seamlessly blend with the overall arrangement; however, when viewed in proximity, they throw subtle shadows onto the space of the images behind. At once a structural obstruction and an integrated component, the acrylic surfaces of these works assert flatness and depth, becoming literal and figurative vistas into the works' imaginative spaces.

More austere than the riotous "Half Life Forms" is Pande's 2014 series "H&M"—an abbreviated allusion to the Indus Valley sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Comprising monochromatic digital prints produced by taking flatbed scans of small torsos hand-sculpted by Pande, the series alludes in particular to the infamous Harappan red jasper male torso (c. 2600–1900 BCE) now kept in the National Museum in New Delhi. One of the more controversial archaeological finds of the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE; mature period 2600–1900 BCE) in the early 20th century—across sites that now connect part of the subcontinent's India-Pakistan divide—the figure displays a naturalistic modeling that anticipated the turn in Greek art toward figurative sculpture. Pande, however, is skeptical of such assertions of historical precedence, describing these iconic artifacts of ancient civilization as "currencies" deployed for "exercises in power." Having grown up in Chandigarh and being a resident of New Delhi for the last 15 years, Pande said his relationship with the Indus Valley Civilization depends on it being continually beneath his feet, producing a kind of "phantom cultural osmosis." (He also added, wryly, that most of his underwear comes from the clothing retailer H&M.) With this naturalized assimilation of the Indus Valley in mind, the "Red Jasper" figure is reduced in Pande's work to just another body among bodies, a little figurative sculpture among thousands of other figurative objects produced and captured by the photographic gaze throughout art history.



Portrait of Aditya Pande. Photo by Hemant Sareen. Courtesy the artist.

Moving along from talk of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, Pande's impromptu gallery tour finally turned toward more contemporary sources. Looking at "Half-Life Forms," we talked about the Russian avant-garde after I had noted an affinity to the Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) and his move away from painting in the 1920s toward photomontage, graphic design and public advertising. Pande greeted the association with vigorous nodding—not only was this precedent acknowledged, it was also implemented. Pande told me of his training as a graphic designer. However, while Rodchenko moved from art toward design, Pande underwent a reverse trajectory. Graduating in 2001 from the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, Pande began as a designer before moving into art. Although Pande was deeply interested in typography and graphic design at university, those forms of visual production didn't allow him to "build things up" in the way that drawing did, so, as he later explained on the phone, he "wound them up."

The influence of design training remains marked on Pande's practice, however. What is clear in his work are the tensions between drawing, mass visual culture, industrial innovation and the stabilizing potential of planes of block color. With design in mind, I asked Pande whether or not his works are planned in advance. As an answer, he used the metaphor of skiing down a slope, in which improvisation, variant speeds and possible shifts of direction play out within a more or less predetermined path. Throughout Pande's work, a pantheon of anthropomorphic, mythological, archaeological and imaginative figures emerge to populate that path, whether they are center stage or hiding amid the constructed layers of color, line and image. Inhabiting complex, imaginary spaces behind the window-like frames of Pande's art, it seems that these animate figures might blink and turn round to face us, extending an invitation to join them in their world.