

Two exhibitions in the US explore the legacy and fragility of Gandhi

By **Sujeet Rajan** - October 3, 2019



Debanjan Roy – Toy Gandhi 6 (Small Bobble Head), 2019. Clay, paper, cloth, and iron fibre. Aicon gallery.



NEW YORK – Two exhibitions to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, in Washington, DC, and New York, on October 2, 2019, explored not only the life of Bapu – as he is fondly called, but also the complexities and divergent viewpoints that has emanated over the ages in the role he has played in shaping societies globally.

Aicon Gallery in New York exhibited 'Inappropriated: The Toy Gandhi', by the Kolkata-based sculptor Debanjan Roy. The exhibition runs through October 26, 2019.

The opening also featured a lecture by Prof. Sumathi Ramaswamy, the James B. Duke Professor of History, and Chair of the History Department, Duke University. Ramaswamy, a cultural historian of South Asia and the British Empire, has focused research in the last few years in the areas of visual studies, the history of cartography, and gender. She has studied and written extensively about Gandhi and his role in India's visual culture.



Debanjan Roy – Toy Gandhi 8 (Soft Toy), 2019. Fabric and synthetic padding material. Aicon Gallery.

At the heart of the exhibition is the premise that Gandhi, the icon, has become all things to all people, a veritable toy. That Gandhi has been used to promote business and enterprises, is now a tool for commercial success for some. American civil rights activists have marched on Washington wearing his signature cap. Dictators have issued postage stamps with his picture on it. Restaurant owners have named their all-you-can-eat-buffet establishments after him,

Roy has done work in the past too on Gandhi, showing him in a modern avatar, digitally and tech savvy. Niru Ratnam, UK based curator and art historian, wrote this about Roy's earlier solo show "Experiments

with Truth": "He has produced a series of works which take Gandhi ostensibly as their subject but this is a Gandhi who is seen holding or interacting with incommensurably contemporary objects; a cell-phone or an iPod for example. This incommensurability is at the heart of Roy's project—how do we square India's history with its present and its future?" Whereas in previous art work, Roy retained a strong and consistent visual vocabulary, shiny poppy human forms painted glossy automotive red, this work wanders, visually, said notes from Aicon.



Debanjan Roy – Toy Gandhi 2 (Russian Dolls), 2019. Wood and enamel paint. Aicon Gallery.

From Russian dolls, where different stages of Gandhi's life (and of his longtime partner and wife, Kasturba) are housed inside of each other, to bobble head sculpture, and marionettes, Roy runs over large swathes of sculptural terrain. Yet, through all the ground that he covers, his grounding in clay forming and wood-carving come through consistently.

The power of suggestion is employed not in form making, but in letting the viewer, perhaps uncomfortably, come to terms seeing a familiar icon in a very unfamiliar setting. Perhaps, the viewer even asks if one is complicit in disparaging a pillar of modern mankind.

This uncomfortable zone is where Roy thrives. Personally, he is very comfortable in making the viewer uncomfortable, as he is a big fan of Gandhi, but not the toy Gandhi has become—a plaything for anyone with an agenda.

"People recognize Gandhi as the maker of a great idea – non-violence. While we use his image all the time, we are not willing to adapt his way of life," Roy is quoted as saying in the past of his work, in *The Indian Express*. "In this day and age everyone falls for corporate tyranny... we need someone like Gandhi," said Roy.

What also comes through in this new set of works on Gandhi at Aicon, however, is the sheer vulnerability of Gandhi, and his fragile image in a world prone to sheer escalation of words and differences within hours; where military confrontation globally is more of a probability with each passing year.



Debanjan Roy – Toy Gandhi 4 (Small Superhero), 2019. Silicone and automotive paint. Aicon Gallery.

The Russian dolls that showcase Gandhi could very well be envisaged as bowling pins in a bowling alley, that can easily be toppled, with minimal effort. A superhero doll made of silicone and automotive paint, which shows a muscular Gandhi, is ironical for its miniature size. One can almost sense the futility of perhaps Gandhi's overtures to stem the steady flow of aggression and diatribe, forget saving the world.

A few years ago, in 2014, The Menil Collection, an art museum in Houston, put together a thought-provoking exhibit inspired by Gandhi and the history of nonviolence. "Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence" showcased peaceful images against works of art depicting violence.

In that exhibition, a hollowed-out handgun becomes a first-aid kit for gunshot victims. Fragments from the feet of Buddha statues stood near a painting of ghostly dancers entitled "Hiroshima." Photographs of Gandhi hung by images of Nobel Peace Prize winners he inspired, reported Reuters.



Debanjan Roy – Toy Gandhi 3 (Toy Soldier), 2019. Wood and enamel paint. Aicon Gallery.

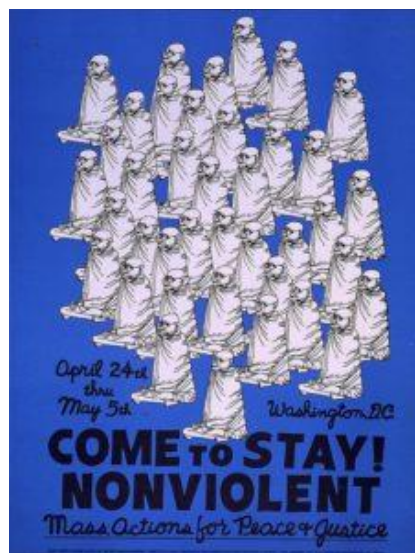
Josef Helfenstein, museum director and the exhibit's curator, selected the items to resonate with Gandhi's satyagraha, or "truth force" principle of forging strength and courage to battle aggression via civil disobedience, nonviolent resistance and peaceful protest.

GANDHI EXHIBITION AT LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The Library of Congress showcased a number of rare and interesting items from their law collections to commemorate the life and legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, in a day-long exhibition, on October 2, 2019.

A few of the items are from the early period of Gandhi's life when he was a practicing lawyer in South Africa including when Gandhi's application for admittance as an advocate of the High Court of Natal which was being opposed by the Law Society of Natal. The Law Society claimed their opposition was based on procedural grounds but they were suspected of racist motivations due to Gandhi's Indian origin.

The exhibition also featured items related to the historic 1922 trial when Gandhi was tried before the District & Sessions Court of Ahmedabad for sedition under section 124A of the Indian Penal Code based on certain articles he published in his weekly journal, Young India. He was charged with "bringing or attempting to excite disaffection towards His Majesty's Government established by law in British India."



Poster for nonviolent mass action for peace and justice, April 25 through May 5, 1969 in Washington D.C. Prints & Photographs Division of Library of Congress.

The Law Library also showcased the printed record of the Mahatma Gandhi murder case. A rare book acquisition by the Law Library in 2002, it details a significant event of Indian history, the assassination of Gandhi on January 30, 1948.

An eight-volume record of the Gandhi murder trial, it had originally belonged to the main assassin, Nathuram Vinayak Godse, before he was executed in November 1949. The margins of the volumes contain the handwritten notes of the defendant and his counsel during the trial.

The first volume of the Gandhi trial set, which were displayed, contains the verbatim testimony of the 149 prosecution witnesses. The second volume includes the written statements of several of the twelve defendants and the third is the judgement of the trial court, according to notes from the Library of Congress.

The exhibit also showed a rare book of memoirs by the Chief Justice of the Punjab, G.D. Khosla, who heard the appeal of Gandhi's murder trial. The book, *Murder of the Mahatma, and other cases from a judge's note-book*, includes chapters on criminal cases that he personally adjudicated—on arson, dacoity, poisoning, and vendettas. The book ends with an authoritative account of the murder of Gandhi.

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