

# ARTFORUM



Debanjan Roy, *Toy Gandhi 4 (Superhero)*, 2019, silicone and automotive paint, 56 x 38 x 32".

NEW YORK

## Debanjan Roy

AICON GALLERY  
35 Great Jones Street  
October 2–October 26, 2019

On October 2, 2019—the 150th anniversary of Mohandas K. Gandhi's birth—the Kolkata-based sculptor Debanjan Roy transformed this space into a veritable Madame Tussauds dedicated solely to the shiny celebrity of the Mahatma, “the great soul.” With a careful

hand, Roy plays with Gandhi's image, rendering it as a series of toys, including a beefed-up superhero, a life-size puppet, and a plunger-holding bobblehead. On the gallery's first floor, eight different Gandhis stand off, smirking at one another. None of them contain much of a soul, let alone a great one.

Perhaps the most unsettling of these sculptures is *Toy Gandhi 1 (Munny Doll)*, 2019, an all-white, six-foot-tall, Minion-like figure. Its gummy grin shows us that all you need are some visual cues—a walking stick, a *pancha*, glasses, oversize ears—and you can make what was once a symbol of sacrifice and resistance into whatever you like. There is a deep capitalist critique going on here: Once an image has been largely circulated, it becomes estranged from its founding principles and can be used to sell, sell, sell. But Gandhi is not only the victim of capitalist misappropriation. On the same day as the show's opening, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi published an op-ed in the *New York Times* using Gandhi as a political plaything, pushing for right-wing Hindu nationalism in his name.

Through wood, silicone, and clay, Roy reveals just how disturbing such appropriations can be. While so many are in the business of simplifying Gandhi for all kinds of spurious ends, Roy complicates him. In rendering the playful poignant, he forces us to rethink the dangerous ideologies grabbing hold of our icons, allowing us to see that, just like Gandhi, we are not to be toyed with.

— Saikeerthi Rachavelpula