

# essays

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PERSPECTIVE

## Bringin' Back Bapu!

He marched for 22 days to protest Britain's rule: What artists are learning from India's famous non-violent, pro-agrarian leader. By Murtaza Vali

ATUL DODIYA, *Bapu at René Block Gallery, New York, 1974, 1998*, watercolor on paper, 45 x 70 in. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Clemond Prescott Road Art Gallery, Mumbai.

January 30, 2008, marked the 60th anniversary of the death of Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian nationalist leader whose dogged determination and shrewd politics helped the country gain independence from Britain in 1947. Embraced as the symbolic father of the nation, or *Bapu*, by both the state and the masses, Gandhi's portrait is ubiquitous in postcolonial India, appearing on currency and postage stamps and in photographs, paintings and sculptures. *Bapu's* austere figure pervades India's vibrant popular culture, from cheap, popular prints sold in bazaars to billboards, advertisements and even a scene-stealing appearance as a mobster's conscience in a recent Bollywood blockbuster.

Though Gandhi is widely venerated as a saintly icon, his radical and somewhat idiosyncratic ideas are far less

influential and relevant to India today than his ubiquity suggests. Beginning with India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, postcolonial India embraced modernization and industrialization, abandoning Gandhi's pro-agrarian vision. In recent years, India's embrace of free-market capitalism has only exaggerated the gulf between rich and poor. And while Gandhi's commitment to non-violence, practiced through strategies of passive resistance, non-cooperation and civil disobedience, has inspired struggles for social justice globally, India has fought numerous wars, has been plagued by communal violence and militant fascist politics and has recently joined the nuclear arms club.

In unpacking Gandhi's complex legacy, contemporary Indian artists have most often turned to his omnipresent



VIVEK VILASINI, *Vernacular Chants II*, 2007, photograph, 37.5 x 33 in. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York/Palo Alto/London.

portrait. This year, a series of commemorative exhibitions held outside India provided an occasion to reevaluate Gandhi's legacy and to reflect on the ways in which artists engage with it. London's Aicon Gallery held "Who Knew? Mr. Gandhi," a group show that opened on January 30. Included was Debanjan Roy's *India Shining II* (2007), one of a series of wry sculptures of Gandhi, the title referring to a slogan heralding India's economic emergence. Cast in aluminum and painted a glossy red, this realistic depiction of a loincloth-clad, laptop-wielding Gandhi is seated atop a quilted, white floor cushion. Visually seductive, it thrives on ambiguity, teetering precariously between homage and critique, underscoring how far India has strayed from Gandhi's vision. By setting up a simple opposition between old and new, traditional and modern, local and global, the sculpture seems to quarantine Gandhi—and his revolutionary ideas—in India's past. It leaves us profoundly unsure whether its true target is India's economic liberalization or Gandhi's ascetic medievalism.

Coated in an overbearing primary red and exhibited during a year in which the international art market heralded "India as the new China," Roy's Gandhi bears unexpected similarities to Chinese Political Pop, which slyly critiqued Maoist authoritarianism by juxtaposing the ubiquitous image of Mao with the symbols and slogans of multinational capitalism. However, given India's permissive, democratic society and Gandhi's relatively benign influence compared with Mao's, Roy's sculpture barely transgresses. And like Chinese Political Pop, which has lost its subversive edge and has turned into a cottage industry, Roy's commercial success—the "India Shining" series enjoyed a high profile at Art Dubai 2008, with one

selling for USD 20,000—might herald a wave of glitzy troublingly pop works about Gandhi.

Shown alongside Roy's sculptures at Aicon, Vivek Vilasini's more modest *Vernacular Chants II* (2007) offers a more nuanced reading of *Bapu* as icon. A digital composite of nine straightforward photographs of the head and shoulders of Gandhi statues from across India, *Vernacular Chants II* brings humor and healthy skepticism to the hallowed figure. Arranged in a three-by-three grid, the photographs establish a typology for such commemorative statues, acknowledging the ubiquity of this iconic image while documenting the diversity of materials and styles—from the photorealistic to the almost cartoon-like—used to render it. Highlighting difference through repetition, it challenges the possibility of an authoritative depiction of *Bapu*. What emerges instead, is a shattered icon whose saintly aura is distributed across endless iterations, providing a sociological portrait of India, as each statue reflects the political allegiances, economic means and vernacular aesthetics of the community that sponsored it.

While Gandhi has inspired a variety of sophisticated responses from contemporary artists in India over the years, Atul Dodiya (*SEE AAP 33, 37, 43, 52*) is notable for having portrayed Gandhi for over two decades, grappling with not just his iconic image but also his historical and philosophical legacy. In the late 1990s, Dodiya initiated "An Artist of Non-Violence," a series of large-scale sepia watercolors, loosely based on archival photographs. Drawing its title from Gandhi himself, the ironic series sought to intertwine Gandhi's aesthetics and politics. Its centerpiece, *Bapu at René Block Gallery, New York 1974* (1998), imagines Gandhi walking in on Joseph Beuys' famous May 1974 gallery performance in New York, during which the German artist spent three days living with a coyote in a small room. The image aligns Gandhi's political practice with Beuys' aesthetic position, which sought to extend art into the social realm by embracing pedagogy, performance and myth.

It is an apt comparison. Gandhi skillfully identified symbols that resonated with the Indian masses and then expressed them through his body, modulating his appearance, disciplining his bodily desires, embarking on grueling fasts and marches. In a recent essay, art historian Carol Becker positioned Gandhi as an artist who shrewdly used his body to inspire political resistance and spiritual renewal. Joseph DeLappe's *The Salt Satyagraha Online: Gandhi's March to Dandi* (2008), commissioned by New York's art-and-technology center Eyebeam and performed from March 12 to April 6, tapped into this potential, drawing inspiration from Gandhi as actor not image. During 26 days of walking on a customized treadmill, DeLappe reenacted the 240 miles of Gandhi's epic 1930 march—completed when he was 60—protesting the British salt tax. DeLappe's wired treadmill controlled the movement of an avatar resembling Gandhi in the virtual realm of Second Life. While Roy accentuates the incompatibility between Gandhi and technology, DeLappe deploys technology and his body to reactivate the potential of Gandhi's philosophical convictions and his physical exertions. As contemporary artists in India and abroad revisit Gandhi, they might look beyond his wizened, bespectacled image, drawing instead on his practice as a rich model for critical performance art.