

The Art of Being GANDHI

On the 145th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, a Houston gallery will hold a retrospective of his teachings and attempt to trace satyagraha across cultures and over time

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A PRAYERBOOK lies open against which rests a pair of perhaps one of the most iconic eyeglasses in history. A pair of slippers, a pair of wooden *khadau* and two wooden bowls with spoons are arranged around them. A small journal and a bronze water vessel complete the picture. Taken by an anonymous photographer circa 1948, this image shows the only belongings Mahatma Gandhi owned at the time of his death.

The director of Houston's Menil Collection, Josef Helfenstein first felt enamoured by this image while reading Gandhi's autobiography as a teenager. To him the captivating image felt like "not only a portrait in absentia of a charismatic person, but an allegory of an extraordinary way of life". This image opens the show, "Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence", which will commemorate Gandhi's 145th birth anniversary at the Hous-



(From left to right) Martin Luther King Jr at his office in Atlanta, Georgia; *Last Possessions*, a work by an anonymous photographer; Gandhi during his last fast at Delhi's Birla House on January 18, 1947

ton museum on October 2.

But the exhibition reaches far beyond the life of the Mahatma. More than 130 curated artworks—paintings, sculptures, documentary images and texts—from around the globe will trace the resonance of the ethic of non-violence and Gandhi's favourite tool of resistance, satyagraha.

The idea of holding an elaborate

retrospective of Gandhian thought stayed with Helfenstein years after he read the autobiography. "An idea emerged that this enigmatic image deserved a more thorough examination," says the director, who has curated the show with Delhi artist Amar Kanwar as consultant. The idea further developed when he had the opportunity to meet Rajmohan Gandhi,

Mahatma's grandson.

The director reached out to museums and private collectors, such as Houston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Holocaust Museum Houston, Yale University Art Gallery, among others. The theme of violence and its resistance drew out an impressive number of works from across the globe. "We collected beautiful works



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THE MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON.
HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS



of art and compelling artifacts and documents—and although they may be drawn from different and sometimes distant cultures, they are not unrelated. Together, they address an ancient and complex topic: how to overcome violence through non-violent means," Helfenstein says.

Spanning six sections, the show begins with a gallery dedicated to "Gandhi's Final Moments and the Memorialization of His Predecessors". A collection by renowned photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson shows Gandhi towards the end of his life and the events surrounding his funeral.

While one section chronicles non-violent resistance across the world, with works around the Civil Rights era, and the struggle against apartheid, Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi, another documents a world torn apart by violence. There is the 1961 photograph by Shomei Tomatsu evoking Japan's nuclear bombing through images of everyday objects; Yve Klein's painting *Hiroshima* (1961), Ai Weiwei's *Feet*

(2002), take up this section.

A section that deserves mention is titled, "The Division Gandhi Sought to Avoid". "Here, we have tried to capture the devastation that resulted from the Partition of India and Pakistan," says Helfenstein. For this section, Helfenstein approached two Indian artists, Mumbai-based contemporary artist Shilpa Gupta and Kanwar. Gupta's installation *I:14.9* from her 2011 solo show, will be a part of the Houston show. It has a glass vitrine containing a large ball of thread that Gupta wound herself. Its length signifies the fence constructed on the India-Pakistan border," says Gupta.

Kanwar will present *A Season Outside* (1997), a poetry video work that shows the inflammatory military ritual at the India-Pakistan border, juxtaposed with texts and images that recall Gandhi's insistence on non-violence as a form of peaceful intervention. "Josef saw my work in 1997, and felt there were some shared resonances," says Kanwar.

Kanwar says that, everyone has a Gandhi connection. "Violence is fundamental question in our lives and there is always a personal connect with Gandhi," he says. After Houston, the exhibition will travel to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva. An illustrated book of the same title and edited by Helfenstein, will also be released. A calendar of lectures, panel discussions, film screenings and programmes is also being planned. "We want to reopen the discussion about the man that Mohandas K Gandhi was and the revolution that he brought," Helfenstein says.