

SRR LA A room with a view

Rare and unseen drawings by art masters offer a peek into their creative process

By DHAMINI RATNAM
dhamini.r@livemint.com

An ink on paper drawing of the late abstract artist Vasudeo Gaitonde, dated 1985, reveals a series of scribbles that resemble the script of a familiar yet unknown language, whose words seem poised at the tips of our tongue, unable to come out. Strong, thick lines of varying length course through the piece—a common graphic novel technique to indicate lines of writing—while large spherical shapes hang from them at intervals.

According to artist Sudhir Patwardhan, this is classic Gaitonde: "This drawing indicates the difficulty of trying to find meaning. Gaitonde's paintings do the same thing. They play with the distance between abstraction and meaning. Simply put, in abstraction, do forms mean something? There's a fruitful tension between not naming something and meaning something."

Patwardhan, an artist whose drawings of the city and its residents have been exhibited globally, will hold a walk-through for an exhibition of drawings at the

Jehangir Nicholson Art Gallery in Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. While the eponymous art benefactor and former Mumbai sheriff's collection is vast—800 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints—and ranges from 1968-2001, 45 drawings have been showcased in this exhibition titled *Taking the Line For a Walk*. These include works by F.N. Souza, K.H. Ara, Tyeb Mehta, Bikash Bhattacharjee and Patwardhan, among others.

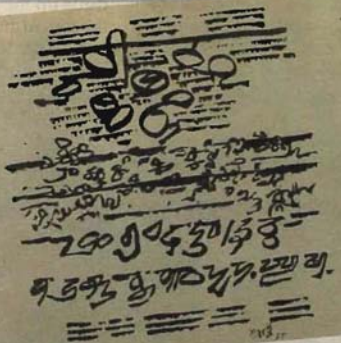
The classic idea of drawing—a monochromatic, two-toned sketch conducted in pencil or charcoal—has been broken down in the last century, with paintbrushes and pastels. At the same time, the colonial legacy of academic training relegated draughtsmanship to a less important space in the art practice, effectively undermining its position as a work of art. Cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote, who is on the advisory board of the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, points out that one of the origins of drawing lies "in a private moment of practice (and is) an artist's interrogation of received notions of style, propriety and plausibility".

"Drawings encompass a range of

forms. Whether as doodles or calligraphic passages or highly compositional images, they are ultimately testaments to the secret processes of the artist's mind," he says.

Patwardhan would agree. In the 1958 untitled ink on paper drawing by Souza, one sees several things at once. In one corner, you find a scene with perspective, complete with a vanishing point with buildings and hills in the background; in another, the buildings are cubist in recall; curvilinear designs fill the whites around the figures of a woman and men. Patwardhan says this sketch is like "the lab of an artist".

In contrast, Patwardhan's own drawing is "finished". Titled *Dying City*, this 1999 charcoal on paper work has contradictory elements which indicate that artistic styles aren't necessarily pure. It incorporates a classically understood receding space depicting a horizon and settlements in the distance that are smaller in size than the buildings in the foreground. But each individual structure, the artist explains, is influenced by a cubist style where planes are broken and



Smudged: Gaitonde's drawing with ink on paper, from 1985.

rearranged. "The structures draw on an aspect of cubism which breaks down objects into fragments and arranges them in different planes, thus creating a tension that reflects the general despair of a city that is crumbling, and incapable of coping." Unlike his other works which, while unsparing in their details of city life nevertheless convey hope and energy, this drawing emerged from Patwardhan's own despair at the increasing violence in the country.

"Drawing gives the artist the freedom of improvisation," says Hoskote. This exhibition is a testimony to this.

Taking the Line For a Walk is on till 30 August, 10.30am-6pm (Mondays closed), at Jehangir Nicholson Art Gallery, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.