



SH Raza at home; his art works *Hey Ram* and *Shanti* inspired by Gandhi

# Moment of Truth

SH Raza on deconstructing Gandhi in his latest solo, his belief in a higher power and his latest preoccupation, *prakriti*

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A FORETELLING "Hey Ram" is painted in Hindi on a canvas at the entrance of Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, as an address plaque, familiarising us with the occupant inside. Once in, there is a conspicuous absence of the face associated with the words, yet his presence hangs in the air. There is a horizontal geometric landscape of greys, whites and blacks that buries the word "Satya", and a spherical wave of colours standing on the base of "Shanti". A hue of sunset colours swarm the words on another canvas, ending with "*Jahan pyaar hai, wahan ishqwar hai*" in Hindi.

Hours later, we find ourselves in front of yet another address label, a metallic "RAZA" on the boundary wall of a house in Safdarjung Development Area. Intimation enough. SH Raza is sitting amid his paintings. He points to an incomplete one — a large canvas with outlines of geometric patterns — and mumbles lightly, "I thought I'd finish this one before you come, but couldn't."

For someone who grew up during the pre-Independence era in the small town of Mandala in Madhya Pradesh, around a time when ideas

regarding revolution and freedom were flying about, the topic of Mahatma Gandhi is an easy conversation maker. The 13 works on display from his latest series "Parikrama: Around Gandhi" at Vadehra Art Gallery came equally naturally.

In 1930, an eight-year-old Raza saw Gandhi in a public meeting in his hometown and was so impassioned by this "darsan" that even when Paris became home between 1950 and 2010, his India visits would see him at Gandhi's samadhi in Tees January Marg, Delhi. "Gandhi has always been on my mind. I've come back to him through authentic paintings that have a sense of his ideas, particularly of satyagraha and ahimsa which are most important to me," says Raza, who started work on "Parikrama" three years ago. It was also important that around 1947, when the political history culminated in India's Independence, fol-

lowed by Gandhi's death in 1950, a parallel history had branched out, with the formation of Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, helmed by FN Souza and Raza, who challenged the pre-existing "revivalist nationalism".

Take the 92-year-old through "Parikrama" and his deconstruction of Gandhi in the form of his quintessential geometric patterns and Hindi texts, and he says, "I want to tell my country what I've been doing all these years. I've been reading on Indian concepts, Gandhi, the *Ramayana*, and the *Gita*, from my childhood. I used to read books on them in

France. There are so many things that I'm still discovering," he says. At the gallery, one finds a sense of timeless fluidity of Gandhian ideas and presence.

Along with the exhibition, two books have been launched on the master, both published by Vadehra Art Gallery, and priced at Rs 2,000 and Rs 25,000 respectively. While *A Journey of a Master* is a coffee-table book with prints of Raza's works, *Geysers* comprises letters between Raza, fellow artists and critic

friends such as Akbar Padamsee, Souza and VS Gaitonde among others, between 1948 to 1988.

Currently one of the most expensive Indian artists, Raza is busy with his latest project on the theme of *prakriti* (nature).

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