

The contemporaneity of Gandhi

In the Indian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, artists are inspired by his teachings 150 years after his birth.

by Maria Teresa Capacchione

This is an important year for the Indian Subcontinent which is commemorating the 150th anniversary of the birth of one of the most charismatic characters of the twentieth century, Gandhi, in the same year in which 900 million citizens were called to the polls to elect the new government (reconfirming the outgoing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the BJP).

2019 also sees the return of India to Venice for the second time in the history of the oldest Biennale in the world, eight years later, with an official pavilion and, we say it immediately, a pavilion not to be missed.

In the wonderful spaces of the Arsenale, the exhibition "Our time for a future caring" - an exhortation to pay attention to a shared future - contains in a very intimate atmosphere, the works of seven artists who cross the twentieth century to the present day and reflect on the legacy of Gandhi and the values of non-violence, fairness and equality: **Nandalal Bose, Atul Dodiya, GR Iranna, Rummana Hussain, Jitish Kallat, Shakuntala Kulkarni** and **Ashim Purkayastha**.

As a matter of fact, entering the pavilion you have a feeling of recollection and peace, but don't expect anything didactic or documentary. It might seem an easy and captivating choice to use such a universally recognized leader, so charismatic as the pivot of an exhibition and especially in India this choice has raised some critique. But the quality of the selected artists and their long-standing commitment to the figure of Gandhi is so out of the question that criticism has given way to pride. Also because each artist has developed and interpreted the Gandhian practice to the point of making it the object of a contemporary reflection.

Entering the pavilion we are greeted by what, at first glance, seems to be a small colonial museum: it's "Broken Branches", the work of **Atul Dodiya** (Mumbai, 1959). Nine dark wood vitrines, raised a few centimeters from the ground and slightly inclined on the upper part to prevent the birds from resting on the. These showcases are the reproduction of those of the Kirti Mandir museum in Porbandar, where Gandhi was born and where his goods are stored. The vitrines contain shelves full of objects exhibited as remains: photographs faded through the years, postcards, watercolors and prosthetic legs, risen up as a warning against indifference and oblivion. At the top of the windows, symbolically, the images of those birds that are not given space in the museum, like homeless souls.

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The work was carried out by Dodiya in 2002, after the Gujarat riots during which hundreds of Muslims and Hindus were killed. " Those revolts have upset India - says Dodiya - there was a feeling of deep pain, uncertainty reigned over the future of the entire country. That is the land that gave birth to the Mahatma: where was his philosophy of non-violence and all his teachings? How could human beings harbor so much hatred as to kill their own brothers? The year 2002 marked the end of a hope ... all the objects displayed in my vitrines speak of this loss, this pain, this uncertainty. The prostheses, for example, speak of amputated limbs, of absence" continues Dodiya.



In the windows we also find references to the life of the artist's father and his illness. "My father was a constructor, he built buildings, and the act of building and demolishing is very present in my work, that's why there is also a photo of the Twin Towers into my vitrines. In my opinion, Gandhi's philosophy of life and his ideology are very current in today's difficult world, we should talk more about the injustices that are being perpetrated against the weakest. The widespread violence we are witnessing all over the world - not least the bombs in Sri Lanka that have touched us so closely - and the same Indian politics that increasingly incites people towards intolerance, push me to be still and always very involved on the themes and values of the Mahatma. Clearly for an artist the problem is how to make all these issues converge into a creative and not journalistic or political work. But the more I see impositions in the world, injustice against minorities - Dodiya says -, the more my reaction is to talk about Gandhi".

In Dodiya's meticulous work there is a clear reference to what himself calls "the aesthetics" of Gandhi: "the Mahatma – the artist continues - was obsessed by the coherence and essentiality of his lifestyle and pursued his goal (the independence), with an amazing meticulousness. This for me is Gandhi's aesthetic. His way of dressing (or not dressing), his non-cooperation, his marches, all this was very aesthetic. And all this fascinates me and inspires me very much, so much so that I have dedicated more than two hundred of my works to him".

At the center of the pavilion is instead a closed room, entering where we immerse ourselves in the spectacular installation by **Jitish Kallat** (Mumbai, 1974). We are in a black box, on the wall in front of us a white curtain of fog on which we see projected slowly a letter whose incipit is "Dear friend", only at the end of the letter we read the signature, MK Gandhi. It is a letter written by the Mahatma in 1939 to Adolf Hitler to push him to reconsider his violent means.

Covering Letter - Kallat says - much like my three Public Notice works, reflects on an utterance from history that might be repurposed to re-think the present. The work is a piece of historical correspondence beamed onto a curtain of traversable dry-fog; a brief letter written by M. K. Gandhi to Adolf Hitler in 1939 urging him to reconsider his violent means. There is a sense of perplexity in the way that Gandhi words his address; as the principal proponent of peace from a historical moment, he greets Hitler, one of the

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most violent individuals of that era, as a friend. Like many of Gandhi's gestures and his life experiments, this piece of correspondence seems like an open letter destined to travel beyond its delivery date and intended recipient - a letter written to anyone, anytime, anywhere."

At the center of the installation is the spectator, who is literally wrapped into the words, who becomes part of that letter and can even cross it, passing through the curtain of white mist. "Every visitor - keep talking Kallat - brings in different personal, social and historical experiences to the work, in a way altering its meaning. I'm very interested in this conversation manifesting in Venice... each iteration of the work has generated a new unforeseen dimension of meaning... for instance, just two days prior to the work being exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Donald Trump was voted to power at the end of a very toxic and divisive election. This development completely altered the reading of Covering Letter. I often can say that Gandhi's words to Hitler seem equally addressed to anyone, at any given point in time as it allows one to self-reflect and introspect".



Continuing along the *exposition's path* we meet another particularly interesting work by one of the two women exhibiting in the Indian Pavilion, **Shakuntala Kulkarni** (Dharwad, 1950) entitled "Of Bodies, Armour and Cages".

The connection with the Gandhian thought in Kulkarni's work is very subtle: her bamboo canes armors have a double reading, representing both a protection of the female body and its cage. The artist's reflection starts from the concept of non-violence to address the issue of violence against women and the poor visibility that this drama has in Indian society and unfortunately not only in the Indian one. Another concept that links her work to Gandhi's philosophy is the abolition of castes and hierarchies also in the work, yet herself has experienced the difficulties and resistance encountered in working with the two artisans who helped her in braiding the canes of the armours. They came from very different backgrounds as it was very hard to work with them together as a team.



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The exhibition continues with the work of **Rummana Hussain** (1952–1999) the second female presence of the pavilion, recognized as the first Indian performance artist. Her work was deeply marked by the riots of Babri Masjid and her work "Fragments" - composed of poor materials such as clay, bricks, a pot split in two parts from which comes out the red dust of gheru, bricks, terracotta fragments -, on the one hand evokes the life of villages, on the other the breaking, the violence of conflict. Hussain, shocked by the events of Ayodhya in December 1992 (which represent a watershed between multicultural India and India of religious intolerance), embarked on a research process on marginalization and now, 25 years after the creation of her works, in a difficult age like ours, these objects rediscover a new expressive force.



Continuing the path we meet a wall of the Pavilion covered by the sandals of **GR Iranna** (Sindgi, 1970). His installation "Naavu" (We Together), is a composition of dozens of padukas, the Indian sandals traditionally made of wood, an object-symbol of Gandhi (although less known than his glasses, now a universal icon), which represent his idea of passive political resistance through the collective action of the march. The strength of this work lies in its perspective: if seen from afar, the enormous set of sandals gives the work the strength of the mass. But as we approach it, we realize that each sandal is different from the other, as is every individual: people of all social classes united into the march and into peaceful struggle.



Almost in front of the work of GR Iranna, we meet **Ashim Purkayastha** (Digboi, 1967), an eclectic artist whose art has a strong component of socio-political criticism. Becoming famous for his work Gandhi/Man without Specs (Gandhi/Man without glasses), Purkayastha wonders why he should not be able to question even a leader as "The Father of the Nation." In Venice the artist brought his series of stamps "Farmers", a reflection on the fact that the revenue from the sale of stamps never reach the farmers. "Shelter" instead is an installation made with stones collected around the city of Delhi, stones that could be seen as symbols of violence, or as tools to build a house, the dream pursued by hundreds of thousands of migrants who come to the city in search of a better life.



The pavilion ends with a tribute to Indian modernism with the "Haripura Posters", the tempera on paper panels by the master **Nandalal Bose** (1882-1966), commissioned directly by Gandhi for the Indian National Congress which was held in 1938 at Haripura, exactly. The sixteen panels were made with handmade paper laid on straw panels and natural pigments that portray rural scenes, denoting the close relationship that existed between Gandhi and Bose and his ability to represent Mahatma's philosophy.

The Indian pavilion is the result of an interesting public-private initiative between the Indian Ministry of Culture, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (which curated the exhibition), the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Confederation of Indian Industry.

Finally, we point out that the Indian presence in Venice does not end with the official pavilion, but sees the participation - still within the Arsenal - of three other artists whose works are of rare intensity: **Shilpa Gupta** (with the installation 'For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit '), **Gauri Gill** (with the series of photographs "Acts of Appearance" and 'Becoming') and **Soham Gupta** (with portraits from the "Angst" series).

In short, that of the Indian Subcontinent is a large and thick presence on one of the most prestigious stages in the world that denotes a moment of particular ferment in contemporary Indian art. To follow.

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Venice Biennale
Indian Pavilion
Arsenale

Commissioner: Adwaita Gadanayak, National Gallery of Modern Art.

Curator: Roobina Karode, Director & Chief Curator, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

Artists: Nandalal Bose, Atul Dodiya, GR Iranna, Rummana Hussain, Jitish Kallat, Shakuntala Kulkarni, Ashim Purkayastha.

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