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Friendship and creativity went hand-in-hand in artist-poet Gieve Patel's life

The exhibition 'A Show of Hands: In Memorium', curated by Ranjit Hoskote, celebrated Gieve Patel's bond with Mumbai and its people.

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Gieve Patel photographed by Atul Dodiya | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Atul Dodiya and Vadehra Art Gallery

When a deeply loved and admired artist passes away, it is the city left behind and the vast pastiche of friendships made and sustained in it, that offer the best possible summation of a working life in the arts. When that artist is poet, playwright and painter Gieve Patel (1940-2023) and the city as capacious as Mumbai, the unusual can be expected.

A Show of Hands: In Memorium, the recently concluded exhibition, curated by poet and critic Ranjit Hoskote was held at the Jehangir Nicholson Arts Foundation Gallery (NGAF) in the (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sanghralaya (CSMVS), Mumbai. The exhibition, supported by Vadehra Art Gallery, featured works by artists Aditi Singh, Anju Dodiya, Atul Dodiya, Areez Katki, Biraj Dodiya, Gulmohammed Sheikh, Jitish Kallat, Mahesh Baliga, Nilima Sheikh, Ranbir Kaleka, Ratheesh T. and Sudhir Patwardhan and Sujith S.N. — many of whom were friends and colleagues of Gieve. The show also included younger artists whose works Gieve was interested in and those who were inspired by his work.



The exhibition, supported by Vadehra Art Gallery, featured works by artists, many of whom were friends and colleagues of Gieve | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery,

This might have become a sombre occasion; instead it was a joyous, tender and unfussy act of remembering a friend in the midst of works of art, that had some sort of connection with Gieve.

Locating the exhibition in the JNAF gallery also unambiguously alluded to a steady, solid philanthropic tradition, which had contributed to the making of a rich, varied, public-spirited and free-thinking arts ecosystem in Mumbai. The gallery's core collection is from Jehangir Nicholson (1915-2001) one of the early patrons and collectors of modern and contemporary art practices and as much a Bombay institution as Gieve.



Atul Dodiya's 'Laughter' | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Atul Dodiya and Vadehra Art Gallery

Defying labels

As friends narrated one story after another amidst laughter and even gossip, it was clear that Gieve was an artist with wide-ranging interests. He was often seen at poetry readings at the NCPA lawns or the Sassoon Library, or silently watching a Bharatanatyam programme or reading out his translations of the medieval Gujarati poet Akho, whose six stanza form of *chappas* he had worked on for decades.

Attempting to draw a simplistic correlation with the man and his artistic selves or trying to slot him definitively in a particular movement in the arts is simply unworkable. He had the ability to be precise, specific but also in service to certain principles that he could not be dissuaded from such as the enduring value of the classical arts, not a popular position to take today. Here he is speaking to his friend Sudhir Patwardhan in *Art India* (volume 5, 2000)



Gulimohammed Sheikh's 'Dreaming with Gieve' | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Gulimohammed Sheikh and Vadehra Art Gallery

"I am indeed a sucker for permanent values in art, and for the landmarks of the past. An artist will ignore them at his peril. Identifying with this 'eternal' stream gives one a strong conviction about what is significant and what is not. But also, I have a sense of being continually nurtured by the work and the presence of other artists on the scene. I think this scene has happened because we are talking to each other a lot — through our work, exchanging ideas, and yes of course through very lively gossip! What we are all doing is trying to zero in on to some very essential notions — in our different and even conflicting ways."

As friend and senior artist Nilima Sheikh pointed out, Gieve's acuity of observation was quite remarkable. "As artists when we speak to each other we expect to be understood. But Gieve, because he was also a writer could enter an artistic work with sharpness and empathy. He had a way of cutting through the superfluous", she says.

Memories of Marine Drive

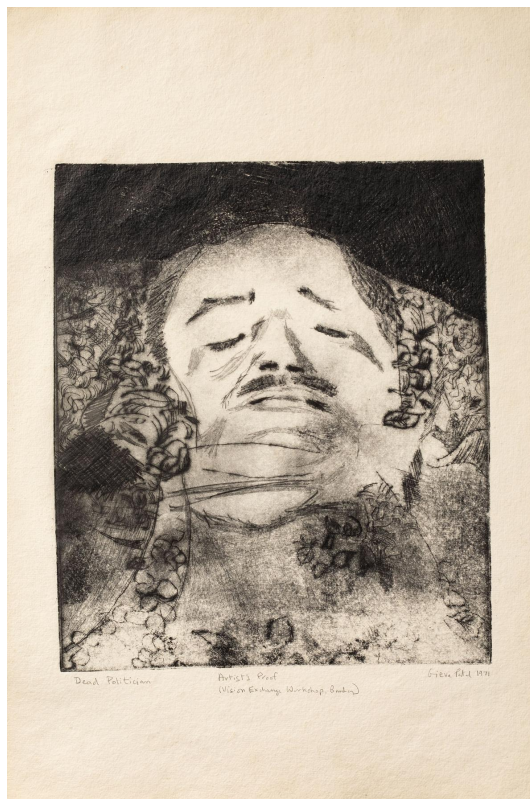
Pointing to the unusual laughter on the day of the opening, Sudhir Patwardhan simply says any meeting with Gieve always brought lots of laughter. Sudhir, who moved to Mumbai straight out of Medical College in Pune, to be in a city where exhibitions and meetings with fellow artists were likely to be more frequent, met Gieve, also a young doctor.



Sudhir Patwardhan's 'Marine Drive' | Photo Credit: Courtesy: Sudhir Patwardhan & Vadehra Art Gallery

His painting as a tribute to his friend is titled 'Marine Drive' and shows two friends sitting by the sea late and having a free-wheeling chat. Sudhir says they would meet at Marine Drive for some quiet time after Gieve closed his GP clinic on Lamington Road for the day, while Sudhir came in from Thane before taking the last train back from VT station.

Atul Dodiya chose to share his series of paintings on the 'Nayanars' made for the scholar David Shulman, whom he met through Gieve. But it was the painting titled 'Laughter', which used one half of a human skull and another of Gieve's laughing face that opens up many stories. Dodiya points to Gieve's well-known fascination with death and the decaying of the human body. "He is probably the only painter who has painted 'Death' in so many ways," says Dodiya.



A work from Gieve's ink sketches from Dead Politicians Series. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Among Gieve's works at the exhibition were his ink sketches of the 'Dead Politicians Series'. "You might say that as a doctor he was drawn to the idea of death, but I think it was more of a very insistent philosophical questioning and seeking that drove him," he says. This was also evident in his famed series of paintings on 'Wells' in which the self and reflection are examined.

As a young student at J.J. School of Art, Dodiya says, he had taken to dropping into his clinic in the evenings. A decade later later, when he approached the senior artist to write a note for his first solo exhibition at Chemould, he agreed setting off another cycle of artistic friendships and possibilities in the city.