

Snapshots of the City: Gieve Patel

“Everything that I knew about the streets of my city came to my aid. In Bombay the street is an extension of home, and as we know, is sometimes the only home. The emotional range expressed by the crowd was intoxicating, from serene presence to happy camaraderie, to destitution and misery, all in close proximity to each other.”

- Gieve Patel (b. 1940)

Born and raised in Bombay, Gieve Patel traverses multiple roles as a poet, playwright, painter and a practising physician. His narrative paintings take the form of ‘snapshots’ of everyday life in a monumental city.

Throughout his career, Patel has considered both the grotesque and the ordinary elements of urban life and the sometimes violent dimensions of mortality. His early works centred on images of single figures, as we see here in this painting, *Dead Politician* (1969), that depicts a deceased body covered in garlands. The harrowed look on the figure’s face draws us in to make us empathise with the individual, commenting on the way society honours corrupt leaders.

Patel’s later works progressed to feature more layered compositions, as we see in some of his paintings that present aspects of everyday life in Bombay, using soft pastel colours and simple contours to depict the human form. In *Gateway* (1981), we see two figures with the Gateway of India in the distance. *Early Morning Local* (1981) portrays a notably uncrowded train berth in the city. Rather than depicting the typical chaos of public spaces, such works draw us into emotionally charged moments and intimate interactions between individuals.

Following a visit to Italy in the mid-1980s, when he was exposed to important Renaissance paintings, Patel’s multi-figured narratives became even more complex. He was captivated by Pietro Lorenzetti’s iconic painting, *Crucifixion* (1340s) that portrays a crowd standing at the foot of a cross. This inspired his depiction of crowds in his seminal work, *Off Lamington Road* (1982–86) that references a busy street in Bombay, close to his medical clinic. While his early works focused on the solitary experiences of one or two individuals, Patel envisioned this particular composition differently. Here we see a series of individual narratives contained within a singular canvas.

Patel’s quiet compositions allow viewers to reflect on their experiences of Bombay as a shared social space. At the same time, his poignant subject matter reveals to us the stories of those on the margins that may otherwise go unheard.

In addition to being an accomplished painter, Patel (b. 1940) has also received great acclaim for his writing career. He published his first collection of poetry in 1966, the same year as his first exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai. He has since won numerous awards for his writings, and has been a part of major exhibitions in India and abroad. He continues to live and work in Mumbai today.

In 1995, the name of the city was officially changed from Bombay to Mumbai, as it is known today. Since this video discusses a time period before the official name change, we refer to the city as Bombay here.

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