



AKBAR PADAMSEE

**SEARCHING FOR
THE PRESENT,
WHERE?**

**BEING - BECOMING IN AKBAR PADAMSEE'S
FIGURATIONS (1995 – 2006)**

Curated by Srajana Kaikini

Searching for the Present, Where? Being-Becoming in Akbar Padamsee's Figurations (1995 - 2006)

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Shadowing Akbar Padamsee's artistic search

The expansive artistic practice of Akbar Padamsee (1928–2020) was entangled in several questions, stated and tacit. More than questions, however, his works appear to be searches. This exploration unfolds not just through his material works but his larger natural inquisitiveness on the nature of reality, be it through reflections on time, space, the order of things, or the knowledge and experience of the self and the other.¹ A metaphysical preponderance can be seen in Padamsee's thinking on human configurations in his drawings and photographic works that were made between 1995 and 2006. The subjects depicted in Padamsee's later works appear like notes and pages from the artist's search for presentness and what it may mean.

A 'painter-philosopher'² and a 'thinker's artist',³ Padamsee's figurations are accented by philosophical thinking on power, transcendence and perception and in varying intensities or registers, appear to be tussling with the longstanding metaphysical double-bind of *being* and *becoming*. Under the umbrella of this intellectual preponderance, these works appear to us both as gestures as well as mirrors – giving us an opportunity to perceive a dialectics of being. Sensed amidst this artistic probation is a dance with ever-elusive *time*.

In this essay, I try to understand this search for presentness in Padamsee's figurations, both drawings and photographs, made between 1995 and 2006, as a way of unpacking the larger atmosphere of thought that emerges from these works relationally. I take cues from two key texts – one written by Geeta Kapur in 1978, titled *Akbar Padamsee: The Other Side of Solitude*, and the other a conversation between Homi K. Bhabha and Akbar Padamsee published in 2010, titled *Figure and Shadow: Conversations on the Illusive Art of Akbar Padamsee*, as guiding interlocutors to the persona and the life-work of Akbar Padamsee.

¹ I am grateful to Bhanu Padamsee for sharing her insights into Padamsee's intellectual probes.

² Geeta Kapur, 2020. "Akbar's Aura." (2020) *Critical Collective*. Online. <https://criticalcollective.in/ArtistInner2.aspx?Aid=111&Eid=1310> Accessed 14 August 2021.

³ <https://www.artisera.com/blogs/expressions/akbar-padamsee-a-thinkers-artist-who-explored-the-intricacies-of-existence> Accessed 14 August 2021.

What are the tussles and confrontations we may encounter when any kind of systematisation is applied to the embodied subject? Have we ever been able to see a person as a person and nothing else? Where may we find a chosen dissolution of selves? When are we ready to be the *sahrdaya* of an experience? What makes us stop, look away, hesitate, judge, or indulge in a work of art? These are some tasks that Padamsee sets the viewer on with his later figurations.

These series of drawings – black charcoal on white paper – and photographs – black and white – speak about the body as a place of *being* and *becoming*. These figurations are subjects set in motion. In this world view of the self, perhaps social signifiers like clothing, location, context and even *thinking* of the body singularly may be perceived as superfluous. In Padamsee's later figurations, embodiment of the self is presupposed. The interest is, therefore, to look for when and where these embodiments become *present* to us. While some drawings bring to us glimpses from other selves – lives enmeshed in *sanchaari bhaava* (fleeting emotions), the photographic images speak in their own language trying to grow from the moment captured into new kinds of beings, creating their own *sthaayi bhaava* (foundational emotions).⁴ They are not so much abstract as they are intentional – they need us to speak to them for them to speak to us. The abstractions emerge from the attention to process.

These works from the collection of The Guild and other private collections offer lines of play between the various registers evoked by the elements, and become an occasion for the viewer to deterritorialise the body as place. This way of curatorially reflecting on the works may perform as a dialectical stance to the measured and attuned conscious gestures that underlie Padamsee's works. Through a deterritorialisation of these 'subjects' enmeshed in their world of social signification, the hope is to be able to perceive these subjects as being-becoming in the *now*. Perceived in this light, we may hope to see the work of Padamsee's art practice *as* philosophy, in this particular case, a philosophy of being-becoming through an unsettling of the subject-object dichotomy.

What it may mean to see as is

Akbar Padamsee, closely associated with the Bombay Progressive Artist's Group, was an artist whose preponderance over human subjects may be seen as formal in method, abstract in style but transcendental in intention. His beings are simply present. Amidst the discerning (*savikalpanic*) and the non-discerning (*nirvikalpanic*) perception of the artist, we are given a window to see *as is*.⁵ Perception, in the context of Akbar Padamsee's later figurations, is directed towards some kind of emergence that the moment of encounter provides.

⁴ I use these concepts from Rasa aesthetics as a conscious gesture of tapping into the universality of affect on offer in these works. Rasa aesthetic theory allows for an account of this possibility of universality of affect through its methodic categorisations of the kinds of emotions (*bhaavas*) invoked either as *sanchaari* or *sthaayi*.

⁵ Perception is a key philosophical project across cultures and underlines a non-Eurocentric interest in the entangled understanding of experience and knowledge. Therefore, in this context, I use discerning and non-discerning in the sense of the *savikalpanic* / *nirvikalpanic* perceptual distinction rather than any form of reason-based distinction.

The body is an occasion for subjecthood. This subject is also perhaps the most elusive, resisting to be seen for what it is, as opposed to what it stands for, perhaps because it breathes and thinks and may choose its condition, if free. We see in Padamsee's photographs these almost dialectical presences, forms that are caught in between movement, amidst the fall of light and shadow, perhaps not so interested in too many things. In being as *is*, one may glimpse becomings – a becoming mountain, a becoming cloud, a becoming light.

Caught in reveries, as if lost in thought, pondering over a made decision, sleeping in anticipation of a difficult day or just tiptoeing so as to not wake the sleeping one, Padamsee's subjects in his drawings come to us absent-mindedly, entangled in their domestic meshes. We are kept away, we aren't present to them, they seem to have not yet noticed that their moments have been shared with others. These are selves that do not need speaking for; and then, there are sudden awakenings, where one may, as if broken from worldly reveries, walk out of time, space, meaning and language and be completely present to the world – a presencing that obliquely confronts us – haunted by the traces of a socially signified life.

Tracing particular histories of bodies

The body is an occasion for the manifestation of power. In Michel Foucault's words, "deployments of power are directly connected to the body – to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures..." Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) did not envisage "a 'history of mentalities' that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a 'history of bodies' and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested."⁶

The genre of the nude in art history has been a critical semantic ground for arguments on the object/subject, the ideal/real. For Kenneth Clark, for instance, the nude is an ideal form and not a subject.⁷ This Platonic distinction between the naked and the nude, however reveals a different kind of commitment attributed to the work of art which I suggest may not help in understanding the Indian modern artistic search through the human form. The rebuttal of John Berger to Clark's idealised vision of the nude – "Kenneth Clark maintains that to be naked is simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art" signposts this rupture from the safe dissociation of art's work from lived experience. Berger observes that the nude "is always conventionalised," and insists it "also relates to lived sexuality. The female nude is subservient to the male 'spectator-owner'... men act and women appear."⁸

⁶ Michel Foucault. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. R. Hurley, Penguin Books. pp 151-2.

⁷ U. Weisstein. 1957. "Review: The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form by Kenneth Clark." *College Art Journal*, 16(4), pp.360-362. doi:10.2307/773506.

⁸ <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-31-summer-2014/rescue-civilisation-man>

In 1954, Padamsee was charged for alleged 'obscene' paintings referring to his *Lovers 1* and *Lovers 2* exhibited at the Jehangir Art Gallery, the point of contention being that the male figure was shown touching the female figure's breast.⁹ This very point of contention also became the ground for defence of Padamsee's case which he ultimately won; the court accepted the prevalence of visual semantics of sensuous love across various global artistic schools and works of acclaimed artists as well as in Indian temple iconography that have the recurring motif of this gesture as a gesture of love.¹⁰ The entanglement of an artist's work in relation to the human form as well as the framework for accessing, appreciating and critiquing works that depict the human body in any form, continue to straddle this confused line of correspondence. While legal terminologies and frameworks are committed to a social condition determined by sociopolitical motives, it is a larger long-standing question of how artistic expression, intention or artistic search, need to be adequately addressed and cared for by legal systems.¹¹

The art historical genre of the nude in dialogue with cultural signification, was the site for critical turns of the avant-garde globally, be it in the works of Manet, Duchamp, Sher-Gil or the Bombay Progressives, amongst several others.¹² Engagement with this genre in contemporary times cannot be distanced from critical intersectional questions around representation, identity and the sociopolitical location of the gaze of the subject in the work, the artist as well as the gaze of the viewer. In a gender-diverse queer affirmative sociopolitical atmosphere post the 2018 cancellation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and post the #metoo movement that began a long and slow process of reaffirming poly-gendered subjectivities and their dignity at the centre of human relationships, the history of the body and its depictions in visual art history may slowly begin to relinquish its implicit indebtedness to the dichotomous binary vision that pervaded readings of the moderns across the world and particularly in the Indian context. As emerging contemporary artist Saulius Nuobaras, whose practice investigates bodies and their prejudices, observes in his thesis *Falling Fig Leaf* (2020), "the spiritual interpretation of the body [is] no longer a convention." Instead, the nude has become a "platform for expressions for marginalised young artists who do not see themselves reflected in conventional canons of art history. Contemporary art and eroticism find themselves in an oddly ambiguous relationship, with innumerable artists addressing the subject in new ways."¹³

These intersectional critical discourses on art practice also give us sufficient grounds to hesitate in preserving a vocabulary used to critique the genre of the 'nude' in any archaic form.

⁹ Akbar Padamsee v The State Case No. 249/P of 1954 [3]

¹⁰ "Judgement in the trial of Akbar Padamsee for alleged 'obscene' paintings" (1954) in *Marg VII* (4). Digital Scan Courtesy Dr. Chitra K.S, The Guild Art Gallery.

¹¹ See Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati. 2019. "Obscene or artistic? The poetics and politics of the obscenity law in Indian art and literature" *Indian Law Review*. 3:1, 33-60, doi: 10.1080/24730580.2019.1600214 for an extensive review of similar cases and the larger developments in the Indian Penal Code regarding this clause over the years.

¹² Manet's *Olympia* (1865), Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase. No. 2* (1912), Sher-Gil's *Self portrait as Tahitian* (1934)

¹³ https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/media/inline/2020/8/14/200622_falling_fig_leaf_print.pdf Accessed August 21st 2021.

Further, conceptually reconfiguring the nude as merely the body also risks reducing the perceived to a singular category. Keeping these in mind, the human forms in these works are addressed as *beings*, keeping with an ethical commitment to Padamsee's thinking and intellectual affinities.

Signification, Discernment and Deterritorialisation

The body has been at the heart of several intellectual traditions of enquiry. The signification of the body, be it social, linguistic, political, performative or philosophical offers us with its own conceptual vocabulary to think about the self and its imaginaries. In these works, we may notice a cadence between such a signification, de-signification and re-signification – a dance of relational stances that may, when perceived as notes in time, make present to us a new configuration of subjecthood.

Disinterestedness was a concept put into motion by the transcendental idealist Immanuel Kant, as he contemplated on the possibility of aesthetic judgement around a tulip.¹⁴ This idea of disinterest was not apathetic but more a distanced, equanimous kind of interest – one that enables us to perceive and judge the flower for its beauty. Padamsee, is not perhaps so interested in declarations of judgements as he is in understanding any subject for what it is and how it may presence. There is a perceivable, *practiced* distance with his subjects intentionally as if presenting an assemblage in order to expand his and the perceiver's perception manifold. This conscious distancing is also seen in Padamsee's method, as has been observed by Geeta Kapur who, in her essay "Akbar Padamsee: The Other Side of Solitude" (1979), reads Padamsee's works as occupying "a position of uncompromised solitude," where "the remoteness from the viewer is deliberately maintained ..." in the works, "kindling them to a pitch of intensity which may not start a widespread conflagration to be sure, but which is sufficient to ensure that a deep inner glow will pass from image to image".¹⁵

Geeta Kapur describes Akbar's early figurations made in 1951–52 as primitivist almost as an adopted attitude, not dissimilar to Gauguin, marked by the explicit sexuality of the figures, handled sensuously. By 1954, Kapur observes, his figures lose any sense of primitive qualities, when Akbar is more interested in the 'look'¹⁶ in the eyes of his image, "deeply hypnotic" marking "precise individuality of the person portrayed." This transition occurs through his series of images called *Prophets*. Observing this transition, Kapur notes, "It is as though Akbar moved one step closer to the human, even while retaining a bond with the divine" thereby

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Trans. Guyer and Matthews. Cambridge University Press. New York. See pp. 120, 165.

¹⁵ Geeta Kapur. 1978. "Akbar Padamsee: the Other Side of Solitude" in *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi. p. 87–113. Accessed on 1st August from https://akbarpadamsee.net/book_articles3.html

¹⁶ Interestingly, Bhabha, in his conversation with Padamsee, makes an observation about this 'look' to be enigmatic, illusive which "is not the kind that makes the spectator feel immediately identified. It invites and at the same time elides his look, so it is more like a gaze. ... It creates an anxiety rather than an identification." (2010, p.46)

signposting a period 1955 onwards where the figures are more human, more vulnerable – “The body was handled as though it were a sounding board for the spirit and the figures retained a profound quality of sentience; an aspect at once attentive and remote, intimate and monumental.”¹⁷

The equidistance between the subject and object where Padamsee pitches himself as an artist behaves like a threshold for the viewer, from where a kind of deterritorialising of the subject may take place. The idea of deterritorialising, first proposed by the transcendental empiricist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,¹⁸ is that process by which one may, in a playful or measured manner, disassemble a mesh of significations to reorganise them into another configuration of significations – a displacement of registers that shift the safe semantics of the known to a different semantics of a new known. This is resonant in how Padamsee, in his essay “Reflections on Form” (1960), understood the role of order in his own reconfigurations of the “the form of known objects” – “Organisation, orchestration are means, not plastic ends. We create order to give significance. If order becomes an end in itself, it would die a semantic death.”¹⁹ The prevalent choice of black, white or in-betweens and nothing more in these figuration works is perhaps an extension of this conscious discernment – a structural economy practiced to create new significations.

Tracing the Conceptual precursors to Padamsee’s later works

Padamsee’s interest in systematisation, schemas, grids, and their role in emergence of form is something that locates his practice amidst interrogators of the structures of reality – these are glimpses of an artist keen not in the art of self-expression but of a seeker who is trying to understand his perceived, cognised and elusive encounters. Bhabha observes how “the body emerges through the schema displaying one aspect of its selfhood” and the matrix is “the precondition for the emergence of the figure” – but also that the experience of the works that emerge are glimpses of an “affirmation of process”.²⁰ “Akbar casts the key away, but the figure preserves it.”²¹ Thus, in contrast to the figure of the Romantic artist – Bhabha situates Akbar Padamsee amidst the figure of the artist “whose sovereignty is somehow pushed aside by the very power of the ideas, the materials, the technique”²² that cannot be “possessed or territorialized.”²³

¹⁷ Geeta Kapur. 1978. “Akbar Padamsee: The Other Side of Solitude”, in *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi. (Chapter 3, pp. 87–113) Accessed on 15th August 2021 from https://akbarpadamsee.net/book_articles3.html

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

¹⁹ Akbar Padamsee. 1960. “Reflections on Form” *Design Annual*. July. Accessed on 14th August 2021 from <https://akbarpadamsee.net/1960AkbarPadamsee.html>

²⁰ p. 16 Homi K Bhabha and Akbar Padamsee. 2010. “Figure and Shadow: Conversations on the Illusive Art of Akbar Padamsee” in *Work in Language*. Marg Publications. Digital Scan courtesy Bhanumati Padamsee.

²¹ p. 17 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²² p. 17 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²³ p. 19 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

Talking about the photographic works with Bhabha, Padamsee notes how light plays a crucial role in many of his formations. About the photograph he says, "If there is no light, there is no photograph." Elsewhere, about a piece of paper, he says, "The white of the paper, for me, is light."²⁴ Thus, there can be seen a correlation of the seen, unseen, the known, unknown and a play with the givenness of this world and an artist's encounter with it in drawings and photographs.

For Bhabha, Padamsee's art sits "at the cusp of a contradiction: and it is [his] ability to either negotiate the complexity, or to leave it alone."²⁵ Bhabha's rumination on the colour grey and its possibilities can be, for us, a framework within which to imagine the chromatic economy in the photographs.

"Is 'grey' the colour of the unconscious? Something misty that throws a kind of deceptive mask over both memory and reality? [...] grey always preserves a certain, uncertain transparency. Grey allows you to dimly perceive the ghosts that haunt you, the desires that passed you by.. and yet, grey allows you to believe that something will emerge, something will come through for you. Grey is art's atmosphere; a climate of perception..."²⁶

This unconscious, he remarks, "is never on time", alluding to ways in which the unconscious in responding to his questions, is "suddenly called into conversation and appears dishevelled and undressed like a person woken too early or too late."²⁷ Bhabha sees the Grey period as a conceptual precursor to these works²⁸ and I extend this alignment by further situating these figurations as a conceptual *premonition* of a metaphysics of the subject in Padamsee's works. The 'delayed unconscious' seems to appear in his drawing works, in the repeated lines that almost reinforce the subjects through a duration, in order to ascertain that they *are*, that they exist and that their structures of existence can perhaps be captured through the measured probe of the artist. On the other hand, the emergence is of a different kind in the photographs. As Padamsee admits to Bhabha, the technology does offer him a greater "philosophical ease".²⁹ When probed if there is any relationship between his water and ink on paper works and the photographic works, Padamsee replies, "In the watercolours, I work from nothing to something and in photography it is the other way around - everything is a given."³⁰

Padamsee was attuned to the ontological systems he was working with, the paper becoming an occasion for him to bring into existence new *beings* while the photographic film became an occasion for him to receive a moment where the given *becomes* more than what is. This

²⁴ p.23 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²⁵ p.68 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²⁶ p.52 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²⁷ p.52 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²⁸ p.25 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

²⁹ p.24 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

³⁰ p.63 Bhabha & Padamsee, 2010.

being-becoming dialectic perhaps can only be potently acknowledged in its gestural heft and significance in the light of the long journey of artistic practice that marks Padamsee's artistic search in this world with elements like space, light, time, colour, line, volume, figure and nature as companions that led the way.

Sensing a Metaphysics of the Subject in Padamsee's works

These later figurations give us a glimpse of the arc of Padamsee's artistic search. The unsettling of space and time in the obvious is also resonant in the ways in which there is a resonance between landscape and beings. The metaphysical mirroring between landscapes and the body is seen across artistic, literary and philosophical imagination – in the correlation between *raga*, *rasa*, and seasons, between states of the mind and types of landscapes in *Sangam* poetry, and in the rich ecological imagination of the cosmos in certain South Asian philosophies that conceptualise the body symbolically.³¹ In this metaphysics of the subject, the unmoved mountains, the still waters of a lake or the iridescent moonlight are all infused with subjecthood and are part of an intersubjective sentience. In a way, what is absent in the seen may be present in the sensed.

In *Reflections on Form* (1960), Padamsee's philosophy of perception is evident in the manner in which he writes on his idea of what forms are, what they do and how they are perceived – “A sequence of images impresses our mind with the idea of form. To draw one such contour and call it true representation would be inexact.” He is attentive to the truth of any visual encounter when he acknowledges that the “elimination of the function of certain senses and compensating their absence of function by an equivalent plastic presence enriches the language of art.” His interest in the play between form and feeling is committed to taking anything perceived to its highest possible sense of being. “... the eye becomes recipient, an organ of transit; those who see nothing have nothing to see. The spectator who from his honey world exclaims ‘How lovely’ is a liar.”³²

Few artists are able to co-create histories of the subject alongside histories of the body. As can be seen in these works, the body is not simply a passive site where subjectivities are recognised; the body creates its subject, its coming into being. These subjects, by being present, may then willingly choose to face us, turn away from us or even look beyond us. Padamsee, in his perception of his beings as subjects, respects this presence of power as well as its absence.

³¹ For instance, Jaina metaphysics have a rich cosmic systems modelled upon the body. Similarly Sankhya and Yogic metaphysics gives a central role to the body as a stage for the order of the cosmos to play out.

³² Akbar Padamsee. 1960. “Reflections on Form” *Design Annual*. July. Accessed on 14th August 2021 from <https://akbarpadamsee.net/1960AkbarPadamsee.html>