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Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan

Bose Pacia

508 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Through March 4

New York may still be an international culture center, but there is a wealth of art out there that it never, or seldom, sees. Although Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan, two of the best-known painters in India, are well into the middle of their careers, this two-man show is as close as either has come to having a solo here. Fortunately, these two colleagues and friends make a complementary pair.

I have admired Mr. Patwardhan's work since I first saw it in a group exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery in 1985, and have eagerly sought it out since. His painting might be considered a form of Socialist Realism, minus ideological hard-sell or an agony-or-ecstasy tone. Instead, he paints everyday, unprivileged urban lives with a solidity of form and a deliberateness of pacing that imbue even crowd scenes with a ceremonial, moral weight.

This is true even in a beautiful new picture of an artist sitting in front of a drawing in his studio. He looks grave and sunk in thought, perhaps about work done, or not done. Meanwhile, the shapes of pastel-colored buildings outside his window are reflected in the glass doors of a cabinet, and form a marvelous abstract composition there. It is an unasked-for gift from the street, a reward for being attentively alive.

Mr. Patel's style is looser, more improvisational, a flow of vivid, sometimes violent impressions. Mourners weep. A bare-chested man, decked with flowers, his eyes unfocused, confronts us. In a painting that suggests a mortality-haunted version of a Milton Avery image, crows peck at roadkill. In another, a human corpse lies rotting in a landscape.

More formal in effect are semiabstract pictures, each built around a large central circle, meant to be the opening of a well. The titles tell us that we are looking down at reflected details of landscape and sky. But we could just as easily be deep inside the well, looking up at the world through its water. Thus, in Mr. Patel's art, as in Mr. Patwardhan's in a different way, reality meets magic; logical accommodates possible.

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