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A CAMERA PICTURES LIFE IN AND BEYOND SUDHIR PATWARDHAN'S CANVAS

by SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

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Harshil Bhanushali's art documentary *Picturing Life* (2024) finds its anchor in a major exhibition, titled *Walking through Soul City: Sudhir Patwardhan: A Retrospective*, held at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Mumbai, in 2019-2020. Curated by art critic Nancy Adajania and spread across four floors, the more than 200 paintings, spanning the artist's career from the 1970s up to 2018, primarily featured his incisive, humanist views of the teeming, pulsating city of Bombay/Mumbai. The show motivated Bhanushali to capture Patwardhan's work on film. But *Picturing Life* also seemingly indicates a desire to release the images from the bound walls of the exhibition space and take them back to the chaotic urban spaces that have served as the artist's muse for nearly five decades.

A three-part internal structure energizes Bhanushali's film. Extreme close-ups of paintings by Patwardhan are followed by cuts to the real sites and figures represented in them. For instance, a shot of the proprietor in a painting titled "Irani Restaurant" is followed by a similar view of the actual man behind the counter in one of the city's once-thriving Irani cafes.

Apart from setting up a direct relation between the object and its painterly representation, the frequently matched views are also self-reflexive. They draw attention to how the camera mimics the artist's view, simultaneously producing a photographic representation of the original object and *an image* of Patwardhan's image. These repeated cuts and juxtapositions establish an intriguing exchange between the real and the represented, and between the mediums of film and painting. A fundamental distinction exists between the two art forms, with photography laying claim to a more objective portrayal of reality over painting's subjective interpretations.

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The third element embedded in *Picturing Life* is the placement, alongside the close-ups and real shots, of the complete view of the painting in the gallery space, with attendees observing the artwork. In these shots, the gallery is presented as a hallowed space, facilitating a thoughtful appreciation of art, but one that is detached from the immediate, visceral world of the streets. It is a space meant for distance, and resultantly, the camera too is far away from the paintings, remote and observational rather than immersive, just like the viewers in the gallery – separated by geography and class from the painted subjects. It is this triadic set of cyclical cuts, between zoomed-in views of paintings, their referents in the real world (train passengers, factory workers, families, and, at one point, the artist himself, juxtaposed with a self-portrait titled “Erase”) and the complete works in the exhibition space, that propels Bhanushali’s documentary, the rhythm becoming a representation of the life of the artwork itself.

An engagement with Patwardhan’s painting style brings up the notion of space as fiction, where the canvas becomes a field of manipulation, stitching together fragments to make up a whole. One of the most striking examples of this is “Mumbai Proverbs,” a landmark seven-panel mural that historicizes the city of Bombay/Mumbai, integrating movement in both its sheer scale and in the chaotic multiplicity of its images. In *Picturing Life*, what is interesting is how employing the tools of cinema, Bhanushali replicates these ideas of fictive space. The close-ups, like Patwardhan’s paintings, focus on parts – faces and feet. Some zoom-ins are so extreme, they become disorienting, offering no sense of the real size of the painting or its other elements. This idea is also duplicated in the real world. There are only a few extreme wide shots that capture large expanses of the city in one go. The greater attention is towards zooming in – on tenement structures, tin roofs and torsos. The tracking shots where the camera moves across the surface of a painting are also like the close-ups that dissect them, the director’s way of guiding our eyes being similar to the way the artist’s paintings with their multiple scenes guide viewers.

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Finally, because of the reliance on shots of static paintings, their real referents notwithstanding, the director places extra weight on other elements, such as the soundtrack. City sounds, such as those of noisy vehicles, crowded railway stations, factories and rioting mobs animate the paintings in the film. Recordings of the artist's commentary and intermittent text elucidating the progression of his style also do their bit to counter the centrality accorded to the image in this film.

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