



HELPING HANDS
Mother-daughter duo and artists Anju and Biraaj Dodiya move the former's artwork titled *Conversation in Rust* (2022) in their Ghatkopar studio

A brush with destiny

Celebrated contemporary painter Anju Dodiya always knew her daughter Biraaj was creatively inclined. But when Biraaj elected to pursue art, how different her journey would be from her own was something Anju hardly could have fathomed. By VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR.

Photographed by SAVIO GERHART

It's the night before Diwali and Anju and Biraaj Dodiya are on opposite sides of the world. They appear side by side on Zoom; Anju muted in Mumbai, Biraaj unmuted in New York. "I'm usually with her when she logs into these meetings," says Biraaj as her mother tries and fails to unmute herself. Ten minutes later, Anju's microphone has learned to behave, we've all had a hearty laugh and I've whispered a word of thanks to the tech gods, although neither mother nor daughter seems fazed by the caprices of technology.

As someone who emerged as an eminence grise in India's contemporary art scene during the 1990s, Anju Dodiya's geniality takes me by surprise. "It was all

just happenstance," she says of her successful career. Born into an orthodox Sindhi business family, Anju was expected to keep with tradition. So when she dropped out of her commerce degree to join Sir JJ School of Art, her mother presumed the arrangement was simply a stopgap between college and marriage. When she did get married (to her college senior, the noted contemporary painter Atul Dodiya), she did not swap her career for companionship as her mother had imagined. "My sister-in-law, Priti, would often tell me, 'You love to paint and I love to cook, so you need to go to the studio and I'll be here at home.'" A few years after Biraaj was born, Anju began tailoring her schedule around her daughter's—

dropping her off at school in the mornings, sometimes meeting her for lunch, accompanying her to sports practices—all the while working nights, weekends and whenever else she could squeeze in time.

Still, the guilt persisted. "I was never one to attend parties, but sometimes I'd go to work-related events and panic if I didn't return by 11pm. I'd wonder if Biraaj was still awake and needed me," she recalls. International work-related travel sometimes meant she had to be away for longer spells, and she confesses that she might have given up altogether had it not been for the support of her family.

Biraaj doesn't remember any of it. "I was always very well looked-after," she affirms. So much so, that as a child, she

could identify every sari shop in the vicinity of Ghatkopar's Cama Lane, where the Dodiya's lived. "My mother-in-law loved saris, so she would often take Biraaj along on shopping trips," says Anju. But it wasn't just the sari shops with which Biraaj was well-acquainted. Thanks to her aunt, she was equally familiar with neighbours and neighbours of neighbours. It was these bonds, which her daughter developed in her absence, that gave Anju the reassurance she needed to continue painting in her studio across the street.

In many ways, Biraaj is a reflection of her mother. She has the same alabaster skin, the same button nose, the same dark brown hair. While she also inherited her parents' love for art, her path was destined to take her away from their cocoon of comfort: colleges in India knew her lineage, so she knew she had to move somewhere she could stay largely anonymous and create her own identity as an artist. Chicago was that place; more specifically, the School of Art Institute of Chicago, where she pursued a BFA and studied painting,

print-making and photography. It was great for her, but not so much for her mother. "I'd follow all the crime news from Chicago and it would send me off the edge," recalls Anju. It was an anxiety that would plague her for years, through Biraaj's stay in Chicago and then in New York, where she'd later move to do her MFA.

Biraaj's return to Mumbai before

"Last month, I was dabbling with oil, which I hadn't done since college. When Biraaj came to my studio, she was the one guiding me. It was like the roles had been reversed" — ANJU DODIYA

COVID-19 was a homecoming in more ways than one. It was a return to her hometown, but also, in some ways, to her childhood. "We did things we hadn't really had the time for before," she observes of her reborn relationship with her mother. Plants were watered, books were swapped, Agnès Varda and Ingmar Bergman films were watched and rewatched. As one

domestic routine led to another, mother and daughter learned about each other's larger leanings in a way they never had before. "I could sense her adulthood. That was new for me," says Anju.

Artistically, the two are nothing alike. Anju leans towards the figurative with her piercing self-portraits. Biraaj, who has had seven exhibitions since 2020, abides by abstractionism in her moody canvases.

Anju uses watercolours, Biraaj works with oil. Yet they manage to find common ground. "We are able to critique each other's work," shares Anju of her daughter. "Last month, I was dabbling with oil, which I hadn't done since college. When Biraaj came to my studio, she was the one guiding me. It was like the roles had been reversed."

The pair is the first to admit that living in a house full of creatives can sometimes be a bit much. "It leads to a saturated energy and sometimes we all just need our quiet," says Biraaj. But for now, after all these years apart, everything once again feels just right.



ALTERED REALITY
The Path of Berries by Anju Dodiya (2006).
Acrylic on mattress

LIFE IN TECHNICOLOUR
Marrow's end by Biraaj Dodiya (2023).
Oil paint on wood and linen

