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# ASIAN ART NEWS

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# ZHOU JINHUA

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# The Existential Human Condition

*Indian artist Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar's art may be described as complex visual poetry. His art has been informed by a broad range Eastern and Western influences, as well as a good deal of serendipity. While Adivrekar's artworks are complex, they also possess a curious intimacy.*

By Vera Wijaya

Many contemporary artists are aware of controversial political and celebrity figures of the past. Along with the increasing turbulence of our societies, they are also concerned with the future of their nations. Consciously breaking away from traditional arts and cultures, many young artists prefer to pursue bolder and

socially realistic subjects. Thus, it is common to see various world leaders dressed in mocking fashions, figures of women depicted in provocative poses, two-dimensional contemporary landscapes, raw human expressions, localized sociopolitical scenes, regular citizens consuming popular brands, animation dolls and computer-generated robotic images on canvases.

Despite the recent excitement of the "contemporary arts," many Indian contemporary artists have chosen not to abandon their traditional artistic elements. Instead, they are proud of their traditions and dream of expanding their cultures while incorporating various contemporary life concepts into their art. Utilizing a strong foundation in religion, literature, and phi-



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **Every move brings a change**, 2007, oil on canvas, 122 x 173 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

osophy, Indian artists continuously strive towards creating innovative presentations of new abstract ideas. Though many artists such as Jogen Chowdhury, Bhupen Khakhar, and Ganesh Pyne continue to favor narrative arts through poetically symbolic paintings, it is not uncommon for other, equally accomplished artists, like Subodh Gupta and Meera Mukherjee, to work with unusual color themes, sculptures, video, photography, daily objects, documents, and historical images. Such radical methodologies often yield brilliant and compelling artistic expressions. One such promising and talented young artist is Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar. In many ways, the old expression “*there are two sides of the same coin*” must have held true for Adivrekar. Greatly inspired by traditional Indian words of wisdom and proverbs, Adivrekar is keen to explore the various possibilities of how human beings perceive the world in which they live. Drawing from life experiences and intellectual discourses, Adivrekar encourages viewers to challenge his art while conveying important moral messages through his paintings.

**B**orn in 1974 into the family of a prominent artist in Mumbai, the pursuit of knowledge has always been greatly emphasized in Adivrekar’s life. Growing up in a culture where old literary philosophical wisdom is often not easily understood by common men on the street, the artist feels the importance of simplifying the academic aspect of the universal truth. Wisdom in a manner of proverbs is widely accepted. It is because many of these proverbial wisdoms reflect the verity of nature, which hold the answers to the many problems in human



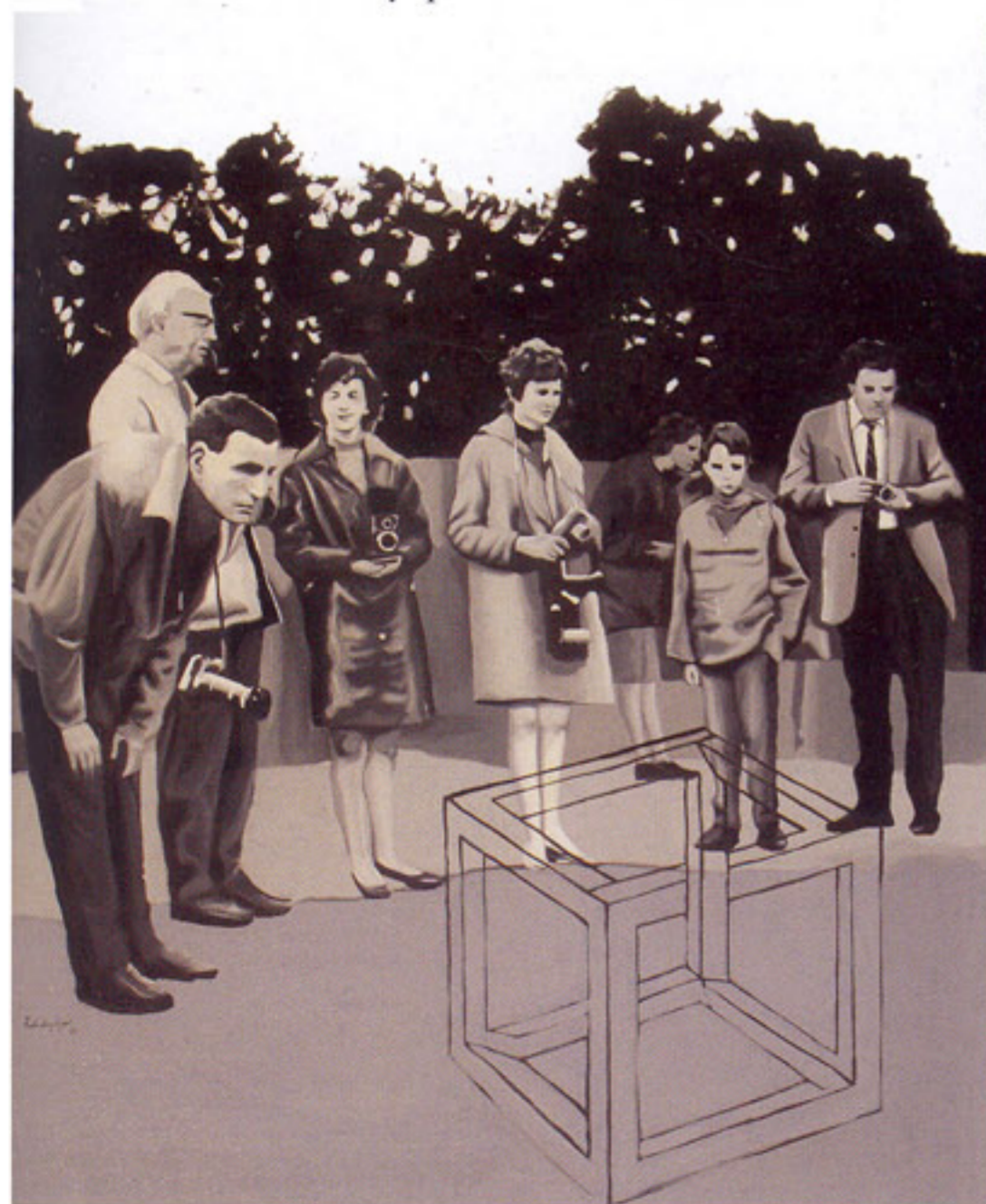
Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **Every exit is an entrance someplace else**, 2007, oil on canvas, 122 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

existence. For many generations, though wisdom has become a familiar concept; unless one is insightful, its understanding and real life application may not be useful. For Adivrekar, human relations are not based on a single linear model but as a set of complex interactions fueled by personal experiences, expectations, and interpretations of one’s actions. Based on the ideas of perceptions and reality, Adivrekar wants to portray the existential human condition through the instantaneous coexisting chronologies of life. Motivated by his viewers’ artistic appreciation, Adivrekar strives to evoke the memories and visual intelligence of his viewers through his artwork.

Since graduating first in his class at

Sir J.J. School of Arts in Mumbai, in 1997, Adivrekar has worked with concepts based on time, journeying, cities, and people. By early 2000, he began to build more complex themes into his work such as space, allegories, mythology, symbolism, multiple dimensions, humanity, documentary footage, movies, and historical facts. He also experimented with unconventional painting methods. Today, he especially enjoys working with found photographic images and public historical records. His love affair with photography stems from his obsession with the reflection of the truth. Free from possible misinterpretation of the artist’s freehand drawing, photographs freeze an image’s truest form in time.

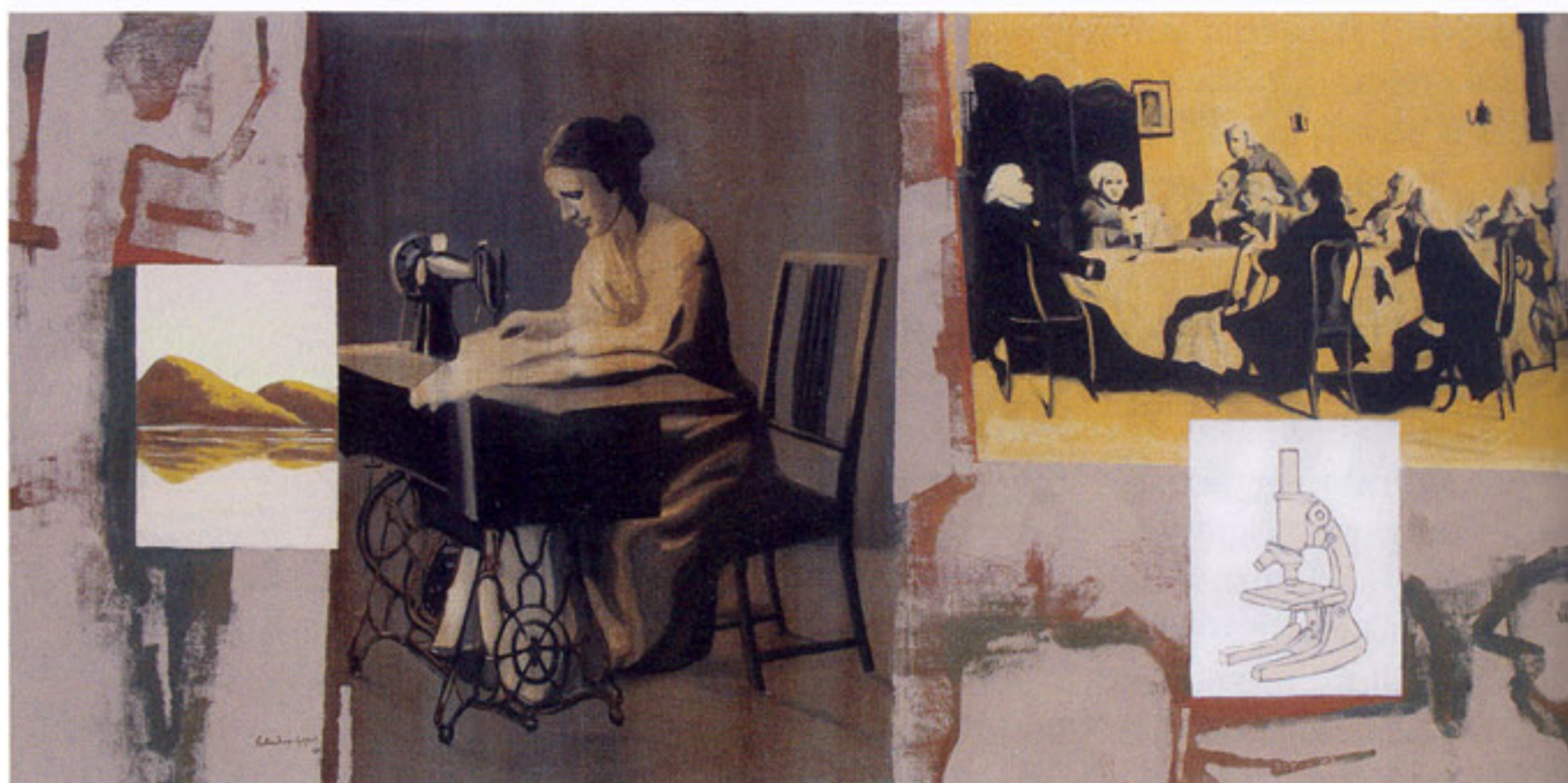
In desiring to achieve a stronger emotional effect on his art, Adivrekar says, “The power of a photograph to produce in us longing, nostalgia, and melancholy for the event or place. It is the most perfect picture since it appears as almost direct reflection of the world.” Yet, despite making photographs his central focus, Adivrekar does not aim to present his subjects in a photo-realist technique. Aside from his resistance to being categorized with other realist artists, Ratnadeep also feels that with an image that is neither a painting nor a photograph, he is unable to develop new experimental techniques which lose control on the specific effect he wants for the image. Instead, the artist proceeds to paint the photograph on his canvases; creating textures, manipulating his paintings with deliberate drippings of colors and print reproduction processes that can produce both realistic and negative film effects. These themes and techniques are often combined and have always been consistent throughout his career.



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are**, 2007, oil on canvas, 122 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

Adivrekar's skillful technique is broadly evident in his latest series *poetry of images*. At a glance, one sees the distinction in his paintings. Filled with unspoken symbols and poetry, each painting is imbued with the sense of mystery of a bygone era. Almost immediately, the viewer is confronted with a sense of yearning, a desire to travel back in time; to locate something they have lost. The powerful images in his paintings give viewers an instant impression that real events are happening. In many of his past works, Adivrekar favored dark colors, painted in a monochromatic tone. For his latest works, he introduces a richer palette, including bright and muted primary colors through which to expand the vocabulary of moods while stimulating the visual appeal for his viewers. Not surprisingly, many of his paintings were made of several found images, and his technical ability to exert control over proportion provides a sense of balance to his pleasant images.

For most of his work, he divides his subjects into two major parts. In each part, more details and sub-scenarios or seemingly unrelated events may be painted over: these appear as small objects located in the foreground. While some images do not appear to bear any relation to the next, many others logically compliment the images in the next part. For each overall piece, Adivrekar skillfully unifies all images into his paintings. Their colors are blended in scale to project a sense of space and time. Like continuous scenes in a silent film, the subjects in his paintings seem to be constantly interacting and on the move, accompanied



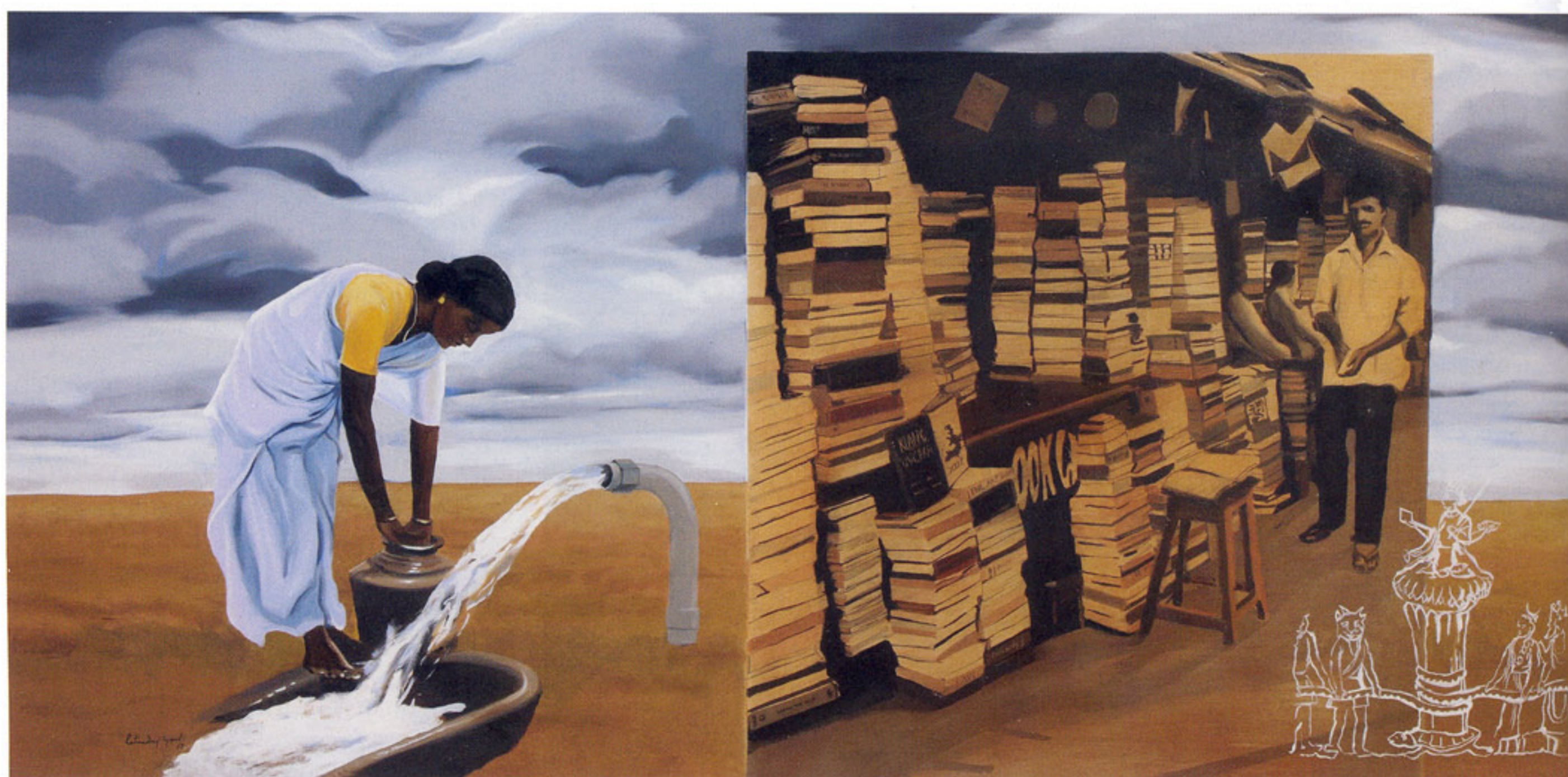
Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **A wise man can see more from the bottom of a well than a fool can from a mountain top**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

by a narration that can only be heard in his viewers' minds. By introducing images of highly accomplished individuals, important historical facts, nature, well-known landmarks, portraits of famous paintings and art, viewers can immediately recall their memories of things they know and identify the elements. With mixed emotions, viewers may feel a connecting link with the images. Yet, on the same paintings, Adivrekar also incorporates images of regular people, complex diagrams, and abstract motions; all of which are products of his imagination.

Like a good riddle, the complexity of his "poetry of images" is further narrated with one-line proverbs assigned to his many moving visual images. Art observers who are familiar with him may find that his works present an interesting blend of eclectic creative processes that result in an out-of-the-world visual experience. His random arrangement of images reflects the

quality of Vladimir Tatlin's photomontage technique. At the same time, his choices of colors in several paintings are influenced by Marcel Duchamp's sketch of *The Large Glass*. Some of Adivrekar's abstract/surreal ideas mirror that of Max Ernst, while his film-like moving and compartmentalized images resemble the works of Man Ray. Through the intimate details of his creations, one could not help but feel that Adivrekar was trained under some of the most influential post-World War One masters.

Having achieved the desired spatial effect, Adivrekar further arranges his subjects in multiple translucent layers; with angles that seem to suggest many ongoing conversations among the various objects in the paintings. Adivrekar intentionally challenges his viewers to question the meaning of what they see: How does a picture of famous astronaut relate to cubes and a chair? In *Every Exit is an Entrance Somewhere Else*, some viewers may identify



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **True wisdom manifests itself in different forms**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **A man with one watch knows what time it is; a man with two watches is never quite sure**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

the portrait of the famous astronaut Yuri Gagarin (1934–1968). Some may even remember Gagarin as the first human who, in 1961, traveled into space in Vostok 1. However, the same viewers may not understand the clutter of images that appear on the right side of Adivrekar's painting. Intrigued by the painting, a serious art observer may try to obtain more information on the images. Then perhaps the observer will learn that the images on the right are the famous "*black cube*" and a series of abstract art pieces by Russian constructivist artist Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935), who founded the Suprematism movement in the early 20th century.

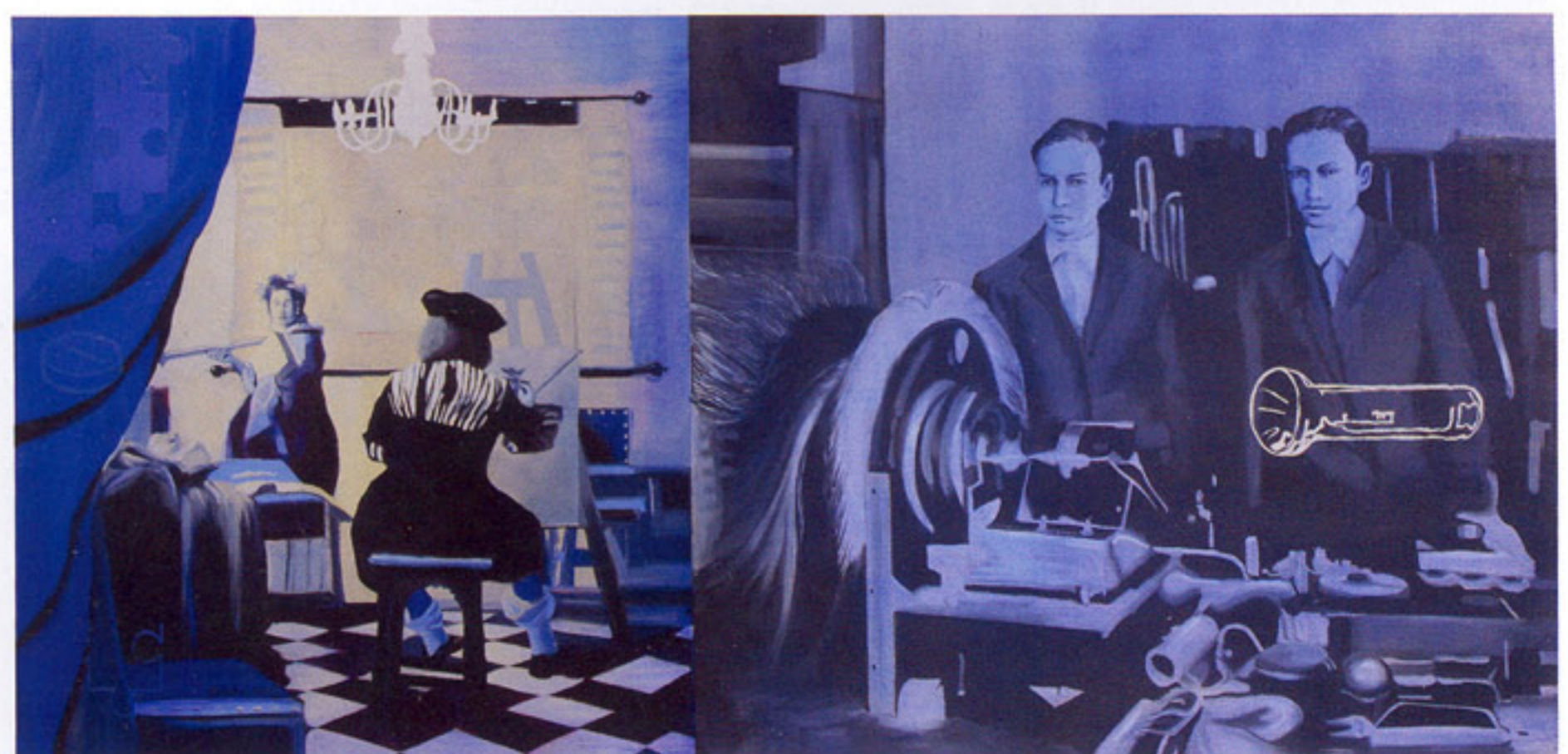
**A**s a versatile artist, Adivrekar does not always treat his subjects with pure cynicism. At times, he finds fresher ways to interpret his works in inspiring styles. *True Wisdom Manifests Itself in Different Forms* illustrates a woman on the left collecting water in a pot. Seemingly satisfied with the small pot, she continues to allow the water pipe to run, causing it to overflow the big basin in front of her. Here, Adivrekar avoids the use of short simple sharp lines to create soft outlines for figures in silhouette. The silhouette of a woman produces a mysterious feel in the picture. The unclear facial expressions leave room for viewers to imagine the woman's emotion. Adivrekar uses wide lines to form blobs of wavy clouds in the background. The deep stretch of sandy desert and the flowing lines of the woman's sari in the foreground leave behind an eerie feeling of an apparition standing in the midst of an infinite land. As Adivrekar intends the woman in the picture

to symbolize an allegory, a surreal quality suits the mood of the image. As the image on the left gives way to the right one, one sees a street vendor of books whose small stall is overstacked with books. In many cultures, books represent knowledge and wisdom. A similarly accepted law of nature is the understanding that once an empty basin is filled with water, excess water will overflow and be of no use to anyone. In relation to the book vendor, the woman with the overflowing basin symbolizes the truth in life. Unless one opens one's mind and eradicates existing bias and prejudices, one can never gain new knowledge. Just like the basin filled with overflowing water, conflicting thoughts that result from a closed mind prevents a person from learning from new experiences and finding new wisdom.

In preserving his tradition, Adivrekar also painted smaller images of the

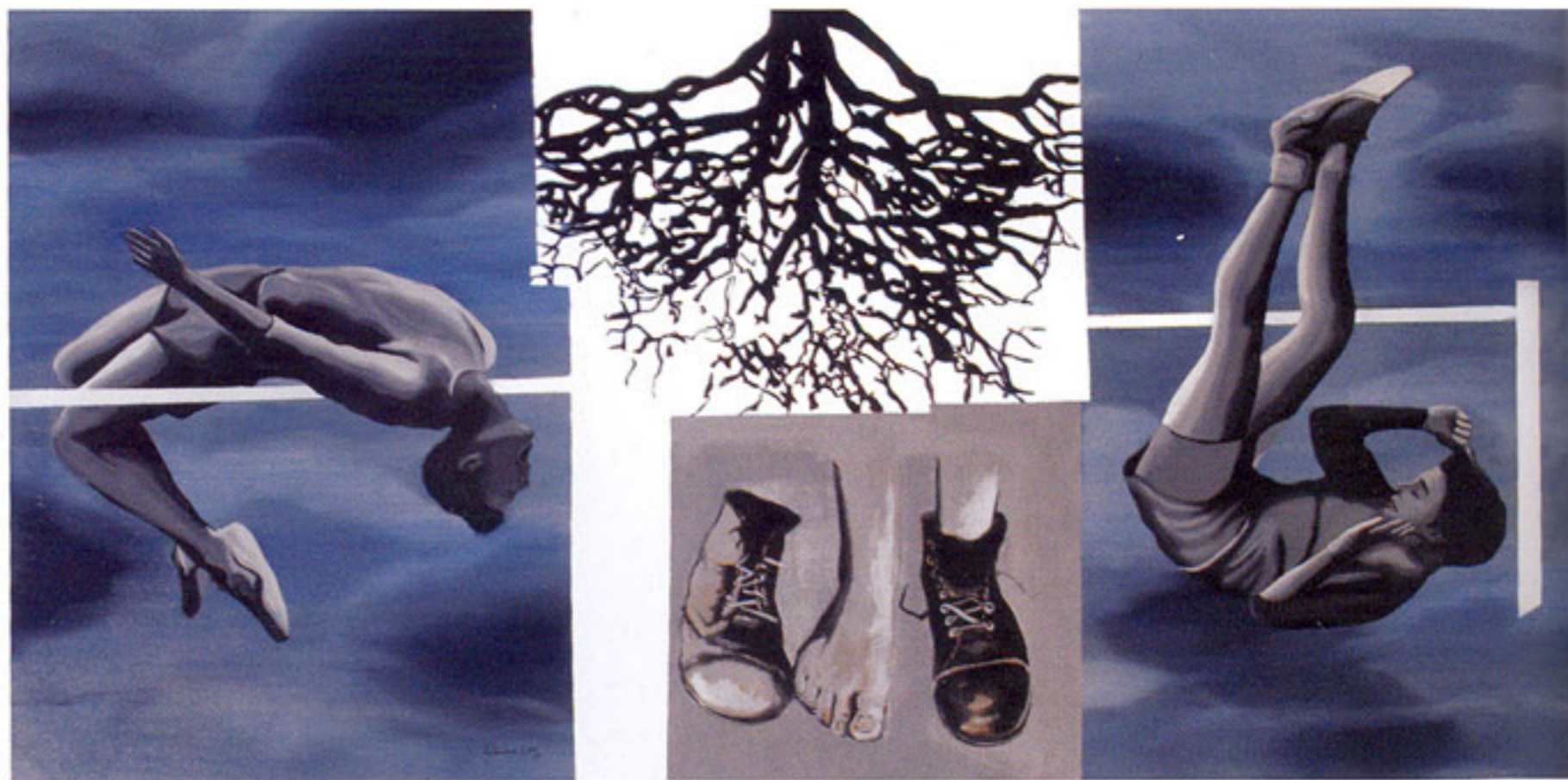
famous scene from Hindu mythology *Samudra Manthan* at the bottom of the book vendor's stall. Also known as the churning of the milk ocean, the story represents a person's spiritual journey. In order to achieve a sense of self-realization, one must train their ability to concentrate, withdraw all sense of desire, and practice austerity. In the story, each character also represents the good and bad qualities that a person possesses. By drawing a parallel analogy between the water basin and book vendor, Adivrekar concludes that, unless one opens up their delusional mind to get rid of their overflowing pride and ego, it is hard for them to achieve self-realization or *Amrit*.

Ever imaginative, the story, which pertains to excess is presented with a different twist. A painting of the blind watchmaker shows three images arranged horizontally. On the extreme right is a



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **Alice came to a fork in the road. "Which road do I take?" she asked. "Where do you want to go?" responded the Cheshire cat, "I don't know," Alice answered. "Then," said the cat, "it doesn't matter."**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

painting of a blind watchmaker done with a photographic effect. In the center sits an old image of the Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695). Finally, on the extreme left is a big sketch of a seemingly confused man covering his eyes. Unlike Adivrekar's previous works, the images found in this painting do not appear to be random. Rather, the painting is unified through a central theme: time. Christiaan Huygens is well known for his use of the pendulum to regulate clocks. A dedicated scientist, he is credited with formulating the wave-particle duality theory and modern calculus. His productive career represented a major step in the development of scientific innovation. Like Huygens, the blind watchmaker is also productive in his watch designs. Adivrekar uses the watchmaker as an analogy to argue for the existence of God. Like the good watchmaker, he points out that God's existence is proven through the design of the universe. On the other hand, scientific advancement undeniably plays a significant role in the advancement of society. Inevitably, some may be confused by the perennial struggle between the existence of the Creator and science. Adivrekar's personal philosophical interpretation states: "Some call blind the watchmaker who conceived of life, but it is his watch that strikes all of us blind." Adivrekar implies that an intelligent person could be blinded by their own intelligence; it becomes unfortunate when too much intelligence blinds them in a way that they do not wish to see at all. In the painting, the confused man is confronted with the images of Huygens (scientific intelligence) and the blind watchmaker (God's existence.) In his confusion, the man is unsure about the truth and he covers his eyes, refusing to see at all, thus blinded. In relation to the proverbs and Adivrekar's personal philosophy, the three images in his paintings serve as a moral tale that illustrates his proverb: "A man with one watch knows what time it is; a man with two watches is never quite sure." This is



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **The foot feels, the foot when it feels the ground**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

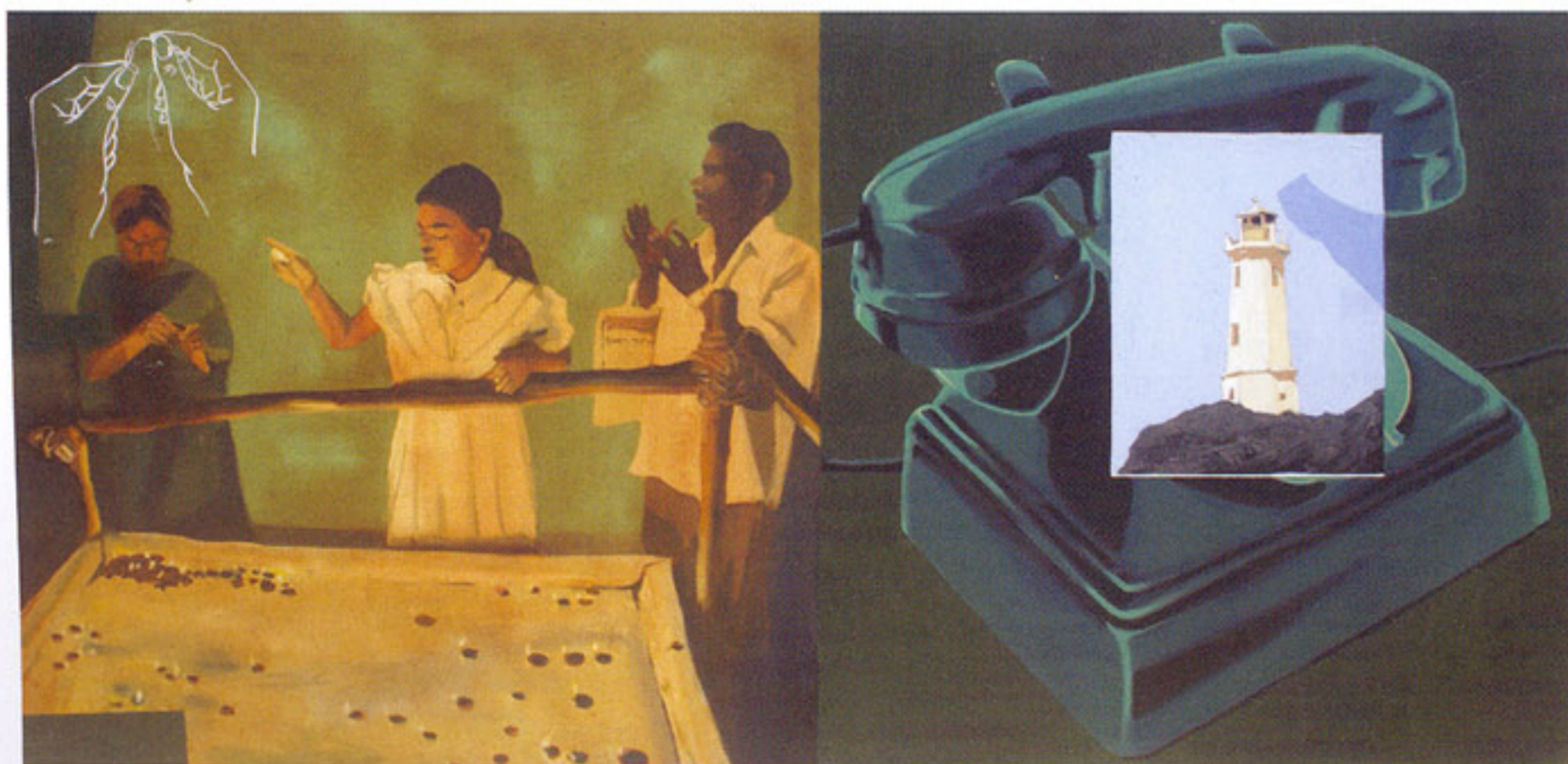
yet another example of how excess may not always give the best outcome.

**I**n *Every Move Brings a Change*, Adivrekar depicts two famous scenarios. On the left is an image of a 16th-century landscape painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569). In the painting, Bruegel incorporates more than 100 proverbs that pertain to townsfolk in the Netherlands. In the image, Bruegel produces a brilliant study of human activity. The townsfolk in the painting are in constant movement and interacting with one another. The figure of a woman described as "To carry fire in one hand and fire in another" literally depicts a two-faced lady who is ready to stir up trouble. Another shows a man "Banging his head against a brick wall," which is a representation of a person trying to achieve the impossible. At the center of the painting, Bruegel writes, "One wind on the distaff what the other spins" to describe two women engaging in idle gossip.

Adivrekar only includes half of Bruegel's original painting. In his own piece, while he maintains the use of lines and shapes of the figures, Adivrekar replaces the painting's original colors with brighter colors. The original roof was replaced with a surreal image of an old hand,

indicating movement. To the conventional observer, Bruegel's figures may appear random and unrelated. However, when given the appropriate proverbs, each movement tells a story. Each proverb describes the actions and the motivations of the townsfolk. Bruegel has given a new meaning to the lives of the people in his paintings. The visual metaphors would come alive to the observer. On the right side of Adivrekar's painting is an image of Kasparov and Roizman engrossed in a game of chess. Even viewers who are not familiar with how the game is played would know that chess involves interaction and confrontation of two make-believe "kingdoms." Although the key point of the game is to protect one's king, all the character pieces will need to move. In Adivrekar's version of Bruegel's painting the image of the chess game forms a system of relations.

Adivrekar distances himself from any particular group or artistic movement. Although he produces easily digestible images, the subject matter is not straightforward; meanings are not readily grasped. In order to understand his art, one must be willing to learn. Adivrekar is a deeply cultured and intelligent person. It is clear that he puts a lot of thought and meticulous planning into the construction of his work. Through his work, he demonstrates a deep passion for history, the arts, politics, literature, philosophy, and social issues. To him, appreciation for various aspects of humanity is more meaningful than creating an image on canvas for the sake of creating art. He wants his art to challenge his viewers' ways of thinking, encouraging them to broaden their horizons and expand their knowledge. Adivrekar's exhibition of 20 seminal works on his *Proverbs* series, to be shown at Museum of the National University of Singapore, from June 5 to August 16, 2009, will go some way to further appreciating his talent.  $\Delta$



Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar, **If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are - 2**, 2007, oil on canvas, 84 x 173 cm. From the *Proverbs* series.

Vera Wijaya is an arts writer who lives in Singapore.