

GLADSTONE GALLERY

"India, Jim Hodges," As told to David Ebony, *Art in America*, November 2011, 54-55.

INDIA JIM HODGES

A TRIP TO INDIA last winter was a surprise and a revelation. With friends and collaborators Eric Sharff and, later, Susan Bell Richard, I spent over six weeks traveling all around the country. We started in Mumbai and then went to Delhi, Agra, Bangalore, Mysore, Kerala and other places. The complexity and diversity of the sights, sounds, colors and textures of the place have inspired at least three of my large-scale recent works.

The visit was a profound experience, as I recognized there the spectrum of materiality and color

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Jim Hodges" at both Gladstone
Gallery spaces in New York,
Nov. 5-Dec. 23.

with which I have been working for many years. Though I'm from the Pacific Northwest, I found myself completely at home in India despite the fact that the intricacies and the complexities of the culture and landscape contrasted dramatically with my relatively simplistic Western mindset. It was a wake-up call in a way. I want my work to maintain a similar kind of energy and surprise factor.

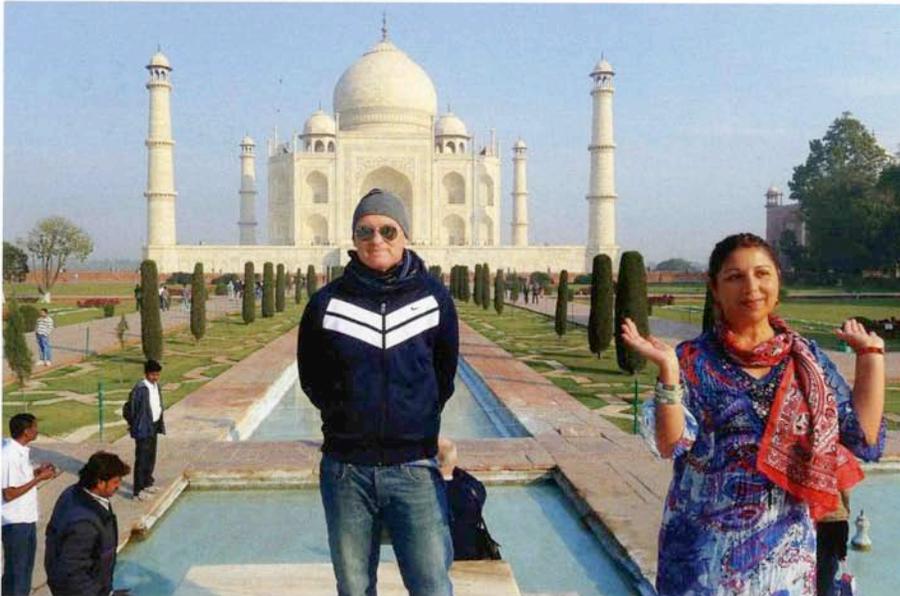
The liveliness of Hinduism—the day-to-day devotional practice of the religion—is amazing. People there are constantly attending to the religious statues, oiling them, clothing them, decorating them with bits of paper or gold-colored foil. Among these decorative materials there doesn't seem to be a hierarchy, at least in the streets or the temples. Statues will be

ornamented with flowers, sandalwood paste, even aluminum foil, with the emphasis on adornment and not on the cost of the materials. In fact, most of the adorning is part of a devotional act repeated over and over. There is a diversity of representation—in the use of abstract symbols as well as the literalizing attributes of the gods. I am attracted to that kind of merging of abstraction and realism.

I didn't actually make work in India. I took lots of notes and many photographs, although I chose not to bring a good camera, keeping myself free from the pressure to produce something while I was there. With my iPhone, I grabbed hundreds of images and hours of video. They all exist as a series of "Indian miniatures," I guess.

At times, the trip was difficult—the crowds can become overwhelming. But even the difficulties of traveling in India can be inspiring. Suddenly, at one moment, people surround you. As they greet you, you can see they're looking for access to you somehow. They want to touch you, they're curious, with a different sense of personal space, or they want something from you. But even that part I found fascinating. In New York, we are used to putting on the horse-blinders as we move through crowds. But there, it's kind of impossible.

Lessons came to me in varied forms. For instance, the first time I crossed the street in Jaipur in Rajasthan was one of the scari-



Jim Hodges in Agra, India.
Photo Susan Bell Richard.

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MUSE



Hodges: *Study for B.E. 1 Lilac*, 2011, Japanese silver leaf on linen with cardboard and walnut veneer, 11 by 10 by 1½ inches. Photo Ronald Amstutz.

est experiences of my life. We had just pulled over to get some cash out of an ATM. Jumping out of the car with Eric and me, our guide, Jamini, stepped into the rushing river of speeding traffic. Looking neither left nor right but assuredly, with directness and purpose, moving one foot in front of the other, he sidestepped moving cars, and just kept on walking. With my heart pounding in my throat, and legs shaking, I managed to stick close to his side, panicking that any second one of the approaching vehicles would clip us or worse! Eric, in his confusion and fear, instinctively started to run. Our guide immediately shouted, "Don't run. You'll get hurt. Walk slowly and the cars will move around you. If you run, the cars won't know what to do." This was it: a simple instruction, the logic and the way. There's a kind of

simplicity of collaboration on a huge public level in India. There's an order within the chaos, an agreed upon system of give and take. Later, reflecting on this event, Jamini expressed the foundation of this unspoken rule. "We are Hindu," he said. "We believe in destiny, so we compromise and that is why we are happy."

Rajasthan is one of the most beautiful parts of India, with spectacular terraced landscapes contrasting with sharp outcroppings of light brown stones, quickly shifting from bare, bleak, dry and pale stretches to rich, luscious fields of emerald green and yellow. One vivid memory is of a group of women wearing garments in a rainbow of colors and walking in a

JIM HODGES is an artist based in New York. He was recently appointed acting chair of the sculpture department at Yale University.

line through a mustard-gold landscape. Some were carrying heavy bundles balanced on their heads; one held a baby to her side. The towns in Rajasthan are either Muslim or Hindu, resulting in many mosques and temples. Throughout the landscape, numerous temples can be seen, adorned with colorful flags. When I asked our driver about the significance of the various hues, he said simply, "God loves color."

I am thinking about all of this for my work: to strive for a kind of openness, and also to accept a certain level of mystery, the understanding that you can't know everything. To embrace uncertainty is important. What could happen next? Above all, it is the spirit and energy of India that moved me.

THE HOLY CITY, Varanasi, was one of my favorites. Even the abject aspects of the place were moving. One day, while I was taking notes there, I dropped my pen in the gutter, basically one of the open sewers that run throughout the city. The pen didn't actually sink. The muck was so dense it just stuck there, and when I pulled it out and washed it off in a nearby cistern, I had a kind of revelation. The way the dirt came off the pen, its thickness and color contrasting with the shiny metal—how the muck slowly dissolved, giving way to the material of the pen, the thinning of the murky black residue—still has my attention.

Back in New York, after a rain, I took paper out to the street and let it merge with the gutter. Then I brought the paper back to my studio and dried the sheets on the floor. They've stayed there, gathering scars and grime from my day-to-day traffic. I've applied silver and gold to a few of them. I'm still waiting to see where the others will take me.

—As told to David Ebony

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