

ArtReview

Tala Madani *Shit Moms*

David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles 7 September–19 October

Shit, even for the most anal among us, is a powerful lede. Thus *Shit Moms*, Tala Madani's second show at David Kordansky, commands our attention even as it makes explicit its impishly manipulative premise, a grotesque disavowal of common decency, the sort that filmmaker John Waters might thrill to. Madani's exhibition of mostly oils on linen and a few animated shorts prominently features diapered putti, both male and female. The infants are coupled with golemlike maternal female figures composed of sludgy refuse who accompany them in various acts of childish horseplay turned abject.

Madani is at her most acute when rendering these babies, their unsteady stances and protruding tummies delineated as tenderly as those of a Titian Christ. Yet it's not the infants – who in the paintings *Shit Mom (Quads)*, *Shit Mom (Disco Babies)* and *Shit Mom (Dream Riders)* (all works 2019) appear unabashedly fascinated by excrement, much as they frequently seem in life – to whom Madani invites our simultaneous empathy and disgust, but rather their female caregivers. Just as she courted female revulsion at the grotesquely enlarged and flaccid penises of the adult men shown in

earlier works, here she plays on a gender-specific fear: the possibility of being a bad mother. A theme that has seen an upsurge of late in memoirs (part of what Parul Sehgal described in *The New York Times* last year as a 'sudden flurry of fascination' with mothers, especially at their most insecure and least sufficient), motherhood is here painted at its nightmarish nadir. Unsupervised babies roam what look like squatters' dens, huddle in unlit warehouses or, most damningly, endure the caresses of mothers so squalid that, rather than wiping their offspring's shit away, their touches leave brown smears.

These scenes of digested matriarchs are somewhat abruptly intercut by largescale diptychs invoking the theme of cinema. As in Madani's show at 303 Gallery in New York last year, depictions of projectors dominate the two largest paintings on view at Kordansky. In *Corner Projection (Panic)* a projector throwing a blurred vision of fleeing childlike bodies onto an adjacent panel is safely confined within the borders of the film screen. Meanwhile, in *Corner Projection (Time)*, viewers appear to run from the projection much like the 1895 audience who purportedly fled the theatre when the Lumière

brothers debuted their footage of a train appearing to be headed straight for their seats. In the last century of cinematic advances, filmmakers' initial attempts to elicit physical responses from their viewers has been replaced by appeals to psychological triggers. Thinking about this show, I kept coming back to a scene from 1996's *Trainspotting* in which the hapless Spud, a member of a crew of Scottish heroin addicts, emerges at his girlfriend's family's breakfast table after having discovered that he has shat the bed, and his subsequent mortification when her mother wrests the dirty sheet from him, splattering shit over the entire family in the process. The scene's impact lies less in its graphic obscenity than its underlying pathos of having soiled someone's mother. One has to remind oneself that (unlike with Waters, who notoriously did in fact make performers eat faeces) it's only a movie.

Madani invites a visceral response from her viewer. But her invocation of fictive cinema, and the distancing it provides, leads one to wonder if these works are meant as a sincere commentary on our maternal fears and hangups (both primal and evergreen) or as a mockery of them in life and art alike. *Cat Kron*



Shit Mom (Dream Riders), 2019, oil on linen, 196 × 203 × 2 cm.
Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles