

ARTFORUM

Tala Madani

303 GALLERY

In "Corner Projections," Tala Madani's recent exhibition of paintings and animation, the blunt, raunchy, and cartoony directness of attack that characterized her previous New York show, in 2010, was not entirely gone from her pictorial tool kit, but the paintings here were



Tala Madani, *The Shadow*, 2018, oil on linen, 80 x 80".

much more oblique. Stylistically, she's dialed down her palette and added elements of illusionism. Most of the new paintings were in shades of gray, sometimes with a few small patches of prismatic color. As well, the artist provided some tricky light effects, which rendered the works a bit too slick at times, yet all the more potent for it.

The paintings' protagonists were still all male, as has been the case since Madani's art first hit the scene right after she received her MFA from Yale University in 2006, but they weren't all adults as before. In *The Shadow* (all works 2018), an infant—we just assume the kid is a boy because it's a Madani painting—crawled toward an out-of-view light source and cast a vast, looming shadow in the painting's foreground. It was a telling prequel to the portentous doings in most of the other pieces in the show, suggesting that the terrifying shadows that haunt us come from deep in our childhood (Freud would have agreed) and that the dark effects we have on each other are rooted, paradoxically, in our attraction to the light. The men she depicted in other works remained something like this haunted baby. Thus, in *The Ascendant*—the painting that seemed most like Madani's earlier work due to its use

of color and its focus on the figure—a mustached man in a gridded tank top and red underwear appeared to imagine that he was rising (in Muybridgesque stop-motion) toward a light above—a heavenly one, I suppose. But what are those brown brushstrokes flowing toward his face? Is the light he adores shitting on him? In the world Madani portrays, aspiration is met with humiliation.

Most striking here were the two large diptychs, installed in corners of the gallery, that gave the show its title. In *Corner Projection with Squares*, five shadowy male figures wielded handheld projectors that cast a few rectangles onto a smaller canvas catty-corner to the big horizontal one they inhabited, while in *Corner Projection with Prism Refraction and Buckets*, four men holding projectors were joined by others—one makes a V sign with his hand, while another, oddly enough, proffers a white rabbit; these are presumably what interrupt the light beams to cast the shadows intruding upon the delicately colored and illuminated rectangles on the smaller canvas. A seventh man held a bucket and spray can. In these works, and most of the others in the show, the casual violence and mayhem that used to make up Madani's subject matter is now sublimated, though it was still clear that what's being projected is not really light, but some irrational desire. In case there was any doubt of this, the videos screened in a separate room, which retained more of the comic brutality of the earlier paintings, made it obvious enough. In *The Audience*, we saw the heads of four men watching a movie in which a hapless fellow keeps going up an escalator. At the top of it, a gang awaits—they beat him then toss him back down to the bottom, repeatedly. Eventually, they dismember the poor fellow (it was hard not to think of Jamal Khashoggi, though of course the piece was made before the journalist's murder). In another episode, a giant phallus descended from the sky crushes some men below. Men, according to psychoanalysis, are such thanks to their possession of the penis—it signifies the power of their gender. But Madani understands that this so-called power of theirs annihilates them in the end.

—Barry Schwabsky