

TALA MADANI

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A sculpture, an installation, a photograph or a painting—to cite only the most prevalent mediums—always seems suspicious to me when they try for instant seduction. Doesn't the quality of an artwork depend, in varying degrees, on its ability to resist our first

glance? Modern art has shielded us from these systems of seduction. From Manet to Pollock, by way of Warhol or Filliou, it has taught us to question our spontaneous inclinations and the baser ideals ascribed by the times. When the artist appeals to our taste, which Marcel Duchamp defined as "the repetition of a habit," it panders to the least interesting parts of us: our sense of compromise, our group instincts, the return to a familiar routine and a single, unchanging form of enjoyment. And yet the apparatus of seduction has never been so sophisticated: today the *known* and familiar—slick, soothing images that can be easily grasped and understood—are the weapons of an economy of attention which seeks to capture our "available brain time" and unleash our consumerist drives. Our world is designed to please, it therefore shrinks to *what we already know*.

As for bourgeois "good taste" which now goes by a thousand different names, not only is it produced on an industrial scale, but it is also beamed into all our homes by social media. The globalized economy, oriented toward the visual as a force of attraction, has thus coopted all images for its own benefit, scaling them to its own dimensions. And though it may run on algorithms, seductive images are their trusty sidekick. And therein lies the importance of holding to this aesthetic principle: resist the siren call of "pretty," latch onto and train one's eyes on the artworks that don't solicit,

have nothing to communicate or sell us, and which beckon to us in a much more profound voice. In today's world, this principle has proven to be salutary, imperative even, and should be applied broadly.

It could be, however, that this has been the source of many misunderstandings concerning contemporary art. The refusal to be seduced is swiftly interpreted as an abnegation of beauty. For some, it means that we favor the idea or concept, or are even indifferent to form. Indeed, aesthetic experience is often summed up in a black-or-white judgment: either it's beautiful or ugly. Banking on the fact that the artist always aims to please, we presume they've missed their mark. They are therefore imposters.

Those that deliberately exclude themselves from this operation of seduction are treated as "provocateurs," accused of not respecting the tacit contract that ties us to images.

That is where a second aesthetic criterion must arise: what we qualify as "beautiful" in Western culture (but I'm using this term only for convenience), amounts to a powerful appeal. What is an artwork? Above all, a signal. If it is intended to last, a signal needs energy; and the energy which art summons turns out to be quite unique. It is this energetic alliance that comprises the phenomenon we call *beauty*. The artworks that we visit in museums are those that have conserved a power whose wavelength implies durability, and whose complexity, embedded in a form, allows us to explore it from multiple points of view. Reorganizing and transmitting these signals, the artist works to produce this energy in the form of his or her choice and it may last centuries. In other words, the successful artwork harnesses this fragile and random power, through which it perpetuates its capacity to disconcert, its power to address the viewer, across time. It continues to produce elements with which we can enter into dialogue – a modulation of frequency. It was in this sense that Marcel Duchamp said "it's the viewer who makes the painting." When the conversation is over, that is when the viewer is gone, the work

turns into a multicolored surface, into a mere object.

When I first saw Tala Madani's work, it didn't seduce me. Her paintings even bothered me; they created a certain, initially formal, uneasiness. Her figurative painting representing men, rendered in large brushstrokes, somewhere between abstraction and cartoon, was at the very least discomfiting. Next the uneasiness was iconographic: Tala Madani develops repetitive male-dominant imagery, with a grotesque and of course caricatural bent. It is plausible that my malaise was reinforced by this association between manliness and absurdity, aggressiveness, violence and inconsistency. In Madani's world, the male is a vain, vindictive apparition with a herd mentality. Generally Middle Eastern in appearance, he initially seems to refer to the artist's native land; but there are no specific references to Iran in her paintings, whose backgrounds are monochromatic and spaces generic. Parking lots, cells, impersonal interiors: the venues in which the various elements of Madani's scenes unfold is stifling and even prison-like. These are fragments of a unified or even totalitarian world that reveal no outside context. "For me," she explains, "painting comes from the fact that I need an abstract space for my ideas, because the physical space where I live is not conducive to what I want to do. The square becomes the variable space where any action is possible." In the history of modern painting, this geometric vision of experience inevitably brings to mind Francis Bacon and his theater of the flesh. There were male faces in Bacon's work too, except that their twisted bodies and windswept, brush-battered faces seem, by contrast, to belong to a stable world built on the bedrock of classicism. Madani doesn't disfigure her male puppets, instead she places their stereotyped bodies in a world of absolute butchery. At odds with Bacon's pictorial system, she reveals horror from the outside. Mutilations, torture or sadism don't come from within, as in the work of the British painter, but from

outside. In Madani's works, there are only standardized bodies, group think and behaviors that seem devoid of interiority, rubbing against each other in gleeful incoherence. Everyone does the same thing, is dressed in the same way, and these repetitive figures function like icons in an undogmatic and faceless totalitarianism. What Tala Madani shows is the image of a society controlled by all and for all – a social network gone haywire. Francis Bacon paints the human being; Tala Madani paints a mental landscape.

Almost all her paintings seem to come from a single scene, a "square" where the actors of a silent film might be said to perform, like fragments of a single world. They function like short sequences or excerpts from a pop-up animation. Infinite loops on *Vine*, flashy snapshots on *Instagram*, customizable images on *Snapchat*: Tala Madani bases her pictorial practice on a diet of online imagery on social networks, and she uses the visual codes of advertising to underscore its negativity. In her animated films, the analogy is even clearer: the repetitive movements of her characters, their graphical efficiency, the brutality of scenes, the uniform backgrounds, the contrast of colors—all the elements of Madani's aesthetic refer back to visual communication and digital advertising. On the technical side, she substitutes classical painting's *light/color* duality with a wide range of special effects. Color is sometimes transformed into an object, into a solid material, while light is treated as something artificial. In her most recent series of paintings, which includes *Shitty Disco* and *Rear Projection* (2016), she uses a luminous, artificial light evoking a computer turned on in the darkness, or a digital iPhone flashlight. Light as a special effect can even become the center of a composition, as in *The Cleaner* (2016). In the center, a luminous spotlight of unbearable density; in the foreground, however, a figure with his back to us, himself lit by another light source to his left, throws a bucket of paint at the blinding splotch. In Madani's work, light never shows

anything, it blinds the viewer like a spotlight: too bright, it impairs the gaze. In the 2013 series *Rear Projection*, it literally shines out of the characters' behinds and illuminates their excretions, reminding us of a searchlight whose purpose is to leave nothing cloaked in darkness. It's a police dragnet, a crime-fighting tool, an aggressive raid.

Whereas light is represented by Madani as a tool of control, the paint, on the other hand, renders it opaque or covers what is intolerable to behold. In an astonishing reversal of the range of the visible, Madani's painting concentrates on the personal and unapologetically disgraceful part of human behaviors (sex, biological needs, violence), even as it consistently hides something from us. "Death, like the sun, cannot be looked at steadily," wrote La Rochefoucauld. Hence in another series, we see a single open door from inside a dark room letting through various qualities of light and smoke: an immutable place, a minimal layout regulated by the play of differences. Tala Madani paints variations.

If we consider it in relation to itself, that is, to its history and techniques, we miss the heart of modern painting. For it develops its narrative using the idea of painting's demise. Its destiny thus unfolds within the relationship it creates with other modes of image-making, within the pressures exerted on it by forces threatening it with obsolescence. It is through this frantic dialogue with photography, cinema, television and now the internet and phone apps, that painting runs alongside (or counter to) the times. Take Gustave Courbet: he was doubtless the first painter to take the appearance of photography into account, and to *respond* to it.

Youssef Ishaghpour sums up this issue by writing "photography is the trace, the effect and the domain of light, while Courbet's painting consists of a clear expression of the concrete."¹ This weight of physicality, this insistent presence of the subject opposing photography's "image of absence," is the foundation of Courbet's *realism*. Rather than a competition with

the optic veracity brought about by photography, this pictorial realism represents the exact opposite: it was an "aesthetic founded on action, engagement and the capacity for transformation."² It is painting's connection to the real that plays out in Courbet's acknowledgment of mechanical recording, and through it he reinvents realism as a materialism and as an action. The genius of his idea is that the "real" we are talking about in painting isn't about imitating faces or landscapes, instead it is formed in the act of painting itself. In the relationship between art and reality, everything plays out in this real, meaning in the capacity of artistic practice to transform the world by situating itself at the point of intersection between reality (physical or social) and representation. Photography is only the first episode in this long history. Current technologies have deeply modified our relationship to the real, to such a degree that the images that circulate today on social networks seem to want desperately to prove that it still exists, since we've experienced it. Yet the selfies taken in front of a monument or an artwork testify to a co-presence, rarely to an experience: they signify "I was there." The millions of snapshots posted to Instagram or Facebook every day refer back to a totally different version of the real than Gustave Courbet's. They function like acts validating an experience, stamped by communication. It is this state of the image, and this impoverishment of experience, that Tala Madani's paintings resist like a fun-house mirror put up to the visual production of our times. To capture the era, Courbet painted *L'Atelier*, which is a closed space. In Madani's "squares" it's the brutish real of our era that finds itself on display in ostensibly trivialized forms: violence, vulgarity, processes of control, and the systems she invents to mask them.

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NOTES

1 Youssef Ishaghpour: *Courbet. Le portrait de l'artiste dans son atelier* (Circé, 2011).
P.99.

2 Quoted by Catherine Strasser: "Le Temps de la production", école des arts décoratifs de Strasbourg, p. 26.