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Desires Unrestrained: Tala Madani Takes Irrepressibility to the Whitney Biennial



Tala Madani, *Primer*, 2015, oil on linen.
JOSH WHITE/COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES
AND PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON

In Tala Madani's paintings, slightly overweight men pee, poop, and masturbate together. Her characters, almost always men, seem like they're outside the restrictions of the everyday world—they can happily smear shit on each other and throw lassos around their distended penises because no one is there to judge them. "I'm not ever trying to make something funny," the artist told me, speaking by phone from Los Angeles before the opening of the Whitney Biennial in which she appears this week. But then, a qualification: "I mean, okay, sometimes I am. Certain paintings I'm serious about, and certain paintings I'm laughing my ass off."

Over the past decade, Madani's paintings and animations has conjured a universe where desires go unrestrained. Her work has become recognizable for stylized tableaux, which are often devoid of women or background details. Men are given free rein to act inappropriately, ejaculating on themselves and occasionally disco-dancing in dark, void-like spaces. Loosely painted yet tightly composed, her pictures are playful studies of desires that, in the real world, might get repressed. Madani compared her work to clowning. "Clowns can be dead serious while trying to make you laugh at something," she said. "It's serious stuff that's been processed through humor."

Madani's new works at the Whitney Biennial make up one of her first major presentations in New York. Her art is more often shown in London and Los Angeles, though that will likely change soon. In May, David Kordansky Gallery, which represents her in L.A., will devote its entire Frieze New York art fair booth to her paintings. For the Whitney, Madani made a series of new paintings as well as a likely attention-getting new animation, *Sex Ed by God*, that features God giving lessons on how best to perform cunnilingus.

The half-serious, half-raunchy tone of Madani's work comes out of caricature. She has discussed being influenced by the cutting social critiques of William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier, while at the same time drawing on political cartoons that appeared in humor magazines she read while growing up in Iran. She moved to

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America when she was 15, and one of her animations is currently on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art as part of its rehang including artists who would today be affected by the Trump administration's travel ban.

Madani sees it as her duty to inject a female perspective into the lineage she follows. Historically, she said, women "really don't have the agency to [make] social criticism." But why, then, are there almost no women in her work? She responded inquisitively, wondering if a woman painting female figures would be asked why she is not painting men. "Society is obsessed with correct genders for correct gender expressions," Madani said. "Sometimes, for me, the 'he' in the paintings is not so different from myself. I don't feel like I'm not talking about myself or my attitude."



Tala Madani, *Son Down*, 2015, oil on linen.
JOSH WHITE/COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES AND PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON



Tala Madani, *Projections*, 2015, oil on linen.
JOSH WHITE/COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES AND PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON

More recently, Madani has combined her influence from caricature with a newfound interest in film. Since moving to L.A. five years ago, she has started going to the movies more. "The influences have become a bit broader, outside the realm of fine arts," she said. "Quite raunchy!" She said she had been thinking a lot about *Café Flesh*, a 1982 porn she saw at a series about experimentation with sex on film. "L.A. has opened up a lot of esoteric film experiences," she said.



Tala Madani, *Babeless*, 2017, oil on linen
FREDRIK NILSEN/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON

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Projectors have figured into her recent work. In part, this is a way of parodying painters' obsession with light: by having light sources in the picture, Madani undermines the skill that usually goes into crafting their works. But it also creates a "commingling of light and the body," she said. "It's about what gets projected from your body."

Several new paintings in the Whitney Biennial include male protagonists, this time with light coming not from projectors but from within their buttocks and their chests. "Whenever I imagined the projection was coming from the rear, the ideas that would come to me were decomposition and death, degeneration and shit," Madani said. When light was turned around to emit from the front, her imagination was triggered in different ways. She realized that, in a rarity for her paintings, a male figure could project what she called "maternal energy"—images of the Madonna.

For all the tongue-in-cheek humor on display, Madani said she hopes her characters have fully formed personalities. She brought up *O*, a 2012 painting in which a man sitting on a rolling chair strokes his penis, which is so large that it arches over his head. He smiles as he ejaculates; the background is a pink haze, to suggest lust. "I had this desire to paint someone embracing [himself], in a really loving, respectful way," the artist said. Though this could be read as satire of the a distinctly male brand of narcissism, it is also, for Madani, a genuine portrayal of freedom and desire. "He's kind of loving his very big dick," she added, tenderly. "I'm giving him the space to really enjoy it."