

Art in America

Shit Moms and Cake Men: Tala Madani at the Museum of Contemporary Art

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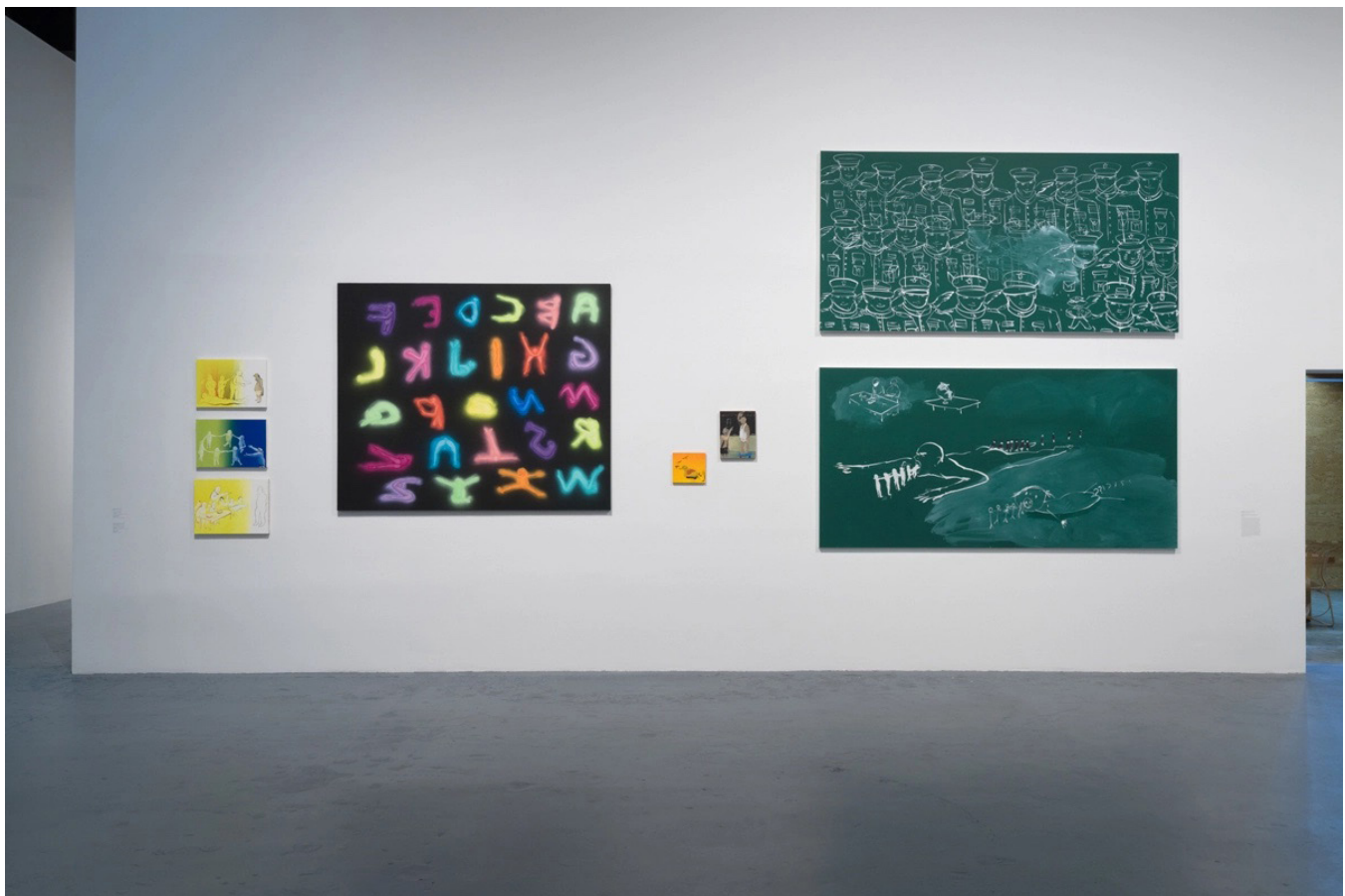


Tala Madani: *Wrong House*, 2014, video, 3 minutes, 30 seconds.
COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

In Tala Madani's stop-motion animation *Wrong House* (2014), a chubby, nude, bald man paces a lonely apartment. Soon, the mailman arrives, only to be hoisted aloft, strangled, and unceremoniously tossed aside, lifeless. A series of subsequent visitors, including the milkman and a pair of fresh-faced proselytizers, all meet the same fate. As each man's neck is wrung, blood spurts out, seeping across the floor and covering the naked antihero's body. Finally, he exits and the animation ends, leaving more questions than answers. Despite the horrific wantonness, one cannot help but titter at the video's deadpan, cartoony screenplay and buffoonish pilgarlic. The morbid humor is characteristic of Madani's paintings and animations, which flesh out the sordid tendencies lurking beneath the veneer of human respectability.

Responding to the preponderance of attractive ladies and heroic gentlemen in paintings throughout art history, Madani is perhaps best known for her depictions of men making asses of themselves and, more recently, women fashioned simply of dung; but as her first North American survey, "Biscuits," currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, reveals, the feminist critique inherent in her gendered satire is only one facet of her larger investigation into how societal ideals are formed and perpetuated. Building on the dark comedies of Honoré Daumier, James Ensor, and Paul McCarthy, she wields her cynical brush to cast *Homo sapiens* as a sad, sorry, brutish lot, no less comical nor contemptible than other creatures we deem inferior.

Spanning 15 years and containing 118 paintings and 18 animations, the show is organized not chronologically (Madani frequently revisits bodies of work) but thematically. Much of the work addresses how conformity and obedience are taught and enforced. The exhibition opens with *Perfect Copy* (2022), a monumental painting of a page from a children's coloring book depicting an avuncular-looking policeman dutifully filled in with blue scribbles, intimating the inculcation of questionable values: faith in law enforcement can prove injurious, if not fatal. Further along are other education-themed works, including two sardonic trompe l'oeil canvases resembling chalkboards, followed by *Reverse Alphabet* (2010), a painting of 26 naked men contorting in ridiculous poses to form letters in mirror-image. The pitfalls of bequeathed knowledge are perhaps most clearly illustrated in *The Womb* (2019), where a TV-watching fetus, either inspired or frustrated by the chronicle of world history playing out onscreen, pulls out a pistol and



View of Tala Madani's exhibition "Biscuits," 2022–23, showing *Reverse Alphabet*, 2010.
PHOTO BY JEFF MCLANE

shoots holes in the uterine wall—an especially resonant, if ambiguous, scene in light of recent spates of violence and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Other pieces consider interpersonal influence on a smaller scale, in scenes where an individual or a band thereof acts as self-appointed goader or enforcer. Men talk each other into dangerous acts such as trying on nooses; Madani makes frequent references to self-destruction and futility. The victim in the animation *Mr. Time* (2018) ascends an escalator only to be accosted by a quintet of identical ruffians who push him back down, a scenario that repeats until the character's severed limbs and torso stubbornly inch up the escalator on their own. In *Fan* (2020), one man watches a video of another blown away by the titular appliance and proceeds to smash his own fan with a hammer, after which he promptly sweats and finally melts. The simple animation speaks to the perilous assumptions inherent in learning from watching others, as well as to man's capacity for sabotaging his own well-being.

Madani's depictions of males may be farcical, but they read as extensions of the competitive, ritualistic, and often dangerous shenanigans that transpire in patriarchies' homosocial echo chambers. The artist's emphasis on the opposite sex began with the 2005–08 series "Cake Men," which debuted in her first solo show at Lombard Freid Projects in New York. Those scenes of men smashing pastries into each other's faces or using candles to burn tattoos of birthday cakes into their skin provided the basis for the bald, bearded, middle-aged galoots who continue to populate her work. These archetypal characters were originally presented as men from Madani's native Iran, but their generic, cartoonish appearance and ambiguous settings allow them easily to symbolize untoward everymen from anywhere. Fueled by id and ineptitude, they communally sip from giant disemboweled kidneys; offer one another enemas at inopportune times; and sprout grass from their pubic areas, which they tenderly water with garden pails, taking turns chewing on the overgrowth. When they aren't busy leering through 3D glasses at oversize images of little girls lifting their skirts, the lecherous louts flagellate themselves with their own grotesquely elongated penises. After a while, the comedic vignettes begin to feel similar, cohering into an imaginary world of dystopic masculine hegemony.

But neither does Madani's own gender escape her incisive eye. Deeper in the bowels of the museum, things take a feminine turn. A spacious gallery covered in lush, leafy wallpaper serves as a shrine to "Shit Moms," an ongoing series inspired in 2019 by the artist's own experience as a new mother. Originating from a painterly accident, Madani's shit mom is the squalid opposite of King Midas: Everything she touches is besmirched with fecal sludge, a whimsical play on notions of mothers never being good enough to satisfy societal expectations. In *Shit Mom Animation 1* (2021), the excremental matriarch, bored and alone, saunters insouciantly through lavish interiors apparently sourced from design magazines, dirtying them in the process. Extending the defecational character's presence into three dimensions, messy brown smears of latex paint defile the installation *Wallpaper with Shit Mom* (2022), bringing to mind the story of how Eve was blamed for ruining the paradisiacal order of Eden.

In the exhibition's final room, Madani's scatology transmutes into the debut of her latest series, "Cloud Mommies," begun this year. As fluffy and white as cuddly poodles, the



View of Madani's installation *Wallpaper with Shit Mom*, 2022–23, at MOCA LA.
PHOTO JEFF MCLANE/COURTESY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

nebulous madonnas on these giant canvases tower high in the heavens, dwarfing the viewer. Barely there stick figures eagerly hold out large bowls to catch droplets falling from the nipples of *Cloud Mommy (Milky)*, 2022, as though she were providential amid drought. For all their apparent optimism, a degree of skepticism also underlies these portrayals of cumulate water vapor, which is, after all, intangible and ever-changing. If the shit moms represent women unable to embody impossible ideals, perhaps the empty-real cloud mummies *are* the ideals that no one can ever attain. Yet there they float, elusive and shape-shifting, across the sky of the collective unconscious of Madani's dreams.