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Tala Madani: Biscuits review — paintings of sharp scatological satire

The Iranian-born artist's show at MOCA in Los Angeles is unafraid to pull viewers down into the muck

Jonathan Griffin January 11, 2023



Tala Madani's 'Key Words (Holiday)' (2021) © Courtesy the artist; Pilar Corrias; David Kordansky Gallery; 303 Gallery. Photo: Elon Schoenholz

Tala Madani, who was born in 1981 in Tehran but now lives in LA, has been exhibiting her outrageously funny, politically caustic paintings and animations since the mid-2000s. She has long shown herself to be a deeply skilful painter, even virtuosic, as visitors to her mid-career survey *Biscuits* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles can judge, although her ability sometimes manifests in surprising ways. She has established herself

as a master of the faecal smear, just as she is adept at painting the prismatic effects of projected light.

Although her themes have remained broadly consistent — preposterous masculinity, authoritarianism, shame, motherhood, scatology — this extensive exhibition demonstrates her tonal range and astounding formal inventiveness. Once pigeonholed as the profane Iranian feminist who paints funny fat men, Madani has expanded her reach.

A giant painting of a smiling, saluting police officer greets visitors to *Biscuits*, his features rendered in crisp outline and his uniform a mass of furious blue scribbles. "Perfect Copy" (2022) is based on a colouring-in exercise Madani's daughter brought home from school. Through Madani's ironic transposition, this icon of state authority is humbled by a little girl and her mother. The canvas's monumental scale is conceptual; at more than 14ft wide, it signals the seriousness with which Madani approaches what many consider the artless, silly, or infantile. It sets the tone for the exhibition.



Three works from Madani's 'Cloud Mommies' series © Jeff McLane

The next painting viewers encounter is the panoramic "New Landscape" (2022), in which we gaze up between a naked man's splayed legs. A misty light emanates from his anus; miniature, baldheaded men creep towards it, proffering drooping turds like sacrificial gifts. Don't spend too long trying to decode Madani's allegories; the world she portrays is purposely absurd and anarchic.

Madani's paintings appear to have come together swiftly, mostly in oils on linen or canvas. Her style is improvisatory, deft but economical. Figures are painted in a few quick lines on to flat grounds; spray-paint produces soft miasmas of colour. Sometimes she screen-prints backgrounds, then paints figures on to them later.

A new series in oil on linen emulates the look of school blackboards, even including the smears where the white chalk has been ineffectually dusted off. This simple but effective

technique sends up the museum artist's status as cultural pedagogue. For another series, *Peter and Jane*, Madani contracted Chinese artists to copy illustrations from *Key Words Reading Scheme*, the British textbooks from which she and her Iranian classmates first learnt English. She then embellished the paintings with her own interjections, including the tubby little bald men who populate so many of her canvases. I laughed out loud at "Key Words (Holiday)" (2021), in which a smiling 1960s dad drives his two kids with a huge dung pile (added by Madani) strapped to the roof of their car.



'Bouquet' (2006) © Collection of Tala Madani. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

Madani's art may be funny, but it can also be horrifying, sad, empathetic and humane. It derives from the artist's experience of unjust and irrational societal structures both in Iran and in the west. (She moved to the US when she was 13, and later lived in Berlin and Amsterdam.) Some of her hardest-hitting pieces, however, are not her satires of the patriarchy (which can seem abstract and generalised) but her confessional paintings and animations dealing with her own struggles as a parent.

In 2019 Madani began a series titled *Shit Moms*. In the painting "Shit Mother I" (2019), a brown, barely human form lies prone beneath spotlights; four babies clamber over her

body, two of them appearing to put pieces of her in their mouths. (The Sisyphean effort of trying to prevent small children from ingesting toxic substances is one that any parent will relate to.)



'Shit Mother I' (2019) © Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Jeff McLane

Shit Mom spoils whatever she touches. In one gallery, huge, catastrophic swipes of brown paint besmirch the leafy wallpaper. In "Shit Mom Animation" (2021), one of the several stop-motion videos included in the show, she traipses around upscale interiors (photos taken from magazines) leaving her muddy, excremental trail behind her. It is worth reminding ourselves: it's only paint.

One of her more awful visions is brought to life in the animation "Mr Time" (2018), in which a man ascends and descends a set of escalators, at each rotation getting shoved down by a group of men at the top, and successively losing parts of his battered body. By the end, just bloody stumps are shuffling from escalator to escalator. Importantly, however, Mr Time does not die; the animation loops indefinitely.

If Madani's work is too gruesome or obscene for some, they may find their sensibilities soothed by the last gallery in the exhibition, where she unveils her latest series on canvases more than 14ft high. In "Cloud Mommies", the mother's body has transmogrified from bodily waste to water vapour, ascending from the ground into the blue firmament where she floats peacefully along. Close inspection reveals childlike finger-paintings on the paintings' sublime surfaces: noughts and crosses here, stick figures there.



A still from Tala Madani's 'Mr Time' (2018) © Courtesy the artist; Pilar Corrias; David Kordansky Gallery; 303 Gallery

Nothing escapes Madani's defiling touch, it seems. Of course, her broader point is that many of those things traditionally considered sacred — the nuclear family, patriarchal seniority, state authority — are themselves tainted. Only by opening ourselves to all that we normally try to repress or sublimate, Madani proposes, might we ascend to a place of freedom.

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