

Tala Madani

PAINT MISBEHAVING,

Text by Robert Shore
Portrait by Adam Laycock



Reading Light, 2013, oil on linen, 41 x 35.5 cm,
courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Joshua White

Born in Tehran and now living in LA, Tala Madani has established one of the most distinct painting styles in recent years. Her latest works, however, point in new directions, both in terms of style and subject matter – 3D vaginas and Ladybird children’s book imagery are a long way away from her usual territory with its hairy men in heavily ritualized scenarios... She talks to Robert Shore about these new departures.



2013 was a big year for Tala Madani, whose paintings showing cartoon-like scenes of ritualistic male bonding have won her an avid following in the art world. In February, the Moderna Museet in Malmö filled its Turbine Hall with almost a hundred of the rising Iranian-American star’s works, offering a summary of her career so far.

‘It was an amazing experience. It did a lot of things for me psychologically,’ she reflects. ‘The Moderna Museet show had about 88 works in it. There were a lot of works coming back that I hadn’t seen in a while, which allowed me to have a different experience of my own works.’

How did seeing all that work together make her feel? ‘There are ups and downs in the studio and you sometimes wonder: What is the cumulative experience of all of this? You never know what’s going to happen when you see all that stuff together – everything you’ve been doing for the last six or seven years. It could definitely go either way.’

Does the exhibition – Madani’s first big solo institutional show – mark a new phase in her career? ‘I don’t think so. To think like that would be quite problematic for my studio health. Any idea of a career is a side effect of other things.’ Madani’s interest in ritualistic men-only scenes has often been noted. When she began painting, did she make a con-

scious decision to concentrate exclusively on men as her subject matter? ‘Certainly the idea of initially only focusing on men was a very conscious choice,’ she says. ‘I wanted to focus on creating spaces – I mean spaces in the paintings – populated only by men because that was what I was most curious about. I wanted to create spaces where I could [put myself] psychologically in scenarios where I wouldn’t usually be able to be if they were real.’ Exclusion in real life was a motivating factor, then.

Humiliation is a regular experience for the figures in her paintings. Why does she give men such a tough time in her work? ‘I think it’s fair enough to say the men are going through some tough moments in the paintings,’ she laughs. ‘But what for me makes them interesting is that, though they’re going through tough moments, they’re willing and smiling through it all. Humiliation is desired and welcomed. The line between the perpetrator and the victim is blurred.’ There’s a duality in her treatment of her male figures – ‘parallel interests’, as Madani puts it. If mockery is one strand in her approach, it’s clear that there’s also a fondness for her subjects. ‘I find a problem with the over-socialized part of our brains, so I like to make the paintings a place where everyone can misbehave, where it’s okay to misbehave and



Hangman Lesson, 2008, oil on linen, 40 x 30 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bal

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everyone can act childish. That's where the painting becomes a kind of antidote to it all. So the paintings encourage or fight for a more base behaviour. For one thing, I'm poking fun. For another, everyone should misbehave more.' Madani has two shows in the UK this spring, and some of the new work contains female figures. That seems to represent a significant departure, I suggest. 'It could be. It depends on how one perceives them. In these paintings – let's say *3D Pussy* or *Abstract Pussy* – the female characters are giant images of a girl. With *3D Pussy* it's a 3D image of a girl, so not even a painting of a tangible thing, it's a painting of a projection. It's a painting of something that's not even present.

'You want to feel like you can go anywhere. The idea that I would only paint men became a bit fascistic for myself so I thought: If I had to paint girls, what would they be? And these images came to me.'

There are other unwonted elements in her new work. For instance, *Set Dressing* and *Popular Toys* feature children – a rarity in her paintings. 'Childish behaviour isn't, but children are, yes,' she laughs.

These particular works are derived from illustrations in Ladybird Books' famous *Peter and Jane* series of early readers for young children. That's certainly a departure for Madani. 'Absolutely – stylistically, immediately they take you somewhere else,' she says. 'I was very interested in the perversion present in the original *Peter and Jane* illustrations. I was interested in the sunny and safe space they presented and wanted to have Peter and Jane play with my men.' The process behind their production was quite complicated. Madani made notes on the source illustrations – which she first discovered when she attended an English school as a girl in Iran – and handed them over to an artist in China to execute. 'And then I painted over them with my figures and my marks,' she explains. 'It was also interesting that the process of doing these paintings revealed something about the current economic structure of the world. The prototype of Western culture, *Peter and Jane* have a "Made in China" sticker on the back. The British Peter and Jane got affected in the hands of the Chinese artist: the eyes are just a little bit slanted; it's just not "right" in the way the illustrations had them. And then I thought of where my men could fit within this structure, within these paintings; they became small, squeezed, expended.'

Animations have long been an important part of her practice. 'I make about one or two a year,' she explains. 'They're very, very short and they're silent and they're done in a very analogue way. I paint on one board, I take a picture of it, then I erase it and paint the same board and take another picture of that.'

Why are they important to her? 'When an idea requires a narrative jump, when offering a glimpse into an image wouldn't capture the idea fully,' she says, 'that's where ani-

mation comes in handy. I'm also interested in their mobility. Paintings have certain logistical restrictions on where they can go. Early on, the fact that my paintings were not going to Iran, let's say, fuelled my desire to make things that could travel one-to-one online. You know, you can see images of paintings online but it's definitely not the same as experiencing a painting first hand. I wanted to make something that would have bigger mobility.'

Has she shown work in Iran? 'I've been in group shows there – showing drawings, things that were easy to bring. It's a logistical thing, I've not had any problems so far with content. But the fact that I'm not actively participating in the art world there may also be why I've not had any problems. I've given a couple of university talks and showed the works and they were met with laughter and acceptance generally. I'm pretty sure *Abstract Pussy* and *3D Pussy*, for instance, wouldn't be OK there, but they're also not OK in other places.'

How different is art education in Iran? 'Cinema and graphic design have really flourished in the last 20 years. There's been strong film and graphic design education, as opposed to the more traditional art forms like sculpture and



Shadow, 2011, silk screen, digital print, marker, acrylic, ink on paper, 88.9 x 58.4 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bal

painting. The professors in those areas are very conservative, in that sort of academically trained Russian lineage, so quite traditionalist and quite dead in some ways. What's fascinating is when you do see a contemporary Iranian painter or sculptor coming out of that environment – and I don't put myself in that category [because I was trained in the US] – and not have any of those shackles and be quite innovative. It's quite a feat because there isn't the support structure to push you.'

Things are opening up, however, owing to the burgeoning art scene in Dubai and other Middle Eastern art centres. 'The Emirates have given a lot of young artists in Iran who can't travel beyond the Middle East a commercial voice and a more global visibility,' she says.

She doesn't think she would have become an artist had her family remained in Iran. 'A lot of my desire to paint came from the psychological distance I had from where I was born. Every action anyone takes comes from an energy source and that energy source was formed because I left Iran when I did and my language skills were what they were. I can't imagine doing the same thing at all if I hadn't.'

She's happy to be described as an Iranian-American artist – sort of. 'It really depends on who's listening,' she says. 'It's more truthful than to say "she's an Iranian artist" or "she's an American artist". Either of those would be less accurate. So, in lieu of a more specific label, we can stick

with this one! Living in Amsterdam for four years also influenced the way I work. Even within America, where you are affects the atmosphere in your work.'

After a pause she returns to the question. 'I do consider myself an Iranian artist,' she says. 'I think it's very wrong to imagine that anyone breaks from their own structure. There was a book that came out by [the art collective] Slavs and Tatars that featured covers from a magazine, *Molla Nasreddin*, that was published in Iran in the early 1900s. When I saw it I was struck by the similarity between how I draw and how they drew and also by the satirical attitude. There's always been a lot of satire in Iran.'

Madani's art education began at age seven, when she started attending calligraphy and painting school in Iran. She says that, although the exercises were simple enough – drawing horses and flowers, that sort of thing – the experience had a decisive impact on her development after her arrival in America. 'I think if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have used painting so heavily after I came to the US. The fact that I went to calligraphy and art school in Iran from the age of seven really befriended me to the material in a very intimate way.'

Earlier in our conversation she's described her painting *Dirt* as being 'about the idea of a group versus an individual, a mass turning into an abstraction, a desire for the individual to join that mass'. I mention that traces of her calligraphic training are apparent in it too. 'It's not conscious, although



Set Dressing, 2013, oil on linen, 97.2 x 76.2 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Joshua White



Red Stripes with Strain, 2008, oil on linen, 195 x 210 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bol



Piss Rainbow, 2008, oil on linen, 250 x 195 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bol



3D Pussy, 2013, oil on linen, 250 x 203 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Joshua White



Spreading Clown, 2008, oil on wood, 40 x 30 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bal



Dirt, 2011, oil on linen, 30.5 x 45.7 cm, courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London, photo: Thierry Bal

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I do think it's there,' she agrees. 'At some point I decided to start making the paintings that I could make, as opposed to the paintings it would be hard for me to make. I decided to simplify – make the thing that I could make and work with that. That opened the idea of painting quite directly and without worrying about "skill" as such. Especially when you're making figurative paintings, everyone presumes they should know certain things, and I just decided I knew enough.'

'So I allow the hand to be free, and when you give it that freedom, the more innate things that you learned as a child – I do think there is something about cell memory, cumulative information that is in your body from your ancestors – can also just sort of come through. So I think the calligraphy does come through.'

Before taking Painting at Yale, Madani studied Political Science and Painting at Oregon State. How serious was she about the political element of her studies? 'I was very hesitant in deciding that painting was going to be my life's activity,' she says. 'Iranians culturally are political people – because of the recent history of Iran everyone has become politicized. So studying Political Science was very serious for me – the idea that I might go into international relations or something like that. I did an internship in Berlin in 2003

with the German Council of Foreign Affairs, and it was fascinating.' She worked closely with an expert on Iranian affairs and attended a lot of conferences with Iranian officials. 'It definitely affected the psychological space of my paintings,' she reflects. 'Wanting to be involved in certain things that I wasn't involved in, wanting to be at certain tables that I wasn't at, all of those experiences informed the kind of paintings that I then started making.'

How explicit is the paintings' political content? 'In the US, people are so propagandized daily by the media, they really resist anything that takes a very direct or particular position in art forms,' she says. 'But whatever one makes, whether it's a cactus painting or a still life or a film about Nigeria, artists are defining their philosophical and political position through their work. Everyone is defining where they stand politically, philosophically, and I think I do as well.' But she has no explicit agenda, though? 'I think there is an agenda actually. I think one agenda is to complicate everything! There is a resistance to understanding things that are complicated; everyone wants to simplify things. I think my work has an agenda to keep opening things up that have been closed down.'