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REVIEWS JUL. 21, 2014



Tala Madani

LONDON,
at Pilar Corrias

by James Cahill



Tala Madani: *The Swing*, 2014, oil on linen, 38 by 25½ inches; at Pilar Corrias.

A British series of educational books published in the 1960s and colloquially known as Peter and Jane (its proper title was Key Words Reading Scheme) was parodied to brilliant effect in artist/comedian Miriam Elia's recent book *We Go to the Gallery*. Taking the eponymous siblings on a tour of a gallery, Elia lampoons such art-world oddities as blank canvases and balloon-dog sculptures. The original books' dated illustration style and family-values traditionalism provide an easy foil for that which aims to be avant-garde and convention-busting.

Painter Tala Madani also showed this to be the case in two canvases, *The Lesson* and *The Swing* (both 2014), included in her recent exhibition at Pilar Corrias. Each of these paintings features an expressionistic interloper amid a Peter-and-Jane-style scene. In *The Lesson*, a loosely depicted sylphlike figure straddles the head of a schoolboy, urinating a stream of egg-yolk yellow onto his exercise book. The nebulous character suggests a personification of gestural painting, as though "high art" were excreting onto the staid bourgeois respectability represented by the illustrative scene. In *The Swing*, however, the tables have turned, with Madani appearing as willing to ridicule the opacity of expressionistic painting as she is to criticize the banality of educational imagery. Here, a Peter-like boy gleefully pushes a drippy demon on a swing, the latter slipping off its seat and dissolving into illegibility, its vague rendering seeming noncommittal amid the otherwise tightly painted composition.

Abstract Pussy (2013), the show's titular work, presents a team of Lilliputian adventurers crawling toward the crotch of a small girl suspended against a flat field of color like a clip-art pictogram. One of the party holds up a placard bearing a Kandinsky-esque design, as if its abstruse meaning is what they seek in the uncharted territory between the girl's legs. In such works, Madani



falls back on the well-worn strategy of lumping together discordant pictorial idioms (computer graphics, newspaper cartoons, modernist abstraction). What distinguishes her approach is the humor underlying some of her juxtapositions: *Abstract Pussy* nicely expresses the absurdity of turning anatomical parts into metaphors or abstractions like the Greek god Priapus or the *vagina dentata*.

The toilet humor and tits-and-ass silliness in much of Madani's paintings are in exquisitely bad taste. Yet her work is at its best where the bodily comedy strikes at some deeper social controversy or anxiety. The apparently young age of the girl in *Abstract Pussy* (and in a parallel piece, *3D Pussy*, 2013, in which the probing figures wear 3-D glasses) cannot be ignored. Perhaps the picture's superficial flippancy belies a critique of current obsessions regarding children's sexuality and fears about pedophilia, pointing to the hypocritical mix of proscription and prurience that besets discussion of these topics.

At points, Madani's medium dovetails nicely with her scatological themes: in *Decorated*, the thick, brown branches of a tree appear to have been defecated onto the canvas. Too often, though, her paintings have a labored quality, suggesting nimble satirical drawings that became bogged down in paint. This quality of in-betweenness or incongruity would no doubt be claimed by some as the canvases' very point and potency. Yet it also draws attention to what they lack—the facility of cartoons or the spontaneity of doodles. Madani's humor is not itself the issue; it simply demands more definitive and piquant expression.

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