

LAUGH OUT LOUD

GROUP DYNAMICS AND THE CATHARSIS OF TALA MADANI

BY JAREH DAS

Aristotle's statement - 'the whole being greater than the sum of parts' is disrupted by studies of male collective behavior, which recurs in the paintings of Tala Madani. Silly grins, legs and arms akimbo, pot-bellies, balding heads, p**s-stained bottoms are the norm here. They appear and reappear in this absurd world the artist creates which confines her subjects. There is no way out for them.

Madani repeatedly and solely depicts men of Middle Eastern origin in paradoxical scenarios that are heavily laced with humour. When you take a closer look at the subject matter, you soon realise that to interpret these paintings as just being humorous, misses the point entirely. Tala uses humour as point of entry into works, which speak of machoism and group dynamics. They also raise questions about the male-dominated world of painting and its histories, by highlighting the absurd patriarchal power systems that control and dominate the art world and beyond. By exclusively depicting male subjects, questions are raised about the dominance of masculine behaviour and the subsequent loss of individuality that comes with it.



Madani reverses the traditional objectification of the female subject in painting by excluding them. In her works, she reverses the normative role of females being depicted by men, to a woman depicting men. The gaze is now exclusively on male subjects. In a recent interview, at the launch of her solo exhibition 'R.I.P Image' (Moderna Museet, Malmö), Tala described her use of laughter as something that is quite complicated:

'It's not necessarily 'ha ha, funny' laughter, sometimes it's a burst of energy, this intensity of whatever's coming up'.

Laughter is a higher personal energy, which Madani expresses through her art. Laughter becomes ubiquitous with catharsis; this trajectory is represented visually through a vivid palette, where explanation is absent and comprehension relies on directly experiencing the works.

Although the history of group dynamics and modern psychology is often accredited to Gustav Le Bon, other critical thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno et al, studied this subject extensively. William Schutz's three-dimension model on interpersonal relations provides an engaging theoretical framework for understanding the paintings of Tala Madani, from the perspective of three dimensions: inclusion, control, and affection. Schutz proposes that for a group to be able to develop across these three stages, in each stage, issues of inclusion, control and affection must be resolved. If the group is unable to resolve any of these issues, they regress into a previous stage. He elaborates that the group also devolve to an earlier stage if they are unable to resolve outstanding issues in a particular stage. Schutz referred to these processes of group dynamics as 'the interpersonal underworld', because they dealt with group processes that were largely unseen.

One can liken Tala's men in their scenarios to a visualisation of these 'largely unseen' processes that Schutz talks about. In a sense, these men are being laid bare, with the audience acting as jury to the externalisation of internal processes that form and

inform group behaviour. Consider 'Morris Men', her 2012 painting, where four men take central position on the canvas, with thick brushes of paint that resemble legs spread apart. Their legs gradually decrease in width span as you view the canvas from bottom to top. The work recalls the symphonic movements of 1920's female cabaret can-can dancers. Similarities with their female counterparts end here however, as these men are far from elegant. They are bald, with aloof expressions on their near-identical faces. Their legs are painted in bright pastel colours, with paint trickling down. They look clumsy and uncomfortable, although there is a sense that they are trying to outshine each other in their whimsical dance.

This work also reinterprets the Colour Field paintings made prominent by American artists such as Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko in the 1950s. Morris Louis's interpenetration of colour saw him stain the canvas with thinned acrylic paint, so that it was difficult to see where one colour ended and another began. The technique creates a wash-like transparency so that the perception of depth was problematic.



'Mawlana'
Ammar Haj
Ahmad/Oasis
Theatre Group
(Courtesy The
Mosaic Rooms)

Whereas Louis's work consisted of abstract lines, Madani gives her coloured lines a masculine identity. These bold abstract lines are given candid faces and legs. She has now stained the canvas not just with paint, but also with 'her' men. This modern movement was dominated and celebrated by predominately male artists, women artists like Helen Frankenthaler are mentioned, but usually as second fiddle to male counterparts (not as good as men who were clearly regarded as experts on the field). Tala is staining this seminal Morris Louis's work with her signatory men as a means of interfering with this masculine history of modern art. The title 'Morris Men' comments on the dominance of celebrated male painters in this modernist movement, with female counterparts often left out or represented as being secondary to men.

Madani's trajectory is a visual expulsion of an internal process that is influenced by individual and collective social contexts. It is easy to read these works when you see them but the difficulty lies in describing what you see. Titles do little to aid this verbalisation and in 'Red Interrogation', 2011, the limits of comprehension are pushed. Two men are sat facing each other in a small dark room. The male figure in the right is saying something to the other, in what appears to be emanating from his mouth out in a vomit of red smoke. The figure on the left shields his face with a clipboard. What does this red smoke symbolise? Its colour suggests danger, but perhaps an intoxication of sorts or the exposing of uncomfortable truths in this interrogation room.

Drawing on a completely different influence, Madani's painterly sensitivities could also be likened to the surrealism of Lewis Carroll. His story 'Through the Looking-Glass' adopts as its main theme, a mimicry of the mirror image. The text uses frequent changes in time and spatial directions as a plot, juxtaposing opposites, time running backwards and so on. Essentially, this view presents a different way of looking at the world.

In the paintings of Madani, one observes the mirroring of behaviours. She likens the behaviours of her men to the nonsensical nature of mankind in collective situations, which often results in adverse ways. Here, we see a loss of the self in favour of a collective

'SHE LIKENS THE BEHAVIOURS OF HER MEN TO THE NONSENSICAL NATURE OF MANKIND'

identity. 'Grand Entrance' (2011), is anything but a grand entrance. We see a figure's legs hanging through a glass window with his face barely visible through the windowpane. His thighs are bloodied, suggesting he has walked blindly through the glass and that this scenario is accidental. It could also depict a failure to escape. Entrapment can be physical or psychological in the sense that if one's mind is brainwashed, progressive thinking becomes restricted.

The paintings of Tala Madani present a compendium of problems associated with collective systems of beliefs that shape group behaviour. These paintings question the histories of painting itself by creating ambiguous settings for how work is made and interpreted. By staining the works with 'her men', Madani reverses perceptual roles if subject and object, creating a dichotomy between theory and practice, as well as gender in the histories of painting.

Although she uses humour as a point of entry, and subjects are simply depicted with thin brush strokes and perhaps caricatures of who they really are, to approach these works from a single perspectival view, leaves the viewer confused, dumbfounded and as whimsical as the men being portrayed. **HBA**



'Mawlana' Ammar Haj
Ahmad/Oasis Theatre Group
(Courtesy The Mosaic Rooms)

WAITING FOR BIO NEW PIC

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Tehran, Iran, Tala Madani lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. Recent solo shows include the Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Pilar Corrias, London, UK (both 2011). In February 2013, her largest museum exhibition to date will open at Moderna Museet, Malmo, Sweden; it will tour to Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden later in the year. Also forthcoming in 2013 is a solo exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, UK.