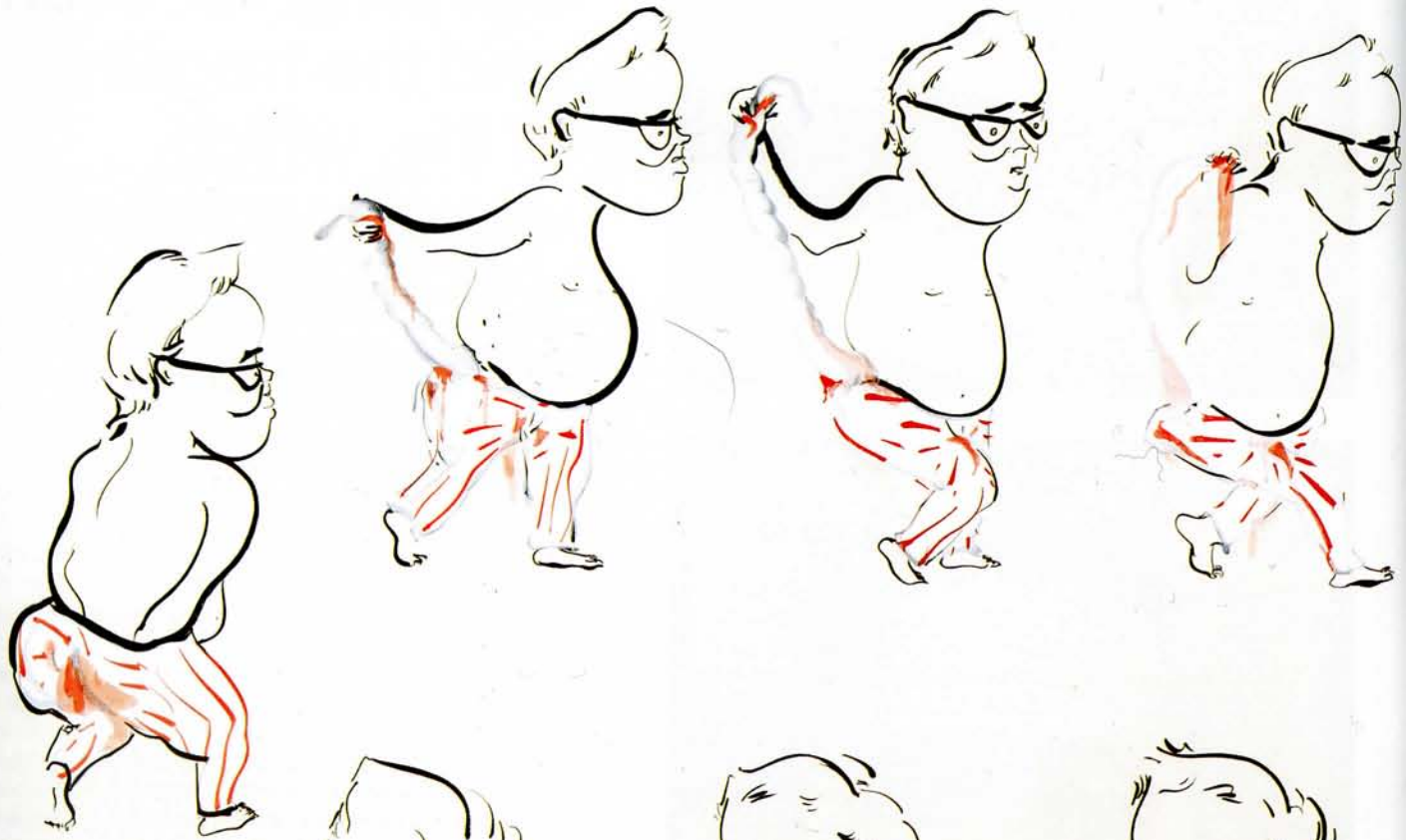
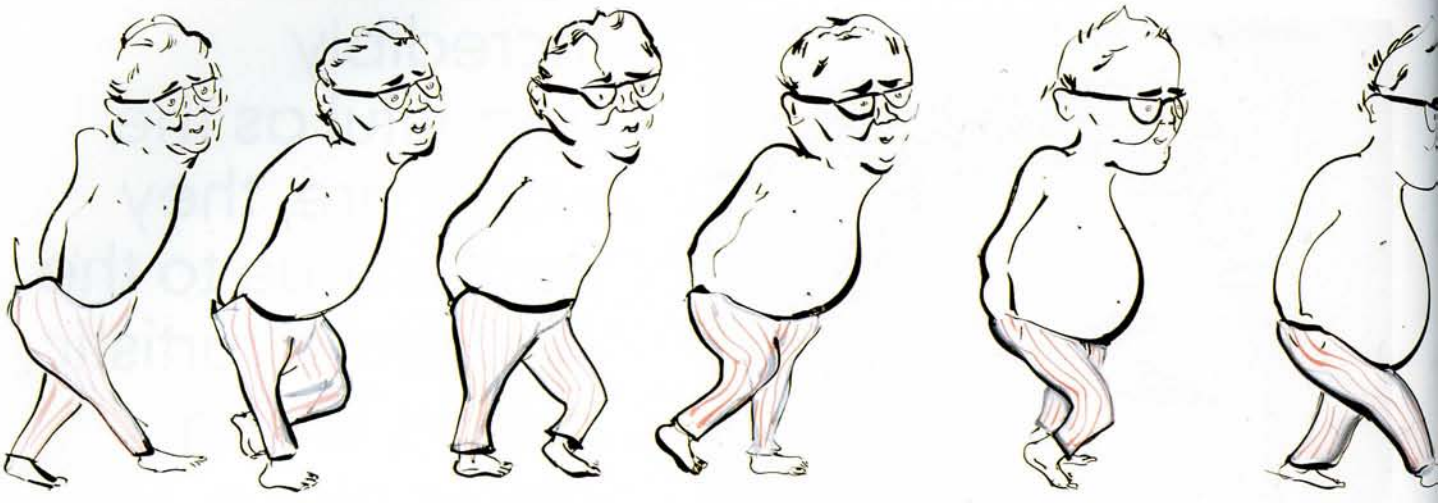




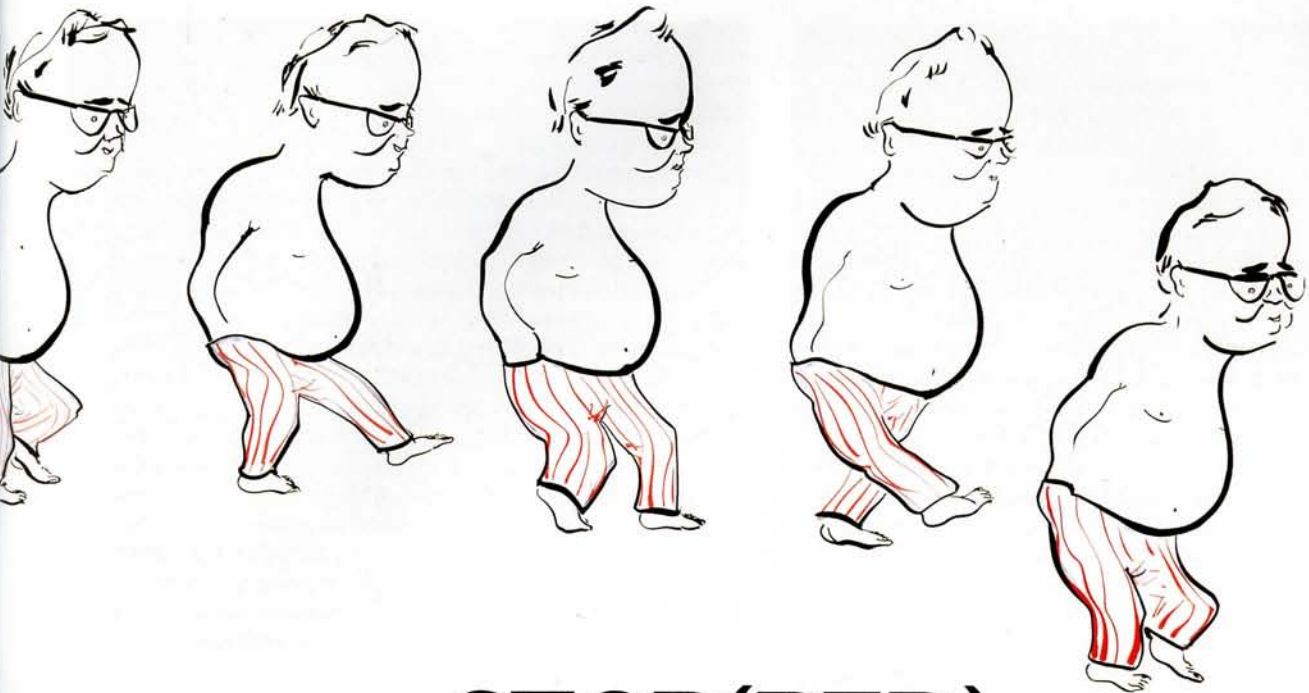
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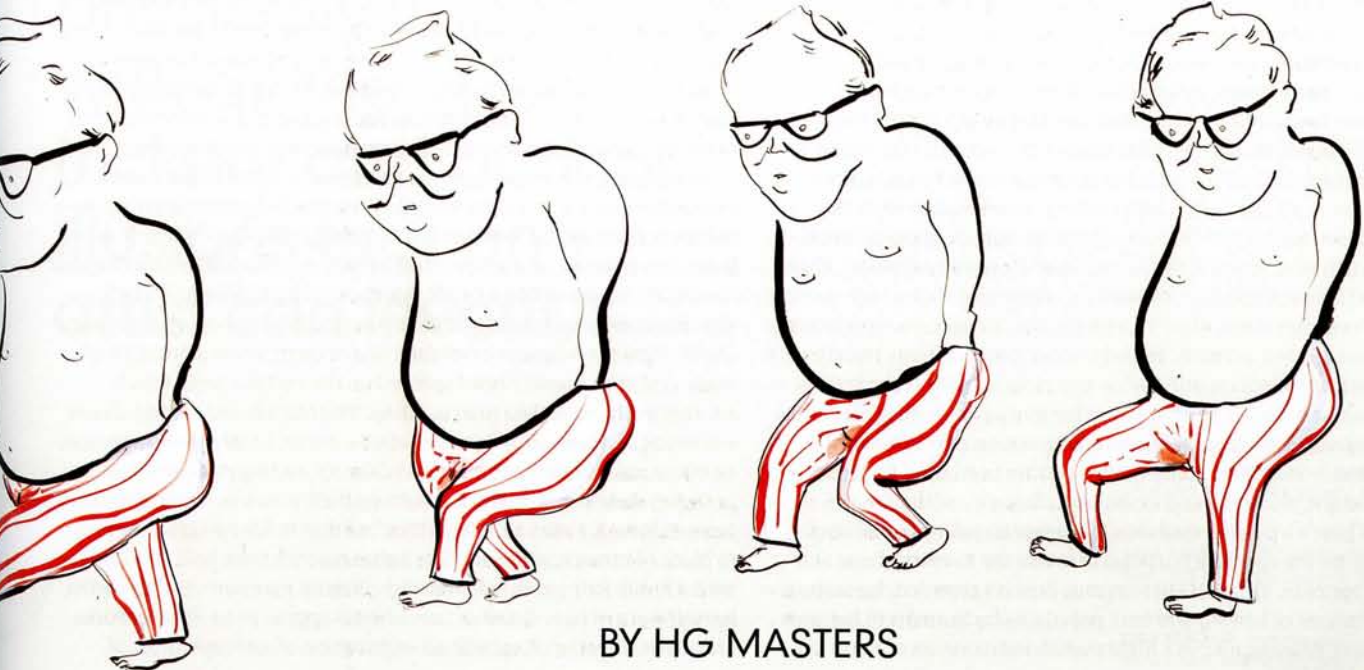
**STOP(PED)**



**MAKING**



**SENSE**



BY HG MASTERS



**On the opening days of Documenta 13 in June, Rabih Mroué** performed a live version of *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012) about the use of mobile phones to capture events of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent circulation of this footage on video-sharing websites. Mroué made an analogy between this footage and the credos of the Danish filmmaking movement Dogme 95 as outlined by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg: "Shooting must be done on location, the sound must never be produced apart from the images, the camera must be hand-held, the film must be in color, filters are forbidden, no superficial action, the director must not be credited." Mroué then displayed a short, grainy video clip recorded from the roof of a building. The camera finds a sniper on the street below, is seen by the soldier and within seconds is knocked to the ground from the impact of the gunman's bullet.

For Mroué, the mobile-phone lens provides an almost ideal tool for representation. "It is as if the camera and the eye have become united in the same body—I mean the camera has become an integral part of the body." Later in his monologue, he proposed: "What the cameraman witnessed is the exact same thing that he recorded at exactly the same time. As a result it is also the same thing that we witness when we watch the video. This means that our eyes are an extension of the cameraman's eyes and, as we established, his eyes are an extension of his mobile phone's lens." With a metaphysical, postmodern sleight of hand, Mroué comes to suggest that we are being shot at, but that we (that amalgamated trinity that comprises the image, the cameraman and us) are still alive as long as the image circulates. In this extreme version of representation, as we look at the images, we enter them, and they become us.

For centuries in Europe before photography and film were invented, it was the painted image that provided one with a view, via a window, onto the world, which the painter depicted through a system of perspectival space laid out on a flat surface. However, in South Asia, during roughly the same period as the European Renaissance and Baroque, Persian and later Mughal miniature painting traditions rarely observed the rigid conventions of linear perspective. Since these miniature paintings are primarily illustrations of stories from the Quran or from important mythological tales such as the *Shahnama* (The Book of Kings), multiple episodes, a whole story even, can be described within one image. There is no pretense of the painted image being anything like what one sees when opening a window: in other words, there is no *there* there.

If we take Mroué's conjectures seriously about the primal immediacy of the digitally recorded image, perhaps we should reconsider the painted canvas, even in the European tradition, not as a window onto the world but as a stage onto which the artist places figures and objects. Perhaps by thinking about how pictures are constructed, we could see how artists throughout history have embraced not the supposed naturalism of painting, but its self-conscious staging. This tendency, evident in the works of the *Caravaggisti* and of classicists such as Nicolas Poussin, grew more pronounced during the 18th century, when figures from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* became a favorite subject among French painters such as Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Their fantastical landscapes are populated by archetypal characters—young lovers, clowns, servants, masters, elderly curmudgeons—representing eros, sadness, greed, comedy, tragedy, social conservatism, hubris, with no pretensions of representing what was right in front of the artist's eye. The scenery serves as a backdrop for rehearsed theatrical dramas that are intended as allegories of human emotion and behavior.

Elaborately imagined scenes have not only been used to depict the aristocratic pleasures and emotional allegories of the French Rococo. There's a parallel tradition in European painting that uses caricature for the opposite purpose: to reveal the horrors of war and human depravity. Think of Hieronymus Bosch's crowded, fantastical representations of heaven and hell, populated by humans in heinous vignettes, or Francisco Goya's nightmarish indictments of Bourbon-

era Spanish society, with humans depicted as farm animals and goblins. World War I veteran Otto Dix produced grotesque caricatures of war-ravaged Berlin society in the grip of moral depravity and rising nationalism, while Max Ernst painted haunting dreamscapes inhabited by unimaginable, hybrid human-machine specters, and Francis Bacon turned Christian saints into eyeless monsters. In these gruesome portrayals, humans, often hybridized with animals, appear in the field not of realism but of pure fantasy. With the same simulated freedom found in animated cartoons, drawn or painted figures do not follow rules of physics or anatomy, or laws of space and time.

In light of the global deregulation of artistic practice and discourse that occurred in postmodernism and poststructuralist criticism, perhaps it does not make sense to think of contemporary painting only in terms of past work. Instead, what if we were to reconsider the possibilities of painting as specific to that medium? After all, figurative painting, in its capacity to address topics of violence and destruction, offers inventive alternatives that the camera, for instance, plainly cannot. The canvas could be compared to an empty realm that needs a director to organize its characters, realize a script, define the scenery and set the world in motion. This is painting as comic or tragic stagecraft, with an ability to present the physically impossible with all the visual trickery and optical illusions that an artist can invent.

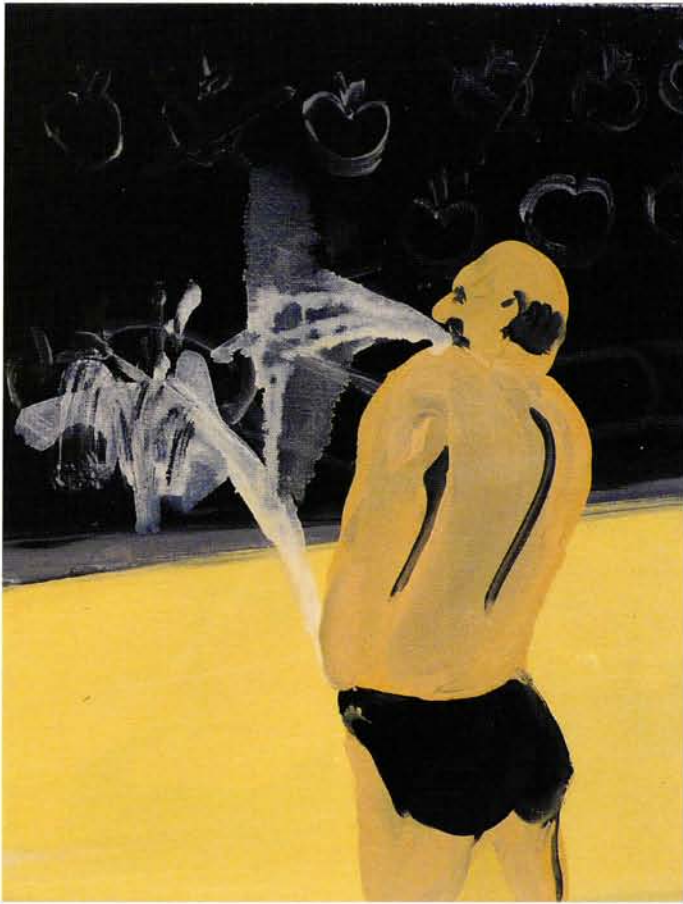
### **BREAK A LEG, OR TWO**

In Tala Madani's paintings, her characters—usually burly, balding men in their underwear—inhabit a universe defined by its cultish ethos, ritualistic behavior, apparent debauchery, sadomasochism, buffoonery and machismo. These fleshy men stand on wooden floorboards, circular daises or angular platforms that resemble a fighting ring—*mise-en-scènes* without reference to a specific geographical place. They are self-segregated, by gender, from the rest of reality, and what happens in this world surpasses any common stereotype of fraternal idiocy. It is often remarked both that Madani's figures are "stereotypical Middle Eastern-looking men"—which seems to refer to little more than the artist having been born and raised in Tehran—and that her paintings are the transgressive imaginings of a woman about what goes on in all-male gatherings. They are perhaps better understood, however, as darkly comic allegories for collective or herd mentality—its brutality and demagoguery—equally applicable to American as Iranian society.

For her 2008 exhibition "ASS•AS•SIN: hashish anyone?" Madani drew on the legends of the Hashshashin, an order of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, whose members, reputedly under the influence of their charismatic leader and hashish, carried out selected murders of generals and politicians from the 11th century on. In Madani's hands, the activities of this secret society are reimagined in the contemporary world, with a heaping of irony from the artist about the latent homoeroticism, imbecilic hazing and ritual indoctrination of the paranoid-delusional beliefs prevalent in all-male societies.

Parsing individual paintings for narrative is a challenge. A man in blue pants and a white shirt appears to be teaching anti-Semitism to babies in *Dirty Stars* (2008), as he points aggressively to stars, some of them five-pointed, one six-pointed, drawn on a blackboard. In *Original Sin* (2008), a man in black briefs, his back to the viewer, looks to be simultaneously urinating and vomiting on a blackboard. *Animalology* (2008) shows two figures cavorting: one of them wears a horse-head mask and grips a wolf's head speared on the end of a pole, which another pudgy-cheeked man is riding. The blackboard behind shows a drawing of a man supplicating before a horse. In other works we see: an obese naked man bathing in a children's wading pool; two figures in smiley-face T-shirts who are holding their noses as if one of them has just farted; a man wearing a blue bra that holds two green apples in place of breasts, while another figure reaches from behind him with a knife. Painted in a deliberately clumsy manner—as if the artist herself were as ham-fisted as her subjects appear to be—these works are absurd theater, often with an insinuation of extreme forms of





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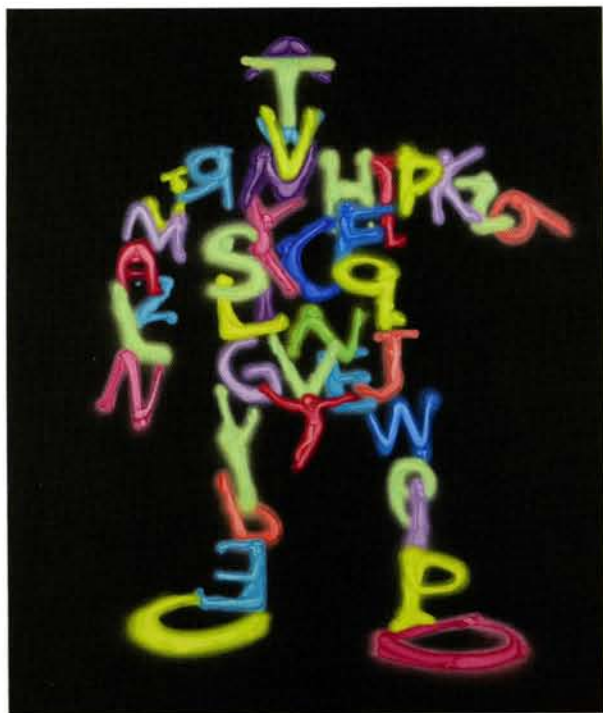
**TALA MADANI**, *Spiral Suicide*, 2012, oil on canvas, 203 x 305 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias gallery, London.

(This page, left)

**TALA MADANI**, *Original Sin*, 2008, oil on linen, 30.5 x 24.1 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, right)

**TALA MADANI**, *Hangman Lesson*, 2008, oil on wood, 40 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist.

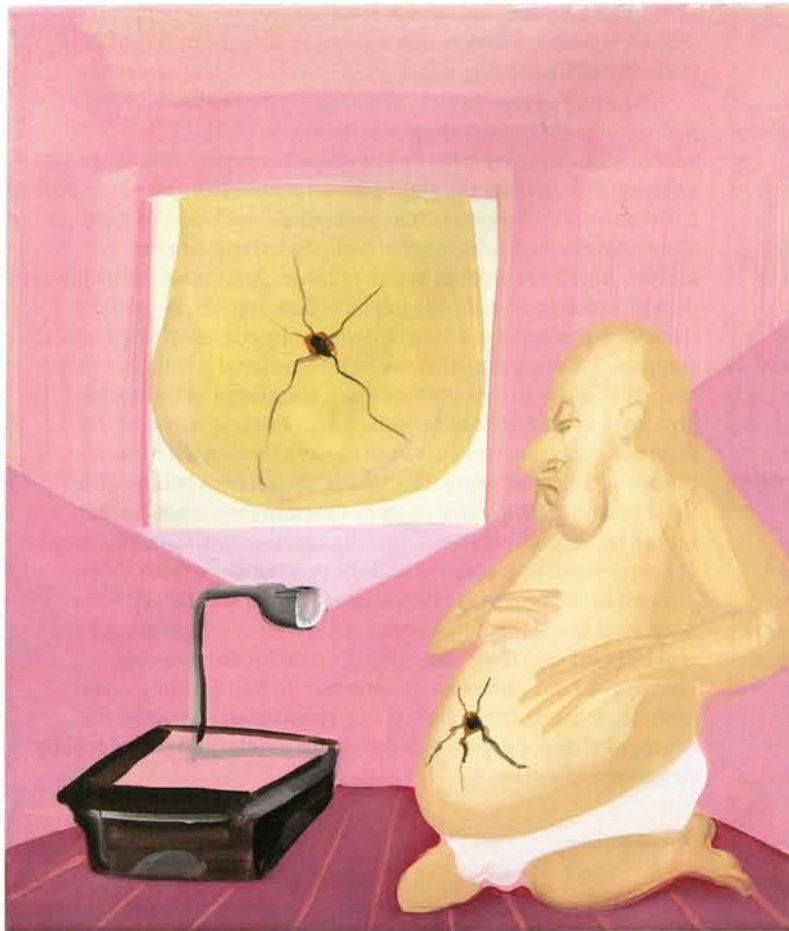


sadomasochism. In *Hangman Lesson* (2008), for instance, a figure in black shorts and suspenders (the Dominant as Executioner) instructs another figure clothed in white underwear on how to hang himself.

In the works by Madani that followed during 2009–10, her buffoonish males become more like a macabre cheerleader squad, often forming letters of the English alphabet. In *BHaus* (2009), against a solid black ground, six men in black briefs stand on the shoulders of seven men, forming a pentagonal (or house-shaped) structure, as if engaged in some sort of acrobatic formation or modern dance routine. In *Leviathan* (2010), the title of which is a reference to Thomas Hobbes's famous tract on the social contract and the animalistic chaos in which humans would otherwise live, a striding human form is made up of letters of the alphabet, which themselves are figures contorted into shapes—a riff on ideas of the social body. In *Aaaa* (2010), a man in a red tank top is squatting with his black briefs around his ankles. The field is a gradient of orange from yellow to red. From the man's mouth comes a trail of capital A's, one of which, equipped with little feet, appears either to be kicking him in the rear or about to enter his ass en route to emerging once more from his mouth. At Madani's mercy, these men are part of an acerbic role-reversal in which the female artist crudely objectifies and mocks her subjects. Madani the painter is part puppet master, part animator of this cruel theater.

The ironic misandry of Madani's works culminates in her series "Manual Man" (2010), whose title and themes are a play on an infamous 1971 screed *The Manipulated Man*, in which the writer Esther Vilar argues—in a rebuke to the prevailing feminist ideas of the day—that men in industrial cultures are enslaved to women. The contrarian tone of Vilar's book finds a corollary in Madani's series, which is filled with the kind of antinaturalist, cartoonish tendencies that can make the painted canvas the inverse of the





(Opposite page, top)  
**TALA MADANI**, *BHaus*, 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**TALA MADANI**, *Leviathan*, 2010, spray paint and oil on canvas, 229 x 191 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page)  
**TALA MADANI**, *Projector*, 2011, oil on linen, 35.6 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias gallery, London.

visual world, transforming the painted realm into a purely symbolic or parallel reality. In fact, Madani alludes to the idea that the pictorial space is a stage most clearly in *Spotlight with Wave* (2011), which shows a wave-patterned curtain with a pair of feet sticking out from the corner, conflating the landscape (or seascape, more accurately) directly with the stage scenery. Other paintings flesh out Madani's portrayal of the ludicrous, obscene events of this realm. In *Chinballs with Flag* (2011), one heavily stubbled figure (whose jowls are painted to resemble testicles) holds out a red-striped flag with a pair of pendulous hairy balls in its middle, while another man sticks his head through a hole in this flag. In *Projector* (2011), a babyish fat man in white briefs encounters his own distended belly on the screen of an overhead projector. Throughout this body of work, the senselessness of these rituals of humiliation and (self-) abuse seems to elide the inanity of juvenile pranks with the gravity of utterly dehumanizing acts, such as the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison.

Furthering the idea of painting as a kind of simulated or parallel reality, in recent work Madani takes up the stories of the Jinn—supernatural, unseeable characters from Arab folklore and Islamic teachings who inhabit a coexistent world and occasionally interfere with the human realm. Many of the Jinn, in Madani's renderings, are portly, middle-aged and wearing thick-rimmed glasses, giving them the slightly droll, hapless look of technocrats or university administrators. *The Whole* (2011) depicts a squat, shirtless fellow in an armchair in his briefs with a gaping hole where his belly button should be. He's looking at a black shape in his hand, as if he's just ripped it out of himself. The self-disembowelment is continued in *Guts* (2011), in which a figure with no face and a square hole in place of his belly is sitting in a chair opposite a pile of anthropomorphic red intestines. *Kidney Left* (2011) shows guys poking straws into a massive red organ,

while *Kidney Right* (2011) has one figure on the ground sucking on the end of a renal artery as another embraces it. In the recent diptych, *Spiral Suicide* (2012), a bulging shirtless figure in red-striped pants walks in a circle across the two canvases; blood gradually seeps through his pajamas and we see that he is pulling his intestines out from his anus, until he collapses and dies in the center of his loop. The absurdist theater of Madani's paintings is a purely psychological space, a simulated arena in which the entire atmosphere can reek of brutality and violence, even when the actions in the painting appear inane, ludicrous, surreal or inscrutable.

## **BEAUTY AND THE BESTIAL**

Illustrators and satirists know well that daily life itself is a kind of pageantry—in which people arrange themselves according to social rules and customs, as well as by their own instincts—and their works often reveal the divisions and fractures societies contain that will one day spill over into bloodshed and conflict. Looking at Rokni Haerizadeh's paintings during the mid-2000s—campy, expressionistic satires of Iranian society, with wedding scenes, summer afternoons at the Caspian seaside and traditional funerals, the figures painted with cartoonish glee and insouciance—the contradictions of Iranian society are present but stifled. In his diptychs from the time, wedding guests shimmy to pop music or embrace furtively as a bride greets her guests, while the men are segregated in a second canvas drinking alcohol; women in black burqas serve tea to rotund shirtless men while boys frolic in the water; the family eats while mourners pray at the graveside. A slightly later work in the same vein and format, *Sizdeh Bedar* (*The 13th Day of the Persian New Year*) (2009), depicts families picnicking on a grassy hillside, between a highway interchange, on a day when it is considered bad fortune to eat indoors. Women prepare



food, men play sports or lounge. In the right-hand panel, a man perching on the hood of a black Mercedes is served by a woman. In the background loom the city and posters of martyrs' faces. Though clearly related to the populist genre of Qajar-era coffeehouse paintings, Haerizadeh's scenes have the whimsy of a society painter—reminiscent of Florine Stettheimer's faux-naïf pictures of New York in the early 20th century—mixed with an undercurrent of dissatisfaction. But the attitude of these canvases seems to be that while it might be too late to salvage this discordant society, at least we can satirize its rituals and behaviors (with a fair amount of compassion). This is society represented as lived theater—but it's a story that, in reality, will flip from farcical to tragic.

Haerizadeh's canvases return to more expressionistic and theatrical roots in a series of five paintings entitled "Masnavi Ma'navi – The Fifth Notebook" (2007–09). Taken from a portion of the epic tale by the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi, the canvases portray a lurid parable involving a maidservant who trains a donkey to fornicate with a gourd, and whose mistress dies in the act of having sex with the donkey. In one canvas we see a woman lying on her back with legs splayed open to the viewer, a donkey head in one arm, a gourd in the other. The next image in the series depicts a woman sitting in a chair wearing a modern-looking bra and polka-dot tights holding what looks like a gourd between her legs. Framing the erotic figures, lost in ecstasy, are curtains composed of calligraphic-meets-expressionistic brushstrokes. Perhaps more akin to a webcam than a stage setting, these are performative moments nonetheless. In illustrating a lesser-known bawdy episode in a revered poem, the series tackles the emergence

of a long-suppressed but inborn deviance and its raw portrayal (here, it is erotic), a subject that is given a fuller, more violent form in Haerizadeh's ensuing works.

Whatever humor—caustic, affectionate, nostalgic—is evident in the earlier paintings vanishes in the series "Fictionville" (2010), in which bestial imagery takes center stage. The series was created after Rokni and his brother, the photographer Ramin Haerizadeh, relocated to Dubai in 2009, following increased official suspicion concerning their artwork, the confiscation of their works from a collector, and the June 2009 protests in Iran following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection. Such biographical facts explain, in part, the distanced, mediated relationship to the subject matter. The works are comprised of photographs from the international news; Haerizadeh takes the figures and paints over them, transforming them into gruesome animal-human hybrids. A man in a gray suit with the head of a pig sits alone in the front row of a theater, while numerous buxom bird-headed women are visible several rows behind him; the logo of the Iranian news agency Fars is in the corner. Street protesters become pigs while security officials transform into donkeys or are rendered as gaping red mouths bearing white teeth. Often referred to as Orwellian in reference to *Animal Farm* (1945)—the allegorical novel about the spread of despotism—these images are also Hobbesian in their conflation of social breakdown with humanity's base, animalistic tendencies. In transforming actual events into this horrific masked ball, Haerizadeh intensifies the feeling of violence depicted in the media, as televised reality rapidly devolves into surreality.

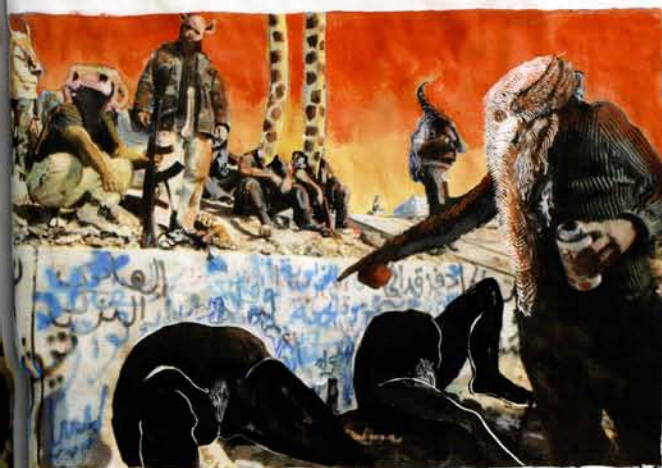




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**ROKNI HAERIZADEH**, six works from the series "Fictionville, Life Is Perhaps that Enclosed Moment When My Vision Destroys Itself in the Pupil of Your Eyes," 2010, paint on screenshots, mixed media on paper, 29.7 x 42 cm each. Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.

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(Previous spread)  
**INCI EVINER**, *Stranger In My Head*,  
2010, acrylic on canvas, 125 x 207 cm.  
Courtesy Galeri Nev, Istanbul.

(Opposite page)  
**INCI EVINER**, *Broken Allegories*  
(detail), 2008, acrylic and color on  
unstretched canvas, digital prints,  
paper. Courtesy Galeri Nev, Istanbul.

## **ALL THE WORLD CAN BE A STAGE**

"Making art is a violent thing, art itself is violent," İnci Eviner writes about her practice. The human figure is central to the Istanbul-based artist's works, which have spanned various two-dimensional media over the last 15 years. In her paintings, drawings and collages, Eviner works most often in black acrylic paint or ink on a flat white ground that merges into the wall of the exhibition space; she also paints directly onto gallery walls. At her 2005 exhibition "Uncanny" at the Akbank Sanat art space in Istanbul, oversized paintings on paper doubled as a surface for animated video projections. For Eviner, the drawn or painted line is "free of any historical encumbrance, it refuses to belong on the surface of paper, turning it into a void . . . Ultimately everything that has ever been on paper reaches towards a story, which becomes not mine but [the] line's own story." Eviner's paintings are composites of historical motifs, but are not themselves rooted in a place or time.

In works from "Uncanny," arabesque shapes—motifs from Turkish patterning—merge with animal and human forms, for instance women holding their breasts or a woman with duck feet lifting her skirt, as the blankness of the wall and canvas create a virtual, flat space, liberated from context, but also devoid of specificity. Humans are intertwined or masked by decorative elements; humans even become these decorative elements. This kind of symbolic, visual violence against the human subject—whether against non-Europeans in a postcolonial critique, or against women in a feminist one—represents forms of systemic brutality that have unfolded over time and across cultures.

The liberation of the female image, from art history—and from the social structures that give rise to misogyny in the first place—is the central subject of Eviner's installation *Broken Allegories*, shown at the Shanghai Biennale in 2008. There, her room-size piece took everything out of context. Fragments of printed texts, Islamic geometric patterns, the silhouettes of security fences, cut-out photographs of female legs, all of them floated around the walls of the white-painted room. The centerpiece was a drip-streaked ink painting showing a monkey with a baby on its back. The mother monkey's arm is reaching out to a girl's dress, which has no figure inside of it. The sense of displacement—figures, animals, plants drifting incongruously—represents, in Eviner's words, "a world where grand narratives, heroes and myths have become extinct, images can only exist temporarily within their shadow." A figure labeled as the French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme looks like the bust of a woman rendered in wide brushstrokes, with a face collaged together from an illustration of a helmet and a photograph of a woman's ass in a black thong.

The monkey, in its role as an element of chinoiserie—the Orientalist genre par excellence, popularized in French Rococo paintings and ceramics—is a recurring figure in Eviner's drawings. It can stand for humans, as well as for animals—or, in an evolved anthropomorphism, for the dehumanized human. In *Panty for Boucher* (2009)—named for the Rococo painter François Boucher,

who was renowned for his voluptuous nudes—we see a black-painted monkey holding women's underwear to show the viewer. Around the figure are phallic-looking orchids and figurines comprised of a naked female's legs and angel's wings. Another of Eviner's drawings, *Stranger in My Head* (2010), shows the naked backs of three women, two of whom have hair that has been transformed into a furry animal. The void that is created by Eviner's blank spaces is potent as a place of metaphorical isolation from the real world—it represents an imaginative ground where images of images can exist together. As to how she uses digital manipulation to plan and execute works, Eviner says that "the slippery surface of the computer offered me an infinite opportunity for arranging these meetings." The actors in Eviner's theater of the oppressed are cast from across art history and cultures, linked by exclusion, objectification or misrepresentation.

## **DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION**

As part of their respective practices, Madani, Haerizadeh and Eviner all create animations. Tala Madani makes short, rough, stop-motion animations using oil paint. In *Music Man* (2009), a figure in pink briefs, standing against a wall painted with three rows of black stripes (like the notation bars found in a musical score), pulls another man into the picture and, holding him like a baby, proceeds to choke him and gag him until he vomits. Rokni Haerizadeh has transformed his "Fictionville" works into animations, like a demented version of the evening news. İnci Eviner's videos are populated by tiny figures engaged in repetitive nonsensical gestures, as in *Harem* (2009), in which they inhabit an Orientalist drawing by German artist Antoine Ignace Melling. In their own way, each artist has used animation to further push the potential of the painted, or constructed, image away from reality into the realm of fantastical, dark places occupied by violence and brutality.

These three are not the first, nor the only, artists working in this manner at the moment. The roots of the emergence of a cartoonesque realm as a virtual theatrical space can be traced back to Philip Guston's paintings from the end of the 1960s, with their bubblegum-pink hues and creepy hooded Ku Klux Klan figures, and the impudent paintings of John Wesley, who, from the 1970s onward, with the dancing, cavorting character Dagwood Bumstead (appropriated from the 1930s American comic strip *Blondie*), merged the banality of American Pop with the eroticism of the French Rococo. As the practice of contemporary painting proliferates internationally, artists are increasingly drawing on image-making strategies outside a tradition of Euro-American art history long enthralled to debates over rules of perspectival space or their rejection—a discourse that has floundered or spun round and round in the wake of postmodernism's end games of appropriation, endless citation and self-referentiality. The blank canvas, as a stage for action, adventure, debauchery and cruelty beyond the fragment of the world that a camera lens can see, can have more to offer in portraying the demonic forces at work wherever humans congregate. ♻️



