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Greater New Yorkers | Tala Madani

By KEVIN MCGARRY

The Moment homes in on five artists from “Greater New York,” an exhibition that runs through Oct. 18 at MoMA P.S. 1 in Queens.



Tala Madani. Alec Holst

Tala Madani’s paintings follow a playful stream of associations that must bubble up from her morbid, deadpan and frequently gory sense of humor. Or is it her sense of tragedy? This classical ambiguity makes her cartoonish situations all the more beguiling. Motifs like public violence and mustachioed men hunched over en masse have led to political readings of this body of work, which just might be more neutral than it suggests — and consequently, it rides an interesting tension produced by interpretive agendas.

At P.S. 1, Madani is showing a cross section of recent work: “The Accident Series,” three painted animations in which a taxi ride, a hospital visit and a subway episode all go horribly wrong, in silence, frame by streaky frame; a smattering of 22 drawings of subjects including slippery stairs, a diagonal pile of bodies, a recurring object that resembles a cauldron and a man bent into the letter D; and one small painting, of a table and an enema bag, specially selected by the curators.

Q. Where in greater New York do you live?

A. I live in Brooklyn and I live in Amsterdam, so I go back and forth. I have a studio here and I have a studio there and I try to keep a studio in Iran, too, so I can make the year based on three locations.

How did you wind up in Amsterdam?

I went to the Rijksakademie, which is a residency program there. And my partner lives in Amsterdam, so we go back and forth together.

How does your time in each place differ?

Well, I attended Yale School of Art and many of the graduates naturally moved down to the city afterwards. I have a great network of friends and artists here in New York, and of course the public spaces, the museums, everything here in terms of resources is great. But when I'm working, I am simply in the studio. Sometimes it doesn't really matter where I am because I am just in the studio, for better or worse.

And you were born in Iran?

In Tehran. In 1994 I moved to Oregon and I went to Oregon State for my bachelor's degree.

Is animation a new direction for you?

It is. I made two animations in 2008 and I just made five more last summer. It's interesting to think about "the moving paintings" because they are silent, and it's all about bringing the painting to action. A lot of my work is about action. Where I'm living currently — Europe, United States, etc. — is not necessarily where I want to be taking action, so the canvas becomes this abstract space for my actions. That's how I look at the paintings, and the animations were to invite the idea of time into them, and motion.

What sort of action are you interested in taking?

I always like to be quite vague when I talk about my work because I think the more you talk about something the less you see it. We're so comfortable with language and words, and visual language has its own rules — to decode it, people always gravitate to a text, or an interview, or whatever is on record that can be used to quickly understand the work, instead of spending time with it themselves.

It's kind of a consumer impulse — oh, I've heard about this work and it's about that, so I'll visit and see that, and I'll have had the authentic experience.

Exactly, and so we really don't even need to talk about any of it! Just see what you see and don't see. There's nothing that I *should* say about it, anyway.

When I Googled your name, the most common descriptions of your work all referred to this reading of stereotypical Middle Eastern men in the paintings. Is this consistent with your own reading, if you were going to share it?

I hate this term of "stereotypical Middle Eastern" — what I'm interested in is machismo, and we see that everywhere, in all cultures. If I were from Latin America then I suppose the figures would not be Middle Eastern, they would be Latin. This kind of reading is based more on me, rather than on the paintings. So of course there's a problem with that.

Who are the men, then?

I'm interested in sort of taking out the frontal lobe of these characters and making an argument for baseness, and play, so that the characters are just playing, and unsocialized in a way. But it's not an accusation — it's more of my own games and my own play. I definitely think that the conventional read of my work is a politicization of me, and I'm not saying that the works aren't what they are — people can read into them whatever they want.

In many of your paintings, the figures appear to be in the process of becoming letters, as in several of the works on paper included in “Greater New York.” There seems to be a continuum of figuration in your paintings, with elements sliding back and forth between form and figure.

Figures are quite core to my interests. The last show that I did at my New York gallery, Lombard-Freid Projects, I played with a lot of symbols from the alphabet — how text is inherently a form. The title of the show was “Pictograms.” I was exploring going back to the signs of the alphabet as raw image, as opposed to language. The show dealt with the idea of the figures wanting to become alphabetic characters, and yet always somehow missing the mark. There is this sentiment throughout of heavy irony pulling the figures down. The A, for instance — I thought it would be funny to have an A with an empty wagon, forcing this strict functionality upon it.

Are the figures in your paintings aspiring to be recognized as alphabetic characters because parts of language carry pure, objective meanings, whereas images are vulnerable to subjective interpretations?

Well, language is power, right? So, what language you use is a demonstration of your position of that within the world order. I told myself that I would never use Persian language in my work because there is automatically such an exoticism. It becomes more decorative if you use Persian because there is no read of it. For the same reason I also decided early on that I couldn't use the Latin alphabet either because I didn't want to play with that seesaw, shifting all the weight onto the most Western text.

It was looming in my head: What if the figures themselves became language, so that it's not really a letter that I'm using but a figure going into the shape of a letter? There's one painting, called “Leviathan,” after the Thomas Hobbes book, which has a figure on the cover made up of lots of other little figures. In my painting a man becomes an alphabet becomes a huge, bigger man. It reminds me of Iron Man — powered by this mechanical strength.

So as you were saying, by trying to be letters the figures were trying to be objectively understood, yes. The figures also are using the power of the alphabet or of language to their advantage. For them, it's time to learn English!

With another power game in mind: Are you interested in painting as it's contextualized by art history, in working with or against the historical grain of the medium?

I think it's very difficult to maneuver effectively in that space. You can't really design those things, or even be self-conscious of them. I think it's best to be informed of everything, not just of painting but of sculpture, performance — all different kinds of work — to be your own best audience, so that your own work can surprise you. If you're aware of everything going on, and your work still surprises you, then hopefully it's moving somewhere fresh and it can add to visual language that is already so abundant.

I really don't consciously think of trying to create a historical opening for my work. I think you just have to find the best form for your ideas. For me, again, painting comes from the fact that I need an abstract space for my ideas, because the physical space where I live is not conducive to what I want to do. The square becomes the variable space where any action is possible.