

Chris Wiley: "Abject Expressionism"

**Additional documentation about *Tala Madani. Rear Projection* exhibition
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Pawing through a copy of National Geographic in the desultory aisles of a corporate bookstore when I was about twelve, I vividly remember coming across an image of an all boys' grade school classroom nestled somewhere in the dusky winter hinterlands of Russia where they had instituted an ingenious new wellness regime for the students: light therapy. Every morning the students would apparently strip down to their underwear, don monstrous protective goggles, and array themselves around an ultraviolet light pole, which bathed them in ghostly blue light. The tableau was like some dystopian future rehash of the archetypal hearth image, where warmth, companionship and fellow feeling had been supplanted by a bleak utilitarian ritual of science designed to stave off the withering effects of a sun-blotting nuclear winter. What struck me most, though, was not this sci-fi flavour, but that it appeared to be a strange form of organised humiliation, which rendered it into a kind of synecdoche of the experience of schooling itself, and, perhaps, modern life more generally.

Now imagine those kids grew up, grew goatees, got jobs, and got fat. Their school reunions might look something like Tala Madani's *Sun Worship* (2012, p. 61), a garish gold canvas sporting a cartoon-like rendering of a clutch of middle aged men in their plaid skivvies, hands clasped in prayer and faces contorted with the look of distressed supplication, with rivulets of urine snaking their way down their legs and comingling in a centrally placed drain. In all likelihood, this is an exaggeration – but who am I to be a judge of probability in this brave new world of ours, with its bottomless wells of secret perversions? Regardless, documentary-style verisimilitude is certainly beside the point. Madani's paintings and stop motion animations are more like psychic gathering points, distillate allegories boiled down from the dross of our dankest desires and our most stinging humiliations.

In this way, they bear a certain conceptual resemblance to the work of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, those bad boy plunderers of the dark corners of our collective psychic storehouses, with a couple of key exceptions: Madani is an Iranian woman, whose scatological, abject, and impishly funny works are concerned with a fantasy world populated exclusively by men, who almost unfailingly appear to be of Middle Eastern extraction. Needless to say, this is pretty knotty territory. As a matter of course, however, the complexities of Madani's work are often flattened so that they fit in a fairly well-worn box. Take, for instance, a work like *Enema Up the Ladder* (2012, p. 77), which depicts two men, again in their underwear, one holding the serpentine nozzle of an enema bag and the other

perched on top of the titular ladder, gamely offering his ass for insertion, or *Chinballs with Flag* (2011, p. 35), in which a man whose pendulous, stubbly jowls recall giant testicles, hangs a flag with a face-sized hole cut above a cartoonishly drawn scrotum in front of a male companion, giving this latter man the appearance of having a similar facial mutation. More often than not, the temptation has been to take these bizarre psychosexual vignettes and hang them on an easy metaphoric deployment of abjection that amounts to mere Western finger wagging, painting these men as ciphers for the raging male id behind our possibly exaggerated notions of the theocracy-ordained misogyny that has become such a hallmark of our collective perceptions of Madani's home region. This read, however, strikes me as not particularly subtle.

That said, Madani's choice to cede the imaginative territory of her paintings to a demographic that is the closest equivalent that the Western world has to a boogiemer is certainly not something to be quickly dismissed. But rather than turning this presumed critique directly around on Madani, and assuming that she is attempting to make a point about her embattled status as a Persian woman, it is perhaps more germane to speak of the way the men in her paintings behave, and how that might reflect on our collective ideations surrounding the figure of the ever-abstracted and displaced Middle-Eastern male. A good place to start, in this regard, is with one of Madani's earliest body of paintings, from 2006, that she refers to as her 'Cake-Men Series'. In it, Madani's men enact strange rituals of sex, sadism and humiliation, centered rather incongruously on tiered, pink birthday cakes, whose icing is slathered on bodies, whose spongy innards are poked and penetrated, and whose candles are used to burn and brand. It is a Sadean carnival of epic proportions, made more menacing by the benign nature of its primary totem. Here, one of the most universal of celebrations – the celebration of birth, and by extension, of life – has been transformed into its dark other, in which depravity is the order of the day.

This type of inversion, in which activities that have the flavor of boyhood games go awry when played by adult men who should have left them behind, allowing repressed psychic violence and physical aggression to come bubbling to the surface, has remained a vital vein in Madani's paintings ever since. However, it is specifically the Western perception of Middle-Eastern male sexuality that her paintings play with, and force us to examine. Classically, the way in which the West has sexualized its male others in the process of building architectures of oppression has been to see them through the lens of hypersexuality. Thus, we have the image of the savage 'African', hell-bent on raping innocent white women, just as, historically, we have the image of the sensuous, mysterious 'Arab', with his harems of belly-dancing women and his knack for seduction. But, almost as soon as the dust settled after the Twin Towers were impaled and fell, this latter image underwent a radical shift. Popular justifications for the attacks began to include the

salacious, much-contested detail of the seventy-two virgins that supposedly await Islamic martyrs in paradise, the implication being that this new terrorist threat was, in part, a form of violent sexual release, manufactured by the repressive nature of fundamentalist Islamic society. A new type of sexual other was born: a thoroughly repressed one, whose thwarted animal urges were routed into aggression. This, of course, is the variety of sexual otherness that crops up frequently in Madani's paintings, but their weight does not spring from mere representation. Madani's men become everymen, who hold up 'dark' mirrors that reflect our desires and drives in all their unflattering complexity.

For all the myriad ways that Madani's work asks us to examine ourselves and our relations to those we think are radically other, however, it has just as much to say about painting. Her work is replete with all manner of bodily waste – vomit, shit, piss, blood – that is spattered, streaked, dripped, and forcibly expelled. Take, for example, *Piss Smiley* (2011, p. 49), where a crowd of faceless men bobs neck deep in a field of wavering lines that is equally suggestive of ruled notebook paper and a crudely drawn ocean, caught in the process of being anointed with a waterfall of electric yellow urine that sticks to their blank visages in crude smiley faces. Or, see her darkly hilarious animation *Music Man* (2009), in which a man who has drawn a crude musical staff on a wall is seen forcing another man to vomit note-like gobs of puke on his waiting armature, before folding him up and stuffing him down the front of his bright pink briefs. Or perhaps her collection of paintings of men with enema bags, where the promise of future shit geysers is planted indelibly in the viewer's mind. Clearly, these works have something to do with bodily horror, with the psychic rupture that occurs when the hidden workings of our interiors come roaring out into the light of day. (Her series of paintings of men with gaping, asshole-like punctures in their bellies, such as *The Whole* (2011, p. 96) and *Projector* (2011, p. 43), seem apposite in this regard as well. However, Madani's treatment of base bodily materials suggests that they also have something to do with the act of painting as such.

In some of her works, this relationship is quite literal: piss in *Piss Smiley* (2011, p. 49) and vomit in *Music Man*, for example, are used in the service of mark-making. Tacitly, we are furnished with the idea that bodily excretions may be the most primeval of all painting tools, placing the origins of painting not in the caves at Lascaux, but in infants finger-painting with their own faeces, pictures pissed in the snow, and blood smeared on bodies in preparation for war. However, Madani also seems to deploy excreta in service of a more metaphoric consideration of her medium as well. Here, painting is cast as the exuberant exteriorization (or perhaps tortured expulsion) of the useless, as a kind of glorified waste. This reading in particular casts the enema works like *Waiting Enema* (2012, p. 62), which depicts a melancholic man seated at a table, enema bag in hand and hose trailing out of his pants, in a slightly different light, rendering them into scatological allegories of

artistic frustration. Perhaps it is important, in this regard, to remember that Freud described the drama of the anal stage as the struggle to regulate the giving and withholding of (faecal) gifts.

This play with the notion of art as somehow related to waste (both bodily and, in the case of early avant-garde artists like Kurt Schwitters and their descendants, material), and the equation of painting with excretion, is not a new one, of course. It stretches back at least to the abstract “paintings” that Marcel Duchamp made with his own semen in the late 1940s, through Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit* (1961), Warhol’s late 1970s *Oxidation Paintings*, and across vast swathes of Paul McCarthy’s oeuvre, particularly his video work *Painter* (1995), in which he appears as the titular painter, bulbous-nosed and phallus-fingered, huffing around a ‘studio’ stage set stocked with canvases and oversized paint tubes, one of which is marked ‘SHIT’. Madani’s work spins off of all of these precedents, but it finds its most direct link with McCarthy’s snide critique of Abstract Expressionist histrionics (at one point he can be seen attacking a canvas with an oversized brush squealing “De Kooning! De Koooooooooning!”). Like McCarthy, Madani takes aim at Abstract Expressionism in works like *Action Painting Room* (2012, p. 79) and *Blackout* (2012, p. XX) in which representational imagery is partially occluded by splatters of black paint – equal parts Niki de Saint Phalle and paint ball war games aftermath – which summon up the violence at work beneath the surface of Ab Ex’s romanticized creative paroxysms. Related to these works is *Morris Men With Piss Stain* (2012, p. 92), a pastel colored approximation of Morris Lewis’s iconic *Veil Paintings* that has been transformed into the splayed legs of grinning men in a Busby Berkeley-like array, providing a discomfiting reminder of the usually sordid associations of Lewis’s painterly signature: the stain.

These recent works have their origins in a series that Madani began four years prior, dubbed *Dazzlemen*, which engaged with an entirely different history of abstract painting and provides a map to the heart of her critical stance. The paintings take their name from an ill-conceived, yet visually striking form of wildly striped camouflage known as Dazzle camouflage, which adorned ships during the First World War and was designed not to conceal the vessel, but rather confuse potential attackers as to its bearing, speed, and orientation. In the *Dazzlemen* works, Madani’s men paint their bodies in tribal patterns, vomit stripes up in rain-bows, and sport stripy costumes that appear to have been designed by some mad jailhouse couturier. All the paintings have a debauched, bacchanal feel, but one work from the series in particular, *Red Stripes with Stain* (2008, p. 36), proves to be emblematic: a group of men are seen crawling next to a candy-striped wall that resembles a work by Daniel Buren, wearing pyjamas with matching stripes that almost – though not quite – conceal the stains on each of their asses. Here abstract painting is called out for what Madani thinks it can be: a smoke screen that

veils human frailty, perversity, and aggression behind tidy patterns and pompous flights of gestural sanctimony.

This is not to say, however, that Madani holds abstraction in total contempt. It is clear that she is well acquainted with the joys of wielding the brush and resonant potential of the mark, and the gesture. Her works would be lifeless otherwise. As such, when attempting to suss out Madani’s artistic affinities, it is important to remember that Post-War gestural abstraction was not an impulse that was limited to the United States, and that it took on a decidedly different character elsewhere, which dovetails more neatly with Madani’s work.

Take, for instance, the work of Japan’s Gutai Group, particularly that of Kazuo Shiraga. Shiraga engaged with paint with his body directly, creating violent, often quite ugly paintings while suspended by a rope, using his feet as brushes, as if engaged in a primal dance, or an esoteric form of martial arts. His most iconic work, *Challenging Mud* (1955), saw him embroiled in an unwinnable battle with the muck of the earth itself (an analogue, certainly, for shit), twisting and grunting and pounding his way to the creation of an impermanent painting, or an expressionist earth work. These works, like those of his Gutai associates, are partially rooted in a desire to directly engage with the material world – indeed, the group’s name can be translated as “concreteness” – a quality that they share with the performative paintings of North American artists like Jackson Pollock, who was a key influence for the group. However, in their emphatic aggressiveness these works were also redolent of the trauma of Japan’s recent past, of both the horrors it perpetrated and those that were perpetrated against it in the Second World War. Shiraga’s later work *Wild Boar Hunting II* (1963) is most explicit in this regard. The canvas is almost entirely taken over by the pelt of a wild boar, which has been lacquered to it with great globs of blood red paint, as if it had been the staging ground of the animal’s slaughter. Here, it appears that Shiraga has enacted a ritual of sacrifice that simultaneously reflects the war’s atrocities, and constitutes a cathartic exorcism of them as well. This stab at catharsis, which is also mirrored in the better-known works of Viennese Actionists like Hermann Nitsch, who sought to expiate the sins of the Nazis through elaborate, often bloody ritual, can be transposed onto the actions of some of Madani’s men as well: their sadistic games can be seen as attempts to obliquely enact scenes of contemporary trauma (like the prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib, for example), and rob them of their teeth through humour and play.

However, as much as Madani’s work may be said to be concerned with a history of artistic catharsis through paint, or critical assessments of Abstract Expressionism, our perceptions of otherness, or the dredging of psychic sludge, it is perhaps most importantly and holistically concerned with staking out (or reclaiming) territory. Regrettably, yet unsurprisingly, the litany of artists that have been trotted out as

guideposts for Madani's boisterous, brutal work are, like the subjects of her paintings, almost unfailingly men. Indeed, save for notable exceptions like Carolee Schneemann, Kara Walker, and a small host of others, it would seem that the province of the abject, the obscene, and the perverse in art has been historically occupied by male artists, who have hewed themselves easily to type: the bad boy rubbing the world's nose in its own shit, who was once the little hellion in short pants throwing mud on the playground. It is in this unwelcoming territory that Madani stakes her claim, positing a notion of artistic equality that ranges beyond feel-good platitudes. For if we are buried in shit, as the bad boys would have it, it is all of us in it together, holding hands.