

HYPERALLERGIC

Necessary Ambiguity: Sangram Majumdar's Recent Work



John Yau December 1, 2013



Sangram Majumdar, "Tilt" (2013), oil on linen, 66 x 48 in (All images courtesy of Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects).

In a media-riddled world where images rapidly circulate, moving from momentary commodity ("gone viral") to forgotten waste, Sangram Majumdar is interested in "what stays."

As he told John Seed in a *Huffington Post* interview, he is an observational painter rooted in the concrete:

Often the reason I start with something physical and actual is because it gives me something to fight against. There's immediacy to the experience that gets actualized through paint. But I also work from photos, memory and maquettes.

Elsewhere, in the same interview, Majumdar stated that he often thinks of his studio as "a stage-set." While this equation might suggest that he is interested in narrative, I would advance that he is more interested in time unfolding rather than in story. I would further state that he seems determined to expand the parameters of observational painting by, among other things, exploring the places where a gap might occur between seeing and naming.

This places him in the forefront of the generation of observational painters that have elected to engage with Lois Dodd, Catherine Murphy, Sylvia Plimack-Mangold, and Stanley Lewis, all hardnosed lookers, as well as idiosyncratic figures such as Euan Uglow, and historical figures and periods such as early Willem de Kooning, Henri Matisse between 1914-1917, Max Beckmann and late Philip Guston. Add Majumdar's interest in the European influence on Persian miniatures and

Indian, or what he calls “Deccan,” art, and one gets a sense of the breadth and particularity of his alignment with history and contemporary painting issues. Above all else it speaks to his ambition to be something more than a niche painter.

The biggest difference between Majumdar and both his predecessors and peers is his use of two kinds of light in a single work — ranging from darkness to reflective glare — which dissolves the unity of the subject, as well as disorients the viewer.



Sangram Majumdar, “Light Steps” (2013)

In his current exhibition of paintings and drawings, *Peel*, which is at two galleries, Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects and Projector

(November 20–December 22, 2013), Majumdar begins with objects — a card rack, a dollhouse, the side view of a painting rack crammed with canvasses and a decorative tree made of cut sheets of colored paper — whose bonds to the familiar become one of the areas he undoes.

It seems to me that Majumdar is after that moment of seeing which occurs just before we name the object, event or experience and begin looking for the next thing, whatever it is. He wants to discover if, by peeling away all the obvious pointers, he can locate the subject on the perceptual threshold separating seeing from naming. At that juncture, even if viewers can name what they see, the work will exceed (and subvert) language’s attempt at encapsulation. He seems to want viewers to sense that they have lost their way and are now looking at something devoid of reassuring landmarks, including such terms as abstraction and representation. I see this as a risky gambit as well as a conscious challenge to a media-besotted world that revels in names and naming, as if somehow everything can be accounted for, safely categorized and subsequently copied.

In “Dusty Twilight” (2013), are we looking at something (a surface) or through something (a window)? By pushing the painting into a perceptual zone where surface and transparency are no longer reassuring handles to hold onto, Majumdar elevates the painting beyond familiar

and limiting categories (abstraction and/or representation). At the same time, recognizing postmodern society's penchant to name and thus believe in, he refuses to allow closure — a conclusion where seeing and naming coincide. “Dusty Twilight” is simultaneously immediate and reticent. If we are looking through a window, what are we looking at?



Left: Sangram Majumdar, “Twilight Echoes” (2013), oil on linen, 38 x 42 in; Right: Sangram Majumdar, “Dusty Twilight” (2013), oil on linen, 20 x 22 in.

At the same time, an irregular grid of red abstract marks over the surface of the painting seems to be hovering in an indeterminate space. In “Twilight Echoes” (2013), which is a companion to “Dusty Twilight,” Majumdar frames the view with what appear to be curtains. In both paintings, the red marks are at once reflections and paint, immaterial and material. Not knowing what we are looking at, where we are or where we are going, is apt to induce panic, which I believe is what Majumdar, who was born in Calcutta, India, and moved to America (Phoenix, Arizona) with his family when he was thirteen, is after — that sense of having lost all

bearings. Might not the basis of this experience be rooted in the artist's biography?

The ambiguity of “Dusty Twilight” arises out of necessity and, I believe, personal memories. It embraces that moment when one is absolutely confounded by something that others who are more familiar with it, whatever it is, might consider banal and not worth paying attention to. Rather than locating this disorientation in a cultural object, Majumdar focuses on an experience that strikes this viewer, at least, as ordinary and remote, like listening to people conversing in a language you don't understand.

In “Tilt” (2013), the ostensible subject is a card rack, though we don't see the armature, only parallelograms, some of which are monochromatic, but most seem to evoke paintings, possibly by the artist. The parallelograms are suspended in the air, with some facing toward the viewer, while others face away: all are tilted in toward a central axis, which has been removed, turning what had been the rack's armature into an invisible energy field, a benign tornado. Scattered clusters of orange, violet and yellow lines, which convey a sense of falling and rising, mark the crimson ground. We are looking at a fiction, but it is one that is also real. This conundrum lies at the heart of a number of Majumdar's paintings, inviting viewers to look and look again.

In “Light Steps” (2013), the artist seems to be looking at (or remembering) a photograph under glass, which reflects geometric fragments of light, sharp as diamonds. Reality, Majumdar seems to be suggesting, is a site of multiple collisions, rather than either a unified or discontinuous field.



Left: Sangram Majumdar, “Interrupted” (2013), oil on linen, 30 x 24 in; Right: Sangram Majumdar “Blackstract” (2013), oil on linen, 30 x 24 in

In “Interrupted” (2013), which is largely white, and “Blackstract” (2013), which is largely black, Majumdar seems to be working from a setup (or still-life) in which he has affixed sheets of cut paper in geometric configurations to a surface, possibly a painting, and faithfully articulated the layers of paper and tape. On one level, he has transformed an abstract collage into a painting. On another level, “Interrupted” and “Blackstract” brought to mind something the great, innovative French writer Georges Perec wrote in an article, “Approaches to What,” included in *Species of Spaces and Other*

Pieces (2008), translated by John Sturrock: “To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us.”

Sangram Majumdar: Peel continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) and Projector Gallery (237 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 22.

The New Criterion

Dispatch April 3, 2019

Sangram Majumdar's sleights of hand

by Andrew L. Shea

On "once, and twice" at Geary, New York.

On a portentous day in 1958, Willem de Kooning was at work on a painting in his Manhattan studio. Over the previous few years he had moved away from his tortured, frenzied *Women* in favor of less-densely worked pictures, their power and energy concentrated into fewer strokes of broad, calligraphic paint. This one in particular, a horizontal canvas of about fifty by sixty inches, contained three prominent slashes—of red, yellow, and sky blue on an off-white ground—as well as a couple of vertical black strokes. At some point, de Kooning must have turned his back on the canvas or stepped out of the room. Unbeknown to him, the story goes, his two-year-old daughter then clambered into the studio, mucked her hands in some white paint, and began pawing the canvas, leaving nine or ten tiny handprints on the work.

De Kooning's response—his artistic response—was not to throw out the painting or cover up the unexpected handprints. Instead, he left them as is, embracing the "accident" of the event—a move informed perhaps by his love for his daughter, but one that was also typical of the master Ab-Exer's proclivity for chance and serendipitous discovery. The work, handprints and all, is now in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts under the fitting title of *Lisbeth's Painting*.

I kept thinking of this work and its story when I saw “once, and twice,” a solo exhibition of eight new paintings by Sangram Majumdar, on view through April 12 at Geary in Lower Manhattan.¹ A standout work, *expulsion* (2019), contains a field of mint green, upon which sits a variety of abstract marks and shapes. Staccato dashes and blips whirl around the outer edges of the canvas, stretching inward but never quite moving all the way into the center of the work. Also reaching in, from the upper-left-hand edge, is a tan form in the shape of a hand—about the size of a small child’s. Below this, one then notices what appear to be the ghosted outlines of two other hands. The resonance between *Lisbeth’s Painting* and *expulsion* feels so strong that I’d have a hard time believing Majumdar didn’t have the earlier work in mind when he was painting. Those unexpected hands introduce an aspect of human pathos to both works, upsetting our perception of them only as formal exercise.

Majumdar is an Indian-born artist based in Brooklyn and Baltimore. A professor of painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art, he has exhibited widely, including at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects on the Lower East Side just a few months ago. The current exhibition consists of new works, all painted in 2019. Hands abound. The gallery’s press release mentions a “recent engagement with the archetype of hands as tools for creating, touching, claiming, and exclaiming,” and though it may be difficult for viewers to perceive exactly how this has been accomplished, it is obvious that Majumdar seeks to thoroughly investigate “the hand” as a multifaceted symbolic form.

The first thing one notices when entering into the Varick Street exhibition space is how differently each painting sits on the wall. Majumdar seems intent on resisting stylistic uniformity—the eight works vary greatly in size, color, and paint handling. The larger of the works, for instance, are nearly eighty inches tall, while the smallest is no bigger than your typical desktop monitor. Majumdar is an exceptionally talented colorist, and the current exhibition demonstrates the artist’s impressive range across and around the color wheel. In a show of such few works, the effect could easily feel disjointed or

incoherent, but Majumdar manages to string both formal and conceptual threads together among these disparate pictures.

One key painting, *a cautionary tale (after Rama destroys the ogress Tadaka)*, was sourced in part from an early–eighteenth-century Indian illustration of the *Ramayana*, a Sanskrit epic poem. In the story, the poem's hero, Prince Rama, is sent to kill Tadaka—an evil and cursed forest princess wreaking havoc on the community—but balks at the task and instead only cuts off her hands. Tadaka then becomes invisible and attacks Rama, but Rama shoots her through the heart with an arrow and so ends up killing her after all. In *a cautionary tale*, Majumdar presents the ogress in profile, as some sort of woman–wolf hybrid. Her body is partly wiped out; it disintegrates and tangles up into the background, a compressed and shallow field of red and burnt yellow. This sense of constriction and discomfort recapitulates often in the other paintings.

That “dismembered hands” are relevant to the current exhibition is clear, but the theme of invisibility also seems to have been important for Majumdar as an entryway into thinking about the painter's role as a presenter and manipulator of information. The artist, I gather, would assent to Voltaire's declaration that “the secret to being a bore is to tell everything.” Indeed, much of the drama in these pictures derives from the way that we are given only a peek, or a glance, at his erased, scraped-out, and occluded figures. *Call and response*, one of the two largest works in the exhibition, is composed entirely of hands organized on the canvas in an almost grid-like fashion. This arrangement gives the painting a frontal, even defensive posture—many of the hands here could be blinking crosswalk stoplights. But Majumdar's use of repetition is anything but mechanical or rote. What may feel at first like a wall instead reveals itself to be a porous, open field, in which forms by turns move forward to our attention and recede into oblivion. On which of these ghostly, shifting forms shall we, like the hero Prince Rama, aim our arrow sights? It's never quite clear.

- I. “once, and twice” opened at Geary, New York, on March 1 and remains on view through April 11, 2019.

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Sangram Majumdar- 'Peel' at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects

While the paintings frustrate, complicate and undermine pictorial expectation, they also bring deep satisfaction in reflections, openings and bursts of revelation.

By William Eckhardt Kohler, Contributor

painter, writer

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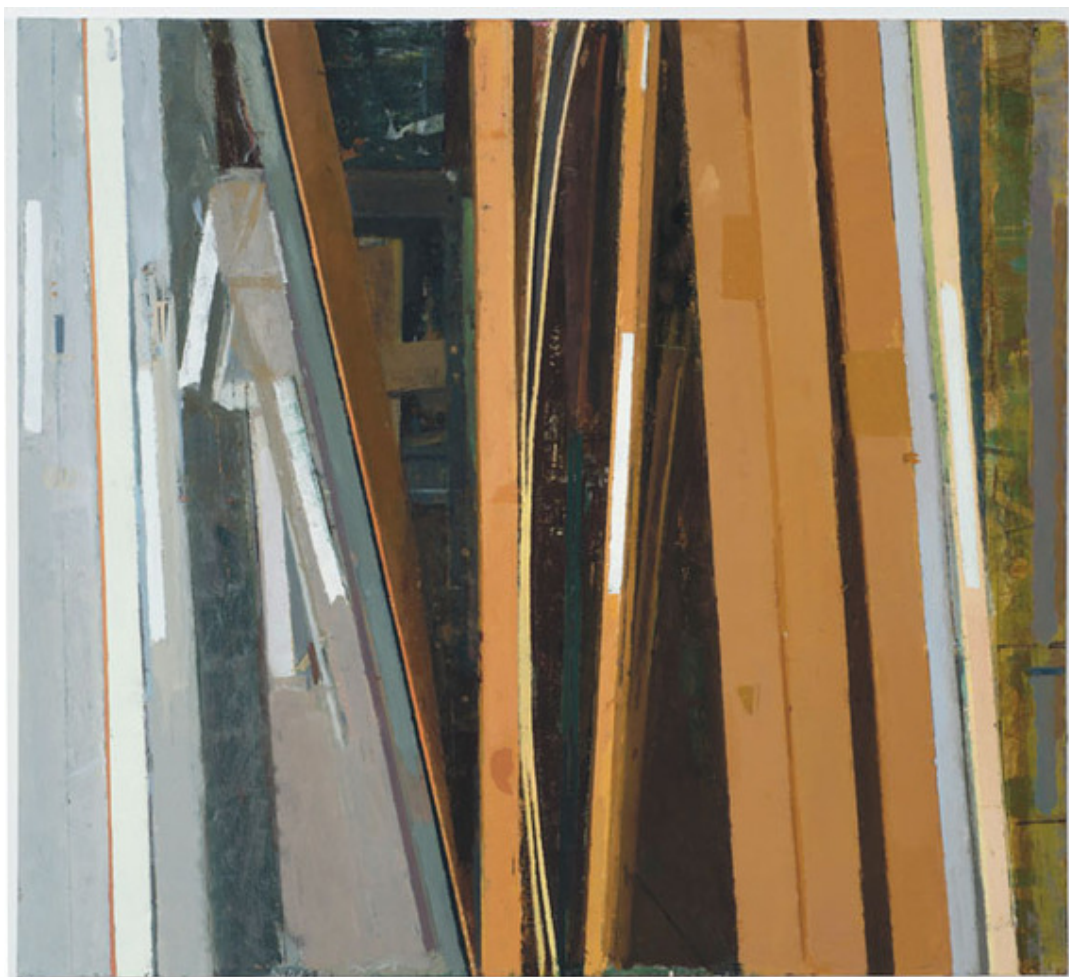


The paintings of Sangram Majumdar, now on view simultaneously at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects and around the corner at Projector, are paradoxical by nature. A self-proclaimed perceptual painter, many of the paintings read, at least initially, more abstract than representational. The paintings are seductive sensual and luscious, evincing a skill and sensitivity that few painters even get close to manifesting. At the same time they hold the viewer at a distance, raising more questions than they answer. While the paintings frustrate, complicate and undermine pictorial expectation, they also bring deep satisfaction in reflections, openings and bursts of revelation. In eluding the obvious Majumdar often utilizes blockages, obfuscations and disruptions, in the process testing how far one can push perceptual painting and improvisation. The alternately fluid and dogged handling of paint recalls at times someone like Edwin Dickinson but with even more mystery and with the Academic tropes inverted. On the other hand, by highlighting unnamable qualities of the physical world he invites comparison to an abstract painter such as Thomas Nozkowski. The ambiguity with which Majumdar engages image making lets the paintings sit in between categories. His earlier paintings were more forthrightly depictive, but the artist seems to have realized that the more representational the paintings appear the more likely it is that what he is actually doing will be misunderstood. This new work is not easily categorizable, is not oriented towards simplistic interpretation or intellectualization, and is not oriented towards the production of interchangeable paintings. Each painting is a beautiful beast, both wild and cultivated, thoughtful and intuitive. In an age when so much painting seems to be moving towards simplification, Majumdar asks us to accept the challenge of extended and thoughtful looking.



Tilt, 2013 66 x 48in, oil on linen

'Tilt' is an intriguing picture that recalls cubist tropes with its fractured planes and snippets of flat pattern. It is however an image based upon a postcard rack that the artist purchased on eBay. The images of the postcards, in earth tones against the magenta field of the painting, scatter out from the picture's central axis. They read as both flat shards spinning off the picture plane, and also as punctuations of pictorial space within the surrounding magenta opacity. The effect is a bit like a house of cards in mid-levitation rather than collapse. What reminds us of the implied hand of the magician, Majumdar's, are the scattered remnants of previous moves and decisions, since abandoned, that the artist allows to remain; these stand as reminders that what we see is not a pat trick, but the outcome of a hard-fought search for what is possible and true for this painting.



Torque, 2013 38 x 42 in, oil on linen

'Torque' is a prime example of the kind of visual ride that Majumdar provides for the viewer. It is, at first look, one of the more naturalistic paintings in the show, depicting the side edges of paintings in a storage rack. This is a subject so banal in the life of a painter so as to pass notice as being worthy subject matter. The canvas is divided into a series of vertical and slightly diagonal bands as well as several

long, slow and slim arcs, presumably of cardboard dividers. The lovely surprise is the way several of these bands recall the zips of a Barnett Newmann painting, hinting at the divine. In contrast, invoking the mundane, others of the bands must be looked at closely in order to determine that they are not in fact pieces of collaged on cardboard. In between the stacked paintings edges, the viewer can discern the hint of a deep space, which suggests a sense of mystery. In another twist, what Majumdar is choosing to represent, is both a physical presence, the sides of the canvases, and a tantalizing absence, for we are not privileged to see what lies on the surface of each of the paintings in the racks.

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Unbuilt To Suit, 2013 66 x 72 in, oil on linen



Step Right Up, 2013 78 x 84 in, oil on linen

Two more stand out paintings, 'Unbuilt to Suit' and 'Step Right Up', are among the largest canvases on view, which is when Majumdar is really at his best. Both pieces are based upon a dollhouse that the artists rescued from the trash, thus a small object is transformed into something other than it was via rescaling. This is not a simple Magrittean language game though. Majumdar has rearranged the dollhouse interior into a disconcerting nether space so that, for instance, in 'Unbuilt to Suit', a staircase is tantalizingly disconnected from a hovering and partially open doorway. A large crimson field, reminiscent in color of a massively expanded Rajhastani painting, anchors the entire painting. Around this red shape he has over painted a white border, a positive negative shape that has been drawn from the outer contour of another of the paintings in the show, 'Paper Tree'. In 'Step Right Up' a white piece of railing places the viewer at the bottom of the canvas as if climbing out of an abandoned swimming pool into a lush tropical forest. However, most

of the flora forms in the top three fourths of the canvas are flattened in a way that reorients the point of view as if we are looking down topographically rather than up from the white ladder. With each of these paintings, the viewer is enveloped in their respective fields, one deep and dark, the other a luxuriant vermillion. Within these color ideas is an abundance of shifting tones and a plethora of ecstatic nuance that defies cogent description, which is part of the point.



Papertree, 2013 66 x 72 in, oil on linen

To a viewer unwilling to sit in the discomfort of not knowing, this may all seem like empty artistic gamesmanship. There is however profound pleasure to be had along the way of unraveling the 'what is it?' of each painting. The paintings are dynamic, vital elusive and unsettled, but not unsettling; rather they provide an extremely

nourishing experience. And, it is clear, with close looking, that these paintings are built from the willingness to risk destroying everything in order to arrive at something new. With each move the artist invites failure, meeting the anxiety of potential dissolution with the realization of unexpected material substance.

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Maybe these paintings are too good. Elegance is unfashionable in an art world that seems to favor the off-hand. The rich color, density of paint and compositional inventiveness of Majumdar's work go against trends that favor the lazy and the formulaic on one hand or novelty and overweening newness on the other. Making something well, with skill and effort, and choosing not to settle on the easy and immediate solution, is not a posture for Majumdar though, but integral to who he is as an artist.

Even in conversation with Majumdar about his work, I usually leave less sure about what he is thinking about than when the conversation began. But then, that is what keeps me coming back, for more looking. In the age of quick fixes and art made for maximum and immediate impact it is rare indeed to find an artist so willing to invite such prolonged viewing and so unwilling, despite the fact that the paintings are complete and whole, to tie everything up neatly in a bow for lazy and impatient minds.

Sangram Majumdar- 'Peel' is on view at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects 208 Forsyth Street, and Projector Gallery 237 Eldridge

Street, New York, NY through Dec. 22nd, 2013. All images reproduced with permission and courtesy of the artist and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects.

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FROM OUR PARTNER

Beer With a Painter: Sangram Majumdar

“There is no time in painting. A microsecond can last forever.”



Jennifer Samet March 14, 2020



Sangram Majumdar, “eclipsed” (2009), oil on linen, 78 x 90 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

BALTIMORE — Towards the end of my visit with Sangram Majumdar in his Baltimore studio, he looks at me and says, “Hey! Can I ask you a question?” He shows me what he is thinking of, compositionally, for a new painting. He asks me to weigh in on whether the space around the figure should be emptier or more full, and what I think of specific elements, like the figure’s shoes. “Do you think this will work?” he asks. We talk through the possibilities, and the next day he shares an image of the painting-in-progress. It occurs to me that Majumdar’s curiosity about what viewers will see, and how they will respond, is a crucial ingredient in the mix of his working process. His questions extend to what a painting is capable of expressing, how it can be done, and if it registers in our world.

Majumdar's painting consistently challenges our expectations. Visual disorientation is part of the driving aesthetic of his work. Rendering may be easy, and color may be intuitive, but everything else is subject to open-ended, non-conclusive investigation. In earlier paintings, he showed interiors that veered back and forth between nameable, quotidian objects and unnameable "abstract" interruptions formed by his source images. Later, he began painting from set-ups assembled from photographic, art historical, or digital sources, on top of which he collaged cut paper or drew with strips of tape. His recent work turns to the walking figure as a recurring motif, still utilizing multiple elements to piece together — and intervene in — the formation of a clear narrative or definitive objecthood.



Sangram Majumdar, studio wall installation of works on paper, dimensions variable (2020)

I've known Majumdar since about 2009, and in that time, I have been thrilled and inspired by the many visits I made to his studio (formerly in Industry City, Brooklyn), which revealed intense, rich color-worlds of paint and paper, and the most surprising set-ups: rearranged dollhouse furniture; cut paper and images laid out on tables like pieces of a mystery puzzle; image projections into corners of his space — and, sometimes, a mundane but beautiful segment of the outside world he points out from his window.

Born in Calcutta, India, in 1976, Majumdar has an MFA from Indiana University and a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Recent solo exhibitions were held at Geary Contemporary and Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, both in New York. He was also the subject of an exhibition

at the Asia Society Texas Center, Texas, and of a traveling exhibition at Drew University, New Jersey, University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, and the University of Vermont. His work was included in recent group exhibitions at Shoshana Wayne Gallery and The Landing Gallery, both in Los Angeles, as well as Freight & Volume, James Cohan Gallery, and Gallery Zürcher, all in New York. Majumdar now lives and works in Baltimore, where he is a Professor of Painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art.



Sangram Majumdar, “sun blind light” (2019), oil and charcoal on linen, 78 x 62 inches

Jennifer Samet: *Can you tell me about early childhood visual experiences, growing up in Calcutta, that may have informed you and your work? Were there particular experiences with other art that resonated with you? How about when you came to the United States when you were 13?*

Sangram Majumdar: I don’t remember going to art museums, but there was something about the walls, the streets, the smell, and the sounds in Calcutta that I think about a lot. Specifically, I remember going to [Durga Pujas](#) with my dad or uncles almost every year. I would bring art materials with me, and in the madness of overcrowded visitors and worshippers, I would find a little space on the ground in front of the deities and start drawing or painting. I loved the visual possibility of the gathering of gods, demons, animals – all within decorative structures. It’s something I drew over and over again.

I used to save Sunday newspapers with color images. I cut out photographs of soccer and cricket players, scenes where players were tackling each other in the field, or a bowler or batsman in action. I would create compositions by pulling characters from them.

Coming to the US definitely affected my visual sensibility. I can recall specific memories, many of which center around smells. I remember getting off the plane in Phoenix and sensing the air was drier. It felt extremely bright. One evening I remember going to a Fry's grocery store for the first time and noticing the ceiling track lighting. There were no shadows anywhere. Light flooded the aisles. Some days after school my mom would ask me to go and get some curly fries from the Jack in the Box behind the apartment complex where we lived. That was my first experience with fast food.



Sangram Majumdar, "crowd drawing 2" (2008), graphite and charcoal on paper, 38 x 50 inches

I only have vague memories of the artwork I made in high school. But I do remember one student in art class who constantly made really accurate colored pencil drawings of Michael Jordan. We got paired to do a wall painting for the drama room that depicted characters from various Shakespeare plays. It wasn't until I went to Rhode Island School of Design that I had total immersion in visual art and painting.

JS: *You studied at the Rhode Island School of Design and got your MFA from Indiana University. How has your work evolved from what you were doing after graduate school?*

SM: One of the last paintings I made in graduate school was a 12-foot-long painting of people in an airplane seen in profile from the outside. This led to a body of work where I was beginning to explore ideas of transition, by situating figures in airplanes, subways, and escalators. I was also exploring anonymity by working with crowds or masses of bodies. There was a thread in those paintings that has continued. It has to do with exploring the sense of in-betweenness that is culturally familiar for most immigrants, especially those who come from different language and cultural traditions.

The type of painting tradition that I come out of is about finding the image and the space through the process of painting. A lot of the changes would happen in the painting. Now, drawing has become a way to work through ideas. I start painting at a point where I feel like the image is set.



Sangram Majumdar, "self portrait in interior" (2011), oil on linen, 15 x 18 inches

In earlier work, there would be ten paintings under the final painting. Now I feel that doesn't need to happen. I want the actual work to happen somewhere else, other than the painting itself. I want to displace the process of thinking through, and changing my mind.

Instead of beginning with the mindset, "I'm just going to get going, and I know it will change," I want to go into it thinking, "This could be it. Start now." It puts more pressure on the decisions. You can't be half-conscious. I think about the level of reserve that makes Alex Katz's paintings work. There's a showmanship that is striking when you realize how little is there. Every move counts. It is not a cacophony of decisions.

JS: *Over the years, you developed ways of working from observation that weren't always just working from a model or set-up. For instance, you would create elaborate collages of cut-up images on top of photographs, and work from that, or project an image behind an interior set-up. What motivated you to create these kinds of set-ups?*

SM: In the painting “reconstructed photograph” (2011), the space is both a still life — strips of paper and photo fragments on a table — and an interior that forms as the image parts lock together, like puzzle pieces. I made two paintings that depict rooms in my grandfather’s house in Calcutta, which no longer exists. The source of “self-portrait in interior” (2011) is my silhouette on the glass of a framed photo. For “interior” (2012), I projected an image of the space in my empty studio. Both paintings are about trying to present a space where I fit or perhaps feel most at home. These were probably the last paintings where there were clear, recognizable markers.

Between 2013 and 2017, I shifted further into a fictional space, making paintings that began to appear abstract while still being rooted in observation. I began working from dioramas that used reconstructed background elements from Indian miniature paintings, and dollhouse furniture. The domestic, the mundane, the theatrical, and the mythological were finally together.



Sangram Majumdar, “reconstructed photograph” (2011), oil on linen, 42 x 46 inches

It is a way to create a three-dimensional experience out of an idea. It gave me more information, from which I could start editing. I have never been interested in representing an existing reality. My interest in representational painting comes out of the fact that every time I look, it feels

different. There is something that happens when there is an accretion of sight; something alien about it. It is challenging, and it doesn't make sense. That's why I'm interested in artists that push working from perception to strange territories, like Leon Kossoff or Ellen Altfest or Lois Dodd.

It is also why I love medieval art, and art that isn't completely naturalistic. You are aware that it refers to the world, but that you are also entering another universe, a built-in contradiction.

JS: *I also think about how your work involves erasure, in the sense of taking away pieces of information that might otherwise easily locate the paintings in terms of recognizable images. Why are you interested in doing that?*

SM: There are two main threads to this for me. In terms of perception, or looking, I am often thinking about how much I actually need in an image. What is it that is actually necessary? How precise does it need to be?

Alongside this, I am trying to articulate the sense of how it feels to be a body in the world, what it feels like to be present or not – to feel visible or feel invisible. These issues have particularly come into the work because of the Trump administration policies on immigration. For people who are at risk of being deported, it might be better for them to remain somewhat invisible. I've been thinking about how it would have felt if that had happened when we immigrated. It hits home, and I've never before really thought about politics so directly with my work.



Not everyone wants a platform to be visible. Some people want to just live their lives. The highest level of privilege is when you can just go out and live your life and not have to worry about it. You can just live a sustainable, middle class life. That is really hard for some people, for multiple reasons. So, in terms of painting, how do you give a body agency so that it can choose to be a presence, or not? Most people who are marginalized don't have that choice.

People might look at the work and feel like I'm not being clear. But the idea of being clear, as it aligns with a mode of painting, doesn't belong to me. That is not my reality.

However, I have also been thinking about how you can give a viewer something to grab onto, when you're making paintings that feel deconstructed, that don't locate either representationally or abstractly, or that give you bits and pieces. What do you give them so they don't feel disoriented? That is where the idea of working with the figure more as a symbol has come in.

JS: *Yes, can you tell me more about the walking figure, which was a central element in your recent work?*

SM: The symbol of the walking figure has become the anchor, recurring across several paintings. A connecting thread in my work is trying to make paintings that have feet in two worlds. The walking figure pose is an embodiment of a psychological space – this liminal condition. I think about the different ways you can be in-between, whether it's a head-space, or the time between graduating from high school and going to college. It is that indefinable, null space.



Sangram Majumdar, "once and twice (for I.)" (2019), oil on canvas, 40 x 33 inches

How do you make paintings about that? It is still just as real as anything else. The gesture of taking a step might take less than one second. How do you stretch out that microsecond? Painting does that. There is no time in painting. A microsecond can last forever.

I'm thinking about the function of repetition, and how each painting of the same motif can differ. There can be a carry-over from painting to painting. You loosely know the structure, but not exactly what the pattern is going to be. It's like anything you do ritually, like going to the gym. You have a plan of what you're going to do. Some days you feel stronger; other days you don't. You adjust.

In the past, when I painted the figure, I thought about who I was going to paint, and what pose the person would take. Now, the "who" has been replaced with the symbol. But I still don't know what the painting is going to look like, what kind of tempo it's going to have. Which way is it going to tilt, both structurally but also psychologically? If you move a foot a little too far, there is almost a threshold point, past which the body is no longer going to function, or be able to support itself.

When you align a figure in a painting with the structure of a painting, it is the visual equivalent of the cross brace. It is the thing that holds the painting up in the back, and it is repeated imagistically in the front. If a person is standing, looking at a painting of a figure standing, there's a mirroring effect.



Sangram Majumdar, "open borders" (2017), oil on linen, 66 x 60 inches

I like the idea of taking the most average thought, or average body, or average gesture, and turning it into an icon. A walking figure doesn't have to claim a particular cultural space. It lives across time and cultures, and modes of high and low. And, it is a pose that allows me to access different emotional and psychological states, from positive to anxiety-filled.

JS: *I know in the past you've spoken about art world pressure to make paintings that are more overtly statements of your identity. And, often, artists are expected to bring visibility to a political issue, so it's interesting to be dealing with invisibility. However, I do know that in recent work you were using Indian poetry and miniature painting as a source. Can you tell me about this work?*

SM: For the work in my most recent exhibition, I was referencing a section of the *Ramayana*, which is an Indian epic poem. There is a section where the two main characters, Rama and Lakshmana, encounter a demon, Tataka, who used to be a princess. They kill her, and in some versions of the story, they dismember her.

What was striking to me — I was looking at an illustration in the collection of the Walters Museum — is that her figure is the more visually powerful image. The demon is three times taller than the heroes. So I had the idea to turn her into the primary character, to make her the icon, and give agency back to this character.



Sangram Majumdar, "underwater electric greenhouse" (2014), oil on linen, 84 x 66 inches

JS: *I'm thinking about your painting, "a loud sun blinds" (2019) in terms of some of the ideas you have mentioned. Was that painting about considering this "threshold" point, in terms of what is enough to comprise a painting or an image?*

SM: I wanted to make a painting where things were really pared down. That white and pale yellow of the painting hits you, and there's a blinding starkness to it. When you go outside and it is really sunny and you've been inside all day, the light can be blinding. There is an interesting dichotomy in how light, which theoretically gives you information, can actually remove information and disorient you.

It wasn't a planned painting. I just kept the door open, considering if I could make it work in context with the other paintings. That became the goal. It was like bringing someone who was very different into a situation or a family. Instead of trying to change the person, you could try to change the situation around the person. It requires empathy and willingness to be more open.

I suppose part of this also has to do with how to activate ideas around the periphery, either through subject matter or process. Often, the things that are in the periphery of my paintings have become over time the major thought. For example, for a period when I was working around the motif of the still life, I made several paintings about detritus, which used to just be an element of the work. When I am looking at artwork in museums or galleries, I look a lot at the corners, the

tops, the bottoms of paintings. I am interested in how a thought comes to an end as it reaches the physical boundaries of a form.



Sangram Majumdar, "cassandra's siren" (2019), oil on linen, 96 x 78 inches

For a long time, my paintings were about me looking at the world. And, in part, looking at the world was a way to escape and not deal with who I was. I am trying to be honest and vulnerable in my studio, considering who I am, and how the paintings I make have a certain worldview that might be a little different — or not. How do I live in the world; what are my anxieties and fears and frustrations?

Over the past few years my life has gone through a big change. Annelies and I have a four-year old daughter and we spend a lot of time with her. I paint significantly less, but I feel the paintings are stronger, clearer, and hopefully better. I am thinking a lot about what is important to me, what I can't live without, what I miss, and what matters.

Sometimes I think that my paintings are all self-portraits of someone who doesn't want to be pigeonholed or tokenized. It also has been a way to push against a tradition of painting that I have absorbed from my training, but which I am not fully at home with. I keep making paintings that reflect the fact that nothing is ever one thing. Life is complicated, and I want my paintings to reflect this condition, while also being generous, inviting, and beautiful.



Sangram Majumdar, *expulsion*, 2019, oil on linen, 44 × 38".

Sangram Majumdar

GEARY

Certain artists settle easily and without trepidation into a credible style that allows them to proceed in an unencumbered, linear fashion; Sangram Majumdar is apparently not among them. A decade ago, it made sense for the critic Jennifer Samet to discuss the Kolkata-born New Yorker's work under the rubric "painterly representation"; at that time his art was rather academic in character, with an affinity for restrained color enlivened by a sensitive touch. Fellow painter Kyle Staver noted—and not without admiration—"a stubborn and humorless aspect" to this approach. By 2013, Majumdar had mostly switched to abstraction, using planar yet complex space and a more energetic, even sometimes downright seductive palette, while still also exhibiting some realist paintings. However, one could still notice that at least a few of the ostensibly abstract pieces were based on observational experience: Take *tilt*, 2013, which derives from the form of a postcard rack.

As far as stylistic resources go, Majumdar calls on the full panoply of classic modernism—though he insists that he can absorb anything, from Indian miniatures to video games.

Majumdar's show at Geary Contemporary, "Once, and Twice," reintroduced the figure into the essentially abstract context he's made for himself, but in a different way: Rather than being based on observation or realism, the imagery in these eight new paintings were essentially ideogrammatic. For instance, in *call and response* (all works 2019) a series of diversely colored shapes are loosely arrayed on a white ground according to an implicit grid; a few of these are rough depictions of hands. One of them, toward the lower left, has bright-red fingernails. It's hard not to think of the handprints that turn up in some of Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, or in Jasper Johns's *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, 1963, or *Diver*, 1962–63. The hand's presence implies a questioning of the autographic aspect of painting, and in the case of *call and response*, and of other pieces that feature similar glyphs, we wonder what came first—the seemingly representational depiction of a hand, or a moment of pure abstraction? Which was the call, and which the response? Similar concatenations of marks—this time white against a primarily blue ground, as though they'd come about through erasure—also occur in *the hidden*. But maybe they are something else altogether, like clusters of brushes sticking upright from cans, à la Johns's 1960 sculpture *Painted Bronze*, evoking a possibly fortuitous connection, but also a teasing self-consciousness about the act of painting. A single unambiguous icon of a hand appears in *expulsion*, entering the painting from the left, fingers spread wide, as if to caress the large patch of green that occupies most of the canvas.

Other works depict a full figure, either striding (in *a loud sun blinds* and *a cautionary tale [after Rama destroys the Ogress Tadaka]*) or perhaps running (*once, and twice [for I.]*). Any narrative impulse is held in abeyance, however. The bodies seem shadowy or provisional—not intangible but apparently becoming so. And despite appearances, their movement is not really forward but is a kind of steady vibration within the pictorial field. The palpability that was suggested by the recurrent hand is withdrawn. In compensation, space keeps opening up. The painted surface is what's on the move.

—Barry Schwabsky