

## Notes on the paintings of Sangram Majumdar

Sangram Majumdar is a perceptual painter and his portraits of his surroundings weave together two empirically grounded narratives. One story is bound up with the objects, people, and places he paints whose appearances all make factual claims in their color, proportion, and scale. When these elements are combined they modify each other and their relations create occasions for painting. The second narrative strand in Majumdar's work is the story of how seemingly disjunctive and arbitrary visual constellations like, say, a sleeping woman and a spill of plant material are transformed into something meaningful in their painted embodiment. Deep in the struggle to find a code or equivalent for appearances is a question that can't be settled: Is the more essential narrative our reading of the depicted facts or the painted fact of the picture's forms?

One could also ask: why would a contemporary painter accept the rigors of painting appearances when they are so abundantly available and so easily manipulated in photographic, video, and computer imaging? Edwin Dickinson once stated his belief that, at bottom, we all see the same thing on the retina; the differences in painted representations are a record of "what a thought had done to the sight." It's interesting to catalogue the twentieth century's radical perceptual empiricists: Dickinson and Morandi, William Coldstream, Euan Uglow, Rackstraw Downes, Lennart Anderson, Lucien Freud, Frank Auerbach and Antonio Lopez. Working from the same obsession with the observable world, I can't think of a more eccentric and varied group of painters. Evidently, the challenge to thought and invention of giving form to appearances has not yet been exhausted. Majumdar's ambitions are fed by these achievements and I believe his interpretations of the sensual evidence blends the "sharable", normative ground of perception with painted improvisations whose incommensurability with any precedent insist that experience is inseparable from imaginative conception.

Perhaps the feelings that are awakened in the imaginative transit from something observed to a painted equivalent could be charted in a portrait of a monumental blue bottle, "Threshold" The ellipses that describe the tops and bottoms of cylindrical objects along with the receding planes of the table and mantelpiece articulate a verifiable point of view. The cool light source reflected in the highlights on the bottle, plastic bag, brush ferrule and funnel suffuses the room. Because the perspective and unity of light fulfill naturalistic expectations the viewer is tempted to speculate on the backstory implied in this slice of studio life. The pictures and cards that strategically grout the still life ensemble raise the theme of picture making itself, and,

although full of autobiographical clues about the world of the painter, it is the evocative power of the picture's shape forms that invites you to assemble a narrative about a painter's vocation.

The blue bottle is a sort of omphalos whose gravitational pull organizes the smaller satellite objects. Echoing the bottle's tangent fit with the perimeter of the black mantelpiece, an art card on the small table displays the inverted profile of a sculpted Greek god. It takes a moment to recognize the face, but the beauty of the interlocking shapes lingers and they begin to echo other profiles that almost detach themselves from the illusion. The arc of the fireplace opening, the shapes of blue, tan and grey in the painting on the mantelpiece, the parabolas in the mirrors and the black frame's intersection with the funnel transform the illusionistic condition of object and interval into a kind of visual poetry. Reciprocity and fit begin to feel like metaphysical principles in the image and the force of this feeling grows stronger because it is released by an arrangement that at first seems so random and contingent on the point of view set forth in "Threshold's perceptual premise.

At the outset of these notes I identified Sangram Majumdar as a perceptual painter rather than a realist. This is an important distinction because the outcome of Majumdar's engagement with appearances is not simply a reiteration of retinal facts but the creation of a poetic place where the experience of light, space, and the character of things is reconstituted in a highly specific language. Narrating my own journey with "Threshold" the picture's forms, it's painterly quality, repeatedly pushed me to figurative language to express the feeling of the depicted relationships. In this sense, the painting's title is a clue to the imaginative transformation it performs. Sadly, the imaginative dimension in the interpretation of appearances is taken for granted in contemporary critical debate, but this perennial challenge in perceptual painting connects the past to the present and remains a locus of meaning for painters like Sangram Majumdar.

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