

Interview with Sangram Majumdar
by Steven Harvey, edited by Jennifer Samet

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SM: I've been thinking about trying to find visual imagery that parallels my working process. My process involves adding, removing, often reworking a painting, but also trying to retain a transparency of decisions in the working process. Areas of color are often broadly applied with the palette knife, and charcoal or single brush lines act as incisions into space. The lines become separations and boundaries and are often a "yes" to one thought, versus a "no" another, which delve into the history of the narrative. I would do a drawing, and I might like it, but often it generally wouldn't work, so I would do another drawing on top. That history began to become part of the actual physical image. It's not about just what is on the surface; it's also about how it came into being.

It becomes about history, which is why I was drawn to the scraps of woodworking that were in my studio from building setups and whatnot. I began to think there is something in there, there is something that I can discover; it is a state complex enough to be a motif. It parallels my aesthetic decisions. Wood is organic at the beginning, it comes from trees, from the earth, and then it is processed - it becomes these systematically rectangular planks that then are taken to make houses or whatever. And then, later, they are taken down and they become scraps again. So there is a kind of circular quality to it. I'm taking this, and building. I'm building with them, but I'm not building houses - I'm building these structures. The wood and the cords are simple geometric forms - rectangles, lines, curves angles. So formally they are dense enough and visually they can also be loaded. But there is also something about the mundane. They are so simple and regular, and I am always drawn to the poetry within those things.

I'm also interested in the contrast between the exotic and the mundane. That is where narrative comes in or imagery becomes interesting. Like when certain passages create a hybrid of patterns - imagery that takes you to another place and another time. In some of my paintings there are snippets of imagery that are like forms from another world. When I go to the Met, I am always drawn to sculptural objects where pieces are missing. Or perhaps I'm looking at a billboard, but things have rotten away or there's some information on top - that's what I'm drawn to. I have a certain need or love for density - a density of mark, density of information, a dense palate and flavor. In terms of narrative, I am always interested in layers. In terms of books and film, I've always loved to experience that feeling that by the time I finish, I want to watch it again or read it again. A classic example would be Joyce or Garcia-Marquez, where you go back to re-read a passage and find a different meaning or different combinations. When I see how that is done, it gives me the ability to try the same. Every time I look, I find a new orientation or a new possibility, a new pattern that forms. Your eyes find these connections and they become indented in different ways.

SH: You're talking about working from life in both the drawings and paintings. Your work has been characterized as perceptual rather than realist. How much is invented, and how much is observed, and how does that interaction work for you?

SM: With those sorts of terminology, people attach themselves to certain phrasing and it becomes a way of thinking. For me, looking is a starting point. But once I start drawing or painting, it is its own thing. The world outside becomes a bouncing-off point. The drawings are more perceptually limited.

SH: Is it because they are figure drawings?

SM: It is because they are about manifesting a sense of place. They are about the here and now, and I'm really interested in that. The paintings start with that, but then I begin to pull back more and more. Especially when I begin to sense elements that are not there, and I start changing things, and it becomes a more synthetic experience.

SH: The picture you are working on today, you started in another city and studio with a certain set-up, and now you've changed it completely. The figure is turned around and it's a different person than who you started with.

SM: Yes, that becomes an extension of the narrative. With a lot of these paintings, I don't start with any sketches. That is an intentional decision. Three or four years ago, I used to do a lot of planning. That was fine, but there was a disconnect between the way I was painting and the imagery. They completely did not relate. I think for me it is important that I start from an impulse and with a sensation. For me the sensation is an actual world, be it something that exists or something that I somewhat manipulated. That begins to give me ideas for the narrative. The people I'm painting have a specific personality and they really drive the narrative in many ways. This can be a little disorienting, and that's why those pauses are helpful when the person is not there. Then I can come in and it helps me play that game between what I want, and what the painting says. I'm trying to become better at listening to the painting. Not doing sketches is really helpful because it helps me think about what's important, and lose some control. It's a play between losing control and gaining control, where you ratchet things down, and where you just close your eyes and jump.