

Simultaneity: The Work of Sangram Majumdar
by Jennifer Sachs Samet

In 1975, in an exhibition catalogue essay entitled “Painterly Representation,” Louis Finkelsteinⁱ wrote that the service of painting was to transfix the past, present, and future – to achieve simultaneity of the movement of life. In a painting, he continued, we transfix a flow of consciousness that is involved with all of the challenges of representing appearance, and all of the potential to create meaning through pictorial language. The potential is immense, he rightly noted, “for painterly vision everything is always up for grabs: the style, the space, the structure, the attitude, above all affect, the way we are touched by the world.” Finkelstein, of course, was not the first to discuss the idea of simultaneity in relation to visual art; Henri Bergson popularized the idea of a constant flux of time and space that animates our consciousness, and his philosophy catalyzed the early 20th century avant-garde – artists like Léger and Duchamp.

Sangram Majumdar’s painting reminds us of the potential and the achievement of transfixing simultaneity within a single visual image. He seems to slice open his worlds, cutting into them almost mercilessly to present an image rich with evocation. In slightly earlier work (2005), he presented scenes of travelers that more literally represented passing time, movement, and geographic transitions. But in his recent work he has found ways to achieve this in a less literal manner: his interiors show an accumulation of stuff: broken chairs, vases, shattered ceramics, electrical cords, and sometimes a figure. The shattered fragments not only take our mind to another time and place—how did it break, why, what was it like before—but it also is a direct metaphor to Majumdar’s distinct painterly style. The angles and lines and delineations of form animate his paintings and take them out of pleasant domesticity into another world. His touch can be raw; he builds up a dry surface with neutrals and pale color. But his hand is never heavy; his surface is not a rough palette-knife impasto but rather juxtapositions that seem almost effortlessly unified. Similarly, within his compositions, there is always something voluptuous to balance out the edges: the circular rims of a vase, bowl or jar. The touches of roundness in figures become all the more rewarding—little gifts to us—like in his drawing *Lucia II*, 2008, where the curves of the nude and the leaves behind become a counterpoint to the slashing demarcations of the interior. His floral still lifes play with this impossibility outright—they are almost a tease in their mixture of austerity and decorative beauty—rich blooms parsed and carved against monochrome, dry grounds.

Finkelstein rightly noted that the artist’s individual choices were foremost – it was the marriage of subject and form where meaning was produced. Majumdar creates an equivalence between the shards of objects represented, and his pictorial means. His work is composed of painterly “shards” – areas of color delicately spliced against one another. He reaps meaning out of fragments: an interior where a staircase juts out from under a black ceiling, a painting hangs on a gray wall, and a ceramic hovers at bottom edge. Or a landscape, like *Midday Sun*, where pink illuminated rooftops cut right through trees and grass seen from above. The contrasts tell a story; it is a subconscious narrative evoked by our awareness of the elements’ passage through time and space, and the painting’s overall plasticity. The simultaneity, the flux, the flow of consciousness speaks to us and reaches us gently.
