

HYPERALLERGIC

[Art • Weekend](#)

Relearning to Draw with Strips of Colored Tape

You could say that Sangram Majumdar is learning a way of drawing in which mastery is beside the point.

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Sangram Majumdar, “Night Running” (2018), oil on linen, 40 x 33 inches (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

Sangram Majumdar, who was born in Calcutta, India, in 1977, emigrated with his family to Phoenix, Arizona, in 1991, when he was 13. This means that he spent his childhood and adolescence in one country and his teenage years in another. Based simply on the sights, sounds, and smells of Calcutta and Phoenix, he has two sets of memories that do not fit together. I think of him as a diasporic artist — someone who inhabits an in-between space in his work.

This is what Majumdar, an observational painter whose work often involves set-ups and staging, told the art historian John Seed in a 2012 [HuffPost interview](#):

I have always been an image-based painter, regardless of the source, be it photography, working from life, or pure invention. 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. [...] Basically, I am open to all sources. Painting for me becomes a way to undo the logic, and create a space that is interstitial and ephemeral.

Since I first [reviewed](#) his show in 2013, Majumdar has moved between figuration and abstraction, often in the same period, all while being rooted in what he calls the “physical and actual.”

Majumdar’s stagings often involve abstract forms and perceptual zones that conflate transparency with surface, making for an unsettled view, as if we are simultaneously looking through a window and at the glass it’s made of. Is a shape meant to be a representational form that is not quite decipherable, or a reflection, or simply a patch of paint?

Majumdar’s collapsing of distinctions between realism and abstraction has caused consternation among some of his peers, one of whom recently asked me: Can you explain to me exactly what’s he up to? This person felt that there is something incomprehensible about Majumdar’s project because he has neither developed a signature style nor become acceptably ambiguous.



Sangram Majumdar, “In Motion 17” (2018), mixed media on paper mounted on panel

An artist who has done terrific realist paintings of mundane subjects, Majumdar seems to have resisted any form of fixity for the past decade. Like the rumpled pants partially hanging over an ironing board in “Interiors” (2009) or the woman bent over, going through her travel bag in “As If” (2012), arrivals and departures have melded into a state of flux, where everything is ephemeral.

In his current exhibition, [*Sangram Majumdar: Offspring*](#), at Stephen Harvey Fine Art Projects, the artist might have found the perfect embodiment of flux — his infant daughter who was learning to walk or, should I say, teeter-totter about. The exhibition includes six vertical oil paintings and one horizontal, mixed media work in the front gallery, and a portfolio of works on paper in the back, which you have to ask to see.

As the paintings’ titles, “Pitter Patter,” “Night Running,” and “Summer Chasing” (all 2018) convey, the shared subject is a child in motion, which Majumdar evokes in the works on paper (collectively titled “In Motion,” all 2018, and individually numbered) with strips of colored tape. By applying straight sections of tape to a surface, he eschewed drawing as well as pared down his means. It is one thing to make a mark with graphite, charcoal, or a brush, but a quite different thing to affix tape to a surface.

I was reminded of a body of drawings by Arpita Singh, which I recently reviewed. In 1973, recognizing that she did not know how to proceed after having had a successful debut show of figurative paintings, Singh began making drawings with a vocabulary of only lines and dots. By limiting himself to rolls of colored tape to “draw” a straight line, Majumdar prioritized movement over resemblance. In contrast to drawing, in which the erasures are often as visible as the marks, you can add and remove sections of tape without leaving a trace of your activity behind. The space of the “drawing” is literally layered with sections of tape. At the same time, the process restricted Majumdar to “drawing” with straight bands, and to working within strict limitations.



Sangram Majumdar, “Beachcomber” (2018), oil on canvas, 42 x 38 inches

Although it is not immediately evident, it seems to me that Majumdar brings together two divergent possibilities: he is a process painter whose work is based on observation. By titling one of his paintings, “Giacometti’s Shadow” (2018), the artist underscores his connection to this singular postwar sculptor and painter, in particular his “Walking Man” of 1960, while also doing something very different with the bright yellow delineating the abstract figure, which is not a color we associate with Giacometti’s attenuated bronze figures and somber, gray paintings. At the same time, the diagonal bands – some of which are based on observing the tape in his “drawings” — were inspired by Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist paintings.

Majumdar’s paintings share something with Harold Rosenberg’s description of an action painting — “What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” However, I also want to emphasize that Majumdar’s paintings look nothing like a work done in a gestural abstract vein. He is an image painter who — in these works — begins working from an abstract layered “drawing” made of strips of colored tape. And yet the goal is not to achieve a copy but to find the image through the process of painting, of adding and wiping away.

“Giacometti’s Shadow” is poised directly on the border supposedly separating abstraction from figuration. Majumdar’s angular structure is both geometric and figural, a visual sign made of paint.

Lots of under-painting peers through, and the ragged blue patches near the canvas's bottom edge echo both torn pieces of tape and blue booties in stop-motion animation. The act of making the painting echoes the subject. You could say that he is learning a way of drawing in which mastery is beside the point.

The other change is in the palette. In his earlier work, the palette ran towards dark and moody colors, and the light was crepuscular. Strong, direct light was noticeably absent. In these new works, however, atmosphere is of less importance. "Beachcomber" (2018) is made of distinct, abstract paint strokes of varying thickness and materiality. The abstract figure with a blue square for a head is made of distinct marks, which the artist has repeated in short strokes throughout the center of the canvas.



Sangram Majumdar, "Giacometti's Shadow" (2018), oil on canvas, 41 x 32 inches

The figure — its many parts — is spread against a ground that changes from light gray-blue to pale violet to turquoise. Some of the marks and forms seem solid and weighty. Others — like the ones above the blue square head — are thin and delicate. Contrary to what might be called generic abstract expressionism, Majumdar does not use a loaded brush. In order to grasp what the artist is up to, it is important for the viewer to acknowledge the paint as paint and mark, as well as to begin discerning the way it links up with a representation of a human.

Majumdar has taken what could easily have devolved into sappy sentimentalism — your first child learning to walk — and transformed it into a pared down, imaginative possibility. Like his daughter exploring her newfound independence, Majumdar had to learn to "draw" in a new way — lines made with colored tape. And then he had to learn how to translate that into a painting without losing any of the freshness of the studies. He wanted to evoke movement and sequence without being obvious or generic, which he did. Majumdar isn't afraid to start over or to begin working in a way that he hasn't before. He has resisted the comforts of style in order to test what he can do with paint. Being deft at it — which he is — is not sufficient. That's something that you can say only about a few artists.

[Sangram Majumdar: Offspring](#) continues at *Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects* (208 Forsyth Street, East Village, Manhattan) through November 10.