

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.