

THE
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SANGRAM MAJUMDAR: RECENT WORKS

Sangram Majumdar's work is hard to pin down. Just as we are convinced that his recent paintings are inventive abstractions, he makes us think about the built environment and interiors. Memories of the figure, now almost subliminal, now relatively explicit, haunt some paintings, while in others, fragments of the body—schematic hands, for example—are declaratively present. In Majumdar's works on paper, those fragments can be repeated as drawing, almost obsessively, until they become a kind of expansive web, returning us once again to the realm of abstraction and making us reconsider our ideas about the hinted-at, elusive imagery and near-imagery of the paintings. And to enrich the mix, we begin to think about the relationship of the Kolkata-born, American-educated, and resident artist to everything from Indian miniature painting to Walk/Don't Walk signs.

Each of these apparently contradictory elements has dominated Majumdar's work at one time or another. Before 2013, he made perceptually based, ravishingly painted, dislocated interiors, often seen from unexpected viewpoints and occasionally inhabited by figures. These wonderfully off-kilter images were usually based on small paper dioramas, surrogate places constructed by the artist to detach himself from conventional observation. "They helped me to think of the painting as its own world," Majumdar explained in an interview, "one step removed from where I am located." Post-2013, his paintings have been wholly their own worlds. Their imagery has remained multivalent, but they have become autonomous and confrontational, while their space remains unstable and continues to fluctuate. The paintings read not as commentaries on our surroundings, but as gently shifting expanses,

enlivened by variations in the density of paint and by a vigorous touch. Majumdar has spoken of his pleasure in having abandoned working from perception. "When you're not observing, but you have a thought in mind, then you have just to put it down. The only thing you're observing is really the painting and the world within it. The painting becomes more about what you are willing to believe in, what surprises you. You can change it because you want to (or not), but it's because of what's in the painting rather than what's in the world."

Yet, at the same time, references flicker in and out of Majumdar's recent paintings. Architecture has influenced the structure of some works, while a series made a few years ago was provoked by his watching his young daughter learn to walk. It's worth remembering, though, that in some works made at about the same time as the ones related to Majumdar's daughter, an overscaled, fraying, striding figure, which seems to emerge from a sea of urgent marks, turns out to have origins in an Indian miniature of Thakata, a princess who becomes a larger-than-life demon in the Ramayana. And that's neither to discount occasional references to the video games the artist played growing up, nor the effect of political upheavals, the stresses of the pandemic, and the events of 2020 and early 2021. "I'm trying to trust what I'm drawn to," Majumdar has said, "whether it's art or other elements that have been part of my life."

Majumdar's refusal to ignore or exclude anything that he finds stimulating to his work, combined with his equally strong refusal to settle for the familiar or the comfortable, results in the bracing ambiguity and variousness of his art. He fully explores the implications of the most fruitful provocations in families of paintings and drawings that explore related conceptions. He dissects, disguises, or emphasizes related notions in fresh ways, transforming them as he does so. He will sometimes photograph works in progress, print the images, and use them as the basis for improvisations that respond to the various, possibly conflicting "what if I did *this*" notions that arise in the course of working, playing with scale, testing the limits of density and

sparseness or degrees of reference and abstraction. The pursuit of these wide-ranging possibilities can result in works that seem remarkably disparate, but we can trace their bloodlines back to a common ancestor.

What unites all of Majumdar's work is a powerful sense of animation, driven by his fluent touch; a compelling sense of mystery, reflecting his openness to a wealth of stimuli; and a surprising sense of color. "I am interested in discordancy and setting up odd color relationships," Majumdar has said. "The colors come from different worlds." So do the triggers for his imagery, whether simplified into abstractness or presented in more legible ways. That multiplicity and complexity are fundamental to Majumdar's aesthetic. He is a painter wholly engaged by contemporary issues and possibilities, but he also sees himself as part of a continuous tradition that reaches back from the present, through modernism, to the old masters. "I'm playing for the team that's about erasing history: down with the past, newness is best," Majumdar has said. "But I'm also on the other team, which is about retaining connection to the past. That tension is akin to the world and to how we exist as people. I want my paintings to be like that. I want them to be like people."

Majumdar eloquently explains the genesis and evolution of his current work. "In 2016," he writes, "I returned to working with the figure because of two key impulses. One was personal and the other, political." He offers the following notes on his current preoccupations:

The "striding figure" archetype has been an anchor in my recent paintings. They expand on the broader theme of liminality that pervades much of my work, pulling from art, cultural histories, symbolic imagery and my own life. And they attempt to synthesize the multiple entry points and interests that are prescient for me right now as an artist. In the studio, I often keep a list of "goals" and "things that matter" on the wall. It looks something like this:

1. intimacy, depth, history, time, personhood, mystery, touch.
2. how to make paintings that combine the personal and the iconic.
3. how to use color to suggest time, light, specific cultural cues all at once.
4. how to use fragments located in my own and broader cultural timeline to create a believable image.
5. to remember the importance of absence and its ability to evoke meaning in a picture.
6. the role of pattern as a scaffolding on which parts of an image can “hang.”

Alongside the studio paintings, and throughout this past year, I have been drawing a lot at home. The two drawings *sm_hand-studies_3* and *17* are part of this ongoing project of drawing my daughter’s hand as she is drawing. They are a byproduct of two synchronous sets of repetitive acts—that of me “chasing” her hands with my eyes, recording what I can remember, while she keeps drawing. The constancy and the repetition of the period, often no more than an hour at a time, are about staying present, trying to feel like I am still making something during this uncertain period, and feeling fortunate to have this precious time to spend together.

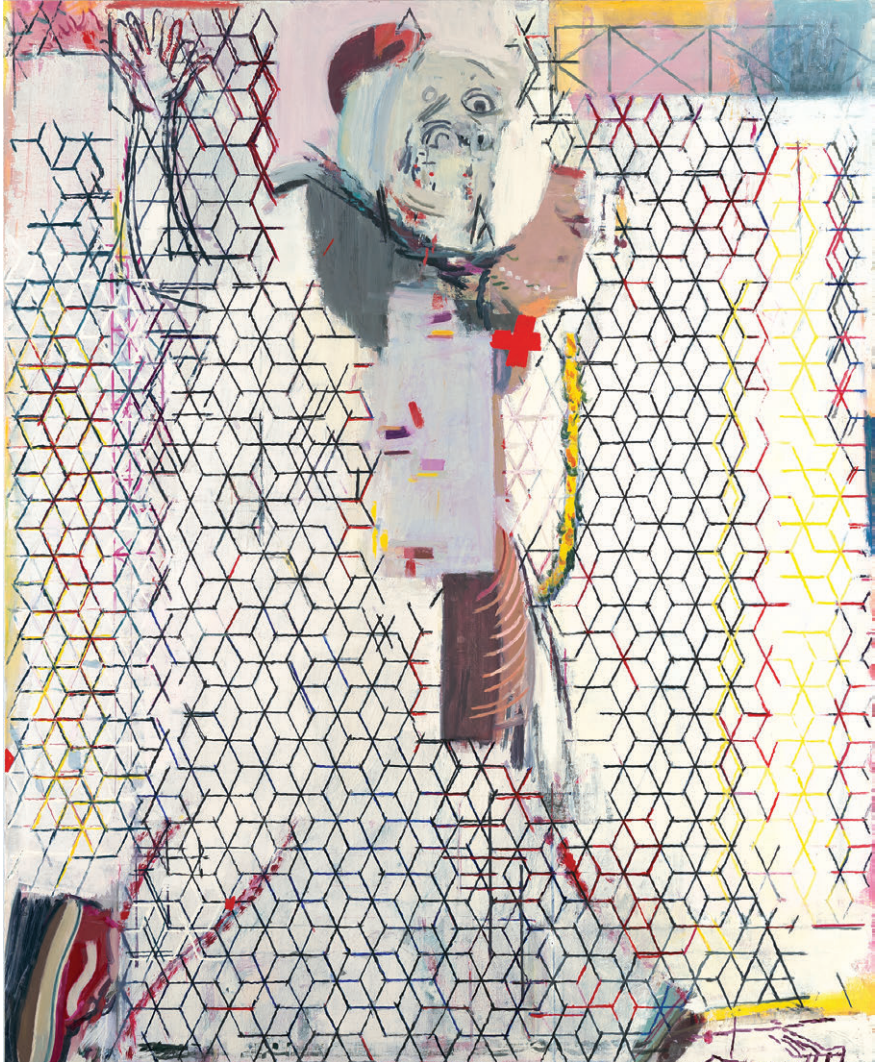


sm_handstudies_3 (2020), watercolor on paper, 9 x 11 inches. © Sangram Majumdar

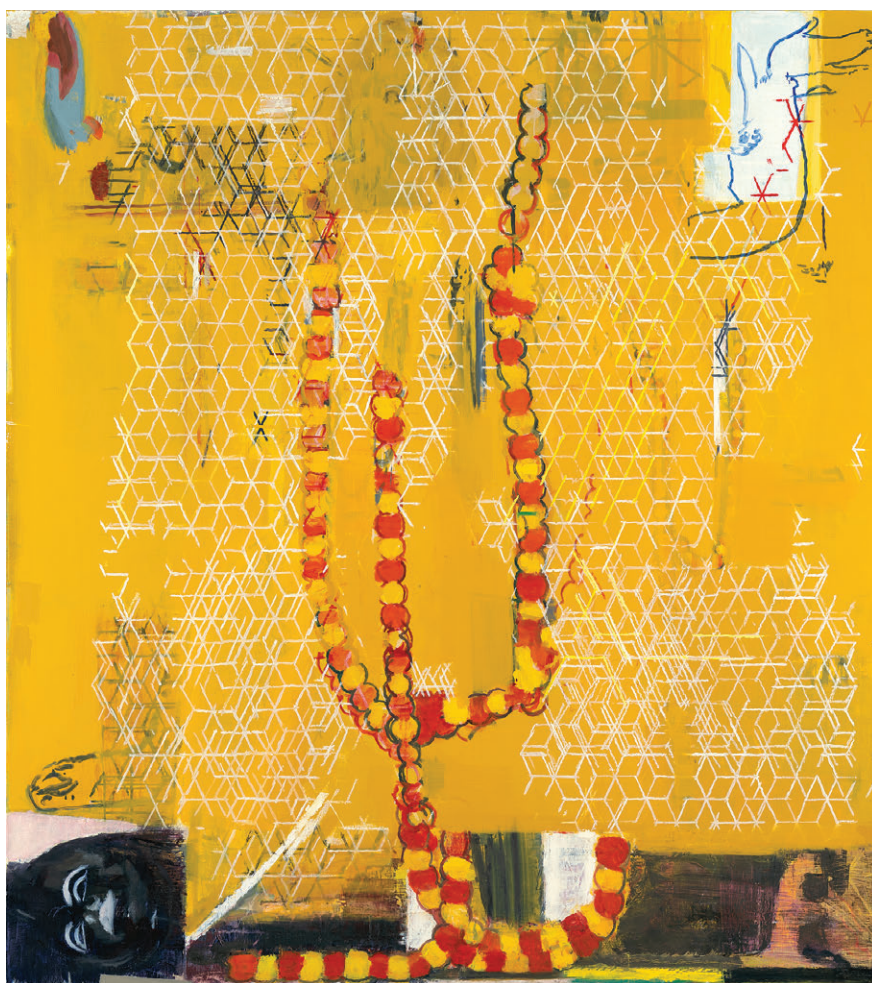


sm_handstudies_17 (2020), watercolor on paper, 9 x 11 inches.

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becoming (2021), oil on linen, 78 x 63 inches. © Sangram Majumdar



becoming 2 (2021), oil on linen, 78 x 60 inches. © Sangram Majumdar



becoming 3 (2021), oil on linen, 78 x 63 inches. © Sangram Majumdar



expulsion (2019), oil on linen, 44 x 38 inches. Private collection.

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whispers left wanting (2019), 78 x 64 inches, oil on linen.

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slipping to (2021), oil on linen, 24 x 30 inches. © Sangram Majumdar