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frieze



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The paintings, drawings and animations of Tala Madani

by Aram Moshayedi

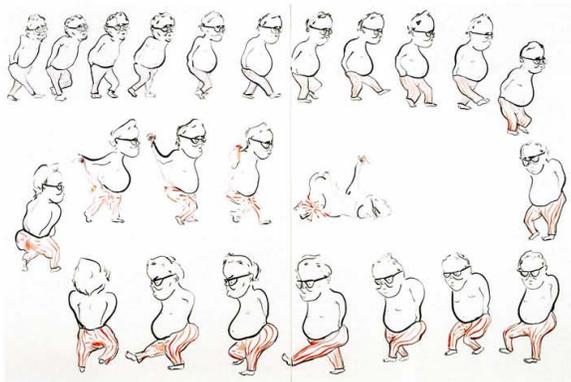
MEN

WITHOUT WOMEN

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Shirtless and wearing only red-striped pyjama bottoms and a thick pair of black-rimmed glasses, a man in late middle age begins to pace from left to right. A spare-tyre belly hangs over his waistband, while sinuous black lines shape his soft, round, worried face, surrounded by tufts of white hair. The few lines that make up this man's round forehead, pot belly and supple breasts compete with the burdensome weight of gravity, which turns the aged body into a sad mass of pendulous limbs and skin. The man is non-descript but familiar – someone's senile grandfather, an estranged uncle or, perhaps, a caricature of Truman Capote played by a bespectacled Philip Seymour Hoffman.

The man paces with both hands buried deep into the buttocks of his trousers; he is also shoeless and appears to stammer slightly with each step. He floats in an evacuated space and inches slowly forward, following an inwardly spiralling path. As he rounds a second bend, we see that the crotch of his pyjama bottoms is soiled but his face shows no sign of embarrassment. By the time he has turned again, his back to us, it's apparent that it is his ass producing the red seepage that blends into the pin-striped bottoms – his hands still buried, rummaging about in search of something within the cavern of his bowels. Unfazed, the man's hands emerge with a trail of intestines protruding from his backside. The entrails stretch like sausage casings nearing the height of his head, pulled tight by an outstretched arm that eventually extends so far that the man collapses forward with his exposed ass pointed toward the sky, a pile of tubular guts pinning him down. The final scene is like a yoga horror movie – the bloody aftermath of a downward-dog mishap.

Such descriptions can only approximate the humorous and gruesome nonchalance that is conveyed in Tala Madani's paintings, drawings and stop-motion animations. Seemingly ruthless and relentless, the candid and satirical world she depicts is perhaps an antidote to the one crafted by Shirin Neshat's overwrought *Women Without Men*

(2009), a feature-length drama told from the perspective of four women who attempt to rid themselves of the men who control them. By comparison (and the comparison is apt not only because the two share a common identity as Iranian-born women currently living and working in the United States), Madani's painted images revel in a fantasy world where men have rid themselves of women and imagination runs wild. It is a world of homo-social fraternity and hazing rituals run amok, where bodily fluids gush, ejaculate and ooze from the most unexpected places of their bodies.

Almost without fail, Madani's men ('my men' as she often refers to them) have been racialized as Middle Eastern – a reflection, perhaps, of the many curators and critics who desire it to be the case – but beyond the artist's own biography there are few clues to indicate this. Certainly, there are traits to suggest the men are ethnically other, but there are just as many examples from Madani's repertoire to undermine this fact. The bloated Anglicized man who disembowels himself in *Spiral Suicide* (2012) is more Norman Schwarzkopf than Saddam Hussein.

Her men bear Middle Eastern traits, but they might also pass for any nationality, just as it is common practice for Arabs and Persians living in Europe and North America to 'blend in' by adopting names like Fred (Fereydoon) and Bob (Babak). Nevertheless, the differentiation between ethnic typologies is hardly the point here. Madani's men are simply men, however grotesque and pathetic – bald, balding or with hair sparsely combed over, mustachioed and unshaven, large or over-projected noses and nasal humps, uni-browed, hairy and unfit, wearing undergarments or pyjamas no matter what the context – and in some cases they are such a blurry amalgamation of line and colour that they might as well be 'women' in the way that Richard Prince made 'men' out of De Kooning's 'women'. There are indicators of manhood in *Panties* (2008), a small brushy painting on wood, but the protagonist's resemblance to Paul McCarthy's

Experimental Dancer (1975) – whose tucked penis betrays him – is evidence of how trans- the world of men without women can sometimes become.

In some instances, Madani's men are, in fact, a single man repeated within an image. This suggests the passage of time; an opportunity to sully the spatial conditions of painting with unwieldy temporality. And as much as this tendency toward repetition and duration is a characteristic informed by the history of Futurist painting and early-modern experiments in chronophotography, it is also the byproduct of the artist's own series of stop-motion animations, which adapt the content and style of her paintings to a determinedly time-based medium. Running for no more than a few minutes, works such as *Headbug* (2009) and *The Apple Tree* (2007) animate the subjects of Madani's paintings, who are forced to replicate themselves when they are fated to canvas, linen or paper.

A work such as *Spiral Suicide* affords the experience of duration in painting only because its shirtless protagonist is repeated a total of 24 times to carry us along with him as he stumbles toward his own blundering intestinal misfortune. The limitation of narrative in painting appears throughout Madani's expansive output; the theme of men in uniform confuses any assuredness as to whether or not a single man is being repeated or is shown as part of a larger social body of boneheads. Perhaps it is the result of the artist's quick and fluid mark-making – the running paint, the merging of striped figures with their striped surroundings – or the obscured faces in larger paintings like *Dirty Starts* and *Smiley* (both 2008), that make it seem as if these men and their intolerable behaviours are proliferating exponentially. As both men in the plural, and man in the lamentable singular ideal, they are rooted in time as subjects of a seemingly timeless medium, trapped in the continuum of historical sequence – made explicit by Madani's apparent reference to and defilement of the legacy of colour-field painting – where the undulating drips and pours of, say, a painting by Morris Louis give way to a sea of bald heads and curvaceous butts.

Previous page:
Projector, 2011, oil on linen,
51 × 31 cm

1
Spiral Suicide, 2012, oil on
linen, 203 × 305 cm

2
Chinballs with Pants, 2011,
oil on linen, 30 × 20 cm

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*It is a world of homo-social fraternity, where hazing rituals run amok,
and bodily fluids gush, ejaculate and ooze.*



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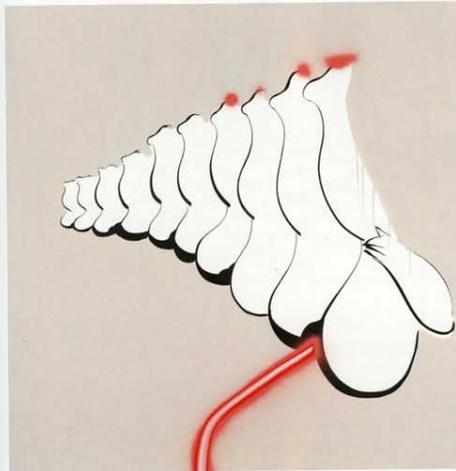
If narrative storytelling is even just a small part of 'reading' paintings, then the 2,500-odd still images that add up to the one or so minutes of Madani's flickering *Headbug* or *The Apple Tree* make this fact explicit. Hand-painted in oil on wood, and wiped away after her camera captures each single frame, these works bear the looseness and imprecision that is part of stop-motion animation. As a process of both accumulation and subtraction, the painted layers are quickly added, manipulated, smudged, trugged, blotted and erased to allow narrative to unfold one frame at a time through minimal means. What matters most in a work like *Music Man* (2009) is not that the scene appears consistent from one frame to the next, but rather to show what it's like when a taller man uses another man's ejaculating phallic bald head to notate a musical composition with creamy white daubs of vomit. The scene is the stuff of ridiculous erotic fantasy, not unlike Mike Kelley's crude evocation of bearded pussy mouths in *Day is Done* (2005), or any other example that equates seemingly innocuous physicality with an organ of sexual pleasure. To this end, *Music Man* accomplishes what Madani's discrete paintings set out to do despite their determined limitations as static objects. Rather than seek to evade the burdensome legacies of medium-specificity, timelessness and Modernist painting, Madani's animations curtail the conditions of medium-insufficiency, perfectly suited just as it is to represent a paltry world of men without women. ♦

Born in Tehran, Iran, Tala Madani lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. Recent solo shows include the Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Pilar Corrias, London, UK (both 2011). In February 2013 her largest museum exhibition to date will open at Moderna Museet, Malmo, Sweden; it will tour to Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden later in the year. Also forthcoming in 2013 is a solo exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, UK.



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1
Avatar,
2012, oil on linen, 55 × 61 cm

2
Light Parody,
2012, oil on linen, 36 × 28 cm

3
Music Man,
2009, animation still

4
Neon Toes,
2012, oil on linen, 168 × 163 cm

5
Enema up the Ladder,
2012, oil on linen, 48 × 38 cm

6
Blackout, 2012,
oil on linen, 60 × 45 cm

