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The artist Tala Madani with "Disco-ball Break Out," 2026. She paints the disco as a place where people indulge their impulses, sometimes with disastrous effects. Credit: Maiwenn Raoult for The New York Times

An Artist Inspired by Men Behaving Badly

In a new show at David Kordansky Gallery, the Iranian American painter Tala Madani plumbs the lives of her characters with absurd humor and a strange tenderness.

By Aruna D'Souza
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In 2023, viral TikTok posts saw women asking the men in their lives how often they think about ancient Rome. Pretty much all the time, was the consensus.

The little cartoonish men that populate Tala Madani's lush paintings and animations seem to think about it a lot, too. In her new show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, opening Sept. 18 and titled "Control X" (for the computer keyboard strokes for "delete"), we see these diminutive dudes searching for new heroes and saviors. And doing it badly.

One of the recurring motifs in this new body of work is the Capitoline Wolf, a bronze sculpture that shows the wolf who rescued the orphaned Romulus and Remus by letting them nurse; the twins went on to found the city of Rome, as the legend goes. In her painting "Adoption," a balding, very pink, doughy man holds out a baby bottle, begging the wolf for some milk of his own. She ignores him. In "Feral Monument," tired of the begging, perhaps, she transforms from sculpture to living animal and crushes his body between her fangs. Elsewhere men in a darkened room pile up, one on top of the other, to perform the heroic task of turning on a light switch.



"Feral Monument," 2026. Credit: Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery

For the last 20 years, the Tehran-born, Los Angeles-based artist has been investigating what makes men tick, as a way of poking holes in the machismo she sees undergirding public culture, in the United States as much as in Iran. Whether family patriarchs, religious leaders, or politicians, her art seems to suggest, all we can do is cry at their antics. And laugh. And also cringe. Mostly at the same time.

As always, a deep empathy underpins Madani's analysis of their foibles. "The guy holding the milk bottle — he really wants to be mothered," the artist, who is 44, said in a video interview from her Los Angeles studio. "I also realized recently that it's very much about immigration, too — can I be mothered or nurtured within your space?"

Madani plumbs the lives of her characters, and taboos, with absurd humor and a strange tenderness. The work feels almost existential.

And if it grosses you out, well, that's kind of the point, too.



"The Cleaner," 2024. Her stop-motion videos are made from thousands of hand-painted successive images. It conjures, with humor, the experience of always having to clean up someone else's mess. Credit: Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery

In a hand-painted, stop-motion animation, "The Cleaner," a man walks away from our view, streaming human waste from a hole in his back, while another dutifully tries (and fails) to clean it up. It's a scene tinged with melancholy, and captures the relentlessness of modern lives — and how it feels like we're always having to deal with someone else's mess.

Madani's provocative work has been featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and she has been the subject of a major retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 2022 as well as recent shows at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, in Athens, Greece, and Vienna's Secession. Last year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York installed a suite of five of her short animations in its permanent collection galleries.



"Adoption," 2026. Credit: Lee Tyler Thompson/Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery

Stuart Comer, the curator who arranged the MoMA display, said he was drawn to the succinct way Madani's work got to core questions about geopolitics and patriarchy. "They're kind of Beckett-like in their simplicity and their force," he agreed. "The work just has an incredible urgency and visual vibrancy."

Its focus is often on a world that no longer makes any sense. Language itself flies off the page in "Human Alphabet," or runs out the door in an ambitious animation, "Alphabet City." In "Fanned Out," bodies are so fragile that they are blown away by a simple household fan, a motif that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. In "Cloud Currencies,"

the U.S. dollar and Japanese yen signs are transformed into fluffy clouds while equally vaporous figures try to surf them or hang on for dear life.



"Cloud Currencies," 2026. Credit: Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery

"A lot of this work emerged from a sense of sadness for the fact that so many people are searching for origin myths," as the guideposts they've depended upon in the past break down, she explained. "But maybe they're reaching for the wrong ones."

And looking for them in the wrong places. In the Kordansky show, "Modern Sun," a massive, glowing screen offers a tiny figure who looks on in awe. "It's God, it's technology, it's life, it's everything," she said. "It's the thing that absorbs everything. I guess it's the internet."

Madani was born in Tehran. She moved to the United States at age 13 to be with her mother, who had relocated to Monmouth, Ore. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment above a "teriyaki chicken restaurant," she said.



"Fanned Out," 2026. Bodies are so fragile that they are blown away by a simple household fan. Credit: Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery

"I ricocheted from a city of 16 million to one of 6,000," the artist recalled. She didn't speak much English when she arrived. "Because of that, my math got really good, and I just drew all the time," she said. "They were these universal languages." She received a scholarship to study art at Oregon State University. There, Madani began to focus on the male figure in paintings that poked holes into the kinds of world-destroying machismo that she saw circulating globally.

Since graduating with her M.F.A. from Yale in 2007, she has spent much of her career trying to avoid the authority of Western art history, by embracing caricature and cartoons, and cultivating a style that is as far as you can imagine from academic realism, and even avoiding the female figure because of how overladen with meaning it was in the canon.

It took until 2019, some months after the birth of her second child, for the female form to appear. The character of a woman literally composed of her own waste, was an accident.

"I tried to paint a mother and child, and it was so kitschy, so I wiped the mother away," Madani said. The smear that resulted became the antithesis of the usual representation of ideal motherhood, and an assurance that it was OK to fail.



From the start, she had no illusions about the failures of the Iranian revolution, especially when it came to women's lives. But when she got to the United States, she realized how little most Americans knew about Iran. "When you're far away, you think you're having a conversation or a dialogue" with American culture, she said. "And then you come here and you realize, Oh my god, I was talking into space."

"That distance creates stereotypes, it creates simplifications, it creates fear," she said. "It became really interesting for me to tickle that space in my work."

After 9/11, she said, she was pained by the way Middle Eastern men were being portrayed in the Western media, and was especially troubled by the photographs of men tortured by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War. "I felt the need to take men gently in my arms and at the same time be deeply critical of them," she said. "Like, I know you're screwed by society because of your political position in the world order, but I'm also deeply upset with you for what you do in the name of patriarchy."

She has stepped away from some of the over-the-top body humor in the new work because of current war between the United States and Iran and other recent global events. "This has been a year to release, to slow down," she said. "I was processing so many new images from the news."

"The pause in the abject and irreverent content in my new painting was because I was trying to understand how the humor would sit now," she said.

"Tala understands that humor and horror sit right next to one another," said Rebecca Skafsgaard Lowery, who co-curated Madani's retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. "Humor becomes an entryway for looking at violence and discomfort and everything we get wrong in our interpersonal and geopolitical relationships."



Madani, in her studio in Los Angeles. In her new show she largely moved away from the scatological humor of earlier work, as she took the temperature of global events. Credit: Maiwenn Raoult for The New York Times

And in the art history canon. In “Control X,” “FLY” shows the electric moment in Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam” — the tiny gap between the hands of God and man — unceremoniously interrupted by a fly swatter.

In a hilarious take on Jacques-Louis David’s equestrian portrait of Napoleon, a pantless, potbellied man sits on a white steed. His face is depicted as a cutout hole, like those carnival setups where visitors can poke their heads through and take a photo. You, too, can be a hero, it says, if this is the kind of hero you long to be.

Madani said the show is coming from a softer place than her work has done in the past. “At the end of the day, with everything happening in the world, I wanted the paintings to be life affirming,” she said. “I wanted the work not just to reiterate the problems we’re living through, but to reinstate life energy.”



"Creation Cleaner," 2026. One painting from a series poking fun at the art history canon: Here, Michelangelo's creation of Adam with a hand rubbing out graffiti on a dusty window. Credit: Tala Madani via David Kordansky Gallery