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Artists

Tala Madani on the Messy Business of Painting

'I go sideways to painting,' said the artist. Her unflinching new works are now on view at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.



Tala Madani. Photo: Brigitte Lacombe. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

by Eileen Townsend | Sep 23, 2026

"You don't have to make this about coffee," the painter **Tala Madani** told me when we met for coffee. "The truth is banal. Make society what you want it to be. That is being alive."

It's a hot morning in early September, but the cafe where we met—on the east side of Los Angeles, close to Madani's studio—is clean and featureless and has blasting AC. We ordered at a counter, a long grey modernist block, selecting sterile-looking pastries from a glass vitrine entombed within the block. I'm vaguely reminded of **Kim Kardashian's** minimalist Calabasas home, specifically her bathroom sinks, which are stone slabs with faucets but no basin. I asked Madani if she's familiar with Kim Kardashian's sinks.

"Yes! Imagine spitting out toothpaste in this type of sink, and the toothpaste is going everywhere!" she responded gleefully. "And Kim, she's washing off all her makeup and the makeup is spreading everywhere, getting all over!"

I appreciated this beeline towards the chaotic. It felt like a classic Madani traverse, similar to what takes place in her work—the move from cleanliness to mess and back to clean again.



Installation view of "Tala Madani: Control X" at David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Madani is coming off months of concerted work towards her new show, "Control X," now open at **David Kordansky Gallery** in L.A. When we met, she looked slightly disassembled and told me she's tired. Despite this, I felt fixed within her cone of attention. She moved lightning-quick through conversation and her attitude was porous.

She finds biography dubious, but she also thinks we are formed within the first seven years of our life ("and then we just GO"). Madani was born in Iran in 1981, and her family emigrated to Oregon. Her native language is Farsi, but since she came to America when she was so young, she sees both her English and her Farsi as compromised by this move. She called language her "disability," though she speaks brilliantly and inventively, facilitating a few new words ("human-o-phile," "brain-work," "happen-chance") during our conversation.



Tala Madani, *Hard Route* (2026). Photo courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

She attended **Oregon State University** and then **Yale** to study painting. She has lived and worked in L.A. for 15 years. In 2022, she had a mid-career survey at **MOCA Geffen**, and since then, she has shown work in other cities. She's married to another artist, **Nathaniel Mellors**, and this show will feature their first-ever collaboration. He composed music for her new animation, *Alphabet City*.

Madani's best-known body of paintings is perhaps her "Shit Moms" series (2019–), pictures she made of pieces of shit performing motherly acts. Her other work include pictures of naked businessmen shooting light out of their butts, and massive paintings of clouds and ceiling fans blurring across a ceiling.

It's abject stuff, but where another painter's interest in abjection might bring them to dwell in the mud, Madani's surfaces are smooth and facilitate direct images. She is a pragmatic, efficient painter. Her figurative works have a slapstick and



Tala Madani, *Me Time* (2026). Photo courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

barely assembled quality, and sometimes feel to me as if they have arranged themselves on-site for my benefit. Her attitude owes something to German painting and her execution owes something to Eastern traditions. She paints caricaturally, on wet surfaces with soft brushes, in thinned layers of oils.

She told me that she has never loved painting, but painting keeps loving her back. She lets the work pass through her, but keeps herself in the dark. "I go sideways to painting," she said. "I like Herzog's idea to not turn on all the lights. The painting is never in relationship to myself, and I don't think I need to go through a psychoanalytic process to come to an image. It is the painting. It is the relationship to the process of making, not to me."

How does this translate to the studio? "I am chill. I am loose. I allow everything to



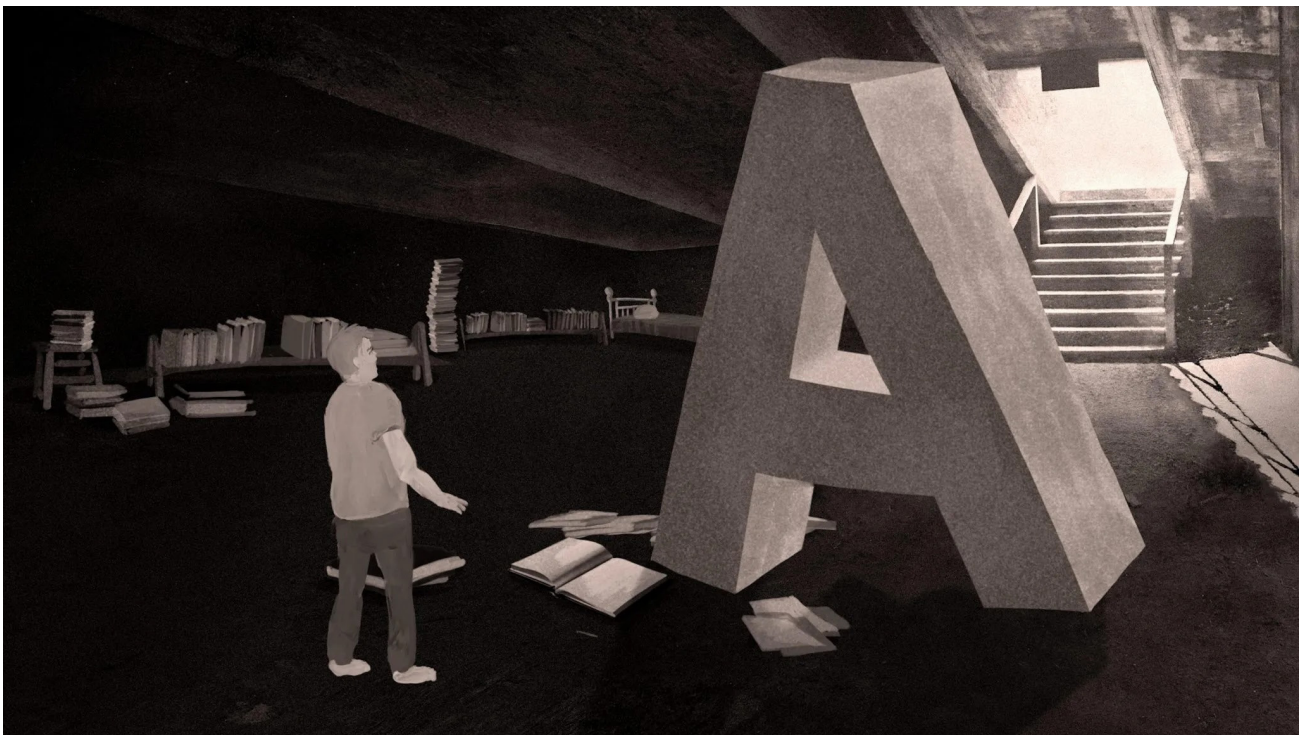
Tala Madani, *I Heart "Cxxt"* (2026). Photo courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

come in, sketch it, I see what ideas are low-hanging fruit and I resist them. I go for something a bit higher, a little bit meatier, a little bit harder to chew."

Madani believes deeply in willpower and agency. In recent months, she's been deep in the Middle Ages, thinking about **Bosch** and **Rabelais** and the history of satire: "There is an art and a wit to it. It's not about being authentic; it is about being a different character. I really fight for that to not be lost in the culture."

The new animation, *Alphabet City*, is also bound up with these issues of personal agency and language, and came about because she "wanted to make something that is about how structure can hurt people."

The video begins with large animated letters replicating and performing acts of violence on smudges of humanoids, who attempt to replicate language before growing monstrous themselves. Madani explained: "The language becoming big and taking itself onto the figures is about how sometimes the structure itself is faulty... so then the language takes over and fucks everybody up."



Tala Madani, *Alphabet City* (2026). Photo courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

Does she think language is always the enemy, always a repressive force? "I really like to think about it as a tool rather than as a huge block that makes us. They say that before humans had language, they had music and an enjoyment of sound. The culture that puts so much value in language. I like to tease that out because I feel that that misses a lot of human-ness."

We talk about formalism. "There is a fascism in adhering to something formally limiting," she said. She traces the development of representational space from

the late medieval period through the Renaissance alongside a growing impulse to categorize and control the world. "The history of that in terms of images is riddled with violence, and also the violence on the self that has to happen when you can say 'you can only make this kind of mark.'"



Tala Madani, *Modern Sun* (2026) on view at David Kordansky Gallery. Photo courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

When she brought us back to the sterile minimalism that started our conversation, I realized that she'd been circling the fences the whole time, skirting the edges to establish the center. She speaks compositionally, taking us from cleanliness to mess and back again.

"This is why we need minimalism," she said. "To bring us back to the attachment to the image through the power of the object, not the power of representation, was amazing. This has now gotten away from us again, because you can never experience an object through [the phone], you can only see an image. And so we are going back to image-making in a way that the phone can recognize. We have to try and understand what we value as human beings."

So, is all painting abstract?

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"Yes, if you are a painter, you know that. Sometimes."

"Tala Madani: Control X" is on view at David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W. Edge-wood Place, Los Angeles, California, September 18–October 24, 2026.