

# Harper's BAZAAR

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# ART

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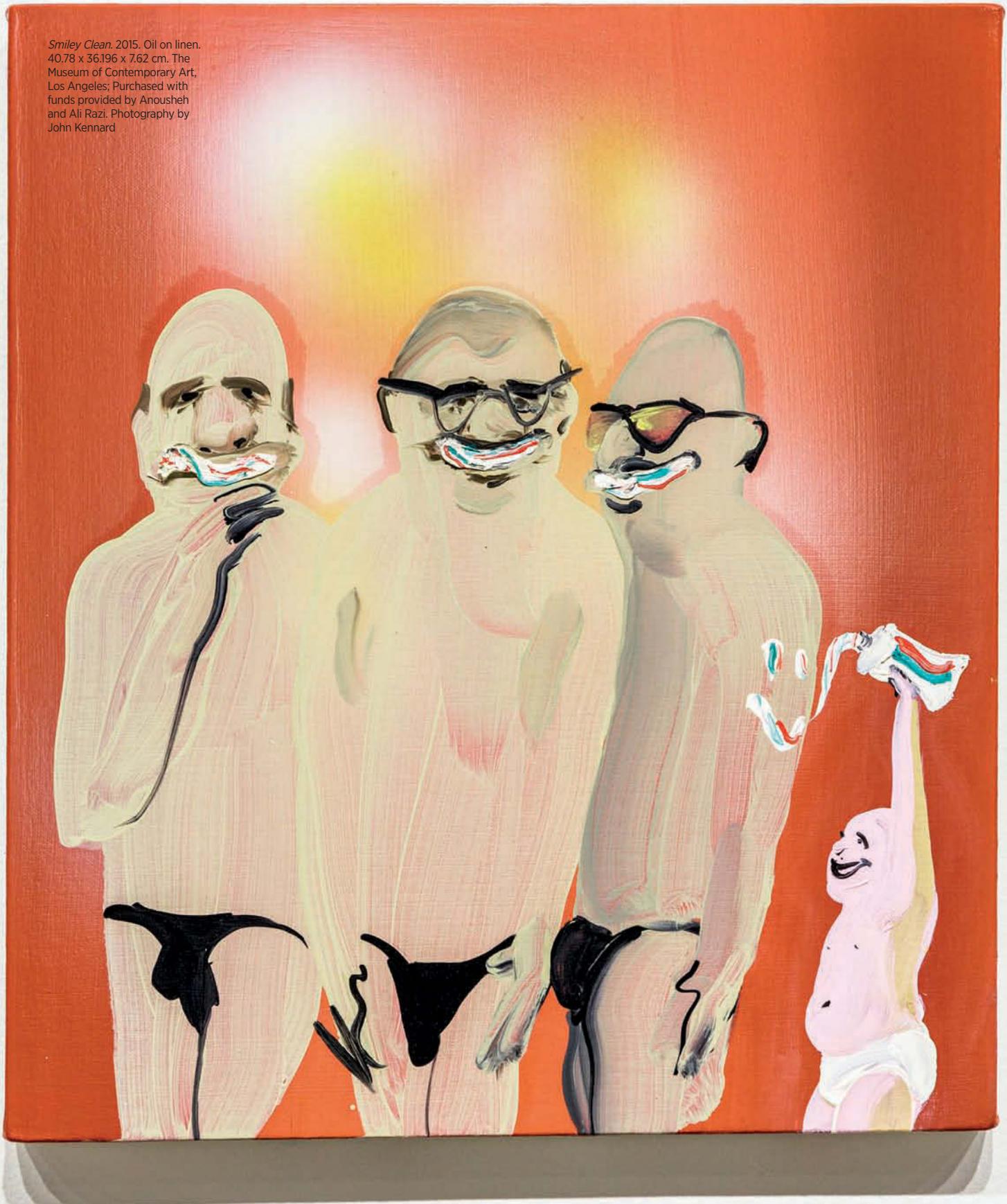
## PENETRATING THE SILENCE

HAYV KAHRAMAN

THE NEW  
TATE MODERN  
*A conversation with*  
**FRANCES  
MORRIS**

BLACK FRIDAY  
MALL CULTURE *with*  
SOPHIA AL MARIA

*Smiley Clean*. 2015. Oil on linen. 40.78 x 36.196 x 7.62 cm. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Purchased with funds provided by Anousheh and Ali Razi. Photography by John Kennard



# MIEN ARE BABIES

**Laura van Straaten**

*caught up with the Tehran-born artist who, in new artworks on view around the globe, gives men a taste of what misogyny feels like.*

*According to Artist Tala Madani*



*Smiley Has No Nose*. 2015. Oil on linen. 152.4 x 152.4 x 4.1275 cm. Photography by John Kennard

**T**he animator and figurative painter Tala Madani has pulled off an interesting feat this year, managing to be practically ubiquitous. The artist, who lives in Los Angeles, has a show of new paintings at her London gallery Pilar Corrias on October 5th (through November 12th), right on the heels of her debut solo museum show in the US at the MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

Madani's presence in so many group shows around the globe has gotten everyone wondering, "How can she be in so many places at once?" This year alone, Madani has shown her work at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in upstate New York; the Kunsthalle Darmstadt near Frankfurt; Nicodim Gallery at Cantacuzino Palace, in Bucharest; Marlborough Chelsea in New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich; and the all-film and video show *Mixtape 2016* at Pilar Corrias.

In New York, her pieces were the standouts of Hauser & Wirth's summer group show where several collectors and journalists were seen thumbing her name into their iPhones to learn more about her. On opening night, people blocked the hall to crowd around the small screen playing Madani's violent video, *Wrong House* (2015) in which each digitally animated visitor is beaten to death after knocking on the door of a nude, balding, bearded, painted guy—in sum, a classic Madani man.

This summer, I spoke with Madani by telephone from her home near the Highland Park area of Los Angeles, as her infant daughter Imra giggled and squawked in the background. The artist was born in Tehran in 1981 and emigrated to the US in

1994 when her mother began doctoral work in computer science at Oregon State University. Madani graduated from the same university ten years later with a double bachelor's degree in art and political science before receiving her MFA from Yale immediately after. Madani's studio is in the same Lincoln Heights building as that of her husband, Nathaniel Mellors, the sculptor and video artist who will co-represent Finland at next year's Venice Biennale.

In her work, Madani's main subject matter is very much on trend for women artists: men. Just down the street from her work at Hauser & Wirth at Cheim & Reid is *The Female Gaze Part 2: Women Looking at Men*, a sequel to a successful group show.

In Madani's case, she portrays men as vulnerable babies whose gestures, expressions, and stances are at turns plaintive, silly, angry, and clamouring. Many of the works depict men exhibiting or playing with bodily matter such as vomit, urine, and feces. "My interest is to subvert a particular overflowing masculinity," Madani in a conversation with fellow artist A.L. Steiner published in Prestel's new monograph on the artist. "There is also another aspect to my work. As an immigrant, I became very aware of being perceived as other. I'm really interested in otherness. There is a lot of play in the works with this perception of otherness."

In many works Madani infantilises and feminises her male subjects. For instance, in *Twins* the men have breasts full of milk, or they play out the mother and baby role in the pietà as in *Adoption* (both from 2015). "Twins and Adoption are playing off Christian iconography, Madani explains in the book. "In *Twins*, the guy is lactating. There is no Madonna, no Mary, so he is the replacement. These works were very much affected by my being pregnant."

"People really associate caricature with some kind of belittling, whereas it is actually a form of engagement. Satire,

satirical caricature, is more of a social engagement with whatever is being depicted,” she continues. “I do think that it would be different if I were a man painting this way. My work wouldn’t be read as critiquing men. It would be read as social criticism, as it has been with Honoré Daumier, James Gillray, Ralph Bakshi, William Hogarth, and many people whose work is satirical. In the history of images, satire has not been female-driven.”

Perhaps it is unsurprising—gender politics such as they are—that while Pilar Corrias has exhibited Madani’s work at Art Dubai and the artist has been in group-shows in Iran over the years, Madani has yet to mount a dedicated exhibition in the Middle East. But that may change soon; she is planning to take her family for a year’s sabbatical in Tehran, where she was a visiting artist at Tehran University in 2008. “It will be sometime in the near future though I don’t know when,” Madani says, “I just know that I’d like to make work there for a while.” Madani says she hopes that a solo show in the region will not be far behind. Plus, she adds, in an email, “I also want Imra to be very immersed linguistically and culturally in Iran before she’s too old.”

Meanwhile, it’s a shame that the Boston area was the last stop for the List’s show, which closed mid-July. Entitled *First Light*, it is a great introduction to an artist whose subject matter is challenging, especially for male viewers, and whose facility with paint is a thrill to behold.

“Some of these are quite naughty but overall they announce very clearly Tala’s signature themes,” says Henriette Huldish, while giving a private tour of the show at MIT, which co-organised the exhibition with the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis in Missouri, where a smaller version premiered earlier this year.

Huldish says men and women tend to respond differently to Madani’s work, with women nodding knowingly, and not necessarily without affection, in recognition of Madani’s men. One man to whom I show Madani’s monograph says her work reminded him of his unceasing bewilderment by women. Another man, *Boston Globe* art critic Sebastian Smee, conceded that “what Madani is trying to say about the ways in which we men project ourselves into the world” is visually “succinct,” even as he hemmed and hawed about the scatological nature of her work.

Of course, the Italian conceptual artist Pier Manzoni created the literally scatological artwork *Merda d’artista* over five decades ago, in 1961 and in later decades the artists Andres Serrano and Chris Ofili broke ground by using real urine and animal dung in their artworks.

But those precedents didn’t stop some negative reactions to Madani’s work; when the artist’s London gallery sent one of her scatological images as a Christmas card, the result was “a bunch of people asking to be removed from the email list,” Madani reported. The artist was surprised by the strength of people’s reactions, musing aloud that each bodily fluid she depicts is “actually quite a productive substance but people tend to read it as negative....I find that interesting.”

Madani paints as if she were drawing; gestural brushwork and a sparing use of spray paint join her confident sense of line and playful sense of humour. “I construct the paintings thinking much more about satire and fables,” she says. In several of Madani’s works, the artist integrates Ben-Day dots from old newsprint

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*Tala Madani*

comics, just as Roy Lichtenstein did; one example is the 2015 painting *First Light*, from which the recent exhibition and book take its title.

That work is on loan from the collectors Anousheh and Ali Razi, just two of Madani’s many Los Angeles-based collectors including Ramin and Jennifer Hawks Djawadi; Artemis Baltoyanni; the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Madani’s paintings feel as if on the verge of being animated. Most read like something’s happening or about to happen that

means trouble. Several works evoke the American torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib: *The X*, with its man being stretched in all directions at the hands of unseen strangers yanking each limb; *The XX*, depicting the shadow man in the same position and grass growing on the shadow where his genitals would be; or *Becoming Brilliant*, in which a hooded figure seems gagged by a flashlight that illuminated his whole head (all from 2015).

Madani finds a lot of inspiration in experimental film—both historical and current. She is particularly enamored by the 31-year-old, Irish-born, Los Angeles-based David O’Reilly whom she admires for moving fluidly between the art world and the entertainment industry and for turning flaws in technology into features in his work. “He uses what normally doesn’t work digitally—what digital animators try to overcome—to animate,” she explains.

She has created a dozen animated short films so far, several minutes long at most. (In addition to the one at Hauser & Wirth, two others were on view in private screening areas at MIT.) In these films, Madani uses stop-motion to capture paintings that she then wipes off and repaints to create, once edited, the sense of movement. “All my films are short because of how long it takes to do,” she explains. “It takes me drawing or painting hundreds of images to make a minute and a half to a two-minute animation.”

Despite the demands of the genre, she is starting to make plans for longer films. “I want to play with more cinematic tools next,” she says.

If Madani moves into longer-form work, and if she mounts a show in the region from which she hails, will she find a receptive audience to this playfulness? “I like to think, after so many centuries of misogyny on canvas, that paintings of men being pushed and pulled wouldn’t cause so much defensiveness,” she says. “Men push and pull each other and it’s fine. I want to play, too.” ■



*Window Pane*, 2015. Oil on linen. 40.96 x 30.8 x 4.1275 cm. Collection of George Freeman, Los Angeles

(Detail) *Dress Codes*, 2015. Oil on linen, 40.005 x 58.1025 x 2.54" Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody, New York.

