

The Boston Globe

Tala Madani's paintings provoke at MIT's List Visual Arts Center

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF MAY 26, 2016



JOSH WHITE

Tala Madani's "Window Pane" is among the artist's paintings on display in the exhibit "First Light," at MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

America's great art museums tend to shy away from showing genuinely disturbing art. Dependent as they are on private philanthropy, their aesthetic criteria get diluted by questions of taste — from which private wealth can never seem to separate itself.

As much as anyone, I appreciate the extraordinary benefits brought to American art museums by private philanthropy. But I miss seeing, in museums, art that puts my teeth on edge. I miss seeing art that dares to suggest — not academically, but viscerally — that all may not be right with the world; that things are out of joint; that our human hearts are dark, and that many of our deepest desires are hateful.

Tala Madani's weird, confronting show "First Light," at MIT's List Visual Arts Center, includes a painting of three men on their hands and knees. They are excreting from their rear ends a brown paste that flows together to form a Christmas tree.

There is also a painting of seven babies in diapers. One toddler is applying brown excrement to a wall with a roller. Another is urinating a dripping smiley face onto the same wall. The remaining four are seated in front of a long roll of white paper onto which more yellow smiley faces are painted, and they are all applying more brown stuff either to the smiley faces or to each other's faces and bodies.

It is hard to know, as you wander through the exhibit, whether you have entered a museum of bad painting, a kindergarten crèche, or some kind of tasteless re-creation of Abu Ghraib.

Madani's childlike, rudimentary-looking style is actually slyly sophisticated. But it leaves us uncertain about which marks represent the disgusting things we fear they represent (piss, poo, penises, and semen) and which are best read as symbols,

abbreviations, or mere unsignifying paint.

In one brilliant work, titled “Smiley Has No Nose,” stick figures with smiley faces (and no nose) confront three naked men. Each man covers his nose with his hand.

Are the flabby, balding men trying to emulate their happy, stick-figure brethren? Do they childishly aspire to the happy condition of stick figures who don’t have to smell their own excrement?

It’s difficult to say. But Madani, who was born in Tehran and lives in Los Angeles, gets us asking some very strange questions, all of them bound up with psychic goo we would sooner not have to contemplate.

Some of these paintings (the men excreting the Christmas tree, for example) are so desultory they fall instantly flat. But many are dazzling. They suggest disturbing connections between ideas we hold dear — creativity, play, childlike innocence — and those we loathe: obscenity, solitude, the uncurbed id.



JOSH WHITE

“Sainted” (2015) by Tala Madani.

Almost all of Madani’s cartoon-inspired characters are male. They have bald heads, flabby bodies, and facial hair. Most of her previous paintings have seemed to parody masculine rituals, openly humiliating men. In “Withered,” for instance (not in this show), balding men are shown staring down at one another’s private parts, where withered plants grow instead of phalluses.

But it is facile to suggest, as does the introductory wall text at the List, that Madani is interested in merely “satirizing conventional notions of masculinity” — a phrase that makes me want to fall asleep even as I write it. There is a deeper, more specific, and far more absorbing compulsion behind her work — although it is by no means easy to describe.

The paintings at the List, all made between 2012 and 2015, are taken up with light sources, projected images, mark-making, and shadows. Smiley faces recur continually, and are made to contrast with the balding, bearded faces of Madani’s cast of corpulent men.

In the show’s best painting, “Window Pane,” the blurred outline of a man is shown behind a frosted window. A red smi-

ley face has been scrawled on our side of the window, superimposed on his “actual” head, which glowers at a safe remove behind the glass.

His arms, meanwhile, have been thrust through the window and rest on an outside ledge. They drip with red blood, leaving us to infer that the smiley face was scrawled with the same blood.

What Madani is trying to say about the ways in which we men project ourselves into the world, and at what cost, goes beyond words. And yet visually, it could not be more succinct.

I wouldn't yet call Madani a great artist. Great swathes of her work — including the two short animations on display here — are soapy, unspecific, and bland.

But this is a genuinely — and intelligently — provocative show. It is no surprise to me that it has been staged by the List Visual Arts Center (in collaboration with the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis). Despite an alarming crackdown on free expression in universities over the past two decades, college art museums — insulated from the need to conform to good taste — are among the only US museums still willing to show art that truly disturbs, rather than merely edifies or soothes.



JOSH WHITE

“The Coming” (2015) by Tala Madani.

Sebastian Smees can be reached at ssmees@globe.com.