

## Pushing the Limits

Are you weary of paintings made by tracing projected photographs? Tired of symbolic pictures that excite at first

sight but wither on repeated viewing? Sick to the gills of art that recycles faces of international icons? Bored by flat acrylics which sacrifice visual pleasure at the altar of expediency? Uncomfortable with canvases outsourced to uncredited assistants under the specious premise that only the idea behind an image counts? Well, Abir Karmakar's debut solo, *From My Photo Album*, is an antidote to all that, and signals there may be life yet in Indian photo-realism.

Karmakar creates interiors with a European feel, into which he inserts a female version of himself. She is slim and gangly where he is short and a shade overweight. In some canvases, he pairs off his male and female selves. And in five small-format images, he depicts himself close-up, in female clothes and make-up. The worlds in which he places his characters are so equilibrium, so finely ambivalent, that to call them fantasy or masquerade is to do them an injustice. Much of the power of these works lies in Karmakar's careful detailing: the floral pattern on a sofa; clothes piled on a chair and spilling out of a cupboard; a purse with gold

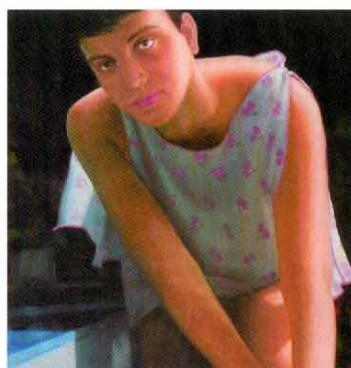
Girish Shahane is impressed by Abir Karmakar's multi-layered photo-realist works.

embroidery clutched in a hand. His paintings embrace the quotidian, the bohemian, and the glamorous with equal enthusiasm. At one end of the spectrum, we have a model with long, shapely legs posing in a sleek black mini, half-reclined across a deep, red couch. At the other end, we see a young mother (baby-sitter?), remote-control in hand, in a small living room, open magazine draped on the armrest of the couch in which she sits, baby lying on one side.

Karmakar is adept at simulating photographic effects: wide angles that flatten out figures at the edge of the frame; backgrounds burnt out because of strong incident light. But he is equally at ease with traditional uses of light and perspective: the glint of burnished metal; the way the warm glow

from a bedside lamp spreads across a wall. His bold but controlled brushwork, his obvious love for defining texture, connects these works with the beginnings of oil painting centuries ago. Synaesthetic pleasure – the use of visual means to induce tactile sensations – is what painting in oils was born for, why it became dominant

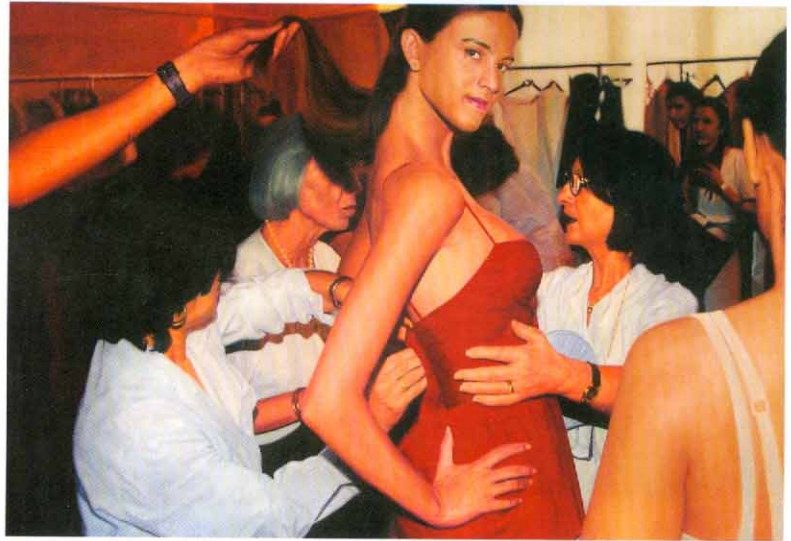
across the globe. But it is a pleasure which Indian artists have, for the most part, denied themselves and their viewers.



Abir Karmakar. *From My Photo Album - VII*. Oil on canvas. 61 cms x 61 cms. 2005.

## REVIEW

A word of caution before I end. At the same time, that *From My Photo Album* was showing at the Museum Gallery (from 3rd to 9th October), Karmakar participated in a rather ill-conceived group show elsewhere in Bombay, which focussed on the idea of metrosexuality. It was logical enough for him to contribute to that exhibition, given his unusual take on masculinity, but the works he produced were not in the same league as those in his solo. They partook of many of the failings of Indian photorealism, crude symbolism being most prominent among them. There was, for instance, a diptych showing a man with a normal body in one panel and with the prodigiously pumped-up torso of a body-builder in the second. If Karmakar can avoid such lazy picturisations in the future, he could emerge as one of the most exciting Indian painters of his generation.



**Abir Karmakar.** *From My Photo Album - VI.* Oil on canvas.  
122 cms x 184 cms. 2005.

**Abir Karmakar.** *From My Photo Album - IV.* Oil on canvas. 183 cms x 229 cms. 2005.

