

Business Standard

Skin show

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You might be repulsed by Abir Karmakar's art, but Gargi Gupta finds that that is exactly the effect the artist is aiming for.

Abir Karmakar's canvases evoke a strong reaction — mostly repulsion. In a sense, the reaction is only to be expected, especially from hidebound Indians (and if you scratch the surface, most Indians, however sophisticated on the outside, are terribly so).

It's not just that Karmakar paints nudes, although male nudity is somehow far more problematic than female nudity. That Karmakar's nudes aren't stylised like, say, Husain's or the Greco-Roman nudes of antiquity, but very real, almost photographic, somehow makes them worse, as does the fact that he doesn't paint the over-muscled body beautifuls who strut the ramp but the slightly plump, soft contours of his own body, and that of many an Indian male of that age and station in life.

And finally, the context he places them in — the elaborately imagined and painstakingly created domesticity of his interiors, the awkward, even passive poses he arranges the figures in and the distinct homoerotic, even kinky charge he works into his canvases — and it's no wonder that many turn away in something akin to disgust.

Karmakar, however, pleads not guilty to the charge of trying to build on shock value. "My painting is not about making a statement. Never," asserts the 31-year-old artist, who's having his first solo in the capital, "Within the Walls".

"I have always been fascinated with the language of the marginalised. What is it that makes a certain gesture, a certain gaze seem gay? This is me, this is how I am," says the artist who paints from photographs of himself taken by his wife. "It is preconceived notions of what masculine behaviour should be that makes them seem gay, or feminine," he counters.

Karmakar is at pains to emphasise that however they may disconcert, his current suit of paintings is in line with themes and preoccupations that were evident in his earlier works which were showed at galleries in Mumbai, London and Berlin.

"I have always been interested in self-representation, in drag as a way of fictionalising the self, the 'other'," he theorises.

"In my first solo, "From my photo album", I created a fictional actor whose face was drawn from my own, but whose body was idealised.

In my second, "Interiors", I was exploring the dichotomy of self and persona, where the two overlap, where one ends and the other begins. I continued with that theme in "In the Old fashioned Way", a solo at the Aicon Gallery in London in 2007, using soft-porn as a tool of reference. But I don't over-analyse; there is always a fluidity."

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The disconcert that his paintings evoke, strangely, is core to Karmakar's aesthetics. The artist speaks of a work he created during his final year of post-graduation at Baroda's MS University. "I painted the intestines in realistic detail, over which I fashioned, in a kind of relief, details using resin, fibre-glass, surgical pipes and so on."

That, however, didn't go down well with the galleries. "The next one year was a struggle," recalls Karmakar, the son of a railway driver who grew up in Siliguri and, despite being good at studies, always knew that an artist was what he wanted to be.

But with his recent success, he is trying to revive that line of work. At the RPG Biennale in Mumbai earlier this year, he showed a large installation in fibreglass and plywood, a room really done up like a bathroom inside, but trailing small, hairlike surgical pipes on the outside. Incidentally, the bathroom is a major preoccupation with Karmakar — it's the room, he believes, "where you connect with yourself".

But Karmakar's most distinctive, and disturbing, attribute is the facility with which he paints human flesh, in oil — much like the Renaissance masters of yore.

Indeed, Karmakar says he has always yearned to paint human flesh like Rubens. And he does — dwelling lovingly on every fold of fat, every crinkle of cellulite, every line of stretch mark, and every pit of acne. It's disconcerting, but then that's exactly the effect that Karmakar is aiming for.