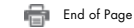




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Critical Collective

25 Sep 2023

Published on 25th September 2023

Abir Karmakar: Interpreting the Object World

by Gayatri Sinha

It is with the exhibition "Passage" that Abir Karmakar's obsessive interest in interiority marks a point of definition.

Currently on view at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinrucke, Mumbai, the painted walls that comprise the exhibition have been installed to create a spatial discontinuity. The artworks do not commit themselves to linear viewing or indeed to a predictable movement in space. Distributed and divided over room-like sections that emphasize the empty white space of the gallery, the viewer happens to come upon a domestic interior, here and there, that appears oddly familiar and yet not easily identifiable.

In conversation, Karmakar speaks of how these works were first created for the Asia Society Triennale (2019), and installed at Governor Island, Newark, in two rooms of a 19th-century house with wooden flooring and chandeliers, originally made for senior officers of the American army. Karmakar prepared for the exhibition by visiting strangers' homes in the suburbs of Kolkata, intent upon showing how images of Sharada Ma and Vivekananda resonate, because they were contemporary to the occupants of the houses on Governor Island in the late 19th century. The contrast between the embedded military history of the highly fortified island and the invocation of the Bengali saintly figures could not be sharper. Originally belonging to the Lenape American Indians, the island was turned into a military fortification and a major army administrative centre in the 18th century. With the modest figures of Kali and Durga, Sharada and Vivekananda painted on his walls, Karmakar invokes a transnational contrast, of American military ascendancy on the one hand, and a tipping point of the Bengal renaissance on the other.

With Karmakar's exhibits now installed in Bombay, other evocations come to the fore. The old house, with its air of neglect, gods wrapped in plastic, and a showcase crammed with family photos and curios acquired from bazaars, looks like an ethnographic detail from a middle-class family album. Karmakar renders it in excruciating detail, drawing on the memory of his own father's home in Siliguri, which he left 19 years ago.

The other home that he paints is Christian, with much the same kind of dis-arrangement – objects of livelihood and of faith jostle in the same, crammed space against brightly painted walls, now fading and patchy with age. Karmakar's art appears mimetic, even photo realist; yet he transforms the seemingly flat, banal interiors with a play of light, that creates an enigmatic air around unspoken presence and absence. In the interim between the psychological delineation of homoerotic figures in his works of the early 2000s and the unpeopled spaces of others' homes, Karmakar straddles the arc of this dyad with his outstanding painterly skills. While the experience of Covid prompted works that documented the horror of masked medicos and bodies transported in vans, Karmakar titled the series *History Paintings*. However, it is his return to domestic interiors other than his own, as in the large work executed for the Kochi Biennale in 2016, that renders Karmakar a master interpreter of the object world.

Passage is on view at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinrucke, Mumbai, from September 14 to October 26, 2023.

The Delhi Contemporary Art Week 2023

by Radhika Sharma