

Majumdar's canvases of vivid chaos

The US-based artist alludes to the animosity towards those questioning majoritarianism



'Monstermashup 3' (2025). COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUECKE

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There is a sense of animation in Sangram Majumdar's layered paintings. His works have a palpable feeling of movement as figures flit in and out of the canvases. He creates frozen moments featuring hybrid creatures and anthropomorphic beings in the midst of frantic, almost chaotic, action—marching, dancing, jumping their way through the paintings. These canvases of vivid chaos are part of the show, *Bad Actors*, on view at Galerie Mirchandani + Steineruecke, New Delhi, till 25 July. The artist, who lives in Seattle, US, was recently awarded the Neddy Artist Award in painting—an annual award, funded by the Behnke Foundation and stewarded by the Cornish College of the Arts, and given to visual artists based in the Puget Sound region in Washington state.

Majumdar draws on the past and present realities of India, where he grew up, and the US, which he now calls home. The title of the show draws on the term “bad actor”, which in the US stands for “an immoral or delinquent figure”. “...the exhibition wishes to act, in an impulse that recalls the meticulous recasting of such stock types as *badmaashes*, thugs, and bandits by social historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Radhika Singha, from this in-between place on the polarized present,” writes Meghaa Parvathy Ballakrishnen, a US-based scholar of modern and contemporary art with specialisation in South Asia, in the accompanying essay.

There is no denying that we live in polarised times with a sense of growing animosity towards immigrants and people of colour. These issues have seeped into Majumdar's work consciously and subconsciously, and is reflected in the treatment of figures stereotyped as “delinquent” by society. The nebulous shapes that lie on the boundaries of figurative and abstract reinforce that feeling. Majumdar introduced this treatment of the figure as an archetype around 2016. The new work continues along this line, “only growing and expanding around imagery and language coming from political spaces used to galvanise differences among people,” he says. He believes that *Bad Actors*, both the title of the exhibition and the theme underlying this group of paintings, emerges from a language used in the media to amplify anxiety towards those who are being treated like monsters from myths and folktales. The group of “delinquents” represent beliefs and systems that challenge majoritarian thinking. “But majoritarianism [as laid out by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*] is not the majority. It is a mode of thought that perpetuates accepted norms and treats knowledge as certain, universal, and unquestionable,” he says.

However, while Majumdar continues to mull over these ideas, he does not want the imagery to reinforce these fears in any way. In his view, the word “monster” could also point towards something simply unknown, even marvellous. “I loved it when (art historian) Partha Mitter points out in his book, *Much Maligned Monsters*, that there's no single word for monster in Sanskrit, and how a range of characters and types fall under it—*danavas*, *rakshasas*, *pishachas*. Simultaneously the word ‘teras’ in Greek can mean both monster and marvel,” he says. “So, the various ‘faces’ in my paintings point away from a monolithic definition and towards a greater multiplicity of experiences and meaning.”

The strong sense of movement, or use of gestures, is key to his process. The visually charged works stem from the very act of painting that he undertakes. Majumdar can often be found working on the floor and the walls of his studio—pouring, scraping and wiping—making additions and deletions simultaneously like a film editor. “There's often a slippage of lines and shapes of colour...I am often thinking how lines create boundaries and shapes fill them. However, devoid of that alignment, the series also hints at how boundaries are ultimately a human construction tied to power and control,” elaborates Majumdar. This combination of shifting spaces, figurative fragments and misaligned elements emphasise that paintings can also be active spaces for both the artist and the viewer.

Majumdar works across mediums. He often uses mixed media for drawings and as collages on letter-sized sheets of paper. Often he creates sculptural dioramas made with cardboard, paper, wood and digital printouts to visualise the spaces that he wants to explore in his paintings. More recently, the artist has started creating monochromatic wall paintings, which extend from the floor to the ceiling, in a single session to explore the role of gestures in painting.

However, in his earlier interviews, Majumdar has mentioned his affinity with oils “because it responds to the body in a very visceral and physical manner. I also love that this medium brings a lot of baggage with it”. Creating oil paintings is an acknowledgment of his western education. However, the connection of oils with the natural world feels closer to his thematic interest in the physical realm and the human condition. “While I am working with oils, I am simultaneously pushing against the traditions embedded within western painting traditions by incorporating imagery and methods that hopefully expand what we expect from an ‘oil painting’,” he explains.

You get a sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar in his paintings. For one, there is a sense of solidarity with figures from works by artists like Arpita Singh and Tyeb Mehta. Like them, he too is interested in the overlaps between iconography, myth, abstraction and history. Majumdar is particularly interested in the way Singh used the dot and the line to build images in some of her earlier works, and the more elaborate schematic organisational methods in later paintings to create an “unstable but highly convincing pictorial space”. “I also like the way Mehta speaks about the diagonal as a major structural and psychological element in his work. Both artists make paintings that pull me in without telling me how to think or see,” he says. “To me, they are significant artists who have paved the way not only for other artists, but in also shaping a visual lexicon that is expansive and generous.”

On till 25 July, Tuesday to Saturday, 11am-7pm.