Abir Karmakar
Everyday

For his exhibition, Everyday, Abir Karmakar presents over thirty oil paintings which address the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its psychological effects. These are fastidious pictures of surfaces and scenes, all derived from photographic sources from the last two and a half years. They contend with the unpredictability of the virus, capturing our fears and futile attempts to control contagion. With his brush to the canvas and eyes to the screen, Karmakar practices witness-painting, chronicling collective events—minute by minute—through his own painterly touch.

Yesterday I grabbed a metal railing as I climbed the steps out of a train station. As quickly as I'd touched it, I withdrew my hand and looked it over before continuing on my way. "Don't touch your face or phone," I thought to myself. These everyday moments of paranoia continue to grip us throughout the ongoing pandemic. One wrong move, a moment of contact with the invisible, and who knows what will ensue. For those of us who see, it's natural to want our eyes to spot the virus. After all, vision has evolved as our primary sense and it's our sharpest tool to navigate the information age, scanning words and images to make sense of a changing world. But vision alone is useless in detecting Covid-19. No matter how hard we look, the virus eludes our eyes.

Abir Karmakar's trompe l'oeil paintings of surfaces, all made throughout the dread of the last couple of years, heighten our awareness to physical contact. During a recent Zoom chat, I asked him what changes he'd observed in his work and life. "We are more sensitized to touch and have grown suspicious of our own hands," he

said. From painter to painter, this statement offers additional meaning. “Touch” is a term often used interchangeably with “the artist’s hand.” It is registered by gesture and fluidity, the facture of the medium itself. To paint is to both act upon a surface, while simultaneously observing one’s own actions at the distance from the retina. It’s a process of impulse and recognition in equal measure, not unlike reaching for a railing and then scrutinizing one’s palm.

The Surface paintings, made from 2021-2022, appear abstract but are literal translations of flat architectural fragments. They look like maps because they are maps: they trace a real patch of the built world at a roughly one-to-one ratio, color to color, shape to shape. These are surfaces the artist encountered in his neighborhood on brief outings while his city of Vadodara was on lockdown. Snapping photos with his mobile phone, he would return to the studio and steadily render the image on canvas, inch by inch.

Despite his methodical transcription, Karmakar’s paintings never belie their scale or precise locale. Each painting is a topographical realm. Where Surface 7 (2021) could represent aerial views of island archipelagos, Surface 6 (2021) appears to render snowy trees and their shadows seen from afar.

This is no over-interpretation because it’s evident to a close looker that the artist was seeing beyond the confines of his studio while making this work. While he and his local community were forced to stay inside and travel was restricted, the artist found a way to escape through the very walls that shut him in.

In other works from this series, scale operates in the opposite way, giving the illusion of magnification, each painting a forensic interrogation of a particular spot. Surface 8 (2021) could be a detailed image of a bloodied shirt, evidence from a crime scene. Cuts and scratches seem to scar Surface 9 (2021), the canvas taut and hide-like. Surface 11 (2021) looks like another lurking virus, spores writ large, floating and lethal. The surfaces Karmakar chooses to represent are not sterile or wiped down with bleach; rather, they are accumulations of residue, porous and respirating. Although his recent work is derived directly from digital imagery, Karmakar plays with significant shifts in scale, both materially and pictorially. For instance, he's made a number of cityscapes that vary in size from 10x14 inches to 60x144 inches. By comparison to the Surfaces series, his urban scenes look model-like and miniaturized, even when they're at their largest. They are eerie in their mimetic realism, dense with the evidence of human activity, but utterly absent of people.

I'm particularly struck by the artist's choice to depict signs and placards, their text inscrutable. At a slight distance, askew, or not in focus, they can't perform their job, that is to say, these signs are illegible.

And in this sense, they signal the ways that the pandemic has brought Vadodara, like so many other places, to a standstill. To not be able to read or interpret written language implies isolation from society. These paintings ask what it means for signs to not be read or statues to not be interpreted. By picturing his local district, all without people, Karmakar paints the loneliness of lockdown. We don't see figures behind windows or masked on balconies. The daytime backdrop means we don't see interior lights or street lamps illuminating walkways. Cars, too, are few and far between, parked inside garages or in dedicated spots.

Vadodara's concrete walls and balconies, metal grates, and paved sidewalks all stand silent as the wind blows through the trees and the clouds pass overhead. Inside these buildings, people hide themselves from the virus, hoping to evade its brutal toll. Architecture becomes the protector and ally of its own inhabitants. In The 25th of March (2021), one catches a glimpse of Karmakar's immediate neighborhood during India's first nationwide lockdown. It's a solemn scene, yet strangely animated. The buildings look at one another with wide-eyed windows while others keep watch over a distant horizon. With their doors shut and gates locked, even houses seem to wear their own personal protective equipment.

This view is familiar to the artist as he's lived in the neighborhood for nineteen years. The buildings he depicts have observed his own comings and goings. Now, through his painting, they've become his eyes. Witness is a key concept for Karmakar. His History Paintings depict scenes of daily life in the province of Gujarat, of masked and uniformed municipal workers, socially distant gatherings, and the grim tasks of administering the dead. Collecting uncredited journalistic images from his local online news source, the artist transcribes each one onto a canvas not much bigger than his computer screen. Side by side, he studies the image and copies it, making each one over the course of a single day. Collectively, these paintings add up to a chronicle of death, of waiting, and anxiety. As an artist, Karmakar is a witness, just like us, refreshing his news feed but staying with the images that speak to him, even if they're difficult to digest.

I was interested to learn that Karmakar, a native Bengali speaker, doesn't read Gujarati fluently, so he encounters each online image without full understanding of its written caption or context. It's through painting that the artist grapples with the story, retelling it through his own visual vernacular. "I see myself as a scribe," he told me recently. In these paintings there is no flourish or ornament, no hyperbole or understatement. Like traditional western genre paintings, the artist describes the mundane and often tragic realities of local events by copying the images' details and setting the scene. He focuses on people's actions, such as marking circles on the ground which designate safe standing distances, or the hoisting of a stretcher into an ambulance. His brush traces the details, such as the folds of body bags, how they crease and compress under the weight of their contents, or the way golden sunshine lands on red earth in the late afternoon. In journalism there is an expression that in order to be balanced in one's reporting, one should write "without fear or favor." Perhaps Karmakar's daily History Paintings are journalistic, but infused with his own subjective emotion, expressions of both.

I once heard an argument for the necessary neutrality of the artist, using the example of Francisco Goya's The Third of May, 1808, the famous painting that shows a confrontation between Napoleonic executioners and Spanish captives. If Goya had made the painting on site, he presumably would have had to choose a side, risking his own life or taking another's. By making the painting in a studio, far from the scene itself, he was able to tell the story more fully. At the very least, he was able to survive and focus on the task at hand, the painting. I ask myself, does this neutrality come at the expense of direct observation? Can physical distance make the artist less—or more—of a witness to that which they represent?
As visual culture and technology evolved throughout the

twentieth century, many artists referred to printed and televised news imagery in their work, particularly representational painters who were grappling with the recurring obsolescence of the medium. How, it was implied, does painting stay afloat in a sea of images? Vija Celmins responded by representing the image and its mediated form. Burning Man, her 1966 painting of a fiery car crash, was painted with a bright blur, a representation of its paused presence on the TV. In Bikini (1968) she renders with graphite a folded page from a magazine that shows one of the nuclear test explosions on Bikini Atoll. Both examples foreground the mediation of the image as what she refers to as "an alternate subject, another layer that creates distance. And distance creates an opportunity to view the work more slowly and explore your relationship to it." (Relyea, Lane, et al. Vija Celmins. Ediz. Inglese. Phaidon Incorporated Limited, 2004, p. 125)

Thanks to faster and more ubiquitous internet connections, there is virtually no lag in the publishing or broadcasting of information today. This is what distinguishes the 21st century mediated reality from that of the past. Our experiences increasingly derive from social media, where we receive information through its rapid spread. Today, the encounter of an event can register at a great distance. We might not be physically in proximity but we share the same temporality. Words, sounds, and images are transmitted instantaneously, so that we witness tragedy and horror, often in real time. Unlike Celmins, Kamarkar is moving his brush at the speed of online news, a cycle that has no beginning and no end.

Abir Karmakar told me that he wants to "give the image another life through painting." I initially assumed he meant that painting offers a sense of permanence to the ephemerality of images, that he can make a material fact that will remember beyond the lifespan of a human or even a

jpg. But his three monumental panoramic pieces, all from 2022, challenge our assumptions about paintings as objects. Indeed, they already appear to be in a state of degradation, pixelated and blurry. The proportions of these pieces resemble Chinese handscrolls, a format for painting that is never seen in its entirety, but rather section by section. Here, the constant flow of people, each comprised of countless dappled datapoints, echoes the stream of information, constantly pouring in and out of our frame of vision. The artist seeks here, through painting, an image which is unfixed and precarious, just like life itself.

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July 2022
Massachusetts, USA