

It shouldn't be so arresting but it is!

Moving through Abir Karmakar's *Passages*, QUASAR THAKORE PADAMSEE maintains that we are never just one thing.



[Overleaf]
ABIR KARMAKAR
Passage 4
Oil on canvas.
108" x 168". 2020.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

Karmakar's *Passage* was installed at the gallery's new Ballard Estate space from September 14th to October 26th, 2023.

I must confess that I feel like a bit of an imposter writing this piece. My relationship with art is mainly confined to the walls of my mother's drawing room. Growing up, this was a fractious relationship because every new painting meant less wall space for me to bounce a ball off.

On the odd occasion, when I do find myself inside an art gallery, the appreciation of the work is without any understanding of the context or the form or the brush stroke. It is often a simple, personal connection.

That is exactly how I first encountered the work of Abir Karmakar; wandering through a building during the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa. Coming upon a room, that looked like ...well.... a room. "Is this art?" My plebeian brain conjectured. And yet as I wandered through the different spaces that he had created I couldn't help but feel like spending more time among them. At the time, I didn't know who the artist was or what the work symbolized, just that I wanted to hang out among those abandoned rooms.

Imagine my surprise, when a few months later, I was asked by Galerie Mirchandani +Steinruecke to create a performative response to his *Passages* series. A collection of six life-sized paintings of the interiors of two houses – one from Bengal and one from Gujarat. When I first encountered these works, they were wrapped in a protective plastic as the installation was still being done. At first viewing I didn't quite get the 'big deal'. The details were obscured by the plastic, and I must confess that my theatre instincts kicked in – so they felt like the 'box sets' that we are used to seeing on stage.

However, the more time I spent in the gallery, the more I was drawn to the works. The scale, the detailing, the colours, the power all seemed to add up to something much greater than their individual parts. The one that I took a particular liking to was *Passage 4* – one of the walls from the Gujarati home.

It surprised me with its Christian imagery. There were images of Mary and various depictions of Christ. And yet, this was a house from Baroda. In a simple frame it captured everything I love about India. We are never just one thing. We can be Gujarati and we can also be Christian. It was political without trying to be. In today's context of homogenization, the innate Indianness of this wall inspired me. The feeling was heightened even further by the presence of the calendar which had a depiction of Christ, with the numbers and days in Gujarati. Having a doorway in the centre of the wall made the piece even more poignant. It felt like a gateway into the world we must aspire to.

But even apart from the social context, the work stands out for its incredible attention to detail. The blurred reflection of the tubelight on the veneer cupboard elevates the work on repeat viewing because it's not something you might notice the first time. And this alive-ness, where every time we view it, it is something more makes it an incredibly enjoyable experience.

Static yet dynamic.

