

Bad Actors
Sangram Majumdar
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There are some paintings you experience passively, simply absorbing what you see, like reading and processing a complete sentence. And there are some that require a more active engagement, a participatory approach. The paintings gathered together under the heading *Bad Actors* fall into this second category. They aren't the kind of images that allow you to identify specific objects or scenes; just bits of both. Nor are they about tangible subjects or a schematic of the artist's own vision. Instead, following the direction of their titles, they suggest situations, or the rough outlines of certain characters. Although you do need to do some mental assembly to get to that point. Indeed, ultimately what you're confronted by is something like a series of sentences you need to complete. That you find yourself, as a viewer, doing so automatically, almost unconsciously (at least as unconscious as any experience can be in art gallery) is a testament to Sangram Majumdar's artistic skill.

Take *Bad Actors 1* (2026), the first of a trio of paintings from which the current exhibition takes its name. It comprises a series of leering, demonic faces. Some are in outline, some composed of blocks of colour, some half-present sketches, some even more barely there. We can make out a lot of eyes, some teeth. Perhaps we imagine some of the latter to be fangs. Although, in truth, many resemble sutures after surgery; or the way in which a child might represent the teeth on a skull. Ultimately though it's we who are doing the stitching on this fractured image, in which nothing seems to be absolutely asserted by the painter's hand. He tees us up via the flash of possibilities that we can glimpse in his underpainting. Like a peek into alternate realities. At roads and colours not travelled. More simply he gives us a land of demons, a land of fear, which is the kind of land many world leaders, whether of the United States or of India (to name the two to which the artist is personally connected), or indeed most of the places in between, would like us to think we all inhabit. 'Here be monsters,' cartographers once inscribed on maps when attempting to describe geographies about which they were ignorant, that were unexplored, and hence dangerous. It's how we treat those we term 'others' today. But perhaps that's just me stitching things into this alignment. Although that in itself is, in part, how these paintings work.

As that last sentence implies, they are doing work: as animate forms rather than the fixed, static images that we traditionally associate with painted worlds. And their instability – their evidently collaged, not absolutely coherent nature – is precisely what gives them life. One of the faces in *Bad Actors 2* (2026), for example, seems to be composed of little more than a pair of lips, the suggestion of a tongue and a single eye. Elsewhere in the same work, the focus seems to be on jagged teeth and a gaping maw, or, in the case of a purple-skinned figure to the bottom right, a facial

expression that we might find conjured by a demon drawn from Hindu or Chinese mythology, and attached to another head above it as if it might be part of a totem pole. The cross-cultural references begin to pile up (indeed, Majumdar's reference materials for these works span painting to architecture sourced from the West Coast of America to the Far East of Asia). Although the overall vibe of the *Bad Actor* works might owe just as much to American painters such as Jean-Michel Basquiat or the panoply of faces, ranging from the cartoonish to the carnivalesque, in a work like Belgian painter James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888). And yet, on some literally fundamental level, the painting itself is more of an abstraction than any of that might suggest. An accumulation of blocks of colour and suggestive marks.

This tension – between figuration and abstraction – might also be construed as a fundamental resistance to being understood in any particular way, or a more generalised resistance to the idea that appearances tell you everything and that the world is easily read. In this, Majumdar's paintings pursue a similar line to what the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant once described as the 'right to opacity': the right of the Other to remain just that; ungrasped by and free from conventional modes of understanding the world. Or, more simply put: we should learn to be OK with difference.

As such, we might view Majumdar's art as a corrective truth for a time in which many states concern themselves with the apparent separation, by a variety of means, of natives and others, often by demonising the latter. You might imagine that in the US an ICE officer would characterise his paintings as 'shifty'. Which they consciously are.

Monstermashup 3 (2025), for example, appears to contain disembodied parts of a tiger and sections of what might be chain-link and more elaborately decorative fencing, or equally at times a linear representation of stars, with some further faces partially revealed or appearing to lurk in the 'background' of this otherwise relatively perspective-free painting. The whole works in a fashion akin to 'dazzle painting' – abstract geometrical patterns developed during the First World War in order to make naval warships hard to read (in terms of their size and velocity). Majumdar's paintings here are similarly resistant to measurement.

Throughout, as in the *Bad Actors* paintings, we have the sensation of eyes staring out at us. Of our gaze upon the painting being returned by the painting itself. Furthermore, thanks to the fact that the eyes in Majumdar's paintings are often cropped out from another context or isolated from any larger whole, this reflective gaze operates in a seemingly furtive, disturbing fashion: within a general atmosphere of suspicion. But beyond the sensation of being surveilled, the process

has the effect of making us more conscious of how we, in turn, might look at others. Or at the unfamiliar. Or simply at things, like the paintings before us, that do not necessarily reveal themselves, but that require a little more figuring out. In that sense, you might say that the form of these paintings (one of which, dating from 2026, is indeed titled *The Others*) is their meaning, or vice versa. But the games being played are more complex than that alone.

Where some works incorporate images reminiscent of fencing, others – among them *Marginalia* (2025), *A Calculated Certainty* (2026) and *A Developing Situation* (2026) – appear to incorporate partial framing devices, both simple and elaborate, as if mocking both art's ability to contain and to be contained. It's a device that finds its most complete articulation in *The Informant* (2026), which appears to depict some form of human-animal hybrid, surrounded by multiple attempts to assemble something like a frame or border. A frame that's fragmented, dislocated, waiting to be assembled. There to separate the bit that's art from the bit that's not, perhaps. Or to give the subject of the painting a sense of shape and purpose. Like European portraiture or Indian miniature painting of the 1800s.

Teras (2026) sees the artist at his most cacophonous. The painting's title refers to the Greek word for monster, or marvel, the two poles around which Majumdar's paintings oscillate. The painting itself is composed of patches of colour overlaid with a process of concentrated brushstrokes that at times appear to describe physical features – eyes and faces, or eyes without faces – at others veer towards the fencelike structures that feature in other works or, at other times still, suggest a written language – an originary *ur-language*, in which a form becomes a line, becomes a mark, becomes a gesture. A fluid, animate language, with its own rhythms and flows, in which anything that is asserted can be denied or transform into something else. Overall, it is evidence of someone exploring the full potential of suggestive mark-making, or expression more generally (and an invitation to viewers to follow that lead). As such, the whole is as imaginatively expansive as it is formally constricted, with one mark or painterly gesture appearing to cancel out the next, reminiscent, in atmosphere alone, of Francisco Goya's celebrated aquatint *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (c. 1799).

Of course, a similar type of slumber appears to characterise the world in which we live today. And perhaps it's this sleep that Majumdar is really depicting in this show. You could argue, and others have done so, that his current works' fragmentary nature is a reflection of the artist's living between worlds, in a cultural sense, between his Indian heritage and his US residence. But that might be a little limiting. Because, in truth, the world in which we all live is increasingly revealed to be full of contingencies rather than necessities. With truths that change, with friends who can become enemies, with people who act in bad faith, with people who are bad at

acting or pretending, with people we might describe as 'bad' while meaning it in the sense of good. In reality we all live in a fluid and mutable world, and perhaps Majumdar's paintings give us an example of how and why we might come to terms with that. Of how what might appear to be a bad actor could, in fact, be operating in good faith.

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