

(This catalog essay was written to accompany "PEEL" a solo exhibition of work at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, NY, Dec 2013)

Unbuilt to Suit

David Humphrey, 2013

The woman in a red dress has rotated her golden facemask vertically to expose one closed eye. Her anonymity is preserved in Sangram Majumdar's painting *Look, See* because his swift rendering has a greater obligation to the imperatives of the artwork than to identifying the woman. She reveals her face while withdrawing to an interior of languid thought. Her gaze turns inward as Majumdar directs us to notice the play of light across her glittering mask, through its misplaced eyeholes to illuminated bits of flesh beneath, to her open lips, black nail polish and reclining torso.

"What does it mean to look with your eyes closed? We do that often. You talk to somebody, you leave and you can't remember what the whole conversation was about because you weren't really paying attention, you were thinking about what you're going to have for dinner, because you're hungry and your stomach is growling". *

Sangram Majumdar is a skilled depicter. He has trained himself to make paintings from observation in ways that deploy a range of representational schema, historically evolved to render light on objects in space, into the personal service of a poetry of *looking* and *making*. Those pictorial conventions are used by him to thrust perception into unexpectedly dynamic interactions with the physical, the mental and the cultural. The tradition of composing visual information into coherent pictures is made to argue with itself about how sense is derived from the visible world. By vexing the visual cues by which we recognize things Majumdar challenges our habits of looking and generates new associations with traditional means.

“I feel like I can't plan. I'm not someone who plans the painting and I'm also not somebody who goes from painting to painting with an idea of what the next painting will be. A few people I've talked to have used the phrase, "left turns" as opposed to "right turns". I think I'm somebody who takes left turns at night, in which you go across more traffic and there's a greater possibility of getting into an accident”.

Majumdar's paintings make dramatic use of shadows and their special capacity to both obscure and reveal form. Objects become hard to identify as they sink into darkness while distinctions between figure and ground slur. His paintings playfully reflect on the transition between the actuality of paint and the represented subject. Sometimes he tricks us into believing there is no distinction at all, like his image of a storage rack of paintings, where thickly applied brown paint so closely resembles cardboard that we have to look very closely to see that he has not glued cardboard to the surface. Or his painting *Interrupted*, where subtle shifts in tone suggest the translucence of standard 8½x11 printer paper and strips of masking tape to hold the pages in place. Majumdar narrows the space between the depicted and the means of representation by painting already flat materials. *Interrupted* perversely resembles a certain type of abstract art, originally evolved to reveal process and avoid what (for some people when I was a student in the seventies) was considered the morally questionable “illusionism” of representational painting. But in Majumdar's hands the illusionist trick becomes a metaphor for lucid dreaming. The oscillation between looking into a picture fiction and noticing how it is made of paint on a surface is like being in a dream while knowing you are having one. Recognition of the work's crafted artifice is deferred as we trip across our sense that a colored canvas has been partially covered by a composition of white paper. What blocks our view becomes the view itself.

“I don't choose what to paint based on an idea and then try to look for it. Things creep in and things move in and I try to be receptive. There's an impulsive desire

involved with looking, regardless of what you're looking at, the floor or a person or staring at the ceiling.”

What transformations occur through the process of representation? How does the skilled labor of the artist inflect those transformations? Is competence a theme? What produces or disturbs our sense of coherence?

Majumdar finds ways to complicate his disciplined way of working through automatism and ambiguations. The two large paintings *Step Right Up* and *Unbuilt to Suit* began as representations of a broken dollhouse Majumdar found in a stranger's trash. He broke the plaything a little more before painting images of its rooms caught in a turbulence of disorganization, with all sense of their original small scale removed. *Unbuilt to Suit* features a doorway halfway up a deeply saturated red wall. A detached staircase leans near the doorway to suggest a state of disrepair or demolition in progress. The painting itself seems at risk of being covered over by white paint coming in from the edges, as though repairs to the wall around the painting are intruding onto the artwork. *Step Right Up* is much darker, like a poorly lit attic in which unused furniture and broken objects are stored for an uncertain future. What seems like the handrails of a metal staircase along the work's bottom edge suggest that access to this space is limited and occasional; the attic becomes a space of half forgotten memory. Some of the objects depicted in *Attic* sink into the shadows while others come into being only partially articulated. Both *Unbuilt to Suit* and *Step Right Up* suggest that the process of painting, understood as perceptions organized into an accumulation of practiced or spontaneous behavior, could be a metaphor for threshold states of consciousness.

If the general and the particular and everything in between can coexist. what would that world feel like? Within my own vocabulary, I've been trying to parse out these pieces and have them coexist in various ranges depending on how they are painted, almost trying to end the way I began.

Paper Tree is a depiction of colored paper triangles taped to the wall in the generalized shape of a tree. The painting is a recession of surrogates, a cascade of material blanks that stand for something that stands for something else. Majumdar's application of thin paper-like slabs of paint covers over what is below, masking the ground and under-painting while representing the light falling onto the exfoliating green, blue, yellow and brown triangles on the wall. The grey background sometimes nudges ahead of the paper shapes to make triangles of its own. At the top of the canvas the wall flares into a brightened hot spot. The leaves on a real tree catch light for photosynthesis while Majumdar's triangular skins of paint synthesize the impression of light on a surface. His hard work articulates a playful essay on the relationship between perception and representation haunted by the phenomenologist's insistence that there is a *really* real world before and outside our attempts to describe it.

*All quotes are Sangram Majumdar from a conversation in his studio with the author on 10/13/2013.