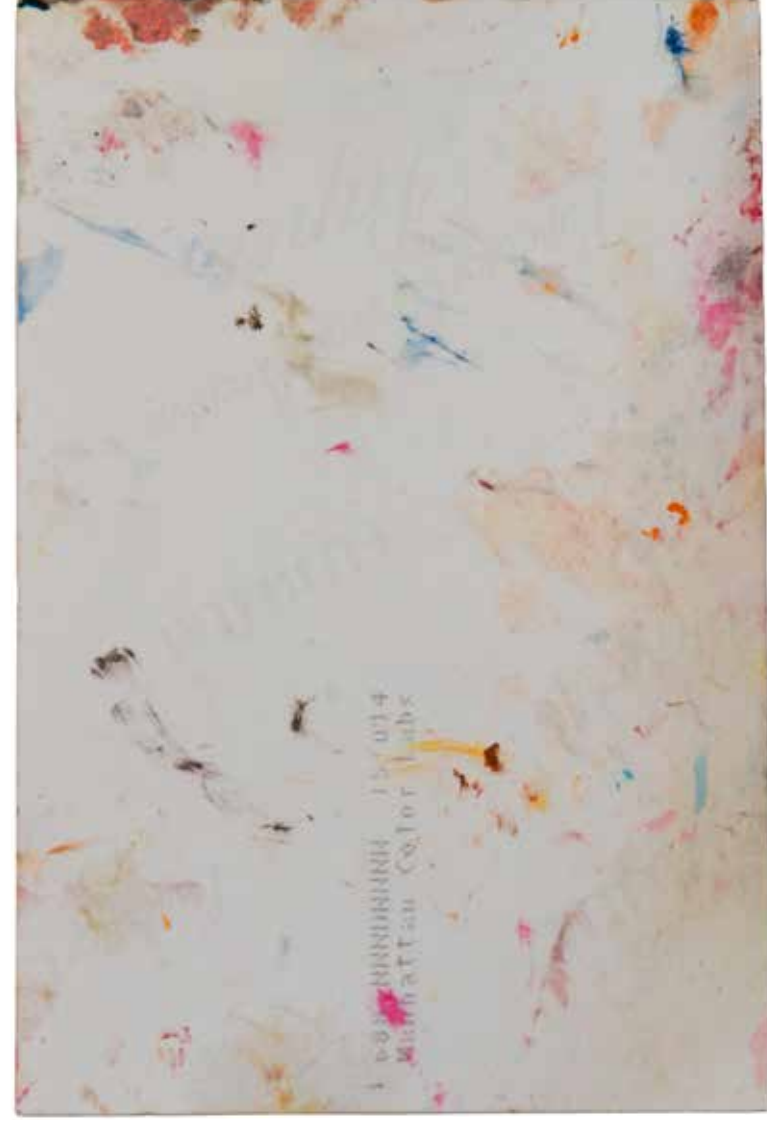


GOD  
DONT'T  
LIKE  
UGLY

Thomas Erben Gallery





GOD  
DONT'  
LIKE  
UGLY

Schandra Singh

INTERVIEW  
BETWEEN  
*ELLEN  
GALLAGHER*

**EG**

AND  
*SCHANDRA  
SINGH*

**SS**



**EG** The first work of yours that I saw at the Saatchi gallery in London in 2010 was a painting of a guy floating in an inner tube. This idea of liquid – the water, but also the way you handle the paint – continued throughout the work. Your line is made in a fluid way, and the subject and the matter is quite fluid.

**SS** It's fluid with different energies.

**EG** What do you mean by different energies?

**SS** I think about my paintings as a dance performance of my own energy. So sometimes, like in *The Lazy River* that you saw in London, the painting is very fluid and whole. It only took me two and a half weeks.

**EG** It's a huge painting.

**SS** It's 10 feet by 8 feet.

**EG** Oh wow! That's the scale I work in, and in my practice, I don't think of that scale as being so big. I thought of your painting as being really

enormous when I saw it in London. I wonder if that's because of the planes within it. You tend to have these bursts that happen in a central space and explode forward from multiple planes within a work.

**SS** I want the painting, even though it's two-dimensional, to be popping off the picture plane at the same time. That's the energy I was talking about. How can you construct a nose with three lines, or even 500 lines, and have it look flat and make it pop off the canvas at the same time?

**EG** It's also that the material is flatter, so it's like you are using one plane of paint to make all of the fractal spaces pop out.

**SS** I can see this fluidity in all of the works I've been making. Sometimes I go to my studio and think, "I'm going to paint this ear and the ear is going to take me an hour," and five hours later I'm still painting the ear. It's very much connected to my emotional state at that time. If I paint that ear fast, then there's something flowing in me. If I'm painting that ear slowly, there is something that is a little reserved or anxious.

**EG** So in a sense you are making a portrait of something that you've decided to make already—the ear—and at the same time it is a portrait of a psychological space within you.

**SS** Yes.

**EG** So simultaneously it's a sign for something, and the sign itself is really more of a measure of something, like a measure of an internal space.

**SS** The first time I was ever asked to make a portrait, I made a fractured image of myself. The way that I see form is through the light that is coming in and hitting it. A lot of the time when I'm photographing people I want them in the light, so when the light hits them and I'm looking at their noses, I see a little bit of crimson and a bit of pink and I'm breaking it all up to create two dimensions.

**EG** In general, what I saw was a lot of brown bodies that were made up of alizarin crimson colors. It was like you flipped this image where you get a sense of red blush under brown skin. You put the blush on top. It's like the liquid sense of skin is on top of the skin.

**SS** Yes, you just said it in a very poetic way. Most people say it's like I'm bringing the insides out. I think with the brown bodies I don't do that as much but when you use that alizarin crimson as the main marker, as opposed to a light brown or something, it definitely looks like the internal matter is coming out.

**EG** Is that because of how you see light through flesh?

**SS** Yes, and I also think it provides expression.

- EG** But it's not just in the flesh or describing an expression of that being's character, no, it's an expression of light or, like you said, your mood.
- SS** People have said to me, "You don't like people on vacation." When I photograph the people that become the subject of my paintings I always let them know that this is not about them, because sometimes they do become grotesque-looking or crazy-looking.
- EG** And you do studies based on these photographs and transcribe the drawing to linen, so you're not using a projector at all. You are working free hand to free hand.
- SS** Yes. You said once, "I paint until it hurts," and that resonated with me. Sometimes I paint until it hurts. I actually fight for a painting and this can feel insecure. I think a lot though about how Alexander McQueen said that a good artist has to be insecure, because those insecure moments are leading into something original in the work.
- EG** Or questioning. Also it's exciting what you are doing with the uniform in the painting entitled *Rose*.
- SS** The uniform is intense.
- EG** I don't really know what kind of space *Rose* is in, except that the space she is in is the uniform. So everything else floats away into the distance.

- SS** The uniform is the thing that gives it subject, and a place.
- EG** With *Rose*, it is she and the uniform together collapsed as one entity. I am thinking of a Duane Hanson representation. The weight is both inside and outside of the figure and always in direct approach to the viewer. It's just something that people don't represent that often in contemporary art: class.
- SS** It's a scary thing to do sometimes because it brings up a whole bunch of questions, and people will wonder why I am doing that.
- EG** So you painted Shelley and she is part of this body of work, and Shelly's on holiday and *Rose* and Dorothy are housekeepers.
- But I think aspects of your work are about social expressivity like Duane Hanson's. I'm bringing Hanson's work up in terms of an art-historical comparison, but in fact, you are creating a facade and a realm, like your own puppet theatre. Your figures do look like gruesome puppets, however humanist or human. You really know how to tell an ethical story, like "God don't like ugly."

*On page 8:  
Lazy River  
Oil on linen  
90" x 108"  
2006*



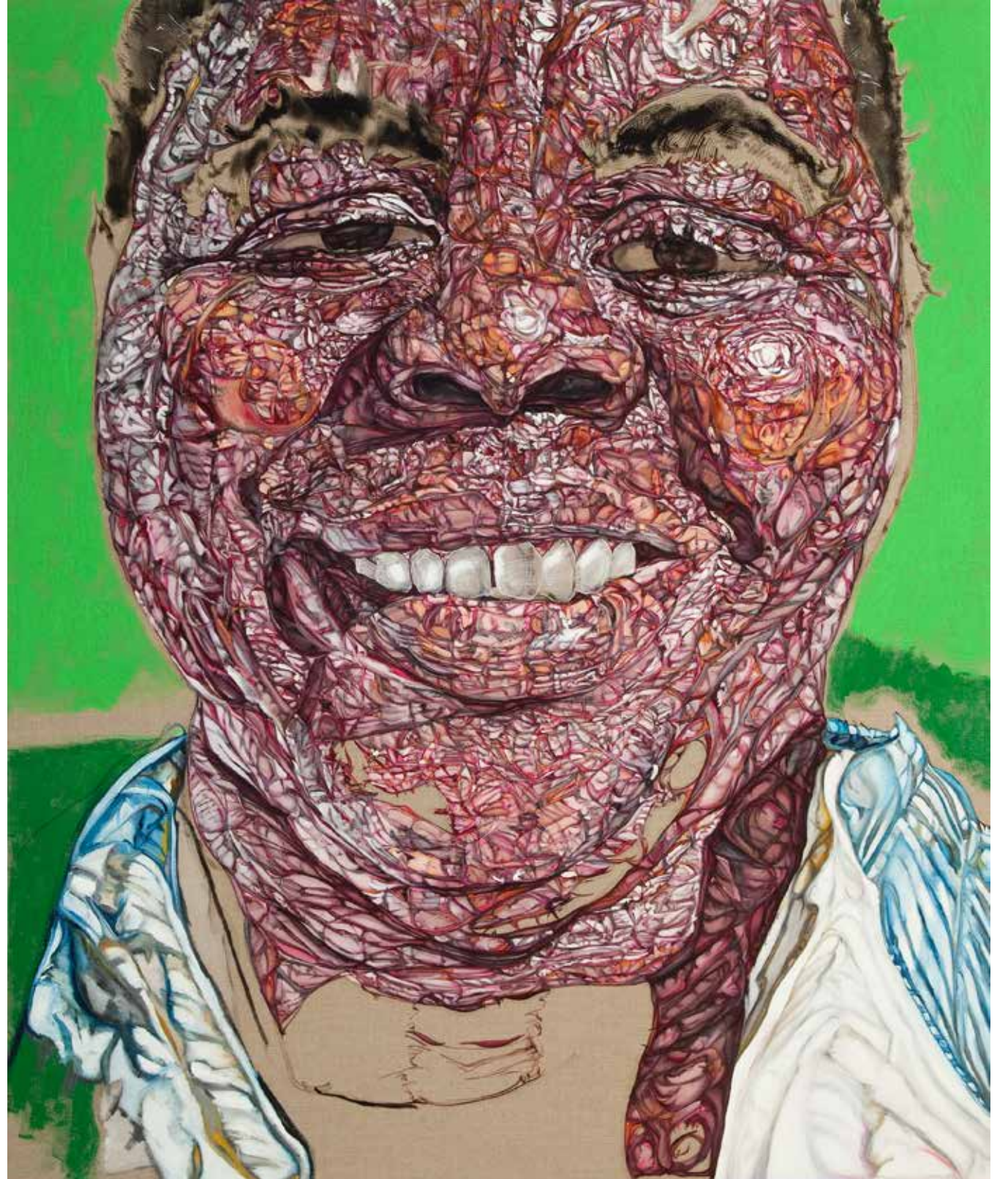
Rose  
Oil on linen  
84" x 108"  
2014

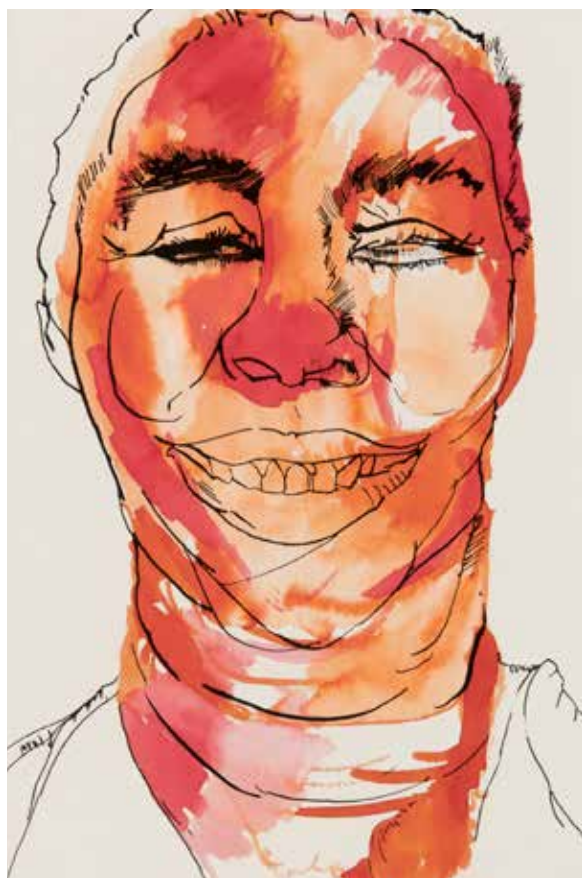






*Dorothy*  
Oil on linen  
72" x 60"  
2013







*Gene*  
*Oil on linen*  
*72" x 60"*  
*2014*





*Jean*  
Oil on linen  
84" x 108"  
2014





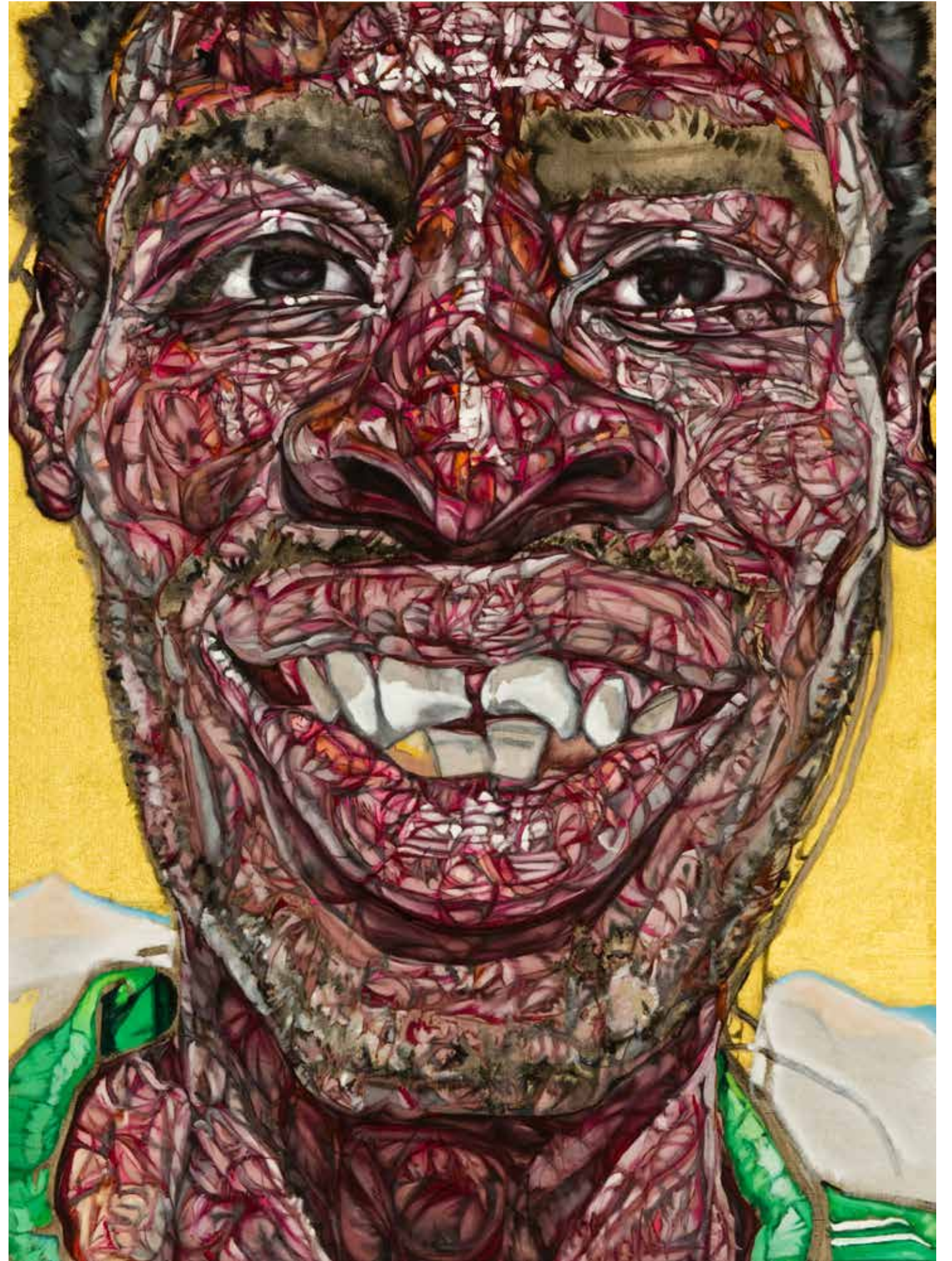






*Little boy*  
*Oil on linen*  
*17" x 16"*  
*2013*

*Rinaldo*  
Oil on linen  
38" x 28"  
2014





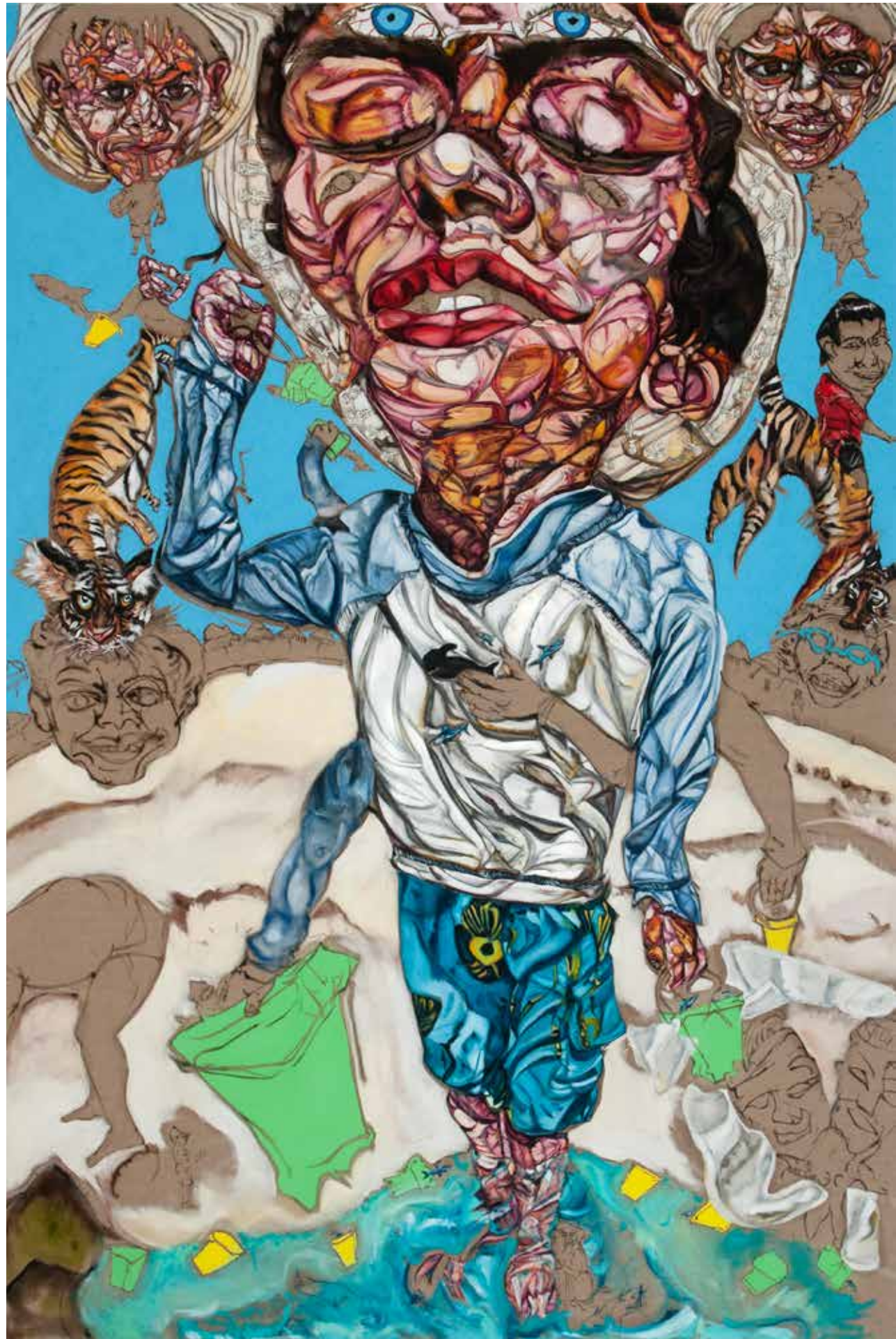


*Shelly*  
Oil on linen  
79" x 108"  
2014









*Shiva*  
Oil on linen  
108" x 72"  
2014





HUMA  
BHABHA

**HB**

AND  
JASON FOX

**JF**

INTERVIEWS  
SCHANDRA  
SINGH

**SS**



**JF** Are your drawings made exclusively from photos you take or do you draw from life?

**SS** I go to tropical places and come back with about 300 photographs. Usually I'll find one that really stands out. I'll take that one photograph and start drawing that image over and over again. It's a way to get used to the picture itself, the image that I'm going to paint larger. I'm exercising my brain a bit with the image.

**HB** Your paintings have a lot of calligraphic marks. Do you feel like a lot of the mark making that happens in these preliminary drawings come into the paintings, or do you approach them differently?

**SS** The drawings are a very freeing process, even though I am concentrating on the photograph. When I go to make the actual painting, I'll look through all of the drawings and I'll pick one that is almost compositionally correct to what I want to make bigger.

**JF** Like a study.

**SS** Yes. I'll make around 20 drawings and I'll choose one to move forward with. But in the other drawings there will be ideas that might eventually come into the painting.

**JF** Do the drawings stand on their own or are they just a part of making paintings?

**SS** The drawings are separate pieces, but they also play off each other. When they're all lined up they're almost like a kind of classical music chord, with different expressive lines and energy. They work alone, they work as a set, and they work to help me move into the painting.

**JF** Are the drawings closer to caricatures or realistic portraiture, or somewhere in between?

**SS** Often the heads are bigger than the bodies, the noses are quite profound, the eyes are a little cartoonish—that's very distinct to my style. It allows me, when I go into the paintings, to let them be in their own fantasy worlds.

**HB** It's also how you perceive their personalities. Even the second or third heads that you add are like ghost features.

**JF** I'm curious why you use images of people you don't really know very well. Do you ever take photographs of your family or your friends?

**SS** Usually I don't paint family or friends. I don't know the people in my paintings on an emotional level. It would otherwise become so loaded that it would stunt the process for me of just going into the painting as a painting.

**JF** The drawings are loose, like armatures that haven't been filled in yet, whereas the paintings have a very intense amount

of detail. It's nice to see them together, playing off each other.

**SS** I need to have both dynamics in my practice and my work, the intensity and the looseness. I only draw to classical music. It's meditative.

**HB** What do you listen to when you paint?

**SS** Hip-hop or funk or '80s music. When you look at the paintings they're much more energized. But within the paintings there are drawn parts. In *Shiva*, the whole bottom is open drawing. I'm interested in drawing and color. If I just made these drawings, I could color them in, but the paintings allow me to use color in another way.

**JF** The more you make drawings, they naturally take on a life of their own. They become a separate body of work, even if initially they're just helping you work through painting ideas or figure out composition.

**HB** The more drawings you do, the less it's about the person in the photograph. They're not portraits anymore. It's just about different compositions; and you can add or subtract things from it.

**SS** It's never really about the person; it's more about how I'm connecting to them as images. Like the smiling woman in *Jean*: She would wear these incredibly colorful outfits on the beach, and this purple glittery visor. I didn't know 'Jean' at all;

I just knew that she would make a punchy, colorful painting. When I start drawing they become whatever I want them to become. What's interesting is that in the paintings they become more singular. I come home with many photographs and I choose one, then take that *one* photograph, make many drawings, and pick one drawing to make one painting. The process goes between multiple space and minimal space.

**HB** There's so much in the drawings that instead of going from drawing to painting, you could be going from painting to drawing.

**SS** Yes, and they can become different characters. In one drawing of Gene, he has no beard; and looks white. In another drawing he looks Indian.

**HB** The teeth are very prominent in all of them. They all seem to be irregular.

**SS** Yes. I paint the skin as a very fractured surface, but the teeth are very flat. I get to the teeth and they'll either be all white, or I'll take something out of the tooth, or the gums will be green. In the painting of Shiva he has two teeth on the bottom and then the two teeth beside these are little gods, Inca gods.

**JF** How did you introduce imagery like that? Is it purely intuitive or is there a conceptual idea behind your references to other religions, animals and mythology?

**SS** One of the first paintings to which I added something was *The Dreamer*, 2008. It's this tough Italian guy from New Jersey who kept showing me pictures of his little dog. I took photographs of him lying in the water as if he was dead. In the painting he's lying in the center, and on either side there are smaller versions of him merged with dog heads. I found it ironic that he's a gangster type guy, but he was in love with his tiny Shih Tzu. On the left there's a tiger or a dog coming out of the water.

**JF** So it's biographical.

**SS** Sometimes it's about my biography. I photographed the boy Shiva in Tulum in Mexico. We were looking at these beautiful Mayan white-stone ruins with decrepit gods on them. I kept trying to take pictures of it, and as we were leaving, I bought a book of Incan, Aztec, and Mayan gods. When I decided to paint Shiva, I went back to that book. It's ironic because Shiva is the name of an East Indian god. He's this little Indian god on a beach in Mexico, which plays into a bigger theme in my work.

**JF** What's the bigger theme?

**SS** Pretense, internal struggle. To look behind the mask of our external image. We try to relax and be peaceful and in control like a god, but are we really in control and at peace?



*Dreamer*  
Oil on linen  
84" × 108"  
2008

On page 54:  
*The Lazy River*  
(drawing) 06  
10" × 14"  
2006

THE ROAD  
TO PARADISE  
IS PAVED  
WITH  
BATHING APES.  
SCHANDRA  
SINGH  
*GREG TATE*

Like dancing about architecture, painting about postcolonialism ain't easy. Globalization has made the West and its discontents stranger bedfellows than anyone could have imagined before the age of Al-Jazeera and Al-Queda websites (not to mention what is likely more yoga teachers in West Hollywood than in all of India). The democratization of global culture (and global profits) may still be a utopian dream but the democratization of telecommunications media (and explosives) have made for disquieting, asymmetrical cultural equalizers. Fitting the global status quo into paintings without being obviously political (or esthetically vulgar) or removing all room for self-revelation (for artist and viewer) is measurably difficult. It requires a wartime correspondent's gift for veiling empathy with distance and a lyric poet's ability to impose crafty metaphoric inventions on baldly exposed human frailties.

Since Caravaggio Western figurative painting has in part been about a search for suitably unsuitable subjects. Painting's voyage of representative descent from Gods to priests to royals to soldiers to rebels and outlaws to scullery maids, dancers, prostitutes to de Kooning's combustible harpies and Warhol's fluorescent 15 minute starlets may have finally found its transgressive subbasement in the 80s and 90s—the decades when Jenny Saville arrived with her hefty transsexual masses, Leon Golub with his state-police truncheoned brutes and Jean Michel Basquiat dared illuminate the equal-opportunity martyrdom awaiting black men, (iconic and common, 'high on the hog' and 'beneath the underdog') thanks to Capital's race, power and manhood games.

Basquiat famously said he put black people in his paintings because he couldn't find many of them in other people's work. Schandra Singh found her suitably unsuitable invisible Others for painterly privileging not on the mean streets of Gotham but in plain sight on family Caribbean holidays. While white people on vacation aren't the rarest of pictorial subjects, they cannot, in the world after 9/11, casually represent the picture of carefree repose and the good life they once did.

Leisure travel, airports, 'exotic' locales, luxury resorts—all once upon a time markers and signifiers of moneyed, invulnerable Westerners freely traipsing about a troubled, impoverished globe—had become even before 9/11 sites where the prospect of pain loomed as much as pleasure, places where one's unwinding and one's undoing might easily be conflated. Singh's paintings do not contain easy melodramatic narratives of ashen victims or swarthy vicimizers but the surface tension apparent in them—the recurring sight of turbulent waters awash with floaty, somnambulistic subjects—speaks volumes about the purgatorial limbo and fragile peace into which today's globetrotting Caucasian traveler must thrust his or herself.

Pair up 'terrorism' and 'tourism' for a Google search and you'll be presented with nearly 4 million citations and revelations. Among those revelations is that there now exists a small cottage industry of researchers devoted to plumbing the growing, profigate link between these binary subjects. Another is that since 9/11 Marriott hotels have six times been the preferred targets of anti-Western groups in Muslim countries, the latest in Pakistan only weeks ago.

By coincidence Singh in conversation reports that the majority of family vacations

at which she performed surveillance on her subjects occurred at Marriott Hotel timeshares in California, Hawaii and the Caribbean. None to date have been the site of any anti-American bombings, ('knock on wood' as the saying goes) but the work's inaudible and undetectable echo of these facts is certainly spooky intel to ponder as you ogle the sun roasted flesh of her marbled, corpuscular, bisected figures.

It's to the Greeks that we owe the concept of leisure and to the Industrial Victorians that we owe our present-day notions of weekends, time-off and summer vacations. An actual town in Belgium called Spa is responsible for originating the desire for the restorative Spa visit, a tradition that dates to the medieval period. The advent of Club Med brought the Spa experience within the price range of middle-middle class families, American and European, in the 1950s.

A self-described 'Eurasian blonde', Singh is the product of an Austrian mother and South Asian father. Though in most places she would easily read as a 'thin American white girl' her own internal version of ethnic Otherness and bi-raciality has ways of spilling into her life and work that defy ready categorization. This writer first met her at Yale in a seminar class I taught for a very small group of mostly African-American males disgruntled with their graduate programs discomfort with discussions of racial content. Singh's presence among this group as the only woman was anomalous but not uncomfortable for her or her fellow students of non-white description. Graduate art programs can make an outcast of just about anyone regardless of race, creed or color and

Yale provided the against-the-grain Singh with her own brand of marginality and outsidership. Without going into gory details, a well-provoked '\*!\*\$#' to the academy appears to have prompted the first series of paintings that define her current oeuvre. In the short period Singh has exhibited professionally, viewers and buyers who meet her have frequently told her that they were expecting the persona behind those paintings to belong to a large black man from the Caribbean. Were those same racializing appraisers of art and identity to visit the economically depressed, sketchy neighborhood in upstate New York where Singh lives and keeps her studio they'd likely be even more surprised by her anomalous phenotypicality.

All that said, Singh's repression of obvious racial identity politics remains remarkable on the one hand and obliquely obvious on the other. In the late 1960s there arose the term The Spook Who Sat By The Door, (after a novel by Sam Greenlee, about a black CIA agent who foments a street revolution with government intelligence, weapons and training). It became a colloquialism for black folk who used their invisibility and disregard by the white gaze to gaze at the gazers for ulterior motives. In Singh's case the purpose of her reverse-gaze isn't to terrorize tourists but to rethink them and remold them into the world's latest set of Others at risk. The presence of corpulent semi-nude white males in her work has also led some to unwittingly erase her many female subjects and thus see her work as a feminist commentary about white masculinity—a take on Singh doubly-ironic and comical since there is something feminizing and infantilizing about her raw portrayals of languid and lethargic men in trunks.



Schandra Singh wants to whisk us off to Paradise and then make us gasp in horror at the human-debris wealth has deposited and left on display in her cold-eyed memory theatre. Hers is not your mythical Bomber's Paradise, the one crammed with horny angelic virgins but one that comes equipped with the heavenly/earthly rewards promised by another faith entirely: heated swimming pools, artificial lagoons, gated estates, sunscreens, tanning lotions and festive floatation devices. Schandra Singh wants us to reimagine Paradise as a pro-capitalist people-zoo. A place to see real people of means pretending to enjoy themselves in dioramas and concentric cages of their own choosing. Schandra Singh also wants to re-image Paradise—as she frames a kind of Expressionist vacation slideshow where promises of escape-ism turn out to be Faustian lures for carnivalesque scenes of beached carnage. Hers is not a Paradise Lost but a Paradise Askew—a post-Katrina post-9/11 of the existential kind, where ghosts and zombie of Colonialisms Past litter poolsides wearing sketchy human hosts; precarious loungers poised between dreamings and drownings, tannings and targetings. A prismatic acrylic Paradise of beefy travelers and beatific natives thoughtlessly at play in the vestigial fields of spent Capital. A fearsome Paradise of turbulent and treacherous swimming pool waters and mean-spirited plastic pool-animals.

Unlike many of her more blithe contemporaries Singh's paintings unabashedly choose to have post-millennial tensions loudly echoing around their bones. This is no surprise once you find out that unlike most of us she didn't view the fall of the twin towers from the

safe haven of her living room television but from her apartment window directly across the street. Having been There on 9/11 and being of South Asian and Austrian parentage, Singh could have easily indulged the current market's passion for readymade identity-paintings. Sold us abstracted narratives of present-day terrors and Holocausts-past. What she compels us to look at instead is the queasy face of leisure and privilege on holiday, at the prospect of idyllic getaway landscapes become target zones, at manmade Paradises predictively encroached upon by a world with increasingly less tolerance (and less efficient security measures) for non-virtual havens. What she would also have us side-glance at in the process is the invisibility and wily agency of the ethnic, the servile and the exotic as they appear to her and to her brushed-in beholders of same temporarily self-marooned in Paradise.

Singh works form and color into a broken and incendiary mosaic of blood reds and blues—a color scheme that conjures up vitality and violence in an evocative blur of sensations and meanings. Lost paradises are usually meant to evoke lost innocence but our post-millennial age is one whose most pronounced feature is the global loss of faith in Western indomitability. In the tradition of Beckmann and Grosz, Singh has redirected the gaze of our Occidental tourist selves from contemplation of our navels to complicity in our own vulnerability to dissipation. In sight of Singh's obliquely satirical paintings we are made to see ourselves as groovy, laidback and slightly intoxicated bathing apes dissolving in acidic torrents of false security, anthropomorphic anxiety and delusional spectacles of excess, waste, wealth and gated invincibility.



*Schandra Singh's studio, 2014*

God Don't Like Ugly  
Published by Thomas Erben Gallery

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