

## Between the Back and the Loin

### Jenny Eden on Parham Ghalamdar's exhibition at Workplace Foundation

From the middle of the room, I can't see clearly. My eyes reverberate between drawings and paintings, intoxicated by my field of vision. Then drawings appear, smashing and crashing their way along two facing walls of the gallery space. On one wall, three befuddled horses canter comedically, circling the room like they're on the carousel from crazy town. Two have their heads sliced off, squirting from the cross section of their necks. All three discharge a molten-like substance from the space between their backs and their loins. On the opposite wall, two planes are hovering, snapped in half and exploding, overzealously. More paintings hang on the remaining walls, and without carnage behind them they monitor the scene and meditate through the experience.

We are in different times to the exhibition's inauguration. Times exemplifying, even greater than intended, the absurdity of our lively existence. Through experience, memory and in painting the best picture I can, I am taking you with me, into the space.

It's impossible to see the paintings without seeing the drawings, and vice versa, but I suspect this is intentional – one cannot exist without the other. We may try to separate them through looking, but part of the 'exhibition experience' is coming to terms with their inseparability. Indeed, together they suggest different levels of consciousness, where the paintings are the conscious present and the drawings are the paintings' Id. Even then, we are speaking of something intertwined, conjoint, and reciprocally dependent.

Looking out stoically, paintings hang over the drawings, modest in size, resistant but empathic. Their positioning over the horses seems significant – they all follow the belly line – but their placement is illogical, and no meaning can be ascertained. This row of paintings is like a series of portals to other worlds, remote from the drawings, existing supernaturally. The paintings over the planes are definitely more connected, like they've curiously emerged from an explosion – a catastrophic event giving way to one lush painting after another – and suspended at a point when one raced ahead with the others following suit.

Born in Tehran in 1994, Parham Ghalamdar moved to the UK in 2015. His background as a graffiti artist, and his experiences of authoritarianism in Iran, have undoubtedly impacted his thinking and practice. Resistance to oppressive ideology is especially evident in the nature of the drawings, in their medium, stylistic quality and undeniable audacity. But across a wider practice, Ghalamdar draws on other influences too, including Western and Middle Eastern Art History, Soviet Realism, animation and traditional Persian miniatures.

Moving into the paintings, I am able to investigate these influences more fully, and better understand Ghalamdar's message. As I do this, the horses gallop away and the planes put themselves back together, and wait in the wings to be reinstated when I move back again.

Soon I know that I know nothing. The paintings know more. Familiar forms, colours and compositions are arranged on the picture plane – indeed, some come from the drawings – but I can't establish sense in their relationship. Nothing makes sense but everything is provided. The paintings live with passion and they do the "*most living*" (Camus, 1942, p59), embracing a freedom of depiction in all its wonderful forms.

Ghalamdar's paintings depict sagacious worlds, unique and profound, threaded together in community. Motifs, objects and scenarios appear and reappear, introduced and examined. They echo the frames of a storyboard, but this story is fractured, futile and dysfunctional – a story undone, an anti-narrative. Presumed innocence, implied through childlike forms and a sugar coated palette, is quashed when I spot a fire ball, a severed finger or another dismembered

aeroplane. Positive object relations are in jeopardy, the tragedy of the absurd is nigh and immediate aftermaths are in abundance. Everything is on the brink.

Ghalamdar watches animations, like Rick and Morty, Adventure Time and the new Trussell and Ward blockbuster, Midnight Gospel. Whilst stylistically naive, they reference complex themes, ironies, absurdities and impossibilities. They offer an outlet for the adult mind to bathe in the perversity of human existence – they are vehicles for laughing at our ridiculous hopes and inevitable struggles. Ghalamdar tells me their visual language is similar to traditional Persian Miniatures – the illustrations or paintings on paper from his homeland, depicting love scenes and meaningful allegories. Both employ lucid colour, black outlines and clear content – no shadows, no textures, just intense flatness. Both are streamlined message transporters, rigorously constructed and measured in their communication.

With equal attention, Ghalamdar's paintings are meticulously rendered. Take 'Spectre', for example, with its a smooth painted surface, clean painted edges and gorgeous transitions from dark to light. Here, the head is shaped by dynamic tonal variations, the hat is consistently structured and well-rounded, and the turquoise-green goo-threads are so strikingly executed they could drop off the painting at any moment.

The compositional elements of this painting have also been scrutinised. A desolate, glitch-free landscape is host to a carefully staged scenario, placed to the right with space to the left for (our) contemplation. This area is where the head's empty eyes look out on, the cowboy hat looks across at, and the heart-ear-trumpet looks down on. Thus, the objects direct us to an unoccupied portion of the painting, and into irrational contemplation – who's head is this? Is it dead? Is the heart thing an ear trumpet in the shape of a heart? Does it belong to the head or is it alien to it? That cowboy hat isn't propped, it's levitating! Where is this? – and doubled back on ourselves, we enter self-analysis fraught with our own idiosyncratic questions and insecurities.

By organising and executing these paintings with such rigour, Ghalamdar is attempting to put things into order and make sense of the world around him. What is pictured, however, is the opposite – non-sense, dis-order, sur-real. To this end, the paintings exist in the oscillating tension between two opposing poles, committed to an *"impossible possibility"* (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, p5). In a Kierkegaardian sense, they live within a state of despair, within a sickness, one chosen and to some degree desired (Kierkegaard, 1849). Indeed, for artists, tensions like these make paintings; as Albert Camus put it, *"what seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support"* (Camus, 1942, p52). Tensions also draw you into a painting and hold your attention, just like animated cartoons can for hours, days or weeks.

But animations are quick, instantaneous things, and paintings, like Ghalamdar's, are not. Exploring this difference, Lydia Lee says the laboriousness of figurative painting is in stark contrast to our immediate culture of *"taking, editing and sharing images"* (Lee, 2020, p12). Partially deriving from this culture, the subject matter in Ghalamdar's paintings *is* taken, edited and shared – as well as invented – *and* it is laborious and slow. Here lies another paradox; the digital, instantaneous characteristics of Ghalamdar's painted content is at odds with being slowed right down during the painting process.

Translating digitally animated content, illustrations and posters into paintings as Ghalamdar does, provides an alternative to technology and a *"cultural-counter tendency [...] against the acceleration of everyday life"* (Herbert, M. 2019, p7). Many other contemporary painters are involved in this too – each in their own ways – to remind us of the presence of painting, and to rationalise the current pace of life (Ibid.). Indeed, this exhibition seeks to negotiate with circumstances of living, operating as a metaphor for today – the wall drawings embody rampant thoughts pinging about on social media and the paintings make us turn our phones off and simply *be* for a bit.

In today's arena of life, it is not surprising we question if our thoughts are really our own. But getting up close to the work in this exhibition, thinking is arrested, narrowed and channeled, and

the absurd is reconciled. We also witness the hand that made the thing, and we are rewarded. The painted surface reveals itself and we can breathe a sigh of relief that this painting is actually just as real as us.

Written by Jenny Eden  
Photographs by John McKenzie

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