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SHAILEE MEHTA
THE WILD FEMININE

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Shailee Mehta is a Goa-based artist whose work engages in an ongoing dialogue between the personal and the political, merging her personal history with broader themes of history, mythology, and contemporary society. Central to her work is the exploration of figuration, particularly focused on the representation of coloured female bodies, with an inherent

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In anticipation of her upcoming solo exhibition, *Mudbath*, opening on 22nd June at indigo+madder in London, Shailee Mehta delves into the evolution of her practice and the profound influence of her recent return to India, specifically Goa, on her latest paintings and drawings.

In this conversation, the artist discusses the convergence of the urban and nature in her surroundings, cycles of life and death, feeding stray dogs, the dichotomous symbolism of the feminine, rituals, her personal index of symbols (from chairs to mangrove trees), human-animal hybrids, the self and the shadow self, and the power and vulnerability of the female gaze.

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Hi Shailee, you're speaking to us from Goa, where you've recently moved after studying and living in London. Has this new environment shaped the way you work, or what you're making in any way?

Absolutely! In many ways, the move to Goa came from an urge to push my own boundaries as a painter. With this particular body of work, I collected a lot of source photos from my neighbourhood, which is a wonderfully strange convergence of the urban and the wild. I started to take photographs on my regular walks around the area— the expanses of land that have been taken over by wild grass, the everyday rituals of feeding the stray dogs, and even the atmosphere

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rebirth.

It's really exciting that you're opening your upcoming solo show at indigo+madder in June. You've titled it *Mudbath* - could you talk to me a little about the significance of this title?

Mudbath was the title of the first painting I made for the show (now titled Stained), and then went on to become the title of the exhibition due to its resonance with the other pieces that followed. It stemmed from my inquiry into the malleability of mud as an element and rituals we develop in connection to nature. Gradually, it expanded to encompass the language of being unkempt, unclean, tainted, and dirty—terms often used to oppress women and impose societal expectations of what womanhood should or should not resemble. The depiction of mud in these paintings subverts the notions of purity and sterility that femininity is often subjected to.

Throughout your work, there is a consistent focus on portraying female figures. Is there a specific significance behind this?

It is the subject matter that I am most familiar with and want to continue to create space for. The need to paint a female figure came from a very personal and instinctive place. It stems from my awareness of the body I inhabit and the space it occupies, and the influential gazes that mould its identity. It also extends beyond the personal realm as I've noticed a scarcity of visual representations of women embodying states of leisure, strength, vulnerability, togetherness, and, most importantly, wildness.

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curious to hear why you choose to depict your figures in this way?

This theatrical quality in my painting and the neutral, contemplative facial expressions are largely informed by my interest in Mughal, Pahari and Kalighat paintings. Their manipulation of scale, perspective and the linearity of time has continued to shape my understanding of the painting surface. This is also why, at times, it feels as if the same figure has moved across the image, such as in *The Myth of Your Return*.

I also feel it helps me explore how painting can be used to portray the embodiment of otherness through play or role-play. For example with *Twin(e)*, the unnatural and contorted positions of the women stacked onto each other stretches the boundaries of the human body, forming a pair of animalistic figures.

When you are first making your images, how do you arrive at your compositions?

It always starts with a drawing, or multiple drawings coming together. These include drawings of the body in certain positions that I vividly recall, places I have been to that have left an impression or imagined mythologies where animals and women are engaged in a dialogue.

Stray is an oddity within this process as it did not start with a sketch but a small piece of writing. It was interesting to use words as a starting point, removing the visual cues to completely focus on the narrative as an experiment. Stray dogs occupy an intriguing liminal space in urban cities, where they continue to negotiate between their wildness and their sense of belonging to households. Feeding them everyday feels like a ritual now, and I think the painting is an attempt to capture this ritual of care and intimate encounter with their territory.

I've noticed that there's been a recent shift in your compositions - whereas before, your paintings focused on individuals, now they depict figures in pairs or in groups, and feel more expansive. What instigated this?

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and movement. Several natural elements that I have painted, for example the mangroves, are directly taken from automatic drawings of landscapes in my sketchbook. The reconciliation of this process with the medium of painting is where the composition emerges from.

The pairs came into the imagery quite unintentionally, but in hindsight I see them as a way to comprehend notions of the self and the shadow self. The multiplicity of selfhood also comes through in the intertwined groups I depict, where the pile-like form seems to emerge from their surroundings. This portrayal rejects the binary nature of their existence and proposes a co-existence of various identities.

Your work has developed in other ways too - whereas previously, you placed your figures indoors, they now find themselves set against nature. Did you intend to communicate something in particular by bringing these groups of females out of their domestic settings and into the natural world?

I particularly wanted to bring forth the role that both women and nature play as caregivers, while also highlighting their exploitation for the same qualities we idolise them for. On one hand they continue to be put on a pedestal as deities, goddesses and Mother Nature, and on the other hand their role in the mundane and in the domestic setting is that of conformity rather than of agency.

Works like *Her promise*, *Strange*, *In The Studio* and *The Case for Sita(phal)* are creating direct associations between feminine desire and un-romanticising the natural, portraying it with fragility, gentleness but also something ungraspable.

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both as companions to the female figures, as well as merging with them to create hybrid creatures. How do these two separate ways of incorporating the animal form into the images contribute to the works' meaning?

They both go hand in hand. For example, I feel *Stray* and *Strange* are partner works where one is the beginning and the other is the conclusion (the viewer can choose which is which). Companion animals create a sense of solidarity with the women, and are an embodiment of unadulterated love which are inserted in the narrative as a symbol of instinct and freedom. When this idea is mirrored into storytelling and mythology, it drives me to produce the hybridity you ask about. This is also where notions of beauty and ugliness are broken down, the taboos are exaggerated and the body is pushed into the realms of absurdity.

In the 16 paintings which you've made for this upcoming show, there are symbols that recur time over; the chair, or the mangrove tree are two that stick out to me in particular. I'm curious to know what these symbols signify for you personally?

These symbols, as I briefly mentioned previously, have helped me in creating a personal index that I can employ in my imagery. The chair, for me, is a signifier of urbanity, domesticity and rest whereas the mangrove tree has become a subject of interest because of the way it reproduces. It speaks to me of the uncontrollable ways in which nature survives, expands and cultivates itself. Additionally what drew me to paint mangroves is the striking contrast between their fleshy red interior beneath the brown bark, making them appear quite corporeal when combined with their tentacle-like structure.

And finally, what are some of the key themes or ideas that you hope viewers will take away from this body of work?

I do hope that the work speaks to the audience of the same power and vulnerability that I have felt, when I have found femininity outside the restraints of an imposed sanctity. I have been in active engagement with painting and

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Words
Vanessa Murrell



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Art July 21, 2023

Anton Munar

The art dies with the artist

Peres Projects presents "The Garden Dies with the Gardener," his debut solo exhibition with the gallery and his first one in Berlin, open until September 2.



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Entering the enigmatic dreamscape

The artist discusses her evocative and transformative multimedia interpretations of Feminist space operas, cute manga-style imagery, and mythology.



Art July 20, 2023

Almendra Bertoni

A vibrant debut

A mix of old and new, "Pray For Me" is her solo debut in NYC. Incorporating religion, sex, and vibrancy, Bertoni's work presents true artistry.

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Art July 13, 2023

Kristen Giorgi

Sun on your skin

The Atlanta-based abstract impressionist and figurate painter opens up to us about her latest exhibition and creative process.



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INTERVIEW

“The sky is never the same and that admiration for this drives me” the artist tells us as we chat to her about her work and the magic of Prussian Blue.



Art July 06, 2023

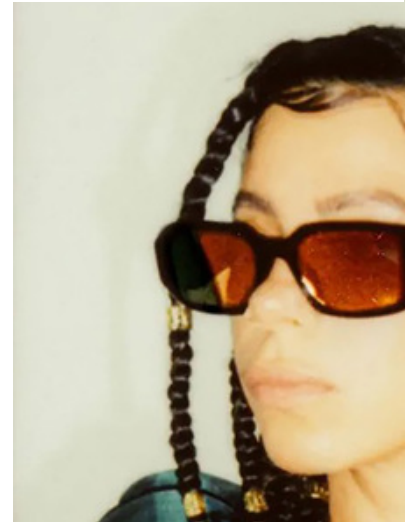
Cere Anatomiche

The ecstasy of dissection

Until July 17, David Cronenberg and La Specola unite in a mesmerising fusion of art, science, and cinema at Fondazione Prada’s groundbreaking exhibition.

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Photography July 19, 20

Luis Alberto Rodrig
Choreographing stillness
From dancer to photographe
book "O", where he displays

Music July 19, 2023

Sam Austins
A cordial invite to feast
The LA based, Detroit born a
romantic song that exists in tl

Fashion July 19, 2023

Berlin Fashion Wee
High-impact street style
Mateo Navarro captures with
Week, whose collections we'l