

The Emperor's New Clothes

Abir Karmakar bares all at his latest show in London, but Deirdre King isn't about to be seduced.

A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF ABIR KARMAKAR'S *IN THE OLD FASHIONED WAY*, an exhibition of 13 oil-on-canvas works, was its overwhelmingly orange palette. To be sure, one painting did have a grey background, and in another, there were hints of other colours. But mostly, orange engulfed everything.

Arranged over two floors at Aicon Gallery, London, from 26th October to 17th November, Karmakar felt the need to turn the heat up for this display: he must have chosen the colour for its warmth. Unlike in his earlier paintings, the figures in these self-portraits were naked. Karmakar confronted social taboos against nudity, which obstruct our connection with our bodies. This was coupled with Karmakar's ongoing exploration of masculine sexual identity through feminised self-portraits, which could be interpreted as a representation of the feminine side of the male psyche. Whereas previously, Karmakar 'performed' female identity by depicting himself as both man and woman in the same scene or as dressed in drag, in these works, he did so by painting himself with his genitals tucked between his legs.

Despite the hot palette and subject, these paintings felt passionless, partly due to the figures' detachment from their surroundings and partly due to the static compositions – Karmakar's figures, which stared out at the viewer, were almost exclusively placed in the central foreground. Detached figures also appeared in Karmakar's 2005 exhibition, *From My Photo Album*, but images in his 2006 show, *Interiors*, showed more active narrative content and interaction between figures and their



Abir Karmakar. *In the Old Fashioned Way 1* (Part of a Diptych). Oil on canvas. 48" x 72". 2006.

surroundings. The self-portraits in this show evinced no interest in their environments; the figures conveyed a sense of isolation.

The settings of Karmakar's paintings referenced aspirational middle-class domestic interiors. However, in comparison to the more amply furnished interiors we have seen in his work before, the trappings here were relatively sparse. They overdosed on sensuality, with their suggestions of sleazy love-nests. A shag-pile rug (*In the Old Fashioned Way 1*), a velvet couch (*In the Old Fashioned Way 5*), and a satin-sheeted bed (*In the Old Fashioned Way 8*), were all bathed in orange light, which conjured up connotations of low-lit dives and bordellos.

Karmakar has expressed a desire to move away from photo-realism towards a textured painterliness. The sensuous materials in his work, the proffered physicality of the body depicted, suggested a move towards greater tactility. However, there seemed to be still some way for Karmakar to go before he achieved success with this shift.

Karmakar's work can be positioned within the contemporary critiques of gender developed by such thinkers as Judith Butler, Jacqueline Rose, and Jacques Lacan, all of whom argue that gender is not necessarily the same as genital sexuality and biological difference, but is socially and linguistically constructed. As such, gender can be deconstructed and re-constructed. While in his previous works, Karmakar used cross-dressing to mark his reconstruction of gender and sexuality, in these recent paintings, his genitals (draped, tucked, and otherwise



Abir Karmakar. *In the Old Fashioned Way 5*. Oil on canvas, 72" x 107", 2007.



Abir Karmakar. *In the Old Fashioned Way 7*. Oil on canvas, 48" x 72", 2007.

arranged) were shown to be as plastic and friable as outlandish costumes.

Karmakar's deconstruction of polarised gender definitions foregrounded ambiguity within a broadly described sexuality. His self-portraits made no attempt to erase either maleness or femaleness, but like transvestism – insinuated by the manipulated genitals and drag outfits in his paintings – maintained ambiguity, presenting the artist as a nuanced man-as-woman. Aware of the anxiety that the leakage between established boundaries induces, Karmakar stated that he aimed to paint psychological fear-things which people usually don't want to confront, "a certain state where demarcation between right and wrong blurs." This latest work successfully staged ambiguity and anxiety as lived realities. From a distance, the canvases seemed to depict slightly corpulent women, but with something unsettling about them. The uncertainty was dispelled when you saw them at close quarters – they made viewers confront a revised notion of sexuality.

However, while Karmakar's latest work was interesting and complex, its multifaceted issues were addressed somewhat naively and unevenly. Central to this was his problematic depiction of the feminine. The woman – albeit appearing as an aspect of Karmakar's own sexuality – was presented as a sexual object for the viewer. *In the Old Fashioned Way 6*, she lay spread-eagled face upwards; *In the Old Fashioned Way 8*, she thrust her pelvis forward; she dropped her panties in *In the Old Fashioned Way 3*, and bent over to present the viewer with her rear

twice in the diptych, *In the Old Fashioned Way 1*. Karmakar's representation of his feminine side through this negative portrayal, showed no hint of critical distance and made his work a conduit for values as polarising and oppressive as those he sought to subvert.

The well-established critique of this sort of representation of women was outlined by John Berger in the 1970s – and continues to evolve through gender and feminist theory. Given that Karmakar's conceptual territory is sexual identity, his apparent ignorance in this area represents a lacuna in his work. This empties out much of its subversive force, since in the paintings, the feminine was still pitted against an opposing masculine – external polarities that seemed to have been simplistically internalised.

The axis on which this failure turned was 'the gaze'. Karmakar's self-portraits did not avert their eyes demurely, as the majority of portraits of sexually objectified women do. Although there were half-raised, coy glances (for example, *In the Old Fashioned Way 2, 3, 5, and 7*), by and large, the gaze of the protagonist was direct. Occasionally, s/he even looked down on the viewer from above (*In the Old Fashioned Way 2*). However, Karmakar's was not the famously bold gaze that Manet's *Olympia* turned on the viewer. *Olympia* remained subservient to the male viewer – and painter – while the impassive stare of Karmakar's feminised body was that of the male artist, surveying himself in the act of taking the preparatory photograph. For Karmakar, masculine identity seemed to put on offer the feminine Other, which was prostituted in



these paintings as a spectacle to be sexually consumed by the male viewer. Here, the male gaze sought out its own object of desire, colluding with the viewer: "Touch me, take this body", it seemed to say, "as a man touches a whore."

The disjunction between the nature of the masculine gaze and the presence of the feminine body as spectacle prevented the viewer from a simple identification with the feminine. In the diptych, *In the Old Fashioned Way 1*, the painted figure thrust his bottom towards us, the gesture framing sexual invitation and mock-aggression.

Considering the entanglement of values in Karmakar's recent work, the show's title read as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of established sexual relationships only superficially dressed up as subversion. Same old..., same old... or, to put it another way, a case of the Emperor's new clothes.

Abir Karmakar. *In the Old Fashioned Way 2.* Oil on canvas. 89" x 72". 2007. ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND AICON GALLERY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY GOSWIN SCHWENDINGER.