

Mequitta Ahuja

Ma

Aicon Gallery Exhibition: December 17, 2020 – January 23, 2021

Press Preview & V.I.P Reception: Saturday December 19, 1:00pm – 7:00pm

35 Great Jones St, New York NY 10012



Mequitta Ahuja, *Merge*, 2020
Oil on polyester drafting film, 36 x 36 in.

We are delighted to present ***Ma***, Aicon Art's debut solo exhibition of US-based figurative painter **Mequitta Ahuja**.

Ahuja writes '*I make paintings by scraping away paint, figuring something new out of loss. What's left behind, that's the painting.*' Comprised of twenty oil sketches and five large paintings, this exhibition brings together a timely and deeply personal body of work all made within the past fifteen months—the final months and days of her mother Sonja Ahuja's life. Ahuja uses drawing to mourn. Giving material embodiment to her experience of urgency and loss, the artist devised her new, subtractive process of applying layers of paint to the surface and quickly pushing and scraping paint away to reveal bodies, entangled and often in embrace. As source material, the artist revisited a series of photographic studies she made as an art student of herself and her mother in which the two women, both naked, push and pull each other. Using her signature strategy of auto-referential figuration, the artist expanded her representational system to include the image and body of her mother Sonja.

The physicality of the artist's method is palpable—gesture, form, line and vivid color—the figures thrum with painterly immediacy. The artist writes '*The foundational contrast is thick and thin, opacity and transparency. Blue is the masstone and blue is the light. Blood-clot red is the masstone and pink is the light.*' In the emotionally charged works of *Ma*, loss, grief, healing, gratitude and connection hold equal court.

The works may be viewed through another lens, that of the art historical canon, which the artist continually interprets. In two of the five canvases on display, the artist combines her new subtractive method with her signature additive process. In *Portrait of Her Mother* and *Primary Love*, the artist depicts herself holding, and presenting to the viewer, pictures of her mother – a simple, evocative gesture. In these, the artist affirms the artistic queries she outlines in her essay for the exhibition catalogue, '*Is it possible to make a painting that frees you from a certain kind of writing? A painting that does the work of the artist's statement, so that the writing can do a different job?*' *Portrait of Her Mother* and *Primary Love* say yes.



Mequitta Ahuja, *Portrait of her mother*, 2020
Oil on canvas, 72 x 84 in.

In *Portrait of Her Mother*, the drawing held by the artist serves a double purpose—referencing a personal and an art historical past. As Dr. Jordan Amirkhani writes ‘*Thus style, in this series, is not just a continuation of the great paternal orders and aesthetic operations of painting, but a feminist critique of artistic development that takes the Mother as its most potent gravitational referent. This notion of style as familial and relational expands Ahuja’s investments in responding to historical painting and the generations of painters across the Western canon who fought righteously for the medium’s capacity to present likeness, build worlds, and articulate interiority.* This bridging of the personal and autobiographical with the material and art historical context of painting is one that Ahuja has long investigated. Ahuja’s work is the fabric of an intersectional awareness that speaks using myriad painting idioms to identity in the plural.

The timeliness of this body of work is also two-fold. The artist’s mother died on May 3, 2020, and the coronavirus pandemic continues to kill at alarming rates. With *Ma*, Ahuja offers a space for reflection during a time of individual and collective loss. In the words of Leila Grothe, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art, ‘*Ahuja collapses time through generations and art historical eras. There is comfort in this recurrent understanding of time. It follows circumstance rather than calendar. Mother (Ma) reminds us that we are so incredibly special because we care and are cared for, but really this rhythm of humankind is universal.*’

Mequitta Ahuja (b.1976), based in Baltimore, MD and Weston, CT, is contemporary figurative painter with African American and Indian American roots. Ahuja aims to hold and to embody in her work both politics of identity as well as the function of self-portraiture exemplified by Poussin’s 1650 self-portrait: displaying authority within the history and discipline of painting. By merging past and present ideas of self-portraiture, Ahuja’s work destabilizes the genre’s old and current conventions. In addition to Poussin, the predecessors informing her approach are Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, Kerry James Marshall and the author Doris Lessing. Ahuja received her BA in 1998 from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, and her MFA in 2003 from the University of Illinois, Chicago. Ahuja’s works have been widely exhibited, including venues such as the Phillips Collection, the Brooklyn Museum, Studio Museum in Harlem, Saatchi Gallery, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Crystal Bridges, Baltimore Museum of Art and Grand Rapids Art Museum. “Whip-smart and languorous” is how the July 24, 2017 issue of the *New Yorker* described a work by the artist, then on view at the Asia Society Museum. Ahuja is a 2018 Guggenheim fellow.

Please contact Aicon Art (erica@aicongallery.com) for more information.