



Abir Karmakar

ABIR KARMAKAR

Uncanny Space

July 23 - September 12, 2015

Aicon Gallery, New York



**A WOMAN MUST HAVE MONEY AND A ROOM OF HER OWN
IF SHE IS TO WRITE FICTION.**

-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of Her Own*

Above: *View I*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

Cover: *Angle VI*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.

Back cover: *Door*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 84 x 36 in.

A Room Of His Own: Abir Karmakar's Paintings

by Donald Kuspit



In the Old Fashioned Way 6, 2007, Oil on canvas, 90 x 132 in.



In the Old Fashioned Way 4, 2007, Oil on canvas, 89 x 72 in.

The ancient Greek myth tells us that Narcissus was so completely in love with himself—so completely absorbed in his appearance—that he rejected the male and female lovers who were attracted to him because of his beauty.

Since 2007 Abir Karmakar has been painting pictures of his bedroom, and sometimes also the small bathroom adjoining it, both probably in the apartment in which he lives. In the first of the thirteen works that constitute the provocative series he calls *In The Old Fashioned Way*, 2007 he stands in his bedroom, completely naked, and facing away from us, so that his buttocks are in our face, as though inviting us to copulate with him. This voyeuristic, perversely confrontational work sets the tone of the entire series: again and again we see Karmakar posing and prancing in front of us, sometimes threatening to break through the

picture plane and fall in our laps, sometimes narcissistically absorbed in his beautiful body, lost in self-appreciation in the privacy of his bedroom, the inner sanctum which ironically becomes his showcase. Crucially, his penis is invisible, usually tucked away between his legs, sometimes hidden behind a bit of cloth, unsuccessfully suggesting his modesty. He's as much a woman as a man, he seems to be suggesting, but it doesn't really matter which he is, because both a woman and a man can be mounted from behind—penetrated "the old fashioned way," as the title of the series implies, the man in his anus, the woman in her vagina and anus.

But as the six works in the *Scent of the Bed* series from 2011 make clear Karmakar doesn't need company: his own naked body, fitfully

moving on his bed, is all he needs to give himself pleasure. The ancient Greek myth tells us that Narcissus was so completely in love with himself—so completely absorbed in his appearance—that he rejected the male and female lovers who were attracted to him because of his beauty. His rejection of a loving relationship with another person sealed his fate: he drowned trying to embrace his reflection in a mirror of water. He disappeared into his own appearance, as it were, his name remembered in a flower, known for its intoxicating scent and beauty. "Narcotic," the Greek word for intoxicating, has been linked with the narcissus flower since antiquity.

In the twelve works of the 2011 *Scent* series Karmakar is nowhere in sight. No self-portrait, no self-display, but the provocation remains, in the form of the messy bedroom and bathroom. Disorder, verging on chaos, is everywhere, suggesting a certain disillusionment, a loss of self-love, a sort of emotional catastrophe, irrationality run riot. What we see are the messy, tattered remains of a life that has imploded—the abandoned stage-set of a suddenly tragic drama. The hero is dead, the litter of his ruined world all that signifies him. But, unexpectedly, indeed, seemingly miraculously, in Karmakar's new series of works, *Views and Angles*, all 2014, the disarray has disappeared: order, dignity, calm—sanity, reason, control—inform the space. Karmakar is still missing from the scene, but it is clearly he who has restored his environment, indeed, improved it, for it now has a decency that his earlier environments lacked. In *Scent I* the bed is an unmade mess, in *View I* it is neatly made. A bathrobe is on the hanger on the back of the door to the bathroom, clothes are neatly folded and carefully placed on a chair, rather than strewn around the room as they are in *Scent XI*. There are no odors in the room, whether from the bed or the clothing. There was something unsavory and unhealthy about Karmakar's early rooms, but the new ones are immaculate and impersonal. The difference between the dirty, shadowy, disorganized bathroom pictured in the seventh work in *The Old Fashioned Way* series and the clean, luminous, well-organized bathroom in *One View* makes the point clearly. It is as though the exhibitionistic Karmakar has become a control freak. There is a new sense of propriety in Karmakar's works, and with that a new sense of self-restraint, not to say inhibition—a revolutionary change in self-consciousness. And, strikingly, in *Angle VI*, there is a splendid dining room, with a grand old-fashioned table with six comfortable chairs around it, suggesting that Karmakar has become social, has company and friends, finally overcoming his provocative narcissism and sensual boldness. He is no longer trying to arouse us with his indecent posturing, but reassure us with his bourgeois surroundings. He seems to have grown up, matured beyond his immature narcissism, with its sexual overtures to the spectator. He now seems to invite us into his



Scent I, 2011, Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.



Scent II, 2011, Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.



Scent IV, 2011, Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.



View I, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

Gradually the patient gathers the failure of the facilitating environment into the area of his or her omnipotence which belongs to the state of dependence.

-D. W. Winnicott,
*Fear of Breakdown*¹

home, rather than tantalize and taunt us with his naked body. The relationship to the Other—the spectator—has clearly changed. The two bookcases, with their many books, suggest that he is no longer as self-absorbed as he once was, but is absorbed in reading about the world outside his apartment. No longer fascinated by his body, he seems to be cultivating his mind, as though in pursuit of knowledge rather than self-expression. No longer is the spectator the mirror in which Karmakar sees his own pleasure but a person with whom he can share a meal and talk about ideas. Clearly the narrative has taken an unexpected turn.

But that's a half-truth, for the dining room is shut off from the outside world, as the curtains that hide it suggest. They let the light through, but they hermetically seal the room.

The hint of blue in the light suggests the sky outside, but the light falls onto the brown wooden table, trapping it inside. The same curtain, with the same cold blue light of the outside, appears in a view of the bedroom, as a sort of afterthought to the warm light of the sun-like ceiling lamp in the room. Reflected on the ceiling, its light forms an aura of orange around a core of yellow, brightly glowing and concentrated, conveying a sense of emotional depth, compared to the diffuse, shallow light of the curtain, oddly alien and emotionally empty in the intimate space. Stripping away the body that is the focus of attention in *The Old Fashioned Way* series and the messiness that is the focus of attention in the *Scent* series, the *Views and Angles* series reveal, with uncompromised clarity,

the basic emotional meaning of Karmakar's room, whether a bedroom or a dining room: it is what the psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer calls a "claustrum" and simultaneously what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls an "area of omnipotence." That is, it is both a claustrophobic space and a facilitating environment—an environment in which one can grow and develop and finally become independent enough to venture into the outside world—that has failed one, leaving one trapped inside it, narcissistically stuck with oneself. The

table awaits the guests, but there are none. Indeed, there are no place settings, for no one is expected. Karmakar's presence fills and animates the rooms *In The Old Fashioned Way* pictures and Karmakar's clothes fill and enliven the rooms in the *Scent* pictures, but the rooms in the *Views and Angles* pictures are filled with unexciting inanimate objects. The rooms are dead spaces, spaces with no signs of a living being, spaces that seem like abandoned shelters, spaces whose only sign of life is the icy light that lingers in them, filtered through the drawn curtain, an opaque barrier between the lifeworld outside the transparent window and the stilled life inside the somber rooms.

One cannot look outside, only remain inside: we are in Karmakar's "infantile internal world," which is what the "claustrium" is, according to Meltzer. (It has many compartments, as Meltzer says, which is why Karmakar's apartment is a good symbol of it.) It is invariably a narcissistic world, a world in which what Freud called "the imperial infant" reigns, and as such an area where what Freud called "omnipotence of thought" operates. For Winnicott, it is a world in which one's "dependence" on "the facilitating environment" that is "the good enough mother" makes one feel omnipotent. Karmakar performs his omnipotence *In The Old Fashioned Way* pictures; he's emotionally an imperial infant—indeed, he's as charismatically naked as a new born baby. He's all self-excited body with little or no reflective mind. The bedroom is his facilitating environment—a sort of mothering womb, as the womb-like globe in which he encloses it suggests. But in the *Scent* pictures the bedroom is a wreck and he is nowhere to be found. The facilitating environment has failed him. Become a mess, it signals the emotional mess Karmakar has become. Collapsed into chaos, it signals his loss of omnipotence. In the *Views and Angles* works Karmakar has come to his adult senses, so to speak. The bedroom has an "integrity" it never before had; it is pristine, as though the bed had never been slept in. It is certainly not the bed on which his naked body is displayed in the *Scent of the Bed* pictures. It is unlikely that its clean sheets have the scent of his body. The dining room suggests that he has a more



Angle V, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



Angle VI, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.

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reflective, expansive view of himself, as I have argued. A new sense of ordinariness or everydayness informs all the rooms of Karmakar's apartment; there is nothing provocative about them, nothing unsettling. There is an air of expectation in them: what will happen in them now that Karmakar has made a sort of peace with himself, accepted the painful loss of his omnipotence? Is the disciplined neatness of the rooms a sign of unconscious resignation or is it a pause before a new in-your-face emotional adventure? In the *Views and Angles* works Karmakar extends what has been called Degas's keyhole vision into new emotional

territory. Degas peers through the keyhole into the private space of young women—fully clothed dancers in their rehearsal halls, half-dressed prostitutes at rest in their bedrooms, and, most intimate and personal of all, naked bathers in their bathrooms—as though to explore the strange territory of their bodies, conquer with his consciousness their femaleness, penetrate their Otherness with a sharp eye. There is something clinical and cold and debunking about Degas' voyeuristic realism: he enters a space usually forbidden to men in order to strip woman of her mystery, as though to suggest that what Goethe elevated as "the eternal feminine" was in banal fact mundane and ordinary. Degas called himself a realist, and his realism is at its most psychological in *The Bellelli Family*, 1859–1860 and *The Interior (Rape Scene)*, 1868–1869.

The rooms in these pictures speak directly to the rooms in Karmakar's *Views and Angles*: completely closed off from the outside world, Degas' rooms are also claustriums. But Karmakar's psychological realism is profounder than Degas' psychological realism: Degas' rooms symbolize an adult's internal world, as the unhappy adults in conflict in them imply, while Karmakar's rooms symbolize an unhappy infant's internal world, as their emptiness implies. There's no warmth in them—no feeling of empathy. The psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut famously argued that if the mother has no empathy for her infant he or she feels

empty. "Empathy, the expansion of the self to include the other, constitutes a powerful psychological bond between individuals." It "is a psychological nutriment without which human life...could not be sustained." Describing what he called the "mirror transference," Kohut speaks of the "maternal responses of reflecting, echoing, approval, confirmation, and admiration of the greatness and perfection of the grandiose self"² of the "imperial infant" (Freud) or the "omnipotent infant" (Winnicott). There is no psychological nutriment in Karmakar's rooms, no expansion of the self to include the other, which is why they are filled with dead objects, and why no human beings sit together at the dining room. There is an air of unfulfilled life in Karmakar's empty rooms. There is nothing to lure us into them, as his body once did, nor are there any intimate traces of him, such as his piles of clothing, but rather a sterile quietism. We could be in a monk's cell in a modern cloister. I suggest that the globe that contains the rooms is the mind's all-knowing eyeball. It is a sort of crystal ball in which the inner meaning of the rooms is made ironically clear by the subtle distortion of their appearance. External reality is transformed into inner reality by the imaginative tricks of the reflective eye. It is also the camera's eye, the neutral eye of a detached consciousness rather than the self-conscious—not to say self-indulgent—eye that created the earlier paintings. Seen from different angles, and thus in different views, the room becomes an uncanny space, all the more so because there is nobody in it, suggesting a peculiar out-of-body experience. His body no longer inside the room, Karmakar surveys it from the outside, sometimes looking at it close-up, sometimes from a distance, a god looking at the world he has created for himself from different perspectives, as though sizing it up. It seems to be waiting for him to enter it but he never does. Karmakar's room is a profoundly private space, even an oddly sacred space: dare one say it is a temple he spiritually inhabits by way of his all-seeing eye? The globular camera's eye informs the room—the walls of the room curve they way it does—the way spirit is said to inform matter, indeed, space. The new paintings are a meditation on the artist's eye, indirectly calling attention to it however much it is directed to the artist's space, thus completing the narcissistic circle of his art. Whether inside



Sun II, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.



Sun III, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.

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or outside his room, Karmakar is self-absorbed, focused on himself, an assertion of individuality and "difference" that can be read as a kind of defense against the indifferent world, not to say mass society, hidden behind the drawn curtains in his rooms, outside their insular space and art. He holds his own against society by way of his asocial, if not anti-social, art. It is one of the valuable uses of high art.

We are looking at a mirage—an illusion that seems to be declaring that it is an illusion. Contained and isolated in the globe, the rooms in *Views and Angles* create the illusion of self-sufficiency but no one—no self—is in them. Seen from different angles, the objects in the rooms sometimes seem far, sometimes near and impinging, and the rooms sometimes seem vast, sometimes small and confining. The changing, destabilizing perspective makes the space seem indeterminate; the objects in it may be fixed, but it seems unfixed, indeed, dizzying. No longer anchored in the objects, which move away from us and become smaller or move closer to us and become larger, we seem to spin uncontrollably in space. It is as though Karmakar has lost his mooring in space, lost his grip on it, so that it becomes uncanny and slippery, making it hard to find one's footing in it, place oneself in it. In the early works we were half inside half outside Karmakar's rooms—with him in body or in spirit. Now we—the spectator—are completely outside the work, in the nowhere that is the outside. "The inhabitants...trapped in the claustrum, live in dread of being thrown out into 'nowhere'."³ Unable to see into Karmakar's constructed Room, which is shrouded in darkness—in effect the dark room in which his photographic pictures are developed—we are nowhere, but it is not clear where Karmakar is. Karmakar's *Views and Angles* are subtly tragic conceptual works ingeniously confirming what existential philosophers have called the unavoidable solitariness of human existence.

END NOTES

¹ D. W. Winnicott, *Fear of Breakdown*, *Psychoanalytic Explorations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 89

² Quoted in Paul H. Ornstein, *Introduction*, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut: 1950-1978* (New York: International Universities Press, 1978), I, 56-57

³ Silvia Fano Cassese, *Introduction to the Work of Donald Meltzer* (London: Karnac, 2002), 90

Views



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View VI, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



View V, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



View III, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



View IV, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



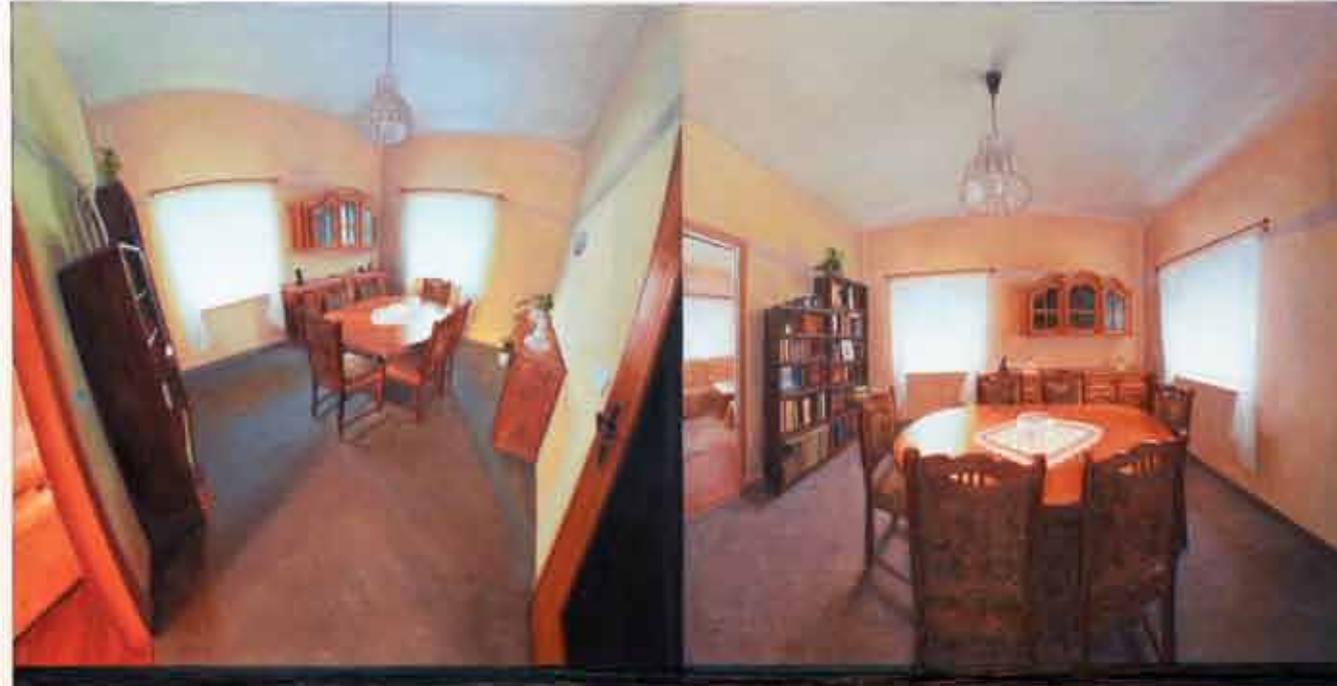
View II, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



View I, 2015, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



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Angles

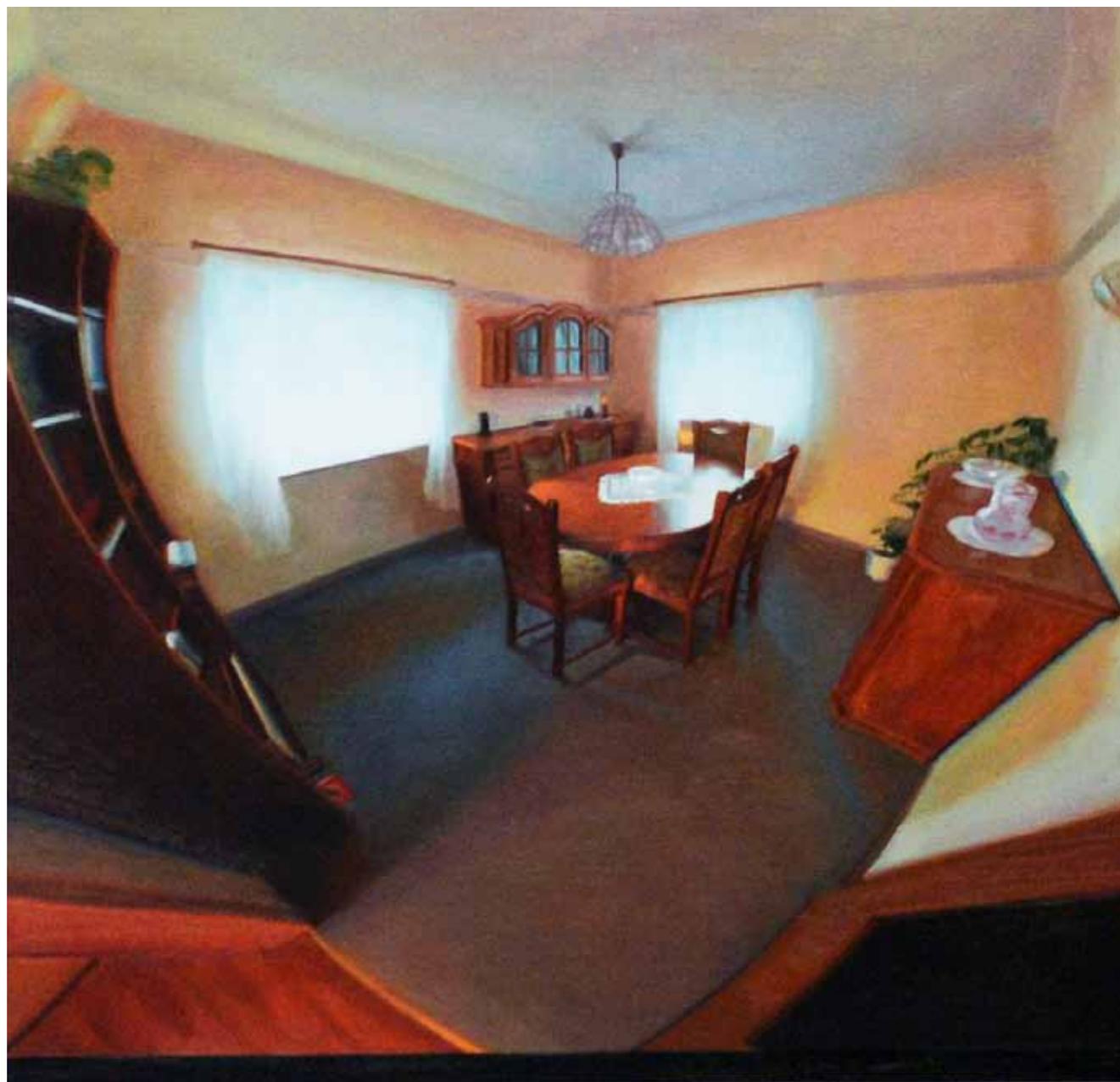
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Angle V, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



Angle VI, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



Four Angles (Detail View), 2015, Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.

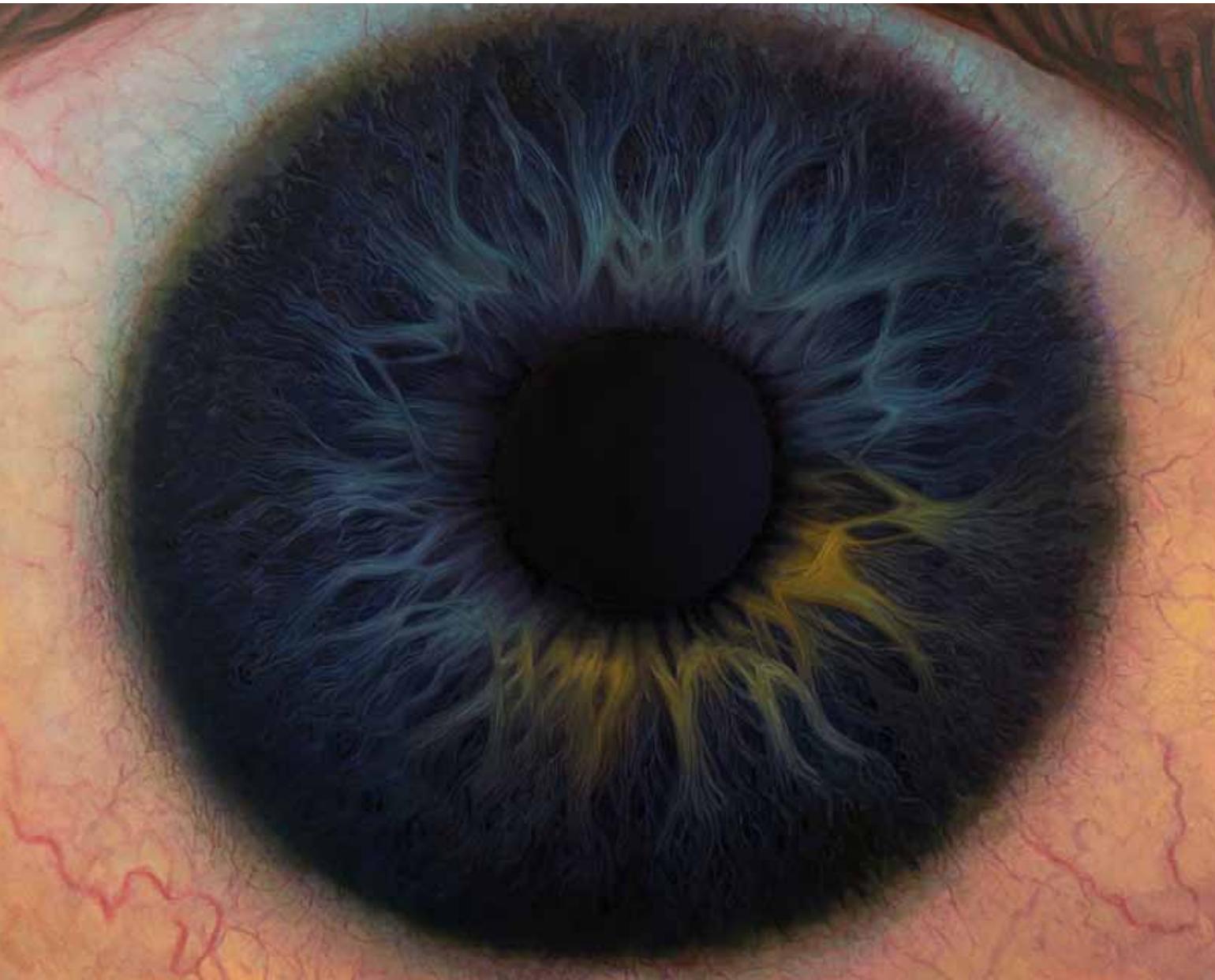


Four Angles (Detail View), 2015, Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.



Suns

Suns I - IV (Installation View), 2015, Aicon Gallery.



Sun I, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.

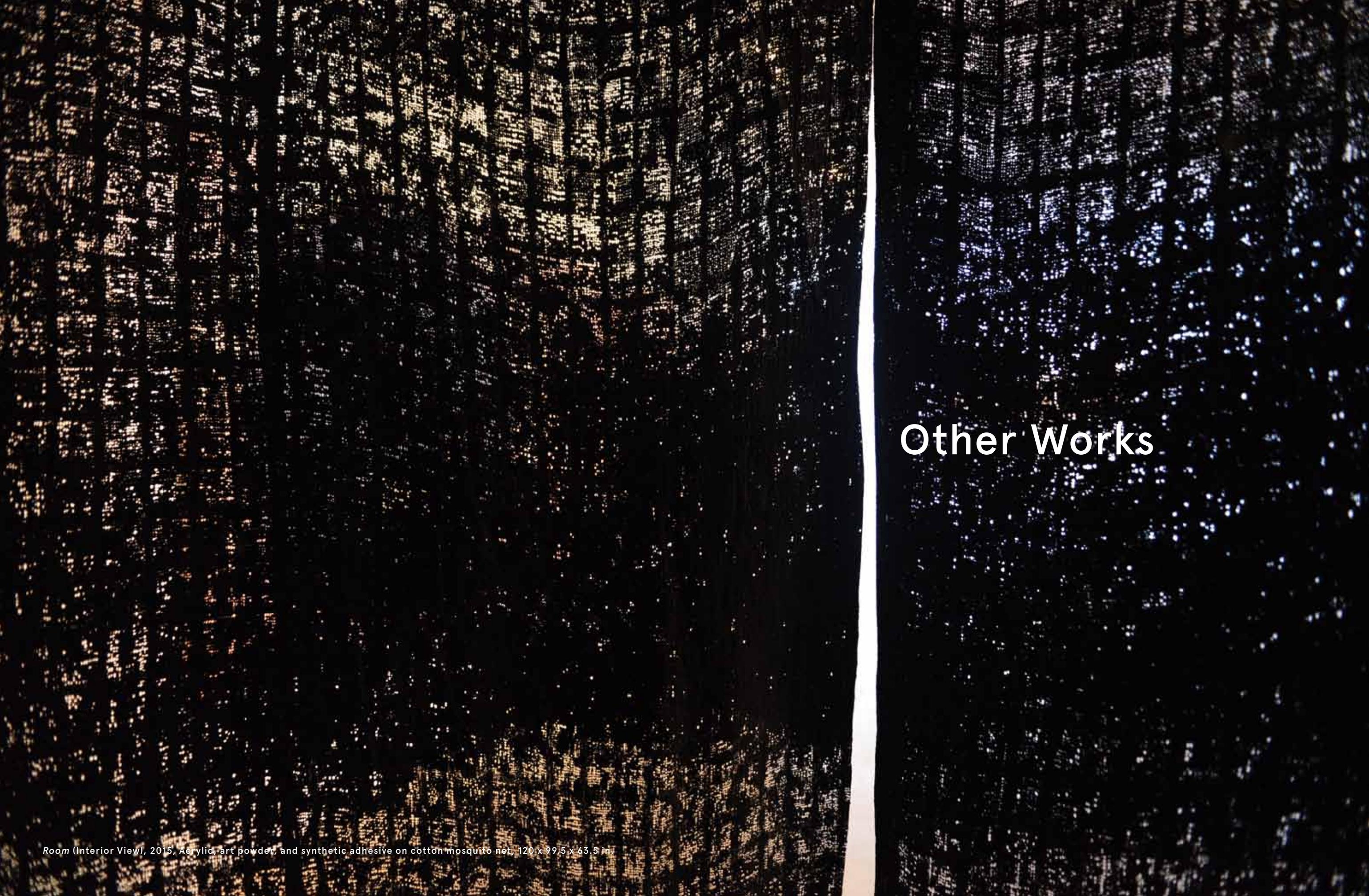


Sun II, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.



Sun III, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.

Sun IV, 2015, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 in.



Other Works

Room (Interior View), 2015, Acrylic, art powder, and synthetic adhesive on cotton mosquito net, 120 x 99.5 x 63.5 in.



Curtain (Installation View), 2015, Aicon Gallery.



Eclipse, 2015, Oil on wall clock, Dia: 15 in.



Curtain, 2015, Oil on un-stretched canvas, 121 x 141 in.



Door, 2015, Oil on canvas, 84 x 36 in.



Room, 2015, Acrylic, art powder, and synthetic adhesive on cotton mosquito net, 120 x 99.5 x 63.5 in.

Biography

ABIR KARMAKAR

Born 1977, in Siliguri, India.

Abir Karmakar's paintings and video works began by questioning the archetypical notions and static formalities of gender, sexuality, intimacy and the complex relationships a person can have, not just with others, but with oneself. He articulates, "I have never been interested in binaries – male/female, private/public, right/wrong, real/fiction, but the area that connects, blurs or overlaps them." Since these extensive figurative explorations, Karmakar has moved through a series of works in which humans are conspicuously absent, leaving the viewer with a disquieting sensation of having just missed what he was there to view in the first place and left staring down a memory which can never be reclaimed. His most recent works deal with issues of voyeurism, privacy and paranoia in a post-Edward Snowden world. A world where one man disrupted his life to give us a voyeur's vantage into institutionalized voyeurism by the state. But also a world where that vantage may be on the path to obsolescence, as people on the inner sides of keyholes throw open their doors and share their most private moments with the world in graphic detail, voluntarily and for no apparent gratification other their own desire to exhibit.

The artist lives and works in Baroda, India.

EDUCATION

2003 M.A. (Fine Art, Painting), Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda
2001 B.V.A. (Painting), Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012-13 *Room, Interrupted in Passage*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
Catalogue essay: Ranjit Hoskote
2011 *The Morning After*, Aicon Gallery, New York
2008 *Within the Walls*, Gallery Espace, New Delhi
Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
Catalogue essay: Gayatri Sinha
2007 *In The Old Fashioned Way*, Aicon Gallery, London
Catalogue essay: Donald Kuspit
2006 *Interiors*, Galerie Heike Curtze, Berlin
Catalogue essay: Kamala Kapoor
2005 *From my photo album*, The Museum Gallery, Mumbai
Catalogue essay: Kamala Kapoor

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014 *Mapmakers III: The Evolution of Contemporary South Asian Art*, Aicon Gallery, New York
Residual Remnant, curated by Rekha Rodwittiya, SITE art space, Baroda
My Sweet Lord, 1 x 1 Gallery, Dubai
Reviving the Retinal, curated by Kat Wyma, Gallery OED, Cochin, India
2013 *Touched by Bhupen*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
Peak Shift Effect, curated by Gayatri Sinha, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
2012 *Cynical Love: Life in the everyday*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Noida, India
Reconstructing (White) 3, The Loft, Mumbai. Catalogue essay: Rangit Hoskote
Four Projects, Gallery Ske, Bangalore

2011 *Adbhutam – Rasa in Indian Art*, CIMA Gallery, Kolkata and India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
Window in the Wall: India and China – Imaginary Conversations, curated by Gayatri Sinha and Gao Minglu, Pearl Lam Fine Art, Shanghai, China
Dolls, Sumukha Gallery, Bangalore and Chennai (in association with Art Chennai 2011), and Rob Dean Art, London
Of Gods and Goddesses, Cinema, Cricket The New Cultural Icons of India, curated by Arshiya Lokhandwala for RPG Academy of Art & Music, Mumbai
Yeh Image Mahaan – India meets Bharat, Lalit Kala AKAdemi, New Dehli, organized by CIMA Gallery, Kolkata
Pills, curated by Avni Doshi, Latitude 28, Delhi
5th Anniversary Exhibition, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
India Art Summit, New Delhi
2010 *Changing Skin*, The Fine Art Company at Coomaraswamy Hall, Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai
Trial and Error, Abir Karmakar, Debraj Goswami and Rahul Mukherjee, Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda
INDIA AWAKEN: Under the Banyan Tree, Essl Museum, Vienna
Curated by Dr. Alka Pande from the permanent collection of the museum
Have I Ever Opposed You? New Art from India and Pakistan, Gallery Faye Fleming and Partner, Geneva
2009 *Failed Plot* – curated by Gayatri Sinha for KIAF
A New Vanguard: Trends in Contemporary Indian Art, Saffron Art and The Guild Art Gallery
New Fables: Contemporary Voices, Gandhara Art Gallery, Kolkata
Long Gone & Living Now, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
Threshold: Forging Narratives in South Asian Contemporary Art, Aicon Gallery, New York
Shifting Shapes – Unstable Signs, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA
PANORAMA: INDIA at ARCO_Madrid
Presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
Mutant Beauty, Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi
Curated by Gayatri Sinha
2008 Gallery weekend at the Baumwollspinnerei Factory Complex, Leipzig, Germany, presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke
A MAZ ING, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
Curated by Anupa Mehta for RPG Academy of Art and Culture
2007 *1st Anniversary Exhibition*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai
The Harmony Show, Mumbai
Reality Bites, CIMA, Kolkata
Beyond Credos, Birla Academy of Art & Culture, Kolkata
2006 Annual Exhibition of Birla Academy of Art & Culture, Kolkata
Two x Two, Sarjan ArtGallery, Baroda
Red Earth And The Pouring Rain, Lanxess ABS Gallery, Baroda
Feb Group Show, Baroda
2005 *De Tour*, Galerie 88, Mumbai
The Harmony Show, Mumbai
2004 *Fusion*, Bayer ABS Gallery, Baroda
2003 *Read*, Birla Academy of Arts and Culture, Kolkata
1995 Annual Exhibition of Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata

AWARDS AND HONORS

2007 The Harmony Award
2003 Awarded Gold Medal, M.A. (Fine Art, Painting), Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda



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