

'Displacement' by Abir Karmakar

The following essay is based on the exhibition 'Displacement' by Abir Karmakar, held at Mirchandani + Steinruecke Gallery in the aftermath of the 3rd Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016. On display are large-scale interior paintings, executed in oil-on-canvas, from the series 'Home' (2016), first showcased at the Kashi Art Gallery, a traditional house in the South Indian style, and one of the prominent venues of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Complementing five of the Biennale paintings with three recent interiors (2017) for the gallery show, Karmakar revisits and further interrogates the core subject matters of 'Home', such as site-specificity, identity, memory, and belonging. In addition, the exhibition at Mirchandani + Steinruecke provides him with an accurate frame to reconfigure the role of contemporary painting by relating it to the spatial contingencies and economic imperatives of the gallery context.

The Door

Showcasing Karmakar's virtuoso skill at creating convincing visual illusions on a flat surface, these untitled paintings of domestic interiors are rooted in the Dutch genre of the 17th century. Known for ranking his artistic practice within the lineage of Western art history, Karmakar draws on this early modern period, where the value of a work of art depended as much on its content as on the quality of its execution. However, in his quest of rethinking the visual formula for the depiction of realistic space, Karmakar did not immediately embark on the rendition of large-scale interiors. The cornerstone for the latter was laid in 2013 with a painting of a single, life-sized door. This early painting was based on the conceptualization of the door as an autonomous entity, extracted from the wider narrative and compositional syntax of the interior.

Aligning the shape of the door with the shape of the canvas, Karmakar saw the opportunity to engage in the exploration of the function of 'meta-pictorial' devices. In early realistic paintings, doors, windows, curtains, and mirrors were employed as deceptive elements, visual 'artifices' that conjured the illusion of

infinite space. One is reminded of Velázquez' painting *Las Meninas*, whose vanishing point is the doorway, where a person rendered in silhouette appears to hold open a curtain on a short flight of stairs. In addition, the doorway offers extra light to the rear of the painting, alluding to an undefined space behind.

Karmakar covers the surface of the door with meticulously painted stains, scratches, and traces of dirt, numerous marks that not only speak of the door's function, but also the cultural, social, and class origin of its user. The realistic rendition of the door lures the beholder into surrendering to the visual illusion of an infinite space behind. However, Karmakar's intent is not to renounce two-dimensionality by creating a wall object, as such 'give up working on a single plane in favor of three dimensions'.¹ Rather does the shape of the door serve as the painting's frame and is thus an integral part of it. It is, precisely, remaining within the confines of the flat surface that allows him to stage the painting's fictiveness and provoke the beholder's awareness of self-deception.

The Absent Figure

The creation of large-scale interiors offers Karmakar further opportunities to interrogate the epistemological implications of pictorial illusion. Unlike the classic Dutch genre, which depicts the figure in relation to the space, Karmakar's interiors are entirely devoid of human presence. In muted colours, he celebrates the palpable tension between the glaring absence of the figure and its presence made visible through the objects of everyday life. Suitcases, kitchen utensils, clothes, trinkets, and furniture imprint the empty space with their marks. Like the door, they are not inanimate objects, but encode a layered past, memories, and a belonging that go beyond their utilitarian function. Manifesting an expressive subjectivity, these objects draw a psychological portrait of the absent figure in relation to the space, similar to Candida Höfer's large-scale photographs of empty interiors. 'I realized that what people do in those places – and what the

¹ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in: *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 148. The author describes the use of shaped instead of rectangular surfaces by Stella, Noland, and Olitski to be experienced as part of the painting and not as object.

spaces do to them – is more obvious when nobody is present, just as an absent guest can be often the topic of a conversation.’²

The delicacy of Karmakar’s brushstroke, his technical proficiency with pigments and the subtle and precise effects of light lend these objects almost anthropomorphic qualities, such as the ability to withdraw from the external world by dreaming. ‘The furniture takes on elongated shapes, prostrate and languorous. Each piece seems to be dreaming, as if living in a state of trance, like vegetables and mineral things. The draperies speak an unvoiced language, like flowers and skies and setting suns. [...] Everything here has its appropriate measure of light and delicious dark, of harmony itself.’³

The Poetics of Home

Karmakar’s interiors evoke home as an inward-looking world of quiet stillness. Painted with compositional clarity, these repositories of private experience have less to do with functionality than with the way in which they convey a certain *Stimmung*, the tentative mood of its absent inhabitants. These interiors represent a space of refuge in an often diffuse, semi-tenebrous light, where time seems to be suspended. Simultaneously, they manifest the inexorable march of time, as the external world constantly threatens to invade this encapsulated realm of privacy. Apart from being a dreamy refuge of secluded privacy, Karmakar evokes home as a social and cultural space, mirroring the mores and habits of a Gujarati urban middle-class family of the 21st century.

The series ‘Displacement’ is based on photographs Karmakar took of the domestic environment of a befriended family he visited in Kutch. Throwing light on the profound transformation Indian society has been undergoing due to migration, he concurrently retraces the story of several generations of his own family, which migrated from Chittagong (now in Bangladesh). This personal story reflects the collective destiny of migrants at large, whose existential dilemma lies in displacement and rootlessness. Exploring the notions of home

² Candida Höfer, in: ‘Candida Höfer en México’, Galería OMR, México: Turner, 2016, p. 104.

³ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Twofold Room’, in: Francis Scarfe (Ed.), *The Poems in Prose, with La Fanfarlo*, London: Anvil Press, 1989, p. 37.

and belonging, place and identity formation, Karmakar's interiors, the arrangements of sofas and curtains, mirrors and framed photographs with garlands, TV sets, and staircases that spiral to nowhere, speak of the irrevocable loss and longing for an origin, of a certain nostalgia that is inexorably tied to the possibility of return as the 'culminating point' of migration. Home is considered as a space between a domestic reality, ordinary and mundane in its very nature, and the evanescent, palimpsest-like memory of something lost that lingers on in fantasies and symbolic imaginings.

Karmakar's quest of 'What is home?', a metaphysical quest in its very nature, invariably leads him to deconstruct the topos 'home'. Rather than being rooted in a clearly identifiable and permanent place, the idea of the original home seems to stem from the process of migration itself. It can only be looked at from the vantage point of dislocation as the *modus vivendi* of migrants. Their acculturation and integration cannot obscure the fact that identity is constructed and transformed through the dynamics of dislocation, with the shifting of home being embedded in the temporality of human existence. Even 'non-migrants' find it hard to unambiguously define 'home', as one can have several homes that only partially match with a physical place. The various implications of home as a geographical, political, social, and emotional space lay bare its historical conditions and the impermanence of its nature.

Painting Revisited

Karmakar's skillful play with illusionism and its capability of 'deceiving the viewer's eye' is linked to the reformulation of the role of contemporary painting. In the 1970s, painting 'seen as an art on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem – how to organize the surface of the picture,'⁴ suffered a serious crisis. This crisis resulted in an abstract vocabulary devoid of any illusionism and, in its most radical form, in the negation of the medium itself. In contrast, Karmakar further develops his realistic vocabulary, firmly rooted in the classical canon of art history. Interrogating the conventions of his vocabulary and its suggestive potential of

⁴Michael Fried, *ibid.*

deception, he exceeds the limits of visual illusionism in terms of space, linking the medium to the contingencies of the site-specific context.

Integral to the production of the paintings for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale was the incorporation of the physical conditions of the Kashi Art Gallery, such as size, scale, topographical features, lighting, and sequence of rooms. In an attempt to align the dimensions of his interiors with the exact dimensions of wall, ceiling, and floor of the Kashi Art Gallery, Karmakar saw himself forced to render some of the painted objects, such as a TV set and cupboards, with slight distortion to fit the spatial requirements. He then cut a door-shaped opening into the canvas of one of the paintings that were displayed at the entrance hall. This cut-out corresponded to the exact location and size of the entrance hall door of the Kashi Art Gallery. Instead of deceiving the viewer's eye with a painted door resembling a real one, Karmakar forced the viewer to literally walk through the painting to access the rooms behind. Bringing Lucio Fontana's radical gesture to mind, that consisted in overcoming the flat limitations of picture making by slicing the canvas, Karmakar boldly 'assaulted' the canvas in an attempt to expand the medium into the physical space.

Site-Specificity Again

Offering an experiential and spatial understanding of the historical Biennale site, Karmakar decided to reformulate the term 'site-specificity' in relation to the white cube of the gallery, often called a 'blank slate'. In a critical approach to throw light on the adoption and assimilation of this term into the dominant culture, he links it to the dynamics of displacement. He 'dislocates' five paintings from the Biennale and has them 'migrate' from the institutional context to the commercial space of the Mirchandani + Steinruecke Gallery, assigning these paintings a new 'home'.

The displacement of the paintings asks for an additional site-specific gesture that consists in placing them on the gallery floor. Similar to the radical modernist practice of freeing the sculpture from the pedestal, Karmakar frees the paintings from the wall. He places four interiors from the Biennale as autonomous, free-

standing elements in Room 1 of the gallery, rendering their make-shift supportive structures visible. But whereas the modernist sculpture severed its relation to the actual site by renouncing the pedestal, thus achieving the status of a placeless, nomadic object, Karmakar's gesture of renouncing the wall is what relates the interior paintings to the actual location.

In Room 2, he displays a space-dividing structure on which two interiors, specifically created for the show, and spanning the width of the room, are stretched on the back and front of the makeshift support. As at the Kashi Art Gallery, Karmakar repeats the bold gesture of slicing the canvas to cut out a door shape, forcing the viewer once more to walk through the painting to get access to the rooms behind. He challenges the idea of what constitutes 'painting' by exploring the expansive terrain between painting and site-specificity. Offering a comment on the constitutional elements of, and the numerous possibilities within, painting itself, the medium is used to 'interrogate rather than accommodate the given architecture, disrupting the spatial conditions of the art work's site.'⁵

The Protagonist

Establishing an inextricable relationship between the work of art and its site, Karmakar demands the physical presence of the viewer as an indispensable component for the work's completion. Questioning the limitations of the medium of painting as a self-sufficient aesthetic category, he turns the viewer from voyeur into protagonist. Designating the beholder a position within the painting by absorbing him or her into the depicted scene, Karmakar offers an imaginary entry, which, for a single arrested moment, makes painting and beholder fuse together. At the same time, the elision of the gap between subject and object is revealed as pure self-deception, the veritable 'culminating point of the involvement process'. Hiding and revealing the false premises of illusionism, Karmakar creates the actual experience of walking on a stage. This experience is enhanced by the visibility of the supportive structures, with the free-standing

⁵Miwon Kwon, 'One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity', Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 5.

interiors assuming an almost theatrical quality, making the beholder aware that the reception of the paintings does not only include the spatial environment in which they are located, but also his or her active involvement.

Emphasizing the presence of the beholder, Karmakar articulates the pictorial space in its expansiveness, transcending its function as a self-contained whole. He subjects the painterly practice to the process of self-renewal, rejecting the clear, epistemological differentiation between pictorial and physical space in modernist paintings, proposed by leading art theorists such as Rosalind Krauss. In discussing the ideological purism of modernist paintings, Krauss suggests that the '[p]ictorial space is that which cannot be entered or circulated through; it is irremediably space viewed from a distance, and is therefore eternally resigned to frontality.'⁶

In Room 3 of the gallery, Karmakar stretched one painting dislocated from the Biennale on a makeshift wall, replacing the gallery wall. This large convex-shaped structure allows him to adjust the size of the painting, reflecting the slightly bigger dimensions of the wall of the Biennale site, to the gallery room. One is reminded of Karmakar's earlier series 'Views' and 'Angles' (2014), consisting of empty and hermetically sealed off interiors with no signs of a living being. Through a keyhole vision, he enables the viewer to see the objects from different angles at one glance. Unlike these earlier series, where the beholder is kept outside the interiors, the free-standing structure in Room 3 asks for the physical involvement of the beholder. The sheer size of the structure does not allow him to *contemplate* the painting in its frontality. Rather is he forced to walk along the length of the curved shape, bulging into the space, exposing himself to destabilizing perspectives in order to *experience* the painting in its totality.

The Mural

Karmakar's reflections on site-specificity not only address ideas of display and perception, but extend them into the mode of dissemination as an imperative of the commercial space. Unlike the institutional frame of the Biennale, the gallery

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'Léger, Le Corbusier, and Purism', in: *Artforum*, vol. 10, no. 8, p. 52.

brings to mind the cycles of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as exchangeable commodities. Exploring the genesis of painting, from mural to easel painting, Karmakar traces the medium's history from being organically connected to architecture to its execution on a portable support. In Room 4, the last one in the sequence of gallery rooms, he ironically plays with this genesis. He paints one detail of the medium-sized interior, which he created specifically for Room 4 – a skirting made of geometrically patterned floor tiles typical of Indian middle class homes – on the bottom of the column facing the painting, which is part of the architectural structure of the room. Likewise, he paints the surface of the gallery door adjacent to the painting in one of the interior's dominant colours to generate a coherent spatial environment that integrates the main architectural elements of the room.

The gesture of painting the bottom of the column reminds of early murals at a time when painting hadn't gained mobility and autonomy from architecture. Reassessing the relationship between painting and architecture, Karmakar demonstrates that site-related works of art are not just exchangeable commodity goods that fall victim to the 'tyranny' of capitalist market forces. As the series 'Displacement' manifests, the *in situ* displayed interiors are not mere self-sufficient, trans-historical entities with universal meaning. Rather are they experienced in the *hic et nunc* of an 'unrepeatable and fleeting situation', emphasizing the spatial particularity and temporality of the location as well as the ephemeral presence of the beholder. Karmakar ingeniously resists the homogenization of space and the commodification of painting as placeless and exchangeable. The exhibition is testimony to the celebration of the open-endedness and continually expanding, self-interrogating and evolving nature of the medium. He forces the beholder to critically rethink the prevailing cultural and economic value system which circulates paintings, throwing light on the conditions of its production, perception, display, and dissemination.

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