Blending Out

Salman Toor's paintings reveal a spectrum of queer lives

ESSAY / ARTS

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CHERYL MUKHERJI FOR THE CARAVAN

IN THE SUMMER OF 2019, when Salman Toor ushered me into his studio in Bushwick, a neighbourhood in New York City's borough of Brooklyn, a tiny section of his wall caught my eye. There, he had pinned a disparate collection of references for paintings he was working on for his India debut, in December, at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery. *I Know a Place*, the title of the Pakistani artist's exhibition, depicts a surreptitious utterance between a pair of queer men who desire each other's flesh, friendship and company, away from the violence of prying eyes.

For years, fans of Toor in the United States, and his global admirers on Instagram, have hailed him as a contemporary revolutionary, owing, perhaps, to the principal subjects of his

paintings: queer South Asian men finding solace both in solitude and amid queer company, while also being susceptible to bouts of loneliness and longing. But Toor confounds our imposition of specificity upon his craft, since specificity begets fetishisation, an impulse that his American and European audiences might be prone to. When I asked Toor how a showing in India would differ from an exhibition in the States, he said: "It will be with much more ease, much more subtlety, that I can speak to a South Asian audience and express things which might be lost upon a Western audience." The subtlety of Toor's paintings subverts this fetishisation. His queens are neither bathed in perpetual joy nor shrouded in a recurring doom. Each of Toor's compositions is a challenge to a binarised understanding of South Asian queerness that geographical distance can confer upon his admirers. To witness Toor's paintings is to witness the spectrum of queer lives, not its archetypes.

The principal subjects of Toor's paintings have been queer South Asian men finding solace both in solitude and amid queer company, while also being susceptible to loneliness and longing.

There is, of course, a specificity to Toor's ambition: it is an ambition driven by a desire to nuance the presentation of South Asian queerness. In "The Queen," for instance, a queer man is adorned in finery such as an organza dupatta, a crown, and a necklace by other queer men, who dress him in the front yard of a home in Lahore—refashioned from the memory of Toor's own family home. It is a fabulous, rousing scene of inclusion and joy set in a city perceived elsewhere as one where such queer festivity would be improbable. In another painting, titled "Afterparty," a brown queen has deliberately disengaged from a group of white and brown queens dancing in a New York apartment, somewhere in the East Village, New York's "gaybourhood." Geographically, Toor makes a case against reading Lahore and New York as queer purgatory and paradise, respectively. His chiaroscuro approach mingles them and presents them, almost in a panoptic fashion, upon the same canvas, so that his audiences can refrain from imposing a specific reading either upon his subjects, the places they inhabit and the queerness that a specific geography demands of them.

The references pinned to his wall included a still of an amorous heterosexual couple—actors, Toor confirmed—from an Iqbal Bano mehfil aired on Pakistani television in the 1960s; the Italian artist Jacopo Bassano's "Supper at Emmaus"; a photograph of men, taken by Toor, lounging by a canal somewhere in West Punjab; a nineteenth-century sepia print of an orgy; a 1970s advertisement for jumpers; and a Mills and Boon cover, where the man gently lifts the chin of the heroine, who is averse to meeting his gaze. I focussed on a monochrome print of a young Benazir Bhutto, surrounded by men from the Pakistan People's Party. My eyes flitted between Benazir on the wall—regal and officious—and a painting Toor had just finished, titled "Funeral."

In the painting, a child dressed in an orange t-shirt and a pair of white shorts appears at the centre of a sitting room, surrounded by men. One smiles at him, indulging him, two smile slyly at one another and others study the floor melancholically, much like the child himself. But Toor does something unusual with the brush: there seems to be a halo of sorts around the child's head, suggesting divine power. Yet, at the same time, he appears to be reluctantly putting on a show at this funeral, in his bright clothes among a coterie of men dressed in shades of black, white and grey. By putting on this show, he seems disempowered, despite that halo.

The emblems of power, and lack thereof, are visible in both the photograph of Benazir and this painting. The sole woman overpowered by masculine presence in the photograph is the chieftain holding absolute power. On the other hand, the divine light around the child in "The Funeral," which would suggest his omnipotence, renders his own agency impotent within the cocoon of masculinity. Although Bhutto was a reference for another painting in the show—"The Poet"—Toor was welcoming to my suggestion that Benazir and the child in "Funeral" could be inverts of each other. It is not uncommon for Toor to manoeuvre an affect in a photograph he uses as a reference into its invert in his paintings, while also transposing characters' movements, accoutrements and countenance.

This transposition, visible across his oeuvre, points to Toor's desire to render conspicuous both abundance and lack in his final artwork. Toor encourages us to understand the continuity in his paintings between the apparently incongruous. He discourages ideas of discontinuous, almost compartmentalised, performances of

COURTESY SALMAN TOOR

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Salman Toor has been hailed for his paintings featuring queer South Asian men finding solace both in solitude and amid queer company.

BELOW: One of Toor's early paintings, "For Allen Ginsberg," depicts disparate figures, icons and even text in the nastaliq script arranged in a surrealist chaos, with Toor's queer protagonists still intact.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
As an undergraduate at Ohio Wesleyan University, Toor encountered painters from the Western canon, from whom he borrowed in order to marry their aesthetics with that of miniaturist painters he admired.

queerness, as he does with his desire to subvert geographically confined ones. Instead, his implicit suggestion has always been that queer power and powerlessness are twin affects—entwined, fickle, malleable. In his paintings, power is continuous with powerlessness, the West with the East, abundance with deprivation. Toor feels it imperative to show that the queer protagonist, both at home and away from it, both with friends and ensconced in loneliness, both in love—erotic or otherwise—and in fits of violence, embodies a life that is filigreed with multiple emotions and the lives of "others." It is this that brings pain and pleasure to the protagonists of his paintings.

TOOR'S DESIRE FOR SEEKING CONTINUITY among seemingly opposing affects, cultures and aesthetics begins at home, and more importantly, with the formal concerns of art. As a boy in Lahore, his first tryst with racial and cultural intermingling was at his grandmother's home, where he grew up studying "cheap prints" of Paul de Vos's "Stag Hunt," Thomas Gainsborough's "The Honourable Mrs Graham" and "The Blue Boy."[1] "In retrospect, it's funny," Toor confessed, "because, as in most middle class households in Lahore, there were lots of little porcelains and prints of white people being genteel with teacups and roses and that sort of thing."

One can clearly glean how a Persian miniature from the Tabriz school, such as Amir Khusrau Dehlavi's "Pandj Gandj," may have influenced the conception of a painting such as "Mehfil/Party" in *I Know a Place*. The men who are peppered along the edges of Dehlavi's miniature sit in a semicircle, attentive to the principal figure on a raised platform in the centre of the painting. They seem far removed from the wildlife in the frame, or, in another sense, this is their refuge—a clearing in the forest, where they can congregate peacefully without much intrusion. Similarly, in "Mehfil/Party," the musicians in casual wear, arranged like a qawwali troupe, are courted by little pockets of admirers in a tableau that pays homage to the tableau of miniatures in "Pandj Gandj." They inhabit a portrait of a brown queer haven in the midst of the babble of the city outside.

Whether it is the busy mayhem of durbar scenes of Mughal miniatures or the quieter variety such as "Gujari Ragini"—an eighteenth-century miniature by an unknown artist that depicts a woman sitting in her courtyard playing her veena to a parakeet—it is not merely the distinctive tableau of miniatures that Toor has refracted to the twenty-first century with his own paintings. It is also Toor's fascination with the tendency of miniature schools to constantly borrow and syncretise cultures, whether it is the East Asian influence on the Tabriz school or the marriage of the Kalighat Pat style of Bengal with the already flourishing trope of Mughal miniatures as "Gujari Ragini" demonstrates.

In the spirit of such syncretism, Toor has often turned to two miniaturists in particular: Nainsukh and Abu al-Hasan. He sought inspiration in the work of Hasan, a miniaturist who worked during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. Hasan transcended national borders and the artistry idiosyncratic to, and contained within, such borders. "I often turn to him because he made copies of Albrecht Dürer's prints," Toor told me. "He was looking at portraits and engravings from Europe and creating a hybrid world." It is fitting, then, to find Toor pairing Hasan with Nainsukh, whom he admires for the multiple perspectives the latter's miniatures toy with. Nainsukh's "Villagers around the Fire," which is presently on display at the Indian Museum in Kolkata, was particularly instrumental for Toor. "It courts the idea of multiple viewpoints, some aerial, others based on a single point perspective in the same picture. It is a fascinating solution that I've sometimes tried in my work," he said. His interest in the multiple perspectives of Nainsukh and Hasan's effort towards transcendence implies that Toor desires the porosity of borders—formal, national, cultural. Only porous borders, and an active engagement with the idea of syncretism, can enable the primary affect his paintings seek to produce among his audience: empathy.

Toor has often turned to two miniaturists in particular: Nainsukh and Abu al-Hasan, and also borrowed from a cast of painters from the western canon whose work he encountered at university.

As an undergraduate at Ohio Wesleyan University, Toor encountered a cast of painters from the western canon from whom he borrowed in order to marry their aesthetics with that of the miniaturists. In an interview with *ArtNow Pakistan*, he cited various features of Western canonical work that his admirers may be able to trace in his paintings. The seventeenth- and eighteen-century baroque painters impressed Toor with their "floridness" and "vividness." Paul Rubens's "overcrowdedness" influenced him, as did the "dignity" in Anthony van Dyck. He absorbed the "romance and sexuality" in Jean-Antoine Watteau and the "decorative brilliance" of Paolo Veronese. After graduation, Toor moved to New York, where he prepared for grad school. Before entering the Pratt Institute, he was consumed by the "Napoleonic grandiosity" of Kehinde Wiley's male figures, the "pale mannerism" of John Currin, and the "Phillip Guston vibe" of Nicole Eisenman.

For a South Asian queer person, such as myself, Toor is an especially important figure in contemporary art, making the brown gay man conspicuous and remedying his absence. But Toor's work is not without precedents. If one were to delve into his earlier works, one might see how he shares the surrealism of Bhupen Khakhar, who, besides Toor, is perhaps the most noteworthy South Asian painter to paint male same-sex desire with as much fervour.

In his 1924 manifesto, the French writer André Breton described surrealism as part of a "violent reaction against the impoverishment and sterility of thought processes that resulted from centuries of rationalism." In Khakhar's 2016 retrospective at the Tate Modern in London, many of his paintings, such as "Yayati," "Janata Watch Repairing," "You Can't Please All" and "Night" were all scenes from a "surreal dreamscape," a qualification that the journalist Lowenna Waters reserved for the latter Khakhar painting in particular, in her review for *The Economist*. The surrealism of Khakhar's paintings seems a "violent" break from tradition. The critic Georgina Maddox found the intermingling of the conscious and the subconscious in Khakhar's aesthetic "in agreement with the rebellions of the movements of the 1960s and the 1970s against what were construed as the asphyxiating norms of the prevailing genres of modernism and traditionalism." The asphyxiation Khakhar resists is both formal and political. Maddox writes that he was not one to experience an "aesthetic embarrassment" that came from being a student of European realism and academic painting. Rather, he became a "conduit" who ushered the middle-class queer Gujarati aesthetic into High Art at a time of high homophobia in India.

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In "For Allen Ginsberg," "Jetsetter" and "Resident Aliens," early Toor paintings that were exhibited in 2015, disparate figures, icons and even text—in the nastaliq script—are arranged in a surrealist chaos, with Toor's queer protagonists still intact. Toor admitted to have been "in conversation with" Khakhar in his earlier works. But, over the years, his paintings shifted from the symbolic to the clear and scenic, which resembled photographs rather than a "surreal dreamscape." Toor now strives for an almost forensic clarity in his paintings, which extend access to those, such as myself, who are not educated in the hermeneutics of art. Earlier this year, over a phone conversation, Toor and I discussed his thoughts on Khakhar. He said that he now considers his own aesthetic closer to the queer aesthetic of another South Asian painter, Amrita Sher-Gil.

But, the sense of asphyxiation that Toor resists in his work is not unlike Khakhar's approach. Toor's work is consumed mostly digitally, specifically through Instagram. In a recent profile in *Interview* magazine, Sarah Nechamkin wrote how Toor is not interested in images "of sculpted torsos and cre-

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atine-coursing hardbods" that "abound in contemporary gay culture." Rather, Toor is more interested in the "sissies." Last summer, as Toor and I lingered by his supplies shelf, I asked him about such queer-masculine "hardbods" who pervade Instagram. I brought up a popular American Instagrammer whose images I had once admired for their aesthetic appeal. Toor dismissed the Instagrammer outright: "It's all abs and ass and dick." Here, he was resisting the monopoly of the ideal body, which is often the bane of social media as well as high art that is informed by the martial masculine white bodies of canonised European artists.

Toor's brown sissies, on the other hand, have registered successfully in the zeitgeist because, like Khakhar, "aesthetic embarrassment" does not mar Toor's work. For Toor to be taken "seriously" into High Art—that is, the European realist style where male bodies are the archetype of Atlas-like masculinity—he does not consider it necessary to reiterate that same body, or those similar affects of his western predecessors. Like Khakhar again, Toor may also qualify as a "conduit" who connects Lahore with New York, the Indian and Persian miniaturists with the baroques, and queer South Asian precedents such

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OPPOSITE PAGE: "The Confession" captures, and is acutely self-aware of, the paradox of queer life, and indicates a fervent desire to reconcile what we believe to be divisions.

LEFT: Loneliness and overcrowdedness often seem to occupy the same canvas. This is visible in "Immigration Men," in the quiet detachment between two men wrought by the possibility of deportation.

The rest of Toor's India debut flits between the loneliness in certain paintings and an "overcrowdedness," so much so that his subjects, in his own words, feel "trapped within the frame."

as Khakhar and Sher-Gil. His paintings, which make us feel guilty of peeking, or intruding, with its photographic, matter-of-fact depiction, is not only produced by crossing geographical and aesthetic borders. That guilt of peeking in makes us realise that Toor's paintings have that inherent ability to allow us entry into his protagonists' world and not merely study it as disinterested bystanders.

"In my professional life, one of the greatest rewards was that the work brought warmth and togetherness among the viewers, especially when shown in South Asia," Toor told me. "People recognised themselves and their own in the paintings, making social divisions seem less solid, other people less strange, regular life less obvious and more mysterious and worthy of contemplation." In both Toor's paintings and in the relationship shared between them and his viewers, the prospect of inundation leads to a sense of communality. Toor has accrued fans over the years precisely because of the qualities of his predecessors that he has gathered into what he calls a "storehouse of collective imagination."

Salman Toor's paintings depict the rush and the retraction of joy that comes with living a queer double life in the public and the private.

"I hoped, through painting, to give dignity and power as it was historically bestowed to usually wealthy white people, to others around me," Toor added. "In painting, I'm thinking about ideas of immigration, assimilation as a journey, or resistance to assimilation in an adoptive culture, in a liberal bastion like NYC. And it is interesting to show it side by side with my incongruent-seeming experiences in a conservative social setting. I like that these can be brought together in the world of painting, in a single work or through curation."

The way the subjects in "Lavender Boy" and "Man with a Limp Wrist," both part of *I Know a Place*, bring together the protagonists and their observers is through empathy. In their emancipatory, private nudity, the subjects in both paintings seem ironically trapped in their train-carriage-sized New York bedrooms or the slim canvas. But Toor does not compromise the expansive tendencies of his paintings. As with earlier works in the similar vein—"Man with Tote Bag, Laptop, and Shoes," "Shower Boy" and "The Reader," shown in October 2018 at New York's Aicon Gallery—Toor's lone men invite their witnesses to seek out similar affects, map their own emotions upon the subjects. Toor flirts with the scope of his spaces, as walls close in and the circle of friends and lovers grows smaller and smaller until the last man standing reposes naked. But an invitation extends from the canvas: it is an aspiration to fold in empathy from the confederacy of Toor's myriad admirers and mingle with the affect of his subjects. It is empathy that renders Toor's paintings expansive in their effect.

RIGHT: Bodily violence has been explicitly absent from Toor's oeuvre until this painting, titled "The Beating."

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THE REST OF TOOR'S INDIA DEBUT flits between the loneliness in certain paintings and a Rubensian "overcrowdedness," so much so that his subjects, in his own words, feel "trapped within the frame," not unlike the subjects of the miniatures Toor so admires.

Loneliness and overcrowdedness often seem to occupy the same canvas. There is the ceremonial dressing-up with one's mates in the front yard of "The Queen," the jouissance of "Late Night Gathering," the subdued but substantial joy of a smaller group in "The Convalescent," the multi-racial trio in "Lunch" who gossip on the phone, the pockets of communion and companionship in the crowded "Mehfil/Party," the sycophants who are mesmerised in "The Poet," the intimate and quiet acknowledgement of something hidden from us that the two men in "Arrival II" share, the quiet detachment between two men wrought by the possibility of departure—or worse, deportation—in "Immigration Men."

Toor depicts the rush and the retraction of joy that comes with living a queer double life in the public and the private. For Toor's queer man, the private is not always melancholic and the public not always jovial. Take the dancing queens in "Afterparty," for example. We are all witness to a triad dancing in the emerald room. However, you turn to the right side of the painting, and sitting on the floor with his phone, looking directly at us, is a lad separate from the dancers, yet still connected to them by means of a man encouraging him to join in. The joy that eviscerates loneliness and the impeding loneliness once the party ends is evoked in "Afterparty" in a diptychian manner. But, unlike a diptych—a painting on two hinged panels, which could be closed like a book—the borders between the two moods are not as explicit or impervious for Toor.

"The Confession" encompasses my singular fascination with *I Know a Place*. The two men in the painting who stand in the balcony, separated from their friends at their party, exchange a private, heavy, almost melancholic moment while the party inside is almost boxed off. Despite having torn away from the party, they also seem to be a

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part of it, if only as an offshoot. It is a perfect embodiment of the doubleness of public dances and private confessions that South Asian queers have contended with. The public and the private, in this painting as well, are not incongruous, but continuous. The men seem to be tied to the party with an invisible umbilical cord. At the same time, the lone bulb that pours light over them ensconces them in their own private cocoon. The translucent door suggests that either side can flow back into the room or inundate the balcony. "The Confession" captures, and is acutely self-aware of, the paradox of queer life, and indicates a fervent desire to reconcile what we believe to be divisions.

What remains steadfast in all the paintings so far is that Toor's work is not merely something to look and marvel at. It is more a palimpsest, where we write ourselves on to Toor's confederacy. The sleeping boy in "Lavender Boy," for instance, coiled amid his sheets, speaks to contours of our own loneliness. It is a painterly project to evoke empathy and extend the bacchanalia—and the shadowy emotions that prevail once the bacchanalia subsides—beyond the spaces of his paintings.

I WAS NOT BORN INTO A "nouveau-queer" India. The spectre of homophobia haunts me still. It pervaded, and still pervades, the spaces where I am expected to feel most secure: at home, for instance. It has only been slightly over a year since Section 377 was amended. To some outsiders, especially for Americans with whom I converse, the September 2018 judgment seemed a reversal that repaired hetero–queer relations instantaneously. But reparations can never happen overnight.

I was standing before a painting Toor had just finished for the exhibition that had taken me by surprise. It was a painting that announced a sudden break in the general rasa of Toor's work. Bodily violence has been explicitly absent from Toor's oeuvre until this painting, titled "The Beating." Bathed in his signature green, this painting is also a hybrid picture: there is the passivity of the onlookers' deportments on the one hand and on the other, the animation of the two willowy men, with one striking the other with a cricket bat and the other writhing on the grass. There is the blank expression worn by one onlooker, melancholy by another, the fear of the victim, the hatred of his attacker and perhaps the intrigue of the man looking from the building. Toor and I discussed how, for both Pakistan and India, the cricket bat symbolised for so long an instrument of the nation and the fervent masculinity that builds it. To see that instrument beating any effeminacy out of the man seems quite on the nose, even for Toor.

The garden of "The Beating" shares similarities with the garden in "The Queen." Only this

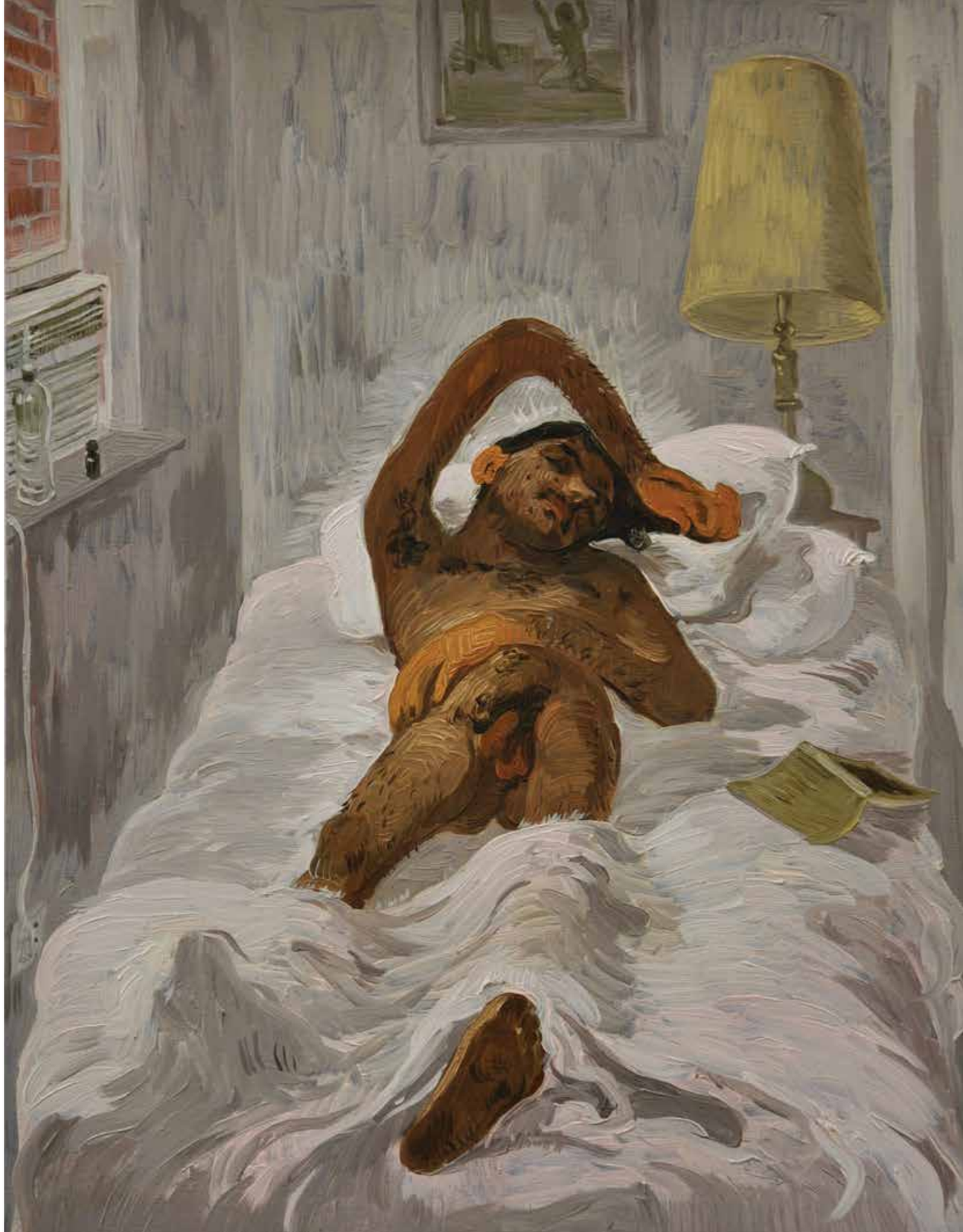
Toor said, in *The Beating*, "Dignity, or the violent slashing of it, was on my mind. In it, there is the theatre of violence, but also the passivity among the figures who watch."

time, the men in "The Queen," who were once in cahoots, have turned upon their own sex. It reminded me that the joy of queer camaraderie that I have often imbibed from Toor's oeuvre does not mean that he is prone to erase the history of violence that led to that joy. Given that violence is shown so explicitly for the first time for a South Asian audience, it might imply that either Toor is telling us that we cannot afford amnesia or that India's new queer freedom does not mean that homophobia is not pervasive still, especially for its neighbouring countries.

Toor told me that the painting "is something that I have been thinking about for a year or so. Dignity, or the violent slashing of it, was on my mind. In it, there is the theatre of violence, but also the passivity among the figures who watch."

I fixated on Toor's poetic phrase—the "theatre of violence." For an audience, the stage lays bare all its players. Particularly in scenes where characters hide or are concealed from one another, to the audience, both the "public" and "private" aspects of their lives are rendered visible. Toor brings that same clarity of visibility, the same panoptic vision the stage privileges its audience with, to his paintings. And, in Toor's claim that the miniaturist approach, with which his paintings are conceived, distances his painting's spaces from "watchful eyes" and the "violence from the traditional or mainstream world," he has now begun to show how even such spaces are beginning to be intruded upon.

For his upcoming solo exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, Toor had selected a mix of old and new paintings. The collection is titled *How Will I Know*, and does not bear the certainty that a title like *I Know a Place* has. Even with titles, Toor has selected invert notions. It is his way of acknowledging the contrariness each painting of his carries, and the revisions he instigates with our notions of borders and empathy. Toor's paintings do not facilitate much technical decoding, given that he has moved on from his surrealist magic-realist days. Rather, I have been drawn to Toor over the years because of the multiple, seemingly antithetical moods and spectrum of queer feelings that a single canvas of his can generate. ■



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