



Postcards from the Pandemic

The benumbed landscape and the casualness of death are captured atmospherically by Abir Karmakar in his Covid Chronicles, finds Lajja Shah.

Even though you enter Mumbai-based Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke's expansive new space with prior knowledge of the subject of Abir Karmakar's show *Everyday* – mimetic chronicles of the doom and gloom wrought by the coronavirus pandemic – you are unprepared for the surge of emotions experienced on encountering the works physically.

An overwhelming sense of déjà vu gradually gives way to a lingering feeling of disquiet as Karmakar's compelling oil paintings, culled from photographic sources and rendered in the photorealistic mode, make us confront the grim reality of the past two years. With memories of the pandemic still raw, it takes a few moments to reorient to the sterile setting of the gallery in order to regain a critical distance from which to view the works. *Everyday* marks the artist's fifth solo with the gallery and is on display from the 26th of August to the 20th of October.

In a series of small-scale works titled *History paintings*, Karmakar refers to the western art categories of 'history painting' and 'genre painting'. While the title refers to the former, he employs formal and thematic devices germane to the latter to document scenes from daily life as they unfold under the deathly grip of the virus. He meticulously renders gathered images from online news sources in the city of Vadodara, where he lives. Akin to the practice of journaling, he makes each one of the painted snapshots over the course of a single day. In his adept transcriptions, the mediated imagery acquires an affective afterlife that extends beyond the ephemerality of the original images and the specificity of their locale.

All too familiar scenes – a home inspection by healthcare workers, maintenance of safety protocols,

socially distant gatherings, hearse vans piled up with body bags and the conveyance of dead bodies – that are by now imprinted on our collective psyche assume an emblematic dimension in Karmakar's charged depictions. In *History painting 21* (2020), a partially visible corpse enshrouded in blue plastic poignantly conveys the fate of the dead in the time of contagion. While adhering to the conventions of journalistic representation, Karmakar imbues the *History paintings* with an underlying melancholy. The pictorial space, replete with exacting details, embodies palpable traces of panic and waiting, of anguish and loss. As the artist turns witness in the process of making these works, in the act of viewing them, we as onlookers, become co-witnesses to his vital testimonies of the visible and the visceral that record the anxieties and uncertainties of an unprecedented occurrence in contemporary history.

Amidst unrelenting reminders of death, in two large-scale works, Karmakar registers the experience of life coming to a standstill as mounting fear of the virus drove people indoors during the lockdowns. In the striking *8th of May* (2022), he portrays a top-angle view of a residential neighbourhood. Cast in a pall of eerie calm, it appears to be weighed down by the spectre of dark, ominous clouds. The houses stand sentinel-like, their barred doors and windows offering a semblance of protection from the unseen. Purged of human presence, the surreal and foreboding de Chiricoesque cityscape evocatively conveys the loneliness and isolation of its invisible inhabitants.

Comprising a suite of six works displayed back-to-back in groups of three, the *Surface* paintings punctuate the gallery space with a reflective pause. They disorient our perception momentarily and call for a closer,

(Left) Abir Karmakar. *8th of May*. Oil on canvas. 90" x 72". 2022.



Abir Karmakar. *History painting 36*. Oil on canvas. 30" x 36". 2022.
Images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke.



slower viewing. The trompe l'oeil paintings that at first glance appear like abstract expressionist compositions are in actuality literal, to scale recreations of flat architectural surfaces that Karmakar encounters around his neighbourhood during brief interludes through the lockdown. Capturing the images on his mobile phone, he assiduously copies them on canvas from within the confines of his studio. An introspective mood permeates the works; in the precise, painstaking, almost obsessive renderings of surficial accretions and erasures, the artist marks the shifts and churns of an unsettling temporality as days, nights, weeks and months coalesce into a strange and singular moment.

The exhibition comes full circle in *Gathering*, a series of three panoramic tableaux that depict large crowds receiving instructions from healthcare officials. The expressions and body language of the masked figures betray fear while their individual features, blurred and pixelated, are indistinguishable, as if they have already been reduced to a statistic. In this series, Karmakar shifts focus from exploring the impact of the pandemic as a physical and emotional reality experienced at an individual level to addressing its repercussions as a collective experience at the socio-political level. As the scenes in *Gathering* unfurl, they bring to mind the high-handed manner in which stringent quarantine measures were peremptorily imposed and their consequences on the survival and livelihood of the have-nots.

In the renewed humdrum of daily life, as the horrors of the Covid-19 pandemic begin to fade, Karmakar's haunting evocations of grief and loss are timely reminders of the fragility of human existence. They allow us to revisit painful memories and find, perchance, a sense of closure. As you exit the gallery, you find yourself glancing one last time at *History painting 36* (2022) in which a slant of luminous afternoon light – illuminating a group of people awaiting their turn to get vaccinated – offers a glimmer of hope.