

SURFACING

Manish Nai's New Paintings

In the last three years, Manish Nai has remade the constituents of painting. Found metal sheets, fragments of roofs and walls once painted red, white, blue, or tan, are assembled directly on the wall; aerial abstractions tilted upwards. Kitchen butter paper is pasted on raw jute, superimposed squares and rectangles made dynamic by pastels and blacks, one material absorbing paint, the other resisting it. Plastic netting, an insect barrier in Indian homes, is drawn with gouache paint, squiggles and smears emerging on two sheets covering a hollow center, one imaginary window squashed against another. Metal, jute, cellulose, polyester: these are not the supports we associate with painting. They are matters of the street, the factory, the market, and the home, sharing at the most a sheathing function, sheltering things as sacks, wraps, and barriers. Certainly, Nai has his turn with more conventional surfaces, as indicated by the luminous watercolors on paper, both monumental, in 2023, and intimate, as in his paintings from the 2000s. But what is it stake in these rooms, it seems, is the transformation of materials, through painting, to their mattering.

The pictorial equivalent for this claim in the paintings is their interest in emergence. Things rise atop one other, neon lines on wash; colored strokes on color blurs, planes upon planes, as if building from a crowded surface towards clarity, the process rubbed and condensed and erased until it becomes a formal element, pressing into attentiveness. Each work has a distinctly frontal plane, either a literally rectangular surface or a register of painted marks, that is on “top” or “in front” of the work, gaining primacy. Overturning questions of abstraction’s flatness, Nai marks instead the temporal depths of “useful” materials through layered work, so representing the porous or indexed or absorbent surfaces, each itself physically and visually complex with their fine meshes, translucence, and curled cuts.

Nai’s dedication to strata makes everyday materials not surfaces but conditions for surfacing. This is especially the case in the large format watercolors, which recall moments of natural abstraction (the mind happily wanders across scale, from Nasreen Mohamedi’s paper landscapes to Joan Mitchell’s canvas colors to Julie Mehretu’s wall fields). Paper is washed, dried, turned, and marked in a long process of layering, looking, and holding. We see the marks upfront, leading us to a visual field of erasure, a visual

experience that contrasts the smaller watercolors from 2009, where Nai is more interested in leading us into openings, transparent grids producing doorways, windows, and other portals filled with flaming or smoky color. In the new paintings, what surfaces is a representation of materials itself.

Nai brings the art of painting to the materials of everyday life, marking the difference between the attentive duration of the studio and what he calls the “overwhelming” transit of urban life in Mumbai. If Nai’s immediate reference is density, his effort to sublimate it parallels the city’s own container, the vast expanse and openness of the sea. Showing surface as depth, Nai asks us what it might mean to see aspects of one in the other. As if to say to paint a thing seen and found ubiquitously in the world otherwise, as painting, is to make it matter. And in making it matter, we return from the surfacing of that thing to its depth in the world it is selected from, the real world, our world, painting sublimating materials, materials now mattering.

-MPB, Oct 18 2023