

Press Release

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from 11am to 8pm

The Beauty You Beheld

Fiza Khatri

There's something queer about Fiza Khatri's latest paintings, and it's not the people in them. While the artist in their work to date has already established a reputation for seemingly casual yet carefully executed portraits of friends and others in their social circle—many indeed gender non-normative—there has been a noticeable and growing de-emphasis on people. Indeed, what's striking in the latest paintings is their focus, not on people, but on *plants*.

Paintings featuring plants in and of themselves are not unusual. Plenty of examples can be found in the history of art: flowers and fruit abound in still lifes, while of course foliage can be found in landscapes, historical paintings, and other scenes set in nature. In fact, in the French tradition, plants have been routinely deployed as part of painters' compositional arsenal stretching from at least Poussin to Cézanne. In the latter's *Grandes Baigneuses* (1906), for instance, the presence of the tall trees at either edge of the painting has the effect of keeping the eye on the motif of the female bathers. Known as *repoussoir* (from the French *repousser*, to push back), the term itself suggests the way that plants had become a convenient foil for framing and highlighting human subjects.

In scenes in which both humans and animals are present, the plants typically are thus of secondary interest. This pictorial order of things was in keeping with art's traditional academic hierarchies, in which historical painting, the representation of human activities, was deemed the highest art form, superior to still lifes and landscapes. This order reflected certain philosophies' emphasis on the position of human beings at the center of the universe.

In Khatri's works, however, the flora is not simply a backdrop for the fauna, but rather the opposite. These paintings work against the hierarchy visible in the tradition sketched out above, and the roles that plants have played in art, and in human society—as decoration, as resources.¹ Both *Raag Multani* and *Duck Duck Cat*, for instance, present houseplants prominently, alongside or even in front of the humans in them. *At Other's Edge* pushes this strategy to an extreme, so that the pothos, aloe, monstera, and other green lifeforms form a jungle-like wall that must be visually navigated in order to reach the cat and two individuals visible in the background.

In addition to being shunted off to the background, the individuals in *At Other's Edge* also reveal little of themselves, as they seem to be asleep, or at the least in repose. Without exception in this group, the people, though the putative subjects of the paintings, are otherwise occupied or are engaged in some other activity. This could be in listening to music, as the title of *Raag Multani*² would suggest, or otherwise engaged or looking away. *Turning Towards*, *Becoming a Room*, or *To Be Carried*: the titles hint at changes of state and are less about activity and consciousness. The net effect of the foregrounding of the plants and the de-emphasis on the humans who are present is to heighten the plants as characters, as beings.

The redistribution of attention that Khatri's paintings perform take as its point of departure the fundamental reevaluation of plant life that has been taking place in the last few decades, shifting away from perceptions of them as the most elementary of lifeforms, mainly capable of growth and decay. In contrast, researchers such as Suzanne Simard have unearthed compelling evidence

