44, rue Quincampoix 75004 Paris _ FR

Press Release

January 11 March 15, 2025

Opening Saturday, January 11, 2025 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 deemphasis 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

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Khatri has noted elsewhere that for them, figurative painting is "not tasked with objective representation."⁴ A simple way to understand the expression is that their practice is not a straightforward matter of painting from life; there is always a degree of invention, of "fiction and coding." But invention, fiction, and coding are also aspects of world-making, of envisioning possibilities otherwise. In painting scenes in which the plants and living beings (both human and animal) co-exist as equals, Khatri's work helps viewers to be able to see the more than human worlds in which we all exist.

John Tain

John Tain is an art historian, curator of the Lahore Biennale 2024 and Head of Research at the Asia Art Archive (AAA, 2017-2023). He is also an advisor to Asia Forum, a permanent collateral event of the Venice Biennale. Previously, he was curator of modern and contemporary collections at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

1. Amitav Ghosh discusses the mechanistic worldview's conversion of "Nature" into "an inert repository of resources, which, in order to be 'improved,' needed to be expropriate." See *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Penguin, 2018), p. 45.

2. Multani is a Hindustani classical raga.

3. See Suzanne Simard, Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest (Vintage, 2020), and also Meg Lowman, The Arbornaut: A Life Discovering the Eighth Continent in the Trees Above Us (Picador, 2022) and Peter Wohlleben, The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World (Greystone Books, 2016).

4. Elliat Albrecht, "How Fiza Khatri Uses Paint to Play with Memories," https://www.artbasel.com/news/fiza-khatri-discoveries

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