

*“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow*

*Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead*

*Walk beside me... just be my friend”*

- Albert Camus

In Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris* (1972), the scientist Kris Kelvin travels to a space station that is decorated with Pieter Bruegel paintings. The paintings function as a reminder of the world Kelvin has left behind, including the suicide of his wife. He is isolated and alone in a space station that is worn down and broken as if it were an abandoned school after the end of term orbiting a distant planet. The film’s most famous scene consists of a single wide shot of Brughel’s *Hunters in the Snow* (1565); the camera pans across a series of extreme close-ups of the painting with an ambient soundtrack that slowly focuses on images within the painted surface. As we hear the sound of the crackling of the fire and the crunch of snow, it is as if a wave of homesickness envelopes Kelvin and at the same time grounds him, in reconnecting with the earth—his home.

In Rosalind Nashashibi’s trilogy of films, *Denim Sky* (2022), the camera lovingly scans paintings by Emile Nolde, Pierre Renoir, Edgar Degas, Milton Avery, Berthe Morrisoe, and Juan de Zubaran. But what is the purpose of their inclusion? The cast which includes the artist, her children, and friends, coexist in a commune-like setting. Together they prepare food, go on walks, and lounge around. The children are always aware of the camera’s presence, while the adults go along with the pretense. Conversations were domestic and occasionally banal, then ocused on the idea of non-linear time, time travel, and aging. The fact that the cast consented to be filmed without any prior knowledge of the purpose of the filming. Apart from documentation of real-time interactions and the occasional interjection of what appears to be a quasi-fictional sci-fi narrative, the film maintains a peculiar emotional quality, intimately drawing the viewer into a recognizable world while at the same time feeling like a voyeur of something otherworldly.

Nashashibi’s art raises questions concerning the nature of intimacy, and how time changes our relationship with ourselves and others. But it also attempts to represent these ideas both in film and in painting. So how does painting feature in this project? In practice, Nashashibi’s work questions both the seductive historical function of a painting to represent the visual world and human emotional content. Her work pushes quasi-fictional narratives that riff off particular existing paintings with seriousness while deliberately wrongfooting the viewer into thinking—Why am I looking at this? *The Golden Age* (2022), a small painting, includes a sketchy portrait of the artist Edgar Degas with a woman with her back to us; his name is emblazoned in neon on a painted frame as if the dripping typeface was lifted from the Art Nouveau signs of the entrance to the Paris Metro. So, the painting is a representation of what exactly? Perhaps an example of the artist thinking, “I want to do a painting of Degas. You know Degas, that French artist of the late

nineteenth century?” The viewer might say “Oh, Ok, I get it, sort of, it is about time, and pointing back and commenting what about that? But does this approach have any agency now? Is it possible to salvage bits from painting history and fast-forward them into the present?”

The style of the paintings is not fixed. Although predominantly figurative, paintings like *Verso* (2022) and *Gaza* (2021) are abstractions in the sense that the formal language of painterly abstraction is foregrounded in making the viewer consider the “how” of its construction. *Verso* gathers random shapes into a taught centre pulling the edges inward, while *Gaza* abstracts two distorted egg-like shapes with a red activist red wedge with a huge teardrop, the title enhancing the image with a sense of conflict. Objects and experiences start to share a simpatico relationship in *Sunday Night* (2021), a binary image of a crying woman oblivious to her reflection co-exists next to a fluffy yellow chick who ponders its mirror image. This attempt to question the role of what paintings can do and what they are for permeates throughout Nashashibi’s work.

In the third part of the *Denim Sky* trilogy, the artist’s close friend Elena wanders through a deserted, after-hours National Gallery in London on her cell phone, talking with Nashashibi, whose disembodied voice we can hear. They are talking about the nature of their current friendship and how that has changed over time. Pausing in front of a seventeenth-century painting by Juan de Zubaran *Still life with Lemons in a Wicker Basket* (1690), Elena talks in a stream of subjective consciousness about what she is looking at and how it makes her feel, while also pointing out visual analogies of what the fruit “quince” represents. The painting, then, is the real object, but it should not be interpreted or unpacked in a search for meaning. The painting’s role is to connect the individual viewer with their own experience and time lived, to that particular image at this one moment encapsulated in this scene.

If contemporary painting now functions as a sign or a signal that triggers the historical experience of looking and thinking in front of the painted surface, then how does the painter construct a language that evokes that experience without just illustrating it? The key to what appears to motivate Nashashibi is that if painting is in itself an anachronistic activity, then the artist proceeds by accepting and consciously celebrating this. To make the painting *Wood, Velvet, Crystal* (2022) that contains an image of a kitsch ornament of two glass swans next to a bunch of bananas, all rendered in soft-pastel colors in a painted blue frame motif, are one thing. But to then cancel the image with a gestural yellow X across the whole surface, asks the viewer a question about taste, as in “No, not this—it is a failure”, yet somehow its success is its self-consciousness, as in “All this is Canceled!” As the viewer, we are witness to the artist’s dilemma.

Shifting meaning and approaching a subject from different angles is embodied in both the moving image and painted surface work of Nashashibi’s art. It questions the process of the present in the

way that time is changing how one thinks and perceives, the shift in roles—child, lover, parent, guardian—brings a continual perceptual change of what one is attracted to and connected with, and this questioning of what is important or not is based not so much on significance or meaning but curiosity and whim.

An earlier painting, *Red Portal, Green Pool* (2019) is a summation of erasure with two red columns framing an image of streaky green horizontal brush strokes. It evokes an image from childhood or a childhood illustrated book—a stage-set or a memory? It has echoes of images that were previously depicted that have been removed—its summation is one of confidence (the grounding pillars) and the vagueness of a dream. This representation of being slightly spooked by seeing something is foregrounded in *My Demons (After Sickert)* (2022). The painting is a homage to the Walter Sickert painting that the artist had seen in an exhibition in London, *King George V and his Racing Manager: A conversation piece*. A subject that would understandably attract in its depiction of a relationship and the nature of gambling. In Nashashibi's version, George V's eyes are closed while the racing manager is depicted in red paint alone, like a demon doppelganger or a version of a split personality. The monogram stamp of the artist's own initials, *RN*, in the bottom right-hand corner of the work appears to be stating “Me too” as if the title of the work alludes to recognizing what Sickert was really depicting.

The title of this exhibition plays with the use of the word *Monogram*, its twentieth first-century fashion meaning as a logo but then also traditionally, as used in art production terms (the monogram was a way to claim your art and always used on prints before the beginning of artists signing their work a century or so ago). In the painting that takes the exhibition title *Monogram* (2022), there is nothing that is discerningly depicted; it is a vast swirl of pastel-colored brushwork that has a snaking yellow form slathered on from top to bottom like a pulled apart version of the famous Gucci logo: the scrawled text of the single word repeated across the surface is both menacing and comic.

The lazy, often quoted phrase “Bad Painting” that first argued a case for a return to figurative painting in the last century doesn't apply here. I think what we are witnessing as the viewer, is one of those strange reversals when “Ugly” actually represents boldness and clumsiness that connects to the grand tradition of the avant-garde: One that searches for purpose through a heightened self-consciousness—this experience flips very quickly into an understanding of beauty, with all the problematic connotations of that realization hanging in the air...

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