

Mequitta Ahuja

MEQUITTA AHUJA'S FOUR LARGE OIL PAINTINGS satisfy the cravings of art-history enthusiasts, not only in their references to early Renaissance Italian paintings, impressionism, and post-impressionism, but in the way they interpret those Western traditions and reclaim creative authorship.

Three paintings spanning an expansive wall depict the artist, nude, occupying tight, sparse rooms, framed by the bisected architectural structure of the room and slivers of the surrounding landscape or otherwise ambiguous exterior—an inside-outside perspective that recalls the biblical frescoes of Giotto. A fourth, incomplete painting (you can tell it's incomplete by the label and the still-visible sketch underneath) titled 'The Artist and Her Model' on the adjacent wall reveals the alchemical process by which Ahuja builds up color, layer by layer, in the three finished paintings. Here, the vivid ground color Ahuja uses as a starting point for creating her nuanced colors is laid bare. In the three other paintings, the layered hues meld to create flat planes of color, hugging the thick weaving of the canvas, with nuanced moments of ground color and bare canvas peeking through the cakey paint.

Characterized by warm, earthy flesh tones and crisp, solid contours, Ahuja's nude figures evoke Paul Gauguin's renderings of Tahitian women,

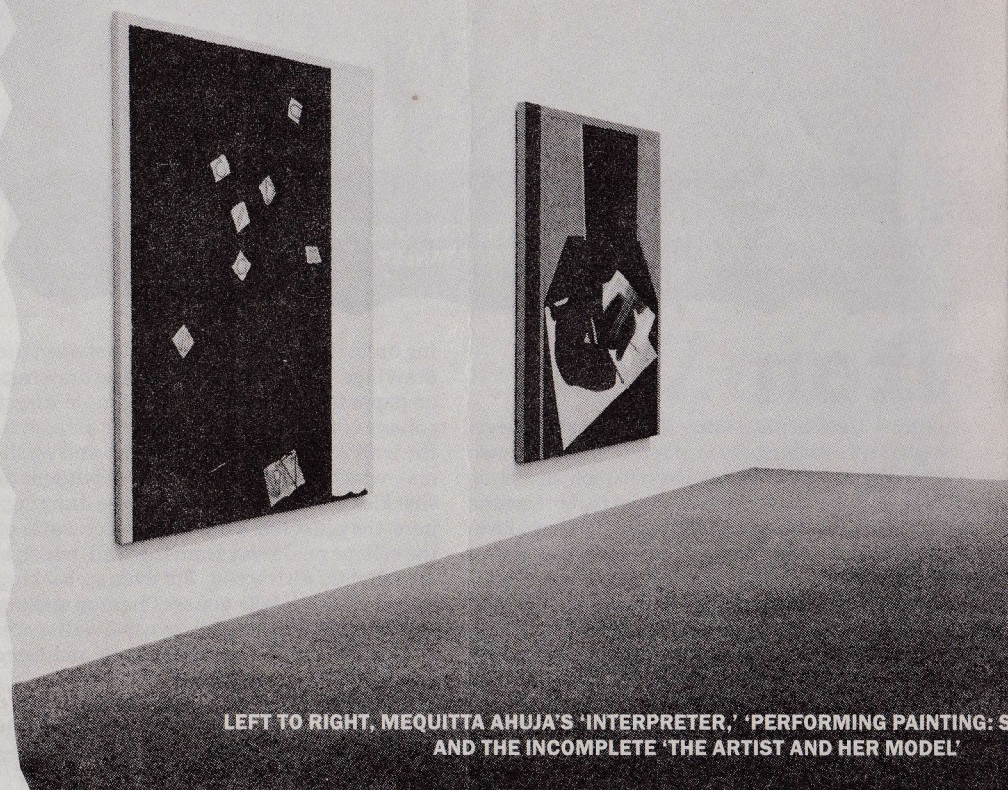
which, while pivotal in post-impressionist painting, objectify the female body and fetishize Tahitian ethnicity. Ahuja's figures are not in any way sexualized; they represent the artist, an American woman of African and South Asian descent, at work—a creator rather than an exotic muse. The flat forms and fluid lines also evoke Japanese prints of women in domestic settings, which had a profound influence on the prints of Mary Cassatt. The incorporation of these influences, which have previously gone through cycles of appropriation, brings them back to a place of cultural equilibrium, in which both Eastern and Western traditions are valued equally without Orientalist fetishism.

Perhaps more powerful than her stylistic

references is Ahuja's use of the personified allegory. In the spirit of this Western tradition—aptly exemplified by Vermeer's iconic 'Allegory of Art,' which is referenced by the opened curtain in Ahuja's 'Performing Painting: Author'—Ahuja uses herself as a symbol of creative authorship, paired with images from Eastern traditions. The subject of 'Performing Painting: Seated Scribe' directly references the famous ancient Egyptian sculpture of the Seated Scribe, as Ahuja presents herself, the artist, as a sort of documentarian. In 'Author' the artist is joined by a floating Hindu goddess as she raises her brush to a blank scroll—the moment before the creation of historical artifact. 'Interpreter,' a dramatically dark

painting in which the crouching figure, surrounded by obscure, floating symbols, holds a mirror to herself as she faces the viewer, might be seen as an allegory for the artist as an interpreter of the histories and traditions from which she draws to create her work.

The three represented roles of author, scribe, and interpreter reclaim the artist's agency over the processes by which history is created, recorded, and understood. With the myriad art-historical references both overtly and subtly packed into her paintings, Ahuja's work is not blindly referential: It methodically reconsiders the multifaceted and multicultural nature of art history and what it means for contemporary art in a globalized society. (Maura Callahan)



LEFT TO RIGHT, MEQUITTA AHUJA'S 'INTERPRETER,' 'PERFORMING PAINTING: SEATED SCRIBE' AND THE INCOMPLETE 'THE ARTIST AND HER MODEL'