



SHARMISTHA RAY
Reflections + Transformations



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Kit White Interview

Kit White: As a painter, you are working within a medium and a formal tradition that represents the Western canon while you are really, by virtue of your background, a citizen of many cultures. Can you describe your relationship to painting in the context of your return to India after being educated as an artist in the U.S.? Is there a statement involved in your pursuit of this medium?

Sharmistha Ray: To work in any medium, an artist has to 'think' in that medium. For me, many possibilities open up in painting, I 'think' in that medium. I am also admittedly bound to the idea of permanence, of leaving a beautiful object behind. For a few years, after moving to India in 2006, I was exposed to a wealth of contemporary art in India and internationally, which was pushing media in many different directions. I engaged with it, wrote about it and was very involved in organizing exhibitions that went beyond painting, drawing and sculpture. However, I discovered that my impulses as an artist and curator are very different; when I returned to my own artistic practice a few years ago I wanted to start from a place that felt 'real.' I understood that trends in Indian art were moving away from painting –and in fact, it's a culture that's embraced canvas painting for a very brief period of its history –but I also recognized that my personal history and influences had a different breadth and depth to it, and I had to be true to that.

Painting has become a statement by default, because there are factions in the art world who wonder why I took up a 'dated' medium; but I don't see it that way. Painting has lasted hundreds of years, unlike many other trends that have obsolescence programmed into them. I am not interested in that kind of transience. Nancy Adajania in her excellent catalogue essay for my last solo show, *hidden geographies*, summed it up thus "...the nomad forms her notion of belonging not only intellectually but through a sensuous knowledge gained from holding, grasping and moulding the shape of her location." I only really started painting after I came to India; painting is about chromatics, and chromatics are influenced by light. Perhaps, it's the tropical light and the compulsion to capture my sensory experiences here. It's how I get to know a place better; it's how I locate myself.

KW: Your investment in the materiality of painting is very clear. And beyond the obvious attributes of the sensual and the haptic, there is clearly a desire in your work to have the image emerge from the material, to make the material essential to the appearance of the image. This strikes me as particularly true in the *hidden geographies* where the image is more suggested than palpably present. But now, you are taking a slight shift with the introduction of the figure. The presence of a recognizable form pushes that balance of material and image in the particular direction of the cognitive and explicit meaning. What are the concerns that drove you in that direction and do you see it as a substantial shift or simply as a way to re-invent that relationship between material and content?

SR: The materiality of oil paint is essential, and the images (or non-images) in *hidden geographies* morphed out of the interrelationships between color, texture, surface, gesture, depth, and so on. The freedom of not having a defined image was something I had worked towards since I started working with abstraction seriously in 2006. It took me a while to break down the image completely and nuance it, so that it existed in and between the layers, instead of on the surface. The eye focuses on recognizable forms, and I wanted to disband the focal image for a repeating rhythm that would engage the whole surface, and trigger the impression of an image and a non-image simultaneously. At the same time, I didn't want complete chaos, so I used a loose grid structure to organize what was happening on the canvas. After that exhibition, I decided to remove the grid and see what would happen to those relationships. There was a lot of push and

pull that went on, and eventually I came upon what I call the ‘crushed flower’ symbolism: the impression of crushed flowers that emerges from the meshing together of these different relationships on the surface. It exuded the kind of ‘chaos’ I was looking for; it pointed towards an organic form, while furthering the haptic qualities of the work.

However, I was still not satisfied. I was thinking about the essence of female sexuality and suggesting it in the titles of my works like *Forbidden Pleasures* and *Sublimation of Desire* – even the ‘crushed flower’ is a complex feminine symbol that takes from the common allusion to the flower, but builds on it through the sensation of being ‘crushed,’ which is at once very tactile, but also a bit violent. But I started to feel that something was ‘missing;’ I wanted to create another formal device to take the narratives deeper, to make the feminine voice even more complex, but what would that formal device be? I started to think back to the figurative works I had made before I entered the realm of abstraction over a decade ago and the steps that had led me forward to abstraction. For a short period as a graduate student at Pratt Institute, when I had made my first experiments with abstract paintings, I was making small color-field studies alongside large charcoal drawings that were driven by identity politics. There was an obvious contradiction between the color studies and the monochromatic drawings, and due to the usual pressures of graduate school, I dropped the color studies as they were rather rudimentary and incongruent with my main body of work.

Even though I am interested in materiality, abstraction has never been based on a ‘pure’ set of principles for me; rather, I see abstraction as a messy set of relationships hovering between poles of object and non-object based painting. Even though my first solo exhibition marked me as an abstractionist, I had a feeling I would bring back the figure at some point. With this show in New York, the introduction of the naked female is a progression of my earlier figurative work around gender and sexuality; but I’ve now placed the figure in conversation with a ‘representation’ of sexuality that I’ve developed through abstraction. There’s an immediate figure-ground relationship that starts to happen when you introduce the figure, and I knew intuitively that the sensuous mostly non-literal worlds I had so painstakingly built up would have to negotiate, maybe even fight with, this new figure-ground relationship. I was worried about this, but decided to take the plunge anyway and see what would happen. I was determined to overcome the waves of abstraction that would keep subsuming any female form that would start to emerge; so yes, in this sense, I did re-invent the relationship between material and content.

The relationship between the ‘figure’ and the ‘ground’ shifts from painting to painting, with the form emerging most definitively in *A Place of Her Own* – and yet, in this painting, the reclining nude (a take on the art historical odalisque) still floats in an abstract painting that doubles as an open sky and garden. The figure for me is a formal and narrative ‘device,’ but I haven’t made any concrete shift towards being a ‘figurative’ painter. These are just categories, and I want to be able to move in and out of them.



Forbidden Pleasures, 2011



The Sublimation of Desire (detail), 2011



Cube-like World (from *Queer Series*), 1998



Retribution (from *Queer Series*), 1998

KW: You mentioned gender politics as an abiding concern of yours, but when you speak about making “the feminine voice...more complex”, you invoke sensuality and sexuality as opposed to the political issues one customarily associates with 20th century feminism. Even your desire to escape “pure” abstraction, and substitute it with, as you say, “a messy set of relationships”, seems to reignite the symbolic association of sensuality and the feminine that is not unlike what we think of in looking at the nude in traditional western art. Is there a difference between the male gaze and the female gaze in terms of the portrayal of the female form or is that beside the point? Is conflating the figure and the ground through this rich use of paint a way to suggest that sensuality, femininity suffuses the entirety of the image?

SR: When I talk about gender politics, I am really talking about my own politics and what was expected of me growing up in an expatriate Bengali family in an Islamic society in Kuwait; I was expected to get married to someone of my own community, have a family and exhibit all the traits of femininity in my appearance and speech. I’ve had that gender dialogue with myself, because I’ve never fit into the categories narrowly defined for women, either in my person or my outlook. My first fleshed out body of work was when I was 19 years of age, and it was called *Queer Series*. I had received a grant from the queer alumni at Williams College to make an original body of work, and I spent the summer of ’98 in the basement of my parent’s home in New Jersey producing them. In these works, the subject was myself, and through large narrative self-portraits in charcoal, I rendered gender transformations of myself. The androgynous self emerged over and over again, asserting itself within the frame of the drawings. My sexuality was also starting to bubble up in aggressive and violent ways. At the same time, I was trying desperately to grasp American culture as my family had immigrated to the United States concurrent to my going to college. I was really thrust all at once into a myriad set of negotiations that took me many years to disentangle.

The complexity of the feminine voice is thus, my own. I am not ‘representing’ all women I am representing my voice, with its specific trans-cultural and trans-gendered tonalities and impulses. Even the terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ were adopted for political reasons, and have to be used judiciously in art; I prefer the terms ‘queer’ and ‘queering’ as an alternative to hetero-normative ways of thinking and being. With reference to the idealized nude, the female form in the drawings and the paintings is based on a specific person, but I wouldn’t like to embellish this further! The presence of same-sex desire is evident, and the fact that her form recalls the art historical female nude – as it was represented by men and for men – triggered for me the association of the ideal form with the male gaze. My appropriation of this form is an attempt to reclaim my own identity –and by monumentalizing desire through ‘my’ gaze, create ‘a place of my own.’

Keep in mind the ‘place’ I am talking about resides in an Indian context, which is very different from a Western one. This is probably where my work diverges from the Western canon, and starts to draw experientially. Indian society is entrenched in patriarchy on every level. The feminist movement hasn’t matured in India, although there’s more awareness around women’s issues now. The queer movement is also tak-

ing shape, and there’s definitely more visibility in major cities; but still, it’s a far cry from the ‘freedoms’ that one enjoys ‘in the west.’ In my case, there’s the physical back-and-forth, as I continue to have family in the United States and come here often. And yet, I’ve started to form roots in India. There’s an alternating of identity that’s constantly taking place, a simultaneous divergence and convergence, a varying set of negotiations to contend with from place to place that gets internalized – this is with regards to my sexuality and gender, but also culture, ethnicity, and race.

Sara Ahmed, a brilliant theorist of Pakistani and British origins, explores the notion of sexual orientations within phenomenological concepts. Close to the beginning of her book *Queer Phenomenology*, she writes “Even in a strange or unfamiliar environment we might find our way, given our familiarity with social form, with how the social is arranged. This is not to say we don’t get lost, or that at times we don’t reach our destination. And this is not to say that in some places we are not shocked beyond the capacity for recognition. But “getting lost” still takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by resisting what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling. Familiarity is shaped by the “feel” of space or by how spaces “impress” upon bodies. The familiarity is not, then, “in” the world as that which is already given. The familiar is an effect of inhabitation, we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out towards objects that are already within reach. Even when things are within reach, we still have to reach for those things for them to be reached.”

Queer individuals, especially if there’s added filters of race, gender, ethnicity (and for some, religion) to contend with, cannot claim existing and ‘normative’ structures for themselves; they have to create their own. For myself, these structures are not rigid, they are organic and constantly changing their shape and form as internalization happens, of new ideas, new experiences, new negotiations. I sometimes wonder if the idea of having a ‘style’ is also not part of some dogma. As you can see with this new work, there’s quite a variance between the paintings and the drawings...

KW: I sense, then, that the “field” of your paintings is a space in which you negotiate multiple possibilities and is a reification of an identity that emerges as much from the physical, the sensual, as the social. Sara Ahmed’s assessment that “being lost is a way of inhabiting space” is a wonderful metaphor not just for a way of working, but, also, for a way of “finding” an image, a meaning, from the process of looking. Does that “dance” between maker and image, painting and viewer, reflect your relationship to the act of painting?

SR: I would like to take a moment to talk about the drawings, and weave that back into my dialogue about the paintings. As I was making the figurative paintings, I mentioned that I kept fighting with waves of abstraction; the sheer materiality of paint driven by the ‘habit’ of technique would continually blanket the figure. It was only after several attempts involving experiments with my technique that the figure started



Fields of Gold #2, 2013



Bed of Roses #2, 2013



Nude #1, 2013



Nude #2, 2013

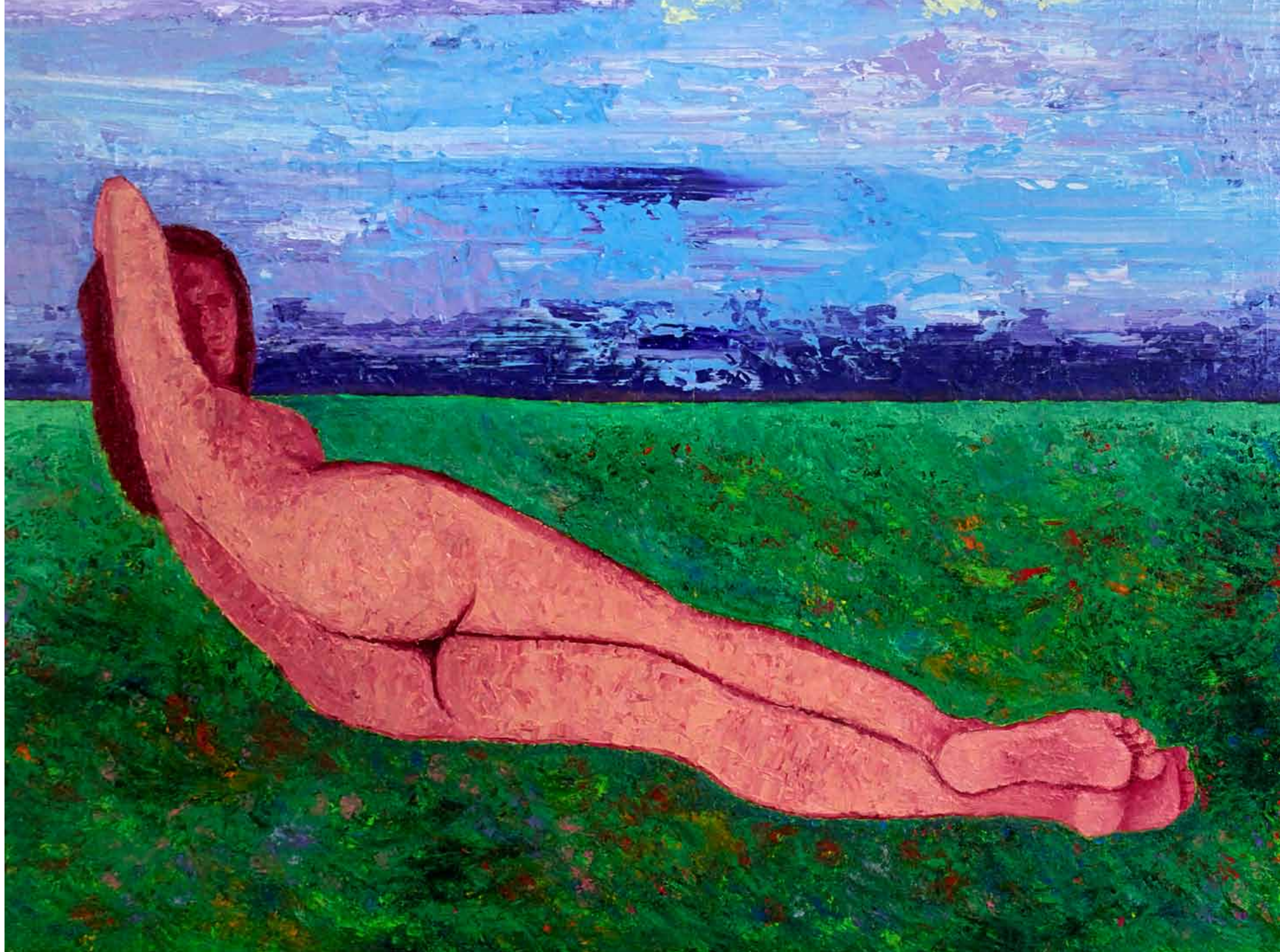
to emerge: as a suggestion of feminine forms located in a golden arcadia in *Fields of Gold #2* and *Fields of Gold #3*, and as imperfect mirrors in the ‘companion’ works *Bed of Roses #2* and *Bed of Roses #3*. While making these works, and pushing through the constantly shifting planes of figure-ground concerns from painting to painting, but also within the paintings, I decided to ‘put down my weapons’ and take a diversion into the drawings. I did this to align myself with the figure more closely, to understand how ‘she’ can exist within the frame as an independent entity. Freed of the concerns of paint materiality, these intimate charcoal and ink drawings started as simple line drawings bathed in ink washes with the figure floating on a white ground. However, as I started to see their potential for narrative, I developed them further. These works enter into ‘her’ bedroom and have a hushed air of intimacy to them, which was purposeful. I realize the title *States of Arousal* is on the ironic side, something like turning your clothes inside out! Again, it’s a projection of my own desires: the ‘woman’ here is an agent; the locus of carnal desire finds its form in her.

The extrapolation of this explicit relationship between the ‘subject’ and ‘body,’ enabled me to open up a path for the last painting, *A Place of Her Own*, which up until then had been in a state of transition. I had only partially completed the figure, and then abandoned it in frustration. I just couldn’t see what ‘she’ wanted from me. In a way, the drawings were a way of ‘getting lost’ in order to find my way back to the ‘grand narrative.’ This could have happened in a more premeditated way, but the ‘sensing through’ is really a part of my nature; a way of inhabiting and understanding the spaces I exist in and through the world, and is reflected in my practice. It is in the ‘sensing’ where meaning resides and is transmitted, through which the haptic qualities are borne.

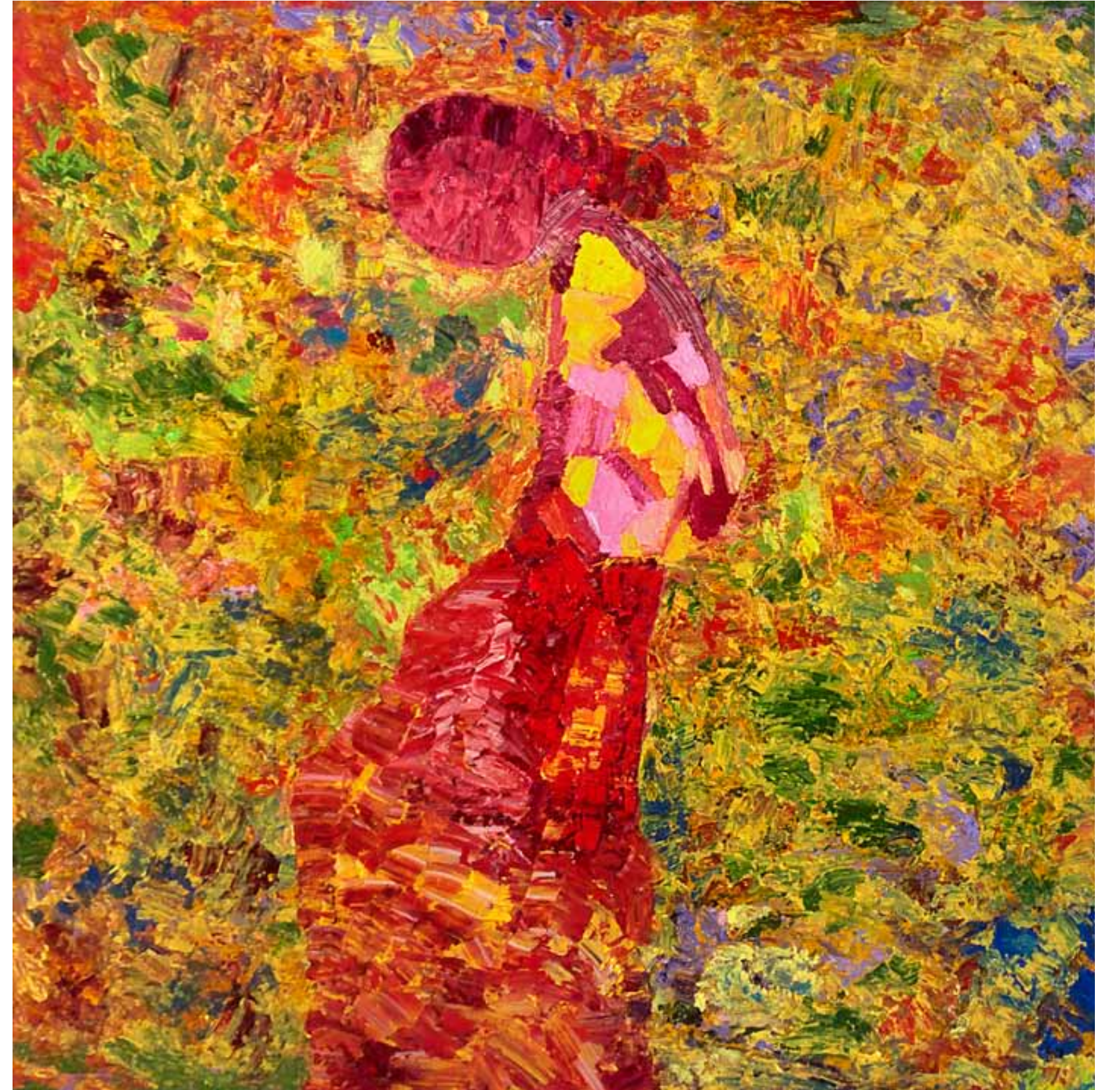
Kit White is a New York based artist and writer. He studied Fine Arts at Harvard University and his work has been the subject of nineteen solo exhibitions, fourteen of which were in New York, and is in the collections of many museums, including the Guggenheim Museum. In 1979, he received the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award for painting. He is also a published critic whose writing has appeared in *Art News* and *Review Magazine* as well as numerous catalogue essays. He is the author of *101 Things To Learn In Art School* from MIT Press, 2012, and has taught and lectured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the Maine College of Art, and McGill University. He is an Associate professor of painting at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, where he has taught continuously since 1997.

Paintings

A Place of Her Own, Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches, 2013



Fields of Gold #3, Oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches, 2013



Fields of Gold #2, Oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches, 2013



City of Eros, Oil on canvas, 96 x 72 inches, 2013



Bed of Roses #2, Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches, 2013



Bed of Roses #3, Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches, 2013



Drawings



Nude #1, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #2, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #3, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #4, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #5, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #6, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #7, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #8, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #9, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013



Nude #10, charcoal and ink on canvas, 12 x 16 inches, 2013

Artist Biography



SHARMISTHA RAY

Sharmistha Ray is an artist, curator, writer, speaker and TED Fellow with roots in Mumbai and New York. Ray's debut solo exhibition of abstract paintings, *hidden geographies* (2012), at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai, comprised of large, densely painted oils on canvas. Sharmistha postulated canonical ideals of beauty and the sublime by distilling her memories, photographs, observations and experiences of landscapes, both urban and natural. The exhibition was a major commercial and critical success, with Ray featured in many leading lifestyle publications and periodicals across India including *Vogue*, *Femina*, *Indian Express* and *Bombay Times*.

In 2012, Sharmistha was awarded a painting commission by the Mont Blanc Young Artist Worldwide Patronage Collection, which is now a part of the corporate collection. In 2013, Sharmistha was shortlisted as Artist of the Year for the L'Oréal Paris Femina Women Awards. A TED Fellow, Ray gave a TED Talk at the first official TED Fellows Retreat in August 2013 in Whistler, BC, about the deepest triggers of her artistic practice, including the social and cultural forces that have shaped her. Following the solo exhibition *Reflections + Transformations* at Aicon Gallery in New York, Sharmistha will have a solo exhibition Galerie Steph in Singapore in 2014.

Before returning to a full-fledged artistic practice, Sharmistha held high-profile positions at some of the world's leading art companies including Bodhi Art, Hauser & Wirth and Art Basel. She has been a critical influencer in the Indian art world as a prolific arts writer for periodicals and art market columnist for *The Economic Times*, and has commented for television stations, including NDTV and CNBC in India, as well as foreign periodicals like *How to Spend It* by *FT*. In 2010, Ray was invited by Art Basel in partnership with ProHelvetia as one of India's leading curators for a special tour of Switzerland's art museums to coincide with Art Basel. Sharmistha has curated high profile exhibitions in and out of galleries, including Art of Travel for the launch of *Condé Nast Traveller* India, in 2010.

Ray was born in Kolkata, and lived in Kuwait before moving to the United States with her family in 1997. She has degrees from Williams College (B.A., Art), and a dual degree M.S. in Theory, Criticism & History of Art, Design & Architecture & M.F.A. in Painting from Pratt Institute. She is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades including a TED Fellowship (2009) and Joan Mitchell M.F.A. Grant (2004). Ray's works are in private collections around the world, including the United States, Germany, Austria, Italy, India, Singapore & Australia.

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Catalog designed by Christine Navin



35 Great Jones Street • New York, NY 10012 • 212.725.6092 • newyork@aicongallery.com
Design: Christine Navin • www.christinenavin.com

