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October 30, 2018

'Salman Toor's New Art Exhibition Is a Breathtaking Vision of Queer Intimacy'

By Osman Can Yerebakan

The Pakistani artist talks breaking sociopolitical and art historical norms in his exhibition at Aicon Gallery, *Time After Time*.



New York-based artist Salman Toor's brushstrokes place young queer brown men in scenes of love, friendship, and solitude in his luscious oil paintings. In *Time After Time*, his ongoing exhibition at Aicon Gallery in Manhattan, he challenges the systematic exclusion of queer men of color from art history. Here, his figures claim

the foreground with their bodies, donning flamboyant attires over their delicate physiques. The artist's dandy types nonchalantly sip cocktails, zealously sway to music, or lazily lounge in their downtown apartments. Beauty, vulnerability, and power shines through each painting.

The artist weaves elements from both Pakistani and American (specifically, New York City) culture into his depictions of intricate scenarios and intimate encounters. Ahead of his third exhibition at Aicon Gallery, we spoke with Toor about painting scenes of queer intimacy, and his sources of inspiration.



Your figures are noticeably content within their social and emotional habitats. And when they are occasionally distressed, their agony seems to result from sudden loss of this happiness — almost as if they didn't know how to suffer. How do you build your relationship with your figures and determine their emotional states?

The figures are imaginary versions of me and my friends, created from a mix of memory, fantasy, and art history. These characters take on my own journey as a queer person of color. I've lived in New York for over a decade, but I grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, a conservative culture in which violence against any form of queerness seethes just under the surface. The happiness in my images is a contingent and shifting matter; the characters are multicultural. Their identity oscillates between Brown Man and Queer Boy, but they also are occasionally subject to the intolerance of their communities of origin.

In the exhibition's eponymous painting, *Time After Time*, a young brown man consoles his white friend or partner who is clearly going through something difficult. Such solidarity and compassion is a theme repeated throughout your paintings. Can you talk about the queer solidarity you build between your characters?

I think queer friendships are special, because they often are networks of support in the face of ignorance or aggression from the outside world; they resemble family. In these paintings, I try to create moments of intimacy, camaraderie, and consolation. The characters are literary, artsy types and they revel in being fully understood by each other inside the world of painting. In *Three Friends* and *After Party*, they babble and dance and try to laugh off Trump's Muslim ban by campily throwing back martinis. They exchange stories of their weekend woes, or their homophobic relatives, or what they're watching on Netflix. In *East Village Iqbal Bano*, they drunkenly listen to a Youtube video of a '60s Pakistani diva, evoking the spirit of classical Indian ghazal in a cramped apartment full of books.

In Pakistan, such friendships and partnerships are carried out only in private spaces, tucked away from hostility. The nature of these bonds is not so different in the United States — they go beyond ethnic and cultural boundaries.



An important impact of your paintings stems from seeing brown men occupy spaces and lifestyles associated with white privilege. This ranges from living in the East Village at a well-furnished apartment to having free time for leisure. Your figures own these living situations and blend in.

The spaces are fantasies. I live in a cozy hobbit hole in the East Village and reimagine my place in paintings like *Three Friends* and *Shower Boy*, and my neighborhood in *Eleventh Street*. By creating these private, deeply comfortable and sometimes privileged-looking spaces, I want to give dignity and safe spaces to the boys of my paintings. Somehow, this also makes me feel safe and comfortable, solidifying my context in this culture.

A person's bookshelf reveals a lot about them. Floating Shelf I and II solely depict books without their owners, and we see books such as Modern Poetry of Pakistan and Susan Sontag's journals. Could you talk about depicting queerness through objects instead of bodies?

16 years ago, never having been to the United States, I flew straight from Lahore to the cornfields of Ohio to attend college. Although I was surprised to find familiar strains of conservatism there, I moved into a hippie commune for my American education. I could paint my nude, long-haired housemates all day long. I had so much fun! Years later, I moved to New York to attend Pratt Institute, and with some effort, I was able to stay on. Now, I live between Lahore and New York City.

Floating Shelf I and *II* attempt to hint at the breadth of this experience: queerness as a portrait resisting easy identification; as unexpected connections across cultures, genders, between the past and present. For me, there is a thrill in bringing Susan Sontag's diaries and biographies, with her imperious picture on the cover, together with an imagined black-and-white photo of my paternal grandparents, an imaginary vintage photograph of an invented Pakistani mom, and monographs of my heroes like Rubens, Goya, and V.S. Naipaul. It's queer curation!

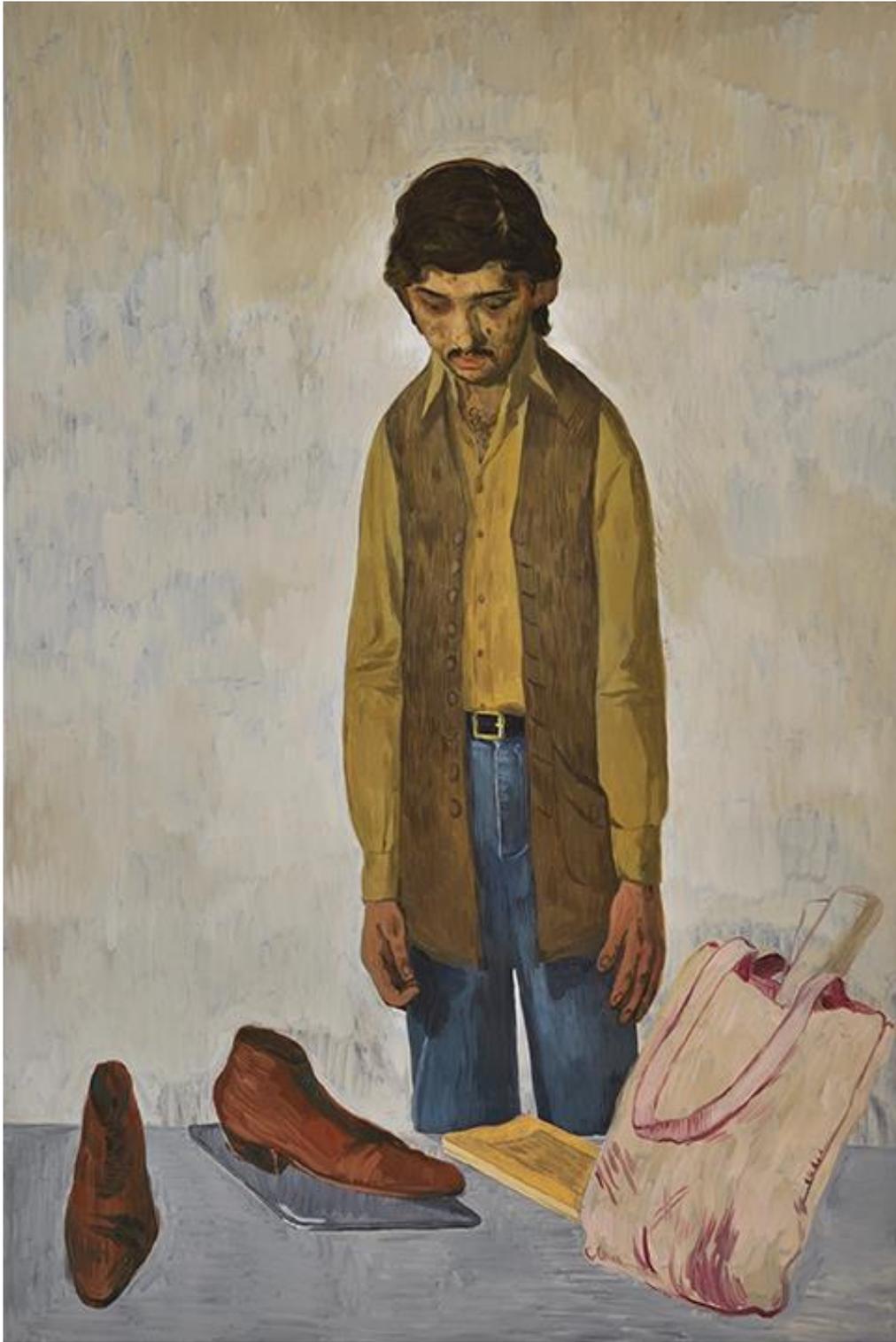
And lamps! I love lamps and cannot abide by overhead lighting.

There is a cinematic effect in your paintings where characters are caught between crucial moments, almost like a film still. How autobiographical are your works, and where do you find your sources for your narratives?

The paintings are imaginary, so naturally they are also somewhat autobiographical. I paint smaller works without sketching or planning, just as mental pictures. These days, I'm a great fan of the 18th century painter Pietro Longhi. The love of color and costume is what drives my work as well. From looking at pictures like his, I want to memorialize or conjure a satin finish bomber jacket, a striped kameez, turtlenecks, and lovely frayed shoes, shawls, or Afghan hats. I also look at contemporary painters like Kerry James Marshall, Dana Schutz, Louis Fratino, and Hiba Schahbaz. I'm lucky enough to be painting at a time when inclusive figurative representation is making space for itself in the art world.

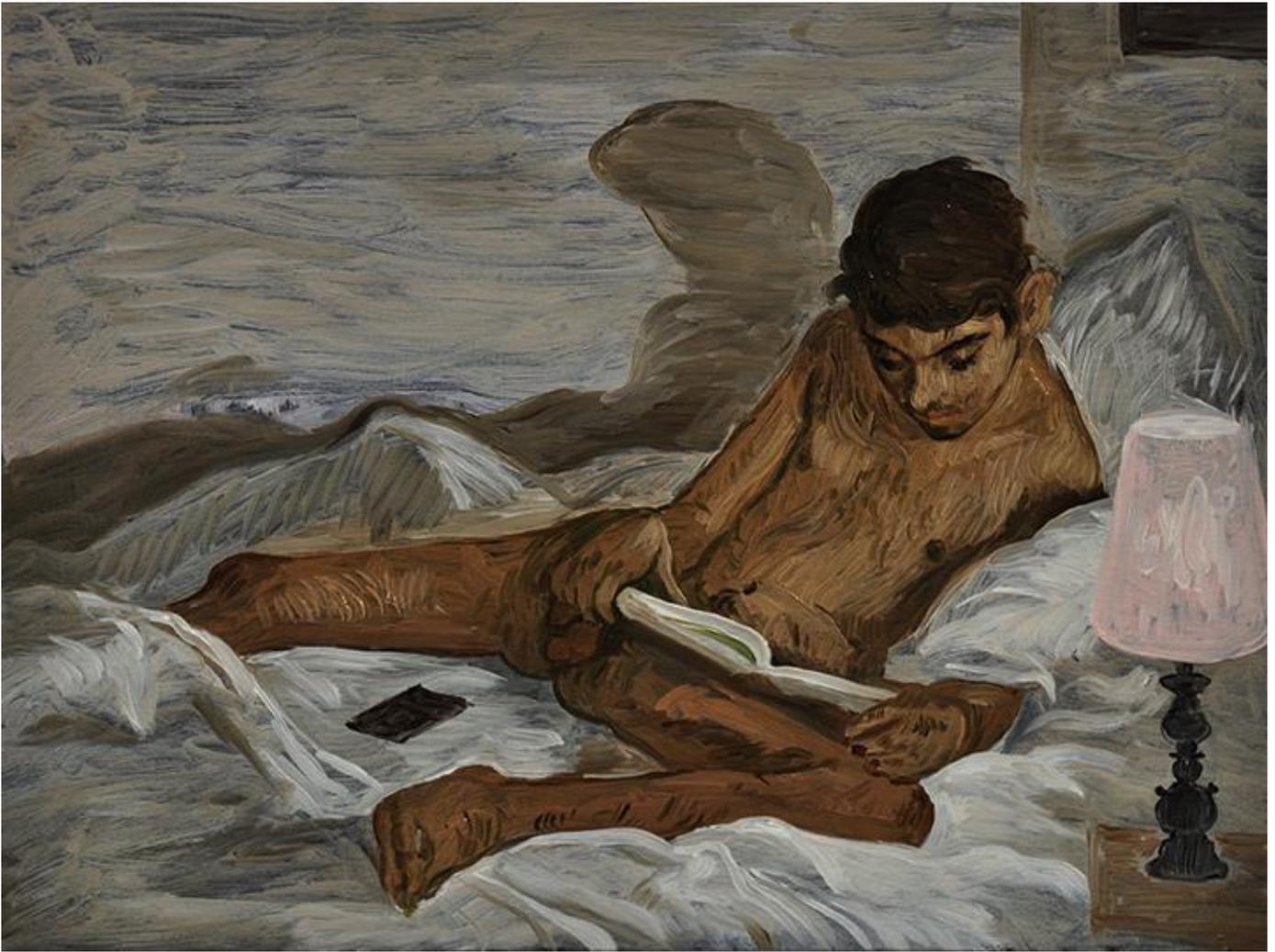
In *Eleventh Street*, New York resembles a North African or Middle Eastern town. How do you weave different histories and geographies onto canvas?

In *Eleventh Street* (which was created with references and models), I thought of the Muslim Community Center on 11th Street in the East Village. I had to admit to myself that I wanted to paint some kind of iconic narrative masterpiece! The tender queer scene in the foreground and the religious prayer scene in the background are connected through a middle ground — the world of literature and music — manned by two old beatniks. I like that the sense of place is muddled up. I eventually created a fantastical street combining the East Village and some new commercial neighborhood of Lahore.



Tenderness is most evident in your nude paintings, such as *The Reader* or *Shower Boy*. How do you paint brown skin as a social and political territory?

I explore the brown body as a site of suspicion, indifference, curiosity, and adoration in its small context in American culture. I see the brown body as a disseminator of subcultured voices and experiences lost in the polarized discourse of 'with us or against us.' Having said that, I'm hardly thinking of these things when I paint. In the end, I paint because it's the funnest and the best thing I can do!



Salman Toor: *Time After Time* is on view at Aicon Gallery through November 21, 2018.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.