

# HYPERALLERGIC

## ‘Painting the Imagined Space Where East and West Harmonize’

By **Bansie Vasvani** on November 30, 2015

Salman Toor’s insular scenes of life in Pakistan have vanished. Instead ghosts, hobos, poets, exiles, counts, ascetics, rabble-rousers, vagrants, and partygoers inhabit a no-man’s-land where time stands still. In Toor’s second solo exhibition at New York’s Aicon Gallery, *Resident Alien*, an artist possessed by a spirit to experiment and plunge into a new world has emerged.

Beginning with a series of small paintings, including “Newscaster IV” (2015) and “Jetsetter” (2015), Toor’s characters develop an otherworldliness that does away with the specifics of place and perspective. With just the right combination of humor and the grotesque, the newscaster’s skinny arms and contorted face anticipate the jetsetter’s cohorts at an airport security checkpoint that recalls the lyrics of the Eagles song “Hotel California”: “And I was thinking to myself / This could be Heaven or this could be Hell.” A blond boy in oversize blue rubber gloves, a green-haired man pointing to some sort of symbol in a book, and a skull-capped bystander foreshadow the panoply of surreal, spectral figures populating Toor’s larger paintings.



In “Resident Aliens” (2015), the figures are an amalgamation of comic books, paintings by Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and van Dyck, Islamic figures, and hip denizens of the East Village. Drawing directly onto the canvas without preparatory sketches, photographs, or images, Toor described his process in an interview with Hyperallergic as an “act of resistance” against any single “monolithic reading of culture.” Set against a clear, starlit night, a dreamy man blows plumes of smoke and faces a group of ghostly characters with long, unattached limbs and bodiless frames. Three ashen-faced women — one in a feathered fedora hat — and a spectacled man peer onto a table of spilled wine like revelers in a space outside of time. These hybrid configurations of exuberant and fluid

brushstrokes come alive despite their formless shapes, creating what the artist calls “new identities without dissonance.”

Toor’s triptych “Rooftop Party with Ghosts” (2015) portrays a location that historians often refer to as the third space, a place created by non-Western artists whose work is a fusion of histories, periods, methods, and ideologies. The artist’s self-described role as “an apprentice from the East” is reflected by the Persian text in the background of the painting, which quotes the 17th-century Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, whose works are highly revered for their perennial relevance. Shah’s poem is paraphrased by Toor as “Come let us go to a place where all are blind. Where no one is ahead and no one is behind.” Through a pageantry of players in a carnivalesque mood — including long-nosed men whispering to each other, couples fondling in the distance, a turbaned holy man regaling a crowd, an Andy Warhol look-alike socializing at a bar, and an apparition from the Pakistan partition surveying the scene — Toor presents a community in convivial bliss. Wearing a combination of South Asian tunics, boots, jackets, and shawls, these figures of varied garb and ambiguous disposition painted in vibrant hues and forms are reminiscent of the sub-continent but buoyed by a worldliness that makes them universally discernible. By giving some grandeur to his images, Toor intends to “stretch” viewers’ imaginations to embrace these composite characters made up of a mishmash of cultural references and conceived as agents of change.



Ruminations by the exiled poet Hasan Mujtaba in his poem “For Allen Ginsberg” inspired Toor’s large diptych of the same name. Words from the poem, glass buildings, mosques, the World Trade Center, vampires representing colonizers and employees of the East India Company, and a violent character resembling Captain Haddock from *The Adventures of Tintin* metaphorically decry Mujtaba’s circumstances by fusing his personal memories of being ostracized for his views in Pakistan with global turmoil and the crusade against Islam. By invading and, as he puts it, “sully[ing] personal spaces,” the artist gives voice to the disenfranchised as he portrays figures in different states of violence, vulnerability, and suffering.

Toor’s process of crossbreeding is best interpreted as his rebellion against being branded as a South Asian painter. His paintings envision the possibility of a new world that commingles the East and the West and projects a third space of harmony.

Salman Toor: Resident Alien *continues* at Aicon Gallery (35 Great Jones Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 5.