

Distance and Proximity

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MAHA AHMED, *Demon of a thousand faces*, 2020, gouache on paper, 61 × 97 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London / Berlin / Nevlunghavn.

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Maha Ahmed

DUBAI

The *Siege of Lanka* (c. 1725), a series of miniature paintings by 18th-century artist Manaku, illustrates scenes from the epic *Ramayana*. In one folio, the hero Rama is seen surrounded by his loyal army of bears and monkeys as he interrogates the demon spies Shuka and Sarana, sent by his nemesis Ravana. While Rama's animal troops are often considered insignificant in the poem, they are centered in the fantastical realm of Pakistani artist Maha Ahmed, who filled a 2018 miniature watercolor-on-paper work with the creatures. Provocatively titling the piece *Demon Plans a Ruse*, Ahmed asks audiences to locate the “demons” in her rendition of the *Ramayana* story, and yet sets them up to fail by rendering the figures with near-identical facial expressions. She thus turns the epic into an allegory for the absurdity of othering.

Animals appear elsewhere in Ahmed's explorations of social division. Born in Pakistan and trained at Lahore's National College of Arts in miniature paintings, she lived and worked in Tokyo from 2016 to 2018. She transmutes the alienation that she felt while in Japan in images inspired by *nihonga*, which, like miniature paintings, prizes meticulousness. In *Demon of a thousand faces* (2020), showcased in her 2020 solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, she incorporates negative spaces in the shapes of *kumokasumi* (cloud and mists), a *nihonga* motif, fragmenting a land with rich vegetation. Conflicts unfold around the separated territories, with animals ganging up to drive other species away from their habitats; for instance, two dragons ambush a bird while a trio of cranes hover over a fish. By blending the tropes and techniques of miniature paintings and *nihonga* to express herself, Ahmed hoped to overcome her isolation.

In her attempts to convey her ostracism, Ahmed also highlights quiet, solitary moments. In the painting *Noise of solitude* (2020), a hybrid creature with a bird's head and bear's body rests on a stone, seemingly indulging in its own thoughts. In Ahmed's portrayal, the outcast does not appear to be bothered by its expulsion, but learns to enjoy its time alone, celebrating the uniqueness of its own existence.

PAMELA WONG



HUANG HAI-HSIN, *Amuse Ourselves to Death*, 2013, oil on canvas, 102 × 127 cm.
Courtesy the artist.

Huang Hai-Hsin

NEW YORK / TAIPEI

“You can’t lose it now,” I told myself as I sat at my office desk, trying to reel myself in from the brink of a laughing fit. I was looking at a digital copy of Huang Hai-Hsin’s painting *Seeing is Believing* (2011). A thick, veiny trunk crowned with a luscious bush has convened three men, who stand around the potted plant, appraising it. The subtle jut of the leftmost figure’s hips was what set me off. He appears to be surreptitiously sizing himself up against the phallic object.

Since her days as a graduate student at New York’s School of Visual Arts, Taipei-born Huang has been drawing and painting observations of our awry world. Though humorous, her compositions are never simply chuckle-inducing. I later wondered about *Seeing is Believing*: What’s funny about toxic masculinity? Indeed, Huang’s potent caricatures leave a slightly off aftertaste.

The artist provokes conflicted reactions by confronting us with our contradictions. In the oil-on-canvas work *Amuse Ourselves to Death* (2013), three women roll on the floor chortling as a storm whips through the room. Two are partially covering their eyes—a motif that reappears throughout Huang’s practice—betraying their determination to ignore the trouble. The subjects’ manic laughter, incongruous with the situation, points to the allure of emotionally detaching from reality. Nowadays, “people seem to know more but feel less,” Huang explained. A contrived aloofness is also embodied by some of the guests in the nearly five-meter-wide drawing *Art Basel* (2019), including two well-heeled socialites posing in front of a Christopher Wool-esque panel that says “Lazy and Stupid,” as if proudly embracing the insult. With a few pencil lines, Huang suggests the guarded vulnerabilities of the culturally powerful.

In her latest series, *99 Cent* (2020–), she continues to depict bemusing phenomena. Drawing from the packaging found in the titular stores in New York, the canvases feature models selling various ideals, except their likenesses have been skewed in the products’ cheap manufacturing processes. We fail as big as we dream, Huang highlights. Her tragicomedies reveal moments of frailty and strength, beauty and uncanniness, joy and pain: the contradictions that make us human.

CHLOE CHU



Installation view of **ANA CHADUNELI**'s "Terrible Dreams," at Patara Gallery, Tbilisi, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Patara Gallery.

Ana Chaduneli

RUSTAVI

Scattered across the slate floor of Patara Gallery were small mounds of sandy earth, from which sprang twigs with withered leaves, conjuring a sere scrubland in the middle of a graffitied Tbilisi locale. Ana Chaduneli had collected the plants from the semi-arid landscape around her hometown, Rustavi, and created sculptures, paintings, and drawings inspired by the specimens for her Patara presentation, "Terrible Dreams" (2021).

Snaking throughout the space from floor to ceiling were white clay vines that resembled the sprigs' monstrous cousins, replete with thorns and serrated leaves—forms replicated in the three line-drawings mounted along the back wall. Shorter, skyward-reaching vines and a leafy clay shoot bursting out of a structural column lent the impression of the organisms' inevitable spread. Chaduneli's plants are chimerical, proliferating in varied stylized forms. In the painting *Fire Plant 1* (2021), the subject alchemizes into another element altogether, its elongated leaves and starburst blossoms rendered as a scarlet blaze

with streaks of violet incandescence. Such works isolate moments in which, per the artist, “everyday objects and organisms transcend each other and boundaries dissolve between them.”

Trained as an architect at the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts before pursuing a MA at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Chaduneli is fascinated by distortions of space. For “Terrible Dreams,” the artist painted black silhouetted vines onto whitewashed, solid-panel window shutters, but the image’s flatness undercuts the illusory view.

This absence of perspective is particularly marked in a series of untitled, surreal landscapes for “What if you were in my garden” (2019) at The Why Not Gallery in Tbilisi. An arched canvas from this body of work portrays an impermeable fog above the horizon line, where it meets a muddy green riverbank populated by two-dimensional plants and an antenna-like structure. The stream in the foreground is improbably bounded by flames, while a flower bud and snake, exempt from fluid mechanics, appear superimposed onto the pale blue water. Influenced by the bounded virtual environments of video games that nevertheless “simulate unlimited space,” Chaduneli crafts imaginary realms that self-terminate in their deliberate flatness, fusing the joy of dreaming with the uncanny realization of its artifice.

OPHELIA LAI

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