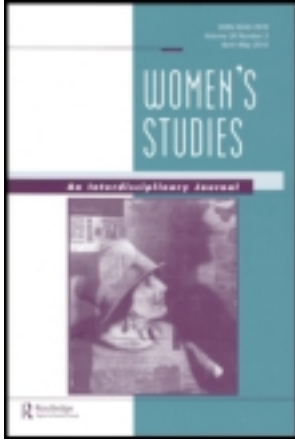


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Painting, Gender, and space: Aspects of Contemporary Women's Painting Practice in Context

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PAINTING, GENDER, AND SPACE: ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S PAINTING PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

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University of Ulster, Belfast

This article explores aspects of contemporary women's painting. It examines cultural, geographical, social, and pictorial space in my own painting practice—Majella Clancy—alongside two other female painters Ellen Gallagher and Shahzia Sikander. In particular it examines the possibility of a differing spatial order in paint that is constructed at the intersection of sexual and cultural difference. This article focuses on painting as a language with the potential to represent sexual and cultural difference and asks whether sexual and cultural difference can be inscribed in paint in spatial terms. If so, what are the characteristics and how are they being applied?

In the recent book *Contemporary Painting in Context*, cultural theorist Anne Ring Petersen argues that “painters have begun to explore the possibilities of broadening the definition of what constitutes ‘space’ in relation to painting” (16). Ring Petersen refers to a physical expansion that addresses three-dimensional, or installation painting. It seems to me however, that in order to fully attend to this expansion painting equally needs to address expanded space in a two-dimensional way. In my effort to engage with these concerns, I will initially outline my own position as a White, Irish, female painter.

Since 2004 my practice has been concerned with painting off the canvas and on a photographic surface. I also use other media, namely drawing and printmaking. Working with digitally manipulated inkjet prints, I respond to the images through various paint applications. Color plays an important role in how the

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paint is applied, allowing for various readings of pictorial space that I would describe as multiple and provisional, by which the singular, fixed viewing perspective is addressed and challenged. The majority of the original photographic images were taken at Perapeniya Buddhist Temple in Sri Lanka. These specific images changed my painting practice and opened up questions for me relating to a differing spatial order within paint and its possible relationship to cultural and sexual difference. My partner is Sri Lankan and therefore Sri Lankan culture is part of my daily life and experiences.

My practice also incorporates imagery from my Irish rural background in the form of the west of Ireland's fossilized landscape. *Land Space II* (Figure 1) is an example of recent work in which both sets of images—Sri Lankan and Irish—merge with paint. I am materially challenging the purity of painted space, and also any fixed notion of cultural identity as it relates to my Irish female experiences. Intercultural exchange within my work is addressed in ways specific to my cultural history and identity. I re-use the west of Ireland's landscape in a contemporary way to address painted space as it relates to class, race, and sexual

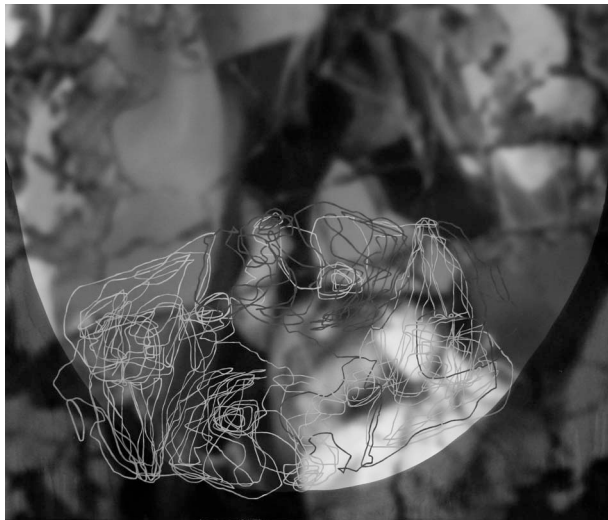


FIGURE 1 Majella Clancy: *Land Space II*, 2010. Oil and gouache on inkjet print, 60 × 51 cm. © Majella Clancy: Courtesy of the artist.

difference. My practice is not contained by any singular cultural experience; instead, it seeks to address multiple and provisional positions and perspectives. This broadening or expansion, as it relates to feminine painted space, reflects my experiences living in a Western society that has many non-Western influences.

Painting in its expanded form both materially and theoretically is also addressed in the practice of the African-American painter Ellen Gallagher and the Pakistani born, American-based painter Shahzia Sikander. Their work also seems to address intercultural exchange in ways specific to their cultural histories and experiences. As in my own practice, they are not contained by any singular cultural experience; both employ imagery from various cultural influences. Challenging fixed and pure notions of cultural identity, painted space, and sexual difference are common factors linking my practice to those of Gallagher and Sikander.

In our individual practices, modernist histories are re-examined through the language of paint. This re-examination unfixes historical paradigms to re-interpret ideas relating to geography, gender, race, and painting practice. This article will read our practices across the interstices within modernism and postmodernism in an attempt to articulate the heterogeneous nature of contemporary women's painting. I will argue that, while feminine painted space utilizes discourses and strategies that may be linked to modernism or postmodernism, it simultaneously exceeds any attempt at categorization within either term.

The Modernity Project

Aesthetic modernity is a key position from which to begin my re-examination of history. In his essay "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," the German socialist Jürgen Habermas describes how the primitive artifact was an aid to creation and a means of expressing colonial desire. Habermas argues:

Historical memory is replaced by the heroic affinity of the present with the extremes of history—a sense of time wherein decadence immediately recognizes itself in the barbaric, the wild and the primitive . . . blowing up the continuum of history. . . . (5)

Habermas describes the avant-garde in aesthetic modernity using an arguably colonialist language, whereby “historical memory” is replaced by the “extremes of history”; the present becomes “heroic” and the future is there to be “conquered” and “occupied.” Habermas argues:

A changed consciousness of time . . . expresses itself through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde . . . invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden shocking encounters . . . conquering an as yet unoccupied future. (5)

Habermas relates the “spirit” and “discipline” (5) of aesthetic modernity to the work of Charles Baudelaire, who created an image of the flâneur/artist in mid-late-nineteenth-century Paris. Baudelaire, in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” instructed that the artist set up home in the heart of the multitude, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite (9). This act of leaving home, of going away in search of artistic experiences link the activities of the avant-garde artist to the colonial histories of the nineteenth century. Avant-garde colonialism is crucial to my article, the way this concept relates to contemporary, global, feminine visual discourses, and to my own practice in which I combine international cultural experiences with my Irish rural history.

My research has explored that rural history as it relates to the historical construct of the Irish peasant woman—an arguably “fixed” and “static”¹ figure within Irish modern art. The ideological notion of a *pure* and *un-spoilt* landscape associated with the West of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century became conflated with the Irish woman through her perceived virginal status and moral purity. Through a masculinist discourse,

¹Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch argues that when an Irish woman appears in imagery in the early twentieth century, she is normally depicted within the landscape. Women were portrayed as predominantly rural, depicted in peasant costume, and set against a rustic landscape (11). Equally, Catherine Nash argues:

The idea of the primitive was appropriated but positively evaluated against the urban, industrial, colonial power. This primitivization of the West and of women, which has as a strong element the supposed unsuppressed instinctiveness, sexuality, and un-self-conscious sensuality of the primitive, had to be reconciled with the use of woman by cultural nationalists as signifier of moral purity and sexual innocence. (235)

the feminization of the land through its association with these feminine tropes became set, enforcing a nostalgic image of a mother (Ire)land and firmly fixing the identity of Irish woman and (Ire)land as rural, marginal, and primitive. Collating these descriptors—*primitive, peasant, rural, purity, un-spoilt, passive, unsophisticated, marginal*—it is possible to construct an image that relates not only to the West of Ireland, but also to the historical construction of an Irish rural femininity. The feminist geographer Linda McDowell, in her essay “Place and Space,” refers to the significance of space and in particular its relationship to gendered identities in challenging the purity of binary oppositions within a patriarchal discourse. McDowell argues that “mobility, travel and the right to move around destabilizes rather than reconfirms these oppositions and associations of fixed womanhood, nation, gender and nationality” (25).

In “Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain,” the feminist theorist Gilane Tawadros reinterprets aesthetic modernism as it relates to feminine painted space. Tawadros cites Lubaina Himid, who argues that “gathering and re-using is an essential part of black creativity” (121). Gathering and re-using as a strategy has a questionable history within aesthetic modernity with particular reference to nineteenth-century colonialism. Himid’s *Freedom and Change* (Figure 2) was made in reaction to colonial activities and



FIGURE 2 Lubaina Himid: *Freedom and Change*, 1984. Mixed media, paint on sheet with painted wood, w. 460 cm. © Lubaina Himid: Courtesy of the artist.

confronts a White, Western, colonialist history.² Tawadros states that Himid in *Freedom and Change* “has visibly adapted Picasso’s work to draw attention to the wider implications of the European process of gathering and re-using” where the “assimilation of ‘primitive’ art into the work of modernist artists is challenged and reversed” (121–122).

Gathering and re-using is linked to economic circumstances, however, I am suggesting that this strategy is not exclusive to Black creativity. I am arguing that gathering and re-using is part of my own rural history and is therefore part of my practice. Both Gallagher and Sikander gather and re-use cultural signifiers relating to their individual histories and identities to articulate an alternative reading of history, culture, and gender as it relates to feminine painted space. In my practice I do the same.

Feminist geographer Catherine Nash describes similar strategies of “re-employment” and “recycling” (243) in relation to the landscape in contemporary Irish culture. In her essay “Remapping the Body/Land: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender and Landscape in Ireland,” Nash argues that the Irish landscape has a loaded history, tainted symbolism, and fixed identity within a patriarchal discourse. However, to re-use the Irish landscape is not a redundant process as alternative readings can be expressed (243). The similarities between the descriptors of Nash and Tawadros are articulated through the insertion of particular feminine histories, Western and non-Western as both have been excluded from a White, Western, male, patriarchal discourse. Tawadros articulates a way of re-examining aesthetic modernism from a feminine perspective to reconsider that which is overlooked. This re-examination includes my own Irish rural history. Tawadros further suggests that within modernism historically, there was room for only one viewpoint which was White, Western, and male

²In Tawadros’s essay “Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain,” Himid states:

The artistic practice of gathering and re-using is said to have been invented in Paris in the Twenties by Picasso . . . Paris jumped for joy at the “discovery” of Africa and her artifacts and stole them . . . gathering and re-using has always been a part of Black creativity . . . it does not mimic and is inextricably linked to economic circumstances. (121)

(132). How then does that reading of modernism change if that viewpoint becomes Western/non-Western and female?

Art historian and feminist theorist Griselda Pollock puts forward three linked ideas—reference, deference, and difference—as a particular way of understanding the avant-garde consciousness within aesthetic modernism. In her book *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History*, Pollock suggests these three ideas are underpinned by space; that is particular spaces for avant-garde representation. These spaces include the metropolis, the rural, and the non-Western (29–31). Within aesthetic modernism these spaces are inextricably linked to hierarchies of gender, class, and race. In what way do these modernist spaces of representation acquire different readings and meanings when considered from a feminine perspective and within a contemporary context?

Inner Space/Outer Thought

Inner Space/Outer Thought (Figure 3) is an example of my recent work made during an artist residency in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2010. My aim was to open up a dialogue with Sri Lankan women artists from a feminist or feminine viewpoint, while acknowledging differences, cultural or otherwise. During the residency I worked



FIGURE 3 Majella Clancy: *Inner Space/Outer Thought*, 2010. Oil and gouache on inkjet print, 63 × 51 cm. © Majella Clancy: Courtesy of the artist.

on a project with five Sri Lankan women artists. The result of this collaboration and the ongoing dialogue is crucial to the development of my research.

The spaces of representation in this painting are multiple in that the photographic imagery incorporates both Western and non-Western spaces. Firstly it incorporates photographs and a drawing made during the residency. The simple line drawing that forms the base of the painting was made from a printed video still of a woman carrying out a domestic chore. The woman in the video footage is my partner's sister, Thiru. The footage was made in her home and materialized over a period of time. The drawing was made on a specific photographic background comprised of fabric that has a particular class and gender association in Sri Lankan culture.

Inner Space/Outer Thought also incorporates imagery from my Irish rural background in the form of old family photographs. These photographs reference a specific historically classed and marginal space. They depict my mother, her sisters, and my paternal grandmother. The majority of these images were taken in the domestic space of the home and in the surrounding environment—the West of Ireland landscape.

The drawing and family photos are scanned and digitally merge onto one surface. They are intentionally blurred so that the viewer is not quite sure where or what these spaces are. Through merging seemingly disparate cultural imagery with paint, my practice attempts to question not only the purity of painted space materially but also fixed ideas of cultural identity as they relate to my own particular rural history and contemporary cross-cultural experiences. I am arguing that both cultural spaces are linked through their depiction of particular marginalized classed histories and experiences. On a formal level, the viewer is brought into multiple fragmented spaces where suggestions of interior and exterior space merge. The paint application is subtle; transparent washes of color interrogate the photographic space. In other sections the paint is applied in seemingly quick gestures, however the purity of the gesture is negated through its collaboration with photography.

In *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (Figure 4), Gallagher references a specific history—her African-American history—through the process of White Western colonialism. Imagery is



FIGURE 4 Ellen Gallagher: *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity*, 2008. Ink, graphite, oil, varnish, and cut paper on canvas, 202 × 188 cm, 79 1/2 × 74 in. © Ellen Gallagher: Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mike Bruce.

culled from a range of sources, namely pre-war African-American magazines that were aimed at a Black readership, and also science fiction magazines and everyday cultural experiences. The title makes reference to a medical experiment carried out on the Black population in Tuskegee, Alabama from the 1930s to the 1970s (South London Gallery).

Gallagher merges that historical reference with other cultural and contemporary experiences, creating ambiguous and fragmented narratives. Gallagher's Irish ancestry is also part of her practice. She states however, "There is a tendency to erase my Irish family, so that it doesn't contaminate people's narrow definition of blackness" (Nichols Goodeve 19). The past is referenced dynamically in relation to the present through an ambiguous representation of space where location is fluid; it could also suggest an underwater space, which in turn could refer to African-American history, slave ships, migration, and colonialism.

Through the painting process, these spaces are transformed into an ambiguous realm of interior/exterior, where other marginal voices question totalizing grand narratives of Western history. The magazine pages are scanned, printed, cut-up, and pasted onto canvas. From a distance the layers appear abstract but on close viewing a rich complex surface is revealed. The layers are soaked in a semi-transparent wash and the grid-like layers form both the figure and the ground of the painting, moving and obstructing as they merge. These layers take their reference from penmanship paper, which is a key component of Gallagher's practice. On a formal level *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* appears to operate in a semi-abstract world between figuration and abstraction.

The Last Post in Red (Figure 5) is a recent work by Sikander, which I viewed at The Valentina Bonomo Gallery, Rome, Italy in 2010. Here Sikander also makes reference to multiple spaces of representation through imagery culled from both Eastern and Western sources. Hindu and Muslim iconography merge with what appears to be a landscape. The location is unclear, however it seems to be linked to a series of works in the same exhibition titled *The Langley Series*. These drawings appear to be made in response to the work of eighteenth-century English garden landscaper Batty Langley, who aimed at designing gardens that integrated "nature and art" (Alvarez).

The Last Post in Red also makes reference to the Indo/Persian miniature, a key component of Sikander's practice. Sikander describes unpacking a space in the miniature, which she can go back to endlessly (Lowry). The space of the miniature seems to allow her to question and challenge a fixed history, not only of the miniature but also of Western hierarchical history. Through this process Sikander offers readings that are uncertain, global and yet vernacular. She visualizes what could be described as transcultural forms where there is interdependency—both Eastern and Western. Sikander challenges ways of looking and engaging with historically fixed spaces of representation. Binary oppositions at the historical core of aesthetic modernism are broken down in a way that articulates Sikander's gendered, historical, and cultural specificity in a globalized context.

Fluidity is also formally apparent through her mark making, where flat areas of color are positioned against semi-opaque washes that merge and pull apart at different intervals.



FIGURE 5 Shahzia Sikander: *The Last Post in Red*, 2010. Ink and gouache on prepared paper, 38.1 × 28.3 cm, 15 × 11.125 in. © Shahzia Sikander: Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

The Last Post in Red appears to reference an exterior space, and/or spiritual space. However this hybrid space defies being pinned down to any particular space of representation. Geographical location is in flux where Western and non-Western spaces overlap through multiple scenes and interactions. Islamic text is also incorporated, referencing cultural specificity; however its appearance here is formal and fragmented. Notably, Sikander studied calligraphy while looking at the paintings of the late modernist painter Brice Marden (Lowry). Through merging a specific language with other cultural forms and contemporary experiences, these fixed historical references become fluid and transformed. Her Islamic feminine identity is referenced through

a Western experience. In merging what appears to be a high modernist painterly language with the historical and cultural specificity of the miniature, Sikander appears to subvert the perceived purity of both. In my own practice and in those of Gallagher and Sikander, the sexual, racial, and colonial association of these marginal, rural, and exotic spaces as visualized by the modernist avant-garde is destabilized. We articulate an expansive reading that includes a feminine visual language that is multiple, fluid, shifting, and mobile.

Modernism/Postmodernism: Feminine Painted Space across the Divide

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the American literary critic, Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as a “break” from modernism and modernity, which he suggests is a reactionary process to historical and societal changes (3). Of particular importance is Jameson’s description of a “crisis in historicity” (25). He argues:

The subject has lost its capacity . . . to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but “heaps of fragments” . . . (25)

Jameson describes a “loss” or impossibility of mapping subjective experiences in a dehistoricised and “fragmented” postmodern world. How then does this impossibility relate to my own painting practice and to my interrogation of a particular Irish rural history? Equally, how does Jameson’s argument relate to the painting practice of Gallagher and Sikander, who also insert specific histories through their subjective experiences?

From the examples I have shown, our separate practices would seem to contradict Jameson’s claims. In our articulation of a feminine painted space the past is inexorably tied to the present. I am arguing that both Gallagher and Sikander use discourses and strategies from modernist history in a very knowing way, without the pastiche or parody Jameson associates with postmodernism. Jameson claims that “within postmodernism . . . the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history” (20). The

practice of Gallagher and Sikander could not be described as a "random cannibalization" (18) of aesthetic styles with the intention of displacing real history; rather, these artists are engaged in a process of uncovering the marginal within "real history" combining a high modernist painterly language with culturally specific processes.

In our female painting practices, concepts of time are referenced in a way that challenges aesthetic modernism. Habermas describes an avant-garde agenda where history is "blown up" and only the appealing historical fragments, namely primitivism, are chosen in order to transcend traditional art boundaries. Also, Jameson contends that categories of "time" give way to "space" in the postmodern (16). Feminine painted space intimately connects "time" and "space" where conceptualizations of time are articulated as fluid and collapsing; made up of moments both historical and present. Where Habermas's modernity project offers a singular totalizing account that is White, Western, and male, feminine painted space operates to destabilize the canon through collaboration with *other* cultures, *other* histories. Although our separate practices invite a postmodernist reading through the de-centering of grand narratives, equally they resist the erasure of history, the personal, and the subjective.

By positioning my practice alongside Gallagher and Sikander, I am able to analyze those aspects of women's painting that visualize ideas of space and time in a contemporary context. There are obvious differences in the histories and cultures represented, however a crucial overlap exists in our articulation of marginal and gendered spaces, which can offer an expanded reading of modernism.

In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, literary theorist Andreas Huyssen describes postmodernism not as a break or rupture from modernism but as "a new paradigm" in that postmodernism has entered into a new relationship with modernism, avant-gardism, and mass culture, which he claims is "clearly distinct" from the paradigm of high modernism (x). Of particular significance is the so-called division between modernism and postmodernism, which Huyssen suggests is dependant on an understanding between high art and mass culture. Crucially, he argues that "the modernism/mass culture dichotomy has been gendered as masculine/feminine" (x).

Historically mass culture is understood as feminine and regressive whereas high art is understood as masculine and progressive.

In my own practice and in the work of Gallagher and Sikander, the mass produced image is a vital component. According to Huyssen, "One of the few widely agreed upon features of postmodernism is its attempt to negotiate forms of high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life" (59). In *The Last Post in Red* (Figure 5) Sikander re-uses the Indo/Persian miniature with imagery from Western experiences through a high modernist painterly language. She engages with a genre that had a specific culture and craft specificity. As Sikander explains it, "I had grown up thinking of the [miniature] as kitsch. My limited exposure was primarily through work produced for tourist consumption" (Berry 7). Equally the mass cultural image is a crucial component of *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity* (Figure 4), in which Gallagher re-uses imagery from post-war African-American magazines aimed at the popular market. The mass cultural image merges with paint collapsing modernist notions of purity of paint. The modernist opposition of high art and mass culture is broken down to include the kitsch. In *Inner Space/Outer Thought* (Figure 3) modern technology is addressed through the mass-produced digital image. Paint, technology, and other media collaborate in a way that is postmodern. Imagery is re-used from various sources and merged with other cultural experiences through which new contexts and other associations are constructed.

The American art critic Clement Greenberg describes how the mass-produced image presented a threat to the purity of high art. In his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg articulates a hierarchy where modernist/high art is for the expert, the "cultivated" whereas kitsch/mass culture is its opposition, a product of a capitalist society, produced for newly literate masses, and a form of popular commercial culture (9). It is apparent in Greenberg's text that the omnipresence of kitsch posed a threat to high and low art boundaries. It also threatened the status quo of bourgeois culture, and the boundaries of class distinction between the so-called "cultivated minority" and the "great mass of the exploited, poor and ignorant" (16). Any blurring of boundaries in high art also meant a blurring of boundaries in social status and class distinction. Contemporary women's painting practice operates in

a hybrid space, destabilizing those boundaries and hierarchies, which relate to social status and class distinction.

On the other hand, feminist theorist Rita Felski offers a recalibration of modernity from multiple and plural perspectives. Of particular importance is the way that she repositions the feminine historically to offer an expansive reading of modernism. In her book *The Gender of Modernity*, Felski describes modernity as “particular experiences of temporality and historical consciousness” (9). She further argues that “the divisions between public and private, masculine and feminine . . . were not as fixed as they may have appeared. . . . They were made and remade in new ways” (19). Felski’s examination addresses modernism in literature, however her insights can equally apply to modernism within art history, as Felski uses key terms such as “mobile,” “shifting,” “multiplicity of voices and perspectives” to describe modernism (8). In this article, I have used similar terms to describe my own practice and those of Gallagher and Sikander in a contemporary context. Felski identifies key issues within modernism that can still be detected in a postmodernist context. She suggests that the other and the marginal within modernism become absorbed by the postmodern world. Similarly, Tawadros states that “postmodernism is a specific historical discourse in European thought which essentially maintains the same old relationship between European and non-European cultures that is between the centre and the periphery” (137).

It would seem that Felski’s articulation of the feminine within modernism has similarities to a contemporary articulation of the same. High modernism and femininity are in many ways considered binary oppositions. While Felski offers a heterogeneous account of modernism that challenges the canon, she further acknowledges that a modernist hierarchy of power and knowledge—the center versus the marginal—reoccurs in postmodernism. Felski states that “many of the myths of modernity that pervade the last fin de siècle can be detected again in our own, suggesting that we may yet have to free ourselves from the seductive power of grand narratives” (10). As I have previously argued, my own practice and those of Gallagher and Sikander seem to resist grand or totalizing narratives, instead insisting on fragmented strategies, utilizing cultural pasts and presents in order to articulate alternative positions. The real and the

imagined collaborate in ways that offer multiple and provisional accounts. Tawadros points out in relation to the alleged loss of grand narratives that the point of reference is still White and still Western (132). Essentially postmodernism remains confined to a manifestly Western framework (141). It seems to me, however, that this reading fails to take into consideration other and marginal viewpoints within that Western experience. My own practice and those of Gallagher and Sikander seem to occupy a hybrid position that does not easily adhere to a purely Western or, indeed, non-Western position in a historical modernist or contemporary postmodernist context.

To conclude, I have argued that my own painting practice and those of Gallagher and Sikander question postmodernism as a break from Habermas's modernity project. Our combined practices insert specific histories, which act to rupture modernist paradigms. However, we do not use the tactics of parody or nostalgia, nor does our work function as merely a reproduction of the past. Instead, we have an authentic relationship to those marginalized voices within aesthetic modernism, as they relate to class, race, and gender. The hybridization of reference points within our visual language problematizes cultural identity, moving it beyond totalizing discourses. Our practices inhabit those interstitial spaces that resist exclusively modernist or postmodernist interpretations. It is this constant oscillation across modernist and postmodernist positions that enables contemporary women's painting to articulate a space that can address cultural, sexual, and racial difference within our globalized society.

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