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 TANG, Frank Yung-Fong ftang@google.com

Review of Paintings in “Salman Toor: How Will I Know” Exhibit

Exhibit: “*Salman Toor: How Will I Know*”, Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York, NY 10014, Nov 13, 2020–Apr 4, 2021

Introduction

Three paintings, all oil on canvas, discussed in this paper are works by Pakistan-American artist Salman Toor in 2019, as part of his 15 paintings “Salman Toor: How Will I Know” solo exhibit. I noticed this artist from the article “Nine Young Asian Artists to Watch For in 2020”^[1] on CoBo Social and found his paintings and biography from both the official website of Whitney Museum of American Art^[2] and the website of his studio^[3]. His photo [Illustration 1], which provides a strong visual clue of the character depicted in his work, and the images of the three paintings discussed are attached in Appendix A.

Toor was born in Pakistan and painted these three arts in 2019 while he was 36. He moved from Lahore, Pakistan to the US to study fine art in Ohio Wesleyan University and later got his Master degree from The Pratt Institute, New York in 2009. He is now a queer immigrant painter^[4] live in New York. He had several solo and group exhibits in the United State, Pakistan, India, and Italy since 2009. His art shows stories in both his life that happened in New York city, his hometown in Pakistan and during his journey in between.

Man with Face Creams and Phone Plug, 2019 [Illustration 2]

This is a self-portrait of Salman Toor painted in 2019 by oil on a mid size canvas, 43 inches tall and 36 inches wide. Toor stands in front of a desk and wears a white shirt, brown pants, and with a midsize black strip yellow shawl covering his shoulders. On the right of the table is an unplugged white cell phone charger. On the left, it shows a big black bottle and three small bottles- a gray one stands left next to the black big one, another gray one lay flat on the edge of the table right to the big one, and a red one in the front, closer to the viewer. Suggested by the title, some of the bottles should contain face cream. Behind the small red bottle is a small pink open bag containing an object with two black rings. It could be two handles of a pair of scissors. Next to it is a rectangle white package laid on top of a makeup brush. A black cell phone is behind the pink bag with a small black dotted brown towel and a small black object under both the pink bag and the white package. The character's beard is not shaved and expresses sadness by a downward looking head pose. Details of his left hand are visible: The color of fingernail on his ring finger is green but pink, or maybe just natural color, on other fingers. The color of the wall is in various gray brown patches to render a simple room without decoration. The artist uses burgundy, instead of black to draw the shadow on the white shirt, and uses tiny touches of jade to emphasize the shadow on his left ear, his chin, and on his inner garment. The background wall in the region behind the head is painted with white strokes to highlight the appearance of the head and create a halo appearance. Same technique also applies to the background behind his left hand, both on the wall and on the table where he hovers his hand over. We also observe this technique in the background behind the big black bottle. The artist also use a lot of thin lines to highlight edges- thin burgundy line over the white shirt, thin mustard lines over the pants, thin white lines on the black cell phone and on the top of the black

bottle, thin jade lines on the inner garment, thin black lines on the white rectangle package and the edges of his hand, and thin jade lines to highlight the shape of his era. The artist skilfully uses vertical white and rhino color texture to illustrate the nice quality of his white shirt and also paints his brown pants as a texture of rough khaki. The buttons on his shirt and the style of his sleeve are detailed to show he cares to wear a stylish look. Important objects in the painting are distributed as in a reverse T shape, slightly shifted toward the left. The artist left the two sides of the upper canvas blank to mark the importance of the character in the center.

The elements of pink bag, the yellow shawl, the makeup brush, and the jade nail polish on his ringfinger signify the social identity of the character - a queer. Both his cellphone and phone charger are unplugged and disconnected. With the sadness expressed on his face, we wonder if that suggests his loss of energy and his disconnection from family. The overall appearance of this painting creates a loneliness feeling to the viewers. Combining his eyes' direction and his table touching suggests it is in a moment for him to decide his next move.

Visually, the yellow shawl, the burgundy shadow on his right arm, and the pink bag dictated the focus of the viewers and marked the signature of this artwork.

The Star, 2019 [Illustration 3]

This self-narrative tells us a story about Toor in a different setting. This work is painted on a round panel, 24 inches in diameter, smaller than the previous one we discussed. Using a round panel subtly accompanying the oval shape mirror in the painting creates an harmonious atmosphere. There are four people shown in the painting, with a total of seven faces, three of them shown as reflections in the mirror. The portion of the reflection of the golden hair barber is very small without details so we will not discuss. The black hair female figure on the lower left seems painted without much care. We cannot observe any of her actions besides her existence.

The focus therefore is on the interaction expressed by their posing, gestures and facial expression, between three male figures: the stylist on the left, Toor sitting in the middle, and the barber on the right.

The composition of this painting is very interesting. Toor appeared on the center right, back to the viewer, not allowing the viewers to see his face. But the reflection from the mirror shows his face in a three quarter view on the left, placed slightly higher than his true head. The head of the barber is positioned on top of Toor's true head, in a position higher than Toor's reflection in the mirror. The stylist is positioned on the lower left, looking upward and brushing Toor's chin with pink makeup and forming a unique head angle. We can also see a small part of the reflection of the stylist's face, with different angles, from the mirror. All the eyes in the painting are focusing on the particular point the viewer cannot see- the face of the real Toor on the right. However, the painter lets us see how he looks from the mirror reflection. But what we see is just a reflection of Toor, not physically the real Toor. The three male characters all hold objects in their hands, the right hand of the barber holding Toor's head, while his left hand is holding a hairspray with index finger pressing to spray over Toor's hair. The stylist is holding a pink color pot rouge on his left hand and holding a makeup brush with his right thumb and index finger to apply some makeup to Toor's lower right chin. The careful placement of the finger position of the stylist shows an elegant and careful move with the ring shape formed by his thumb and index finger and the slight upward tilting of his little finger. Toor, with his signature beard, has a cell phone resting on his open right hand, clearly observable directly and from the mirror. His right hand is open, signifying relaxation. It suggested to the viewer he is waiting for someone to call him and wants to be ready to respond promptly.

The facial expression in this work is also astounding. Toor shows a confident look in this painting- We see no emotion from his face, no sadness or joy. He is hiding his emotion! The confidence is confirmed by the title he named this work, *The Star*, as well as by the halo, expressed by lighter brown strokes radiated out from his head, in the mirror reflection. The reflected Toor inside the mirror sits straight up with an assertive pose. But the true Toor sitting on the right sits slightly hunched. It presents an unconfident Toor staring at a confident inner Toor inside the mirror- maybe a way for him to gain self approval. Both the barber and the stylist express admiration toward Toor with tiny variations by their head gesture: The barber, looking downward, with a slight smear of smile, is admiring Toor's new hair style, his own great work. On the other hand, the stylist, looking up upward straight to Toor's chin from a lower position, displayed admiration to Toor himself. We can sense the stylist is showing more care toward Salman from his eyes. The facial expression of the stylist is described very nicely in this work, by both his very unique angle of head posing, and the fine detail of his eye, although they are tiny in size.

Another noticeable achievement is the rendering of different textile surfaces in this work: Toor's lavender color furry jacket, the stylist's green silky shirt, the barber's black shirt, Toor's black jeans, and Toor's brown shirt. Toor's jacket is rendered with a lavender furry pattern that appears as a faux fur coat. Notice the artist uses gray and flamingo, a darker pink color than lavender, strokes that illustrate the sense of furriness. The length of the jacket shows it is a crop top, a woman's casual garment for the upper body, cut short so that it reveals the stomach. By knowing Toor is a queer, it makes this choice of wearing female jacket logical. The artist also used flamingo paints to detail the shape of the notched collar in both the mirror image and the back of the coat. By using the reflection image in the mirror, the artist also indicates the open

front design of this crop top. This light lavender color object, appeared twice via its reflection in the mirror, with also their noticeable size, dominates the focal point of the painting and displays liveness on this moss and olive background art. The two shirts, the silky one worn by the stylist on the lower left, and the chore shirt worn by the barber on the upper right, bring in more depth visually in this work. Both shirts are drawn with black and jade green lines but clearly show two different textile materials by the artist's use of jade. The artist mixed some jade color with the black to draw the one on the left, illustrating a silky surface of that shirt. The thicker jade lines then serve as highlights to illustrate the reflection of the silky surface. On the other hand, the one painted on the right suggests that it is a black chore shirt with a rougher surface. The artist uses jade lines only to draw the details of the buttons, collar, and the stitching line. It is amazing how the artist uses the same black and jade to illustrate two different textile materials here together. In addition, as a minor note, the artist also used lavender dots and lines to draw the three buttons on Salman's brown shirt in the mirror image and detail design of his black jeans. Notice his use of dotted lines on the jean, the thick lines for belt loops, and the two back pockets with buttons, also provide visual clues to the viewer that this pants is a jean, not a suit pants. Overall, this painting shows very fine technique and detail to render fashion worn by the three male characters in the picture.

Two details of this painting are not aligned with the quality of the rest in this piece of art: First, the female figure showing in profile on the lower left seems dull, lack of action, redundant, positioned in an odd place, and carry no significant meaning in this painting. The rendering of her is flat with monotone brown. We observe no sense of emotion from her face. While the artist clearly depicts her right eye, the only function of her eye is directing her eyesight toward Salman's face, but that already expressed by the other six eyes in this picture, therefore

redaduant. Unlike the stylist who logically needs to squat down to a lower position in order to brush Salman's chin from a lower angle, she appears next to the stylist, abnormally low in the image, without a good reason suggested by the rest of the scene. Therefore she appears in an odd place. There is no significant reason for this female figure to appear in this work and I wish Salman would just paint the flower in the background with a vase there instead. Second, the rendering of the right arm of the stylist is odd and illogical: the most noticeable issue is the disagreement of the appearance, and lack of, a watch in his right wrist. The stylist seems a right handed person, since he is using his right hand to brush Salman in the picture. But the gold belt watch is drawn on his right wrist, which is usually worn on the left wrist on a person, especially for a right handed one. So the appearance of this watch is out of place. But the bigger problem is this watch is not drawn in the mirror image, making a horrible logical flaw of this art work. This disagreement created a slight sense of oddness at a glance, reducing the credibility of the scene. Also, the sudden shift of orange color and the rough drawing of fingers in the mirror image of the stylist's right hand is not aligned with the quality of the rest of the work and looks unfinished. These two areas unfortunately reduced the overall beauty of this piece of fine art.

Bar Boy, 2019 [Illustration 4]

Seventeen people were depicted in this self-narrative imparrasism painting. Toor illustrates the scene of a bar by using different kinds of green. Similar to his other paintings, we can see Toor himself standing in the center of the painting, wearing a hat and looking at his cellphone, one object frequently present in his painting (See Appendix B). Several characters were back to the viewer, rendered as olive green with light green lines to highlight the edges of their hair and hats. Toor also uses gold and eggnog yellow to light up the face of two characters, one on the left and the other on the right. The vivi hand gestures, variety of sitting poses, and

intertwining dancing movements show us a dynamic and lively scene in this dark bar in New York City. The depiction of sprinkling lights on the left and the reflection from wine glasses illuminate the gloominess of the barroom. Toor himself is depicted standing lonely in this work, as one of the only two people not engaging with others. “What are Toor doing there in the bar but not talking to others?” It prompts us to ask. We saw all the others, except the gold-haired drunk guy sleeping on the lower left, are chatting, kissing, dancing, mingling, hugging with others in the bar. “Why are you looking at your phone while everyone else there is enjoying the bar?” The artist wanted us to ask! This self-narrative realism work uses concise strokes and is rich in color. The illustration of lights and shades and the use of green make this impressionism painting one of Toor’s signature works.

Conclusion

Beside carefully reviewing and analyzing three of Toor’s work in the previous sections, we also briefly scan through all his artworks made available on his personal site^[3] to get a sense of his general artistic style and report that in a separate report^[5]. By also examining many of his other works, we notice two common themes usually show up in his painting. The first is himself, which appeared in the majority of his work, but not all. The second one is the cell phone, which appeared in all three paintings we detail in this report but also in half of his work, sometimes in very subtle ways and may not always be held by the main character (See Appendix B). Toor’s impressionism paintings, heavily focusing on shades and reflection, are also showing self-narrative and realism and heavily uses different kinds of green and brown color to tell us his story as a immigrant and lonely queer.

Bibliography:

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Appendix A: Illustrations



1. Photo of Salman Toor (2019)



2. Man with Face Creams and Phone Plug (2019)



3. The Star (2019)



4. Bar Boy (2019)

Appendix B: List of Toor's Paintings Contain Cell Phone

We notice that roughly half of Toor's paintings contain cell phones. In this appendix, we provide a list of 36 of them, with a brief description of the location and function of the mobile phone in the art. It is listed by the display order appears in www.salmantoor.com:

- *"Buddha Boy"* (2019): Toor is holding it with right hand and reading it.
- *"Group"* (2020): Two black cell phones on the table in the front which a group of six male gather to mourn about. The bigger smartphone on the left is unplugged. A smaller one on the right is plugged and blinking.
- *"Man With Face Creams and Phone Plug"* (2019): As described in this paper.
- *"The Star"* (2019): As described in this paper.
- *"Immigration Men"* (2019): The big black smartphone laying on the table on the left, with a belt and a white leftfoot sneaker, seems to be inspected by immigration officials.
- *"Bar Boy"* (2019): As described in this paper.
- *"The Poet"* (2019): Held by the lady figure, not the main character. sits closest to the viewer.
- *"Untitled"* (2019): The big black smartphone laying on the table on the left. Picking up by the left hand of the male in the middle.
- *"Late Night Gathering"* (2019): Held by the left hand of the male in black showing to the male in white sitting in the middle. Notice the content and characters is the same as depicted in another work, *"The Convalescent"* (2019), but with wider angles and better depict the overall environment.

- *“Ambush II”* (2019): Held by the driver on the left. Notice this painting is almost the same, in terms of characters and composition, as another of his paintings, *“Car Boys”* (2019), except in that painting there are no cellphones in the driver's hand.
- *“Lunch”* (2019): The male on the left showing the content of the phone to the two on the right during the meal.
- *“After Party”* (2019): The male sitting on the lower right is holding one with right hand and reading it.
- *“The Convalescent”* (2019): Held by the left hand of the male in black standing behind and showing the content to the male in white sitting with a glass of wine. Notice the content and characters is the same as depicted in another work, *“Late Night Gathering”* (2019), but with a zoom in view and only render three characters in this image. It is telling the same event with focusing on details.
- *“Three Boys”* (2019): Held by the male on the lower left to take a photo, with flash, of the other two.
- *“The Bar on East 13th Street”* (2019): Held by a background character on the left, behind the tangerine color bottle, to take a photo with flash toward the left edge.
- *“Four Friends”* (2019): Held by the second from the right to view the content with the rightmost character.
- *“The Texer”* (2019): The main character holds one and texts on it.
- *“Bedroom Boy”* (2019): The main character is taking a naked selfie with flash by using his left hand, while laying on bed.
- *“Ghost Story”* (2019): Two cellphones lay on the coffee table in the middle. A third one is held and read by the male in pink on the right.

- *“After Party II”* (2019): On the right of the image, a male, wearing a brown hat and tangerine outfit, is reading his cellphone and drinking.
- *“Male Audience”* (2018): The third character from the top, who is wearing a white turban, a navy blue vest and a maroon white grid pattern scarf, is taking an image by one.
- *“Floating Shelf”* (2018): A black long one is plugging in and charging below the lamb on the lower left.
- *“Eleventh Street”* (2018): The main character standing is holding one in his right hand.
- *“The Plan Maker”* (2018): The male is reading from it by holding it in his left hand.
- *“The Reader”* (2018): One cellphone is laying on the bed between his two legs.
- *“Three Friends”* (2018): The character sitting on the ground on the left is reading from one.
- *“Audience”* (2016): Two characters on the upper row on the left each held one.
- *“East Village Apartment II”* (2017): A small black cellphone is on the right edge of the coffee table.
- *“East Village Apartment III”* (2017): A small black cellphone is laying on the bed and surrounded by his laptop, pants, book, and body.
- *“East Village Apartment”* (2017): Two in this painting. Both next to a wine glass. One on the floor on the left. One on the edge of the coffee table between the wine bottle and wine glass.
- *“Resident Aliens”* (2015): The cellphone is behind the yellow wire chair between the green wine bottle and red wine wine stain on the table cloth. By viewing the painting upside down, we can see it shows the text “Amm” on the top with a female face on the screen.

- *“Transliteration Game”* (2015): One on the table in front of the talking character and behind the bottle.
- *“Toor_Salman_07.jpg”* (Year not available): One on the table in front of the fingerprint device.
- *“The Artist”* (2018): A right hand of an unseen character is sticking out from the left edge of the painting to hold a cellphone to take the image of Toor. The character on the right, who is wearing a blue jacket and brown hat is also holding one on his left hand.
- *“Man in Hat”* (2018): The male holds one in his right hand.
- *“Pre Drinks”* (2017): The male on the right is holding one.

It seems the “cell phone” is an important object in Toor’s mind and we observe it repeatedly appearing in his work, sometimes playing a significant role in the work, sometimes just casually appearing naturally as part of normal 21st century life.