

**Distinguished Company:  
Pictorial Dialogues by Nayanaa Kanodia**

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Nayanaa Kanodia approaches the history of art in a spirit of playful homage. Her chosen instruments are an attentive irreverence that is never destructive, a gift for understated comedy, and a conviction that art and life can interweave in the most remarkable ways. Nayanaa does not regard art as a universe separate and remote from the concerns of ordinary life. Nor does she view artists, even the masters of the grand concourse of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century art history, as demigods whose feet never touch the earth. On the contrary, she treats them as immediate presences that enter into the textures of normal life: their motifs migrate to household objects, to linen and furniture; their mannerisms light up a living room or bedroom; their hallmark images infiltrate the routines and solid familiarities of the everyday.

In Nayanaa's paintings, waking life and the life of dream flow together. Circumstance and fantasy coexist in these frames, allowing the recording self a degree of latitude in the matter of representing its interests. As others might collect objects, Nayanaa collects the impressions and experiences of art-works she finds attractive and compelling; she makes these art-works her own, through a process of referencing, parody and affectionate assimilation that results in a series of quirky tableaux such as 'Distinguished Company'.

In these recent paintings, the artist engages with iconic images from the oeuvres of Picasso, Matisse, K G Subramanyan, Modigliani, F N Souza, Jehangir Sabavala, Frida Kahlo, M F Husain, Jogen Chowdhury, and others: her pictorial dialogues with these masters are calibrated in various registers, being by turns high-spirited, wry, votive and witty. A window opens to reveal a seascape by Sabavala; a woman who might easily belong to the Company Period offers us Ara flowers; a troika of bodybuilders flex their muscles against a Rothko backdrop. A woman shows off her toned body against a Subramanyan painting, with its resonances of the bohemian life of Weimar Berlin; a couple has wrapped themselves in Raza images; a group of proud owners sit around a table with stiff formality, acutely aware of their good taste and market sense, utterly possessed by the paintings they own.

Unusually for a contemporary artist, Nayanaa's paintings originate in an unalloyed pleasure, a viewerly enjoyment of visual surface, narrative depth, and the games that artists play with their audiences. 'Distinguished Company' marks a long-distance apprenticeship, retracing the impulses that have excited her over the years: van Gogh's brushy, blazing yellows and greens; Dali's unsettling dreamscapes; Raja Ravi Varma's comforting deities, palpably alive and emanating grace in a pastoral landscape; and Bhupen Khakhar's public theatre of secrecies. Khakhar and 'Le Douanier' Rousseau have been among Nayanaa's major sources of inspiration through the years, for their inventive figuration as much as for their bold, fresh and

seemingly untutored use of forms and resources conventionally thought to be beneath the notice of the fine arts.

In the same vein, I would draw attention to the manner in which Nayanaa revisits the artistic possibilities first explored by once famous but now virtually forgotten painters like Vajubhai Bhagat, who fell into the gap between British-style academicism and the Progressive revolt in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Bombay. These painters attempted to retrieve miniature and popular idioms as vehicles for contemporary metropolitan experience; and while it is all too easy to dismiss their results as kitsch, they deserve a more sensitive reading, as efforts towards reconciling inherited forms of representation with explosively novel subjects and the experience of a rapidly changing world.

Nayanaa handles her materials with a lively and confident lightness of touch; with a sense of fun that is sometimes picaresque, that verges hesitantly on the erotic, but excels in the shrewd, tongue-in-cheek observation of individual psychology and the customs and manners of groups. Her paintings are not without bite, though: observe, for instance, her commentary on the play of egos in the art market, with collectors congratulating themselves on their success in the game of acquisition and dubious operators celebrating the currency of fakes. And if her love of sensuous detail leads her to present her protagonists in rosy cheeks and glowing clothes, seated around laden tables or savouring landscapes of delight, there is also a knowingness that suggests these are passing appearances, illusions or perhaps even delusions.

Indeed, despite appearances to the contrary, Nayanaa's art is sustained by a certain seriousness of purpose. If humour forms one pole of her project, research forms the other: while the paintings that comprise 'Distinguished Company' embody the visible outcome of her engagement, there is also an invisible body of work in the form of the bibliographical and annotative reading, and the rehearsals that she has put herself through as preparation for the paintings.

From this preparation, there also emerge tender, beautiful portraits that move a step beyond the relay of parody, homage and apprenticeship, and point in a new direction for Nayanaa Kanodia: I refer to works such as 'The Virgin of the Zoo' and 'Queen of the Forest', both inspired by contact with some of Frida Kahlo's paintings, themselves enriched by the radical Mexican artist's encounter with the *ex voto* images of colonial folk Catholicism. Sumptuous in their evocation of the female figure who is partly mortal and partly celestial, situated in an abundance of plant and animal life, these are portraits of the powers of fecundity and vitality that help us survive the horrors that history, private or public, may visit upon us.