

## Into the Light

Through scenes of homosocial bonhomie, tipsy merriment, languid repose, playtime and luncheons, Salman Toor presents a make-believe world of normalised and unalienated queer life, says **Adwait Singh**.

My immediate thought upon encountering Salman Toor's works at his first solo exhibition in Nature Morte, New Delhi, held from the 16<sup>th</sup> of December to the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, was, "How pretty!" 'Pretty' of course acquires a special ring in the context of queer aesthetics. It reclaims shallowness as a field of intensified affect like an artificial diamond decorating the décolletage of a drag queen, catching and multiplying the jubilant glory of the wearer in its faux depths. 'Pretty' packs all the pith and poetry of an emoticon. What might otherwise come across as kitschy, in the hands of Toor transforms into self-aware camp, or a loving assemblage of styles from the past that become crucial in issuing queer subjectivities and aesthetics. 'Pretty' thus, despite its light application, forms the mainstream of queer desire and subjective validation. To say that Toor's works are pretty, is then to summon a wealth of delicate queer feelings hid under the appropriated superficiality of the moniker. And it is with a coterie of bubbling emotions and the knowledge of secret joys that a queer gaze grazes the textures of Toor's plushly rendered turtle necks, denims and vintage jackets enwrapping the languid bodies of his subjects nursing stolen moments of same-sex intimacy.

The exhibition title *I Know a Place* could be taken as a banal proposition to make away to a private spot for erotic dalliances as is common usage with young disenfranchised couples in India, queer or otherwise, or something a little more poetic, as in a general avowal of a safe space found in the company of close friends or a lover. Either way, it is a gesture of elopement, an invitation to steal away to a timeless cove beyond moral and legal judgement. The differently-sized oil on canvases inside the exhibition, pitch the idea of a safe place as fictional vistas that reveal scenes of homosocial bonhomie, tipsy merriment, languid repose, playtime, luncheons, musical evenings and friendly gatherings, presumably set between Lahore and New York (where the artist is based).

In a work titled *Late Night Gathering* we are privy to a scene skimmed from the fag-end of a house party, where

a male figure has passed out on a sofa in his underwear as the guests are making to leave. This motif is repeated in *The Convalescent* where the unclad invalid repose on a green sofa, overlooked by two caregivers or companions, who are sharing some screen time. Scenes such as these speak of a certain level of comfort and privilege enjoyed by present-day urban queer set-ups. However, Toor's works go one step further in installing this comfortable picture of queer domesticity. By appropriating the idiom of Western master painters as well as the heterosexual familial frames from modern advertising imagery, and by painting his subjects in somewhat dated garb and interiors, the artist attempts a trans-historical intervention that seeks to garner normalisation for brown queer relationships and lifestyles characterising his current diasporic context by steeping these representations in an imagined past. Moreover, by situating his dandies in the hipster milieu of the East Village, the artist seems to be negotiating a deliberate break from stereotypical representations of brown subjects in the mainstream of American media. The restrained sensuality of amorous couplings, in what appears to be a nod to an eastern sensibility, illustrates the possibility of claiming the space of queer romance on non-homonormative grounds.

In *The Confession*, we see two men out on a well-lit balcony, screened from the crowd, hands pressed to heart to emphasise the sincerity of the confession. *Mehfil/ Party* and *After Party* both portray entwined queer bodies arranged like calligraphy, chatting animatedly or kissing contently. Elsewhere, one observes the making of a queer pastime as in *The Queen* where a bunch of children are playing dress-up before a tent pitched in a lawn, or the interruption of one by the unexpected visit from a long-faced friend. All these frames can pose as authentic alternatives to homonormative depictions of queer engagements and sexualities, in that they linger on the non-events, or the quotidian fillers of queer time. Even moments of interface with that potentially alienating and solipsistic device – the smart phone – are salvaged in Toor's hands as tender

episodes of huddled sociality. The world as seen through Toor's lens is a radically empathetic world where children can cross-dress without censure and brown queer men can entertain the thought of having unabashed and fulfilling same-sex couplings that are not painfully aware of their

deviation from the norm always; it is a world where a man with limp wrists incites not invective but indulgence.

In a post-Stonewall world where civil partnerships and gay marriages have become increasingly common, one still lives in the cold shadow of the closet, and loneliness



**Salman Toor.** *The Confession.* Oil on panel. 20" x 24". 2019. Images courtesy of Nature Morte, New Delhi.





**Salman Toor.** *Late Night Gathering.* Oil on panel. 30" x 24". 2019.

remains a killer at large. It is indeed surprising that Toor's works evince no signs of this baggage and sometimes one despairs that they are no more than romanticised depictions of a bourgeoisie queer lifestyle. However, in this instance, I am willing to argue, and against the wisdom of multiple queer theorists, that there's value in permeating visions of a normalised and unalienated queer life even if a heteronormative frame is held as the metric of that validation. Besides, Toor's current body of work seems self-

aware of this new-found freedom as well as its precarious ground in that it reflexively flashes back into traumatic episodes from the everyday past. Works such as *The Beating*, *Ambush II*, and *Immigration Men*, furnish reminders of the violent underpinnings to frivolity that meets the eye. In view of this, the little privileges are more readily forgiven as dogged resolutions, however fraught, to rise above one's circumstance, to bury the violence of being, deep (or should I say shallow?) in the din of newly affordable pleasures. /