

A portrait of Salman Toor sitting in a yellow, tufted chair. He is wearing a black t-shirt and a patterned scarf. He is looking upwards and to the left. The background is a dimly lit room with a large window, a desk with a lamp, and a floor lamp.

Salman Toor

From Pakistan with Love

Interview by David Molesky Portrait by Bryan Derballa



The fantasy of an unknown artist suddenly being discovered so rarely happens, but for Salman Toor, born in 1983 in Lahore, Pakistan, it became his reality. For over a decade or so, Salman had been creating paintings in NYC reflecting his experience as a queer, immigrant brown man when the moment arrived almost completely out of the blue—or green, in his case!

Unbeknownst to Salman, one of the curators at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Ambika Trasi, had been following Salman's work for years. After seeing an exhibition of his newest batch of paintings, Ambika and her colleague asked to meet Salman. Several visits later, the curators invited him to produce a new body of works for a solo exhibition at the museum, with the caveat that the show be ready in just seven months. Ecstatically, Salman accepted this golden opportunity and rose to the challenge, swiftly creating powerful new works that so perfectly encompass the fundamentals of his oeuvre.

It was around this same time that he emerged into the consciousness of art world followers via social media posts. Even as small scale digital images, they grab attention with a unique sense of colour palette and luscious buttery surfaces. *Bedroom Boy*, the small painting of a lounging nude taking a selfie was what I saw first. The light raining down from the smartphone reminded me of Titian's painting of Danae and the shower of gold. This image made the rounds when it was posted by New York art critic Jerry Saltz. I even met a young Icelandic artist who painted her own version.

Personally, I was excited to see paintings that are reminiscent of the best of the Post-Impressionists, yet speak to the preoccupations of today's zeitgeist. I wanted to understand how these cartoon-like paintings could have so much power. The dabs and strokes that Salman uses to agitate the surface invite the viewer to imagine how it was painted and primes our consideration for hand gestures and a greater awareness of the haptic senses, our own physicality.

Feelings of tenderness pervade his compositions. It's impossible not to fall in love with the almost caricatured, foolish-looking characters, with their slightly long noses, slouchy shoulders, and frail, tubular arms. Sometimes their noses or limbs are painted different colors, reinforcing the notion that they have been cobbled together like marionettes. Their plaintive poignancy completely plucks our heart strings, even if the characters might be very different from whom we identify or spend time.

I was surprised to learn that Salman initially painted in a strict academic style. From his deep love and appreciation for historic paintings came pressure to make a masterpiece. But a decision to change gears afforded more than a year to experiment wildly, loosely and unplanned as he approached his canvases with the abandon of a rockstar. Although these initial experiments took him out into strange new forms that included drips and text, the pendulum swung back towards the historic, where Salman settled in to make the expressive figurative works we know today.



The narrative and conceptual content of Salman's artistic project has long been in the works, beginning with the culture shock of landing in the suburban midwest as an immigrant man post 9/11. At Ohio Wesleyan University, Salman was introduced to painting and developed an insatiable appetite for Western Art History. With such new lenses through which to view the world, he cross-pollinated his personal experiences with iconography from the grand tradition of painting.

Traveling back and forth between Pakistan and college, he observed how the immigration officers would collect bits and pieces to identify who

you are. He began to see his style of dress and what he carried at airport security in relation to nineteenth-century portraiture in which the details and patterns of clothing reveal the trade routes accessed to such depicted individuals.

Upon finishing his undergraduate degree, Salman moved to NYC to attend the Pratt Institute and became a denizen of the East Village, where he fell in love with the nocturnal power of the city, its clubs, bars, and apartment gatherings. Enjoying these safe spaces, both public and private, inspired Salman to create loosely autobiographical domestic scenes of bourgeois urban life.

His characters often appear so relaxed in their cozy atmospheres to the point of melting into them and into one another, conveying a communal dissolution of boundaries. They congregate together in tight spaces, like bunches of sinewy asparagus. Inspired by his great love for theater and costume, Salman mixes tropes and fashion styles into new cultural hybrids that waver between elegant refinement and the grime of the outsider. Through dress and selfie poses, he can communicate ideas about dignity and self regard with a touch of comedy.

While most works depict solidarity, love, and friendship, some paintings include threatening

elements that represent conservative intolerance and the potential for homophobic hate crime. In Pakistan's more conservative culture, these are real dangers. Challenges aside, his paintings reveal new ideas about beauty, multi-ethnic progressiveness, and a new class of people who are redefining urban culture.

Just before Salman took off for a visit to his family in Pakistan, we sat down for a chat in his new studio space against a backdrop of sweeping views of the Manhattan skyline. The walls of the former woodshop were full of new works being made in preparation for two upcoming solo museum exhibitions next year in Beijing and Baltimore.

David Molesky: Does this somewhat regular back and forth between NYC and Pakistan provide you with new perspectives for your narrative compositions?

Salman Toor: A violent change of scenery is good for painting. When traveling back, it's as if my mind, sense of time, and personal space is in NYC while my body is already in Lahore. Everything is fresh. Briefly, for a week, I can see my own culture of origin like an alien would. The same happens when I come back to NYC. These borders of the world, with their profound differences between cultures and clans, become real.

Coming back to a poorer country had freedom in it. Time is cheaper and the nagging questions of an ultra liberal city like NYC are far away. In front of me is a dysfunctional bureaucracy, a failing state, abject poverty and an immunity to it, a beautiful vista of gulmohar trees, my family and my handful of lifelong friends, along with that old illicit feeling of being a rebel late in the night. It is a place without ambition, which is an ideal state for work for me. The demons leave the studio for a whole week after a great journey like this.

What was your early childhood educational experience like in Pakistan?

I went to an all-boys prep school and spent my early life dodging cricket, hockey, football, and riding. It was a beautiful campus, in retrospect, designed to give a romantic aspect to the suffering of queer fem boys in a macho pressure cooker. I found my closest friends in the art room where we made pictures of each other and imaginary and improbably powerful beautiful young women for whom we invented names like Tasmia and Saba. In some ways, we were giving a face to our fem selves. I hated math and religion studies and failed at them all the time and really wanted to be left alone in peace to draw and paint.

What was your introduction to English? Was it taught at school in Lahore?

My family spoke both English and Urdu at home. More Urdu than English. English came up more when talking about disease, progress, or sex (very rare indeed). All so-called "English Medium"



Above: Sketchbook page, ballpoint on paper, 4" x 6", 2021



Above: Four Friends, Oil on panel, 40" x 40", 2019

schools teach English from the very beginning in pre-school. At the time I was in second grade (maybe this has changed now), English textbooks were laced with some improbable ideas like going to the beach or a picnic in the sun, or making a peanut butter sandwich and eating it by a Christmas tree with friendly people called Peter and Jane.

Why did you choose to study at Ohio Wesleyan University in the Midwest?

It gave me the most financial aid. No one from my parents' generation had been abroad for college, and to my horror, my entire extended family and best friends came to the airport to see me off—in tears.

Somehow this Methodist school liked giving aid to South Asians and I even met some people from my high school there. But my real American education began when I moved into a hippie commune on campus. It was run by friends with whom I had a lot of studio art classes, some who were musicians. Here I felt I could live out the Arcadian idyllic pastoral scenes that I was learning about in Art History 101. Ironically, I briefly enjoyed the exuberant, ascetic fantasy of Indian culture imbued in the American freedom movements of the 60s and 70s.

How did you make the brave transition to your current way of working from the more classically academic work you were doing previously?

I somehow got into a conversation with Andrew



Bolton at a friend's gathering in 2010, shortly after I graduated from Pratt. I didn't know at the time that he was the head curator of the costume institute at the Met. I showed him an image of what I'd worked on that day at the studio, something I was quite proud of. He looked at it and said: Yes, this is quite beautiful but what's contemporary about it?

That was a great question that stung me mildly for years. No one at grad school had asked me that. Or maybe in 2010, I was finally ready to really hear that question and try to answer it. Before 2010, I would have scoffed and said: I don't care because I hate contemporary art and don't want anything to do with its charade of a clean break with the past. By 2014, I found iconic contemporary styles in painting I was interested in, like Tala Madani, Jennifer Packer, Kerry James Marshall, and Peter Doig. And instead of doing 15 paintings a year, I wanted to give life to all my ideas—do 30 paintings a year, done with the speed of urgency with which I felt the narratives or ideas.

The ethereal phone light in your painting *Bedroom Boy* immediately grabbed my attention. How are you using the light of smartphones metaphorically in your paintings?

I was thinking of a diagonal, saintly Christian light in that particular painting. I like how a cell phone lights up a face in the dark. I like the faces people make when they watch or read something on their screens on the train or alone in private spaces. It takes me back to Georges de la Tour or Vermeer's letter readers.

Could you explain more about the concept of becoming part of the mythology of the city.

I've tried to merge a sense of living in downtown Manhattan and working in Bushwick with memories of defining experiences in Lahore and try to make them into one story. It's a way of coming from Lahore and then being an improbable inheritor and absorber of the heritage of the LGBTQIA+ liberation movements of the 60s and 70s and the aids epidemic of the 80s, as well as the vital questions about gender and sexuality we are lucky enough to be able to explore in a place like NYC.

Failing to link these themes in painting as in life, which happens often, is best illustrated in my "fag puddles"—heaps and piles of body parts and objects that I think about, like the shape of urinals, scarves and belts, pearls, balls. Sometimes they occur by themselves, other times as part of larger compositions. To me, they are heaps of exhaustion, lust, and a failure to translate. You can see a fag puddle in *Museum Boys*, a painting in conversation with Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* and *Officer and Laughing Girl* (part of the *Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters* at the Frick Madison, on view until January 2022).

What was the big takeaway from the experience of having a solo exhibition at the Whitney?



It happened really fast. And it would be impossible without Ambika Trasi, a young curator at the Whitney who came to all my openings when I was showing at Aicon Gallery, where I had three solo shows from 2012 to 2018. After my 2018 show *Time After Time*, Ambika brought her colleague and curator Christopher Lew to the studio. We had a couple of visits, hung out and got along fabulously. I loved that they were interested in my work and thought that maybe the Whitney wanted to acquire a painting straight from the studio, as I wasn't with a gallery then. But they popped the question on the fourth visit: would I be interested in making a solo show for the Lobby gallery at Whitney within seven or so months? WOULD I? I mean... I died.

I was able to make ten new works and we borrowed the rest from recent collections. The impact of showing at the Whitney didn't become real to me until the show was up. So much excitement, glamour and prestige suddenly pervading my mostly quiet little life!

It's so important to have a diverse body of curators and directors in key institutions who are interested in suturing new stories of immigrants with American history. Late last year, I started working with Asma Naeem, a Pakistani American chief curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art for a solo show opening in May 2022. It's heartwarming to know there are people at institutions who want to share my work with a larger audience.

Are there any future projects that you are looking forward to?

In April 2022, I have another solo show at M Woods Museum in Beijing. I was greedy—couldn't say no. Now I'm handling it the best I can!

I'm also poised for a drawing show—my first show with my gallery Lühring Augustine. I'll probably resemble one of my fag puddle heaps of exhaustion at the end of 2022. I might take a quiet break in 2023 and experiment with video, animation. Let's see.

What do you like to listen to when you are working in the studio?

I love soundtracks. Some old favorites are Patrick Doyle's *Sense and Sensibility* for a sense of sober order at the beginning of the day, moving on to a darker mood with Wojcech Kilar's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* soundtrack, remembering iconic Winona Ryder's sultry mouth telling Gary Oldman's fangs: "Take me away from all this death." For a shot of energy at around 4pm, I move on to Jamiroquai or Tame Impala or early Mariah Carey, Bach, The Cranberries. Then a more contemplative mood with a wonderfully toxic Billie Eilish like *Happier than Ever*, or a gentle Weyes Blood album.

The most comforting music, though, is '60s and '70s Bollywood music or ghazal which is a lyric poem with repeated rhyme set to melody and music, particularly by the Pakistani dames, Iqbal Bano, Farida Khanum and Madam Noon Jehan. ■

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