

UNIT 17

geetha thurairajah

stand b54

In this suite of never before seen paintings and drawings by geetha thurairajah, the viewer encounters a lexicon of art history's key painterly gestures - the drip, the exaggerated brushstroke, the flattened monochrome, and the grid, to name a few. These paintings are largely executed in a wide swath of tones ranging from lurid shades of blue and purple, connoting a kind of screen-based virtual imagery to pond-surface-like gray-greens. Elsewhere, dense pigmentation takes a back seat in a composition primarily rendered in neutral shades of white, off-white, and black, with the exception of sections of washed-out yellow and orange near the centre. Throughout this work - titled *It Was All A Dream* - the surface of the canvas is haunted and delineated by fragmented forms contoured in black or white that appear as if they are waiting to be filled out (and on occasion, have been painted beyond their intended boundaries). This work, via its image-in-formation quality, calls to mind Warhol's *Do It Yourself Series* in which the artist used paint-by-numbers books as the basis for "fine art" painting. In this series, Warhol left the numerical guide for the seemingly pre-designed images partially finished and blank, underscoring painting not as the product of singular genius but as something theoretically executable by anyone.

Like Warhol, thurairajah is similarly concerned with the nature of painting's construction. However, the artist is specifically concerned with its construction in a moment in which every gesture has seemingly already been exhausted. This painterly focus extends beyond the formal citations mentioned above. Indeed, it is not only that painterly form and gesture is itself exhausted but the very approach of self-critical citation of these gestures is also a spent painterly technique. These concerns marked the oeuvre of a whole generation of painters (particularly those practicing out of Germany in the late 20th century) such as Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, and Merlin Carpenter, among others, who rejected the mythos of romantic originality in the canon of Modernist painting, consciously plundering their gestures to poke fun at their predecessor's utopian project. In a sense, thurairajah is engaged with the citation of citations - not only the formal building blocks of Modernist painting mentioned in this text's opening line, but of those before her who were already engaged with this critical mode of quotation. Their presences are indexed in a twofold operation: conceptually, in the aforementioned use of conscious citation and structurally, in the likes of of the "X" shapes on the left flank of *It Was All A Dream* evoking Sigmar Polke's *Modern Art (Moderne Kunst)* (1968) and the mobilization of a limited range of colours that meld into blurred sections, calling to mind Albert Oehlen's *Elevator Paintings*. The artist here is suggesting that even the critical *performance* of originality now constitutes a point of depletion.

Closer inspection of these works here reveals compositions that are not wholly abstract. Melded into the canvas's surface is the presence of a figure, flipping, gesturing, and surfing through the painting's surface in various stages of breakdown and quasi-dismemberment. Enter the crowd surfer. A peculiar figure, the crowd surfer is one who reverses roles. Saturated with emotion and rage, they rise to the crowd's surface, commanding the crowd's attention for a mere blip in time.

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But in this moment, the cultural object (the band) takes second stage to the enthusiast who inserts themselves into the work (the performance) re-orienting its structure.

As Isabelle Graw articulates so eloquently in her text *The Love of Painting*, over the course of the past 70 years or so of painting, the medium itself is no longer conceived of as an object which is an *extension* of the artist but rather a subject *itself*: it is now one and the same as the artist. This anthropomorphization poses a problem in an era where discourses around politics and racial liberation are at the forefront of the popular imaginary (and rightfully so). This political focus, in tandem with the subjectivization of painting, has created a pressure for artists of colour to re-perform their subjectivity (and identity) on the canvas. But oftentimes, the art world fetishizes the idea of an “authentic” subject, one that is not hybrid but a singular and digestible Other. These works here can be seen as a rejection of this notion. Mobilizing the crowd surfer as a surrogate, thurairajah dances through her art historical referents, re-orienting our attention to the painting (and the artist) as chimaeric and radically contingent..

These works, like the body surfer, are situated between an act of love and the killing of idols; a rejection of the primacy and essentialism of (the work) our forebears and an indication of the endless permutations of *who* can be the star of the show.

- Leo Cocar

geetha thurairajah (b. 1986) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

thurairajah studied at Bard College, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Rhode Island School of Design and Wilfrid Laurier University. Past exhibitions include *ACID HAUS*, Scherben, Berlin, 2024; *The Buddha of Suburbia*, King’s Leap, New York, 2023; *At Land*, Foxy Production, New York, 2022; *nonplussed-(+)*, Jack Barrett, New York; *Suspended Disbelief*, Arsenal Contemporary Art, Toronto, both 2021; *soothsay*, Unit 17, Vancouver, 2020 & Centre Clark, Montreal, 2022 (with Gabi Dao); and *Migration is more momentous than ancient invasion*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2019.