

*"Happy Forest," 2007. Acrylic on panel. 28" x 22".*





*"Grimm's Sunset", 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 48"*

Written by Colleen Asper

Images courtesy of P.P.O.W. Gallery and the Artist

Mala Iqbal is a first-generation American, born in the Bronx to Pakistani and German parents. Now based in Brooklyn, her paintings pull from sources as diverse as her background. Drawing from graffiti, abstract expressionism, the Hudson River School painters, and science fiction book covers, she explores the landscape in all its myriad forms. Weaving her varied references through spaces real and invented, she holds together fractured landscapes with the strength of her craft. Her hybrid environments present a sense of place that is familiar, but ultimately not locatable outside of the imagined space of her paintings. Iqbal spoke with us about the construction of her work, her influences, and landscapes both natural and cultural.



"Moonshine Castle," 2006. Acrylic on panel. 60" x 84".

Your paintings couple a signature of urbanity—graffiti—with picturesque landscapes. What is it about this juxtaposition that interests you?

I'm kind of an omnivore when it comes to visual material. In my paintings, I'm trying to take all of these interests that I have and create a space that is simultaneously real and unreal. I started using graffiti in my work as a natural outgrowth of using an airbrush—i.e. sprayed paint—and having moved back to NYC after being away from the city for several years. That was about eight years ago. I used to use graffiti as an element in a more conventional way; it was something sprayed on fences and walls in my paintings, a way to demarcate the mixing of urban and natural. But since the last two years or so, it has come off the walls in my paintings.

So, kind of playing with the idea of "This is a flat thing—no, wait—this is a far off space because it is blurry as compared to the painted (with a brush) part." Well, that's just the formal part. In my work, I'm trying to reference several different kinds of styles, several different idioms, even perhaps several different time periods.

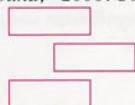
Working with so many styles, your paintings can be read as a taxonomy of paint application: cartoon crispness, spray paint slickness, expressionism's drips and runs, color field painting's luminosity. Is there any method of painting that you would never use, a language that you feel is off limits for your work?

No, actually, I feel very strongly that as a visual artist, I should be able to mine any visual vocabulary in existence. I mean, traditionally, artists are thought of as being more free or something, but we're as trapped as everyone else in social mores or financial straits or physical limitations, so I really try to tell myself this is one place where you can do ANYTHING. Sometimes, though, I have to struggle to convince myself of that. In my work, by combining different modes of representation within a single image, I'm trying to really push the limits, to get to a point where the illusion will fall apart.

It sounds cheesy, doesn't it? Headline: "Artist Gives Self Pep Talks in Studio. Studio Mates Complain of Loud Cheerleading."



"No Firm Ground," 2006. Oil on canvas. 36" x 48".





"The Fata Morgana," 2007. Acrylic on linen. 60" x 40".

I think we all give ourselves pep talks to make our work. Luckily for our studio mates, most are internal. I was listening to an interview Terry Gross did with Michael Chabon where he describes growing up in a planned community in the suburbs of Maryland and watching maps become actual spaces almost overnight, and how this instilled in him a sense of being able to do anything, that bringing the objects of one's imagination into existence was not only desirable, but possible. You were born in the Bronx—how did that landscape affect your work and sense of agency?

The funny thing is that we lived on City Island—which is essentially a fishing village (although a big part of the drug trade in the 70's, I've heard). So my early years in the Bronx were not perhaps what one would expect! I grew up on Staten Island (where my parents still live), which is definitely a strange borough. It has that mix of urban and suburban landscape, tamed and untamed nature that has carried through into my paintings.

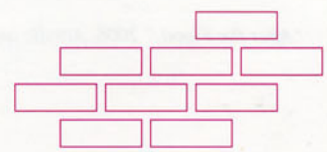
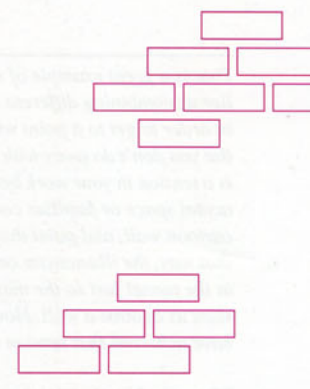
You asked about how the place I grew up influenced my work. But I think the thing that defined my childhood most and influenced my worldview and my work as an artist is being the child of immigrants from two very different cultures.

I grew up with four languages—Punjabi, Urdu, English, and German—being spoken in the house, enabling travel from one culture to the next in the space of a sentence. In my everyday life, there were all these worlds with their own rules, intermixed—Staten Island public school meets Pakistani extended family meets German fairy tales. There was always a tension between different realities, but there was an implicit understanding that one should be able to navigate many different sets of norms. So in a way, I grew up shifting between different worlds and thinking that this was normal, even though it was pretty challenging. I've heard it said that translation is actually impossible, that there is no direct correspondence between languages, and in a way, I think I experience something of this in my own life. I also wonder occasionally if this reflects the broader cultural condition in America, in general. Perhaps we've internalized that tension and are always trying to find ways to reconcile or live with it.

Bringing together many different styles in my paintings is a way to create splits and breaks in the illusion and maybe synthesize something new out of it.



"In Sight of Coconino," 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 90".



A translation that is completely direct may be impossible, but something is hopefully also gained in the resulting confusion. That is how culture develops, and art as well. When you talked about playing with space by pairing flatness with far-off space, those radical shifts in the level of focus between the foreground and background of many of your paintings clearly has a dramatic optical effect, but it also mimics the depth of field of photography. What does the reference to photographic space bring to the work?

I guess it adds a layer of "reality" that is then subverted again by the blatant unreality of the space. I'm often trying to juggle those layers—for example, a big influence has been the following story of Wile E. Coyote trying to outsmart the Road Runner. The coyote gleefully opens a box of holes he's ordered from the Acme Company. He takes one out (a big floppy black thing) and slaps it on the side of a cliff. Ha, ha! The Road Runner will think it's a tunnel, try to run through it, and knock himself out on the rock wall. The Road Runner comes speeding along (beep, beep) and whoosh!—he runs right through the hole in the wall! Coyote is amazed and (a) tries to run after the bird and slams into a rock wall, knocking himself out, or (b) gets run over by the speeding locomotive that emerges from the tunnel while he's standing there scratching his head.



"Camping," 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 34" x 34".

*That is a great example of what you described earlier as combining different modes of representation in order to get to a point where illusion falls apart. But you don't do away with illusion altogether; there is a tension in your work between paint that suggests actual space or familiar constructed spaces like a cartoon wall, and paint that remains just paint. In that way, the illusionism can seduce us into running at the tunnel just so the materiality of the paint can slam us against a wall. How do you know when you have achieved that tension in the painting?*

When my friends say it hurts to look at!

*Well, speaking of hurt—I have heard your color described as “nuclear” and your imagery as “apocalyptic,” but to me, your paintings are too playful to spell doom. I think of the relentless optimism of Disney rather than the nightmarish spaces of HR Giger. How do you think about mood when you are constructing a painting?*

Some are lighter than others, but for me, the most successful ones are the ones that have quite a bit of darkness (mood-wise) to them. To me, they are most pleasurable to look at when they're intense—the saturated color and a lot of dark drama playing off some transcendence, or humor.

*Does the drama always come from the play of space and color, or do you ever try and imply narrative with your work?*

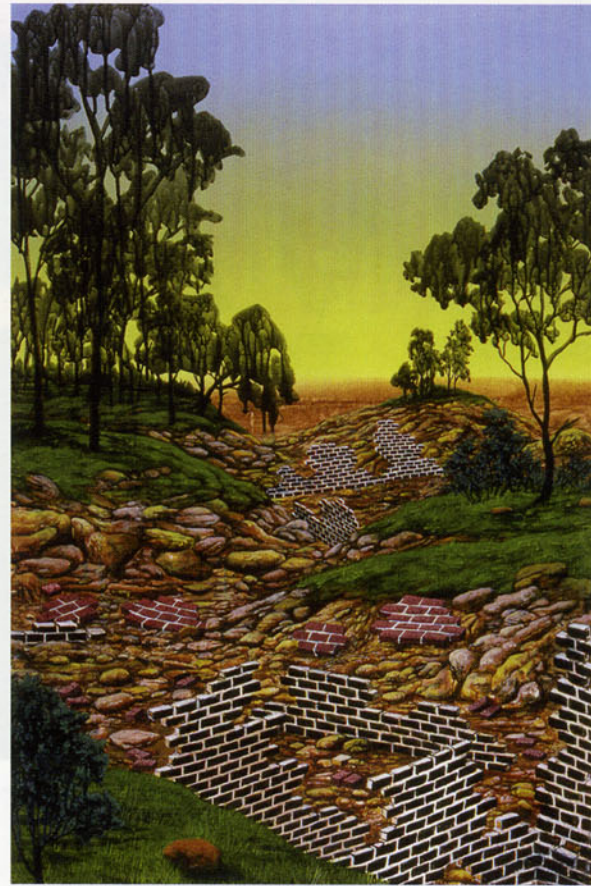
I used to make character-driven work with figures and a narrative, but once I got into landscapes, I wanted to create mood or psychological space more than a story, and for me, that meant leaving behind the figure. So there might be small hints at narrative—like I've done several paintings with a small, empty rowboat in them. This boat is sort of like a character in that it's drifting, unmanned, perhaps run aground, usually in a great expanse of water/paint, so maybe it gives the painting a plaintive feel. But it's also a place where someone looking at the painting can put themselves; they can be a character in the painting. Recently, I've made some paintings with figures in them, trying out two different approaches—a sort of anachronistic approach where the figure is very specific and from some past era that contrasts with the contemporary feel of airbrush/graffiti/ab-ex motifs and then another approach that is more similar to the rowboat, making a figure that is a vaguer, more generalized being, almost an archetype. But this is all very new stuff, so who knows where it will lead. Certainly not me!

*When you leave the figure out of the landscape, that allows the viewer to imagine themselves into the work (think of the way a lot of porn is structured), but I am curious what else you want to suggest about the relationship a figure could have to the spaces you create. I am thinking here of how the Hudson River School painters that your work clearly borrows from, like Frederic Church or Albert Bierstadt, documented the American landscape with romantic images of wilderness that invoke the sublime. A common reading of such works is that their portrayal of the vastness of nature highlights the relative insignificance of man, but that reading doesn't take into account the painting's status as a made object. Representing nature through human prowess underlines the heroism of man; these paintings are intrinsically bound up with conquest. This attitude finds a modern equivalent when Pollock famously responded to the question of whether or not he painted from nature with, “I am nature.” What do you think your paintings suggest about nature's relationship to the viewer?*

The nature/natural world in my paintings is heavily filtered through culture—I am rarely concerned with making something look the way it does in life, or only just enough so that a viewer will think “lake.” In fact, I'd say that I'm not painting a portrayal of nature so much as exploring an idea of nature, which can only be approached through these various culturally created idioms.

*So, rather than saying, “I am nature,” would you opt instead for, “There is no nature?”*

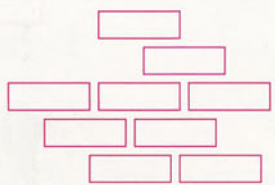
Too absolute for me—I'd say my paintings are as much about human nature as nature. Maybe I am just too shy to do the full-on chest pounding “I am nature.” I can't say “There is no nature,” because I look at it all the time to get ideas.



*“After the Flood,” 2006. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 24".*



*"Wild One," 2007. Acrylic on linen. 36" x 48".*







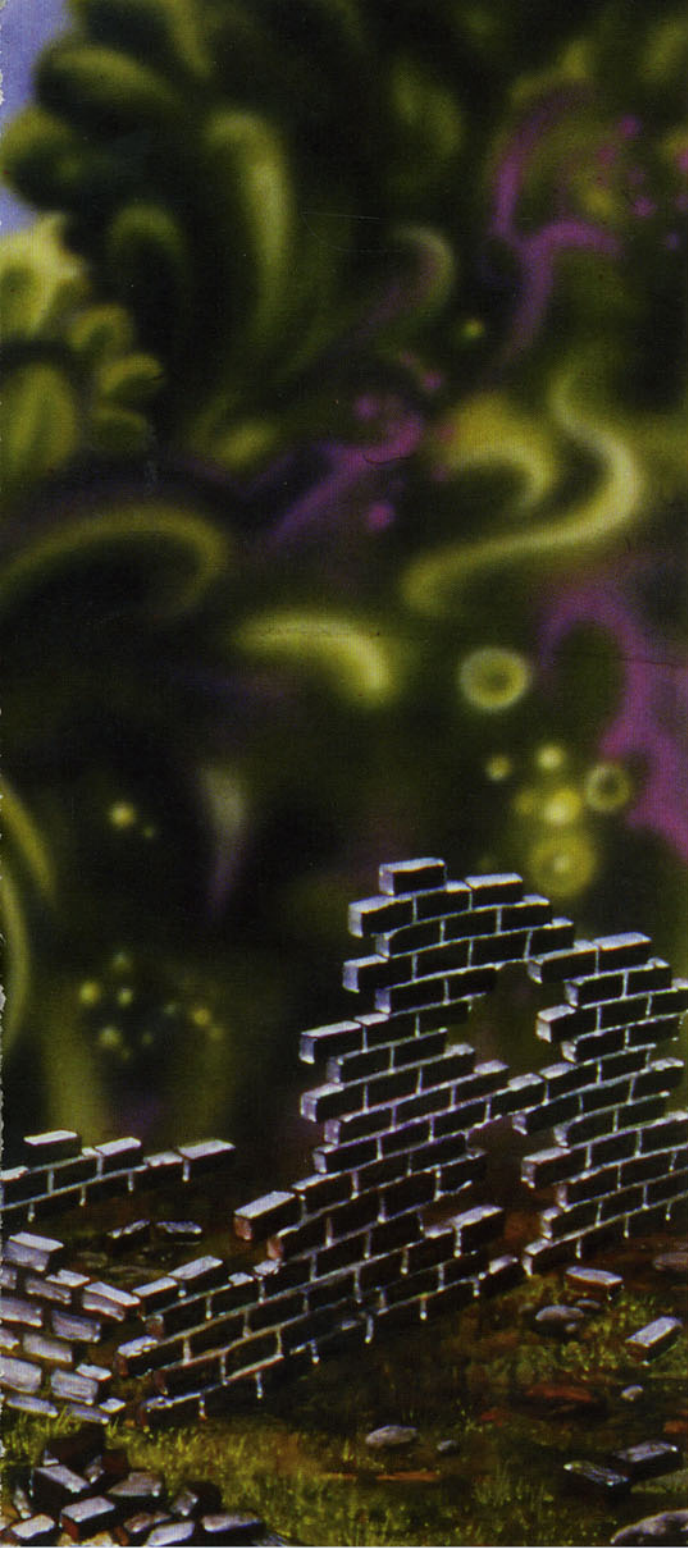
*"Jungle," 2006. Acrylic on panel. 24" x 26".*





*"Jungle," 2006. Acrylic on panel. 24" x 26".*





*Yes, chest pounding is best saved for the ab-ex generation. Clearly the distinction between nature and culture is a useful one, but there is certainly a porous boundary between the two. Having always lived in urban environments myself, my experience of nature is completely filtered through my culturally received expectations of it. When you say you look to nature to get ideas, do you mean spending time outdoors, or looking at images of wilderness?*

Both—I am always looking when I walk around, so I have a big store of memories (and photos) of places I've been where nature is in greater abundance than say, concrete. Here in Brooklyn, I mostly look at the sky. I also look at images of nature in other paintings and places like sci-fi book covers.

*I have thought a lot about some of my favorite sci-fi book covers looking at your work. In the fantasy landscapes of science fiction, there is no pretense of documentation; whether their pleasure is deemed escapist or not, we appreciate the sci-fi landscape for its status as invention. However, your sampling of a wide range of painting styles and modes of representation functions as appropriation. Do you want your work to function referentially and do you see this as in conflict with the works' ingenuity?*

No, I'm not expecting people to stand there and think about where each bit of the painting is coming from. I don't work in such a proscribed way when making them, so if a line of trees looks Italian Futurist to someone, great, but if it just looks menacing, that's cool, too.

*One last question. What do you think about Bob Ross, or the sort of so-bad-it-is-good landscape painting you might find in a thrift store?*

When it's really weird or over the top, it's great. The scary ones are the ones that are somehow devoid of any personality whatsoever, but even a painting in that category might have a (hideously) good waterfall in it.