

Belinda Eaton's life-size canvas of a rickshaw zooming past with its swirling perspective and bold colors is still fresh in the minds of those who saw her work, when exhibited in the late 90s, at the now closed A.N. Gallery of the Coconut Grove in Karachi. The painter returned to the city in November 2008 to hold a solo show at the VM Gallery—after almost two decades; a homecoming that brought with it a sense of joy of living and consuming, and a celebration of painting itself.

It is an almost surreal space, of men and women feasting in a bizarre but delectable combination in which lobsters, prawns and other seafood seem to coexist in strange familiarity. Within the strong circular compositions that bind the elements into cohesiveness, there is a sense of storytelling, in which the diversity of the artist's experiences merge together into a whirlpool, a compositional device used in drawing the viewer inside the picture, and to join the party in Belinda's world.

Belinda was born in Mombassa, lived in NY City in the 80s, Pakistan and France in the 90s and finally Spain, because of which she crosses boundaries of race and culture with ease. The co-existence of multiple planes and references reflects the diversity of her life experiences and makes hers a narrative of global citizenry. Access and familiarity provide groundwork for portraying different subjects without prejudice and preconceived notions: the driver in his rickety rickshaw is as integrated into the whole as a person enjoying a drink in a bar. The energy, thus produced is one of optimism and inclusion.

In *Men with Prawns*, 2004, as in many of her early works with groups of people, the figures look directly at the viewer, as if anticipating guests to join the gathering; the viewer has no choice but to respond, even if the space is cramped. Apart from the presence of the central figures, the interior of this space is occupied by prawns; a giant prawn floats above the figures, as if magnified for the viewer. Smaller prawns are placed in the foreground, at the edge of the table, another compositional element, offering food to guests expected from outside the picture. In *Gamblers*, 2008, another one of the two large works on canvas in this show, one of the partying poker players literally reaches outside the picture frame with an Ace of Hearts, leaving no choice but for the viewer to participate in the game. The connectivity of the inside to the outside is seen in many of the artist's early works with single figures and commissioned portraits as well.

The primary perspective is based on the beholder's eye level, sometimes called "worm's eye," familiar with painters like Mantegna¹, and gives an instant access to the world inside the picture. Once inside it, there is freedom to navigate into the different planes, spaces and realities. The articulation of space/s comes also from Belinda's admiration for the painters of the Early Renaissance². Influences come from painters like Pierro della Francesca, such

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Belinda Eaton:

An Invitation To Participate

as in the use of foreshortening. One can draw a link to the works of Rosso Fiorentino in terms of the circular movement, as seen in his works like *The Descent of the Cross*; connections to earlier work, such as Jan Van Eyke's famous *Arnolfini and His Bride*, glimpses of which are seen in the *Gamblers*, where the round decorative glass object draws the eye into a receding plane and similar decorative detailing that weaves through the work. As poles apart as Belinda's funky paintings may seem from the painters of the Renaissance, there is a similar sense of monumentality or drama within it. Despite the intuitive nature of her process, she deconstructs some of these references, reinterprets them to be absorbed into her own vocabulary. It is important to note that the effortlessness of this synthesis comes without appropriation.



Belinda Eaton
Face on Paper IX

two large canvases in the current show refresh a link to the work exhibited in Karachi much earlier, while the focus of the more recent paintings at the VM focus on single figures, and "portraits." The new spaces emerge with a similar spontaneity and quick brushstrokes that is directed by the use of acrylic. The central space is occupied by the single figure and is like a portrait in relation to what is around it; the figure/ground relationship becomes more pronounced. It is interesting that the spontaneity or design that was part of the spaces around her work now overlaps the faces. Painted designs/tattoos on faces that were on canvas and paper contain similar undercurrents of multiple layers and planes of seeing and perceiving, as before. These faces are revealed from layers of painted marks and textures. They are literally "brought to light," as the starting point of the surface painted in black. The forms emerge from dark to light. For Belinda, it is an intuitive process, and she prefers not to consciously "intellectualize" her work, allowing for the process to dictate the progression of her narrative. The interpretation and meaning of layers have to come from the outside.

There is continuity in the link to photography and motion pictures. The early work conveyed the grandness and flamboyance of 19th century European concerns and captured a fleeting moment in time; the newer work is a reference to modern day pop culture of fashion photography and cinema posters. Stills and models from fashion magazines are relocated on canvas (and in some instances on paper). Some of the figures look away, detached and unapproachable. This distancing comes from the translation of recycled information, and the license of the post modernist borrow from any source. One of the faces seems to appear as a James Bond poster, while another one bears likeness to Canadian fashion model, Jessica Stam. There's a feeling of déjà vu, of revisiting some part of the past, in this case an image once seen in a photograph. At the same time, the painted face could be a conscious desire to revisit the "primitive," going back to the artist's childhood influences in Kenya.

Belinda's voyeuristic approach defies categorization and its underlying freedom rests on the fluidity and energy of the painted form and color.

W. Janson, Kerman Joseph, *A History of Art & Music*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., N.J., Abrams H.N. Inc., N.Y., p107.

Belinda Eaton's interview by Dion Archibald, Artquotes.net, in which she traces the influence of the Early Renaissance art and illuminations, "the beauty of form" of Piero della Francesca, and Mantegna. She refers to the French Impressionist Villard's color and use of paint; and to the Russian 'for his magic,' Paula Rego for 'the strength of her imagery' and Ron Meuk's 'sculptures which have a soul of their own.'

