

A conversation between Remi Ajani and Rose Davey

July 2023

Sid Motion Gallery is delighted to present its first solo exhibition with Remi Ajani. The paintings in the exhibition have been made since the start of the year, and many finished since Ajani's residency at The Villa Lena Foundation, Tuscany earlier this summer. Ajani practice is an exploration of the language between figuration and abstraction.

The interview below was conducted by the artist and art historian Rose Davey in July 2023. The conversation was hosted in Ajani's South London studio before the paintings for the exhibition were finished. Davey taught Ajani at the Slade Summer School in 2019. Ajani went onto complete her MFA in painting at Slade School of Fine Art in 2022. The artists continue to meet and discuss painting.

Rose Davey: I feel like there is this magical moment in your work... I've never seen it happen because I don't stand over your shoulder while you paint... but... where you begin with something solid that's in the world and then a baton is handed over... where the paint takes over from an exterior image, and then you're working with material.

Remi Ajani: Yeah.

Davey: Often artists are asked to be cast in a role where they bear witness to something. I don't think you're an artist that bears witness to an event, you are witness to your own work. Would you agree?

Ajani: Yeah, and I think the event is me. Not to say they are self-portraits. It's about me as the event, and what I am learning to create an image versus what I'm witnessing. I don't really want to say things. I want people to feel things, and if I can achieve that, then that's the job done.

Davey: Do you find it useful when things go catastrophically wrong?

Ajani: I feel like I spent my time at the Slade making things that went catastrophically wrong.

Davey: That's what you're meant to do at the Slade! That's time well spent.

Ajani: I had taught myself up until that point. I hadn't had conversations about art. There was just all this stuff that was missing, so I decided to make bad paintings.

Davey: Or was it more that you weren't necessarily making bad paintings, you just weren't trying to make good paintings?

Ajani: I wasn't trying to make good paintings, and I also wasn't trying to make paintings that people would be like "oh my god, that's such a good painting!" That was the most irritating thing anyone could say to me. I used to call them 'shit' paintings until I was told at school to stop saying that. *[Laughter]* When you get so into the practice of making failures you're not scared of your painting anymore. I remember thinking... "Well, it looks like the artist just went blub blub blub blub blub *[gestures as if covering the canvas with strokes of paint]*, so that's what I'm going to do." I would prime these huge pieces of paper and then just paint soup. I would try and throw it away, and then Lisa *[Lisa Milroy – Artist and Slade tutor]* would be like "Do not throw them away, have them to look at".

Davey: You just gave me goosebumps earlier...

Ajani: Why?

Davey: When you said you have to get things wrong. You have to have loads of failures so you're not afraid of your own work. That's so true. I find it incredibly intimidating.

Ajani: Painting?

Davey: Yeah... painting. It's a really intimidating thing to do. Because of so many things... The whole *history* of painting... your peers... yourself... why are you doing it? Yet the only way to make a good painting is to not be afraid of it... and how do you not be afraid of it? By fucking it up over and over again.

Ajani: When things go wrong for me now, I see it as an opportunity. It forces you to question why it is wrong. It's that moment where you realise the painting has specific requirements, and you have to let go of what you think the painting should be... and the painting then becomes its own thing.

Davey: I've always felt you can recognise what is wrong... but you can't really recognise what is right. Some things just remain.

Ajani: Yeah... for me it's listening with your body.

Davey: Listening and reacting with your body.

Ajani: Exactly. There isn't an end game for me. It's always a frustration. I just want to make a painting and why don't I just make the painting... why can't I just make the fucking painting?!

Davey: It's like there's an invisible force that's going... "Nah..." "Nope". And then perhaps Art School is the beginning of coming up with all these different strategies of how to get round all these invisible obstacles... so you *can* make your painting. It's a ridiculous thing to spend your time doing.

Ajani: Do you know what though... I think it makes more sense to me than a lot of things.

Davey: Which is why you do it. You do it because there is a pleasure from the frustration of it. You only have to answer to your own personal logic. You don't have to answer to anyone else's... and there's something magical in that.

Ajani: I think that's it. This is the only place where I get to ask a question, or make something, and have no committee.

I am quite obsessed with Cecily Brown at the moment because she just doesn't over think things. She's like... "Yeah I stole that image from Degas, I'm stealing all the time and it doesn't matter". I was looking at Joan Mitchell *[grabbing a book of Joan Mitchell paintings from the*

studio floor], and I was like “oh my god, I’m just going to put that in [pointing to a mark in a Joan Mitchell work]. That makes sense for my painting... and it doesn’t matter that I’m stealing it.”

Davey: I love that.. because I feel like when you start making work... you build a big box, you pull the lid down on yourself and screw in all the screws so it’s all tight and then slowly you start to take the screws out... take the lid off... and you emerge going “oh, I can go wherever I want, do whatever I want, paint whatever I want.” I really remember taking a long time to come to that realisation. I thought, “Oh no, I can’t make that type of work, because I make these paintings” and then you’re like “Oh no... I can do whatever the fuck I want.” It’s a big thing!

Ajani: It’s a huge thing. I think that was something that started to become clear at the Slade.

I think painting is language... and language constantly evolves. Painting is like taking a language and then working with it, to move it, or just to use it... in whatever way makes sense to you.

Davey: It’s great to see these [referring to large drawings on paper on the studio floor made by Remi at the Slade]

Ajani: I remember when I made them and I was like “Oh my god, is this the kind of painter I am?!” [Laughter] And I remember Lisa going... “No. It’s just part of your practice.”

Davey: Calm down... Chill out...

That’s the funny thing with making art... sometimes you feel you are dealing with huge universal themes... and then in an instant it’s down to a grain of rice.

Ajani: I don’t want to contain the universe in my paintings... I’d rather contain the grain of rice.

Davey: I think it was Agnes Martin who said *the assassination of a president is as important as the wiggle of a worm*.¹

As you know I’ve been reading a lot of Guston, and he said when he leaves the studio... and he feels like he’s leaving a living thing... he knows it’s a good painting... like he’s leaving somebody in the studio.² I wondered if you ever had that feeling with your work? That they take on some kind of life... beyond the materials they are... beyond you.

Ajani: I’ve never really thought about it... but now that you mention it... Yeah... Maybe. I think there’s a point when you’re making a painting where you start to feel very protective towards it.

Davey: I think protective is a good word.

Ajani: Yeah... I was speaking to Noor [Artist and fellow Slade Painting Graduate Noorain Inam] about the fact that isn’t it funny that when you are starting to make work and it’s starting to come together... you’re like... “oh my god, I hope the studio doesn’t burn down.”

Davey: If you have that thought... then “maybe I’ve made some good stuff!”

Ajani: Or... “Is anyone going to get to see this?” and then I start to question whether the things I enjoy about the painting, are other people going to enjoy? Are they going to see what it evokes? That’s where I’ve got to with this... [pointing to an unfinished painting], because I’m starting

to see... maybe life... elements of what life is in the painting... space... and colour... and noise.

Davey: Maybe that’s a useful way to assess and understand a ‘successful’ work... how much life does it have? How much energy does it have?

Ajani: *How much energy does it have*. But it’s so funny because I’m looking for energy... but I’m also looking for balance. That’s the funny thing about me taking on this painting. Now I have to make it hang. I’ve always had this thing about making colours sing. I think that’s when a painting gets exciting for me to make.

Davey: We haven’t even talked about colour.

Ajani: No... which is my favourite thing... and yours too!

Davey: Mine too! [Laughter] So let’s not talk about it...

It’s incredible what colours can do. When you get them in the right place... with the right space... with the right neighbour... on the right surface... och!

Ajani: And that was my intention with this... [referring to an unfinished painting] what will make this painting work is the right colours touching.

Davey: Is that a black made from green... or is it a brownish black?

Ajani: It’s a black made from blue and brown.

Davey: Och... and I love it when you get the darkest parts of the painting to work in the centre. It’s like Matisse’s *Snail*... it’s the black at the top. That pink foot as well... Pink foot!

Ajani: The foot’s so odd because it belongs to the leg that would be on the other side... but I made it yesterday and I kind of like the shape, so I kept it... and then I was looking at that pink and I was like... “when did I use pink in that painting?” [Laughter]

This grey... which is kind of bothering me. This grey block... next to the darker grey.

Davey: But that’s great! Look on that left hand side... you’ve got a tone down. It’s like a colour chart down.

Ajani: I know.

Davey: That’s brilliant.

Ajani: But I don’t know if that’s what I wanted.

Davey: It’s probably not what you intended... but it’s what you’ve got... and I would leave it. [Laughter]

Ajani: They’re just happening. The colours are just happening... and sometimes it’s not colour it’s sound... “Oh that part is really noisy... I have to make it silent.”

Davey: I wanted to ask you about abstraction and figuration. If someone said to you... “You are a figurative painter.” Are you on board with that? Or does it even matter?

Ajani: I just generally don’t think people should go around telling other people, who or what they are. [Laughter] I just do what I like... I just paint.

¹ *Agnes Martin Writings*, ed. Herausgegeben Von Dieter Schwarz, 1997, Hatje Cantz

² *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge, 2010, University of California press, p.46