

**Kathy Noble: "Inappropriate Behaviour"**

**Additional documentation about *Tala Madani. Rear Projection* exhibition  
(Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, April 15 – August 24, 2014)**

Inappropriate Behaviour  
Kathy Noble

What does it mean to misbehave? To be disobedient? To act inappropriately? To do something unexpected and therefore, in some people's eyes, unacceptable? What are the parameters that define our behaviour and how do we learn these? What makes one person uncomfortable or embarrassed may be totally acceptable or even enjoyable for another. And, as such, is this behaviour more revealing about the viewer, witness, or other character in the relationship, than about the protagonist enacting the behaviour?

We readily self-censor or modify our behaviour in order to negotiate the different relationships and scenarios we experience – to remain within emotional structures and boundaries set out for us by civilised society. This performance of 'self' begins in our childhood, as we are rapidly socialised from an early age – yet this also often negates our more primal instincts, or needs. Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote his seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1959. He was one of the first sociologists to study day-to-day human interactions and to analyse the significance of these. He treated these interactions as a form of theatre or performance, espousing the belief that human behaviour was consistently shaped by the need, or struggle, to perform the self you wish to be – by attempting to control one's speech, action, dress and staging of interactions with others, you could, in turn, control the viewer's, or audience's, reaction and behaviour. Fundamental to this study was Goffman's belief that humans were taught to consistently modify their behaviour to either avoid embarrassment of oneself, or, for the less narcissistic, the embarrassment of others. As such – if one adheres to this argument – so much of what we may actually wish to say or do remains forever unspoken or unseen.

Tala Madani's paintings and animations perform to me. The characters depicted in them seem to talk to me and their mode of operation is to misbehave. Their actions may be elusive, funny, sexual, angry and sometimes violent; yet they are never embarrassed, and nor do they shy away from fulfilling their needs. In this way, Madani dissects the more flagrant and repressed side of human behavior – often using her 'men' (until recently, she has only painted men) or 'jinn' (mythical genie-type figures from Arabian and Persian folklore) to take part in actions that would be considered inappropriate, shameful, taboo or grotesque. They perform what would normally be deemed highly embarrassing scenarios, in which their naked, chubby little bodies prance around and lay themselves bare, both physically and emotionally via their actions.

*Spiral Suicide* (2012, p. 53–54)

The short, balding, rotund man, wearing nothing but pyjama-like stripy pantaloons and glasses, walks forwards. As one leg moves in front of the other, he pushes his hand down the back of his trousers. Twisting his wrist in an awkward gesture, he slowly inserts his hand, then fist, up his anus – scrabbling around until he finds something that feels like his intestines, grappling to get a hold of them with his short, sausage like fingers.

His grip finally secured, he pulls hard, face contorting from the straining – red and sweaty, stomach overhanging his pants. The effort exhausts him. But he feels satisfaction as his entrails start to emerge. Red and bloody. A gloopy, mushy, sloppy, mess. He walks forward, in a spiral, as if chasing his own tail – trying to confront his insides, but never quite reaching them. He pulls harder, to try and face up to them. More gush out.

He keeps tugging and walking. Then tugs and walks some more. This is so hard he thinks. Why can't I get them out?

He wants to see them. To inspect them. To understand them. Yet he cannot get to them. Dizzy and exhausted, the little fat man leaves a red trail of his insides behind him. His knees eventually give way and he slowly collapses into a heap. A bloody, flabby, mess, alone in the world.

Is this the only way this man can get what is inside himself outside?  
Is it the only way he can express himself? By baring his actual guts?

Madani uses humour as a tool to reveal the unspeakable. Her depiction of exposed bodily functions reoccurs throughout her work, as piss, shit and blood appear as the result of the actions of her characters – as if a kind of end point to their games. She describes shit as 'baroque', in that it is the most extreme end possible, whilst alive. She and I agree that using the word scatological to refer to the study of faeces, in the context of art, is a little pompous, or ridiculous. But this probably occurs because people feel too embarrassed to talk about shit and find it easier to create a more 'scientific' context for this discussion. To psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud shit was your first gift to your parents. To his successor and expert in child psychology, Melanie Klein, it was a symbol in early childhood for the bad internal object or thought to be expelled, and therefore revealed to the child's parents. To Madani it is a source of joy and humour, used as a tool, or language,

for an exchange between her characters, rather than the expression of a negative impulse or interior feeling. For example, in *Brown Christmas* (2012, p. 86), the characters sit on their hands and knees doggy-style, as if doing aerobics together, expelling a giant shit that forms a communal Christmas tree.

*Sun Worship* (2012, p. 61)

Ten men stand in a circle staring and smiling slightly at one another. They wear matching stripy underpants. The group is silent for a while: awkward, nervous, waiting for action.

"Piss on me" one hisses.

"You piss first" barks his neighbour.

"On me... now ... please..." grunts the first.

A patch of wetness appears on one man's pants, followed by a trickle of golden water, trailing through the hair on his thigh. The liquid runs down his leg and pools onto the floor. Opposite another begins pissing, this time more violently – a fast gush of water streams down his chubby thigh. One, after the next, after the other. Until they are all pissing, creating a golden pool in the centre of the floor.

"Piss on me!" shouts the first man again.

Everyone turns to look at him.

Then ignore him. As they pee, they smile, hands locked together as if praying.

A golden shower for God.

Madani's work and the way in which it addresses human behaviour, resonates with much of Mike Kelley's early work. Kelley believed that popular culture had become invisible to us – that it was so all encompassing most people did not notice its corrosive psychological affect. As such, he consciously chose to use aspects of it as tools with which to reveal the unspeakable, or unsaid – revealing a kind of psychological underbelly, or subconscious, of American culture. *Monkey Island* (1982) – which was initially created for a performance and now exists as a series of drawings and texts – was, in Kelley's words, a "physiognomic landscape travelogue that seems to dwell mostly in the sexual region"<sup>1)</sup> depicting a series of monkeys in cartoon form, taking part in a debauched narrative, as if hairy little human beings, shitting and mating. Elements of these cartoonish paintings take

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1) Mike Kelley, Press Release for the exhibition "Mike Kelley, Monkey Island

and Confusion", September 18 – October 9, 1982, Metro Pictures, New York

the form of monkeys morphed into bodily organs such as kidneys and bottoms, whilst others enact strange scenarios – playing out the psychologically unspeakable or subconscious wishes of the monkey characters (and Kelley himself), akin to Madani's men and Jinn. Kelley, similarly, used bodily matter as an inappropriate or base form of humour, and, like Madani, a tool to embody the lowest form of endpoint one could reach culturally – for example his 'garbage' drawings, depict hot lumps of shit that wobble on the page, as if characters with personalities of their very own.

In his own way, Kelley was also 'misbehaving': he had a scathing disregard for both Minimalism and Abstraction, and used drawing and painting to create absurd, comic scenes and sculptures formed from found cuddly animals, in opposition to his predecessors, and in a conscious exploration of abjection. Madani has a similar disregard or irreverence for this canon of mid-twentieth century Abstraction and high culture in general, preferring to deal with the horror, and humour, of the abject. Works such as *Action Painting Room* (2012, p. 79) (which looks like the Jinn went paintballing) and *Neon Toes* (2012, p. 81) (Busby Berkeley formed from fat men displaying their bottoms, legs in the air) display a conscious irreverence for this history, whilst others, such as *Piss Smiley* (2011, p. 49), display a fluorescent yellow piss splatter from the sky, as if the product of the great Abstract Expressionist God on high.

#### *Cell Men Embrace* (2011)

Two naked men stand, frolicking together, happy and playful. Their legs are like pigs' legs – voluptuous thighs held up by little trotters. The man on the left turns to look lovingly at his partner. His partner smiles back. Bliss.

The windows tell a different story. Cages, or prison bars, cover their chests, hiding their innermost thoughts. Abstract swirls hinting at bodies convey violence.

To make art is to be vulnerable. To bare yourself publicly. To lay yourself open. To expose yourself. No matter how deeply conceptual a work is, no matter how related or estranged it is from your autobiography, to make art is to lay open an element of your thoughts; how you, the artist, sees the world. So much of Madani's work is about self-exposure, but not exposure of the self in an autobiographical or psychological sense. It is a form of public exposure or embarrassment in order to reveal something greater that is not describable with language alone. Madani spoke to me of the excitement she feels when

painting; in particular when painting some of the more bizarre situations. What she described sounded orgasmic to me – not sexually, but as a kind of outpouring that enables her a moment of understanding and willingness to lose, or expose, one's self in that moment.

Madani's most recent series of paintings use Peter and Jane from the Ladybird Learn to Read series as her protagonists – books from which Madani used to learn English, when she moved from Iran to the USA as a teenager. Some of the works take the form of realist copies of the illustrations from Peter and Jane, which she had made in China – an act that led to a kind of Chinese transformation of elements of the characters' physiognomies. What is strange about the original illustrations is that Peter and Jane are depicted in scenes that would make more sense in an advert portraying a married couple in the 1950s than as representations of playful children. Madani reconfigures these scenes, creating scenarios in which her men act out mysteriously around the pair, subverting and mocking their relationship. For example, *Abstract Pussy* (2013, p. 9) depicts Jane lying back on the ground with her legs open, as a group of men swarm around her crotch, staring at an abstract painting that one of them holds up as if reading a diagram and trying to figure out what to do.

Which leads to the question, how can we address childhood behaviour and sexuality, when it is considered so taboo today? As children, our bodies are interesting entities that we are slowly discovering and coming to terms with. When my friends and I played doctors and nurses as small children, we would lie down on a table and pull up our skirts to 'inspect' each other. This was not necessarily sexual, or at least not with any awareness. But a way of coming to terms with our own bodies and our relations to others in the world. As such, to me, Madani's Peter and Jane paintings, like so much of her earlier work, seem to ask what it means – in a more primordial or pre-linguistic way, emphasised by this return to childhood – to relate or communicate with others, without worrying about being inappropriate.