

KUNZTEN



Born in New Delhi, India; lives and works in Berlin, Germany
Photo: Luis Bortt

An Artist Interview #33

Amrita Dhillon

What is your artistic process like, how do you approach your painting?

Most of the imagery in my paintings is found in some way, either from film, photographs, magazines, or elsewhere. These images serve more as guides than strict references, providing an initial framework, with the process taking on a life of its own after that. I paint in layers, so some of my paintings exist on top of older works that didn't make it.

One of the first decisions I make before beginning a painting is the format. This introduces a degree of intentionality into a process that often relies heavily on instinct. The choice of a particular format can set the tone for a painting: I associate tall, lengthy formats with a certain unresolved anxiety, or square formats with passiveness and calm.

How do you select the motifs for your paintings, and what themes do you explore in your work?

I think the reasons why I choose a particular motif over another often remains opaque to me too. I can say that I am attracted to images that are somewhere between moments, before a coming change or at their highpoint before they fade; tension, ambiguity, lovers too close for comfort, bright lights, smiling grimaces and strange emotions.

Kunzten, October 2024

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

You use a variety of materials such as canvas, velvet and satin. How do they differ and what does the material mean for your work?

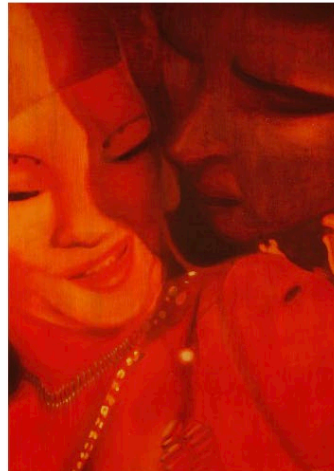
I painted exclusively on canvas and paper until a few years ago. I was searching for a way to materially transform my work and began experimenting with various fabrics. Velvet, in particular, resonated with many of the ideas I wanted to explore. I was drawn to its cultural significance, from Mughal India and Safavid Iran to Ottoman Turkey. It feels like a material that carries the weight of centuries.

Velvet fascinates me more than any other surface I've worked on: there is a certain mystery to the fabric pile that draws the eye toward it. Paint behaves strangely on velvet. Sometimes it sinks into its gaps, becoming part of its personal landscape. At other times, it sits on top, creating a sheen that mimics real light.

A few months ago, when I was in Delhi, I was looking for new fabrics to experiment with. I discovered a type of satin that I brought back with me to Berlin. Painting on this surface is the complete opposite of working with velvet — it's almost like learning to paint all over again. Unlike the absorbent, heavy texture of velvet, satin is slippery and resists soaking in paint. It is similar to painting on glass.



by Amrita Dhillon
Untitled
2024
Oil on Velvet
120 x 90 cm



by Amrita Dhillon
Too Close for Comfort 2
2024
Oil on Canvas
110 x 80 cm

What inspirations and influences do you draw on in your work?

Films are an important source of inspiration for me, particularly Expressionist cinema and Film Noir. Much of my early education about light and composition comes from Hitchcock and Murnau. I am reminded of the underwater scene in Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Once you've seen it, it is hard to forget the way light filters through her hair and the lake weeds, all tangled up.

I'm also interested in older Indian films, Bollywood and beyond — especially the lurid colours and set designs. Many of these films were made on a limited budget, with the cheap materials and strange lighting...really creative and inspiring as a resource for mages. The set design in *Teesri Manzil* (1966) is so bizarre and wonderful.

Tanya Leighton

The first painter I really looked at closely was Kirchner, and I still find myself returning to his work regularly. It's partly what brought me here to Berlin; I remember seeing his work in an art history class at Bard College, and thinking that I really have to go and see the city for myself. I also look at Walter Richard Sickert, a painter who really represents this sense of 'in-between moments' I referred to previously.

I would also include Lionel Wendt and Amrita Sher-Gil, who have been very important for me, in terms of seeing myself, and my people, in a way that honours and reflects us properly. At the moment I am really interested in the works of Victor Man, Jake Grewal, Martha Diamond, Matthew Krishanu and Andrew Cranston.



by Amrita Dhilon
Don't You Try
2023
Oil on Velvet
200 x 200 cm

Your paintings often seem to glow. What role does light play in your work?

Light is both a beautiful and terrible thing; it reveals that which is supposed to remain hidden. This idea often carries religious or spiritual undertones, which I reject in my paintings. I'm far more drawn to the profane, the lurid, and the artificial aspects of light — the cheap sparkle of sequins, the garish shine of gold jewellery, and the cold gleam of metal. In this regard, I think of Bimal Roy's filming of a metal factory in *Tins for India* (1941), where light takes on a magical power in a mundane setting.

I like the way Oskar Zwintscher painted his wife Adele's jewellery and the shiny box in his painting *Gold und Perlmutter* (1909) — the items depicted are clearly valuable, but his portrayal gives them a slightly sickly, faded quality, suggesting their impermanence. I have a similar feeling when I look at some of Sickert's paintings of Venice, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, bathed in a jaundiced, sulphuric glow.

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

Tanya Leighton

How has your painting been evolving in the recent past? What is your focus at the moment, what is currently interesting you?

Since the last couple of years, I've been reflecting on how we as Indian people portray ourselves through images. Although it's challenging to speak of a collective "we" in a country as vast as India, there is a sense of shared identity — geographically connected, shaped by colonial history and cultural ties. In a recent series of paintings, I looked at Indian films from the 1940s to the 1970s, including both Bollywood and regional films from South India, and sought out images that offered insights into this question. I was particularly interested in how women were portrayed, how song and dance were used to mask darker undertones, and how the need for individual freedom was navigated within the rigid conventions of the collective.