

## The Promised land

As I look at the 15 paintings that comprise Subramonian Natarajan's debut show 'The Promised Land', I can't help but think of each of its works in the musical form of the ballad: Ballads to objects, people, and states of feeling that have been lost and are wishing to be found. Like any good balladist, Natarajan's work speaks to the experience of loneliness, obsession, confusion, and despair as the glinting presence of hope is felt, however naively, somewhere above it all. In the song from which the show takes its title, Bruce Springsteen sings –

“Working all day in my daddy's garage

Driving all night chasing some mirage”

Springsteen lyrics offer a way of understanding how these paintings can be seen as the broad fields of painterly and affective experience that they. There is a division of the metaphorical “day” and “night” in the artist's process and work. “Day” is made up of drudgery, periods of terrestrial doubt and uncertainty as he tries to get to what you could call the “mere picture” of the painting. Yet, it is through the act of revision (re-vision), which entails the partial or complete negation of the said “mere picture”, that his paintings are reconfigured, dislocated from any staid temporal location and hurled into phenomenologically dissonant “night”. This is where the substance of the work becomes an attempt to suspend the mirage in any of its chimeric form. Often, it is here— the interior, the natural, the real, the fantastical and the abstract having metastasized throughout one another deeper and deeper into zones of nearly orgiastic uncertainty, that the images of Natarajan's paintings can be found. This zone of dismantlement reaches its energetic peak in “Spare Parts (Bruce Springsteen)” as the interior space surrounding the lone figure at rest is ruptured beyond the clear delineation of abstraction or event, somehow all at

once isolating the figure, risking her position as real, and assimilating her into the formal structuring of the painting. Into the depths of the painting's right corner, an arched door leads out to a window— could this be the same window as the nearby painting “Interior with Stairway”? Peering into the sallow yellow light as it makes visible infinite specs of floating dust, the paintings shadowy, vertiginous geometry and sensitivity to black as a color and state of light allows me to travel through the history of painting— the Tenebrism of Zurbaran or Tintoretto to the loose, architectural formalism of Martha Diamond or Richard Diebenkorn are all conjured up. Spending time with these paintings, I get a sense of Natarajan's respect, maybe even sheer adoration, for the history of painting as well as a fetishistic devotion to the qualities of oil paint. There are magical subtleties of tone and complexities of light born of careful transparent glazing or raw luck. The paintings and the processes which bring them into being assert what Eduard Glissant calls the “right to opacity” insofar as they deny comfortable analogization to any single affective register or painterly/pictorial schema which one might use in attempting to enclose a work to genre. They contain what could be called landscapes and what could be called interior spaces, yet playfully chip away at the surface of given assumptions of what is or could be either. Just as much as they are works which deal with the perception of tangible space, the show is also a forthright celebration of abstraction, not as a form or ‘style’ of painting, but as the basis of painting itself and the root of our perceptual faculties. The things in the paintings which do avail themselves to immediate, specific, and objective recognition come in the form of gifts or talismans; flowers (roses and lilies) and birds functioning as recurrent motifs of reprieve throughout the paintings. In “Dark Corner of a Garden” a coupling of white roses offers itself both as a moment of light in shrouded darkness as well as a means of ascertaining a sense of scale within the composition. In “Bird on a Wire”, in a shivering balance, a blackbird looks to

her side, perhaps inspecting what remains of her home after its destruction. Each of these works contain the results of what is experienced in the process of painting as an extension of having a life. From this, the kinds of spaces and events that take place amid the broad array of formal gestures of Natarajan's paintings— waves, scrapes, slashes, cover-ups, scratches, and rubs settle themselves in my head as appeals for a more rigorous practice of attentiveness to feelings— of our own, of others, of the mirages we chase .