

Mia Sandhu Holds the Gaze Hostage

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Mia Sandhu, "Bawdy 13," 2020. Courtesy Patel Brown.

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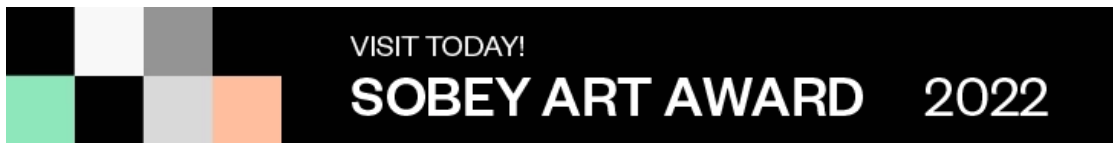
Seeing *You, Seeing Me, Seeing You*, as a title, is a bit misleading. At first blush, you couldn't tell whether the figures in Mia Sandhu's artworks were seeing you see them, as, typical to Sandhu's portraiture, their faces are obscured by smudgy clouds of charcoal. Look closer and the fog thins. Through the smudge that is actually wispier than you thought, the contours of a face emerge: the whites of eyes, rouged lips. But you have to look really closely, and still, the details are hazy, and, for the most part, concealed like the faces of a dream or memory.



(<https://momus2.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/7F0A2553.jpg>)

Mia Sandhu, "A Vessel to Hold 3," 2022 (installation view). Courtesy Patel Brown.

Photo: Kyle Tryhorn, courtesy Patel Brown.



(<https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/2022-sobey-art-award-exhibition>)

The exhibition repurposed Patel Brown (<https://www.patelbrown.com/te-voir-me-voir-te-voir-seeing-you-seeing-me-seeing-you>) gallery into a 1970s interior, complete with kitschy floral wallpaper, wooden mantels, and antique vases. Sandhu's illustrations of women in watercolor and pencil, layered with gouache and collage elements, draw partial inspiration from magazine pinups of the "Golden Age of Porn," as Jenna Faye Powell's exhibition text explains, and I recognized this heavy-handed curation as an effort to transport us into that era. Many of these props are represented in Sandhu's drawings as elements of her nudes' mise-en-scènes, such as the floral wallpaper in *Bawdy 37* (2020) that also papered parts of the gallery walls, and the mobiles that decorate the interiors of *Waxing and Waning 13* and *Waxing and Waning 15* (both 2022) and were hung throughout the gallery. The show's centerpiece was a living room set in the middle of the exhibition space: a tan Togo armchair atop a geometric rug. Sandhu's illustration *Chrysalis 6* (2022) was placed in a picture frame beside the chair. The work depicts a kneeling woman surrounded by drapery. A sheer veil cloaks her face and nude body.

As Roland Barthes writes(<https://soundenvironments.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/roland-barthes-mythologies.pdf>), the striptease is based on a contradiction: nudity is signified only through the presentation of clothing; every prop, adornment, and stage dressing is an element of a “magical decor,” which denotes the nude woman as “an object in disguise.” The veil in *Chrysalis 6* seems to frame Sandhu’s subject as display object (as does the tabletop frame, which turns the portrait into a literal object). But there was an additional contradiction, because the charcoal, while also a veil, was applied after the rest of the illustration was created and does not belong to its “magical decor.” The charcoal resists striptease: it is not, like the other veil within, a presented offer of unveiling.

Following Barthes’s logic, the entire curatorial staging was part of this striptease. Though this was confusing: was *Chrysalis 6* also a prop, or was the setting an elaborate frame for *Chrysalis 6*? When I visited the exhibition, I was unsure whether I could step on the carpet to get a closer look at the work. The drawings were staged as if they decorated these interiors, like they belonged to someone’s home. At the same time, the repetition of objects inside and outside Sandhu’s paintings suggested that spectators were meant to feel like we were inside the world of these paintings. The exhibition’s didactics encouraged your participation in an immersive experience: “It’s not just the earthly colour palette that triggers olfactory hallucinations of musty shag-carpets, smokey floral upholstery, and dusty rattan furniture. All elements in Sandhu’s drawings come together to produce a synaesthetic reaction,” Powell writes. “Your presence completes the transaction.”



(<https://momus2.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/7F0A2375.jpg>)

Mia Sandhu, “*Seeing You, Seeing Me, Seeing You*” (installation view) at Patel Brown, Montreal. Photo: Kyle Tryhorn, courtesy Patel Brown.

While Sandhu’s charcoal smudges undermine porn’s framing of female nudity, the halcyon staging was confusingly sentimental and seemed to overidentify with the subject of critique. The presentation of a situation, as book critic Molly Young [notes in a review](https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/playboy-hugh-hefner-story/) of *Playboy’s* collected centerfolds, is consistent with the construction of porn. She quotes a letter from Hugh Hefner to sexploitation director Russ Meyer—two oligarchs of porn’s golden age—in which Hefner explains that “the ideal centerfold is one in which ‘a situation is suggested, the presence of someone not in the picture.’” Young notes that *Playboy* readers are meant to imagine themselves as participants and points out the common presence of a lit cigar or trouser leg in a frame’s corner to add to the illusion. Much contemporary online porn still encourages this illusion. One only has to think of the popularity of POV pornography, where the camera framing of a disembodied dick allows viewers to imagine themselves in the scene, the penis their own.

Through these framing mechanisms, which *Seeing You, Seeing Me, Seeing You* also employed, porn disguises itself as a relationship, but it’s actually a product. Pre-packaged social situations and magical decor are forms of sleight of hand, constructing the illusion of participation while disguising its production. Powell’s use of the term “transaction” to describe the dynamic between nude and spectator is telling. Her word choice uncloaks this fudged representation of product as relationship. With this demystified product from a projected spectacle of participation, we can begin to consider porn’s means of production, which sometimes include forms of coercion and abuse. Such nostalgic elision, beyond any aesthetic objections to the exhibition’s schmaltzy curation, seems to overlook how porn’s golden age directly led to its present landscape.

The 1970s is a notable decade of choice in which to imagine Sandhu’s illustrations, insofar as it was when the artist’s father migrated to Canada. While her fixation on the decade makes sense, it also limits an audience’s considerations of gender dynamics, porn, and representation to that time and place. The strength of Sandhu’s portraits is their ability to call us from within this stifling decorating scheme, but it would be nice to be able to consider these works beyond any temporal tethers. One yearns for a little breathing room to encounter Sandhu’s work on its own terms.



(<https://momus2.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/7F0A2571-1.jpg>)

Mia Sandhu, "A Vessel to Hold 8," 2022. Photo: Kyle Tryhorn, courtesy Patel Brown.

My favorite illustrations in *Seeing You, Seeing Me, Seeing You* were the pregnant nudes that compose the series *A vessel to hold*. The women in these works adorn their pregnant bellies with garter belts and stockings, laces and silks, their nipples ablush and surrounding drapery plush. Sandhu challenges conceptions of mothers as martyrs and saints. Gabrielle Moser has noted(<https://canadianart.ca/reviews/porn-and-privacy-in-mia-sandhus-golden-girls/>) that her charcoal smudges look like halos, similar to the golden ones of Renaissance painting. At times, they look like gimp masks. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas also writes of [mothers](https://www.academia.edu/3352041/Otherwise_than_being_or_beyond_essence)(https://www.academia.edu/3352041/Otherwise_than_being_or_beyond_essence). Challenging their expected saintliness, he nonetheless represents maternal bodies as tropes for ethical relationships, where a distinct other inhabits the self while maintaining its alterity. The presence of another has us equal parts host and hostage to them—engaging in a relationship with a distinct other being—and Sandhu’s mothers similarly captivate her viewers. These maternal figures were some of the most confrontational works in the exhibition, addressing the viewer head-on: holding bellies in hands or else lifting negligees or spreading thighs. They are exhibitionists and pinup girls. In this postured exhibitionism, the mothers assert their subjectivity, in contrast to the more passive poses of a candid, languid nature (an “object on display”), holding our gaze, holding us hostage.



(https://momus2.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IMG_2152.jpg)

Mia Sandhu, "A Vessel to Hold 7," 2022. Photo: Kyle Tryhorn, courtesy Patel Brown.

The willowy, curving lines of the foliage and drapery encircling Sandhu's nudes recall erotica of the Art Nouveau era, another likely influence. I'm reminded particularly of the Danish artist Gerda Wegener, whose erotic illustrations are often described as challenging the male gaze. Similar discussions have been deployed by critics to frame Sandhu's illustrations, and while tonally and stylistically analogous to Wegener's portraits, Sandhu's

smudges lift her illustrations beyond the parameters of the turning-the-gaze-around lexicon of feminist subversion. The ambiguity of her semiopaque charcoal veils resists this simplification. Subversion can be a trap as it is dialectically chained to the implied presence of its source material: flipping an image or concept upside down often ends up underscoring the influence of the original. This is why the now-canonical feminist subversions of the male gaze can feel either anticlimactic or immediately satisfying. This is also true of anti-capitalist détournement gestures, which usually amount to a quick punchline and the dopamine rush of digestible critique.

On the other side of the spectrum are shock-jockey works like John Currin's *Jackass* series, which also draws from vintage *Playboys* and also obscures women's faces. Currin focuses on the advertisements, only he smudges the women's faces by slapping on looks of disgust at the men in these supposedly aspirational scenes. Currin's misanthropy is a good example of subversion's anticlimax, because it is reliant and hyperfixated on sexist distinctions to get the point across. Unfortunately, discourse around both Wegener's feminist subversion of the male gaze and Currin's adbuster misogyny arrive at the same conundrum. In either case, shooting looks back and forth is not enough because it amounts to volleying power back and forth, circling into tautology.

The artworks in *Seeing You, Seeing Me, Seeing You* moved beyond tautology because one never knew exactly whose eyes were where: what dynamic of looking we were engaging in. As critic Joseph Henry recently suggested(<https://www.artforum.com/books/t-j-clark-s-impressions-of-cezanne-out-of-time-89930>), "What art actually does in its singularity exceeds any of the frameworks we might throw at it." This includes dialectical entanglements, temporal tethers, forced immersive experiences, and this review. Instead, Sandhu's charcoal smudges require us to lean in and wonder. These works resist objectification and easy answers, maintaining their complexity and their individuality.

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