



Saied Dai

Essay by
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...frozen music

One of the most technically proficient and perceptive artists painting in Britain today, Saied Dai demonstrates a formalism and complexity in his work that is increasingly rare in contemporary art, combined with a degree of psychological insight, that is the equal of anything found in Lucien Freud or Stanley Spencer. Solidly informed by art history and academic tradition, his work is nonetheless wholly modern.

A standard question still put to students applying for art schools is: “*Who is your favourite contemporary artist?*” This can be an amusing talking point among friends, but in an interview the question becomes a minefield: a test to determine where (*if at all*) a student fits. When Saied was asked the question during his interview for the Royal Academy Schools he was all too aware of the subtext, but wasn’t about to change his answer: he replied “*Vermeer*”.

Whatever surprise this answer occasioned in the RA board, it didn’t deter them. They accepted him as a postgraduate candidate in painting, and Saied picked up his brushes and set out to illustrate his point. He would make regular visits to the National Gallery and spend weeks at a time painting copies after masterworks in the collection, a practice that at the time was met by his peers and museumgoers alike with puzzlement, and in some cases flat-out derision. One such copy, which took him a year to complete, is an uncannily accurate version of *Lady Standing at a Virginal*. This copy still hangs in his studio and continues to provide him with a touchstone for what motivates him as an artist. A thoughtful, articulate, softly spoken man, Saied becomes electrically animated when asked about the seventeenth-century Delft master. Seemingly all

at once books fly off the shelves and flip open to various reproductions, while his hands trace invisible lines and brushstrokes in the air: “*Just look at how he translated the gilt frame in the background, the lace on her dress... It’s pure abstraction!*”

Just when one might expect to see a legion of brushes marching into the studio, Sorcerer’s Apprentice-like, he just as quickly retreats into calm, and one’s eye returns to the cool polish of his copy, which, when seen among the works in the present exhibition, still appears distinct but no longer alone. The still, silent lucidity of composition, specific atmosphere, and careful balance between abstraction and pure form that are particular to Vermeer, now all visibly emerge from Saied’s own work.

Born in Tehran, when he was six years old Saied and his younger sister were sent by their parents to England, but their parents did not follow them. Effectively abandoned, Saied and his sister were sent to a succession of boarding schools and placed with foster parents who could have stepped from the pages of a Brontë novel. He remembers secondary school in particular as “*a hermetically sealed society based on physical and psychological violence.*” It could not have helped that he was Persian as well, and obviously different. Such a baptism in bigotry and loneliness could have crushed his character before it even had a chance to form; instead, he soon realized: “*I had to look after myself mentally, and it made me to some extent self-sufficient and pragmatic.*” Since he had been relegated to the role of outsider in his own childhood, Saied was compelled, whether by accident or design, to develop an acute eye for the world around him, as well as the nature of those with whom he had to share it.



As a student he excelled at sciences, subjects that rewarded his passion for observation, to the point that he was offered a place at two medical schools, but Saied decided to apply his talents to painting. One of his teachers recommended Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design (now the Arts University College at Bournemouth), and he graduated from there to the Royal Academy. During his postgraduate training at the RA, he not only took classes in anatomy, chemistry and perspective, but also pursued extracurricular instruction at the Wellcome Institute of the Royal College of Surgeons. His passion for scientific observation continues to play a key role in his art and it is Saied's deeply held belief that as an artist he has to be constantly on his guard against self-deception: in any image he makes, he must always try to see it for what it is, rather than, *"with soft hope, imagine that the work is somehow more."*

As precise and accurate as his paintings and drawings can be, he is never interested in photorealism or verisimilitude as ends in themselves. Instead, he concentrates on finding some underlying truth in his subject matter, and tries to capture this reality sensitively, yet rationally, by describing its inherent logic. *"Order begets order"*, he says, and while the rich textures, the depth of tone, and frequently the subject matter of his work are undeniably sensual, for all their tactile quality the pictures retain a certain reserve, even his nudes.

His assured draughtsmanship gives all his paintings a solid framework, and one might say that he builds images like an architect or a medieval mason. *"All observation is founded upon what has been absorbed and understood, rather than just what is seen."* It is this dependence on line and pure geometry in the service of communicating the reality of his subject matter that gives his paintings lucidity and a sense of coherence that can often be mesmerizing.

Self-evidently a figurative painter, Saied describes

himself, in fact, as an *"abstract figurative painter"*. Initially, this statement might sound like an oxymoron or mere mystification, but, as with his paintings, his words reward attention. *"There is fundamentally no difference between figurative and non-figurative art; abstraction is the language common to both."* He points again to his copy of the Vermeer, drawing attention to the morse code brushstrokes that describe the picture frame, lace, and hair, all of which he has replicated precisely from the original: *"This has nothing to do with mechanical replication or mimicry; it's everything to do with translation."* To Saied, it is Vermeer's flawless equations of light, line, shape, colour, and space in the service of subject that make his work the paragon of the eternal image.

Saied specifically strives for a similar sense of coherence in his own work. This is partly because he is sympathetic to the fact that the constant noise of



Persian Garden

our information age makes it difficult for people to absorb images, much less to value them, and partly because he understands that truly timeless images are still and silent in a way that information can never be: *“It’s easy to paint a noisy picture, but much more challenging to achieve silence...The better the art the more it simply leads you into silence.”* Perhaps it was no accident that of the two Vermeers in the National Gallery (*which are of the same subject*) he chose to copy the version where the girl has stopped playing.

Given his Persian heritage, one might expect some evidently Middle Eastern quality in Saied’s style or subject matter, but nothing obviously asserts itself in his work as such. His self-portrait in the exhibition, *Persian Garden* (Fig 1), stands out among the other works largely because it deploys so many Oriental conventions that he normally doesn’t use, such as borders, conscious patterning, distinct outlines and axial symmetry. After meeting and speaking with the artist, one can also appreciate that the portrait is a wry self-caricature. Saied places himself slouching bust-length in the lower-right corner of a composition that is dominated by a beautifully detailed Isfahan carpet. He wears casual modern clothes, his features are abstracted and exaggerated by strong lines and Fauvist planes of colour, and he looks wearily at the viewer, in an attitude that might suggest the whole thing was not his idea. When pressed on the subject, he eventually volunteered that *“If I had to point to anything that’s maybe Persian in my work, I’d probably say reticence”*, a statement that illustrates both his modesty and dry wit, but omits what is arguably the other Persian quality of his art: his command of geometry.

This command is beautifully illustrated in a portrait of his wife, the artist Charlotte Sorapure (Fig 2), for which Saied was awarded the Ondaatje Portrait Prize in 2006. Here, he poses his wife half-length, her long dark hair loose on her shoulders, wearing a jacket geometrically embroidered in yellows and ochres



Portrait of the Artist's Wife

that are complemented by the blue background. He conceived the portrait as an abstract image, which would only upon closer inspection resolve into an actual portrait. Posed in what is basically a cruciform arrangement, Charlotte’s stiffly angled arms, with her hands held in loose opposition at the waist, cross the verticality of her posture and her level three-quarter gaze. The opposing diagonals that play throughout her costume and the draped background complement the soft planes in her face and the gentle helixes of her curls. Saied’s blend of the rational and the reticent in the portrait gives his wife’s image a sense both of vulnerability and monumentality, suggesting

the artist's tenderness towards his subject, as well as his respect for her as a peer.

Whenever Saied paints a portrait, he starts by mapping out the sitter's character through the underlying structure of their physiognomy, a process that demands repeated drawings. Only after he feels that he has begun to understand some of the problems of design in portraying his sitter – be they structural, aesthetic or psychological – does he begin to paint. He points out that X-rays of any of his portraits, or indeed his paintings in general, would reveal subtle pentimenti scattered throughout. But in general his reliance on draughtsmanship in his painting is so absolute, that once he gets out his brush he rarely, if ever, literally returns to the drawing board.

This exhibition includes a variety of drawings in chalks, charcoal, ink and wash; some of which are directly related to paintings. These studies illustrate the clarity and correspondence of line, form and space that lie beneath the surface of all Saied's work, but also attest to the fact that he is a superb draughtsman. This is an increasingly rare quality in contemporary artists, and one that is all too easily overlooked or underestimated. At best, this is a result of drawing being mistaken for something strictly preparatory, effectively only a signpost to the destination of the finished image. At worst, this attitude towards draughtsmanship can stem from a belief that it is a process independent of the image, a kind of atavistic mark-making that the artist has to exorcise before the creative act proper. This is an approach that Saied abhors, not just because it is inherently egotistical, but also because it would make draughtsmanship completely useless.

Saied had been committed to developing his graphic skills long before he arrived at the RA. But it was his exposure to artists like Peter Greenham, Norman Blamey (*who specifically recognized Saied's talent for drawing*), and Roderic Barrett (*whom he credits with*

influencing his approach to composition) that sealed his conviction that drawing was and would always be essential to his goals as a painter. Saied said: *"I was fortunate enough to be taught art as architecture. Drawing reveals the way an artist thinks. It is the means by which one makes visual relationships."*

He speaks of Blamey, in particular, with great affection and respect, singling him out as one of the most generous and patient lecturers he ever studied under at the RA. A devout Anglican, Blamey, who died in 2000, was primarily known for his portraits of church figures and his sensitive, if almost



The Very Reverend Christopher Lewis, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford (in progress)

anthropological, paintings of High Church liturgy. The legacy of Blamey's work in Saied's portraiture is beautifully apparent in his portrait of *The Very Reverend Christopher Lewis, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford* (Fig. 3). The use of strong, almost Gothic verticals, and the coolly objective approach to form – the simple planes of the vestments changing into the more complex and nuanced arrangements of the face and hands – recall the calm aestheticism and mannerist tendencies of Blamey's earlier portraits. Like Blamey, Saied avoids using literal attributes in his portraits, and instead takes a more subtle approach to iconography, akin to manuscript illuminations or Byzantine icons, where the unique qualities of the subject are expressed through emphasis on their hands, or through the inclusion of significant shapes, such as the head framed by an arch.

Another lesson that he took from Blamey, at least in part, was the awareness of how eye level can skew artistic perception (*literally and figuratively*) and how a painter might use this distortion to advantage. A few years after he was elected to the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, Saied contributed a remarkable genre portrait, *The Hairdresser* (Fig. 4), to the People's Portraits exhibition. (*now on long-term loan to Girton College, Cambridge.*) The collection was created from yearly submissions by new Society members, and was started in 2002 as a millennial initiative to produce a collective visual record commemorating the working people of Britain. Saied chose to portray a hairdresser and his client (*who was also the hairdresser's girlfriend*), as artist and muse. Instead of depicting the hairdresser cutting or styling the woman's hair, Saied paints him showing her the results for approval: the moment when creation ceases and creative contemplation begins. This action, showing the client the back of her head, which is for most people an incidental part of getting a haircut, is the basis for a complex composition, involving layer upon layer of reflections.



The Hairdresser

The iterated images of the hairdresser and his client/ girlfriend climb up the canvas like a trellis, illustrating at the same time the subject's professional life and his private life. More than depicting a trade, the portrait hints at the distinctions we try to preserve between our public and private lives, and how the line between the two can become hazy.

The clarity and integrity of Saied's structuring of his subject matter, particularly his portrait sitters, is so manifest that the attention he pays to their personalities might not appear as obvious. It would

be impossible to achieve a work like *The Hairdresser* without his formal technique, but the picture would be no more than an exercise in optics if the elements in the image were not carefully balanced in a way that also frames and illuminates the emotional and psychological qualities of his sitters. The effects of this balance are difficult to describe, but easy to spot when they are absent. To demonstrate: if one mentally edits out just one of the objects in the picture, for example the comb in the man's back pocket, one can see that the vertical axis of the composition immediately loses its moorings and any sense of gravity.

Whenever he takes on a portrait commission, Saied is committed to doing justice to his subject's inner world (*insofar as it adds to the portrait*) as much as to the subject's actual appearance. Moreover, he is aware, even if his sitter is not, that the inherent nature of portraiture is memorial: any likeness must capture something unique and resonant about the sitter so that the portrait can literally stand the test of time. When he set out to paint Dame Stephanie Shirley (Fig. 5), a pioneer of internet technology and a renowned philanthropist, she might have appeared to be the ideal subject for the artist's distinctly rational style. An extraordinarily accomplished woman, her time available for sittings was unfortunately limited: Saied was unable to make as many preliminary studies as he had hoped, and partly for this reason he initially struggled with the portrait, at one point fearing it might not reach beneath the surface of the sitter's accomplishments and outward persona.

In the end, however, geometry provided a doorway that allowed him to get under the skin of his subject, as well as to express a specific truth about her. Dame Stephanie noticed that scattered around the studio were several cardboard sculptures of complex geometric solids, and asked Saied about them. He explained that he had started making the objects when he was a boy, and continued to do so through

art school and beyond, the shapes becoming more and more complex as he got older. The conversation eventually turned to the sitter's own childhood, which, as she explained, was sharply interrupted by the rise of Nazism. Dame Stephanie had been born in Germany to Jewish parents, and were it not for her inclusion on one of the last of the *Kindertransports* to England, she would almost certainly not have survived the war. Saied's addition to the portrait of a star tetrahedron held close to her heart and framed by the dark tones of her costume refers directly to the sitter's accomplishments as a mathematician



Dame Stephanie Shirley (in progress)

and scientist, but also hints at a specific aspect of her personal history. His choice of a high viewpoint and clear rectilinear composition give the portrait a rational detachment utterly appropriate to the subject, but by portraying Dame Stephanie holding one of his delicate paper sculptures Saied also adds a subtle layer that invites questions about what really shapes an individual's life: reason or fate?

Whether they are commissioned portrait clients, the various models and local personalities who often sit for him, or even his wife Charlotte, whose chameleon-like beauty regularly inspires him, Saied usually captures people in a moment of repose or private contemplation. His subjects never appear to confront or evade the viewer. Unlike more gestural bravado portraitists, who actively challenge the relationship between themselves and their models (*sometimes to the point of solipsism*), Saied appears to maintain a far greater level of professional detachment from his subjects. His sitters often seem aware of existing as a likeness of themselves, and there is definitely an element of collaborative role-play at work in his portraiture. His subjects often wear their own everyday clothes, but subtle juxtapositions of shape, colour and pose can recast the sitter in a more iconic role. In his portrait study of a friend, by simply placing the man bust-length before a green screen, and giving him a beret, Saied reimagines him as a northern Renaissance philosopher. In another, a bust-length study of Charlotte, the spread collar of her green fleece makes her face rise calyx-like against the dark background, her downcast eyes evoking images of the Madonna. He frequently depicts his subjects with a veiled or circumspect expression, suggesting polite reserve and even respect for his sitter's existence outside the borders of their image. In the case of his nudes, this look can give the figure an air of either vulnerability or sensual self-containment. In several of the portraits, a sidelong

gaze might entice the viewer to guess at the sitter's inner life, or hint at a sense of detached authority. In others, such as *Carlotta (cat. no. 6)*, Saied actually succeeds in giving his subject a gaze more penetrating and questioning than that of the viewer.

Saied's meticulous technique is enhanced by his use of gessoed panels, which are ideal for maintaining the purity of line and plane that is the core of his style. He also paints on linen, but largely prefers panels or on linen laid down to panels, because unlike canvas, this kind of support can survive repeated scrapings of the paint surface as he builds up his image. Equally important, the gessoed ground preserves the colour and consistency of the oil paint, and allows the paint layers to become something that eventually appears integral to the whole. Preparing these panels involves applying rabbit skin glue and several layers of gesso to both sides of the panel, a time-consuming and laborious practice that cannot be rushed.

By abstracting the visual reality of his subject matter into pure form, coupled with his refusal of, or more accurately his lack of interest in, full disclosure, Saied often gives his images a sense of mystery and suspension in time. Spatial ambiguities and fuzzy contours lend his landscapes and city views a dream-like displacement. In his narrative figure compositions, he sometimes crops and marginalizes the figures, placing them against blank or looming articulated backgrounds to focus on the actions or expressions of the lovers, students, and commuters that people these works. However, Saied's intense observation of his subject matter never gives way to a sense of heightened realism or theatricality. Instead, he composes each painting in planes of tone and colour, which he builds in successive layers to produce a richly tactile paint surface that retains, but does not fully reveal, everything about the image. His scenes of people engaged in solitary, private activities, lushly painted in subtly corresponding palettes, are very much in

the tradition of works by Walter Sickert and Harold Gilman. Recently he was elected to the New English Art Club, an honour which he fully appreciates, but on which he remains somewhat reticent. Possibly he is aware on some level that, compared to the work of so many British contemporary figurative painters, his paintings resemble only those of the very earliest NEAC members, such as the Camden Town painters.

Saied's landscapes and townscapes, often inspired by the Georgian facades of his home city Bath, are frequently less about depicting the actual locale and more about capturing a specific, usually fleeting, atmosphere. He is fascinated by the transformative power of light, and how the effects of dawn or dusk, the light just before or after a storm, can turn the familiar into the sinister, the mundane into the magical. The spatial enigmas within these paintings compel the viewer into the image like a lucid dream, and his buildings often take on a life of their own. A streetlight's yellow-orange glow can give a townhouse an air of comfort or menace; farm buildings in the dark outskirts of a French village seem to face each other in a grudging truce, like aged siblings who never got on as children. Equally, his approach to how light affects inanimate objects often lends his still-lives an appealingly spooky night kitchen quality. Just by employing a high viewpoint and stark tonal contrasts, he can transform a simple arrangement of fish, lemon, knife and plate into a *memento mori*.

In fact, Saied's work is packed with many such subtle art historical references. By using a copper sulphate green tone in the background of one portrait, he evokes Holbein. In his portrait of the chicly eccentric Madeleine, her upright posture and fixed gaze lend a subtle sheen of decadence reminiscent of Weimar era portraits. The starkly lit isolation of fish, garlic cloves, etc. recalls still-lives in Hispano-Flemish religious paintings. The hazy calm of his moonlit landscape practically begs to be shattered by a rider

on a pale horse. These references are undeniably fun to spot, but the unique appeal of Saied's paintings does not depend on them. As intellectually and technically informed as his work is by art history, his paintings are never pastiches. In all of his paintings, regardless of any precedents they might evoke in any genre, Saied strives to present the viewer with a self-contained world, one with a specific atmosphere that is in equal parts mysterious and memorable.

His ability to orchestrate all the formal elements of his image in the service of capturing this mystery and fixing it in the viewer's eye is what makes Saied's work so clear and yet so thought provoking. "*One cannot live with anything that has no mystery*", he contends, but the specific mood, atmosphere or emotion he conjures in each work is no trick. It is based on his flawless draughtsmanship and almost architectural sense of structure. The painting and drawings in the exhibition initially lure the eye and spark the imagination, simply because they are beautiful. But it is the consistent resolution of form, technique and subject matter into an indivisible whole that gives these works a kind of subliminal geometry, making them resonate in the mind's eye. Saied Dai is just a great communicator, and his work offers the rare pleasure of encountering an artist who assumes that the viewer is at least as intelligent as he is.

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