



Hayv Kahraman, *Not Quite Human 8*, 2019, oil on panel, 60 × 60".

Hayv Kahraman

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 20TH STREET

“She reminds me of that Mexican artist Frida Kahlo,” said a middle-aged man as he scanned new works by Hayv Kahraman depicting her constant subject: a black-haired woman with fair skin, poppy-red lips, and large, heavy-lidded eyes. It may have been this figure’s unapologetic unibrow that inspired the comment. But Kahraman, who is from Iraq, also shares the tendency of “that Mexican artist” to weaponize reductive views of her ethnicity and sexuality in paintings as subversive as they are beautiful. She has described her recurring character as an extension of herself: an avatar of her desperation to assimilate as a teenage refugee in Sweden and of her subsequent reconnection with her heritage.

In this exhibition, Kahraman cast her surrogates as contortionists kinked and folded into severe positions. Wearing leotards patterned with the tessellated ten-pointed stars,

diamonds, and hexagons found in traditional Islamic art and architecture, they appeared alone, in tangled twos and threes, and in stacks. Five women formed an acrobatic spire in *The Tower* (all works 2019), backs arched, feet on thighs, crab-like legs splayed wide to frame prominent pubic mounds. In *Not Quite Human 8*, two standing women faced away from one another, their spines bent agonizingly as their heads met the backs of their knees. Sharply defined translucent shafts of gold passed over them—spotlights suggesting they were onstage and we their audience. In certain pieces they recalled hinged puppets or dolls, forced into unnatural positions. In others, their coolly composed, determined expressions suggested that the women themselves conceived this choreography and that these poses were of their own design.

Kahraman's contortionists alternately appeared powerful, capable of manipulating the fantasies projected onto them as objects of "exotic" desire, and exhausted by the performance. The differences between the women's features were subtle but striking—the viewer could read defeat in one weary eyelid, triumph in another, and detect a trace of pleasure in a pair of parted lips nearly identical to every other set. In these portraits, Kahraman alerted us to the process of interpreting the slightest cues in other people, something we so often do without any conscious thought or self-awareness.

Three sculptures, however, practically gutted the otherwise excellent show. Hot-pink, wormlike metal pipes sprouted from low plinths, terminating in circular paintings. One depicted a woman's face, the other two, vaginas at close range. Coin slots wide enough to receive crayons were slit into each, right where you expected them to be. They were so crass, so brashly unlikable, they *almost* worked—if only for the sheer perversity and obvious relish with which they flouted the elegance of the other, more nuanced works. Their presence, however, felt like the sudden blare of a car commercial in the middle of a ballet.

The more successful risks Kahraman took in this show appeared in paintings that flirt with abstraction. The background of *Hyperinvisible 3*, for instance, is mottled with bleeds, stains, and smoky spots of charcoal and chalky orange. Drips run upward from the bottom of the canvas. These evocative splotches suggest an amorphous architectural space—a low wall or balcony, maybe—only to lapse back into obscurity. The bodies of the two women in

this painting, whose overlapping heads form a teardrop near its center, are not filled in with the usual sheer washes of pale pink, but instead are outlined in eloquent black brushstrokes. These lines are alive with Kahraman's own gestures, the twists of her wrist and sweeps of her arm. In an oeuvre distinguished by meticulous exactitude and gorgeous control, it was wonderful to feel the dynamism of the artist at work.

"I think these pictures were designed to turn people off," declared the Kahlo expert as he exited the gallery. Whether he viewed this as a merit or a shortcoming was not immediately clear, but Kahraman might have appreciated that he did not leave "turned on" by the dark eroticism of her paintings. Her work stymies our desires with complex, inscrutable demands. The women who meet our gaze do so with sphinxlike stares that are both challenges and invitations. They appear at once defiant and beseeching, as though to say, "You could never understand," while begging—or daring—us to try.

—Zoë Lescaze