

## Artforum

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### Amir Khojasteh

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“There are only two styles of portrait painting: the serious and the smirk,” declares Miss La Creevy in Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838). The former, she adds, is to be used for professionals and public figures, and the latter for private individuals, “who don’t care so much about looking clever.” Amir Khojasteh’s darkly comedic paintings are decidedly in the latter camp, but none of his subjects are smiling. In his work, humans and horses alike bear the narrowed eyes of exasperated hindsight. They have #regrets, and they turn to face the viewer like Jim from *The Office*, with side-eye that could rival the most popular reaction GIFS.

Paint is so thickly applied that it dribbles down equine foreheads and pudgy chins like sweat, or perhaps drool. In a pair of small paintings titled *El Comandante #1* and *El Comandante #2*, both 2019, Che Guevara seemed to quite literally drip with disdain. If horses sweat and men perspire, do ladies simply glow, as the old chestnut goes? We may never find out; almost all the people depicted are men. When the subjects more closely resemble amorphous blobs, they are gendered by titles such as *The Man with a Horse #4*, 2019.

And then comes the glorious color. There are streaky pinks and oranges aplenty, but muted primaries dominate the artist’s paean to portraiture. Scarlets, mustards, and electric blues hung in a neat stripe around the spare white gallery walls. *Red Room*, 2018, the only work to depict a space, albeit one where portraits might be painted, appeared on a bright azure wall at some remove in an alcove off the main space. The work is a remake of Henri Matisse’s *L’atelier rouge* (*Red Studio*), 1911, with Khojasteh’s own paintings swapped in. The show featured another homage to the French colorist—*Study after the Romanian Blouse by Henri Matisse#2*, 2019—but this quotation is far looser. The hands are so tiny, the voluminous embroidered blouse suggests elbows raised as if to flap like a chicken, and facial features give way to a rather porcine pink snout. *Untitled #3*, 2018, referenced Andy Warhol’s bovines, but replaced the cows with horses.

Other works jettisoned the Western art-historical canon in favor of the Western canon of tyrants—such as Lenin or the Ayatollah Khomeini—whom some might consider revolutionaries. The current American president got a showing here, too, in the unmistakable comb-over of *Portrait of a Lonely Man #2*, as well as in *Studies of the Head of the Orange Men*, both 2019, where he seemed to be connected at the shoulder, like a Siamese twin, to a rather chelonian double that could only be Mitch McConnell. Along with the three-headed Khomeini-like figure in *Three Holy Heads #4*, 2019, these shadowy figures suggested that such figureheads might not always be the ones pulling the strings.

Or are the orange men the ethnonationalists of India and Israel, of the religious-nationalist “orange camp” and the Saffron Tide? It was hard to tell: None of the portraits was particularly faithful; and many were skewed beyond recognition. Particularly compelling were *The Master*, *The Master #2*, and *The Master #3*, all 2018, in which Hitler, Lenin, and Mao, respectively, are distorted as if with the stretch effect from the Mac app *Photo Booth*.

But, listen, there’s nothing more boring than political satire. If these paintings were funny, the humor was in the semiotically overloaded vein of @horse\_ebooks, the famously enigmatic Twitter feed. More than anything, the works were thoroughly enjoyable in their slapsticky impasto. “*The Gloomiest Sunset in the World*” turned out to be an awfully jovial affair.