

The Mirror Has Two Faces

Omar Kholeif



The manufacture of death masks, typically a wax or plaster cast bearing a person's likeness was a common if peculiar act that gained a certain popularity amongst the European aristocracy in the Middle Ages. It involved taking an impression of a corpse's face, and the resulting artifacts produced functioned as mementoes—tokenistic vessels of noble ghosts. These vestiges find their cultural riposte in the life of the swagger portrait that came to prominence during the Tudor period in the late fifteenth century. Heroic, often larger-than-life commissions by noted painters of the time, often of oil on canvas, the blustering swagger in these pictures, has long served as a remnant of influence denoting the Crown and landed gentry. Still frequently seen today, these pictures adorn civic buildings with details of monarchs and their courtiers. For an institution, be it a public museum, a patron's home, or a private member's club, to display such an image is to suggest a kinship with empire, and with it the bloodshed that emerged from the wake of its rule.

While the ancient Egyptians were known to use such techniques to commemorate the dead, these guises were customarily emblems that were created for the spiritual realm, rather than for the living. In mythology, it was said that these death masks were created so that the soul would recolonize the body. They were not intended for display in public museums. Situated alongside gravestones, they also labored to ward off unwanted spirits.

Artist Lalitha Lajmi's preoccupation with the way "death" itself cleaves to the contours of the face via the metaphor of the mask is a longstanding preoccupation. In *Death Also Has a Mask*, a figure embodying the artist's person is rooted to the ground clutching a "death mask" between her thumb and the grip of her palm, readying herself to exhibit this façade, as if about to adorn her face with a Venetian masquerade ball mask. Venetian masks were popularized in the fifth century and were worn by members of every social stratum, proffering anonymity, as opposed to likeness. Contrary to the patrician visions of the contemporary ticketed "masked ball," these holiday-season events were often known to blur social and moral boundaries amongst the various social groups. Symbolism churns from this past to present-day India, arguably the most socially stratified and heterogeneous society that exists in plain sight.

Except Lalitha Lajmi's points of obsession eschewed didacticism and found life in self-analytical points of fixation. If you look closely at any of her pictures, the specter of her critique finds its resolve in the shadows of her reflection. Light bounces off a mirror—a refractive tool, suggestive of two masks, two and several more sides to every story. The looking glass, contrary to common belief, does not reverse the image but presents an inversion of the face. The portrait is presented from front to back. Lalitha Lajmi's lifelong preoccupation with turning the mirror onto herself, fashioning an autoethnography as metaphor of nation was the starting point of my conversations with the capacious author, Skye Arundhati-Thomas.

I had the privilege of spending an intense period with Skye during a residency. It was a text that I commissioned from Arundhati-Thomas on the late Sri Lankan photographer Lionel Wendt for an exhibition catalogue that captivated my attention. In a mere 400 words, the author was able to narrate a century's worth of history, without pomp or circumstance, deploying a signature style that read as much like poetry as it did fiction. I was spellbound. I implored Skye to develop a proposal for a new six-part modular score that I was developing, titled *imagine/otherwise*.

imagine/otherwise—each book is an exercise in recapitulating histories. As each volume is added to the anthology, it reveals the distinct potency that can emerge from stitching together seemingly errant pictures of female portraits into a single frame. Moreover, *imagine/otherwise* is a queered anthology of "female worlding," it is a living piece of music, contoured and shaped through ongoing dialogue with the living and the dead, through extensive examination into letters, archives, papers, and sketchbooks in a sphere that must be reclaimed. Many of the artists, like Lajmi, were self-taught and made ends meet through myriad of means, often practicing their art behind the scenes, while juggling the practicalities of work, creativity, and motherhood. With each book, the author, the editor, and the publisher have had to make ethical decisions regarding their roles. What constitutes the scaffolding of an artist's creative will, and is thus necessary for articulation, and what must be left for the ghosts to inform us?

Arundhati-Thomas was assiduous from the beginning about how to narrate the story of this book. Their approach

is singular—they consider, through Lajmi's interest in the self-reflexive mode of the psychoanalyst, meticulously chosen self-portraits of watercolors, how Lajmi practiced in near silence for decades, could proffer an alternative reading of Indian modernism. As Samuel Beckett would say, "the tears of the world are a constant quantity," and I soon found myself in a flood of blue melancholy hearing the story of the artist's life. I was placated to learn that an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai would soon be opening.

Before the ink had dried on the contract with Skye, just twenty-nine days after the exhibition at the National Gallery had opened, Lalitha Lajmi died on February 13, 2023, aged ninety. In the weeks following the artist's passing, Arundhati-Thomas shared detailed images of Lajmi's lush and porous watercolors, in which the artist's astonishing history scenes came to life in abundant color, layer upon layer, with her incarnation, an avatar of Lalitha, in each scene. I continued with my own research, venturing to explore the artist's panoramic oil paintings and etchings as well. These vistas bristled with a devotion to color, intertextual references to art's histories, but equally a desire to subvert and abjure the conventions of the pictorial plane. Realistic depictions, through the unusual placement of figure and ground, dense color saturation coupled with the iconography of the religious, the spiritual, and of death, abound the surreal, as much as they do the hyperreal.

Early in our editorial discussions, I invoked the voice of my late mentor, the artist and critic Jean Fisher and her personification of the "trickster," which emerges from her decodification of the "coyote," an animal in Native

American tradition imbued with multitude of myth and meaning. Fisher deployed this symbol as a decolonizing agent. While I was under her tutelage, Fisher presented the Norma U. Lifton Lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, later revised as "Tricksters, Troubadours—and Bartleby: On Art from a State of Emergency," published in the journal *InPrint* of Trinity University Dublin, where she argues that the trickster is able to "discover new insight—the difference between a thing and its representation—through a momentary loss of consciousness and change in perspective." When I would query Jean to explain this to me in layperson's terms she would explain, "Coyote lean back!" What she meant was that by surrendering one's consciousness to the art itself one can make inferences on the state of the world, and in turn, of the given conditions of the world in which they live, which would otherwise not be possible. As we come to learn in Arundhati-Thomas's spellbinding account, often narrated through Lajmi's own words after sessions in psychoanalysis, Lajmi, too, clearly personified certain characteristics of the trickster.

Key to the trickster's worldview is also a penchant for humor, even when addressing the morbid. They depict a sense of "cunning" even if detached from their own person, which when considered collectively provides, as Fisher articulates, a "bricoleur's re-articulation of material—words, images and objects—mobilized towards a critical interrogation of the languages of dominance typical of trickster." The trickster, as Fisher reminded me, is still an acute observer of the culture of the present and the past. In *Game with Clown* (1995), an epic oil painting, presents Lajmi's take on the oft-deployed approach to the dinner



Games with Clown, 1995, oil on canvas, 71 x 59 in.

party scene in art history. Artists from time immemorial have developed an iconography around the dining table, to both dramatic and comedic effect. One of the most personally striking vestiges of such a scene sits in the National Galleries of Scotland and was executed by Peter Paul Rubens. The dramatic picture is *The Feast of Herod* (ca. 1635–38). Here, Herod's daughter Salome carries a plate serving serving John the Baptist's severed head for supper.

Le déjeuner des canotiers, or *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1882), is one of French Impressionist Renoir's magnificent still lifes found in the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. It is all about diagonals and desire. The painting is constructed in two halves and features the person who would become the artist's future compatriot. One of my favorite dinner party scenes, to be found

in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, is *The Dinner Party* (1980) by Sam Walsh, a painting that is all profile, detail, and background. It is one of those pictures that says everything with seemingly very little form, only the details.

Enter *Games with Clown* (1995). From the get-go, the title leads the spectator searching for the “clown.” Is the clown the statue, cast off-center, offstage—Lajmi, the trickster, skewing and skewering, engaging the imagined spectator, hoping that they will squint, and squint again. The inevitable would suggest it’s the woman in blue, with white makeup and overripe red blush streaked across her cheekbones. The lady clutching the “mask” of death held to her stomach. A double take. Jump cut to a warped tablecloth whose body begins to assume a diamond-like shape—its checkered pattern in midnight hues interlaces with the colors of old gold, amber, canary, and mustard. That this substantive cloth appears akin to the body of a harlequin’s suit is no accident. The Venetian masquerade costume, and the attendant entertainers. Indeed, consider the deep indigo of the central figure at the table. I cannot help but conjure Pablo Picasso’s *Seated Harlequin* (1901) in the same breath.

In preparation, I would come to learn that Lajmi came to visit Britain to see her son and daughter-in-law, who had settled in England. During that time, she made lists of certain artists whose paintings she would like to see in person. I do not believe that Lajmi would have had the opportunity to visit the exhibition of the reclusive Belgian impressionist James Ensor at the Royal Academy, London, in 2016, but I see in their perspectives a shared kinship. Ensor’s approach to painting, if anything, unspools from

the crevices, from the maddening crowd, operating akin to an inversion of Lajmi’s art. While Lajmi painted from the inside out, using her own image as an anchor to orient, fashion, and craft a painting, Ensor used the carnivalesque crowd to then paint inward, toward the individual. The duplicity of the face—and its function as a metaphor for the nation; the light of refraction, and the tonality of death were all subjects at play within the orbit of both artist’s mind and memory.

Perhaps that is the greatest loss, to me as a historian, not having been able to walk down a corridor with Lalitha Lajmi to discuss her work. With all that said, I and readers still remain privileged that Skye Arundhati-Thomas has embodied a distinct essence of Lalitha Lajmi’s art through lithe prose that reads much like lyric or poetry. Their words are to be imbibed quickly at the pace of a song, one must keep step with their tonality. But like any great record, it is to be played back and returned to, listened to slowly, each sentence examined, in between the folds, for its notation is ever precise in its placement within this overarching composition.

of the world's largest electorate under the democratic method. Yet it was not so straightforward, and it was not so secular. Where the leaders of India gave us Mother India, Lalitha Lajmi offered the trickster. Ultimately, the trickster's defiance is double-edged, weighted by contradictions that are not easily disentangled. While they may disrupt the status quo, they offer no easy solutions, assuming a tempo all their own.

Excursion: A Summer with Lalith Lajmi Omar Kholeif

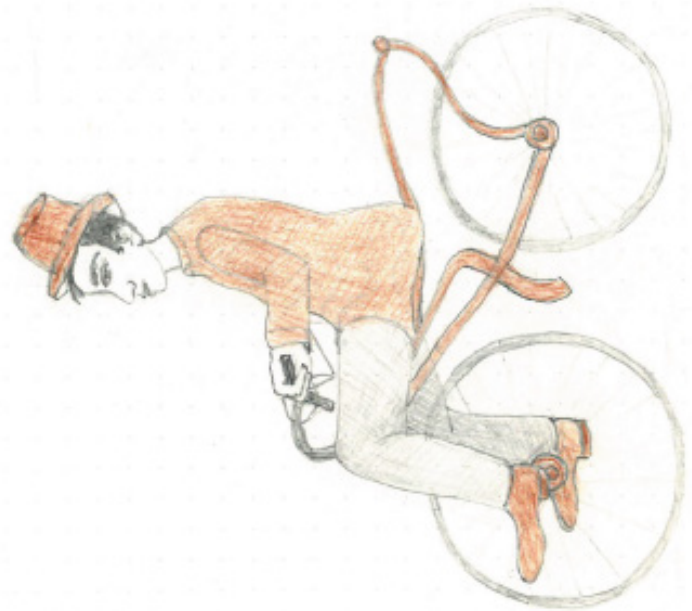
An excursus is an excursion, a diversion, a journey outward and beyond. I felt that it would be a joyful way to end this book if we took a detour into another one of Lalitha Lajmi's worlds—through a diary granted to me by Skye Arundhati-Thomas, authored by the artist in 2010 in the northeast of England.

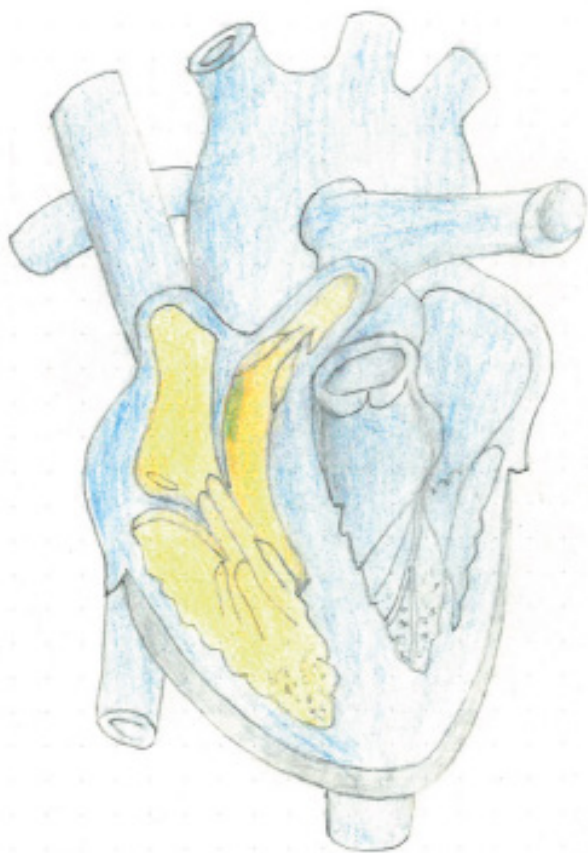
As sacred as diaries and notebooks can be, they can also be frivolous, playful, and confusing in their self-reflections. The journal that I was granted began primarily as an activity log for Lajmi. I held the stained digital facsimiles in my hands anticipating a cradle of confession. Instead, I encountered the most peculiar thing, an autobiography of a life, which resembled something entirely ordinary. For a woman who spent much of her years painting in the stillness of the dark, amidst shrouds of blue melancholy, often depicting scenes of metaphorical death in abundantly choreographed history paintings, the virtuousness of these pages, was relieving to encounter.

Started in July 2010 and completed in August of that year, the diary begins with the artist's

arrival from India to meet her daughter-in-law Joanna at home in England, where she intends to spend the summer. Lalitha is overjoyed that her daughter-in-law's home is all that she had hoped it to be. She details an itinerary. She intends to visit exhibitions and permanent displays of recognized British landscape painters, citing names including L. S. Lowry, John Constable, and Francis Bacon; a visit to Yorkshire is most captivating. Throughout, the artist writes with an obsessive desire to bear witness to certain physical ships, and their armature. Then suddenly, Lajmi's prose is replaced by observational drawings produced from daily life.

The pictures begin with a sideways drawing of a gentleman riding a bike created on July 25th, 2010. Animals, grandchildren, organs, limbs, and birds fill up the rest of the pages. The multifarious motifs reveal an artist who is capacious, consistently interrogating that which is seen and unseen—what exists out with and within the frame of the body itself, as is detailed in the selection of drawings that ensue. "Lalli", as she was affectionately called by her friends, had approved that these pages be published and we hope that their inclusion constitutes a meaningful addition to the artist's worldview.







9 weeks
1.7cm



22 weeks
16cm

