

Manzur Kargar

From Greek Antiquity
to Glossy

By Marisa Casciano



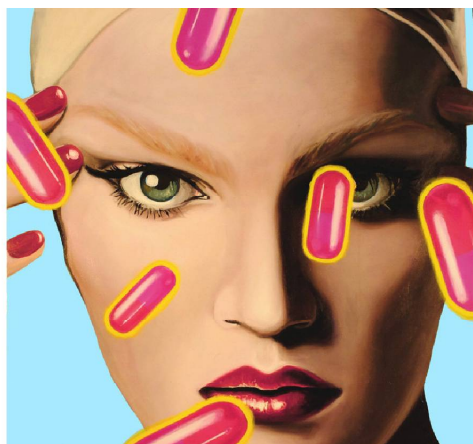
I remember walking the streets of Berlin last October. It was a little too cold for comfort, but we still spent hours passing by tourist stops like the Brandenburg Gate and the TV Tower. We strolled along the East Side Gallery, a collage of graffiti I was expecting to be more tall and less long. It was colorful and powerful nonetheless.

We only were in Berlin for three days. One afternoon we stopped at a coffee shop. I was beyond grateful for an apple cinnamon muffin and a large mug of herbal tea. In that moment, I fell in love with Berlin. The city's unique combination of modern and historic was inspiring to me. How could a place with such stories from World War II and the Holocaust transition into modern day neutral fashion, exciting nightlife and media hubs? It was artistic, unexpected, and it somehow made sense. I found this unexpected transition again when talking with Berlin-based artist, Manzur Kargar. Kargar's recent pieces remind me of magazine advertisements. However, his art was originally inspired by the styles and stories of Greek antiquity. "I like the story of this guy, who was a sculptor, who built a sculpture and he fell in love with the sculpture," said Manzur. "Or the guy who fell in love with his own reflection. The stories are always about beauty."

Manzur was born in Afghanistan. His mother was German, and his father was Afghan. While studying art, Manzur had trouble finding his identity as an artist. He did not feel like he completely belonged to the German or Afghan traditions and found comfort in Greek antiquity and its influence on a lot of European art. "They [The Greeks] explain the first time they had an idea of beauty. They invented a formula for the human body which should be beautiful." Most art students can attest to the formulas that come into drawing a human figure. The head fits in the body seven times; in a normal stance, one leg is strong and the other is soft. The form is often referred to with the Italian word "contrapposto". It is the closest art comes to math and science. Today, we still study these formulas in hope of obtaining the perfect figure, or the ideal form of beauty.



Pills 3, Oil on Canvas, 43.3\"X43.3\"



Pills 4, Oil on Canvas, 43.3\"X43.3\"



Pills 5, Oil on Canvas, 43.3\"X43.3\"

"That was for me a revelation. Oh wow, these guys basically invented the idea of beauty, which still exists. No country before did that," Manzur said. "They actually found the principle of beauty."

Manzur continued to deal with the idea of beauty in the figurative world of art and found that artists used it for different intentions. The Renaissance painter used beauty to convince the people to believe in religion. The modern world uses beauty as a marketing technique, an element of art and seduction in media and advertising.



Bullets 2, Oil on Canvas, 59"X40"

"I had to find a way to the modern times. How can I transform these ideas into a modern painting? Or how can I transform my paintings into today's world? How can I use these ideas of beauty?" Manzur asked himself, going through a sort of crisis at the end of 1999 that he could no longer paint antiquity. "How can I become a contemporary painter?"

Manzur found his inspiration once again in the figure. He started with just the human face, becoming more and more interested in its shape and beauty. He enjoyed that the personality behind the face wasn't important. Often when you paint a face, people were always asking who it is. Like a red carpet event, the talk is often, "Who is she? Who is she wearing?" Going forward, he wanted to avoid these questions as he made a transition into a more modern image.

He began with creating these digital collages. Nowadays, we have a world of images at our fingertips thanks to Google and advertising campaigns. We are almost bombarded with them between our iPhones, billboards and the television. Manzur began to collect these images. A purse. A pair of shoes. Models. He spends days saving them into different folders on his computer and working with them in Photoshop for his next piece.

"Oh this painting could use a flower! So I open the flower folder," Manzur guides me. "I start with some image and put them together, cut them out, or get closer or bigger or smaller."

These images are very apparent when you take in his most recent work. His huge series of close-up faces have geometric layers of butterflies and bold orange lines. They create this physical space between the viewer and the image of the face. The images somehow become an emotional and mental layer as well, as you realize it is a person you can never really reach. "There's always a layer between you and the image." Manzur describes them as unreachable. Like the beauty ideal created by the Greeks, we can never fully grasp what we see. He uses these layers of color and images as a way to play around in his pieces. Ending with one glossy image, which could be quickly mistaken for one of those magazine ads or a photograph if you didn't do a double take.

But Manzur describes this glossiness as the true art of modern day advertising. Think of a magazine ad. It appears picture perfect on the seemingly plastic-coated paper. You are not encouraged to think much, just to be inspired enough to remember it amongst the parade of other images you come across. There is no depth or hidden meaning, just a fine layer of glossy.



Butterflies, Oil on Canvas, 59"X40"

“It has nothing to do with reality.” Manzur said.

“Some people that deal with the human try to be natural. What I’m looking for is just the surface.” Where Manzur finds comfort in this overload of images and glossy advertisements, we have started to feel like we’re drowning. Our world is fast-paced. Technology is constantly growing and putting new ideas and images in our heads that can be hard to keep up with. We take little time to appreciate the art of an advertisement or element of pop culture. In the midst of all the consumption, we forget to absorb a piece of pop culture or find an element of inspiration before we swipe on.

“There’s so much to see and so much to look at, but people can’t receive things because there’s a tsunami of images coming into your life everyday.” I liked picturing this tsunami of images. An Instagram feed or flow of Facebook notifications surrounding me, tweets ringing in my ear. It seemed pretty accurate. But how could one brave the storm so they could enjoy it? How could one find the art in it? What is the art of managing it? Manzur argued it is a matter of awareness. “It’s a matter of are you able to really look at an image. Can you really absorb something, or are you just clicking or swiping on your iPhone.”

He talked of a time when he would take photographs on a digital camera of advertisements on TV. It allowed him to capture a single moment and appreciate it. “If you paint it, which takes two to three weeks, you take the time off the thing. If you paint a piece of a chocolate bar flying through the air, you put it in a different dimension.” Stop and smell the roses, right? It is the idea of slowing down time for yourself to understand the images and become a little involved in them. You don’t have to paint them or be an internationally known artist to appreciate a form of art like that.

“Coming back to my beginnings, looking for where I belong, I found this in pop culture. It’s a common sense kind of thing. And everybody understands the images.” ■

Manzur will have his exhibition at Isabella Garrucho Fine Art November 16 (by invitation only). Please contact us at info@igifa.com for details.