

GAGOSIAN GALLERY  
25/11/08 The Independent, Y Z Kami,  
'Extraordinary Pictures of Ordinary People.'

# Extraordinary pictures of ordinary people

## VISUAL ARTS

Y Z KAMI: ENDLESS PRAYERS

Parasol Unit, London

★★★★

**T**he eye is the keyhole to the soul. True? Or just a tired old truism? That turn of phrase is often wheeled out when portraiture is under discussion. We hear, time and again, how the human eye is always inclined to gravitate towards the answering gaze in order to find not only the focal point of any essentially human encounter, but also that sense of balance that eye contact seems almost to guarantee. In this reading, it is almost as if the body pivots about the eye like the pin that holds the Catherine wheel to the garden shed on 5 November.

In fact, it could scarcely be less true of the brilliant portraiture in oils of Y Z Kami, the Persian-born painter who is currently enjoying his first large-scale exposure in this country. In Kami's work any notions about the centrality of the eye are quite beside the point.

Kami's works are at their best when they are very big indeed – and there are several canvases in this show, two of the best of them dramatically sited in the first gallery, which are twice the height of a man six feet tall, and as wide as that same man is long. I stood against one of them just to be sure. It is almost as if Kami needs to be nearly overwhelmed by the physical reality of the idea of the human presence in order fully to take its measure psychologically. But, for all their size, Kami's are not paintings that shout at us. If anything, they have a curious reserve and restraint about them. They step back a pace or two when we step towards them. Kami never uses bold colours. He inclines towards muted greens, browns, greys, and slightly muddy beiges. He paints portraits of perfectly ordinary people wearing unremarkable clothes of the kind that anyone



Larger than life: Kami's vast paintings dominate the space, yet are strangely muted in colour

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would wear anywhere. It is as if he wants us to stop us remarking upon almost all the things that would make the subject seem singular in our eyes. What is more – and here is where this question of gaze comes in – the subjects of his biggest paintings here are

not looking back at us at all. They look down. They close their eyes. Or in the case of a wonderful, ecstatic looking gardener ("gardener" is the title of the piece), the subject appears to be rapt, inwardly. Now these paintings – they are all oils – have a feathery lightness of touch about them; or at least that is how it seems. That's not quite true though, you realise, when you stand up close and examine them side on. In fact, they are densely worked, though there is no evidence of texture here. This is something to do with the fact that they have been painted in such a way that they look slightly blurred and out of focus, and slightly disembodied, as if the image has lifted off the canvas and away from itself in order to get a slightly better look.

You could say that these representations are painfully realistic – but that would be to diminish their impact. Though seemingly good likenesses, they also seem like ghostly representations of whatever it is about the nature of being human that they are trying to tell us. There is something diffidently mystical about all this. The images, though fully bodied, also feel slightly bodiless too, as if they are not themselves, but the souls of themselves, looking back wistfully from beyond the grave. The fact is that you can go on looking and looking, with increasing admiration, until the cows come lolling home to this end of north Islington. And how soon will that happen?

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To 11 February (020-7490 7373)