

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Y Z Kami

Gagosian Gallery, London

Monumental but quiet; densely worked but light of touch; focused on the portrait yet blurred, ghostly effect; static yet fluid in handling: Y Z Kami's new large-scale depictions of sitters with eyes closed, at prayer or lost in a rapt interiority, are full of the paradoxes which make him one of today's most intriguing conceptual painters. Cropped sharply around the subject's head and shoulders, these close-up portraits in muted colours are rendered with a tremulous sfumato quality, as if the figures are behind gauze. The flat, fresco-like effect gives detachment and a cloistered hush, which feels unsettling rather than serene.

Kami was born into a Shia Muslim family in Tehran in 1956, studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, and has worked in



New York since 1984. He became known in the 1990s for portraits of young men who had died of Aids, but his most famous series is "In Jerusalem" (2006), panels depicting clerics of

different faiths (imam, Catholic cardinal, Orthodox bishop, rabbi) who had met in the Holy City to unite – in protest against a gay pride festival planned to be held there.

Y Z Kami's 'Man with Violet Eyes'

(2013-14)

— Gagosian
Gallery, Robert
McKeever

Kami is alert to the multiple nuances of any attempt to depict religious devotion or authority in the 21st century. Formally, he is in dialogue with sources as diverse as documentary photography, minimalism and Egyptian Fayum portraits of the dead; intellectually he seems to me an existentialist, whose real subject is isolation, alienation, the unknowability of the other, the threat to our individual sense of identity from both global sameness and extreme difference.

His restrained aesthetic and vast scale denies emotional contact yet confers a sense of spiritual longing – the mood too of the simplified mosaic-like "White Dome" paintings, where white light appears to suffuse rows of tiny rectangles, exhibited alongside the portraits here.

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