



IF IT SMELLS LIKE ORIENTAL -ISM

Gian Manik

by Lucinda Bennett

Having worn the same perfume for the last five or so years, this summer I chose a new scent. Each morning, I upturn a tiny glass bottle against the flesh behind my ears, allowing an oily smudge of pale gold liquid to dry on my skin. Blue lotus, fig wood, osmanthus flowers, passionflower, gaiac wood, sandalwood and musk.⁹¹ It is a deep, honeyed, unmistakable aroma—upon embracing me, a friend recognised the perfume, her favourite, and said something like, “It smells like the Western fantasy of the East, it’s

the fragrance of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* ... but it is so good.”

When I first see studio images of Gian Manik’s new series, I think of my smoky, complex perfume, and I think of Said’s seminal text. One of Manik’s subjects is familiar, a flush-cheeked woman leaning on a wooden ledge, her head shrouded in a green gossamer scarf. I’ve seen her before in another, much older, painting by the French Orientalist Jean-Léon Gérôme—the poster boy for Orientalism, his painting *The Snake Charmer* (c.



1879) having graced the cover of Said's book when it was first published in 1978. Manik's *After Woman at a balcony* (2023) takes its title from the original (1887–88) but it is not a faithful rendition. Both works depict an almeh (Egyptian courtesan) on her balcony, many strands of gold coins falling over her breasts as she gazes plaintively out at the viewer. But Manik's version is oddly cropped, the top of her head lopped off as though the painter realised too late that the canvas was too small. In the original, the ledge she rests on is a thin rail, beneath which we can see her soft stomach through a sheer blouse, and the rich red drape of her skirt. In Manik's version, the ledge is thick and loosely painted, the patch around her fingers light and unfinished, missing the small rose Gérôme painted in her hand. Manik's painting is a copy, but not one that hopes to be read as the original.

*In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origins in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these.*⁰²

What is the meaning of an original, when Gérôme's painting is itself a *topos*, an amalgam, a fantasy? The text accompanying his *Woman at a Balcony* on The Met website suggests that the setting recalls Cairo, but that Gérôme made this painting some twenty years after visiting the place, and that he not only painted this model again but also the same blouse again, on multiple different models.⁰³

There is irony in my choosing to cite this fragment of Said's text, but irony is at the heart of Orientalism and the heart of Manik's 'Orientalist' paintings, too. When Manik and I discuss these works, we trip over ourselves, wrestling with how to describe their lush surfaces while simultaneously acknowledging the political and ideological agendas they mask. Sometimes, it's unclear whether we are discussing Manik's paintings or the so-called originals; the line between Orientalist and 'Orientalist'—between voyeur and critic—is never quite distinct.

While Said's writings are more widely disseminated than ever, spreading beyond the realms

of academia, Orientalist paintings still hang innocently in major galleries without being problematised, as if the last fifty years of critical discourse never happened. And even with our knowledge of their problems, we cannot help but also see their beauty, be seduced by the loveliness of these images made to delight the Western imagination. In copying these works, Manik is thinking through these ironies on the canvas, reproducing as a form of art-historical research that asks, *What was it like to paint these then, and what is it like to do so now?* But there is also a personal element, the possibility of what Manik calls "representation as expulsion," copying as a way of "therapising an idea—whether it's personal or borrowed—in a way where I give it enough space or time ... and then when it's done I can move forward."⁰⁴

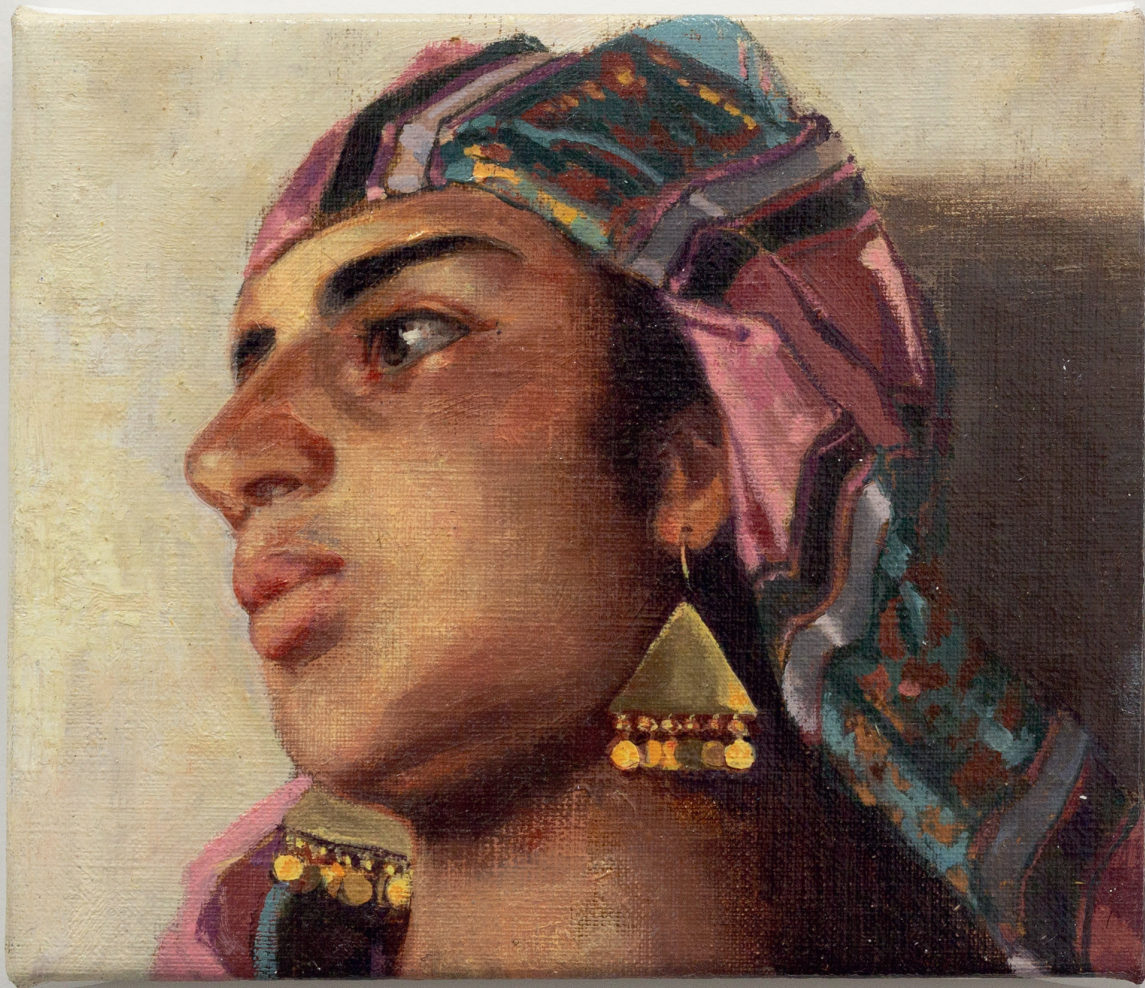
Although Manik is an Australian artist with both Sikh and Dutch heritage, he was raised, in his words, "very Dutch."⁰⁵ Manik's mother made copies of Rembrandts; his grandfather painted clowns. He was reared on the Western canon, sent to art classes from the age of five, where he was taught to paint by replicating old masters. Art school helped him move from traditional painting to exploring conceptual and abstract forms, but in recent years he has returned to the classical methods of his youth, employing them as a subtle form of critique. "It's something I've always thought I could use as a way of working that complements [other methods of painting] but is also a bit cheeky, because the reference is on the surface." The 'Orientalist' paintings in particular, Manik tells me, read as politicised because of his background. "Reclamation is not the right word [for them], but there is this kind of taking back. You can do that in a facetious way and a kind of gentle, sensitive way as well." Out of this gentleness—the almost-faithfulness of Manik's renditions—also comes a slipperiness, an uncertainty around where the artist himself is positioned that might change our contemporary reception of the work. "It's interesting that I'm never known as white, or half-white or Dutch, it's always 'Have you been to India?' ... There're always people who don't know you but feel like they can say something about how you look when you're someone who looks maybe not like them."⁰⁶ With this body of work, Manik is pointing to the gap between perception and experience, between

Gian Manik, *After The Soloist*, 2023, oil on linen, 19 × 40 cm

PREVIOUS
Gian Manik, *After Arab at prayer*, 2023, oil on linen, 39 × 26 cm

OPPOSITE
Gian Manik, *After Orientalist*, 2023, oil on linen, 40.5 × 45 cm

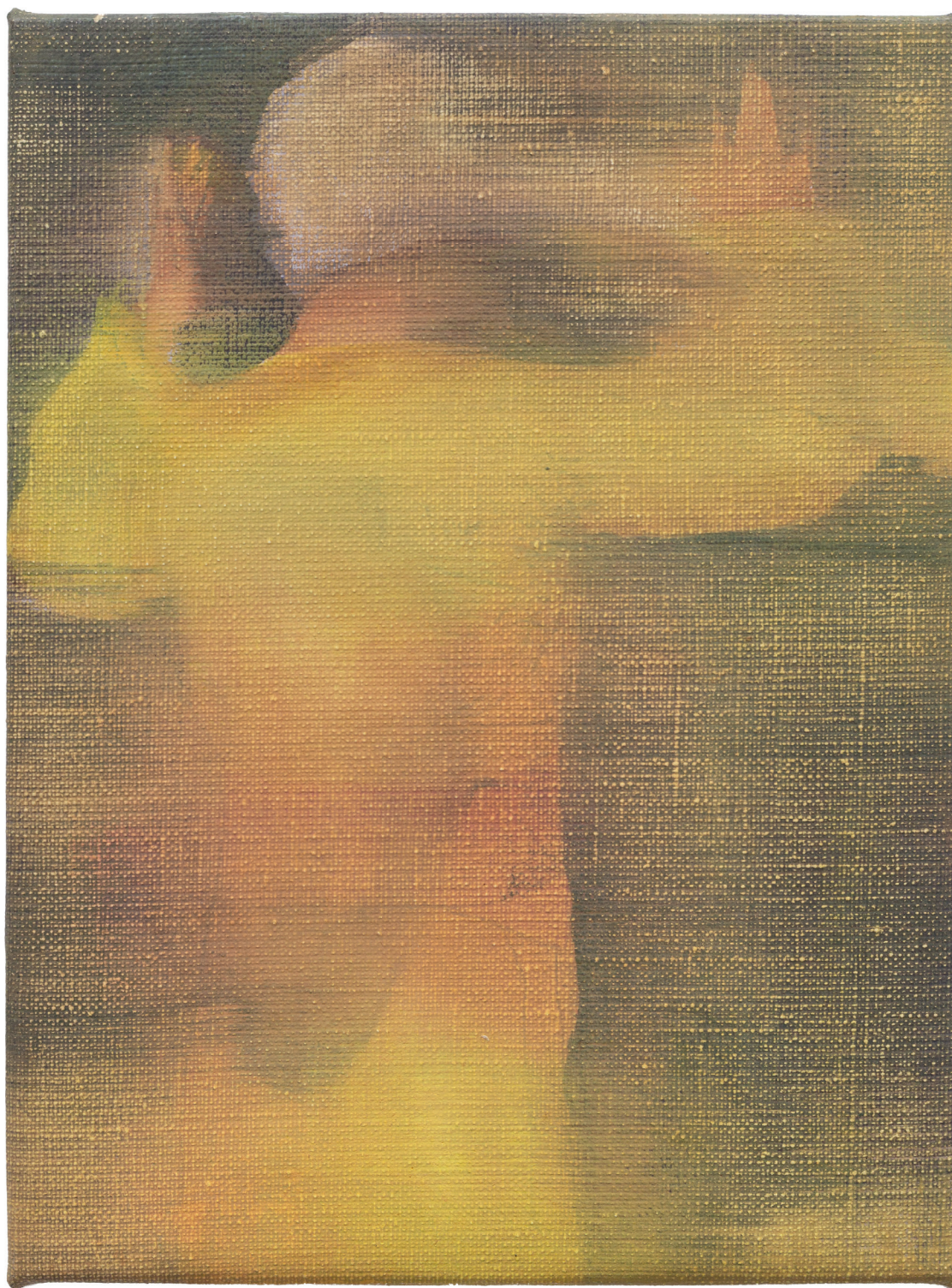




Gian Manik, *After Moorish girl*,
2023, oil on linen, 17.7 x 21 cm

OPPOSITE
Gian Manik, *After Harem Pool*,
2023, oil on linen, 27.5 x 17.5 cm





‘Orientalism’ and Orientalism, asking what designates a painting problematic, and when, and who.

In John Singer Sargent’s *Fumée d’Ambre Gris* (1880), a woman holds part of her cream garment over her head to capture the heady perfume wafting from the silver censer at her feet. In Manik’s version, the smoke is depicted with thick daubs of pale tea-green, the apparent oiliness of the paint evoking the muskiness of the scent with smudges floating up to be held within the tent of fabric above her face. As with *After Woman at a balcony*, Manik has zoomed in on the figure from Sargent’s painting, eliminating much of the *topos*—the high lime-washed walls, the decorative tile floor and woven rugs—to focus on the woman whose

Gian Manik, *After Prayer in the Mosque*, 2023, oil on linen, 21.5 × 16.5 cm

OPPOSITE
Gian Manik, *After Servant of Don Miguel de Castro*, 2023, oil on linen, 16 × 16 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer

identity is deemed irrelevant in the original, turning a genre painting into something closer to a portrait. When asked how he chooses where to crop, Manik likens his selections to those made by facial recognition algorithms, like the ones your phone uses to identify people in your photo reel. There’s that irony again; this same technology is under constant fire for the old forms of racial bias it perpetuates and new forms it creates, especially given that it draws from datasets in which people of colour and women are underrepresented.⁹⁷ In other paintings such as *After The Soloist* (2023) and *After Prayer in the Mosque* (2023), Manik has sanded back the painted surfaces, softening the sharpness and saturation of the oils into something ghostly and

pastel, figures appearing as though through plumes of smoke, out of the mists of time, their faces turned indistinct in a way I can't help but read as disguise.

Alongside these small renditions are two enormous blue canvases, *Garra Rufa* and *Petitenget* (both 2024). Manik describes them as “obscene” while gallerist Dan du Bern uses the term “workman-like”; both feel apt, especially when comparing these large loose works to the jewel-like Orientalist copies. And yet these paintings also follow the thread of Orientalism, pulling it into its present-day form, taking a tourist's Bali as their subject—although, really, it could be any tropical location, any place with palm trees and pools. In one painting, a pale foot is nibbled by a school of garra rufa, toothless fish who will eat dead skin cells, leaving smooth flesh behind—a type of pedicure common in tourist destinations. The other is a landscape, a view of the Potato Head Beach Club where the infinity pool meets the sand, palm trees swaying between two stretches of azure. Manik's painting is so large, you could almost step down into the saturated blue, letting the warm water take your weight as you float under a cloudless sky, never knowing that the beach beside you is haunted, the name *Petitenget* roughly translating to “haunted chest.”⁰⁸

These paintings were both born out of Manik's 2023 residency at Desa in Bali, although not painted until he returned to Australia. “Whenever I go somewhere I'm always quite aware of it being a space I don't own, but in the past there was just this taking of culture, which is what this Orientalist, exoticising lens was.”⁰⁹ He describes *Garra Rufa* and *Petitenget* as “almost the opposite of the same thing,” wherein, much like the Orientalist painters of yore, Manik travelled somewhere foreign to him and, upon returning, chose to render that place in oil paint. Yet Manik's paintings of Bali are unpeopled, are more a “set of references” that designate a tourist destination—sapphire skies, infinity pools, fish pedicures—rather than reveal its location or anything about that place and the people who live there. These are scenes stripped of narrative and nuance, reduced to the barest signifiers and yet we can still find the fantasy, still smell the fragrance of Orientalism even now it's been repackaged as tourism.

The largest of Manik's ‘Orientalist’ reproductions is titled *After Orientalin*, just like the original painted by Édouard Frédéric Wilhelm Richter circa 1875—although when I first see the title, I wonder if it's a typo. It is, of course, not a typo, but its origin is difficult to discern. If Richter's work is titled in German, then it is the feminine form of orientale, indicating a woman from the East. If it is titled in English—as most of Richter's works now appear to be—the suffix ‘-in’, typically used for chemicals or compounds (vitamin, hemoglobin, keratin), is employed to describe a person in a way that goes beyond the exoticisation carried by the word ‘oriental’ into blatant dehumanisation, suggesting this person's Eastern origins render them closer to substance or object.

The woman in Richter's painting is so heavily gilded, so laden with jewels and shine that one could easily miss the sharp hairpin she clasps in her hand. In Manik's version, her elaborate headpiece has been

cropped out, the heavy gold embroidery of her gown rendered in loose brushstrokes, the point of the hairpin a single bright white stroke. Not only is Manik's version not trying to be read as the original, it's almost as if it is unpicking the seams of the original, pulling the image just loose enough that one gentle tug could unravel it all, the whole one-sided history of representation, of the West looking at the East and seeing only what it wants to, plundering the beauty while refusing the complexity.

- Gian Manik
Mine
3 July–3 August 2024
Sumer
Tamaki Makaurau Auckland



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- 01 How to cite a fragrance? The perfume I am describing is Curio Noir's Irtiu Nefertiti.
 - 02 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 177.
 - 03 'Woman at a Balcony,' The Met, accessed 18 May 2024.
 - 04 Gian Manik, phone conversation with the author, 26 April 2024.
 - 05 Ibid.
 - 06 Ibid.
 - 07 David Leslie, *Understanding Bias in Facial Recognition Technologies: An Explainer* (London: The Alan Turing Institute, 2020), 6.
 - 08 'Pura Petitenget Temple and the Haunted Chest,' NOW! Bali, 21 February 2020.
 - 09 Manik, *ibid.*