

Art

Asif Hoque's Once Serene Paintings Reach New, Dramatic Heights in His New York Debut

Harley Wong Feb 23, 2022



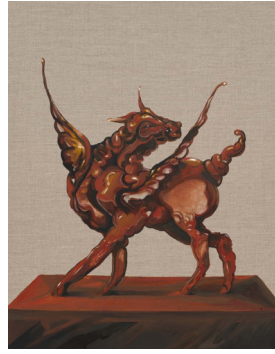
Asif Hoque
Music of the sun, 2022
Yossi Milo Gallery

When Asif Hoque started working on his painting *Music of the sun* (2022)—depicting a winged Bengal tiger leaping into the ocean alongside two curly-haired putti—he didn't realize the work would debut in the year of the water tiger. The piece is currently on view in Hoque's first solo exhibition in New York, "[Before Sunrise](#)" at [Yossi Milo Gallery](#), through March 19th. This latest body of work is heavily influenced by the Brooklyn-based artist's recent visit to West Palm Beach, Florida, where he grew up. With theatrical, sun-soaked scenes awashed in hues of yellow and blue, Hoque's new works mark a clear deviation from the ethereal landscapes of fluffy clouds and lush grass typically found in Hoque's prior exhibitions: "[Loverboy](#)" (2019) at [New Image Art](#), "[Lover's Rock](#)" (2020) at [Mindy Solomon Gallery](#), and "[The American Lover Boy](#)" (2021) at [Taymour Grahne Projects](#).

Though Hoque has concluded the loverboy trilogy, "Before Sunrise" is not necessarily the beginning of a new three-part series—and it references the Richard Linklater-directed film trilogy in name only. Traces from those previous exhibitions—the cupid from "Loverboy," terracotta vessels from "Lover's Rock," winged beasts from "The American Lover Boy"—are still present, serving to further enrich Hoque's world-building. Ultimately, in his latest body of work, Hoque's artistic explorations reach a crescendo, demonstrating the evolution of his oeuvre over the years as he continues to push his practice into new territory. Experimenting with light and color, Hoque's once serene figurative paintings have transformed into grand and dramatic scenes swirling with palpable action.



Asif Hoque, *Speedin thru 195 in a white Ferrari*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Mindy Solomon Gallery.



Asif Hoque, *Bankura Mustang*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Mindy Solomon Gallery.

Born in Rome to Bangladeshi parents, Hoque honors the varied lineages of his personal origin story with references to South Asian art and iconography from Italian art history. *Bankura Mustang* (2021), for example, depicts a terracotta horse, recalling the sculptures crafted in Panchmura in West Bengal. Although they're typically seen static with an elongated neck, Hoque's rendition—like most of the artist's figures—is active, stepping forward on a pedestal while twisting its relatively short neck to face the opposite direction. With its altered proportions, Hoque's Bankura horse evokes the form of the Capitoline Wolf, an allegorical image representing the founding of Rome. Depicting a creature that symbolizes both his South Asian and Italian origins, Bankura Mustang embodies the self-mythologizing that Hoque engages with across his practice.

Those familiar with Hoque's work likely know his scenes of winged lions and Brown deities populating picturesque and heavenly environments, reminiscent of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520–23) and Raphael's *The Sistine Madonna* (1512–13). In the work that followed, the artist ventured into still-life painting. His 2021 solo exhibition "Terracotta" at Mindy Solomon Gallery featured paintings of terracotta vessels embellished with the iconography from Hoque's earlier works. Hoque suggests that, similar to the scenes in classical Roman vase paintings, his mythology also has a long and rich history.



Asif Hoque, installation view of the triptych *Birth of the Sun*, 2022. Photo by Shark Senesac. Courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery.

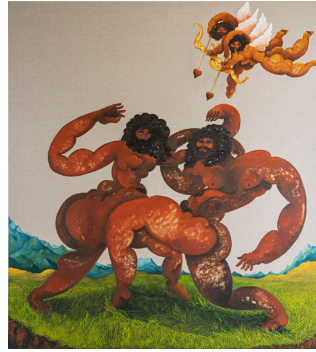
The terracotta vessel reappears in *Birth of the Sun (I)* (2022), the central panel in a triptych on view in "Before Sunrise." The work recalls Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485), though instead of the Roman goddess Venus, a towering terracotta vase with a winged woman in high relief emerges from

the sea. In the adjacent panels, a winged lion, a winged tiger, and two putti encircle the golden vessel—replacing the god of wind Zephyr, a young woman identified as one of the Graces or the Hora of spring, and perhaps goddess of spring winds Aura.

That figures are less prominent in this new body of work is significant. In Hoque’s earlier works, such as *Taro by Alt-J* (2019) and *The engagement; a debut of lovers* (2020), the artist prioritized the presence of Brown figures. They curve towards and around one another, sometimes in dance, as alluded to in the song titles and lyrics incorporated into Hoque’s artwork titles. Oftentimes, they’re seen against a backdrop of partially unpainted, raw linen; the negative space allows for a direct comparison between the figures’ brown complexion and the light tan fabric.



Asif Hoque, *The American Lover-boy*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Taymour Grahne Projects



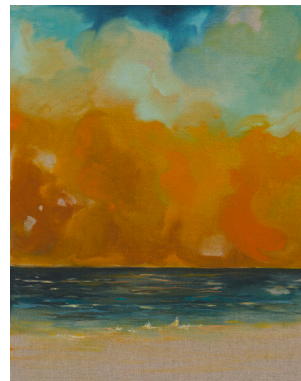
Asif Hoque, *The engagement; a duet of lovers*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Mindy Solomon Gallery.

In Hoque’s more recent works, Brown figures are less prominent. Their winged bodies, once fully formed, are either represented only by their heads or minimized to become barely noticeable beside soaring winged animals. Hoque’s figures are secondary characters to mystical beasts in the artist’s cinematic scenes of rolling clouds and crashing waves, and in some works, like *Hey Google play...Lay it Down by Lloyd* (2022), they’re absent completely.

In three new paintings, titled variations of *Just in Time* (all 2022), Hoque depicts different stages of a sunrise. The works are inspired by his tradition of watching the sun rise with his younger brother whenever Hoque visits West Palm Beach. In *Just in Time #1*, the rising sun creeps up just past the ocean horizon line, illuminating the sky with just a thin strip of orange. Eventually, the sunrise begins to appear like a wildfire, engulfing and dissolving the formerly deep-blue sky, as seen in *Just in Time #3*. Verging more closely towards abstraction than any prior works, the paintings capture not an event, but a feeling.



Asif Hoque, *First Flight*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery

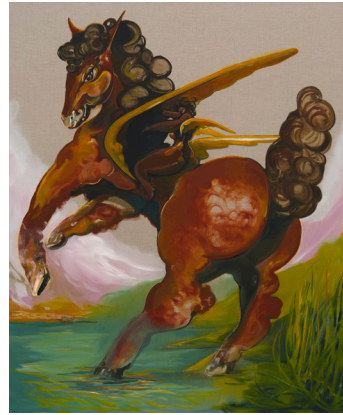


Asif Hoque, *Just in Time #3* 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery

“Growing up wanting to see myself, or someone that looks like me, represented in the Met was a driving force behind painting brown bodies on a classic linen surface,” Hoque said in a recent interview with Artsy. “It helped me communicate the idea of wanting to be seen in a space that hasn’t represented us too often. I also hoped seeing Brown figures on linen would encourage future artists and art lovers to create without fear.”



Asif Hoque, *Rise and Shine*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery



Asif Hoque, *You're so smooth*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery

When Hoque first exhibited with Yossi Milo Gallery in an online show in February of last year, he presented *First Flight* (2020), which depicts a baby phoenix and foal. Now in *Rise and Shine* and *You're so smooth* (both 2022), the animals are all grown up.

In a 2017 interview, Hoque told *Kajal Magazine* his dream: “I want to be recognized by the people I see on Thursday nights in Chelsea....I want to be where I can step away from it too. I want everything.” Five years later, Hoque made his New York debut on a Thursday night in Chelsea to a vast and eager crowd. •

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