



Sharon Madanes, *The Takedown*, 2022, acrylic on linen, 60 × 54".

## Sharon Madanes

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Anyone who has seen the inside of a hospital—in all of its bleak, harshly lit linoleum blandness—would likely not recognize the places depicted in “Bedside Histories,” this exhibition of paintings by Sharon Madanes, in which liquescent bodies seemingly coagulate within warm and overstuffed compositions of Fauvist color. But then again, maybe they have. The artist’s subjects all seem to telegraph the same type of exhaustion—their bodies stooped, their faces drawn.

Madanes is not interested in realism. Presumably she has her fill of that at places like Bellevue Hospital, where she is a psychiatry resident via New York University (how she found the time to complete a show full of new work is a wonder). Such a milieu undoubtedly informed the art on view, which memorializes, with the narrative efficacy of history painting, moments of desperation (the administering of sedatives) and banality (clocks, clipboards) with equal reverence. *The Takedown* (all works 2022), its jagged planes washed in pinks and fuchsias, depicts the plunging of a syringe filled with tranquilizer into the exposed buttock of an agonized patient. People are straining to hold this person down—the scene recalls the clamorous tangle of bodies in Max Beckmann’s canvas *Apachentanz*, 1938, but with more olanzapine (a smaller panel, *Takedown in pink and red*, veers compellingly into loose abstraction). By contrast, *Waiting Room with Leopard Shoes*, with its renderings of chic pumps, loafers, Chuck Taylors, and exposed ankles, could easily double as an ad for the shoe department at Saks. Both paintings deploy torqued limbs and impossible physics—where arms and legs emerge from and how they cohabit once they do is none of our business. As the titles indicate, a lot of waiting unfolds in these pictures, either by bedsides or in rooms where you can feel the entropy thickening the air. Tedium is its own form of torment.

Like Nicole Eisenman, Madanes shifts between roughly rendered cartoon figures (who might sport outsize mitts for hands) and more finely tuned ones, often within the same picture. Also like Eisenman, Madanes seems to be playing a game with herself to see how many people she can cram inside a single composition. The result is next-to-zero negative space; cascades of looking, peering, intrusion; and an effective translation of the airlessness hospitals cultivate with nonpareil acuity. The works challenge anthropologist Marc Augé’s theory of the nonplace, in which he included infirmaries. Madanes’s sick bays are all social interaction—fugacious but not frictionless, suffocating but not saturnine—which is a neat trick. Even so, there are limits to optimism. The outside world is hinted at sparingly, but when it is—a slice of sky, the way a shaft of light hits a sliver of an exterior brick wall, a trace of skyline—it feels desperately far away.

Some of Madanes’s choices are less nuanced. The gray-blue skin of a patient, gauntly cadaverous and sitting for a psychiatric evaluation in *What the Body Says*, presumably alludes to the subject’s dark mood and not to the fact that the patient may have overdosed on colloidal silver. Naturally, Madanes’s paintings depict the hospital experience from the perspective of the caregiver. Patients remain ciphers, reduced to bare kneecaps and slack torsos. Their innominate faces are obscured or cropped from the frame, either out of a reflexive deference to HIPPA privacy laws or as an acknowledgment of the difficulty, if not total impossibility, of having one’s humanity honored within the grinding machinery of the American health-care apparatus. There is no scene, for example, where someone’s insurance claims are being denied, nor are there tableaux about the hysterical billing practices of for-profit medical systems, which make an actuarial science of keeping physician interactions brief. To her credit, Madanes resists the John Singer Sargent mode of deifying doctors as learned scholars. Instead they’re rumpled and barely glimpsed, just as tired as the rest of us.

— Max Lakin