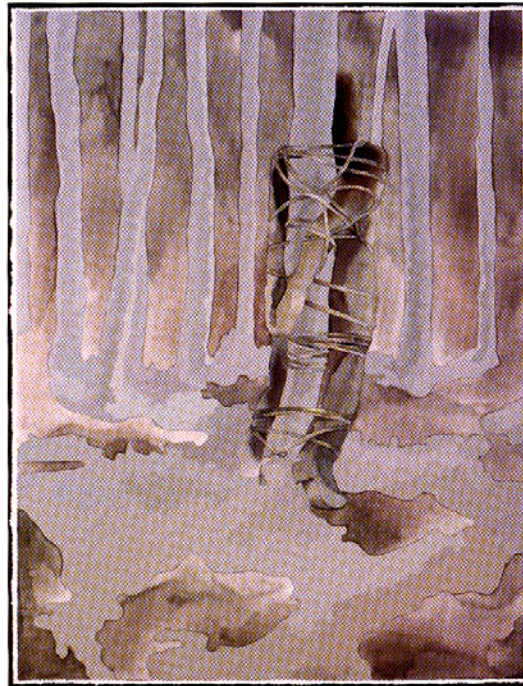


Above: *Rubberman Bound 2*, 2007.
Watercolor and gouache on paper. 76 x 61 cm.



Above: *Rubberman Bound 1*, 2007.
Watercolor and gouache on paper. 76 x 61 cm.

MONICA MAJOLI

AIR DE PARIS

Images courtesy of Air de Paris, Paris and Gagosian Gallery

Written by Colleen Asper

In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry writes a definitive study of pain that positions physical destruction against human imagination. In one instance, she describes the process by which an idea can be experienced as verifiable by analogy—for example, the common sentiment of feeling god's presence in an element of the landscape. The abstract idea of "god" is made available to experience by an analogy with trees, water, or mountains. Scarry then goes on to describe how physical pain or alteration of the body can lend substance to the immaterial.

One such instance that Scarry doesn't explore is the long history of S&M practices that confer physical weight to the intangibles of love and desire by inflicting pain. **Monica Majoli**, whose work represents yet another layer of substantiation—the transformation of both a subculture and a psychological state into carefully constructed watercolors, understands such analogies.

Rubbermen Bound, Majoli's most recent show at Air de Paris, presents four new paintings in her ongoing project of depicting men in fetish scenarios wearing multi-layered rubber suits. These works abandon the gem-like precision of oils that dominated her earlier paintings in favor of a muted palette of watercolors. Though the rubber suits were not the focus of early works, sexual fetish was.

The names that easily come to mind when looking for examples of artists whose practice documents a sexual subculture, like Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, or Larry Clark, don't seem to apply here. Their work asks to be congratulated for its transgressions. Whether this contextualization is lent by the artist or, in the case of Mapplethorpe, by the rocky history

of the work's reception, this is not the territory of Majoli's work, in which deviation is beside the point. Her paintings do not extend the subculture she documents and the work does nothing to celebrate, condone, or condemn the practices she depicts; rather, Majoli mines sexual states for their basic psychological components and physical properties. In this work, sex is a tool, rather than a curiosity.

The switch to watercolors highlights this relationship by aligning the fluid way paint is applied with the psychological and physical state of floating. Each painting in **Rubbermen Bound** is bathed in a different colored light and their limited palettes bestow the hushed reverence of a church or library. We understand the terrain in the paintings in direct relationship to the rubbermen that are bound to it, with figures tied to trees like scarecrows or resting in the landscape like scuba divers, but the backgrounds also become anonymous anywhere-spaces, like the blue-toned landscapes that serve as sets to so many fifteenth-century European portraits.

The rubbermen are each seen in isolation and from a distance which puts the viewer on the outside, but the muffled shapes that describe their bodies and the environments to which they are tethered suggest that we are in their suits, allowing identification with either sadist or masochist. In this way, the works rest squarely within an expressionist tradition of painting and the quiet restraint with which they are rendered only serves to complicate our understanding of that tradition.

To return to **The Body in Pain**, Elaine Scarry writes, "Pain and imaging are the 'framing events' within whose boundaries all other perceptual, somatic, and emotional events occur; thus, between the two extremes can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche."

Rubbermen Bound concurs.

