

Salman Toor Research Paper
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Salman Toor, Two Citizens, 2023. Oil on canvas, 48 × 60 inches (121.9 × 152.4 cm). © Salman Toor. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Farzad Owrang.

Two Citizens (2023) by Salman Toor is a unique artwork that embodies young people and gay life based on his personal life experiences. Toor is best known for his insightful figurative paintings that depict moments in the lives of fictional young, Brown, queer men in contemporary cosmopolitan culture.¹ Toor was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1983, and currently resides and works in the East Village, New York. He attended Ohio Wesleyan University, where he received his BFA, and obtained his MFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. His works are a part of the modern and ultra contemporary art movement, reflecting the imagined life of young South-Asian men as well as his personal life and background.

¹ About Salman Toor

Toor's work consists of a variety of subjects, styles, and meanings, yet all explore the theme of the experiences of queer, Brown men living in urban environments, specifically in New York and the cities of South Asia. Through his art, Toor sheds light on the treatment of, discrimination and dangers towards marginalized communities in contemporary society while also presenting the intersections of queer and diasporic identities in intimate and personal spaces.² His works capture the complexity and diversity of queer experiences and offer a unique perspective on contemporary queer culture and intersections of identity and social justice.

Toor's paintings exhibit a diverse range in style from detailed works reminiscent of 19th-century history painting to expressive, semi-abstract figures.³ He incorporates a variety of techniques drawing on art-historical references, American and South Asian pop culture, and other influences.⁴ In his artistic process, Toor makes rounded, loopy strokes and builds up thick layers of paint to embody the attention and compassion he extends toward his men, granting them space beyond the board or canvas.⁵ He begins each piece by priming the canvas, which he finds deeply therapeutic, before sanding the surface and brushing on a dark acrylic base. Toor loves painting faces the most, although it is also the most difficult part. For Toor, the right face or person has to embody his favorite parts of art history and also destroy them somehow.⁶

The visual style and choices of Toor are closely linked to his theme and subject matter, which explores the daily lives and treatment of young, queer, Brown men. This is reflected in his most recent work, *Two Citizens* (2023) where two men are displayed grasping each other's hands with the bottom half of their bodies nude, and many others. His ability to capture Brown bodies, signify moods and emotions, and challenge conceptions through art is a fascinating process to see. Toor's depiction of conflicting dualities of life expresses his notion of the self and gay, Brown men today. His collection of works are like a story book where each art speaks to viewers in its message or a diary where Toor expresses his perspective on moments in the lives of Brown, queer men.

² Michael Irwin, *Salman Toor* (Ocula, 2020)

³ Michael Irwin, *Salman Toor*

⁴ Michael Irwin, *Salman Toor*

⁵ Ambika Trasi, *The Self as Cipher: Salman Toor's Narrative Paintings* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2023)

⁶ Ambika Trasi, *The Self as Cipher: Salman Toor's Narrative Paintings*

Toor has a diverse range of artistic inspirations like the works of Rococo, Baroque, Renaissance, and Neoclassical-era artists like Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Caravaggio, and Jean-Antoine Watteau.⁷ His incorporation of these styles into his own original compositions suggest the feelings and styles he is drawn to and tries to convey through his own work. Toor's chosen ancestors among his modernist predecessors are Vincent van Gogh, Chaim Soutine, and, more recently, the New Leipzig



School.⁸ Van Gogh's own artistic style and brushstroke consists of dramatic and bold brush strokes, similar to Toor's. Toor's incorporation of Van Gogh's style is also noted through the heightened use of color in his work. As seen in Van Gogh's self portrait and a close up on one face of Salman Toor's *Two Citizens* (2023,) both artists' works feature unique, heavy brushstrokes and bold, vibrant colors. There is a decision behind every chosen color in their respective works that overall connects to the theme of their piece. In *Two Citizens* (2023,) Toor's artistic style of thick and bold brushstrokes are evident through the facial features, interlocking hands, and lower half of the bodies. These features and parts of the body are all well-defined and prominent, and stand out in the piece. This painting technique is visible in Van Gogh's own work, in the defined facial structure lines of self portraits and the swirls in *The Starry Night* (1889.) There is a thick application of paint onto the canvas where the texture of the brushstrokes are clearly visible. It is evident that Toor is inspired and influenced by Van Gogh in his own art and artistic technique styles.



Toor pulls heavily from Western and Eastern cultures. He looks to bridge the two influences together while also exploring the dichotomies between them. He depicts the current queer life experience in the world today, including empowerment and humiliation. It speaks of how queer Brown men experience life and how they interact with themselves and each other. Another interesting fact about Toor is that one of his signature colors is phosphorescent emerald

⁷ Ambika Trasi, *The Self as Cipher: Salman Toor's Narrative Paintings*

⁸ Karen Wilkin, *Salman Toor at the Whitney* (The New Criterion, 2021)

green. His works are closely associated with this color as it is “alluring but also poisonous.”⁹ Many of his pieces are centered around this color, with phosphorescent emerald green always included in his work either on the characters or in the background. This use of color is a defining characteristic of his work.

Toor’s work is a reflection of his own life and based on his experiences and perception of Brown queer men living in New York and South Asia. There is a personal connection to it, where he is his work and is able to express his thoughts and feelings. His works are unique through the blend of characteristics like color, style, and themes. It allows viewers to engage with the intricacy and complexities of identity and queerness.

⁹ *‘Between cultures:’ 10 things to know about Salman Toor* (Christie’s, 2022)

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