

8-8-2017

I Ran Into Myself

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IRAN INTO MYSELF

by

ELHAM MASOUDI

Under the Direction of Matthew Sugarman, MFA

Abstract

Revolutions, demonstrations, and, elections have a wide range of political and social impacts on societies. In many instances, the repercussions of these movements cause significant and irrevocable transformations that affect the daily lives of those living within the community. As a native Iranian female artist, my works of art speak specifically to the women who, like me, have been affected by these radical changes. As such, I use my personal experience of the post-revolution and election era to create poignant and progressive art that reflects the sentiments of many modern, Iranian women.

INDEX WORDS: Revolution, Women's rights, Politic, Censorship

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ELHAM MASOUDI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

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Office of Graduate Studies

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May 2017

DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Matthew Sugarman, Pamela Longobardi, Craig Dongoski and Joe Peragine for their support and encouragement on this program. Thank you to my parents and my sister Atena. Thank you to all my great friends for the last three years in Atlanta. Thank you to Jillian Jantosciak for collaborating with me in writing about my recent works.

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1 INTRODUCTION

My name is “Anahita”, the goddess of water. I heard the ice pedestal melting. I laughed, swirled, and danced. By becoming a colorful motif, I dissolved into this ornamental world, and then the blue silhouettes appeared on the walls. They were induced to laugh, swirl, and dance. The shadows were close, closer than their image in a mirror. I left my land and I hope one day the ice pillars turn to water and my homeland becomes pure.

My name is “Amoo”. In my new land, I am singing and playing with the shadows of my friends. I hope one day our demise comes and people rejoice in freedom.

I am a shadowy puppet and my hairs are my strings. I try to move, to swirl, and to dance but it seems impossible. I hope one day I will break free from my strings.

My name is Iran. I have been blurred and removed from my land. I am no longer sure who am I and where I belong? I hope one day I will remember my true self.

As an Iranian artist, when I came to the U.S., I had a mind full of symbols, myths and anecdotes connecting my culture to myself. Back in Iran, they are symbols, an inseparable part of people’s life. Moving from Iran was more than just a change of location for me. It required adaptation to a whole new culture that in some aspects are the opposite of mine. It involved the loss of many relations, and created a feeling of being outside, disconnected from other people.

2 DIASPORA ART

I utilize an approach of sociopolitical commentary in my work that generally can be seen in diaspora art. As Hamid Keshmirshakan said “The Iranian artists living and working across the diaspora, all share a preoccupation with ‘liminality’, which allows them to assimilate and modify Western approaches, and to use their works as a means of commenting upon issues of nostalgia, alienation, memory and loss. Similarly, the experience of marginality- or living between borderlines-provides an important and productive context for artists, in which they can be active spectators in another culture, while exploring their roots and pasts.”¹. Stuart Hall also defines the diaspora experience: “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. In this context, the artists are continually evolving and generating a new identity for themselves. Hence, the identity of the artist can no longer be contained in any one single culture or norm.”²

My first graduate school project was a personal narrative about an ancient Iranian myth “Anahita”. In this series of my paintings, there exists a duality between living in and outside of Iran, the country I left behind and the one I settled in. The characters in these paintings are welcoming their new identities, however, they are still attached to their old ones. They are representative of those who are caught in between the past and present.

¹ Hamid Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian art*, London: Saqi 2013.

² Ibid.



Figure 1 “Anahita”, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 23 in, 2014

3 POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

The 1979 Islamic Revolution stands out as incredibly significant juncture that led to social and political mobilizations on many levels in Iranian life. Keshmirshekan described the impact of revolution in Iran as: “ The Revolution in Iran, like many other revolutions, had caused a schism between the old and new generations. While experiencing profound yet contradictory changes in the social and cultural spheres, and when religious ideology and revolutionary fervor remain the doctrine of the state, the younger generation-the majority of the Iranian population-appear neither very enthusiastically revolutionary nor very ideological. They seem to be inventing a newpolitics identity for the twenty-first century.”³

The Islamic Revolution was the initial catalyst for change in the lives of women. It is no doubt that women were the biggest demographic that severely affected from the revolution.

³ Ibid.

Among all, women also lost their right to clothing. The first women protest in Iran against this new regulation of compulsory hijab was in March 8th, 1979. More than 100,000 women gathered on the street to protest against the new Islamic government's compulsory hijab ruling. In the protest women said that freedom is not western or eastern, it is universal and the revolution is meaningless without women's Freedom. "Hengameh Golestan, a pioneer of Iranian photojournalism, remembers the day of the protest well. 'The atmosphere was very joyful, women went on strike that day, because the night before they had announced in the papers that women should wear scarves when they went to work. So nobody went to work, they all went on strike, came to the streets and from early morning they began to march from the Tehran University.'"⁴

I was inspired by the Iranian women's post-revolutionary art and decided to illustrate their peaceful protest. This led to my next project, "Protest Dance". As described above, after the revolution, women, and people in general, lost their freedom to protest. Hence, young women can no longer express their anger and dissent on the street, instead, they engaged in alternative platforms to express their disagreement with the official policies. Many women published videos and images of themselves in social media dancing or singing unveiled in public places. In "Protest Dance", I contrast differences in protesting before and after the revolution.

⁴ PIP CUMMINGS, New York Times, 2015,

<http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/09/15/the-day-100000-iranian-women- protested-the-head-scarf/>



Figure 2 "Protest Dance", Photography, 21 X 16 in, 2015

In this series of photographs and paintings, I've combined two sections; the movement of feet as a symbol of dance belonging to the new generation, and the motions of head and hands as a symbol of protest belonging to the older generation. I was inspired by student's protest at my high school in Tehran after our healthy lunch food there was replaced by junk food. Students refused to eat the unhealthy food and banged their spoons on the table in protest. The behavior of Iranian youth changed from being introverted, as they yielded, extroverted, in asking for their rights. I think no one can hide or censor the real image of people that refuse to be silenced any longer.

In undertaking my next project, I was concerned that my audience might not perceive the whole story underlying my work. One feature inherent in my paintings was that their story belonged to a cultural memory. I decided to use another medium for this project, that was video art. The notion of identity and interpretation of the 'self' and 'other' led to the next theme for my works.

"Puppet" is the combination of two videos and mirrors on the walls. I utilized the projected shadows and the reflections created by mirrors. Reflections in my work metaphorically

redefine an identity for the person in two different ways.

The first video depicts a woman covering herself little by little with hijab so that at the end she disappears with only her black hijab remaining. There are two mirrors mounted on the wall which visually replace the eyes of her face. The mirrors reflect the projection of the puppet video that is being projected on the opposite wall. In the puppet video, the woman is controlling her movement, but is also being controlled by others seemingly through strands of her hair acting as marionette's strings. The woman in the first video represents an Iranian woman after the Islamic revolution. Iranian women artists depicted the effect of the Islamic revolution on their lives through the representation of the black hijab. Women covered with hijab and black chador in artworks were historical markers describing Iran post-revolution. Iranian women artists used the image of the black chador and hijab to protest the gradual the loss of control of women in Iranian society: control of their rights and privileges and control over their bodies. The goal of my work is to depict women's loss of control and how they have become puppets in the hand of others.

During this project, I became interested in the use of shadows in my art works. A shadow can conceal the identity, and this became an important element in my works as shadows reflect the person but without detail.



Figure 3 “Puppet”, Video Art, 2014

4 SECOND PHASE OF POST REVOLUTION IN IRAN

Presidential elections:

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami became the new president of Iran. His election created a new environment in Iran; his policies were based on gradual reforms of Islamic regulations for the country making them more tolerant of different views. During his presidency, new social movements for rights and freedom of expression emerged. Independent citizens’ organizations were formed. Also, women became more assertive in expressing their demands. “In the short years after the election of Mohammad Khatami, the press became the battleground of different factions and political tendencies within and outside the state. In the absence of independent opposition, political parties, and amidst continuing intolerance of non-Islamic political organization, the free press became the primary venue for secular intellectuals promoting freedom of expression, political participation, democracy, and the secularization of politics.”⁵

⁵ Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran*, State University of New York Press, 2002

While Khatami's presidency brought a modest raise in cultural and intellectual development and gave voice to new ideas, the election in 2005 of Mahmood Ahmadinejad as President in Iran marked another dramatic shift. "According to a report by Human Rights Watch in the first year of Mahmud Ahmadinejad Presidency. Respect for basic human rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression and assembly, deteriorated in 2006. The government routinely tortures and mistreats detained dissidents, including through prolonged solitary confinement"⁶. According to the same report "the Ahmadinejad government, in a pronounced shift from the policy under former president Mohammed Khatami, has shown no tolerance for peaceful protests and gatherings."⁷ Overall in the first period of his presidency, the country devolved in all grounds. Hence, after the 2009 election, when the officials announced his victory, a series of massive rallies in all major Iranian cities occurred, demanding the removal of Ahmadinejad from the presidency. These protests in the 2009 presidential election, more commonly referred to as the 'Green Movement', featured a large presence of female activists who fought for legal, economic, and socio-political rights for Iranian women. More fearless and assertive than before, many of these women came from different sectors of society, taking advantage of the Green Movement as an opportunity to cross the divide between the sexes. "Thousands of protesters were beaten, hundreds were arrested, and dozens were killed by snipers."⁸

⁶ *Human Rights Watch*, New York, 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2007/country-chapters-7>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Abbas Milani, *Iran Primer: The Green Movement*, 2010.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-the-green-movement.html>



Figure 4, "Green Moment", Video Art, 2015

"Green moment" is inspired by my personal experience of protests during the green movement. There are several layers of symbolism incorporated within this video. Overall it symbolically depicts the presence of the people in a traditional society whose presence is not tolerated. The mosque represents the traditional institution governing the country. The green drops that slowly pour across the more realistic black and white elements within the piece ultimately become like prison bars. These represent government oppression of the whole green movement as well as refer to those who were detained and imprisoned.

5 THE EXHIBITION

My thesis project is largely influenced by one particular image taken by Reuters photographer Lucy Nicholson at the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games. This photo depicts two female volleyball players, with one covered in Islamic hijab and the other clad in more a traditional beach attire, a bikini. This photograph was later published in Tasnim News, an Iranian news agency, but with a distinct difference: the German woman wearing the bikini was censored

by pixilation, as Islamic dress rules forbid women from revealing any parts of their body to the public.

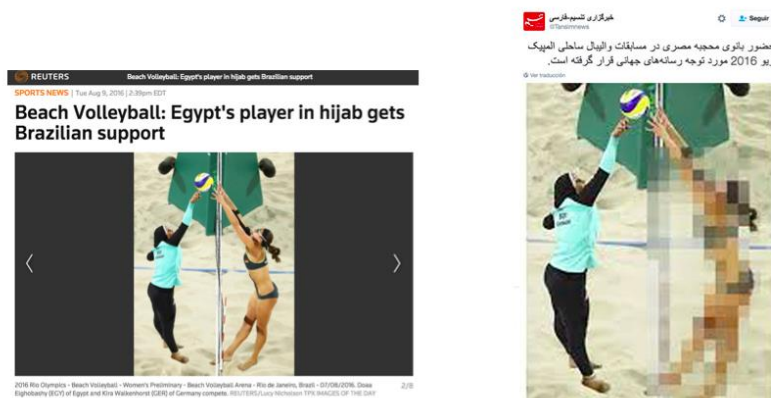


Figure 5 News images

In these works, I criticize censorship of women – of their images, their voices, and their aspirations. To do this, I contrast black and white mosque architectural images with colorful and highly pixelated images of myself.

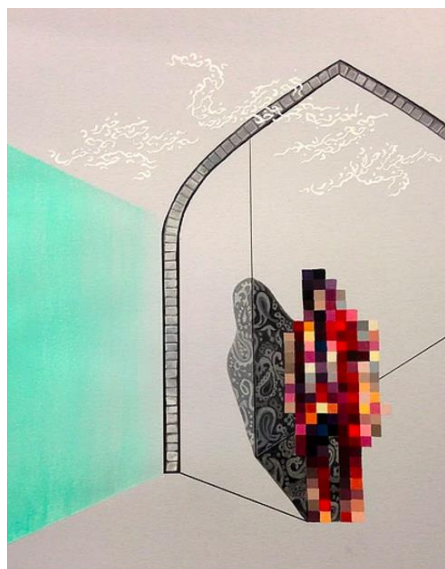


Figure 6 “*I Ran Into Myself*”, Gouache on Paper, 2016

When one lives in Iran, as I did, one becomes accustomed to seeing pictures of blurred and pixelated women, their faces being obscured in this way if they are lacking the proper hijab. After living in the United States for two years without this type of censorship, however, seeing a blurred image of a female volleyball player grabbed my attention in a completely new way, the picture of this censored female player becoming a new sort of identity to me.

For incorporating both modern and traditional customs of Iranian culture in my painting there are two elements – one from the past and the other from the present. For me, mosques represent the past, while the pixelated figures and brightly colored walls represent modern customs.

CONCLUSION

Much of my work references Iran and its cultural heritage and intends to raise questions about women rights, movements, and politics in Iran. This work seeks to involve viewers in personal stories that reference my native country. Ultimately, *I Ran Into Myself* presents a new image of myself, one censored behind pixels. However, this new identity, still living under the vaulted mosque porches, is singing about a day when an uncovered woman’s face is no longer considered objectionable, a day when basic human freedom are afforded equally to all Iranian compatriots (men and women), a day when people rejoice in freedom.

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