



FALLING INTO LANGUAGE

ART IRAN: Falling Into Language

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FALLING INTO LANGUAGE

RODY N. LOPEZ

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CRAFT CONTEMPORARY

Craft Contemporary, in partnership with Farhang Foundation, is proud to present *ART IRAN: Falling Into Language*. This endeavor epitomizes our shared dedication to enriching dialogue through the universal language of art. Merging the realms of contemporary art and craft, this project symbolizes a commitment to cultural discourse and understanding.

As the newly appointed Executive Director of Craft Contemporary, I am thrilled to introduce this exhibition, featuring nine expatriate Iranian artists. Their compelling works delve into the deep bond between visual art and linguistic expression, deeply rooted in the rich visual and symbolic aspects of the Persian language.

We extend our profound gratitude to Farhang Foundation and benefactors including Ali C. Razi, Haleh Emrani, Alireza Ardekani, Shazad Ghanbari, Roshi Rahn timer, Shelley Reid, Tannaz Guivi, Negar Attaripour, and the Fine Arts Council for their generous support. Their contributions have been vital in bringing this project to fruition.

Acknowledgment is due to curators Roshanak Ghezelbash and Hoda Rahbarnik, winners of the prestigious *ART IRAN Curatorial Competition*. Their curatorial vision offers a unique perspective on artistic techniques, communication's essence, and the cultural traditions informing the artists' work. We are also grateful to the jury panel, including Fereshteh Daftari, Maryam Ekhtiar, Tala Madani, Bennett Simpson, and Holly Jerger, former Craft Contemporary Senior Curator, for their diligent selection process.

Special appreciation is directed to the artists of *ART IRAN*: Golnar Adili, Parastou Forouhar, Taraneh Hemami, Elnaz Javani, Maryam Palizgir, Hadieh Shafie, Shadi Yousefian, and the collaborative duo of Neda Moridpour and Pouya Afshar. Through their diverse mediums—collage, assemblage, installation, drawing, ceramics, and textiles—each artist contributes a unique voice, reflecting on tradition, diaspora, and contemporary expression.

Lastly, I commend the dedicated Craft Contemporary team: Prima Jalichandra-Sakuntabhai, Andres Payan Estrada, Adrienne Toomey, Billie Rae Vinson, Danila Cervantes, Sherry Chen, Erika Kieffer, Hana Van Der Steur, Melinda Wax, and Vicente Puga. Your passion and commitment to our communities are exemplary.

As Craft Contemporary continues to challenge artistic norms, we hope *ART IRAN: Falling Into Language* inspires meaningful dialogues, offering new perspectives and fostering an appreciation for art and language's boundless convergence in Los Angeles's vibrant cultural landscape.

ALIREZA ARDEKANI

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

FARHANG FOUNDATION

It has been an immense pleasure and a source of profound pride for Farhang Foundation to collaborate with Craft Contemporary for over a decade, presenting impactful and compelling exhibitions. Following the success of three biennials for FOCUS IRAN, we are thrilled to once again unite with this exceptional museum for the groundbreaking curatorial competition and exhibition, *ART IRAN*.

The genesis of *ART IRAN* spans more than seven years and originates from the visionary minds of Farhang Foundation's trustee and founder, Ali C. Razi, and his late wife, Anousheh Razi. With their leadership, and the invaluable assistance of Farhang's Fine Arts Council, we are elated to witness the realization of this exceptional exhibition. Conceived to provide new curators a platform to showcase their visions through a group exhibition, we are delighted to have granted this opportunity to Roshanak Ghezelbash and Hoda Rahbarnik. Our heartfelt appreciation extends to them for their visionary contributions and dedicated efforts.

Farhang Foundation takes immense pride in the powerful artistic voices and diverse perspectives showcased in this groundbreaking exhibition. In the current global landscape, amplifying the voices of Iranian artists is more crucial than ever, and we are honored to play a role in presenting the works of the nine talented artists featured in *ART IRAN: Falling Into Language*.

On behalf of everyone at Farhang Foundation, our sincere gratitude goes to the esteemed *ART IRAN* competition jury — Fereshteh Daftari, Maryam Ekhtiar, Tala Madani, Bennett Simpson, and Holly Jerger — for their commitment of time and energy to this competition and for selecting this exceptional project.

We extend an enormous debt of gratitude to our outstanding partners at Craft Contemporary, including Rody N. Lopez, Prima Jalichandra-Sakuntabhai, Andres Payan Estrada, Adrienne Toomey, Billie Rae Vinson and particularly former executive director Suzanne Isken, whose unwavering support and collaborative partnership were instrumental in launching this project.

Special thanks are due to everyone at Farhang Foundation, including our dedicated Fine Arts Council, Tannaz Guivi, and Negar Attaripour.

We eagerly anticipate the impact of *ART IRAN: Falling Into Language*, as it introduces visitors to the diverse and magnificent voices of contemporary Iranian artists worldwide.

CURATORS

ROSHANAK GHEZELBASH

AND

HODA RAHBARNIK

ART IRAN: *Falling Into Language* presents nine expatriate Iranian artists who engage diverse forms of the Persian alphabet, handwriting, and fragments as an essential part of their artistic practice to explore contemporary life. These Iranian artists have followed different trajectories around the world. In their state of diaspora, they maintain a solid relationship with the Persian language as a visual and symbolic device. Though immigrant artists inevitably assimilate into the new cultures within which they find themselves, the persistence of what they bring with them from home remains. For some, political upheavals drive them to the diaspora, and for others, notions of identity. For artists, contemporary art acts as a lens through which to view their lives and create. The result is a narrative of the artist's story as a kind of inheritance. This project sheds light on their artistic endeavors, which transcend geographic boundaries; they talk about heterotopia. Heterotopia means "out of place." It refers to a physical representation of an ideal space or a parallel space that includes bodies or elements deemed undesirable, to create a seemingly perfect utopian space.

This exhibition features installation works, drawings, collages, site-specific art, and an interactive installation. The methods and techniques used range from sewing and assembling pieces of letters and words to ceramics and wall painting. The technique of handwriting on objects of different materials, from dishes to architectural tiles, is and has been part of Iranian culture throughout history. In Iranian culture, the written forms are often conflated with the senses and are not purely matters of intellect. By changing the margins of manuscripts or decorating them with flourishes in books, emotion is present in the written words, which is a different approach to language from that of other cultures.

The artists in ART IRAN: *Falling Into Language* share this in common: the text that appears in these works is not necessarily there to be read; it is there to be seen. The point is the audience's inability to read these letters. The artists chose to handwrite instead of using calligraphy—a well-known official expression of the alphabet with a long history within and outside the Iranian art scene; they chose handwriting as their voice—to gain a sense of belonging. The artworks are an unconscious dialogue, a hidden conversation between the artists and their native language. They capture the in-between state artists occupy in their daily reality: no longer belonging in either their homeland or their new home. All these artists remain foreigners to some degree, and what they bring with them into this new state of alienation might ultimately describe a kind of cosmopolitanism—precisely because it belongs to nowhere, it is at home everywhere.

SEEING BEYOND LEGIBILITY:

Writing and the Visual Arts of Iran

MICHAEL CHAGNON

Cultivated engagement with writing has been a persistent element of the visual arts and material culture of Iran for centuries. Beginning in the ninth century, when the Arabic alphabet was first adopted to write the Persian language,¹ calligraphy (literally "beautiful writing" in Greek)² held pride of place as one of the most esteemed forms of visual expression.³ In the modern age, Iranian artists have continued to prominently incorporate writing in their practice, where it often serves as a point of departure for formal and conceptual experimentation: one immediately thinks of the calligraphic works of Faramarz Pilaram, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, and Parviz Tanavoli.⁴

The works of art presented in the exhibition *Falling Into Language*, all by contemporary expatriate Iranian artists, are united by their incorporation of writing. In many instances, however, the basic function of writing, namely legibility, is undermined. Through occlusion, diminution, fragmentation, and other physical and visual manipulations, the ability for these written forms to be read, and thus to convey specific meanings, has been hindered. Consider, briefly, just three examples. The fragmentary, inarticulate syllables covering Parastou Forouhar's *Written Room* (page 28); the word *eshgh* (عشق)—love—repeated and concealed within the paper spirals of Hadieh Shafie's *Floor*

and *Ceiling Circles* (page 54); or the strings of phrases that puncture the skin of Elnaz Javani's plush figures in the installation *My Effigies* (page 36): in each case, the communication of textual meaning has been demoted as a primary operation of writing.

So what is the purpose of the written forms in these works, if not to be read? Perhaps they are best understood not as verbal texts, but as the visual vestiges of their expressivity. Removed from the mother culture left behind, and rearticulated within the society immigrated to, the Persian writing carried by these artworks becomes almost inevitably illegible, a trace of the potential to verbally convey ideas, now functioning as a visual index of the condition of in-betweenness forged through the experience of migration. And yet, while the textuality of these written forms may be suspended, their visual presence is not devoid of meaning. Instead, it redirects us to an alternate eloquence, expressive of sentiments that are unuttered and unwritten.

A thread links the works in the exhibition to other artistic engagements with the written word from Iran's past; this can be described as a tendency by artists to exploit the inherent ambivalence of writing to function as a tool to communicate meaning between a writer and a reader, and also as a visual



Figure 1. Stucco decoration with inscription in a lower register (detail), from an eyvan of a residence in Nayin, Iran, sixteenth century. Photo: Julia Maudlin / Wikipedia, CC 2.0



Figure 2. Torchstand (*mash'al*). Iran, ca. 1560. Engraved brass. Aga Khan Museum, AKM613. Photo © Aga Khan Museum.

form that may be appreciated on aesthetic and conceptual grounds, distinct from the linguistic and textual properties (i.e., verbal sounds, meanings, etc.) that the form represents.

The negotiation of (visual) form and (textual) meaning recurs throughout the arts of premodern Iran. Take, for example, skillfully forged calligraphic inscriptions, a frequently encountered type of surface decoration. Such inscriptions are applied to works ranging from monumental architecture to luxury objects made to be held in hand. In addition to aesthetically enhancing a building or object, their texts often emphasize the function of the work on which it appears: poems that adorn the walls of early modern palaces and eulogize their spaces (Fig. 1); formulaic litanies of good wishes and blessings encircling deluxe objects given as gifts; or selected verses of canonical Persian poetry that, when added to the surface an object, serve as witty references to its function but also frame its metaphorical significance.⁵ For example, candlesticks and torchstands produced between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Iran are often inscribed with poetic verses that allude to a common lyrical metaphor for mystical love, namely, a moth so attracted to the beauty of a flame that it annihilates itself in an attempt to achieve union with it. A sixteenth-century example (Fig. 2) is inscribed with verses by the Persian poet Hayrati Tuni, and reads: *Sometimes my heart burns with love for beauties*. In short, such inscriptions catalyze a dynamic interplay between the function of an object, the appeal of its (written) surface decoration, and the denotation of the text, which ultimately transects form and meaning.

While most epigraphic inscriptions were intended to be legible, in numerous instances their legibility is impeded by their form, execution, or placement. In other words, some inscriptions were not necessarily designed to be read, at least not in the everyday sense.

Architectural inscriptions adorning pre-modern buildings, for example, are often executed in elaborate versions of the Arabic script such as *sols* (Arabic, *thuluth*) and *mohaqqaq*, particularly from the fourteenth century onward.⁶ At times, the calligraphers responsible for designing inscriptions even intertwined letters and layered words at the expense of legibility. When situated high up on a wall, the distance of such inscriptions from the viewer's position may yet be another hindrance to reading and understanding the texts (Fig. 3). Scholars have therefore conjectured that such inscriptions were not designed to be easily read. In some cases, if a text was particularly well known (as in canonical poetry or passages from the Qur'an), a viewer's discernment and identification of a few consecutive words may have sufficed to prompt them to recall an entire passage of text committed to memory.⁷ In other cases, particularly in religious architecture such as mosques, the mere visual presence of a (Qur'anic) inscription was enough to convey the idea of the structure's sanctity: in such cases, an inscription's visibility performs signification beyond its precise textual content.⁸

Similar are the inscriptions found on a well-known category of Iranian ceramics produced in tenth-century Neyshabur during the era of Samanid ascendancy in the region (819–999 CE). The group includes plates, bowls, and other wares used for feasting; they are almost invariably covered in a white opaque slip and inscribed around their inner rims in contrasting black-brown calligraphy.⁹ Executed with exceptional balance, with elongated, almost spoke-like letter-stems that point the eye toward the center of the vessel, the inscriptions contain aphoristic texts expressing ethically upright attitudes and behaviors.¹⁰ A commonly recurring phrase within the group is "Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise" (Fig. 4). One can imagine that a bowl bearing such a message would have been used in



Figure 3. Mosaic inscriptions, Jameh Mosque of Yazd, Iran, fourteenth century. Photo: elishka / Wikipedia, CC 2.0.



Figure 4. Bowl. Iran, Neyshabur, tenth century.
Earthenware, slip-painted decoration.
Aga Khan Museum, AKM543.
Photo © Aga Khan Museum.



Figure 5. Calligraphic specimen (*qita*) signed
by Shah Mahmud Neyshaburi. Iran, ca. 1540.
Aga Khan Museum, AKM254.
Photo © Aga Khan Museum.

a convivial gathering, where the inscription was gradually revealed as the culinary contents were depleted, leading participants to discuss the meaning of the saying while sharing food. Scholars have noted, however, that the calligraphic forms used in Samanid black-and-white wares would not have been particularly easy to read.¹¹ Thus, the handlers of these ceramics were likely better able to appreciate their visual effect than to decipher the inscriptions and contemplate their meanings. Notably, the visual properties of the inscriptions support their textual meaning, with the outer, manifest balance and elegance of the calligraphy expressing the inward cultivation of moral refinement that the sayings encourage.

Even when writing was at its clearest and most legible, textual meaning could remain subordinate to extra-textual signification. Probably starting in earnest in the fifteenth century, calligraphic specimens on paper in *nasta'liq* were produced as independent artworks (Fig. 5). Typically comprising short poetic textual fragments (*qita*), they were often framed by decorative paper frames and mounted in albums (*muraqqa*), where, treated very much like pictorial images, they would have been examined and appreciated by discerning connoisseurs, the aesthetic quality of the writing being evaluated according to established criteria. Such works were not only meant to be outwardly beautiful, however: an idea expounded as early as the ninth century and widely circulated in Persianate court circles of the early modern period was that calligraphy reflected the quality of the calligrapher's soul.¹² This suggests that appreciation of these written works entailed looking past textual content to sense the subjectivity of the artist: the discipline of their hand, the clarity of their mind, and the purity of their spirit. Here, appreciation of form becomes an act of sympathy between artist and viewer.

Artists of Iran have long explored the potential for writing to function as a visual tool that expresses sentiments and ideas beyond the meaning of the text. In each age, this complex application of the written word has aimed to suit the needs of the moment. Like the historical artworks described above, the works on exhibit in *Falling Into Language* stage a complex and unsettled interplay between the form and the meaning of writing. In contrast to their precursors from

the premodern and modern eras, however, even the aesthetic appeal of their written forms is subordinate to other significations. For the exhibition artists, today living and working in places distant from their origins, the visibility of writing ultimately points to an overdetermined (and thus ineffable) state of existing between realms of communication, between regimes of legibility. In their work, the written form becomes a sketch of the self.

1. L. Paul, "Persian Language. i. Early New Persian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online), (accessed online September 15, 2023). A distinctive trait of the use of the Arabic alphabet, specifically when used for Persian, is the presence of several letters whose sounds are not represented in Arabic (ژ, ځ, پ for example). Additionally, since the fifteenth century, one of the main forms of the Arabic script used for Persian writing (but not Arabic) is *nasta'liq*, which was developed in Iran to be both legible and well-suited to the fluidity of the Persian language. See Maryam Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 32–33.

2. The Persian word for calligraphy, *khosh-nevisi* خوشنویسی, has the same meaning.

3. Sussan Babaie, "The Sound of the Image/The Image of the Sound: Narrativity in Persian Art of the 17th Century," in Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson (eds.), *Islamic Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), 144.

4. Lynn Gumpert, "Observations on the Global and the Local," in L. Gumpert, ed., *Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists from Iran* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2015), 20.

5. L. Paul, "Persian Language. i. Early New Persian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online), (accessed online September 15, 2023). Sheila S. Blair, "Epigraphy iii. Arabic Inscriptions in Persia"; and Sussan Babaie, "Epigraphy iv. Safavid and Later Inscriptions," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (accessed online September, 15 2023).

6. Blair, "Epigraphy iii. Arabic Inscriptions in Persia." For a discussion of the variant forms of the Arabic script, see Pamela Karimi's essay in this catalog.

7. The ability for writing to function as an aide-memoire is also evident in early copies of the Qur'an, where the text is executed in a difficult-to-read square script commonly called "Kufic," and often lacks diacritical marks and vocalizations. See, for example a folio from a late-ninth-century Qur'an manuscript, attributed to Iran or Iraq, in the Aga Khan Museum collection, AKM238.

8. See Holly Edwards, "Text, Context, Architekt: The Qur'an as Architectural Inscription," in C. G. Fisher (ed.), *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing* (East Lansing, MI: Kresge Art Museum, 1991), 63–75.

9. Some examples, however, have a black ground and white inscriptions. See Aga Khan Museum, AKM545.

10. The sayings themselves are composed in the Arabic language. See Oya Pancaroğlu, "Serving Wisdom: The Contents of Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," in *Studies in Islamic and Later Indian Art from the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums), 59–75.

11. Blair, "Epigraphy iii. Arabic Inscriptions in Persia"; Oya Pancaroğlu, *Perpetual Glory: Medieval Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnick Collection*, (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), 70.

12. David J. Roxburgh, "'The Eye Is Favored for Seeing the Writing's Form': On the Sensual and the Sensuous in Islamic Calligraphy," *Muqarnas* 25 (2008), 275–98, esp. 279–280.

TIMELESS SCRIPTS:

Contemporary Takes on Age-Old Calligraphic Arts

PAMELA KARIMI

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ART IRAN: *Falling Into Language* is an exhibition that casts a spotlight on the works of nine expatriate Iranian artists who have crafted nine distinctive artworks that span a broad spectrum, encompassing installations, drawings, collages, and site-specific pieces. Each piece poignantly conveys the emotional intricacies of migration,

At the heart of this exhibition lies the artists' profound connection with the Persian language...

weaving together feelings of homesickness, the jolt of cultural shock, and the continuous dance between safeguarding one's ancestral heritage and embracing the nuances of a diasporic environment.

At the heart of this exhibition lies the artists' profound connection with the Persian language, specifically its rich calligraphic forms that have evolved through history. To truly grasp the significance of calligraphy in

contemporary Persian art, one must embark on a journey back in time. Though a comprehensive history is expansive, it is pertinent to touch upon pivotal moments. Calligraphy holds a central position in Persian artistic heritage. More than just written text, it masterfully blends composition, shape, and form, resonating with the viewers on emotional levels. Over the centuries, Iranian calligraphers have transcended traditional writing methods and imbued them with artistic panache. Their work not only facilitates communication but also elevates it to the realm of visual aesthetics and artistic expression. Some have emphasized unique stylizations of the script, while others integrated text with imagery, composition, and page design. These artistic endeavors weren't realized overnight. The evolution of Iran's calligraphic arts spans centuries, stemming from the adaptation and enhancement of imported calligraphic styles.

Originating from its namesake location in Iraq, the *Kufic* script swiftly gained prominence in post-Islamic Iran and evolved into several variations of the style. During the Samanid Dynasty (819–999), Iranian artists developed a variant of *Kufic*, which was adorned with floral patterns and

decorative scrolls. This script was later applied to architectural inscriptions, metalworks, and textiles like silk or velvet. The art of calligraphy flourished further, particularly in the thirteenth century, a period following the Mongol invasion and under the rule of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256–1335). Notable in this period is the development of the "Six Pens," a suite of calligraphic scripts, which ascended in importance, becoming the scripts of choice for the Qur'an and other forms of writing. Concurrently, these scripts graced architectural masterpieces, intricately woven into stucco and tiles. In the ensuing periods, with the Persian language establishing dominance over Arabic, there was a noticeable resurgence in Persian poetry. The *Nasta'liq* script, which evolved as a result of mixing *Naskh* (to write) with *Ta'liq* (suspended) style, was emblematic of this poetic renaissance.

In the fifteenth century, during the reign of the Timurids, the art of album-making began to take a distinct form as eclectic collections and collages of various calligraphic records from previous masters. This curated approach offered a vivid snapshot of the artistic dynamism of Timurid Iran, which subsequently advanced and culminated in what is known today as the celebrated canon of Safavid art.

The influence of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) on Iran's calligraphic arts is undeniable, especially with its pivotal decision to adopt Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran. This transition enriched Iran's calligraphy, introducing Shi'ite religious texts to its corpus. In the early sixteenth century, Shiraz shone as one of the pillars of Persian calligraphy culture. Manuscripts from this era

were marked by their repetitive patterns, suggesting a surge in commercial production of the Qur'an manuscripts. Ruzbahan Muhammad Shirazi, a figure of this era, exemplified this commercial thrust.

In subsequent years, Iranians matured in blending calligraphy, gilded paper, and decorative borders. By incorporating miniature artwork, floral patterns, and arabesque designs with calligraphy styles like *Naskh* and *Nastaliq*, the unique *Golzar*

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style emerged, named after its "flower garden" aesthetic. From this fusion, draft writing and other sub-genres appeared, intertwining words, images, and motifs.

By the seventeenth century, the landscape of Persian calligraphy saw the introduction of the *Shekasteh* style (translates to broken), a variant of *Nasta'liq*. Its distinct characteristics, such as elongated letters, made it stand out. At the peak of the Safavid era, royal

patronage of calligraphic arts was extensive. Monarchs and their circles actively supported libraries, commissioned manuscripts, and curated vast calligraphic collections. A prominent figure from this period, Mir ‘emad Hassani Ghazvini, is celebrated for his distinct style, evident in his Siyah-mashq (black

Over time, the demarcation between calligraphy and painting diminished...

exercise sheets). These sheets were soon transformed into sought-after collectibles, admired for their exquisite craftsmanship.

In the subsequent Qajar period (1789–1925), Mirza Muhammad Reza Kalhur breathed new life into the Nasta’liq style by introducing a more compact approach. The nineteenth century witnessed the advent of lithography, which became the preferred medium for various literary works, ranging from religious texts to popular fiction. Artistic innovations during this time included zoomorphic calligraphy, where scripts were shaped to resemble animals or humans, and the practice of micrography. Over time, the demarcation between calligraphy and painting diminished, exemplified by artists like Isma’il Jalayir, who effortlessly fused the two. Calligraphic arts remained resilient even as the twentieth century ushered in Iran’s swift modernization. In 1950, the Association

of Calligraphers in Iran was founded by esteemed figures like Ali Akbar Kaveh. Under the guidance of such experts, calligraphy continued to thrive and evolve.

The 1960s heralded the Saqqā-khāneh movement, characterized by a neo-traditionalist resurgence. Artists from this period, such as Hussein Zende Roudi, Parviz Tanavoli, and Faramarz Pilaram, seamlessly integrated traditional Iranian art forms and abstract elements with Persian and Arabic calligraphy. While many of these artworks were predominantly style-driven and absent of overt political undertones, Siah Armajani notably engaged with pressing political issues of his time, particularly those related to nationalistic debates and the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

The Saqqā-khāneh movement gave rise to diverse artistic inclinations, predominantly grappling with the incorporation of conventional materials in innovative manners. One notable trend that soon gained traction was the Naqqāshi-khatt (calligraphic-painting) style. Yet, unlike Saqqā-khāneh artists like Zenderoudi and Pilaram, who integrated letters as primary visual elements in a disjointed and nonliterary fashion, Naqqāshi-khatt artists such as Mohammad Ehsai, Reza Mafi, and Nasrollah Afjai – all seasoned calligraphers – predominantly showcased calligraphy as painting. They often drew directly from classic styles like Nasta’liq and Kufic, making them the centerpiece of their creations, resulting in pieces that encapsulated literate and significant phrases, either religious or poetic in nature.

The artists of the Saqqā-khāneh movement and those dedicated to Naqqāshi-khatt undeniably align with parallel modernist artistic movements like Letterism and the Arabic Hurufiyya. Yet, this connection does not relegate the Iranian styles as a mere offshoot of Western or regional modernism. The dialogues between Iranian artists who

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ventured westward certainly played a role. But paramount is the understanding that modern and contemporary Iranian art’s engagement with calligraphy is part of a lineage that has remained steadfast for centuries. Artists from the Iranian diaspora who weave calligraphy into their creations are testament to this enduring legacy.

This exhibition showcases artworks that emphasize the profound tradition of calligraphy in Iranian art. Concurrently, these pieces explore the artists’ unique identities, accentuating their diasporic roots along with tales of migration, displacement, and political unrest in Iran. The medium varies among artists: while some embrace sculptural expressions, others remain loyal to

conventional calligraphic styles on textiles or ceramics. Central to this exhibition is the timeless and dynamic evolution of Persian script and calligraphy, with roots that delve deeply into Iran’s early Islamic eras. This script carries a distinctive duality: while singular letters emerge as standalone artworks, their amalgamation into phrases weaves tales that capture the spirit of our time. For Iranian diasporic artists, the poignant issues in their homeland often find voice through poetry, reflecting a rich Iranian tradition of lyrical expression. In everyday life, Iranians draw wisdom from revered medieval poets. As such, the script serves as a fitting cornerstone for this exhibit, with each artist presenting their distinct interpretation.

PARASTOU FOROUHAR, who migrated to Germany before her parents’ tragic demise by the state authorities in Iran, uses her installations to intertwine religious and political violence with the evolving identity of Iranian women. Using Persian calligraphy in innovative ways, she has transformed



Using Persian calligraphy in innovative ways, she has transformed gallery spaces into “written rooms” that challenge Western perceptions of Persian script.

gallery spaces into “written rooms” that challenge Western perceptions of Persian script. In their meticulous execution and recurrent patterns, the calligraphic designs that infuse life into the entire gallery space evoke age-old styles crafted or honed by

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past masters. Prominent among these styles are the Shekasteh (broken) script, the Nasta’liq (suspended), and the Siyh mashgh—a distinct calligraphic practice featuring overlapping diagonal words and letters in both upward and downward orientations. These styles feature prominently in Forouhar’s offerings for the exhibition. Concurrently, Forouhar’s work seems to bear the imprint of Western traditions, notably the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), which aims to create art that encompasses all physical things around it. Indeed, the fact that the medium metamorphoses into the

architectural space itself, rather than being confined to a page, piece of ceramic, or fabric, underscores the evolutionary journey of Persian calligraphic arts from their rudimentary origins. On the other hand, the illegibility of Persian letters to non-Iranian viewers, which can be perceived as mere ornamentation, mirrors the experience within the architectural interiors of old Iranian palaces and mosques. In these historic buildings, walls are often adorned with epigraphy, geometric shapes, floral designs, and colorful tiles; together, all of these motifs offer an immersive experience. These interiors engage not just the visual sense but also evoke tactile sensations, resonating with the effects Forouhar aims to capture in her work. It is worth noting that Forouhar’s art often becomes animated in front of viewers. She enacts her “written rooms” in the presence of live audiences, intertwining dynamic bodily performances with age-old writing customs. In Iran’s contemporary art scene, such fleeting performances are prevalent and deeply resonate with an engaged Iranian audience. For those residing in Iran, art is not merely a facet of daily existence; it is a powerful medium for political expression that, through consistent practice, holds the potential to drive societal transformation. Forouhar, who is a fervent critic of the atrocities perpetrated by the Islamic Republic, frequently visits Iran. Therefore, it is fitting that she captivates her audiences through such a powerful, performative approach.

HADIEH SHAFIE masterfully presents intricate low-relief paper sculptures, marrying both handwritten and printed Persian texts. Her suspended sculptural piece evokes the



This deliberate illegibility reflects her multifaceted experience as an Iranian American and as an artist drawing upon a rich art form that is deeply woven into her ancestral culture.

traditional Ta’ligh (also meaning suspended) writing style. Meanwhile, her more concealed wall artworks subtly hint at the intricacy and layered depth of the Siyah-mashq sheets, a craft conceived centuries before her time. While Shafie’s art primarily revolves around written texts, its complexity renders it largely indecipherable. This deliberate illegibility reflects her multifaceted experience as an Iranian American and as an artist drawing upon a rich art form that is deeply woven into her ancestral culture. From a distance, Hadieh Shafie’s artworks are often present as decorative mosaics of color. Yet, a closer look reveals these patterns as scrolls of hand-painted text, intricately coiled. Drawn from her post-1979 Revolution memories, an era of stringent text censorship, Shafie emphasizes the word “love” or “Eshgh” (in Persian) in this exhibition. The word accentuates the gravity of warm sentiments often silenced in Iran. Her circular motifs in the “Safar” (or “Journey”) pieces (also included in this exhibition) resonate with the

“sama’,” a celestial dance that was often depicted in Persian manuscripts. An exemplary page from an illustrated manuscript of poems of Hafiz, housed at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, portrays Sufis in dance. Crafted by the Herat artist Behzad, its dancers whirl energetically against contemplative figures, while the green backdrop hints at a terrestrial paradise. The vibrant hues in Shafie’s “Safar” mimic these bodily movements in an abstract sense. Indeed, Shafie’s pieces exemplify the fusion of traditional Iranian calligraphy and manuscript painting, reimagined through the lens of modern abstract expressionism.

MARYAM PALIZGIR’S multidisciplinary artistry resonates with traditional Iranian calligraphic arts, often showcased in crafts like textile weaving, embroidery, and carpet making. Just as tribal female carpet weavers embedded elements of their nomadic identity into their creations, Palizgir intertwines her blended Western and Iranian heritage within a quilt’s fabric. This quilt,



Maryam Palizgir’s multidisciplinary artistry resonates with traditional Iranian calligraphic arts, often showcased in crafts like textile weaving, embroidery, and carpet making.

adorned with a blend of Persian and French texts, delves profoundly into the complexities of dual identity experienced by the artist in the diaspora. In her installation, a head-shaped figure stands atop a pedestal, its many threads extending upwards, connecting to a delicate white quilt on the wall. This artistic interplay—melding traditional quilting and weaving, often linked with women’s world—echoes in **ELNAZ JAVANI’S** work as well.

Javani delves into the somber facets of immigration and feelings of isolation. Through her art, she masterfully employs embroidery as a medium to interlace tales of



Through her art, [Javani] masterfully employs embroidery as a medium to interlace tales of migration and intimate traumas.

migration and intimate traumas. Her installation, “My Effigies,” offers a moving reflection on solitude and personal narratives from her early years in Iran. The presence of calligraphy as embroidered elements underscores how modern Iranian art is intricately tied not only to the renowned traditions of Persian art but also to those overlooked in historical records—traditions that predominantly originated from the

realms of women and the common populace rather than from court-sponsored or elite circles. In the works of Palizgir and Javani, traces of the surge in Feminist art from recent years are likewise evident. For example, following the 2016 US elections, many artists turned to cross-stitching as an outlet for their political dismay, heralding a new era of “stitch n’ bitches.” Moving beyond conventional designs, this revived craft community used cross-stitching as a means of liberating political and social commentary. Indeed, traditional crafts like stitching, quilting, embroidery, and sewing have often been rejuvenated as powerful channels for contemporary Feminist expression, a sentiment also powerfully captured by Palizgir and Javani.

GOLNAR ADILI engages with the Persian language by drawing inspiration from the traditions of the suspended letter (Ta’ligh) and the Siyah-mashq, which emphasize the aesthetic form of writing over its literal meaning. Her extended sculptural piece, sprawling horizontally through the gallery,



Adili’s personal identity, by her own account, intertwines with these letters and words, shaping her perception of the world.

accentuates the letter “ye,” the final letter of the Persian alphabet. This particular letter held sentimental significance in her father’s affectionate letters to a loved one back home. Adili’s personal identity, by her own account, intertwines with these letters and words, shaping her perception of the world. Within some Muslim communities, the frequent use of revered words like “Ali ” or “Allah” is deeply venerated, often presented in mirrored and layered formats known as Musanna. This style is evident across various mediums, from architecture to textiles and metalwork, and has a broad influence spanning regions from Persia to Andalusia. Musanna also bears potential connections to Judaic and Christian scripts, with all of them highlighting the dynamic interplay between form and meaning. In Adili’s art, the delicate balance between form and the deep connotations of a certain letter takes center stage. The mirrored reflections of her letters, manifested as cast shadows on the floor, resonate profoundly with the rich traditions of Musanna.

In the context of this exhibition, if we consider the rich practices of appropriation of texts, images, and objects, which involved collaging diverse pieces into a unified presentation, **SHADI YOUSEFIAN’S** work undoubtedly stands out as exemplary. Indeed, her work exemplifies the appropriation of previously created objects, pieces, and photographs. Appropriation in art refers to the intentional borrowing, copying, and transformation of preexisting images and objects. Unlike the vague boundaries of “influence,” “appropriation” firmly positions both authorship and agency within the creator. As mentioned earlier in



Yousefian meticulously fragments old letters and personal photographs, and in appropriating them, she crafts new forms, rendering the original elements unrecognizable.

this text, in bookmaking, art from previous master calligraphers was repurposed; for instance, under the Timurids, royal albums showcased earlier specimens, reformatted, and enhanced to create a cohesive appearance. This demonstrates a visual manifestation of historical awareness even before it was defined through history books. The Saqqā-khāneh movement (1962–79), emerging alongside global Pop Art, revisited local culture. Artists like Armajani, Massoud Arabshahi, and Tanavoli integrated items such as worn-out jackets, traditional crafts, and antiquated containers into their work. Their motivations spanned from referencing history and enriching the tactile experience to satirizing outdated traditions. In her evocative “Letters and Memories” series, Yousefian meticulously fragments old letters and personal photographs, and in appropriating them, she crafts new forms, rendering the original elements unrecognizable. These original letters held immense value to her, serving as tactile

remnants from Iran. Yet, she dissects them, sifting for the most poignant and resonant sections, akin to a therapeutic act of rediscovery. In this context, words become redundant, and the spaces between them offer her room to breathe. Authentically handwritten, each letter encapsulates powerful emotions, oscillating between the agony of separation and the elation of personal attachments to things from her past. The final artwork consists of three wood panels with original letters imaginatively collaged, similar to the way it was done in the old Persian albums of the Timurid and Safavid eras.

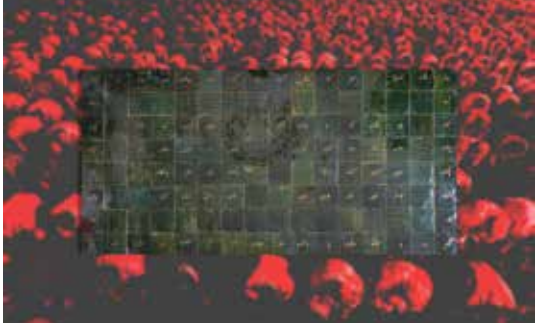
The exhibition also showcases pieces reminiscent of the traditional calligraphic designs found on both underglaze and overglaze ceramic tiles, such as the iconic star-shaped tiles from Kashan. These tiles, prevalent during the Ilkhanid era, graced the walls of both palaces and sacred sites. A notable tile, originating from the renowned ceramic hub of Kashan in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (now housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston), features a border inscribed with poetic verses. One such verse eloquently captures the anguish of parting from a loved one. If in medieval Kashan, glazed tiles with calligraphic scripts conveyed the deep agony of separation from a loved one, the same poignant tradition finds resonance in the work of contemporary diasporic artist **TARANEH HEMAMI**. Hemami's ceramics delve deeply into her intricate relationship with political dynamics while echoing her yearning for home. To further emphasize the separation from the homeland, she presents ceramic tears meticulously arranged on a wall. Thus,



Hemami's ceramics delve deeply into her intricate relationship with political dynamics while echoing her yearning for home.

delicate ceramic representations of the Persian alphabet take the form of tears.

Emphasizing the lasting impact of calligraphic arts as narrative tools, the exhibition culminates with an interactive installation by **NEDA MORIDPOUR** and **POUYA AFSHAR**. Their work showcases over two hundred tiles, each engraved with Persian script, collaboratively unfolding the ancient story of "Khaleh Suskeh" (Auntie Roach). Originally an educational story for women, it chronicles a female roach's life. While the narrative casts her as a casualty of a society rife with sexual discrimination and domestic violence, it was often shared with young girls by grownup women, especially during the Qajar era. Over time, "Khaleh Suskeh" has become a voice for Iranian women, articulating experiences of societal challenges and violence. Viewers are invited to engage with the piece, rearranging tiles to reflect personal interpretations, emphasizing the power of tradition and the evolving nuances of storytelling, especially through the lens of calligraphy. Moridpour and Afshar's



Moridpour and Afshar prompt the audience to engage with the artwork through unanticipated bodily movements and interactions.

interactive art convolutedly weaves viewers into the tapestry of the creative process, elevating them from passive observers to active participants. This engagement deepens comprehension and fosters personal connections to the artwork. While interactivity is often ascribed to Western art, the technique used here also reflects the traditional Iranian approach found in illustrated manuscripts and calligraphic pages. In such works, calligraphy often meanders in unexpected patterns — curving and slanting, demanding physical adjustments from the reader. Likewise, architectural epigraphy in historic buildings required a dynamic and engaged observation. The viewer's eye danced along

varying directions, pivoting and rotating, echoing the dynamism inherent in epigraphic works that meandered in unpredictable patterns. Much as historical viewing practices required viewers to physically adjust, Moridpour and Afshar prompt the audience to engage with the artwork through unanticipated bodily movements and interactions.

The showcased artists masterfully juxtapose the profound traditions of Persian calligraphy with modern-day nuances, weaving in personal tales, societal norms, and the evolving diasporic identity. Throughout this analysis, I have emphasized the calligraphic heart of their works, tracing the evolution of calligraphy since Iran's first Islamic periods and celebrating the rejuvenation these artists have infused into ancestral traditions. The pieces beckon viewers to appreciate them against the backdrop of Iran's long legacy of calligraphic arts while acknowledging the palpable influences from their Euro-American exposures. This exhibition stands as a harmonious fusion of historical depth and contemporary flair, encapsulating ageless and current dialogues. Undeniably, this beautifully curated collection is historically illuminating, visually compelling, and a pivotal enhancement to our comprehension of Iranian art.

Akin-Kivanc, Esra. Muthanna / *Mirror Writing in Islamic Calligraphy: History, Theory, and Aesthetics*. Indiana University Press, 2020.

Blair, Sheila. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Roxburgh, David J. *The Persian Album, 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Karimi, Pamela. *Alternative Iran: Contemporary Art and Critical Spatial Practice*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Keshmirshakan, Hamid. *The Art of Iran in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

GOLNAR ADILI

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

(b. 1976, Falls Church, Virginia)

Golnar Adili, an Iranian American growing up in post-1979 Tehran, has experienced separation and uprooting in its different manifestations. She distorts and amplifies these past events through material deconstruction and reconstruction in her practice. She is interested in exploring the language of her material and blurring the lines between design, craft, and fine art. She has deconstructed and reconstructed materials and imagery relating to her family history for the past decade by mining her late father's archive of letters, photos, and printed matter. Art is her key to understanding the current underlying identity and the world. In doing so, she derives much inspiration from her own life.



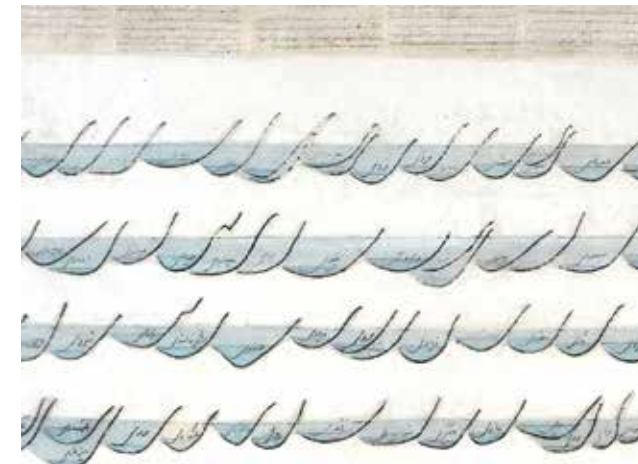
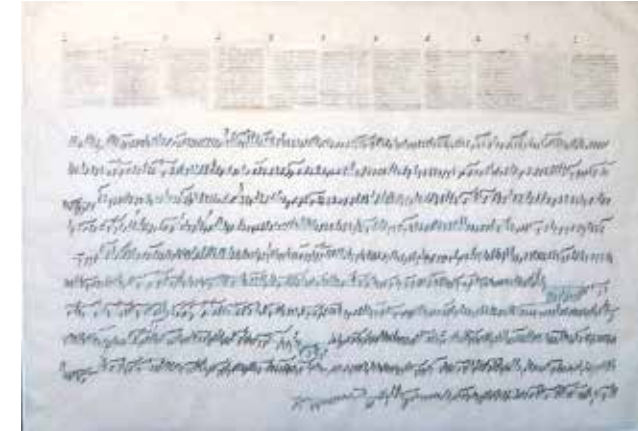


“YE” HARVEST FROM THE ELEVEN-PAGE LETTER INSTALLATION, 2017

These objects, extracted from an eleven-page letter by Adili’s late father to his lover, give you a fragile sense of depth. Each position of ye, the last letter of the Persian alphabet, is calculated very precisely. The “chronological placement,” as the artist explains, is based on the placement of each specific particularity of the letter. At the same time, by putting the forms in the delicate composition, the various untouchable instances of ye set in this delightful structure reveal the state of her father’s mind as he is being displaced. In his handwriting, ye appears as flying figures or hairs in the wind, reminding her how frequently her father’s soul flew to Iran to become part of his loved ones’ lives. The self-exile of both father and daughter became the language landscape, a landscape that could not stand without external structure.

MEDIUM: Transfer on Japanese paper mounted on archival board with wooden dowels

COURTESY: The artist



PARASTOU FOROUHAR

MAINZ, GERMANY

(b. 1962, Tehran)

Themes like the violation of human rights and the oppression of women are significant concerns for the artist and activist Parastou Forouhar, who has employed powerful feminist language in her art while living and working in German exile since the 1990s. Her work blurs the boundaries between form and concept, biography and artistry. With artistic techniques such as installation, graphic print, and performative photography, she engages with the positionality of the female body and how diversity and ambivalence shape the meaning and ownership of the space in relation to gender, ethnicity, and migration. Her work has been widely exhibited around the world. It is included in prestigious permanent collections, including the British Museum, the Queensland Art Museum, the Belvedere in Vienna, the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, the Deutsche Bank Art Collection, and the Walker Art Center.





WRITTEN ROOM, SINCE 1995

Inside a white room, the alphabet appears everywhere to embrace you. Black words on the ceiling, the floor, and the walls. Instead of the white canvas, the room itself is used as a surface to be written on. Sentences surround you with white space between them; these are all the artist's handwriting, which is not necessarily there to be read but to be seen. If the viewer understands Persian, scripts are familiar but still not readable. They might even be confused by the contemplative approach of what it is about, but the artist intentionally made them meaningless. These incomprehensible texts change the viewer's attitude about grasping the idea with one look. Forouhar kills and make words reborn simultaneously. The viewer is invited to absorb a self-destructive artistic approach to the alphabet. *Written Room* started in 1995 and is a work in progress in different art spaces, in various cities. The latest version was performed in 2020.

Medium: Site-specific work, acrylic paint

Courtesy: The artist



TARANEH HEMAMI

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

(b. 1960, Tehran)

Taraneh Hemami works with materials of history, organizing archives of images, data, and information, weaving complementary and contradictory narratives manifested in objects, installations, and experimental collective, collaborative, and curatorial projects. Born and raised in Tehran, and living and working in San Francisco, Hemami engages in diverse strategies to examine the careful crafting of images as propagated for power and political gain and the manipulations of truth and historical facts, the fictionalized realities that have infiltrated our everyday lives. She explores themes of displacement, preservation, and representation in installations that intermingle with the spaces they occupy, complicating their identity and, at times, altering or enhancing their function. She has received awards from Creative Capital, the Creative Work Fund, the Center for Cultural Innovation, the California Council for the Humanities, and the San Francisco Arts Commission. Her works have been exhibited widely, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Southern Exposure, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Boghossian Foundation, and the Sharjah International Biennial.



SILENT TEARS, 2008

Letters of the alphabet of childhood are layered on tear-shaped sculptures without forming specific meanings. Aware of its audiences' likely misreading and misunderstanding of its content, it alludes to the inability to communicate in a new home, mourning the loss of language. The installation reflects a grieving world, creating a memorial, a longing, a cry. The *Alphabet of Silent* series also speaks of censorship while honoring the many writers and journalists who risk their lives to fight for the right to speak the truth.

MEDIUM: Paper and encaustic on air-dry clay

COURTESY: Private collection



WALL OF TEARS, 1998

Archives of twenty years of personal journal pages, notes, and letters were dipped in wax and stitched together as a luminous reference to the gold and silver brick wall of paradise as inscribed in the Koran. Tears associated with longing for the divine and the suffering associated with the search for the higher self in Sufi traditions were sewn from particular pages of the journals and hung from gold and silver threads of the wall, creating a layer of longing on the walls of remembrances.

MEDIUM: Journal pages, thread, wax

COURTESY: The artist



ELNAZ JAVANI

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

(b. 1985, Iran)

Elnaz Javani is an Iranian artist, researcher, and educator who creates sculptures, drawings, installations, and videos that explore themes of the female body, trauma, and cultural identity. Her practice embraces conceptual strategies and handwork using everyday materials, mostly fabric, cloth, and thread. She received her BFA from the Tehran Art University of Iran in 2009 and her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a full-merit scholarship in 2015. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, in the United States, Spain, Iran, France, Colombia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, and Switzerland. Sites include the CAC Ses Voltes International Residency Program (Spain), the Luminarts Cultural Foundation of Visual Arts (Chicago), the Mottahedan Projects (Dubai), the Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal USA, President's Award Exhibitions (Chicago), the Munich Cultural Center at Pasinger Fabrik (Germany), "Le Commun," Bâtiment d'art contemporain (Geneva), San Telmo Museum (Spain), Arts Santa Mónica Barcelona (Spain), and at Espacio El Dorado Bogotá (Colombia).

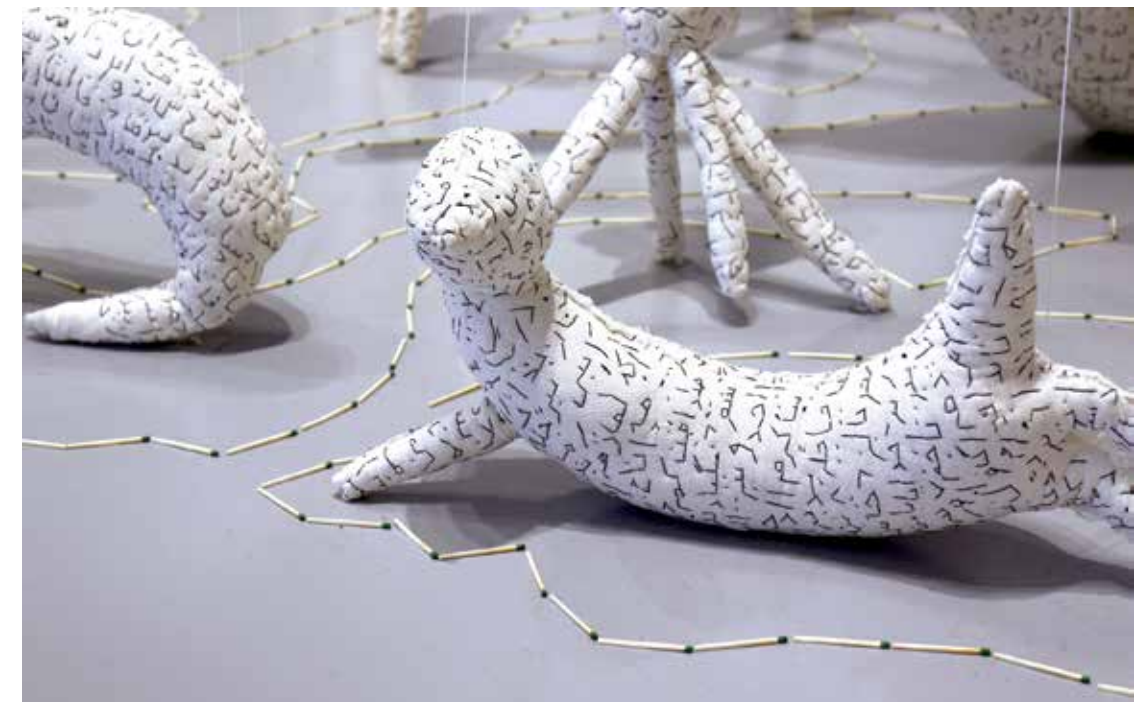




MY EFFIGIES, INSTALLATION, 2020

The installation *My Effigies* features twelve ethereal creatures delicately crafted from white fabric. Each creature is meticulously hand-sewn with fragmented words in Persian and Azari stitched in black across their forms. These objects serve as personal and fictional narrators, delving into the exploration of the coexistence of multiple identities within an individual and their physical embodiment. These gentle entities capture the human figure in moments of disorientation and disruption, in the realms of both mental and physical experience. *My Effigies* casts a reflective gaze into the complexities of identity and displacement.

The white strings suspended from the ceiling are connected to these creatures, suggesting a subtle imposition of control. The soaring connections create an impression of containment, isolating the pieces within their own space. Bound by a border of matches, they remain unable to communicate, symbolizing the artist's poignant experience of diaspora. These soft artifacts, reminiscent of childhood toys, evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing for a sense of belonging. *My Effigies* captures the essence of the artist's journey, weaving together threads of personal narratives and cultural displacement, inviting viewers to reflect on their own connections to place and identity.





MEDIUM: Stuffed object made of white muslin fabric, hand-sewn with black thread, covering the external layer with stories in Persian and Azari calligraphy

COURTESY: The artist

NEDA MORIDPOUR

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

(b. 1983, Tehran)

Neda Moridpour is a Kurdish Iranian artist, educator, organizer, and cofounder of two artist-activist collaboratives, LOUDER THAN WORDS and [P]Art Collective. Her practice crosses disciplines and boundaries to investigate cycles of violence that lead to displacement and gender and racial inequity while establishing dialogue and mobilizing communities. Through collaboration, her practice transforms the seemingly quotidian and mundane via visual and performative interventions, lens-based practices, and bold public roundtables and discussions.

POUYA AFSHAR

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

(b. 1984, Tehran)

Pouya Afshar is an alumnus of the California Institute of Arts Character Animation Department and a graduate of the UCLA Graduate Department of Film and Television, focusing on Animation and Digital Media. He has exhibited his work as a visual artist throughout the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, including the Harold M. Williams Auditorium at the Getty Center, Bovard Auditorium at the University of Southern California, Royce Hall at UCLA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Santa Monica Art Studios, 18th Street Art Center, Craft Contemporary, and numerous galleries and art fairs around the world. He has presented his research at Stanford University, Harvard University, the University of Southern California, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, UCLA, and Residency Unlimited NY. He is the creator, character designer, and producer of the animated series *Rostam in Wonderland*, the cocreator of *1PA2PA* comics, and the creator of *The Tehran* graphic novel. He is an Associate Professor of Art and Design at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

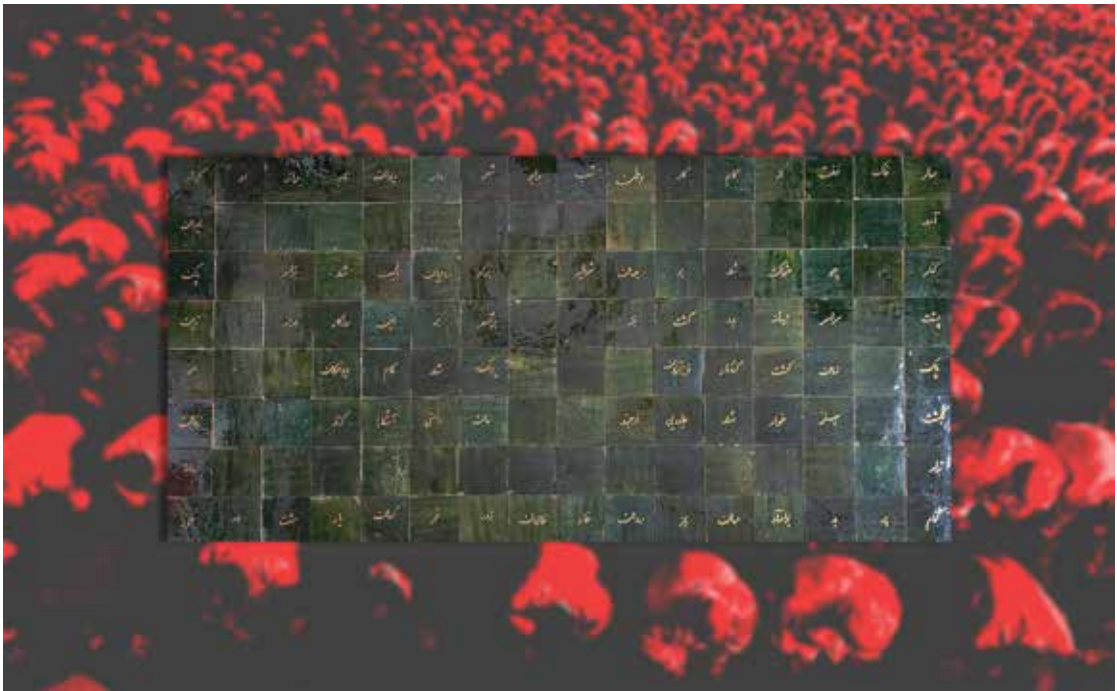


SEVEN CONQUESTS OF STORY II, 2023

Slanting or inclining is the act of altering the direction or subtly distorting the meaning within various forms of expression, such as literature, history, and even religion. This nuanced manipulation in fiction and storytelling has yielded positive and negative impacts on the essence of the narrative, imbuing it with diverse hues and layers of interpretation. Throughout the course of history, when knowledge and intellect guided the art of oral storytelling, the disruptive potential of skewing the established structure was comparatively limited. This structure, analogous to crafting and refining tiles from raw material into a polished piece of art, mirrors the author’s creative process. In this analogy, the “tile” becomes a tool in a game where slanting occurs. Playing this game within the context of assembling a puzzle provides a unique experience of subtly reshaping the narrative’s meaning. Irrespective of the final appearance and aesthetics of the finished piece, each addition or removal of a tile along the way results in a distinct shift in the collective consciousness. Each word inscribed on these tiles invites the audience to partake in this creative endeavor or to observe from the sidelines.

While this project invites viewers’ participation, it does so with the specific instruction of moving the tiles and not modifying the artwork completely. A significant aspect of this endeavor lies in documenting the process, capturing the decisions made by each participant as they engage in the act of slanting, appropriating, or choosing not to partake. The ultimate objective is to illustrate how individuals respond to this artistic game, whether they actively engage with it or opt to wield influence by subtly reshaping a narrated story that traverses the intriguing path of the seven conquests of history, a contemporary yet personal take on Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh (“Book of Kings”)—a journey that continues to unfold.

Medium: Mixed media (ceramic tiles on steel sheet)
Courtesy: The artists



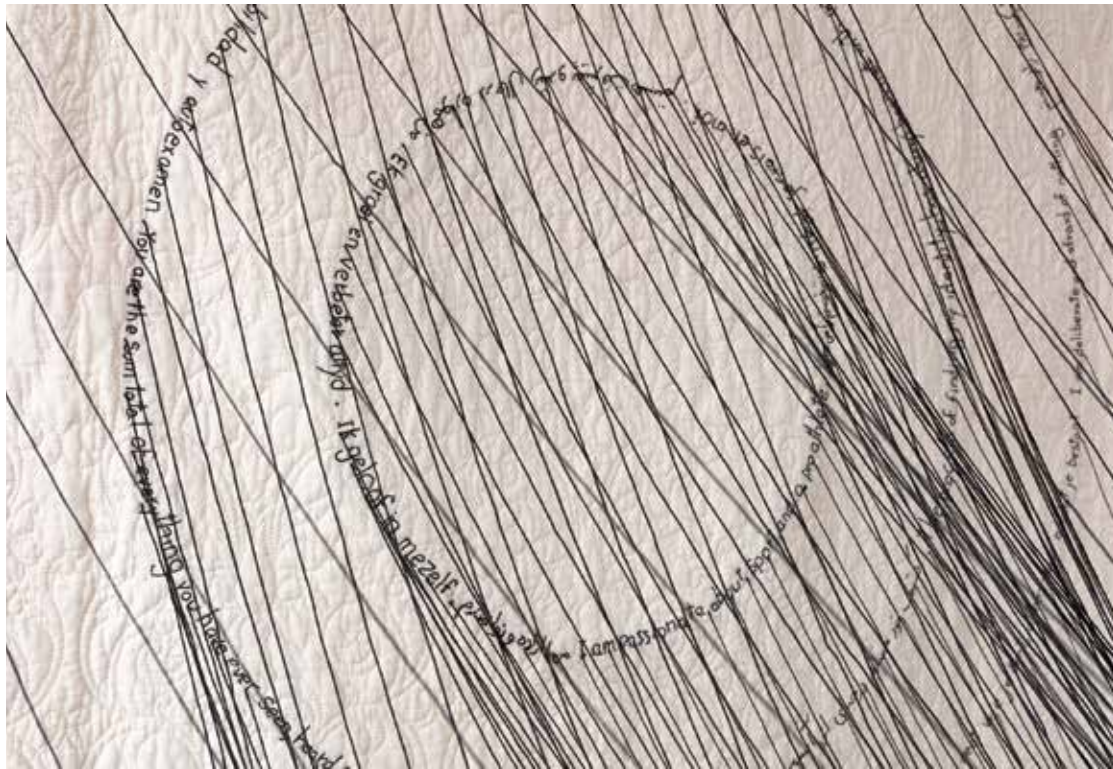
MARYAM PALIZGIR

NEW YORK

(b. 1979, Iran)

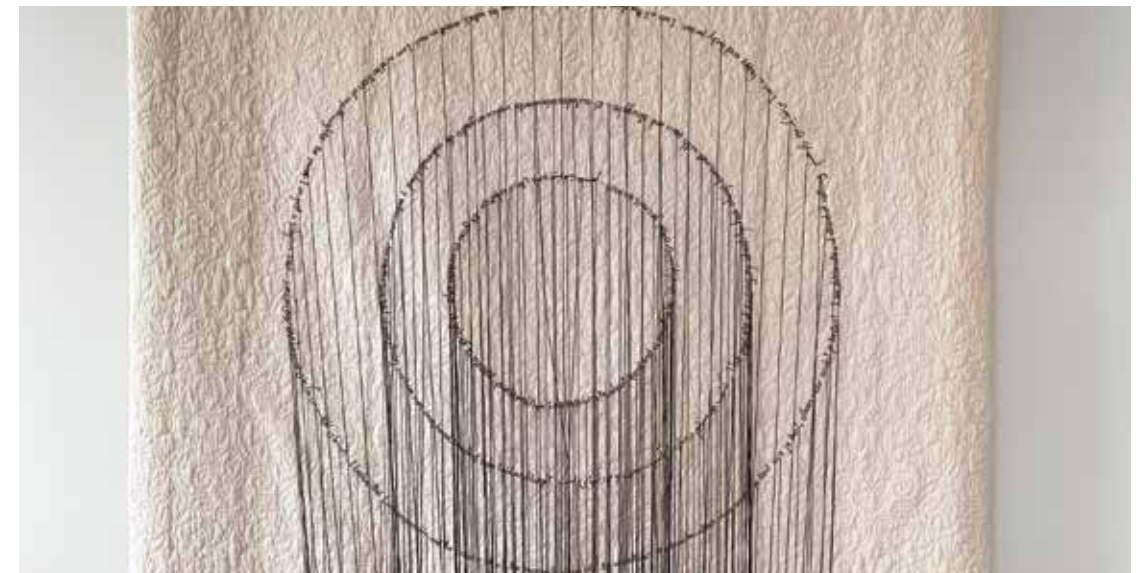
Maryam Palizgir is a New York-based multidisciplinary artist and educator who received her MFA from Georgia State University. She has presented her work in solo and group exhibitions in the United States, Iran, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Germany. Palizgir's work has been featured in many publications, and she was interviewed about how globalization, identity, and culture intersect in the arts in an article in *Global Voices*. She seeks to capture the tensions between tradition and contemporaneity, reality and aspirations, individuality and community, localism and universality, authority and freedom, conformism, and self-expression through installation, drawing, photography, and sculptural painting.





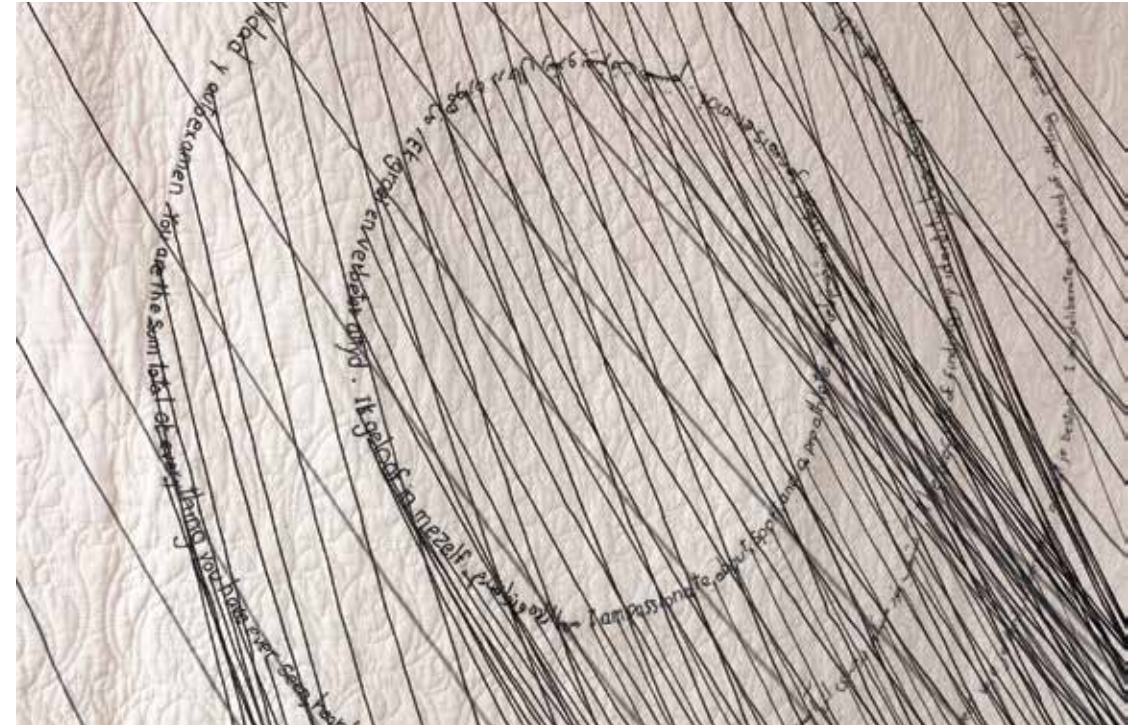
THREADS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, 2023

Threads of Consciousness invites viewers to explore the intimate relationship between our thoughts and identities. It challenges us to consider how our perceptions, beliefs, and experiences shape who we are. As viewers trace the threads that connect the quilt to the sculpture, they embark on a visual and conceptual journey, unraveling the layers of their consciousness and contemplating the profound truth that “you are what you think.” The quilt, a tactile and comforting canvas, serves as the foundation for the embroidered sentences. Each carefully chosen phrase reflects human cognition’s complex and often enigmatic nature. As viewers engage with the quilt, they become entangled in a narrative that probes the depth of our inner world. Like neurons firing in the brain, these sentences represent the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that shape our identity. The ceramic human brain sculpture, meticulously crafted, conveys the fragility and resilience of the mind. Its form evokes the intricacies of the brain’s convolutions, suggesting the complexity of our thoughts. The sculpture, rendered in a stark, unadorned manner, invites viewers to contemplate the vulnerability and resilience inherent in the human experience.



Medium: Installation, cotton blanket, thread, embroidery, ceramic

Courtesy: The artist



HADIEH SHAFIE

MARYLAND

(b. 1969, Tehran)

Hadieh Shafie is an Iranian American visual artist in the United States. Her work is in many public collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the British Museum; the Princeton University Art Museum; the Columbus Museum, Georgia; the Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; the Alfond Collection of Contemporary Art, Winter Park, Florida; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Shafie holds an MFA in imaging and digital arts from the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and an MFA in painting from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She has received grants from the Kress Foundation, RTKL, and MSAC Individual Artist Grants (2010 and 2008), as well as the Mary Sawyers Baker Award from the William G. Baker Jr. Memorial Fund (2009) and the Franz and Virginia Bader Fund (2011). Her work was short-listed for the Jameel Prize (2011). She was an awardee of the 2012 Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program and was nominated for the Anonymous Was a Woman Award in 2017.





CEILING CIRCLE, 2023; FLOOR CIRCLE, 2023

For the last twenty-four years, I have focused my drawing practice on the single word *eshgh*. The physical forms of the work have allowed me to lean into the deeper meanings of *eshgh* as it relates to annihilation and exultation connected to joy, passion, pain, loss, life, and death. I roll, spike, stack, or fold drawings of text to create singular talismanic works.

Ceiling Circle and *Floor Circle* are free from the bounding frame that has housed my works in the past. *Ceiling Circle* is created from spike forms that reveal the drawings of the text contained. The spiked book forms, connected by wire, rest on each other to form a vertical book that dances around a circular void. This central void is a nod to the heart of each book and, in turn, to the dance of the whirling dervish. Another point of departure in my current work is the inclusion of texts from poetry and my own stream of consciousness. My drawing practice has now opened up to usher in reference to language rather than focusing solely on a single word.

MEDIUM: Installation and drawing

COURTESY: The artist



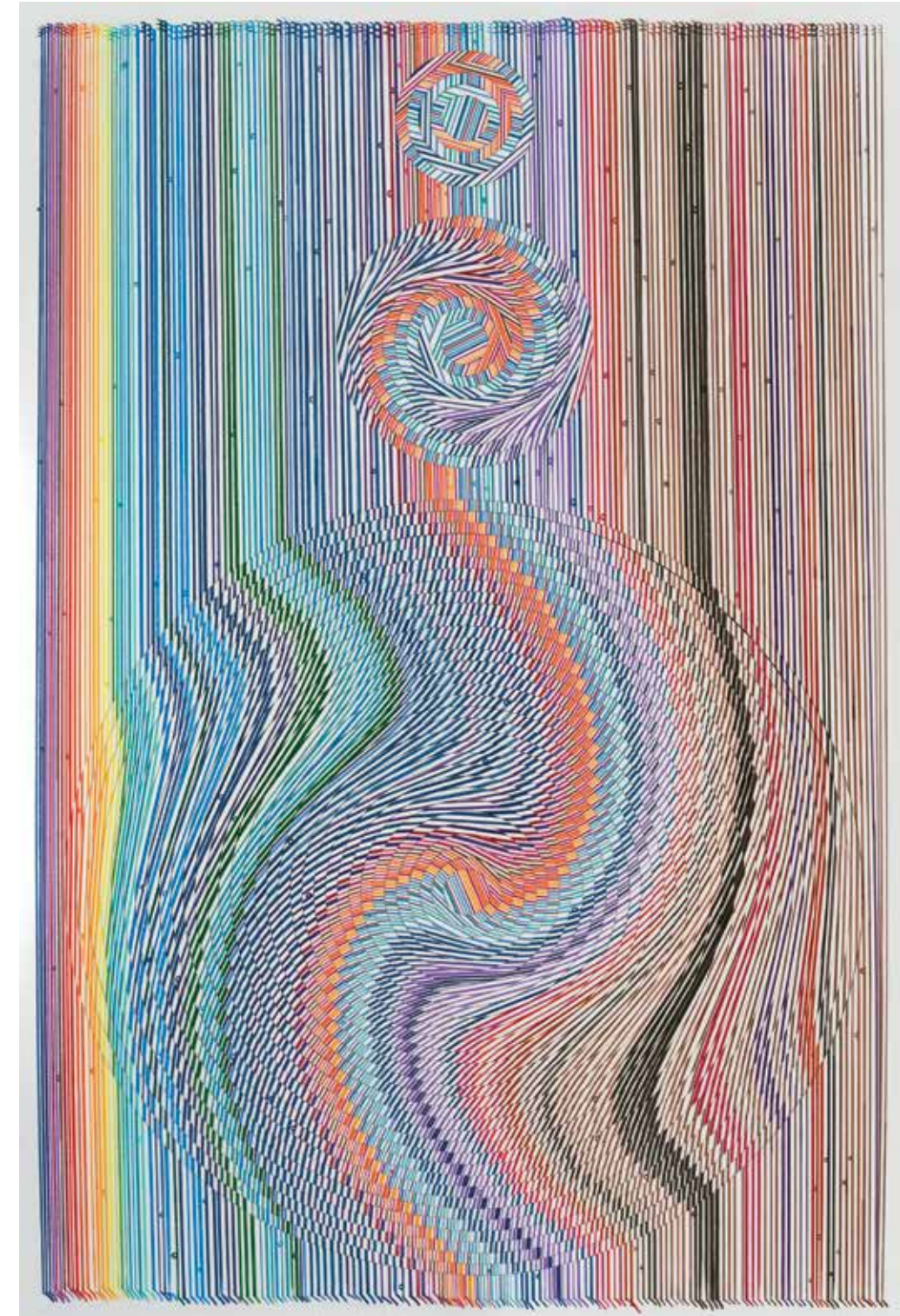


SAFAR 1, SAFAR 5, SAFAR 6, 2021

My latest text-based drawings offer me the opportunity to work with colored pencils. I cherish the use of this material, as it is a familiar material from childhood. Here, I draw the Persian word *Safar* in one long uniform stroke. I create the breaks and patterns in the body of the word by releasing and rotating the pre-cut circular forms. This process allows me to explore myriad meanings and playful compositions, which are much like ripples or sound waves, moving and vibrating across the paper's surface. The cut circles represent "dots," the vowels in the language. The significance of the word *Safar* is manifold, especially with respect to my leaving Iran and not having returned, as of yet.

MEDIUM: Color pencil on museum board

COURTESY: The artist



SHADI YOUSEFIAN

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

(b. 1978, Tehran)

Shadi Yousefian was born in Tehran in 1978 and moved to the United States when she was sixteen. At a time when she lacked the English language skills to express herself, she felt drawn to art to express her longing, her vision, and her experiences. She received her Bachelor's (2003) and Master's (2006) degrees in Fine Arts in photography from San Francisco State University. Her work engages personal and social issues of contemporary life, particularly cultural identity and the immigrant experience. As an Iranian immigrant, her work reflects and addresses issues that touch on universal themes such as loss, dislocation, alienation, and reinvention. Her photography training has given her a unique perspective on ways to employ and explore photography as a medium within larger sculptural and installation pieces.



LETTERS 30 TRIPTYCH, 2020

The *Letters* series originated from a process that began when Yousefian started to go through her boxes of letters more than a decade ago. At the time, she reread many of the letters and discovered how much they conveyed the news of people and events back in Iran and how she had processed or understood them at an earlier age. They became part of her story, history, and memories, but the physical letters simply resided in a box under the bed as a personal archive. She began to cut up the letters, not as a destructive act, but to seek their essence and find some meaningful association with the handwritten words. She continued to cut them up, to find the most important and influential parts—as in the act of therapeutic recovery. After some time passed, she revisited the fragments of the letters and decided to incorporate them into her art.

These original letters (uncopied and unscanned) are the correspondence between Yousefian and her friends in Iran after she first emigrated to the United States. Letters, lovingly written by hand, conveyed intense emotions that reflect the pain of separation but also the joy of achievement and growth. The fragments of these letters, originally in Persian, are cut up so that they are no longer distinct or legible but distill the feelings and sentiments from one person to another.

Medium: Original letters collaged onto a wooden panel

Courtesy: The artist and ADVOCARTSY gallery



ORGANIZING INSTITUTIONS



Farhang Foundation is a nonpolitical, nonreligious, and not-for-profit organization dedicated to celebrating and promoting the richness of Iranian art and culture for the betterment of society as a whole. With a singular mission at its core, the Foundation strives to preserve, nurture, and share the diverse heritage of Iran with the global community. Through steadfast commitment, the Foundation supports a wide array of academic, artistic, and cultural programs and initiatives, fostering collaborative partnerships with esteemed universities, renowned museums, and the vibrant world of performing arts. These partnerships enable the Foundation to cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multifaceted aspects of Iranian culture and promote cross-cultural dialogue.

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Craft Contemporary

Craft Contemporary, located on Los Angeles's historic Miracle Mile, resides in a three-story neo-Georgian building designed in 1930 by Gilbert Stanley Underwood. Once housing Frieda Schroeder Cakes, it was transformed into a restaurant and gallery by painter Edith Robinson Wyle in 1965, gaining nonprofit status as the Craft and Folk Art Museum in 1973. Today, its facade, adorned with a vibrant geometric design by Los Angeles artist Brent Spears (Shrine), showcases the museum's dynamic spirit. In 2018, the institution transitioned to Craft Contemporary, aligning its name with a mission that celebrates both the process and the outcome of making. Craft Contemporary is a vibrant hub for creativity and cultural enrichment in Los Angeles, embracing diverse audiences. The museum remains committed to Wyle's legacy, curating exhibitions featuring established and emerging artists exploring craft media often overlooked in larger institutions. Wyle's belief in the transformative power of handcrafted objects echoes through the museum's commitment to representing handmade art, cultural identity, and immersive experiences. The institution continues to evolve, offering educational programs and hands-on multigenerational workshops, creating a space where Los Angeles residents can deepen their connection to art, creativity, and community.

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