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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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# **I'm Not Sure It Was a Hoopoe or a Decanter**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Ali Kaeini, Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023

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## **Abstract**

### **I'M NOT SURE IT WAS A HOOPOE OR A DECANTER**

By Ali Kaeini, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023.

Major Director: Holly J Morrison, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

"I'm not sure it was a Hoopoe or a Decanter" explores the experience of cultural displacement through the lens of an Iranian artist and immigrant. Drawing on ancient Iranian stories, Persian poetry, and cultural artifacts, my paintings and drawings reflect the uncertainty of the contemporary political and religious conditions in Iran, as well as the challenges faced by individuals forced to flee their homeland due to war, political instability, and social conditions. My work weaves references to ancient Iranian objects, Persian miniatures' structural forms and patterns, and Islamic architecture, using traditional and contemporary materials to create large, unconventional paintings. Through the visual tension created by the displacement of ancient relics and Persian motifs, I express the complexity of my immigration story, which is simultaneously a mixture of belonging and non-belonging. This thesis provides insights into the exploration and acceptance of personal experiences of displacement and the search for identity through Iranian art.

## **Preface**

As an Iranian artist and immigrant, my paintings and drawings are a reflection of an ancient civilization that has been a part of my upbringing, a religious society in turmoil, and my experience of displacement in the United States. Ancient Iranian stories, Persian poetry, and cultural artifacts that have surrounded me throughout my life are woven into my work to reflect the uncertainty of the contemporary political and religious condition as individuals are forced to flee due to the challenges brought on by war, political instability, and social conditions in Iran. My paintings include references to ancient Iranian objects and the structural forms and patterns of Persian miniatures and Islamic architecture. In large unconventional paintings, I describe elements informed by my heritage alongside experiments with traditional and contemporary material to reveal the tough relationship between my identity and cultural displacement. The visual tension and the displacement of ancient relics and Persian motifs express my own immigration story-- a mixture of belonging and non-belonging simultaneously.



Ali Kaeini, 2023, "I'm Not Sure It Was a Hoopoe or a Decanter," installation view, Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

## I. Displacement

### A. Identity and Displacement

Displacement refers to the state in which an individual is removed from the place or situation with which they have a strong sense of belonging. This phenomenon encompasses various dimensions beyond physical distance, including emotional, cultural, ideological, temporal, spiritual, and ontological distances. Examples of displacement include experiencing homesickness as a result of yearning for happy childhood memories, a sense of alienation due to being misunderstood by others, a feeling of emptiness stemming from personal failures leading to social and occupational isolation, and a profound sense of separation from one's roots and an accompanying crisis of identity. These forms of displacement significantly impact individuals' psychosocial well-being and require attention and intervention to mitigate their adverse effects.

“Hearken to the reed-flute, how it complains,  
Lamenting its banishment from its home:  
Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,  
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears.  
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,  
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my home.  
He who abides far away from his home  
Is ever longing for the day he shall return.”

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī <sup>1</sup>

Displacement and identity exhibit a strong correlation. Superficially, habits may contribute to feelings of displacement. Individuals become accustomed to the cycles of their daily routines, and disruptions to these patterns can lead to sensations of uselessness, boredom, and disorder in their lives. At a more profound level, displacement denotes a period when an individual is estranged from their essence, which is their identity. If one were unconcerned with their identity, the severity and impact of the exile predicament would be substantially reduced. As the contemporary Iranian poet Dr. Shafī'i Kadkani eloquently articulates in his poem, *Koch-e Banafsheha*:

I wish,  
I wish mankind could take their homeland with themselves  
Like violets  
(in soil boxes)  
wherever they wanted on day  
in the light of the rain  
in the pure sun<sup>2</sup>

"Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room."<sup>3</sup> The anguish of displacement derives not from the physical distance between

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<sup>1</sup> E.H. Whinfield, trans., *Rumi: The Masnavi*, accessed April 25, 2023, <http://www.masnavi.net/1/eng/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Reza Shafiei-Kadkani (M. Sarshak), "Kooche Banafsheha," trans. Ali Kaeini, *Sokhan Magazine*, 7th edition, 1390 (2011), pp. 168-169.

<sup>3</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, "Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room," in *Memory for Forgetfulness*: August, Beirut, 1982, trans. Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 91.

individuals and their homelands but from the emotional, psychological, and existential separation between them and their core sense of identity.

The issue of immigration, both legal and illegal, is a global issue. In underdeveloped or developing countries, a significant number of people migrate to developed countries in pursuit of a better life. Migration encompasses various levels of voluntary and involuntary movements. When one chooses to immigrate, they are prepared for cultural and linguistic differences, as well as the need to adapt to new environments. Conversely, individuals may be forced to flee due to the challenges brought on by war, political instability, and social conditions. In either case, being separated from one's homeland and language is a distressing experience. Political pressures often drive young people to leave Iran, a country with a high emigration rate. The feeling of displacement endures even when an individual hopes to return to their homeland someday or dreams of recounting their journey to friends and family.

### **1. Shirazeh Houshiary**

Shirazeh Houshiary is an Iranian-born artist whose paintings and sculptures are celebrated for their striking use of abstraction and contemplative spirituality. Her works are characterized by their simplicity of form and harmonious use of color, often evoking a sense of stillness and tranquility. Houshiary's art is deeply influenced by her Iranian cultural heritage and interest in Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam that emphasizes the inward search for God. Through her art, she explores the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds and invites the viewer to contemplate the mysteries of existence.

One of the key features of Houshiary's art is her use of abstraction, which she employs to express her ideas about spirituality and the mysteries of existence. Her works often feature simple geometric forms, such as circles and squares, which she uses to represent the cosmic and spiritual dimensions of reality. Houshiary's use of color is also significant, with many of her works featuring subtle gradations and tonal variations that create a sense of depth and atmosphere. Using abstraction to represent the ineffable, Houshiary invites the viewer to contemplate the mysteries of existence and reflect on the relationship between the material and spiritual realms.

Houshiary's paintings explore the intersection of spirituality and culture and the ways in which these two dimensions of human experience can inform and enrich one another. Her art often

draws on traditional Iranian motifs and symbols, such as calligraphy and Persian carpets, which she reinterprets in her unique style. Her works are a testament to the enduring power of art to transcend cultural boundaries and connect us to the deepest dimensions of our shared humanity.



Shirazeh Houshiary, "Deluge," 2012 pencil, pigment, and white Aquacryl on canvas and aluminum, 120 x 120 cm, 47, 1/4 x 47 1/4 in., Lisson Gallery

My art practice makes use of abstraction to represent the complexity of Iranian identity today, while Houshiary often employs simple geometric forms to represent the cosmic and spiritual dimensions of reality. Additionally, both of our art practices draw on traditional Iranian motifs and symbols, such as calligraphy and the forms in Persian carpets. While my paintings reinterpret my unique style to provide a commentary on the current state of Iranian society and its relationship with the Iranian artistic past, Hoosyari's work is more inspired by Iranian mysticism.

### **B. Iranian Diaspora**

The Iranian diaspora is a complex and diverse issue that has appeared due to political, economic, and social factors. Iran has experienced significant political and economic turmoil over the past few decades, leading to large-scale emigration. The Iranian diaspora is estimated

to be over four million, with substantial populations residing in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. The diaspora is composed of a diverse range of individuals, including refugees, economic migrants, students, and professionals. The Iranian diaspora has had a significant impact on the countries where immigrants have settled and on the Iranian community itself. The diaspora has formed a global network of Iranian communities involved in political and cultural activities and has helped shape the perception of Iran and Iranians worldwide.

The Iranian government has a history of human rights abuses and political repression, leading to the emigration of many Iranians seeking political asylum. Economic factors, including high unemployment and limited economic opportunities in Iran, have also shaped the Iranian diaspora. The diaspora members have made significant contributions to the countries where they have settled, particularly in science, technology, and medicine. However, the diaspora has also faced challenges, including discrimination and prejudice. Despite these challenges, the Iranian diaspora has continued to thrive and contribute to global society.

### **1. The spirit/ritual of light is not to be off<sup>4</sup> (Hajji Washington):**

Haji Washington is a film made in 1982 by Ali Hatami based on Iskander Deldam's book of the same name. This film narrates the tragic life story of Hossein Qoli Khan Sadrul Sultaneh, the first Iranian ambassador to America. Hossein Qoli Khan Sadrul Sultaneh lived from 1848 - 1937 in Tehran. He was known as Haji Washington. He was the first Iranian envoy to The United States of America who held the position of Minister Plenipotentiary.

Upon arriving in Washington, Hajji is proud to rent a mansion and hire a staff but soon realizes that there are no Iranians in Washington and no visitors to the embassy. Stricken by homesickness and nightmares, Hajji writes exaggerated reports to the king in ornate language. As funds dwindle and the embassy falls apart, Hajji's communication with the king is reduced to a personal monologue. One night, Hajji entertains a guest, whom he believes to be President Grover Cleveland, but instead, is a farmer who wants to learn about growing pistachios. When a Native American seeks asylum at the embassy, Hajji befriends him despite their language barrier. However, Hajji's refusal to hand over this refugee leads to Hajji being removed from his post. In a state of madness and silence, Hajji returns home by boat.

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<sup>4</sup> Ali Hatami, *Hajji Washington* (film), Iran, 1982; quote spoken during a monologue by the character "Hajji": "آیین چراغ": "خاموشی نیست" (The ritual of light is not to be off).



"Hajji Washington," Ali Hatami, film still, 1982

The film "Hajji Washington" presents a critical observation of the shortcomings of effective communication and awareness. The movie's central character, an ambassador, embarks on a journey with little to no knowledge of his duties, arriving at a destination where his presence is unanticipated. The character is portrayed as a mere figurehead, a political puppet emblematic of broader global trends. However, it is the lack of awareness of Hajji that is most striking, as the character, Hajji, demonstrates an insufficient understanding of his responsibilities, including being unaware of the identity of the President of the United States. This deficiency in communication profoundly amplifies the character's sense of alienation—a central theme of the film. Through this lens, the film effectively highlights the complex and often harrowing experiences of an Iranian facing the American dream and a sense of displacement.

The film "Hajji Washington" challenges the role of undeveloped and colonized countries' ambassadors and their impact on international relations. Iran does not have an ambassador in America; if it did, it is suggested that they would be a puppet ambassador, as seen in the film.

Yet, in my opinion, the true ambassadors are the people, particularly the Iranian diaspora, who have a significant role in promoting Iranian culture and the genuine desires of the Iranian people to share it with others. In the contemporary age of social media, individuals have greater access to information and statistics, providing insight into the interests and aspirations of societies. Nevertheless, the influence of government conspiracies on people remains a salient issue, affecting individuals in diverse ways. Despite these challenges, I assume that better relations can be achieved, primarily due to the efforts of the Iranian diaspora, who continue to play a crucial role in promoting cultural exchange and fostering improved international relations.

### **C. Historical Identity**

The historical identity of Iranians is a complex and multifaceted concept that various historical and cultural factors, including the experience of colonization and displacement, have shaped. Iran has a long history of colonization, with different empires and powers controlling the region over the centuries, including the Mongols, Ottomans, and British. These colonial experiences have had a significant impact on the Iranian identity, leading to feelings of resentment and a desire for independence. The establishment of an Islamic Republic in 1979 was, in part, a response to the colonial legacy of Iran and a desire to reclaim the nation's sovereignty.

However, the historical identity of Iranians is not solely defined by their experience of colonization. Iranian culture has a rich and diverse heritage, including literature, poetry, art, and music, which have played an essential role in shaping the country's identity. The Persian language, spoken for thousands of years, remains a crucial component of the Iranian identity and is an essential factor in the country's cultural heritage. Iranians also take great pride in their historical achievements, such as the Achaemenid Empire and the Persian Empire, which have helped shape the country's sense of identity.

Despite Iran's rich cultural heritage, the experience of displacement has also played a role in shaping the historical identity of Iranians. Political upheavals, economic opportunities, and wars have led many Iranians to emigrate to other countries, particularly the United States and Europe. This diaspora has helped preserve Iranian culture and identity outside of Iran and provided a platform for Iranian voices to be heard internationally. However, the experience of displacement has also led to a sense of dislocation and nostalgia for the homeland, highlighting the complexities of the Iranian identity and its role in shaping it.

## **1. Museum**

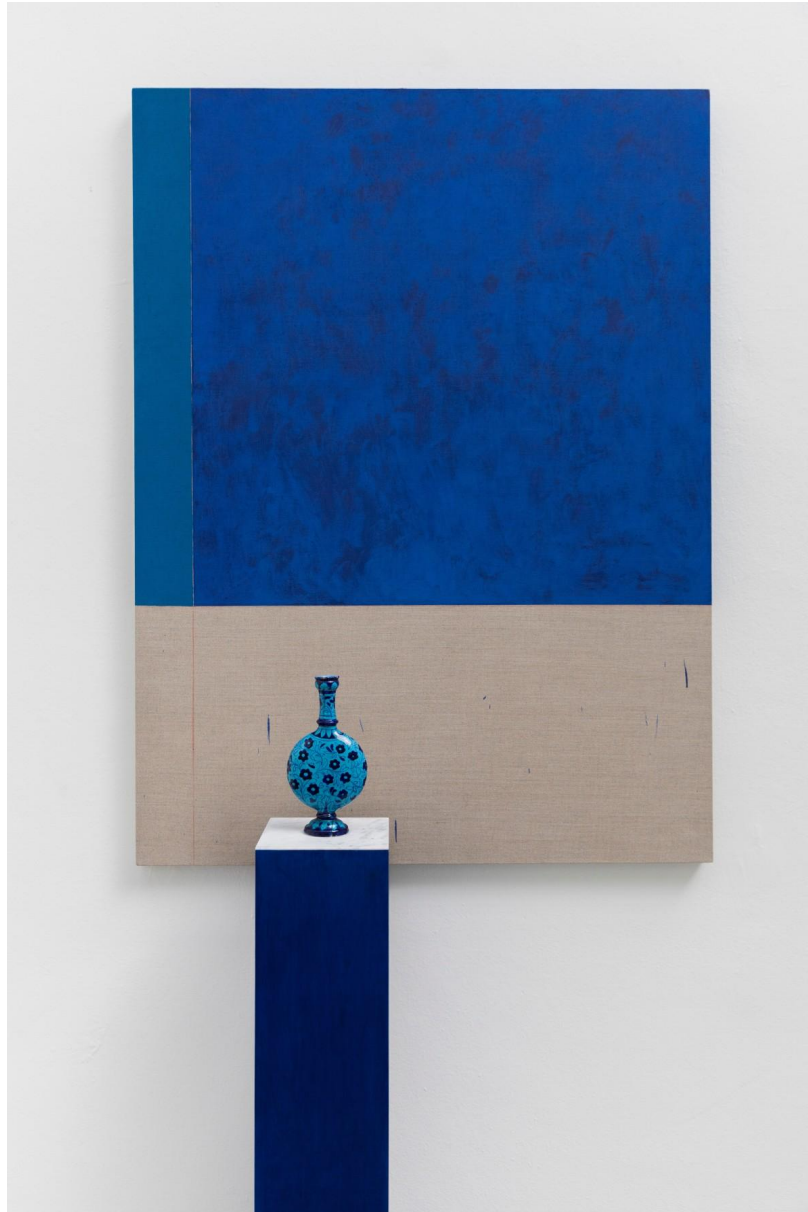
Historical identity is a complex concept that relates to how individuals and groups understand their past, present, and place in the world. Museums play a crucial role in shaping historical identity through their collections and exhibitions, which provide tangible representations of the past. Museum objects are particularly significant as they offer a material connection to historical events, people, and cultures. However, the meaning and significance of museum objects can shift over time, depending on how they are presented and interpreted.

One way in which the meaning and significance of museum objects can shift is through changes in their functional existence. Many museum objects, such as tools or religious artifacts, were created for specific purposes. Yet, when these objects are displayed in a museum, their original function may no longer be relevant. Instead, they may be valued primarily for their decorative or aesthetic qualities. The decontextualized object can create a shift in its meaning and significance. The object is no longer valued for its original function but for its visual appeal. Understanding how changes in an object's functional existence can impact its historical identity is an important area of study for museum studies and material culture scholars.

## **2. Kamrooz Aram**

Kamrooz Aram is an Iranian-American artist known for exploring the intersection of art, design, and architecture. His artistic practice is grounded in research, and his works often take the form of investigations into the historical and cultural contexts of ornament, decoration, and design. Aram's works are characterized by their meticulous attention to detail that often incorporate elements of Islamic and Iranian art.

Aram's works often challenge the Western art historical canon by re-contextualizing Islamic and Iranian decorative arts within the museum space. By doing so, Aram draws attention to the biases inherent in the museum system and encourages viewers to reconsider their perceptions of art and design. Additionally, one might explore the ways in which Aram's works engage with notions of authenticity and tradition. Aram's use of traditional decorative motifs is not merely an homage to the past but a critical exploration of the ways in which cultural heritage is constructed and represented.



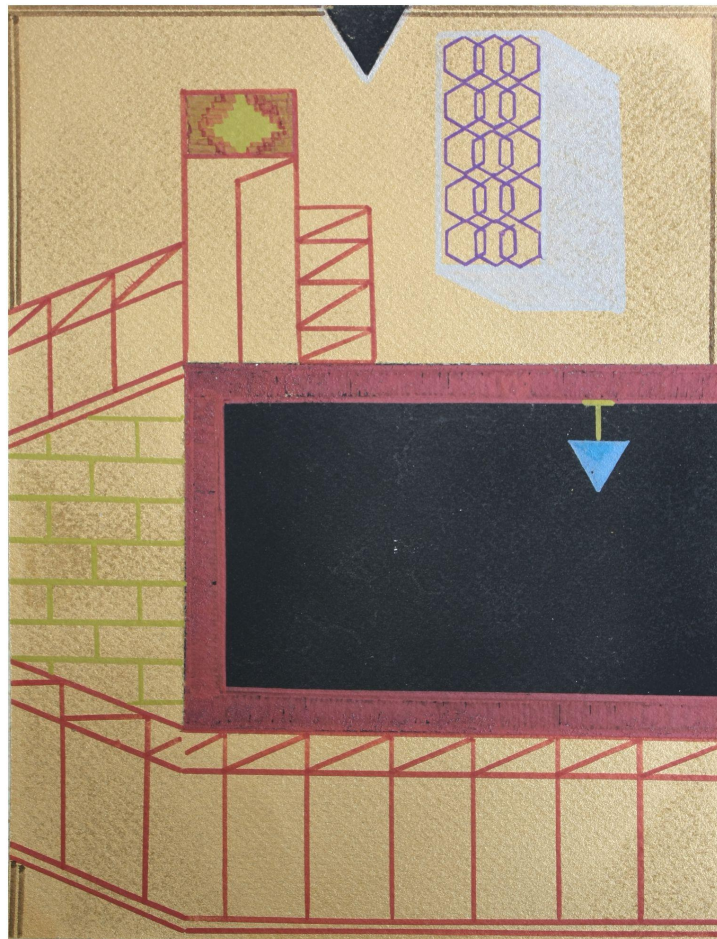
Kamrooz Aram, "Composition with lapis lazuli, cobalt and ceramic bottle," 2021, lapis lazuli and cobalt oil paint on linen, lapis lazuli and cobalt oil paint on wood, marble, ceramic, Panel: 137.16 x 101.6 cm;  
Pedestal: 106.68 x 20.32 x 20.32 cm, Green Art Gallery

My work like Arams' practice challenges Western art historical canon. Aram re-contextualizes Islamic and Iranian decorative arts within the museum space to draw attention to biases inherent in the museum system. My work highlights the potential for beauty and creativity even amid displacement and uncertainty. Overall, my art practice -inspired by Arams' work, engages with notions of authenticity and tradition, exploring the ways in which cultural heritage is constructed and represented.

## II. Art of the Decorative in the Museum

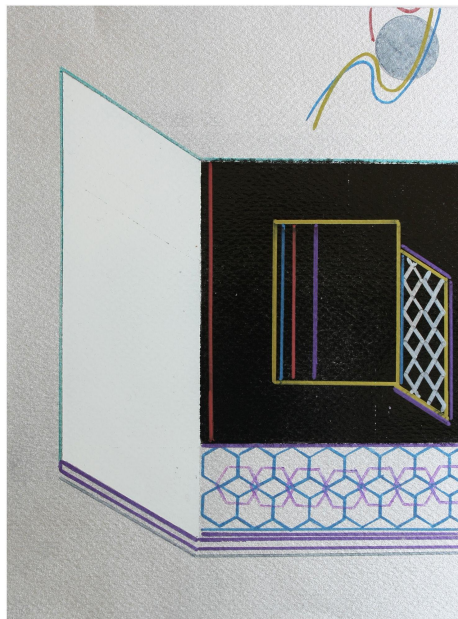
### A. Persian Miniature

Iran's culture includes myths, religions, literature, ancient rituals, wisdom, and divine philosophy specific to its geography and history. Historical signs of Iran's culture can be identified from the emergence of Manichaean religions. In works of art, an original continuity has always been identified in different historical periods. In the Islamic period, the extension of the great culture of Islam, on the other hand, greatly impacted the thought of mystics, sages, and painters. The spirit of Zoroastrian thought was mixed with the thinking of Iranian mystics and sages. The spiritual-illuminative master Sheikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi revived this ancient spiritual-mystical essence. The theories of light in the philosophy and mysticism of Suhrawardi and other mystics emerged from the influence of Iranian Islamic culture. Iranian painting has always embodied the manifestation of Iranian Islamic culture.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2018, spray paint and marker on paper, 9 x 6.6 in

My recent work is significantly influenced by Iranian painting. Initially, I intended to erase many of the main characteristics of Persian miniatures, such as figures, patterns, motives, and traditional symbols. The material in my drawings changed from the traditional form—watercolor—to contemporary materials. The initial drawings for the work shown in my thesis exhibition began by using spray paint and markers. Unlike traditional Persian miniatures, the character of narration is completely lost. Human and animal figures have been removed, and only a few very graphical plant forms are seen. Patterns and motifs are depicted in the simplest possible way, a departure from the original form of the Persian miniature. For this reason, my paintings have lost their symbolic use. My paintings and drawings' motives seem careless and graphical compared to the Persian miniatures. Therefore, the spiritual and lyrical quality in my paintings has also disappeared. I no longer draw on the complex compositions of miniatures. Of all the elements in Persian miniatures, only flat surfaces mixed with straight lines remain. These surfaces are reminiscent of the miniatures' walls, windows, doors, and stairs. My drawings are minimal images of Persian miniatures, distilling the visual traditions to their essence.



Ali Kaeini, *Untitled*, 2018, spray paint and marker on paper, 9 x 6.6 in.

I couldn't manipulate the Persian miniature in the way I wanted as long as I hadn't taken many important features away. My drawings, which began about six years ago, form the inception and are the primary source of my paintings today—both in terms of structure and composition and in developing the works' visual language.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 145 x 145 in, installation view, thesis exhibition, Anderson Gallery

## 1. Light

The classic Iranian painters have always used neutral light in their work, which is interpreted as the color expression of the artist.<sup>5</sup> In Iranian painting, the discovery of the fact of avoiding realism and the transition from the world of reality and nature to the world beyond it in the color and neutrality of light, along with the particular characteristic of "introversion and introspection" of this element, is very remarkable. Due to the origin and source of the painter's worldview in creating his artwork, light and color complement each other in expressing their inner characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Angels do not have shadows in Iranian painting, nor do people or things. Everything is light. This way of showing light in painting is a simple, ideal reality without shadows and free from the weight and volume of everyday reality. This world does not bind it. It is a luminous fantasy. The world described in Iranian painting has its own specific time, place, movement, and objects. Other than the elements of this earthly world, which are illustrated as heavenly and fantastic, the colors are not conceived through nature's observation nor by the artist's random selection. Colors are the result of the artist's intuition and can only be seen with the eyes of the heart. The artist sees everything from above with the same light, which is not projected into the scene. The artist sees everything through the light. The source of this light is in their eyes.

Light is a fundamental element of visual art and religious belief. The manifestation of light and its image have appeared in different periods in different ways in the ancient civilizations of Iran, such as the Zoroastrian and Manichaean civilizations. Like other art forms of this region, the light and color in Iranian paintings are represented by special rules completely different from those governing the image depiction defined by other cultures. The elements of light and color in Iranian paintings are based on light's direct effects and natural properties and do not follow sensations. The absence of shadow is the primary regulation governing the illustrations. The use of golden color and the drawing of halos of light around people's heads indicate their extrasensory and immateriality. It is more important for the Iranian painter to depict the world of ideals and purgatory than to represent the earthly world– the world of corruption and fleeting credit in his eyes.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila R. Canby, "Persian Painting" (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 25-30.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Ettinghausen, "The Arts of Persia" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 125-130.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 90 x 72 in

Light has played an essential role in the center of Iranian thought before and after the emergence of Islam. In ancient Iranian wisdom, God (Ahura Mazda) plays the same role in Islam as "Allah" plays in Islam. With the conversion of Iranians to Islam, the manifestations of the Zoroastrian religion did not disappear. Due to Iranians' knowledge of its mystical concepts, it was mixed with Islam. Light as a sacred element in the world was praised in the pre-Islamic religions of Iran and received special attention in the Islamic era.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This discourse was achieved especially after the thoughts of Sheikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi (1145-1234). Suhrawardi revived and seriously reconsidered many of these pre-Islamic concepts. He wrote detailed commentaries on the attention and implications that Islam also had on them. Apart from the interesting comments of Suhrawardi about "light," people such as Najmuddin Kobri (1145-1221) and Sheikh Mohammad Lahiji (1506-1560) have also presented significant research and ideas about the issue of "color."



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint and fabric collage on raw canvas, detail: 35 x 45 in

As mentioned, the Iranian painter portrays the world of purgatory. The most important effect of this approach is the absence of shadows and the existence of neutral colors. At times shadows can be seen in my work with framing lines, including a reflection of the play of light and shadow. But, all the paintings have an equal light condition. Despite avoiding the presence of light in my paintings, I want the light source to be seen and thought of—with the sun, the moon, and the chandelier depicted as light sources. These light sources do not emit light in my paintings. The sun and the moon are presented in eclipse or just muted—a passive globe. The chandeliers are always off, contradicting their character and expectation. The depicted light sources have neutral physics. The chandeliers depicted in my paintings are not actual chandeliers but a shadow reflected or stretched.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 90 x 72 in

The uselessness of the light sources represented in my paintings is a sign that the source of light and enlightenment is turned off. There is a light source, but it is off. It's like the old Iran, the source of its light, has been turned off for years or eclipsed for an unknown time. A Qajar chandelier that does not give any light is just an ugly and unbalanced shadow on the wall or the floor—the absence of light claims that we are in a deep limbo. The shadow of the thousands of years old Persian imperial enlightenment heavily covers Iranians with all its ups and downs,

traditionalism, and patriarchy. There is no hope for the sun to rise again from behind the moon. The eclipse has led to the blackout of the sun and moon and caused our predicament in the twilight of purgatory. Although Persian miniatures inspire this purgatory light in my work, it does not have a colorful, narrative, and lively atmosphere. There is no sign of a fantastic, metaphysical, or spiritual vibe in my drawings or paintings.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2022, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 72 x 54 in

## 2. Symmetry and Asymmetry

Symmetry has played a significant role in Iranian artworks and culture throughout history. The concept of symmetry is rooted in Persian architecture, characterized by its intricate geometric patterns and symmetrical designs. This concept can be traced back to the ancient Persian civilization, where symmetry was an essential element in the design of buildings, gardens, and decorative arts. The use of symmetry in Iranian art is not limited to visual arts but is also found in music, poetry, and literature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Farshid Emami, "Symmetry in Iranian Art and Architecture," *International Journal of Art and Humanities Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2018): 21-28.

Symmetry is also present in Iranian decorative arts, such as miniature painting, carpet weaving, and tilework. Persian carpets, for example, are known for their intricate designs that often incorporate symmetrical patterns, such as medallions or geometric motifs. In addition, symmetry can be found in Persian poetry, which often uses symmetry in its structure and rhyme scheme. For example, in the ghazal form of poetry, the lines are usually arranged in a symmetrical pattern, with the second line of each couplet mirroring the first. Symmetry is an integral part of Iranian culture and art, and its use has been a defining feature of Iranian artistic expression for centuries.

Asymmetry is a distinctive feature of Persian miniature painting, which Persian artists have widely used to create a sense of harmony and balance in their works. Unlike Western art, where symmetry is often considered a fundamental principle of composition, Persian miniature painters rely on asymmetry to achieve aesthetic balance and visual interest. Through careful manipulation of color, line, and form, they create dynamic and visually engaging compositions that captivate the viewer's attention. This approach to composition reflects a deep appreciation for the natural world and the inherent beauty of its irregularities and imperfections. As such, asymmetry in Persian miniature painting represents a unique and highly valued aspect of Iranian art and culture.



Behzad, Yusuf, and Zulaikha ("Joseph chased by Potiphar's Wife"), Bustan Saadi, 1488, Watercolor on paper, 12 x 7.9 in

### 3. Spirituality of Spirals

The spiral is a symbol with spiritual significance in Iranian culture, particularly in Persian miniature, Tasheir, and Tazhib. The spiral symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and the universe, representing the continuous movement of energy and the perpetual renewal of life. In Persian miniature painting, spirals are often used as decorative motifs, emphasizing the harmony and balance within the artwork. Tasheir and Tazhib, on the other hand, are forms of Islamic calligraphy and decorative arts, respectively, that come both individually on a page or as decoration of the frame around a painting. In these art forms, spirals are often used as part of intricate designs, symbolizing the interconnectedness of all things and the divine unity of creation. Briefly, in Persian miniature, both Tasheir, and Tazhib are spirals that symbolize spirituality in Iranian culture.



Staircase, Ali Qapu Palace, 1597 Isfahan, Iran

In addition to its spiritual significance, the spiral has played a significant role in Iranian art and architecture. The spiral staircase, for example, is a common feature in Iranian architecture, with notable examples including the spiral staircase of the Ali Qapu Palace and the intrados of the dome of the Shah mosque in Isfahan. This architectural feature not only serves a practical purpose but also carries symbolic meaning, representing the ascent to a higher level of consciousness and spiritual enlightenment. In Persian miniatures, the spiral often depicts natural elements such as water, wind, and clouds, further emphasizing the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.

In my artistic practice, I draw spiral forms found in Persian miniatures, Tazhib and Tasheir. My paintings feature a juxtaposition of organic and geometric forms, such as walls and stairs, where the organic forms serve to create a stark contrast. It should be noted, however, that the organic forms within my works do not have any particular spiritual connotation or intention to convey any metaphysical concept. Rather, they remind viewers of Persian calligraphy and the spirals commonly found in Persian miniature paintings. Moreover, these organic forms in my paintings also serve to evoke the image of Iranian women's hair, which has been covered under hijab for the past 40 years under the Islamic regime's force.

The floating organic lines that occupy various areas of my paintings are not without tension, as they are threatened by the sharp edges of giant scissors placed on tables, walls, and stairs. This depiction is intended to convey the precarious state of Iranian women's identity and the possibility of violence against their bodies. Through the use of contrasting organic and geometric forms, my paintings aim to capture the tension and ambiguity present in contemporary Iranian society while also reflecting on the historical and cultural significance of spirals in Persian art.

## **B. Objects**

### **1. Vases**

#### **a) Vases as Body**

Objects and bodies have been compared in various forms. Objects made by humans are certainly a conscious or unconscious reflection of humans as their creators. For centuries, humans have had a tendency to create objects in organic, human, and animal forms. In doing so, objects have become owners of identity, such as ancient Egyptian sarcophagi and later Achaemenid wine cups.

The Persian poet Omar Khayyam and his philosophy have significantly impacted the content of my recent paintings. In his poems, Khayyam speaks of one subject: the transience of human life and its fleeting pleasures. He has repeatedly compared humans to clay vases. Perhaps no Persian speaker enters a pottery workshop without this Khayyam verse coming to mind:

"Last night, as one within the potter's ground  
Beneath the potter's roof I stood, and saw  
Two thousand pots of earthenware go round,  
Their lips at each man's foot refreshing  
draw, And turning to the potter, loud they cried:  
"Why dost thou break us thus and cast  
away The very life that thou hast given?"  
He sighed, And answered, "With the potter's  
wheel at play, My wheel whirled you to being,  
day by day."<sup>9</sup>

In the beliefs of Khayyam, plants, animals, humans, and all living creatures emerge from water and soil, or simply clay, live their lives with water and soil, and return to them upon death. His perspective as a scientist, living from 1048 - 1131, was highly progressive. Khayyam's philosophy was heavily based on scientific and anti-religious foundations. He discussed life, worldly pleasures, and transience and thus has an existentialist view of life. Unlike Rumi, Khayyam denies the spiritual perspective. Therefore, the analogies in his poetry, especially with vases, are a plausible choice of belief.

I have borrowed from Khayyam's poetry in my paintings, using the imagery of vases. When I speak of displacement, it is often a physical and human concern. The feeling of displacement is a reaction to seeking a life and identity that we feel we belong to. The sense of displacement strongly reflects a desire for life and the present moment, which is precisely what Khayyam talks about. The desire for a life full of hope is exactly what he discusses.

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<sup>9</sup> Omar Khayyam, "Last Night as I Stood Within the Potter's Ground," in *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, trans. Edward FitzGerald (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1889), quatrain 34.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2022, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, detail: 25 x15 in.

### **b) The Symbolism of Historical Pottery in My Paintings**

When incorporated in my paintings, all the figurines of clay vases represent humans or other living entities. The variation in the shapes of the vases indicates the diversity in humans. The vases in my paintings are a symbolic representation of humans who, like precious vases buried deep under the soil in ancient times, have been discovered and preserved after centuries. Humans revive and protect these vases to prevent the loss of their identity. I employ the silhouette of these vases, now conserved in museum environments, as a reflection of their

historical identity. The comparison of historical identity to the identity of contemporary humans points to a culture that, due to social, economic, war-related, and other limitations, has been forced to migrate and see themselves as detached from their origin.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2022, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, detail: 25 x15 in.

### **c) Zoomorphic Objects**

Zoomorphic objects have played an important role in Iranian art history, particularly during the pre-Islamic period. These objects were created with the intention of imitating animal shapes and characteristics and were often used as symbols of power and status. The Achaemenid period zoomorphic vase, which features the image of a lion with wings, was used as a ceremonial vessel. Another example is the Sassanid period silver bowl, featuring images of animals such as deer and lions.



Vessel terminating as a winged lion, Gold; H. 6.7 in., Achaemenid dynasty, 5th - 4th century B.C.  
Photograph: Teheran, Muze-le Iran-E Bastan.

After the Islamic conquest of Iran, representational and realistic painting and sculpture were banned, and Iranian artists were forced to find new ways to express their creativity. This prohibition led to the emergence of zoomorphic objects as a popular art form. These objects were seen as a way for artists to demonstrate their skill and imagination while complying with the Islamic ban on representational art.<sup>10</sup>

The 12th-century incense burner of Amir Saif al-Dunya wa'l-Din ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi features the shape of a lion. This zoomorphic incense burner served a practical purpose and demonstrated the artist's creativity and mastery of form. Another specimen is the 16th-century zoomorphic ewer, which features the shape of a goose or swan. This object not only served as a ewer but also highlighted the artist's ability to create complex and intricate forms. The functional features and symbolic potential of zoomorphic objects make them a compelling visual source to incorporate into my paintings. Zoomorphic metalware embodies a spirit of resistance against censorship throughout Iran's history, serving as a response to the Islamic prohibition on figurative art.

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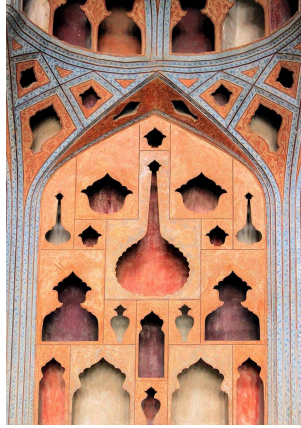
<sup>10</sup> Richard Hillenbrand, "Islamic Art and Architecture" (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 74.



Incense Burner of Amir Saif al-Dunya wa'l-Din ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi, dated A.H. 577/ A.D. 1181–82, created by Jafar ibn Muhammad ibn Ali, bronze



Ewer in the Shape of a Goose or Swan, MTW 1533 Mughal India or the Deccan 16th century, brass or bronze, H: 13 in., The Khalili Collections



Detail from the Music Hall, Ali Qapu Palace, Isfahan, Iran

#### **d) Vases as Architecture**

Vases have been an integral part of architecture and art since ancient times. In Iranian architecture, vases have played a significant role in the decoration of buildings, especially during the Safavid period.<sup>11</sup> Vases are used as architectural elements in several prominent Iranian buildings, such as the Ali Qapu Music Hall in Isfahan. The Ali Qapu Music Hall is a six-story building in the heart of Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square. The palace's façade is adorned with intricate tile work. At its center is a large vase-shaped dome that dominates the structure's skyline. The vase is decorated with intricate floral motifs and arabesques typical of Iranian art.

In contemporary Iranian architecture, the use of vases has evolved to reflect modern design principles while still paying homage to traditional Iranian aesthetics. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is a striking example of vases incorporated into modern Iranian architecture. The museum's exterior is covered with reflective glass, creating a mirror-like effect that reflects the surrounding landscape. At the entrance to the museum, there are two large vase-shaped structures made of steel and glass that serve as light wells for the museum's interior. These vases are a nod to traditional Iranian architecture while incorporating contemporary design elements.

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<sup>11</sup> Richardson, Dan. "The Decorated Vase in Iranian Architecture." *Muqarnas*, vol. 5, 1988, pp. 97-107. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1602161](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1602161).



Music Hall, Ali Qapu Palace, Safavid dynasty, Isfahan, Iran, 1611-1638



Naghshe Jahan Square, Safavid dynasty, Isfahan, Iran, 1611-1638



Ali Kaeini, *Untitled*, 2022, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 72 x 54 in.



Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Kamran Diba, 1977, Tehran, Iran

### **C. Displaced Objects**

In my recent paintings, I compare the dislocation of early Iranian objects with the displacement of Iranian people. The displacement of culturally significant objects is akin to the experience of displacement that many humans experience—particularly immigrants. Being an immigrant, one has an exotic existence and is frequently in conflict with oneself as one adapts to the new environment while striving to maintain their original identity. In the end, one succumbs to the limitations of the new environment, which manifests as a sense of displacement.

### **D. Iranian and Islamic architecture and religious structures**

#### **1. Walls**

In Iranian culture, walls have multiple practical purposes. Walls are constructed to demarcate boundaries. Walls serve as a barrier to divide the interior and exterior environment. Along with other fundamental elements of Iranian housing and garden design, such as streets, canals, columns, stairs, etc., walls are essential for shaping space. Walls provide a suitable base for artists and architects to incorporate decorative features in addition to their functional role. Iranian artists have collaborated with architects to create artwork, including murals, stucco, tilework, and mirrorwork. Numerous historical masterpieces have been displayed on walls in various Iranian governments. In Iranian collective memory, walls adorned with inscriptions remind us of mosques' interior surfaces and domes.

The wall is a central element featured in my paintings. I base the painting's composition on walls in the background. Some walls have windows, doors, and edges that provide a place for objects to lean against or be placed on. The wall also serves as a place for the reflection of chandelier shadows.



Ali Kaeini, 2023, "I'm Not Sure It Was a Hoopoe or a Decanter," installation view, Thesis exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

In the arrangement of paintings for the thesis exhibition, the individual paintings are installed to interact with the room's architecture and the viewer's path. Instead of placing my paintings on a wall, I suspend them at various intervals in the gallery space. The installation creates a sense of barrier for the viewer entering the environment. At times paintings are placed in front of each other, and the viewer must move among them to see various viewpoints. Therefore, each painting is an independent landscape of interior, exterior, or both—and simultaneously, an impediment in front of another wall/painting.

### a) Ayeneh Kari (Persian Mirror Work)

Ayeneh Kari, also known as Persian mirrorwork or Iranian mirror mosaic, is a traditional Persian handicraft that involves decorating surfaces with pieces of mirrored glass. This art form has been an integral part of Persian architecture and design for centuries, with roots dating back to the Sassanid Empire (224-651 AD). The Ayeneh Kari technique involves cutting small pieces of mirror glass into various shapes and sizes, then gluing them to a surface. The mirrors used in the craft are believed to reflect negative energy and protect the space they adorn. The reflective surfaces are said to symbolize the infinite and divine nature of the universe, as well as the impermanence of material possessions.

### b) Monir's Mirrors

Monir Farmanfarmaian was an Iranian artist who created a unique visual vocabulary by merging traditional Iranian motifs and materials with contemporary art practices.<sup>12</sup> Farmanfarmaian's approach to abstraction is characterized by a keen sense of geometry, symmetry, and mirrored surfaces that create a sense of depth and infinity in her works. Her use of asymmetry and irregular shapes also pushes the boundaries of traditional Islamic art and creates a new visual language uniquely her own.



Monir Framaanfarmaian, *Convertible* series, group 10, 2011, mirror and reverse glass painting on plaster and wood, 4 parts, Haines Gallery, San Francisco

<sup>12</sup> Roxana Afshar and Hoor Al Qasimi, "Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility. Mirror Works and Drawings 1974-2014" (New York: Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2015), 15.

Farmanfarmaian's interest in Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, is evidenced in her use of mirrored surfaces, which reflect the viewer's image and create a sense of infinite space. Her work invites contemplation of universal themes of beauty, balance, and transcendence. Farmanfarmaian's innovative approach to abstract art and her exploration of traditional Iranian motifs and materials have made her a significant figure in modern art. Her unique visual vocabulary represents a new way of thinking about Iranian art and speaks to universal themes of human experience.<sup>13</sup>

Monir's works are undoubtedly unique examples of Iranian modern art influenced by traditional Iranian craft. Like Monir, I am inspired by Iranian traditional art in my paintings. The difference between her work and mine is that she doesn't go beyond praising the rich art of mirrorwork and Iranian and Islamic geometric patterns in her glass works. She recreates these patterns to celebrate authentic Iranian art and Islamic mysticism. In contrast, I challenge the traditional rules of geometry and patterns to uncover hidden concepts and symbols within them. I aim to create a new concept in line with critiquing Iranian identity in relation to today's social concerns like displacement.

### **c) Parviz Tanavoli**

In ancient times, walls served as a medium for writing important governmental messages. Numerous examples of written wall paintings from ancient civilizations in Iran, the Middle East, and Egypt have been preserved, providing evidence for this practice.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary Iranian artists have also created works of art inspired by the characteristics of architectural epigraphs, including the walls of Parviz Tanavoli. Tanavoli's walls are, first and foremost, a form of tribute to the inscribed walls of ancient Iranian buildings. The epigraphs he creates are in a summarized and abstract form, reminiscent of a memento for the ancient heritage of western and southern Iran, as well as a reminder of the prominent role of Egyptian, Achaemenid, and Sassanid architecture. From an aesthetic point of view, Tanavoli's walls are pure volumes, similar to minimalist cubes, made of bronze with a dense texture of text in Persian, Arabic, or ancient scripts, and in any case, completely illegible.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Farahani, Fereshteh. "Monir Farmanfarmaian: The Iranian artist who merged tradition and innovation". *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine*, July/August 2015, issue 94, pp. 118-123.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Mousavi, "Wall Paintings in Ancient Iran: A Historical Survey," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22, no. 2 (2014): 125-150.

<sup>15</sup> Shirazi, M. R. (2014). Walls and Their Inscriptions in Contemporary Iranian Art. *Iranian Studies*, 47(2), 291-310.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of Tanavoli is his valuable artwork and his idea of sculpture. Tanavoli has been a firm modernist more than any of his contemporaries. At the same time, his work is imbued with more of an Iranian identity than those of his modernist peers. Tanavoli merged elements from traditional and folk arts, ritual culture, and mystical literature of Iran with modern approaches in sculpture to embody a fluid experience between local modernism and a kind of Iranian postmodernism in his work.



Parviz Tanavoli, Oh Persepolis II, 1975 - 2008, Bronze, 73.2 x 50.3 x 9.8 in.

I suspend paintings in the gallery space to create a barrier that forces the viewer to move through the environment and navigate around the artwork. I challenge the viewer's perception of the wall as a static object and instead, imbue it with movement and fluidity. In contrast, Tanavoli's bronze walls are pure volumes that pay tribute to the inscribed walls of ancient Iranian buildings. Tanavoli's walls have a static and heavy character. His walls seem immovable,

and different meanings can be taken from his walls, such as the unchangeableness of tradition or the remoteness of past glory.

## **2. Windows**

### **a) Orsi (stained glass)**

Orsi windows, also known as Orosi windows, are an intricate feature of Iranian architecture with a rich cultural and historical significance. Orsi windows, composed of colored glass, lead, and plaster, are adorned with geometric patterns, floral motifs, and calligraphy. Orsi windows were first introduced during the Safavid period (1501-1722) and have been predominantly used in religious buildings, such as mosques and shrines, to enhance the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of the space. The cultural significance of Orsi windows in Iranian architecture is multi-faceted, and their continued use today is a testament to their enduring beauty and symbolic value in Iranian culture.<sup>16</sup>

The transparency feature and unique design of Orsi windows have directly influenced my paintings. As walls play a significant role in my work, windows, chosen as a frame within walls, form an additional element. I often cut through canvases to create a window-like opening, allowing viewers to visually explore the area behind the painting. My paintings are usually suspended in the gallery space and may stand in front of one another. The viewer can see other paintings through the window-like opening cut into the canvas. The installation of the work and the window-like openings allow for the interplay between the paintings.

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<sup>16</sup> Gharipour, M. (2013). Orsi Windows of Iran: Their Historical Developments, Cultural Significance, and Technical Aspects. *Muqarnas Online*, 30(1), 115-147.

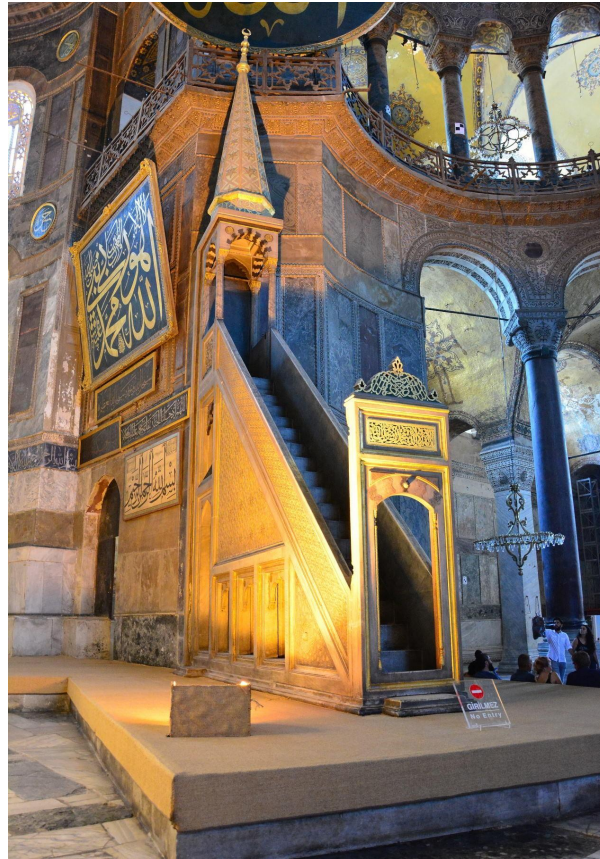


Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, 90 x 72 in.

### 3. Minbar

The minbar is a significant feature of Islamic architecture and culture, particularly in Iran. It is a pulpit in a mosque where the imam ascends to deliver sermons during Friday prayers. The minbar's design and architecture have evolved, influenced by cultural and religious factors, resulting in a unique style that reflects the region's artistic traditions. In Iran, the minbar's ornamentation has incorporated complex geometrical patterns and calligraphy, symbolic of Islamic and Persian culture. Additionally, the design of the minbar is also influenced by the region's climatic conditions, with features such as wide stairs and a canopy providing shade to

the imam. The minbar is an essential element of Islamic and Iranian architecture and culture, reflecting the region's rich history and artistic traditions.<sup>17</sup>



Minbar, Hagia Sophia, 532–537, Ottoman dynasty, Istanbul, Turkey

The minbar constitutes an important structural feature within my paintings. It is depicted in a 2D format that blends with the wall, thus merging with the background. In line with the walls, the minbar plays a pivotal role in shaping the composition of my paintings. My obsession with the minbar stems from its status as a movable staircase, separate from the building, providing a space for ascent and descent. From my perspective, this renders the structure delicate and precarious, potentially endangering the user. Consequently, in my artwork, I utilize the minbar to challenge dominant power structures, highlighting the instability and fragility of these extremist regimes, particularly in fanatical Islamist contexts.

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<sup>17</sup> Ali, Wijdan. "The minbar as an expression of Islamic art and culture." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1-18.

#### 4. Hejleh

Hejleh is a cultural practice in Iranian society that involves the creation of a memorial structure to commemorate a young person who has passed away. This tradition dates back to ancient times and remains an important aspect of Iranian culture today. The Hejleh serves as a reminder of the deceased individual's life and is typically adorned with flowers, candles, and pictures of the person. While Hejlehs are commonly associated with mourning, they are also used for celebrations such as weddings and other special occasions. This cultural practice reflects the importance of remembering loved ones and the value placed on community and family in Iranian society.



Hejleh, street view, Tehran, Iran

Several years ago, I used Hejleh as a subject matter in a series of paintings. Although my recent work does not explicitly depict the Hejleh, its geometrical patterns and mirror-work continue to influence my art. What initially captivated my interest in the Hejleh was its dual functionality in Iranian rituals. This structure is a commemorative monument for a deceased individual and a celebratory centerpiece. The Hejleh embodies complex cultural beliefs within my artwork, including a Khayyamist perspective on the interconnectedness of life and death, where happiness and sadness are inextricably linked.

## 5. Zarih

Zarih is an iconic element of Islamic and Iranian culture and art that symbolizes reverence and devotion. It is a decorative shrine or a cage-like structure that is placed on top of the tomb of a revered religious figure, often adorned with intricate designs and calligraphy. The construction of zarih has been a prominent art form in Iran for centuries, with its origins dating back to the Safavid period. Over time, zarih has evolved into a unique manifestation of Islamic art, reflecting Iran's rich cultural heritage and religious traditions.



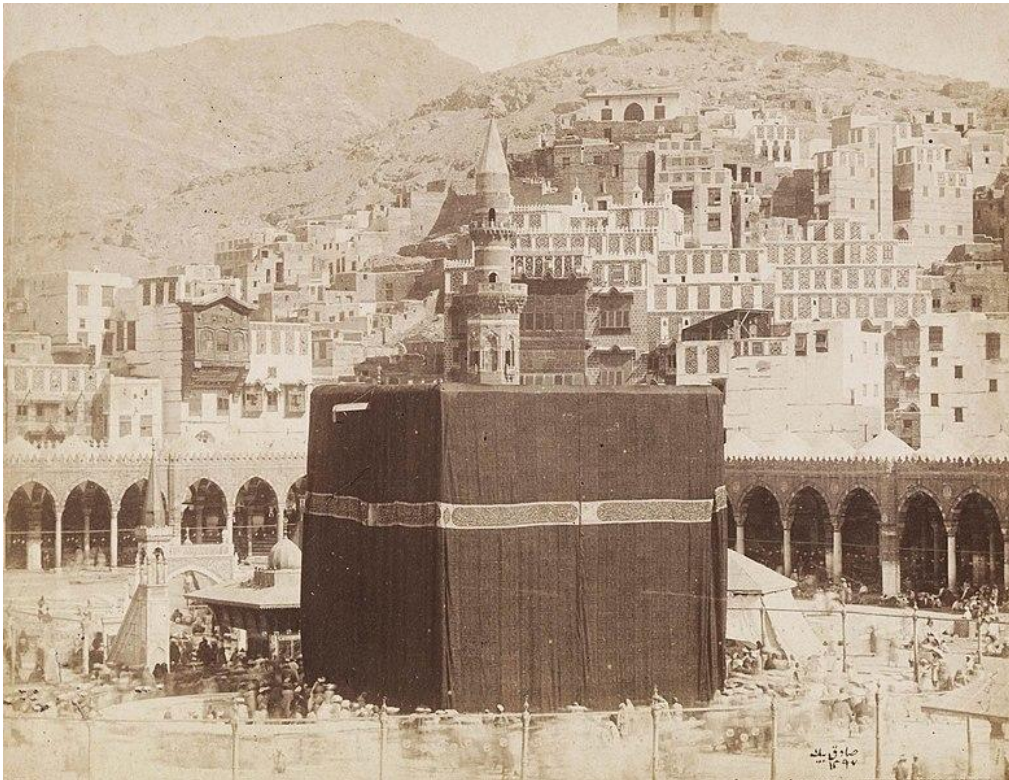
Zarih, Sayyidah Ruqayya Mosque, Damascus, Syria

Zarih, much like the Hejleh, is a religious structure that visually and conceptually inspired my art and research. The Zarih serves as a decorative element placed atop a tomb, intended to preserve the sanctity and holiness of the grave site. However, its physical appearance, resembling a cage or prison, presents a contrasting interpretation of its intended purpose. This incongruity has prompted me to challenge and manipulate the notions of holiness, safety, freedom, and power associated with the Zarih.

## 6. Kaaba

The Kaaba is a revered Islamic cultural structure and art piece in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Its historical and religious significance dates back to the Prophet Muhammad's time and is believed to have been built by the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael. The Kaaba, a cuboid-shaped

structure made of granite and draped in a black cloth, known as the Kiswah, is the focal point of the annual Islamic pilgrimage (Hajj) and is considered the holiest site in Islam. The structure's design, architectural features, and intricate decoration have evolved, reflecting the Islamic world's cultural and artistic influences and making it an essential element of Islamic art and architecture. The Kaaba's enduring significance has made it a symbol of unity for the worldwide Muslim community. Its unique cultural and artistic value has inspired and influenced Islamic art for centuries.<sup>18</sup>

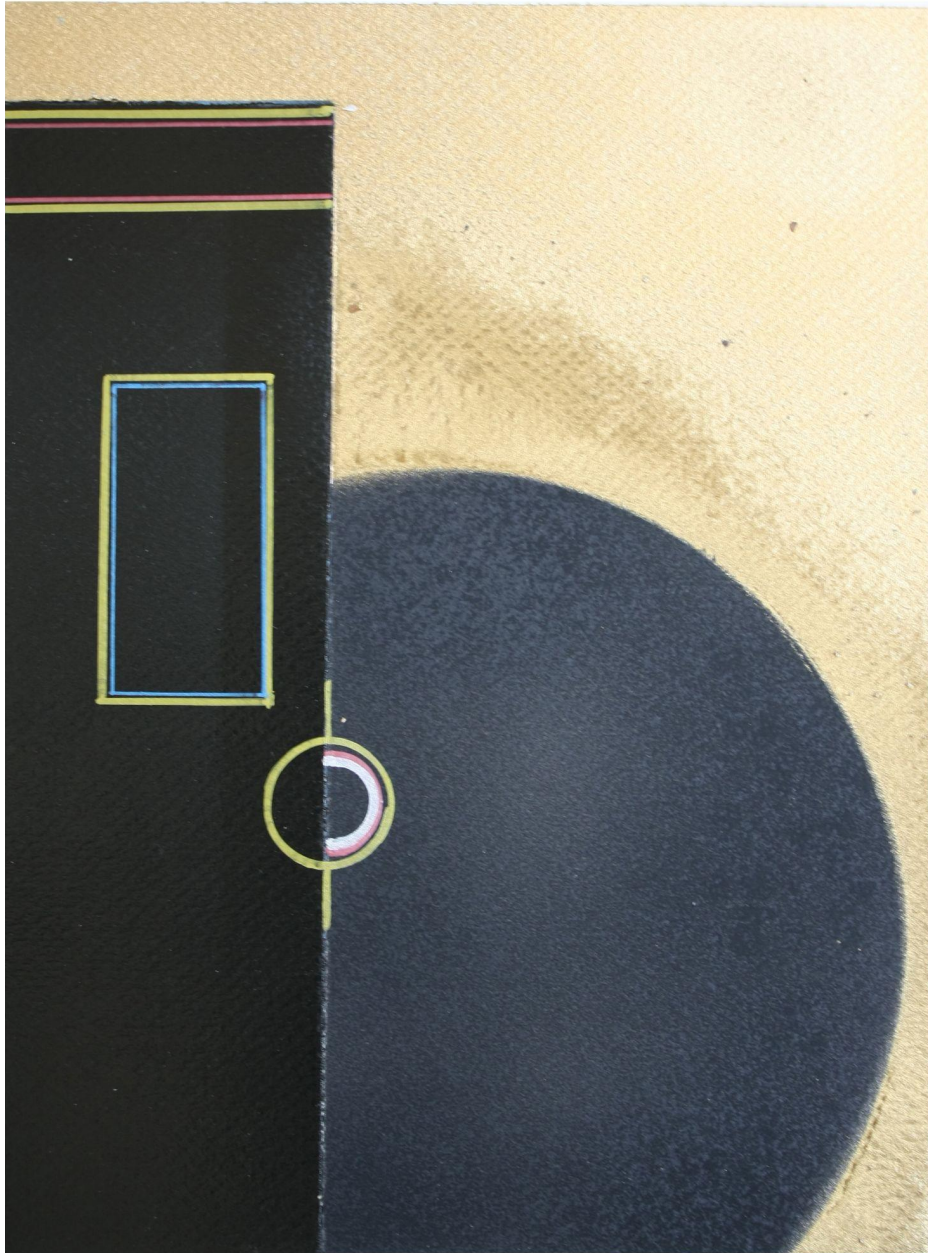


Kaaba, Photographed in 1880 by Muhammad Sadiq, Khalil collections

Despite any religious inclination towards Islam, the Kaaba is a striking visual structure. As an individual born into the Muslim faith but no longer practices Islam, I am continually surprised by the architecture of the Kaaba. This minimalistic building possesses the potential to be interpreted as an art piece, architectural structure, spaceship, or numerous other forms. Its visual allure has inspired my artwork, and conceptually, its construction with just walls and a ceiling has been influential in the minimal language of my drawings.

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<sup>18</sup> F.E. Peters, *The Kaaba: Its History and Significance* (Princeton University Press, 2010).



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2018, spray paint and marker on paper, 9 x 6.6 in.

### **7. Siah Armajani (Bridge Over Tree)**

Siah Armajani (1939-2020) was an Iranian-American artist and architect known for his politically charged public art installations. His work often explores the intersection of art, architecture, and public space, as well as themes of democracy and immigration. Armajani's art is deeply influenced by his experiences growing up in Iran and his love for Persian miniature paintings. In

his work, he often incorporates text and language, drawing inspiration from Persian calligraphy and the poetry of Rumi.<sup>19</sup>



Siah Armajani, Bridge Over Tree, 1970/2019, Brooklyn, New York (Photo: Timothy Schenck)

Armajani's political art often reflects his belief in the power of democracy and the importance of civic engagement. One of his most famous works, "Bridge Over Tree," is a large-scale public sculpture combining architectural and art elements. The piece features a wooden footbridge that spans over a tree and represents the idea of building bridges between people and communities. Armajani's work often comments on the relationship between individuals and the state, as well as the role of art in society. Overall, his diverse body of work has made a significant contribution to the fields of art and architecture and continues to inspire new generations of artists and thinkers.<sup>20</sup>

Armajani has had a significant influence on my art practice. Like him, I am inspired by Persian miniatures and Islamic architecture in Iran. The main commonality between our works is the representation of architectural elements such as bridges, stairs, gates, and building-like sculptures, which we both use to critique concepts such as power dynamics, hierarchy, society,

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<sup>19</sup> Siah Armajani, "Art: Siah Armajani," *Artforum International* 57, no. 6 (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Smith, John. "Armajani's Political Art." *Art News*, ARTnews LLC, 12 Mar. 2021.

and identity. While Armajani's prominent works are three-dimensional, my works are two-dimensional. Therefore, he invites the viewer to enter and physically interact with his structures while I place my artwork in front of the viewer's eyes, although still, the viewer can walk around my paintings.

### **III. Calligraphy and Abstraction**

#### **A. Persian and Arabic Calligraphy**

Persian and Arabic calligraphy is one of the most prominent and influential forms of Islamic art. Both styles employ Farsi and Arabic script and literature, considered sacred in Islam, and aim to convey spiritual and aesthetic messages through intricate, stylized lettering. While Persian calligraphy is characterized by its flowing, organic forms and emphasis on expressive flourishes, Arabic calligraphy is more geometric and structured, emphasizing the harmony and balance of its compositions. Both forms of calligraphy have a rich history and continue to be celebrated and practiced today, representing a powerful fusion of art, language, and spirituality.

#### **B. Abstraction of Calligraphy**

The abstraction of calligraphy in Persian and Arabic art has a rich history, with artists exploring various forms of expression through the manipulation of script. The traditional emphasis on legibility and precision has been subverted, with artists using the forms and shapes of calligraphy to create abstract compositions. In contemporary art, calligraphy inspires artists, with many pushing the boundaries of the traditional form through experimentation. The use of calligraphy in abstraction highlights the script's beauty and versatility, creating a visual language that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers and celebrates the shared humanity of all peoples.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, detail: 25 x 35 in.

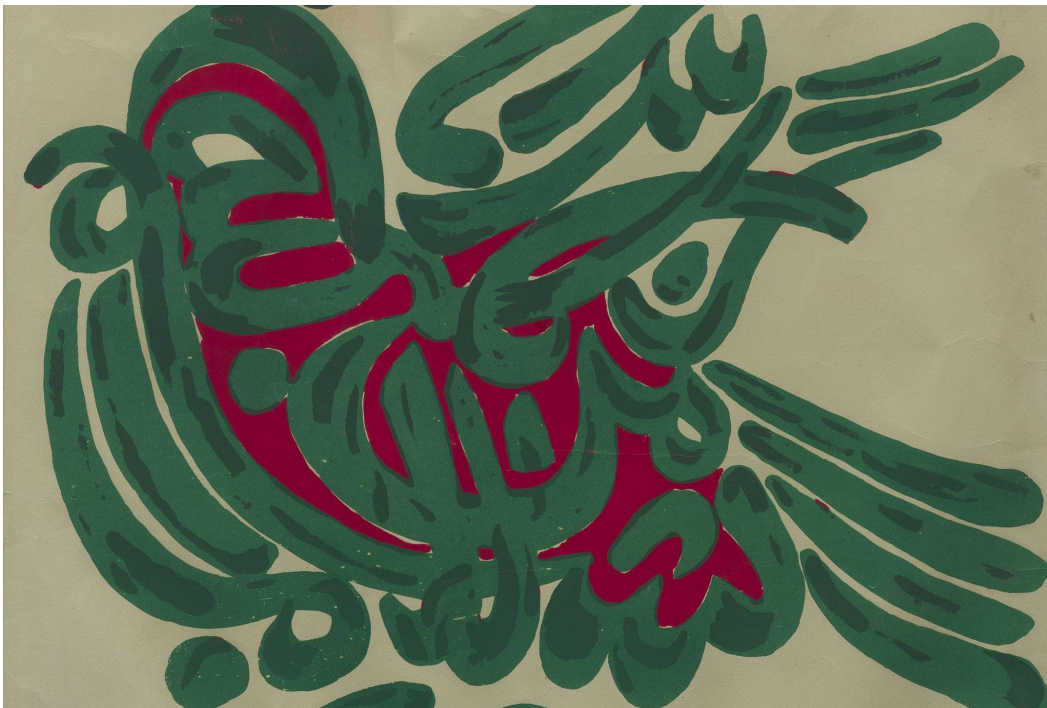
Throughout Persian and Arabic history, calligraphy has been employed and adapted in various ways. While numerous examples of calligraphic art exist from the past until the present, not all of these texts are necessarily legible, not because they are bad but due to being too perfect! As an artist, I use calligraphy in my paintings not to update or follow this traditional technique but to challenge it. I aim to challenge traditional notions of art and broader aspects of power, misogyny, fanaticism, and the sacredness of customs fostered by traditionalism.

In my work, the calligraphic shapes and figures I create are no longer recognizable as traditional calligraphy. Rather, they are more like imitations, made in the manner of a bad student in an art class. My approach, however, is not due to a lack of appreciation for the traditional form but stems from a sense of frustration and stillness in this position. Through my use of calligraphy, I seek to explore and question traditional norms and techniques, pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable within the form. By doing so, I hope to contribute to a broader discourse on the role of calligraphy in contemporary art and inspire others to engage in similar forms of experimentation and innovation.

### **C. Figurative Calligraphy (Zoomorphic Calligraphy)**

Figurative and Zoomorphic calligraphy are two distinct styles of calligraphy employed in Persian and Arabic art for centuries. Figurative calligraphy incorporates images of people, animals, or

objects into the letters and words of the script, creating a hybrid form that blurs the boundaries between calligraphy and representational art. Zoomorphic calligraphy, on the other hand, incorporates elements of animal forms into the letters, with curves and lines of the script being transformed into the shapes of creatures such as birds, fish, and serpents.<sup>21</sup> Both styles have a rich history and continue to be practiced in contemporary art, with artists pushing the boundaries of traditional forms and exploring new ways of combining calligraphy with visual art. The use of figurative and zoomorphic calligraphy highlights the beauty and versatility of Persian poetry and Arabic script, creating dynamic and expressive works that celebrate the interplay between language, art, and culture.



Untitled, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, 1968, 21.9 x 22.6 in.

Contemporary artists working with figurative calligraphy include Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram, and Nja Mahdaoui. Their works explore themes such as identity, history, and spirituality, using the fluid and expressive forms of calligraphy to create powerful and evocative images. By combining traditional calligraphy with contemporary art practices, these artists challenge the boundaries of both forms, creating works that speak to both the past and the present. The use of figurative and zoomorphic calligraphy in contemporary art serves as a testament to the

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<sup>21</sup> Khatibi, Abdelkebir. "Zoomorphic and Figurative Calligraphy." In *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 67-73 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

enduring power of Persian Poetry and Arabic script and its ability to inspire and captivate artists and viewers alike.

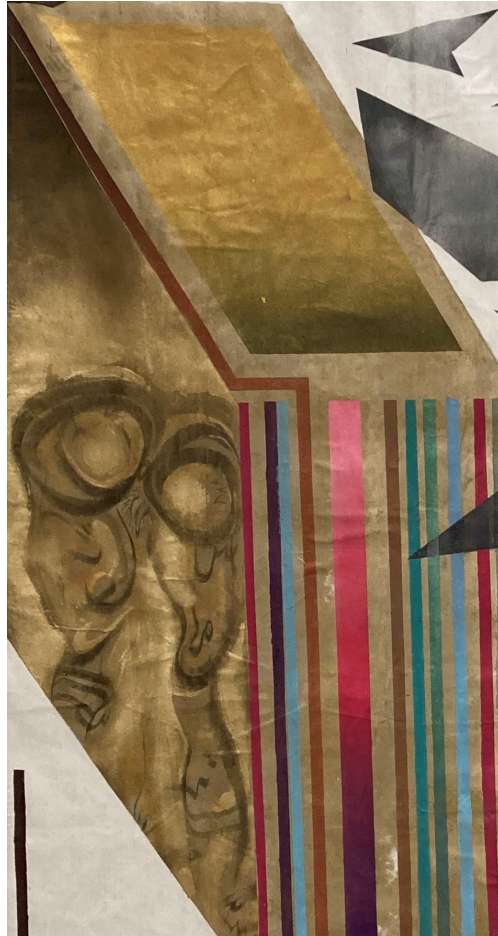
I take inspiration from the traditional technique of figurative calligraphy and incorporate calligraphy-like forms that depict human or animal figures. Although my paintings feature a limited number of figures, the ones that do appear are simultaneously an abstraction of the figure and calligraphy. As an artist, I seek to borrow this unique technique from my forebears and manipulate it, offering my interpretation of the form. At times, the figures in my paintings are depicted as naked bodies engaged in daily tasks or sexual poses. I aim to challenge this tradition's spirituality and holy features by presenting these bodies through calligraphic lines.



Faramarz Pilaram, Composition, 26.3 x 34.6 in., Collection particulière, Paris

The approach to incorporating nudity into the calligraphic tradition is intentionally provocative, seeking to subvert the traditional meanings of this technique and spark a dialogue about its

boundaries. As an artist, I strive to engage with and challenge traditional techniques, pushing them beyond their limits and exploring new forms of expression. While my work draws inspiration from the rich history of figurative calligraphy, it is also a testament to the fluidity and adaptability of this art form.



Ali Kaeini, Untitled, 2023, natural dyes, fabric dyes, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric collage on raw canvas, detail: 55 x 20 in.

## IX. Fabric and Persian Textiles

Persian textile and fabric art have been integral to Iranian and Islamic culture for centuries. The history of Persian textiles can be traced back to the Achaemenid era (550-330 BC), when wool and silk fabrics were woven with intricate designs and vibrant colors. During the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736 AD), Persian textile work reached its peak, becoming a symbol of luxury and artistic expression. Persian carpets, kilims, and silk fabrics were highly valued and exported to various parts of the world. The Qajar dynasty (1796-1925 AD) witnessed the introduction of new

techniques, such as velvet weaving and brocade, which added to the diversity of Persian textiles.

The art of Persian textiles has undergone significant changes throughout the different dynasties, yet it has maintained its unique identity and style. Persian textiles are characterized by their intricate designs, geometric patterns, and floral motifs that reflect the natural environment and Islamic heritage. The use of natural dyes and materials such as silk, wool, and cotton further enhances the beauty and durability of Persian textiles. Today, Persian textiles inspire artists and designers worldwide and remain an essential component of Iranian and Islamic cultural heritage.

### **A. Cheltekeh (Persian Quilt)**

Cheltekeh or Forty-piece embroidery, known as Khatam, Landar, or patchwork, is a traditional Iranian needlework art. This form of needlework involves creating different designs on plain fabric by sewing or drawing a part of the fabric's warp and weft threads and sewing small and large colorful fabric pieces together. The result is a range of items, including covers for chairs, bedspreads, prayer rugs, backs of sofas, curtains, needlework quilts, and cushion covers, among others. Although the exact origins of this art form are unclear, it has been prevalent in Iran since ancient times.<sup>22</sup> The aesthetic of Cheltekeh lies in the color and size coordination of the fabric pieces, which can take the form of squares, rectangles, or equilateral triangles. When colored fabric pieces have floral or landscape designs, they are referred to as patchwork. Skilled artisans would use silk embroidery to add decorative touches to the needlework.

Cheltekeh and quilting are traditional handicrafts created in different parts of the world. Cheltekeh is a type of Persian carpet that is woven in the city of Mashhad, Iran. It is characterized by its intricate geometric patterns and is woven using a specific type of knot called the asymmetrical or Persian knot. Quilts, on the other hand, are a type of blanket made by sewing together pieces of fabric to create a design. Quilts can be made using various techniques, including patchwork, appliqué, and embroidery. One similarity between the Cheltekeh and the quilt is the labor-intensive process involved in their creation. Both crafts require skilled artisans who spend many hours creating intricate designs using traditional techniques. Another similarity is the importance of color and design in both crafts. In Cheltekeh,

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<sup>22</sup> Moshiri, Farideh. "Cheltekeh: Iranian Forty-Piece Embroidery." In *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, edited by Joanne Bubolz Eicher. Vol. 5, Central and Southwest Asia, 236-238. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

the combination of colors and patterns creates a unique and visually striking carpet. In quilting, the arrangement of fabric pieces is used to create a cohesive and aesthetically pleasing design.



Cheltekeh, quilt, various fabrics, private collection in Iran

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the use of Iranian history, art, and architecture to express the displacement experienced by contemporary Iranians, both physically and mentally. Through the use of various materials such as homemade natural dyes, commercial fabric dyes, cement tape, acrylic, spray paint, fabric collages, and printmaking, I have recreated decorative elements, images of ancient Persian and Islamic structures, and objects such as vases, scissors, daggers, decanters, and lanterns. The resulting works of art are characterized by a visual tension that arises from the contradictions of materials and forms and reflects the complex relationship between my identity and culture.

The use of vases as a recurring motif in my works is particularly noteworthy. Borrowed from Omar Khayyam's poem and provoked by the stolen ancient Persian objects that reside in museums around the world, the vases symbolize human diversity and the displacement of the past. The use of broken and dusty object silhouettes as a metaphor for the displaced body emphasizes the historical identity of these objects and the human beings to whom they once belonged.

Overall, the work provides a compelling commentary on the current state of Iranian society and its relationship with its rich cultural and artistic past. By making decorative images out of materials and tools that are often overlooked or discarded, I give them new life and meaning, highlighting the potential for beauty and creativity even in the midst of displacement and uncertainty.



Ali Kaeini, 2023, "I'm Not Sure It Was a Hoopoe or a Decanter," installation view, thesis exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

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