

TIGHTROPE WALKING ON THE RED LINES

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by
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I dedicate this thesis to Amirhossein Mahdavi.
Without his love and support, I would not be sitting here typing these words ...

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ABSTRACT

My work is deeply connected to my own personal experience of the culture and politics of my homeland of Iran. I was born and raised in Iran in a nonreligious family. I experienced the first decade after the 1979 Islamic Revolution as a child. The hardliners had taken power, society suffered tremendous suppression, and Iran was at war with Iraq. My memories are filled with so many occasions in which the dominance of the oppressive regime affected my daily life, from being forced to wear a headscarf in elementary school, to being required to pray and recite the Quran at a public middle school. As a young woman, I was arrested while walking down the street in Tehran, simply because, according to the government's definition, the hijab I was wearing didn't cover enough of my body.

When I am in my studio here in the United States, considering what to paint next and what inspires me most, my mind fills with the rush of my memories of living in Iran. The distance I've gained from those repressions, both geographically and in terms of time, have allowed space for reflection. As I look at Iran's culture from the outside, I have a strong visceral reaction to the unrighteousness of such a repressive regime. Being born and living most of your life under such circumstances makes you feel that it's an unfair ordinary situation, but being distant from it makes you realize how extraordinarily unfair it is to have so many personal aspects of your life dictated and controlled by state power.

It is not my intention to portray myself, or people from my country, as victims, nor is it to draw sympathy from a Western audience. I am simply telling my story. For me, art is a meditative agent. The creative process fuels my imagination and helps me cope with my life traumas, alleviate their cumulative affects, and find positive aspects in them. When I pick up the brush, I feel the weight of my life experiences on my shoulders. When I put the brush to

the canvas, the weight is still there, but it is lighter. My paintings represent unconscious attempts to reenact traumatic memories with the hope of achieving alternative positive outcomes—both at a personal level, and more collectively, at national and global level.



"Never, ever sing that *Googoosh*¹ song with your friends at school. It's forbidden. You'll be in trouble!"

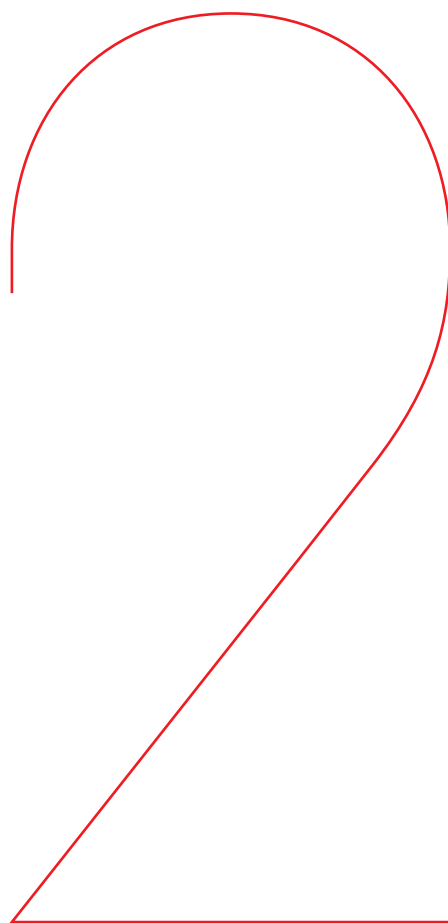
"I know it's hard to keep that tight scarf on your head all day. But you can't go to school not wearing that. If you go to school not wearing that, you'll be in trouble!"

"Never, ever mention at school that we have a VHS player and videotapes at home. It's forbidden. You'll be in trouble!"

"Never, ever mention at school that we don't say our prayers. You'll be in trouble!"

"Never, ever mention at school that we have alcoholic drinks at home. You'll be in trouble!"²

These were the words I remember my mother telling the seven-year-old me in the first weeks of my first year of school. The first time I stepped out of the safe zone of our home. The first time I started to feel confused about and later distinguished the separation and contradictions between our private space and the public space. The first thing I used to do when I got in to my mother's yellow Renault 5, when she came to pick me up after school, was to take off my headscarf and throw it on the back seat. My mother had her own way of making wearing that cranky piece of fabric more pleasant. She used to sew colorful ribbons, plastic pearls and other embellishments on it, to make it something a child would like to wear, or at least tolerate. Was this always the way to deal with things we had to bear? To decorate the unpleasant with pleasant ornaments? I can't find a clear answer.



The theology class is over and the ten-year-old me is filled with guilt. It has been almost a year since my classmates and I had attained the age of religious responsibility³. The year before, our school held a special celebration for the occasion and the only thing I can remember is that we were all wearing colorful Chadors⁴ with beautiful floral patterns, singing anthems related to the event and that we prayed in congregation. This was how we were officially introduced to the world of feeling mandated to do things. That day in class, our teacher lectured us for an hour on how important it is to pray on time, five times a day. Then she added that not only are we responsible for our own prayers, but that we also have to make sure our parents and other members of the family are praying as well. While she was addressing these things, I reviewed my family members, starting with my immediate family; I had never seen either of my parents in prayer. Then I advanced to my aunts, uncles and cousins; I couldn't remember a single one of them praying, either. I had started to feel overwhelmed by the pressure of this guilt when I suddenly remembered that my oldest cousin always said her prayers. That was a reassuring point that made me feel just a little bit soothed. But it wasn't enough to stop feeling guilty. I still felt the urge to confess.

After our class, I ask to talk with our teacher in private. I start by confessing that not only didn't I say my prayers, but that no one else in my family did either, and how terrible I felt and that I didn't know how to deal with this ugly fact. Then I add, "Except from my oldest cousin. She always prays on time, but we all make fun of her and call her names." (Yes, we were mean kids, I agree with that.) I think that this confession will help to mitigate our collective sin.

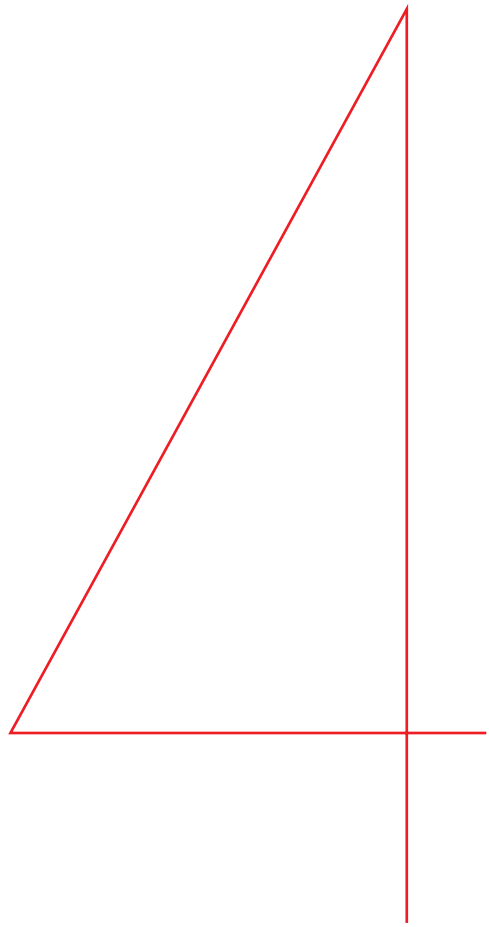
I don't know exactly how my teacher responded, but the thirty three-year old me is now sure that it wasn't a big deal for her; she probably didn't say all of her

prayers either. Maybe she was laughing inside about how this innocent kid had taken her words so seriously. I remember that when I got home, I described what happened that day and both my parents laughed out loud and told me I should never talk about these things at school.

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The twelve-year-old me is standing with rows of other school girls saying their prayers—for some of us, *mandatory* prayers. Some of the students were real believers and they really wanted to pray on time, but for me and so many others it was just something I had to do—like so many other things we had to do in that semi-religious middle school. I remember that during Ramadan we had to finish reading the whole Quran, together with other students. We had to go to school an hour early in the morning, sit behind our benches with the Quran open in front of us, yawning, and follow the sentences as someone loudly recited them from the speakers in each class. We didn't even know Arabic well, but since Persian and Arabic share same alphabets we could read the words— though most of those words sounded like gibberish to us. Sometimes I tried to read the Persian translation in order to get a sense of what was going on, and was overcome with boredom. This would repeat for 30 days until all 30 chapters of the Quran were over.

On that day in the prayer's room, I am late and I haven't performed the ablutions prior to the prayer. I don't have proper prayer clothes and accessories (Chador, prayer mat, Mohr⁵ and so on) somehow disturbing the rows' order (which is something you shouldn't do, when you pray in congregation) with the school's principal standing almost beside me. I am not even saying the correct words. I am just pretending and repeating one section over and over because in Islam, when you are saying prayers, other people are not allowed to talk to you or distract you. In my mind, this is the smartest way to prevent being caught and later punished for these transgressions. We needed the stamp of each day's attendance in our little calendar booklet, to ensure that we got a proper grade for discipline. A low grade could prevent us from being registered next year. The thirty-three-year-old me now knows that nothing serious could have happened back then, but the twelve-year-old me is almost shivering with presentiment.



That night was the first time my parents allowed the nineteen-year-old me to go to a party outside Tehran. My friend's new boyfriend was suspiciously rich. He had thrown a birthday party for her in a quasi-mansion in a suburb of Tehran. That night, everything went well. Everyone was enjoying the party, drinking and dancing. It was almost the midnight when we decided to head back to Tehran. We were just getting into our cars, parked in front of the building, when the police asked my friend, who was the driver, to sit in a police car while someone from the police drove our car to the police station. Few minutes after we arrived at the police station, our other friends, who were in other cars, joined us. The police had begun to call each of our parents to come to the station. Some of my friends started to cry. It turned out that they had lied to their parents about the party or had secret boyfriends with whom they were arrested at the party.

Apparently, the presence of some boys and girls in a closed space was the first crime we all had committed. I realized that when the officer started interrogating me about the party. He asked me to sign a confession form in which I had to write that I had committed an "unlawful relation". When I asked what an "unlawful relation" was, he described it as boys and girls being under same roof in a closed space. Later I learnt that he was making a false claim in order to intimidate me. On top of that, boys and girls were dancing (crime number two), and they were drinking (crime number three; the worst crime).

It was almost 4 A.M when our parents finally arrived. I remember that my mother stood in front of me, while the officer was standing behind her, and said, "I told you must not go to places like this! Our family doesn't accept such a lifestyle." I was surprised by her reaction and said "It was you who gave me

permission to go there!” I was too tired and sleepy to notice that my mother was winking at me while saying this, and that I was supposed to act like I was ashamed. She was thinking that if she showed the officer that I had gone to that party stealthily, it might be forgiven as a young person’s naive mistake.

We had to sign some paperwork and be ready in court the next morning (now, actually the same day). We were lucky that one of our friends had a relative who knew a guy in the judicial system who could eventually settle our case—so we never went to court. I hadn’t started drinking back then, but those who were arrested drunk could end up with a flagellation penalty. A few months later, when my friend had broken up with that guy, we found out that he was the son of a city council member, and that the whole incident was an opportunity to intimidate him into resigning.

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The twenty five-year-old me is sitting in her bed. It is morning after my birthday. Yesterday, I thought the best gift I could get for my twenty-fifth birthday would be the victory of our presidential candidate, and now I am trying to handle the news we all heard last night. I even cried. I never was and still am not a political person, but I like so many other people of my generation, I had lost four years of youth under the horrible presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and had the hope to vote him out of the office. We had to pick bad over worse in order to save the next four years. Polls were showing results in favor of our candidate, Mirhossein Mousavi, and there were constant meetings and rallies on the streets.

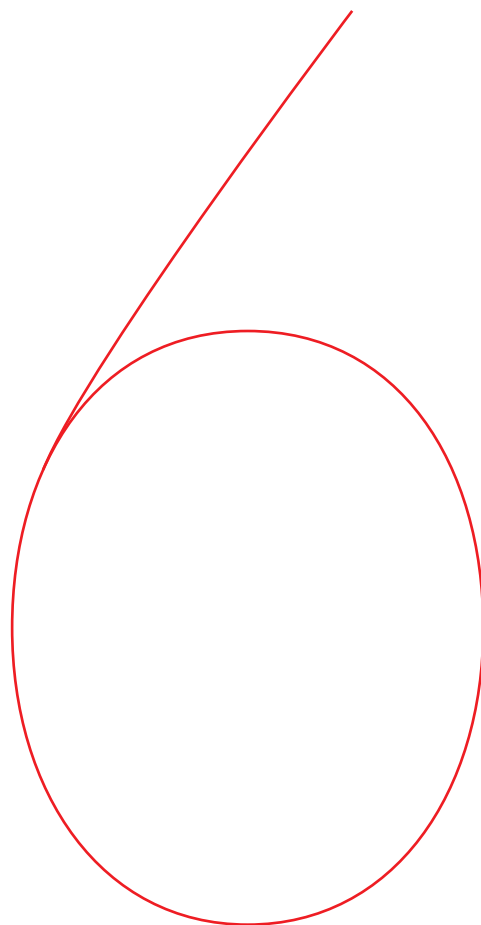
But right after the election things changed. They closed ballot boxes earlier than usual and unbelievably announced the victory of the incumbent candidate just a few hours later. We were furious, sad, disappointed, and felt used as a tool to demonstrate a forged democracy.

Soon the streets are full of people peacefully protesting with one question: "Where is my vote?" However, as time passes, they become increasingly violent. My aunt's house is close to a square which had become one of the centers for the protesters. On this day, clashes break out between police and protesters. Riot police attack them with baton and tear gas so they have to run into the streets around the square. Later that day, my cousin and I are standing in their yard trying to figure out what is going on. When the protesters get close to their house, we can't do anything but let them in. Some of them are injured and my cousin, who has recently started medical school, feels the urge to help them. One of their neighbours brings a large piece of green fabric and starts cutting it in pieces and giving the protesters, to tie on to their foreheads. Green is the symbol of the

movement. Some other protesters run to the building in front of my cousin's house and the doorman closes the glass entrance door after them. We see the police get in front of the building but they can't catch the protesters and so start to hit the glass door with their batons. The police get frustrated and start shouting and cursing. We feel relief when the glass turns out to be bulletproof.

For almost a week, things were turbulent on streets of Tehran and we mostly followed the news about the protests on foreign news channels. We really wanted to be there, beside the other people on the streets, but our parents were extremely worried and didn't allow us. My cousin and I finally snuck out of our houses and headed to the "Silence Protest" which was planned for that day. It was the only protest I have ever attended. It was an extraordinary experience. Enghelab street (which ironically means "revolution" in Persian) was filled with thousands of people silently walking, often with their faces covered by green fabric so they wouldn't be identified and arrested. Others were just showing the victory sign with their fingers. If silence had a sound, I am sure it could be the sound of thousands of people just breathing. I remember there was a man walking beside his son, who had Down syndrome, right behind us, and he was patiently trying to silence his son when he wanted to say something. Later that night we heard on the news that almost three million people had attended the rally, and that seven people were shot dead just a few miles away from us.

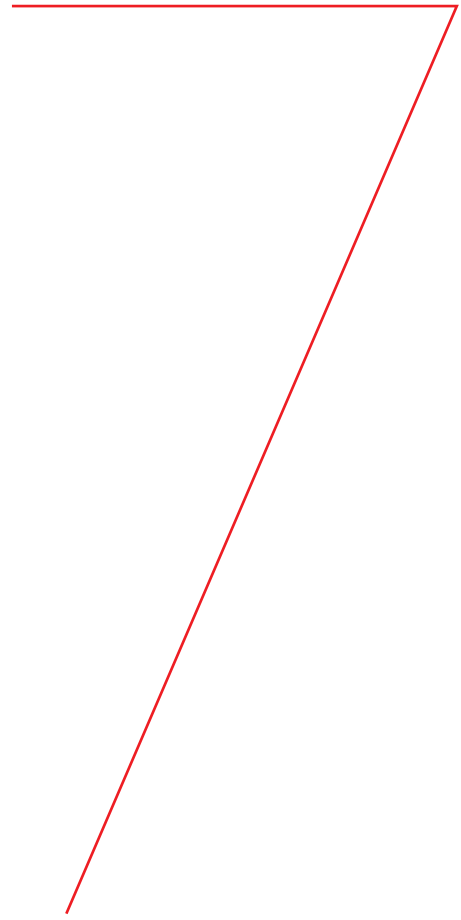
After almost a year of protesting on the streets we could neither have our votes counted nor remove that fraudulent president from office. The next four years of our youth were ruined during his presidency. The three leaders of the Green movement are still under house arrest to this date.



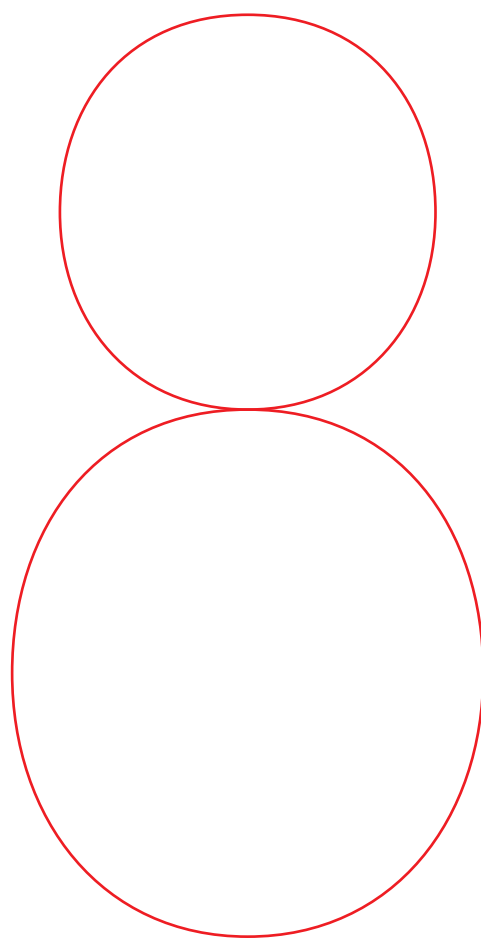
The twenty-seven-year-old me is sitting in the Moral Security Police van waiting for the van to be filled with other girls who had broken the law. We were supposed to head to the police station afterwards, where we were going to be treated like criminals and have our mugshots taken while holding a whiteboard with our names on it. I remember how ridiculous it felt and, unlike the twelve-year-old me who hadn't said her prayers, I was strangely calm. For some reason, I had a feeling that the destiny of all those photos being stored on that outdated hard drive in the police station would be just a Shift+Delete at the end of the day. Later, the Moral Security Police would call one of our family members to bring proper clothes and sign a commitment letter stating that it would never happen again.

Wondering what the crime was? The hijab we wore didn't cover enough of our bodies, according to the government's definition. It was one of the most triumphant moments of my life when my mother showed up and handed me even less appropriate clothes than the ones I was arrested with (on purpose, to mock them, to ridicule them, as a sign of subtle protest). I heard her from the other room arguing with one of the officers, shouting that her daughter hadn't done anything wrong. I was thinking that having her arrested too was the last thing we needed that day.

"Oops! I think my mother has brought my little sister's clothes by mistake!" By saying these words to the female officer who was in charge of releasing us, I could finally get out of that police station.



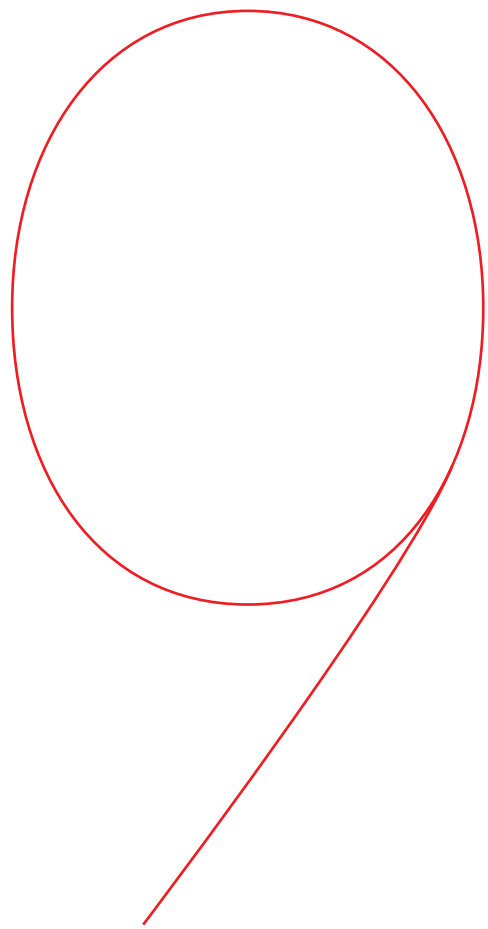
The thirty-three-year-old me is sitting in my RISD studio in Providence, thinking about what to paint next and what inspires me the most. Nothing comes to my mind but the rush of all these memories and many other memories similar to them. The thirty-three-year-old me has been living in the United States for almost three years. Being distant from all of those repressions and looking at them from outside makes me feel intensely how unrighteous it is to live in such a situation. Being born and having lived almost your whole life under such circumstances makes you feel that it's an unfair ordinary situation, but being distant from it makes you think again and feel how extraordinarily unfair it is when so many personal aspects of your life are dictated and controlled by state power.



The whatever-aged me, me at almost any age, has been always busy making, drawing, painting. It was only recently that I realized that for me, art is a meditative agent. It is an alleviation that helps me to cope with traumas in my life, both at a personal level or, more collectively, at a national or global level. Whenever I pick up the brush, I feel the weight of this baggage of memory on my shoulders; when I put the brush on canvas, the baggage is still there, but lighter. Maybe practicing art for me is an act of repetition compulsion⁶. Maybe my paintings are attempts to reenact traumatic memories with the hope of achieving positive endings this time. Or maybe this is an extreme conclusion to make.

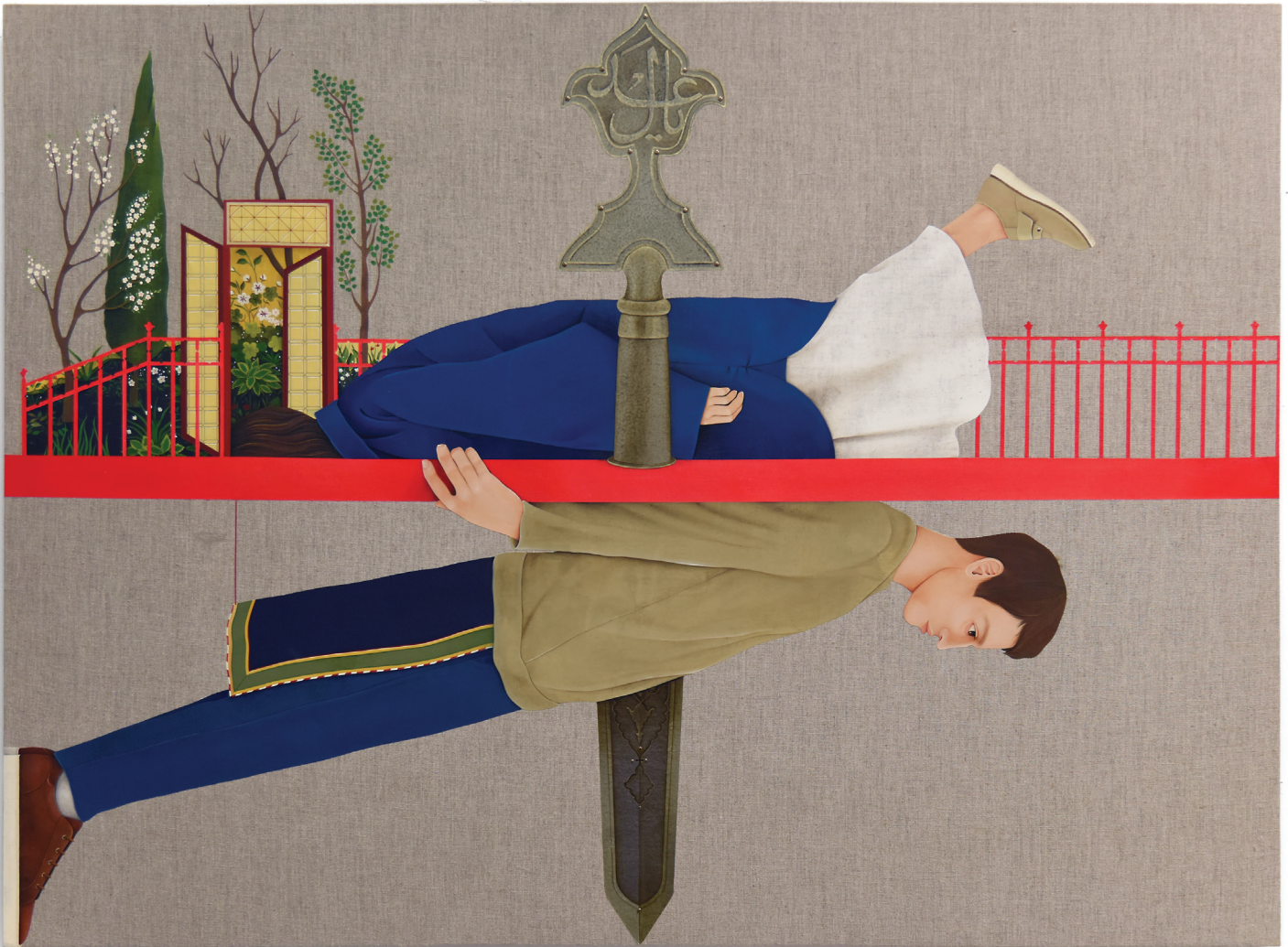
Probably that's why when I came across an essay by Hamid Dabashi in a book called *Contemporary Art from the Middle East*, this part really resonated with me:

[...] where an artist attends to historical events and visually remembers them anew inevitably provokes the traumas that have constituted a collective subconscious. In the visual and performing arts from West Asia and North Africa, there are numerous occasions when artists attend to these traumatic moments in a manner that restores and excavates new meaning and significance in them. The affective history of these aesthetic experiences of national trauma works through the collective recollection of the uncanny [...] when and where the familiar is made foreign by bringing it up close in a visual or performative encounter.⁷



At this point, you, the reader, may sigh as a sign of affinity and say, "Such a miserable life this girl has lived!" But no! My memory is filled with cheerful and colorful moments too; mesmerizing tile patterns from some project my father was working on, valleys so immensely covered with beautiful corn-poppies that just getting near them was enough to see the air filled with their red petals; or that night that streets of Tehran were full of hundreds of cheerful people celebrating victory of Iran's soccer team and its entering the FIFA World Cup after almost a decade, and so many other memories similar to these. I don't want to victimize myself or people from my country in order to draw the [western] audience's attention or their sympathy. I am just telling my story and for me, it's the memories which are more tragic and traumatic that become motivation to create art, and make me to respond to them by creating art. Maybe the creative process helps me cope with traumas, and find positive aspects in them, and makes them fuel my imagination. Responding to these mostly negative incidents has become an approach to exploit them.

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The Virtue Factory

2018 | 54 x 40 IN | Acrylic, metallic spray paint and metal beads on raw linen on wood panel



The Forbidden Lives

2018 | 37 x 50.5 IN | Acrylic, metallic spray paint on found floral printed fabric on wood panel



The Ensemble

2018 | 31 x 61 IN | Acrylic, metallic spray paint and glass beads on raw linen on wood panel



"Staircase to Heaven"

2018 | 28 X 62 IN | Acrylic on linen canvas on shaped wood panel



The Ensemble

2018 | 28 x 62 IN | Acrylic on linen canvas on wood panel, hand dyed cotton cord



Power Dynamics

2018 | 41 X 61 IN | Acrylic and gold leaf on found woodblock printed fabric on wood panel



A Forbidden Funeral

2018 | 37 x 55 IN | Acrylic and gold leaf on found woven patterned textile and linen on wood panels, wood cutouts, brass chain



Untitled

2018 | 46 X 46 IN | Acrylic on found woodblock printed fabric on wood panel



Untitled

2018 | 20 x 24 IN | Acrylic and silver leaf on found woven patterned textile and linen on wood panel



Untitled

2018 | 42 X 42 IN | Acrylic on found woodblock printed fabric on wood panel



The Limbo
2018 | 36 x 24 IN | Acrylic and metallic spray paint on on wood panel



A 40-year Ritual
2017 | 32 X 50 IN | Acrylic on paper



Twist The Power
2017 | 30.5 x 50 IN | Acrylic and glass beads on paper



The Void
2017 | 25 X 40 IN | Acrylic and glass beads on paper

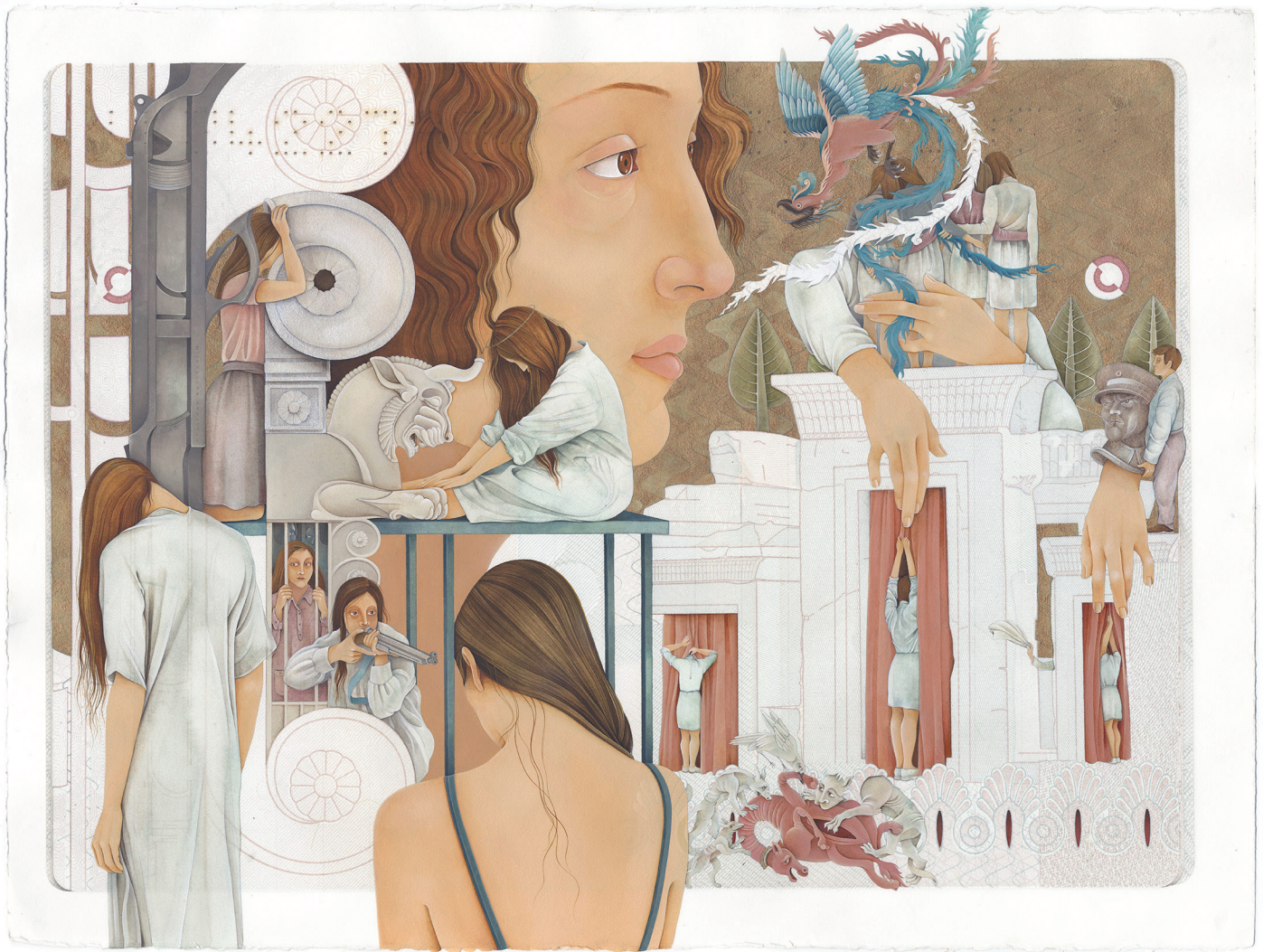


The Ivory Tower
2017 | 41 x 21 IN | Acrylic and glass beads on paper



Simurgh

2017 | 29 x 22 IN | Acrylic and inkjet print (of scanned images of my Iranian passport) on paper



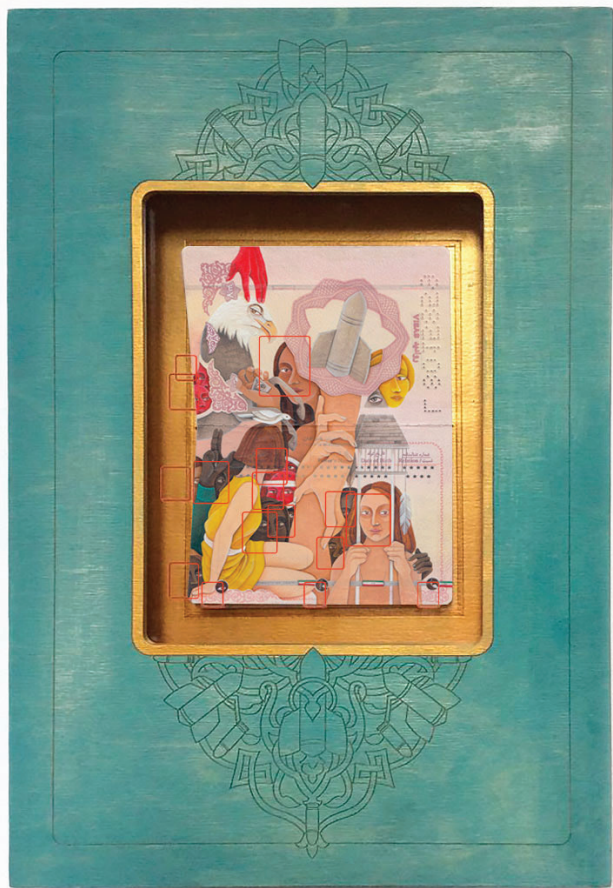
Persepolis

2017 | 29 x 22 IN | Acrylic and inkjet print (of scanned images of my Iranian passport) on paper



Hafez

2017 | 29 x 22 IN | Acrylic and inkjet print (of scanned images of my Iranian passport) on paper



"Let's Have a War, So You Can Go and Die"

2017 | 10.6 X 15.6 X 2 IN | Acrylic on passport paper, thread, inkjet print, UV print on plexi, wood



There's So Many Of Us (1)
2017 | 16.7 X 13.6 X 3 IN | Acrylic on passport paper, thread, inkjet print, plexi, wood, clay

ENDNOTES

1. It was a pop song by Googoosh; one of the most famous woman singers before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After revolution, singing by women became forbidden.
2. Worth noting that those years were the first years after the Islamic revolution. The revolutionary hardliners had taken over the power and the society was more suppressed than when more moderate factions took over the administration in late 1990s. However, some restrictions are still effective.
3. Among the Shia scholars, this age for girls is 9 and for boys is 15. This is the age when the juridical norms become mandatory for them.
4. Chador is a large piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed, worn especially by Muslim women.
5. A turbah (Arabic: تربة ; Persian: مهر mohr) is a small piece of soil or clay, often a clay tablet, used during salat (Islamic daily prayers) to symbolize earth.
6. Repetition compulsion is a psychological phenomenon in which a person repeats a traumatic event or its circumstances over and over again. It is an attempt at mastery of feelings and experience, in the sense that the person unconsciously wants to go through the same situation but in a way that doesn't have negative results, as it did in the past.
7. Keshmirshekan, H. (2015). *Contemporary art from the Middle East: Regional interactions with global art discourses*. London: I.B. Tauris.

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