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THE SEVEN VALLEYS

by

DARYA M. FARD

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski, MFA

ABSTRACT

Starting from my roots in Persian traditions, I am branching out, seeking my place in the universe, and looking for enlightenment among other belief systems. I draw inspiration from Persian poets and scholars like Rumi that form the basis of my research – and the Sufi mystic Attar in particular. Attar wrote about the steps one must complete to attain enlightenment in his tale *The Conference of the Birds*. In this tale, a group of birds must survive through seven challenges, or valleys, to reach spiritual perfection. *The Seven Valleys* combines seven screen-printed Plexiglass panels with projected video, sound, and shadow to explore spirituality. This immersive, multilayered installation is an investigation of the phenomenology of flow, unity, and transcendence and how humans can experience ecstasy in connection with the natural world.

INDEX WORDS: Flow, Enlightenment, Transcendence, Mysticism, Mythical creatures,
Metamorphosis, Persian poetry, Attar, Sufi, Video art, Printmaking, Shadows

THE SEVEN VALLEYS

by

DARYA M. FARD

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

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2022

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2022

THE SEVEN VALLEYS

by

DARYA M. FARD

Committee Chair: Craig Dongoski

Committee: Pam Longobardi

Craig Drennen

Serena Perrone

Nedda Ahmed

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Academic Assistance

College of the Arts

Georgia State University

May 2022

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my soulmate and husband, Dariush Irannezhad who supported me to reach this point. I cannot imagine how hard this path would be without his support. Our companionship has been almost for 14 years with so many ups and downs. We explored so many things in our life together that has been made us stronger. We trusted each other and I know that we have so many adventures to come. Thank you for encouraging me, for supporting my dreams and for always reminding me “I know you will reach your goals.”

I would like to dedicate this work to my Mom and Dad, Manoochehr M. Fard and Irandokht Nabavi in my motherland, Iran, and to my beloved siblings Nazila M. Fard and Arezoo M. Fard who have given me so much love and support. I would like to thank my parents and siblings, and my brother in law, Mehrdad Zakerfathi, the most beautiful human beings that I have ever known for encouraging me to pursue my passions. I would like to dedicate this work to my beautiful loving and supportive Aunt, Nina M. Fard, and my supportive uncles Kiyoumars M. Fard and Shahrooz M. Fard who supported me in this process since I started my graduate school journey in the US. I would like to dedicate this work to my inspirational, wise little niece and nephew, Baran and Kayhan, for showing me what love is and for inspiring me with their pure and beautiful awakening words.

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I am so grateful to have you all in my life!

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A letter to my beloved sister Nazila. M. Fard who left this world before my thesis show in 2022:

Nazi,

You were the best sister that I could have ever had. You were always there for me, a solid support, a warm smile with a strong character. You were always there and I knew I could rely on you to help me through all of my struggles. You were the most beautiful human being that I have ever known who had a big heart to nourish everyone with your love without expecting anything in return. You taught me what love is. I am so proud and grateful that I had you in my life, although it was for a very short time. I am celebrating your soul's freedom because I know you have a better life now. You are always with me, every single moment, everywhere, you are my angel. And I want you to know I am taking my power and energy from you. I can see you from the depths of my heart, and I will always be nourishing my heart with your love. You are my absolute inspiration and pure love.

I love you!

Thank you to all the professors at Georgia State University Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design who have helped me grow over the past three years. I have learned so much from all of you! I am extremely grateful to my committee advisors: Pamela Longobardi, Craig Drennen, Serena Perrone, Nedda Ahmed, and my committee chair, Craig Dongoski, who walked me through every step of this journey. I want to thank them for their professionalism and their ability to motivate and lead me to the next level. This thesis would not have been possible without my committees' thoughtful insights. Thanks to Pam and Craig for their wise and perceptive and precious advice that led me to think in a wider perspective. Thank you, Craig Drennen, for giving me intelligent feedback throughout my work process. Thanks, Serena, for insightful advice, suggestions, and helping me think through ideas that made me stronger as an artist; also, many thanks for supporting me during my very rough time.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I was born in Urmia, a green mountainous city in the West Azerbaijan Province of Iran. My father was a veterinarian, horticulturist, and a spiritual person. Many of my earliest memories take place in my father's garden. This garden was his masterpiece: beautifully designed and perfectly maintained. I spent a lot of time in the garden, sitting outside in the sunshine. It was where I began to learn about the world, nature, animals, and my senses, before I knew anything about the outside world and society. I grew up very close to nature and animals, hanging and swinging from tree branches, climbing, exploring, and looking for animals and bugs. I always relied on my five senses to understand my surroundings.

One of my clearest memories about my father's garden was the special walkway he built through the beds. When I would walk through the vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees, I would try to memorize how they smelled so that I could identify each plant by its scent and not just by sight. I already had a powerful visual memory; learning the plants' smells deepened my experience of the garden. Even today, wherever I go, I absorb the way a place smells. Those scent memories link me to specific landscapes and remind me of places I enjoyed. Committing to memory the scents in my father's garden was the first time I experienced energized focus, that feeling of being immersed in and connected to nature. My powerful visual memory allowed me to eidetically draw the plants and animals and to create new characters based on my perceptions of the natural world. This beautiful, isolated space was vastly different from the world happening beyond the garden gates. My parents made this small safe space for us as a refuge from the political turmoil happening in Iran.

Four years before I was born, the most critical event in Iran's history took place: the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Soon after, the Eight Year War between Iran and Iraq began. This war ended

in 1988 and forever changed the political, social, cultural, and spiritual atmosphere of my country. I remember my grandfather, who was a poet, writing political poems about the revolution that warned us of what the future would be like. His predictions, scarily, turned out to be true. I was born in the middle of the war, but my parents sheltered me from the violence happening all around us. Living in this parental “cocoon” affected my perceptions of nature and reality.

Connecting with nature in my father’s garden was how my family survived the war years. During those years, whenever a bomb warning sound came on the radio, we had to take shelter in underground bunkers. Simple acts like walking in the garden with our animals and learning gardening from my father helped me find a safe and quiet place where I could connect with my inner world. When the war ended and life started to go back to normal, my parents continued to take us on outdoor adventures. Each weekend we would visit the countryside, visiting places like Urmia Lake (the biggest Salt Lake in the world). While exploring the mountainous woods around our home, my powers of observation became even stronger. I connected with my surroundings more profoundly. These experiences helped me realize that nature is not separate from humanity. Nature was and is the best teacher for me.

During my adolescent years, I struggled to comprehend my own identity and paradoxes. There were two different atmospheres between home and society that caused so many dualities and paradoxes. My family and friends were all born during the Shah’s time of rule. This period in Iran was a more moderately religious atmosphere than what we see in Iran today. Pre-revolutionary life in Iran contradicted the autocratic Islamic ideology of the new regime, therefore the new leaders enacted dramatic changes that altered, or outlawed, many aspects of

everyday life. This massive shift toward strict Islamic laws caused me to lose my cultural identity.

The other shift in atmosphere had to do with the war with Iraq. Pictures of martyrs, men who had died in the war with Iraq, on city billboards were ever-present reminders of the conflict. The city became a cemetery. The atmosphere of violence, the slogans of national pride, the hatred of the enemy, and the destruction of war was everywhere. Questions about life, death, and my place in this strange new world loomed large in my mind.

In addition to a reverence for nature, my family has always been interested in mystical philosophy and poetry. These interests also affected my worldview and are the reason I interpret my surroundings in visual and literary language. I became familiar with Rumi's verses, *Shahnameh (The Book of Kings)* and many other literary works, which are some of the most frequently referenced spiritual, poetic, mythological, and philosophical works in Iranian art and culture. As a child, these books were difficult to understand but I grew up hearing these poems and stories so often that they became embedded in my soul.

Many of these works metaphorically talk about spiritual transcendence, the connection between humans and nature, and the power of nature. Mythical characters such as Simorgh, Gordafarid, and Seyavash appear frequently in stories as spiritual messiahs. These mystical stories contrasted sharply with the strictly Islamic environment I was seeing every day. So, the religious atmosphere pulled me in one direction, while my interest in Persian mysticism pulled me in a totally different direction. This tension led me to question my place in the world and how to connect with my inner world, my spiritual self, and the most powerful form of my being.

While I was absorbing all of this mystical poetry, nature, and religion and contemplating how I connected to these things, painting and music became my wings to fly. Connecting to my soul through visual expression was the most effective way for me to transmit my ideas and questions, even though these creative activities had to be conducted in a secretive way. Art helps me perceive the world's mysteries, explore nature, and experience the flow state. In flow, I am immersed in the moment; I go on an inner journey that reconnects me with my mind, soul, and spirit.

2 FLOW

Flow is a term used to describe all kinds of things: biological and geological processes, mysterious dimensions of human behavior, mythical cosmic connections, and even media consumption behavior. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi originated the concept of flow as a psychological state; he defines it as “the process of total involvement with life.”¹ When one is in the flow state, he says, “Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant; or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears; and the sense of time becomes distorted.”² He also says in his book *Optimal Experience* that, “This inner dynamic of the optimal experience is what drives the self to higher and higher levels of complexity. It is because of this spiraling complexity that people describe flow as a process of ‘discovering something new.’”³ Therefore, flow happens when an experience generates a feeling of energized focus, but it could also be a component to the processes that lead to self-growth, spiritual enlightenment, and transcendence, “discovering something new,” as Csikszentmihalyi proposes.

“Flow resembles the meditative state in many ways; both approaches to self-awareness integrate and consolidate a deep concentration state with consciousness. Intentions, emotions, the senses, and thought processes focus on the same aim. In a flow state, humans experience harmony, just as the yogi experiences a feeling of spiritual peace while meditating or, in my culture, as the Sufi performs the steps of the ceremonial Sama dance. As Csikszentmihalyi observes, “When the flow episode is over, one feels more ‘together’ than before, not only

¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), xi.

² *Ibid.*, 71.

³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30.

internally but also concerning, respecting other people and the world in general.”⁴

The concept of flow has been very useful to my studio practice. Learning about the connections between flow and the spiritual realm helped me find other connections, such as those between myself and nature. I also experienced flow in my studio. Printmaking is technical, repetitive, and meditative. It requires sustained focus. I have found that flow through printmaking helps reconnect me with my talent for visual memory that I had when I was younger. In this body of work, *The Seven Valleys*, I am thinking about flow in two ways. First, my images are a physical manifestation of the flow experiences I had during the making of the work. Second, I am creating an atmosphere within the gallery that invites viewers to join me in a spiritual experience.

⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 41.



Figure 1: The Fourth Valley: Detachment
Installation view: Plexiglass screenprinted panel, video projection, viewer's shadow

Simorgh is one of the main ideal characters in my pieces created by silk-screening overlapping, repeating, mirrored abstracted images of birds onto Plexiglass. The birds reference

the *Shahnameh*, the Persian epic poem in which the mythical Simorgh bird symbolizes transcendence. My bird forms use the technique of mirroring, or symmetry, to visualize the harmonious structures found in nature. Mirroring also creates visual flow, as the images repeat and echo back on themselves in a composition that moves the eye in a spiral pattern similar to the Sama dance. I also layer images multiple times in each panel to create organic, swirling forms that echo the Sama dance. I experienced flow as I was making the piece, spending many hours printing the detailed bird images over and over. In the finished piece, viewers could walk around the giant sheets of Plexiglass; their bodies cast shadows that overlapped and mixed with the shadows from my printed images and videos. I used all these ideas to create movement and, therefore, flow in the final exhibition.

3 THE INEFFABLE

Before moving to Atlanta for my graduate studies, I lived for two years in Bandrawella, Sri Lanka. Bandrawella is one of the greenest Sri Lankan cities and sits in the southern region of the country. My house was on top of a hill surrounded by a few temples, a church, and a mosque. In the distance, I could hear the city's hubbub: children playing at the local school and trains arriving and leaving the nearby railway station.

Many of my neighbors were Buddhist and Hindu people who followed their religion's teachings and lived an extremely simple lifestyle. The chanting of monks, the melodic chirps of cricket songs, the sounds of leaves dancing, and the wind hissing over the grass, night and day, combined to form a natural symphony. When the heavy tropical rains came, I could smell the rich moist scent of the woods and soil. As I walked in the forest-like garden, my bare feet splashed through puddles and squished in the mud and wet grass. All these sensory experiences in nature filled me with peace and brought me to a place of harmony with my surroundings. I was filled with lightness.

The spiritual experiences are, to me, the essence of ineffability: engaging with the world as colors, the world as smells, the world as taste, the world as sound, and the world as poetry. These forces combine to form a whole, a form of consciousness that connects to a higher cosmic intelligence. To understand these ideas better, I read a book called *Senses of Mystery: Engaging with Nature and the Meaning of Life*⁵ by the philosopher David E. Cooper. Cooper's writings mirrored my experiences living in Sri Lanka. His descriptions of how we all uniquely conceptualize nature and experience the natural world helped me understand the mysterious side

⁵ David E. Cooper, *Sense of Mystery: Engaging with Nature and the Meaning of Life* (Routledge. Routledge, 2018), chapter one.

of humanity and our relationship to nature. His words gave me the tools to express my ideas and experiences.

My experiences in Sri Lanka were an awakening into ineffability. Since then, I consciously seek the ineffable in various ways. Dance is one form of connection. When I dance, I connect with the ineffable, I control my space, but by linking to the harmonious flow of other people I also feel out of control. I am in the flow state. Part of my mind remains rooted in the present; another part becomes absorbed into the ineffable. I am no longer fully in control of my actions but surrender to the flow state. I experience both fear at my lack of control and fearlessness as I lose myself in the dance.

Printmaking is another way I connect to the ineffable. In the process of creating print pieces, I am on a journey, an exploration into my imagination and senses. Printmaking is all about experience, repetition, movement, and connection with the tools. The repetitive mark-making channels my awareness into my senses. I immerse myself into the repeated movements and scratchy sounds of etching a copper plate, the familiar chemical scents of the inks and acids, the feel of damp paper and smooth stone. The immersive sensory experience disconnects me from the material present, my current time and place, the here-and-now; I become completely absorbed in the printmaking process.



Figure 2: Flow
Intaglio, drypoint, and monoprint on Kozo paper and paper made by the artist

Printmaking is also about chance and accidents. I can never completely control the results of my work. I am continuously negotiating with unseen forces that unpredictably affect the printmaking process. There is a quote from a poem by the medieval Persian writer Saa'di of Shiraz that resonates here: “with the natural processes like growth and decay, where sun and moon, wind and cloud, a power bigger than us and universe at work.”⁶ This lack of control is similar to what I experience when I dance and is part of the reason I enjoy being a printmaker. By surrendering to and taking advantage of printmaking’s mysterious and unpredictable qualities, I touch the ineffable.

⁶ Saadi Shirazi, *The Gulistan of Saa'di*, 1258 A.C.E.

The artist James Turrell profoundly affected my thinking about art and the ineffable and is one reason I decided to include video in my final installation. Turrell's light works offer viewers a chance to experience the ineffable through the reverential, quiet installations he creates. He uses light and space to help us explore how we experience light, color, and space. His works are deeply moving, spiritual experiences. Some of his pieces also use repeated geometrical shapes to fully immerse the viewer.



*Figure 3: James Turrell's Ganzfeld: Double Vision (2013)
Photo: Florian Holzherr / Courtesy of Ekebergparken / Copyright James Turrell*

In my video work, *Ineffable*, I incorporate light, dance, printmaking, and mark-making techniques to represent the process of surrendering to ineffability and flow. The repetitive movements of my body in the video are inspired by a form of spiritual Sufi dance called Sama. In the Sama, the movements are intended to help the dancer achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Viewers can also see images of my etchings, along with bodies actively making large gestural marks with charcoal and images of birds flying and flocking together. These images all move, combine, overlap, and repeat to capture and share an ineffable flow experience.



Figure 4: Stills from Ineffable video

4 MYTHICAL/MYSTICAL CREATURES

Albert Einstein believed that human spirituality exists in three stages, the most advanced stage being mystical experiences and transcendence.⁷ In my experience, the flow state is one way of achieving Einstein's third stage, and in my work, mythical and mystical creatures' function as symbols for the transcendent state.

Myths were one of the earliest ways that humankind has attempted to explain the ineffable. As each culture became aware of the enormity of its cosmic isolation and the uncertainty of its survival, it developed myths and belief systems to comprehend the universe's random crashing forces and to rationalize inexplicable patterns. I am inspired by the power of myths and mystical stories and their power to help us perceive the physical and spiritual world. I use mythical creatures drawn from these stories as metaphorical, visual language to illustrate abstract concepts like spirituality, transcendence, and the ineffable.

Abstract images of bird-like creatures in my work reference the Persian 12th century poem *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid al-din Attar⁸. Attar's work is based upon the earlier story *Shahnameh*, which is well-known throughout my home country; its teachings and characters are sacred, they permeate Persian culture. In *The Conference of the Birds*, the birds of the world go in search of their king, the *Simorgh*, a mythical Persian bird similar to the phoenix in Greek mythology. The image below is an example of one version of the story created around 1600CE. The illustration shows the birds before they depart on their quest of spiritual perfection.

⁷ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1982).

⁸ Farid Ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds* (Continuum, 2000), Chapter 3.



Figure 5: “The Concourse of the Birds”, Folio 11r from a Mantiq al-tair (Language of the Birds) ca. 1600

Painting by Habiballah of Sava

Image credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451725>

The story begins with all the world’s birds gathering for a conference. One by one, they arrive with glorious, colorful, and magnificent crowns and resplendent tails. They decide that the nation of birds needs a king—the Simorgh, who lives beyond the mountain chain that encircles the known world. In order to locate their new ruler, the birds must fly through seven valleys: the valley of search, the valley of love, the valley of knowledge, the valley of unity, the valley of

contentment, the valley of wonderment, and the valley of true poverty. These valleys represent the stations that a Sufi or any individual must pass through to attain spiritual enlightenment.

Each valley brings the birds one step closer to finding the Simorgh, but each valley is also fraught with its own obstacles and challenges which push the birds to the edges of their endurance. The journey's many hardships (predators, hunger, heat, thirst) overtake many of the birds, forcing them to drop out of the quest. Each bird represents a unique human characteristic: the Hoopoe bird is a leader, the Nightingale symbolizes a seeker for spiritual immortality, and the Peacock symbolizes a fallen soul.

When the birds finally reach the Simorgh's dwelling place, only thirty birds are left. They find a lake in the final valley, on top of the Simorgh's mountain. When they look down into the water, they see their own reflections and understand that their oneness is the Simorgh. The meaning of Simorgh in Farsi (Persian) is thirty birds. This story is widely shared in my culture to teach ideals such as reverence for nature, humanity's interconnectedness, and the relationship between humans and nature. The story also has special significance for me; it symbolizes my spiritual journey and my connection with nature.

When I start a new piece, I think about all of the stories and myths I have read or learned. I flip through my memory for images of animals seen in nature and in dreams. From these image banks, I instinctively and organically begin to draw animal forms. I use an additive and reductive process to refine the animal shape until it matches the ideal, I have created in my mind. These animal forms are not naturalistic renderings; rather, they are creatures undergoing metamorphosis. I bring together this organic animal chaos through the techniques previously described: symmetry, overlapping, and repeating images to create a unified, yet still organic, visual order. In this way, the animal forms illustrate the process of becoming, of movement, of

nature's dynamism. The shape-shifter forms symbolize the cyclical rhythm of the universe: birth/metamorphosis/death/rebirth.

There is another connection between animals and humans that I find inspiring. In his book *Animals and the Origins of Dance*, classics scholar Steve Lonsdale explains that early human dance was based on people's observations of the movements of animals: "the animal in action... carries over into dance in choreographic imitation incorporating strength, and magical power."⁹ Dance has the unique ability to elevate human experience and connect us to nature; the rhythmic movements of dance help us enter a flow state. As Lonsdale states, "power and imagination combine in a complex and seemingly endless array of patterns to serve, honour, and reflect the infinite mystery."¹⁰

⁹ Steve Lonsdale, *Animals and the Origins of Dance* (Thames and Hudson, 1982), 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

5 THESIS EXHIBITION

The Seven Valleys was an immersive multimedia installation comprised of screen-print and mixed media on Plexiglass panel, video, sound, shadow, light, performance, and audience's interactions with their shadows. These elements are combined to illustrate the experience of psychological flow, involvement in the present moment and attaining spiritual enlightenment by following a path of seven steps to perfection (*The Seven Valleys*).

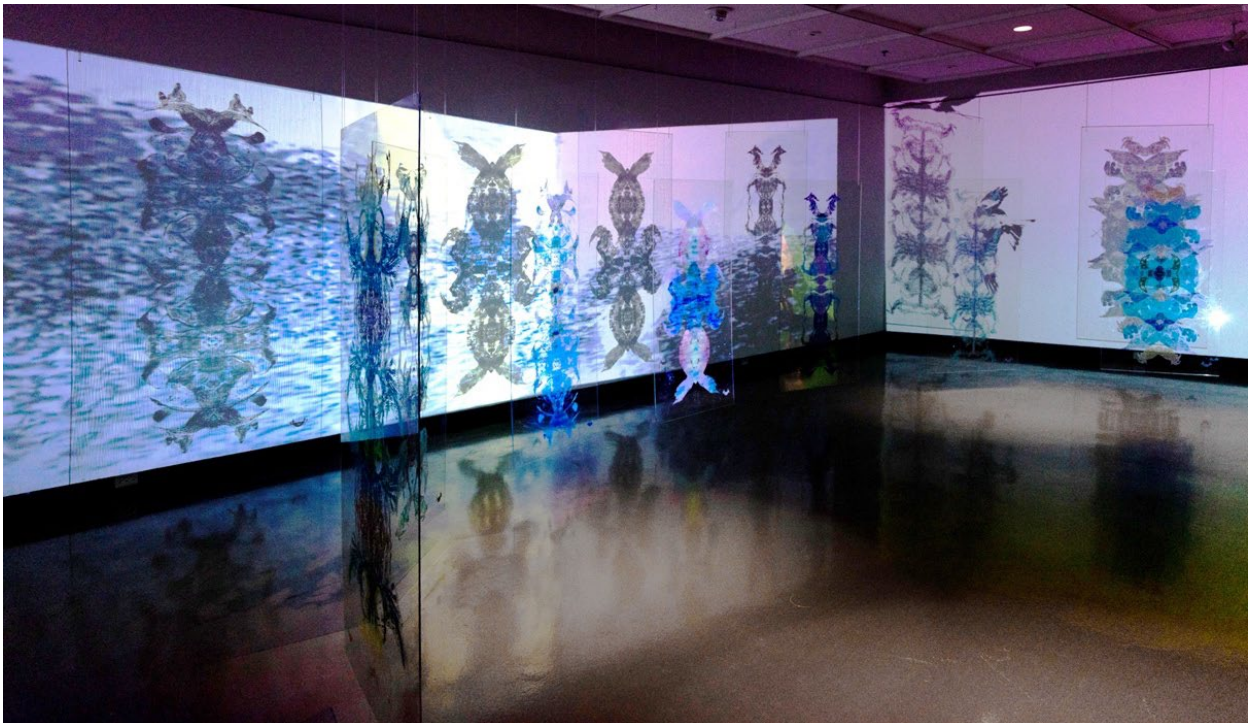


Figure 6: Installation view
Photo credit: Travis Dodd

The atmosphere created in the gallery space invited viewers to share an immersive moment of ecstasy, unity, and connection between viewers, their shadows, projected images, and my printed works. *The Seven Valleys* installation was built around of seven Plexiglass panels. Each panel was screen-printed with an image I created to correspond and respond to each of the

seven valleys in Attar’s story. These images are biomorphic and abstractly reference nature, birds, and animals. I installed the panels following a symmetrical and round shape, which references both the Sama dance and the circular flows of nature. I spaced the panels out mathematically and decided on each panel’s exact placement based on my personal journey in the rectangular gallery space. Each panel contains bird imagery at the top and bottom to signify the birds’ journey and the panels’ sequence is based on the concept in Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*; each panel is titled with the name of one step in Attar’s story. These steps describe the challenges the birds undergo during their spiritual journey.

Table 5.1 A table explaining the valley's meaning, panel imagery and symbolism

Panel/Valley	Valley Meaning	Panel Imagery and Symbolism
1	<i>The Valley of Quest:</i> Where the Wayfarer’s heart is cleansed and their spiritual quest begins, casting aside all dogma, belief, and unbelief.	I repeatedly layered a photograph of a gathering of people in Sri Lanka, practicing group meditation. The layering resulted in wing-like forms. This gathering was an important early experience in my own spiritual journey.
2	<i>The Valley of Love:</i> Where reason is abandoned for the sake of love. The fire of love, causing pain and	The bird-like images on this panel emerged serendipitously as I was peeling paper off a lithograph. This lucky coincidence echoes the Valley of Love’s requirement to abandon reason.

	madness reveals the world of spirit.	
3	<p><i>The Valley of Knowledge:</i></p> <p>This is the last limited valley, where worldly knowledge becomes utterly useless. The Wayfarer begins to face the mystery contained within divinity's revelation.</p>	This panel contains visual references to elephants, animals that are associated with wisdom and memory.
4	<p><i>The Valley of Detachment:</i></p> <p>Where the Wayfarer is endowed with wealth and power of the spiritual world gives up all desires and attachments to the world. Here, what is assumed to be "reality" vanishes.</p>	I created this panel as I was processing my sister's passing. The imagery used for the initial intaglio print, later turned into silkscreen for the Plexiglass panel, was a photograph of a funeral in Sri Lanka. Interesting forms of skulls and bird heads and wings appeared as I peeled the print off the plate and layered the silkscreened images.
5	<p><i>The Valley of Unity:</i></p> <p>Where the Wayfarer realizes that everything is connected and that the Beloved is beyond everything, including</p>	The bird images on this panel are pulled from various, earlier silkscreen prints. Combining these pieces into a new work was my way of enacting this valley's theme.

	harmony, multiplicity, and eternity.	
6	<i>The Valley of Wonderment:</i> Where, entranced by the beauty of the Beloved, the Wayfarer becomes conscious of the vastness and glory of creation and finds that he/she has never known or understood anything.	The original print I based this panel on contains images of butterflies. Here, I am using the idea of the “moth to the flame” to symbolize the experience of beholding nature’s glory. In Persian poetry, the butterfly is also a symbol of selfless love and sacrifice.
7	<i>The Valley of Spiritual Richness:</i> Where the self disappears into the universe and the Wayfarer becomes timeless, existing in both the past and the future.	This panel combines imagery of butterfly wings, my sister’s face, and the surface of a lake. I combined all these elements to signify my sister’s passage into the spiritual plane of existence. She is now united with nature.

To develop my concept in the gallery space, I focused on layering strategies: The Plexiglass panels were only one layer, onto which I then applied video projections. I projected two videos onto three gallery walls with four projectors. The largest wall was covered by video shown from two projectors that split up the same video so that it could be shown on a bigger scale and cover the whole wall. This video, called *Ineffable*, was a video collage that consisted of

figures dancing, bird murmuration, floating body parts, and manipulated sounds of breathing, water flowing, and bird noises. The two side wall videos were of birds flying.



Figure 7: Installation view
Photo credit: Travis Dodd



Figure 8: Installation view

These elements of light, color, and movement combined with viewers' shadows to create a space that continually varied and changed. By using these irregular techniques, harmonizing viewers' interactions with various surfaces, I created an atmospheric space with a sense of mystery and interesting visual accidents that resulted in unique, ever-changing images. When viewers could walk behind or in front of the panels; either way, they could see different images based on changes in the videos.

In my show each viewer becomes like one of Attar's wayfaring birds. Some viewer-wayfarers stayed for a long, contemplative time; some of them visited, left, and came back a few times; still others only stayed for a brief period. The time that viewer-wayfarers spent in my show seemed to indicate how many of the valleys they have experienced in their own lives. Some of them played with their shadows to become part of the piece, while others felt

overwhelmed or intimidated and quickly left the space. I believe these viewer interactions demonstrate my connection with my audience, and how all of us wayfarers can experience unity and spirituality together.

The Seven Valleys took viewers on my spiritual journey. Many visitors said they experienced all of their emotions at once; others said they felt like they were being forced to confront their deepest feelings. Still others reported feeling intimidated, overwhelmed, sorrowful, comfortable, safe, meditative, happy, or fearful. I saw some viewers crying, while others explained how they were feeling. The environment I had created took viewers on an emotional journey; they had become wayfarers. Rumi's very important verse vividly illustrates the experience many viewers shared: "The universe is not outside of you. Look inside yourself; everything that you want, you already are."¹¹ In other words, everything in the universe is within you. Ask all from yourself.

Another component of *The Seven Valleys* was a performance I gave at the show's reception. Creating this show, overall, was a very awakening and spiritual experience; I began to see all the interconnections between me, my viewers, my colleagues, and my surroundings. Three months before the exhibition, my young sister, Nazila, left this world suddenly and shockingly. The work took on a new dimension—that of helping me grieve this loss.

¹¹ From *Divan-i-Shams Tabrizi* by Rumi, 1247 CE



*Figure 9: Wayfarer performance view
Photo courtesy of Cynthia Farnell*

The performance happened on April 7. Earlier that day, I had a very profound conversation with one of my peers, Emily Albee. We each shared our feelings of grief over the sisters we had lost. This conversation is etched in my mind because I had found someone who had an experience similar to mine. This day was incredibly significant for me because it was a

way for me to say goodbye to my beloved sister. It was also a significant day for Emily: April 7 was her sister, Angela's, birthday.

In the performance, I metamorphosed into a bird through costuming and video projection mapping. I also borrowed some of my spiraling body movements from the Sama dance, which is used in Sufi culture as a form of spiritual cleansing and purification. The video contained images of my sister's face, my body dancing, and birds flocking. Video was accompanied by the sound of my sister Arezoo reading her poetry. As viewers entered the gallery, Lizzy Storm handed each person a piece of paper printed with Arezoo's poem (in Farsi and English).



Figure 10: Wayfarer exhibition performance

Arezoo and I were not able to be with our sister when she passed. This performance was my way of saying goodbye to Nazila, just as Arezoo's poem is her way of saying goodbye. Sharing my emotions with the audience and feeling their empathic energy focused on me helped me process my feelings of grief and depression. This day celebrated Nazila and Angela's spirits. I call it "Ineffable Spirits Unity Day."



Figure 11: Installation view detail: Nazila's face

Here is the text I gave to viewers as they entered my performance in the gallery. It includes a note from me as well as one of my sister's poems, translated into English by me.

Hello wayfarer
 Thanks for joining me in my exhibition!
 This show is named TheSevenValleys or Haft-Vádf (in Farsi). I want to bring your attention to the last Valley. This Valley/panel is about my beloved sister, one of the most beautiful spirits who flew recently in my motherland! Her name is Nazila! My other sister, Arezoo and I have not had a chance to take our beloved sister's hand and say goodbye!

This short performance is for honoring her name, saying goodbye, and letting her to be free!

Poetry: Arezoo M. Fard
 Translation: Darya M. Fard and Lizzy Storm

You were taken so early, where did you go
 I made a home with sadness and sorrow

Your flame consumed the candle of my heart
 My soul and being has burned and I became like a moth to the flame

You were the wine! Now I am an empty chalice!
 I cannot remember, how to be drunk and in love,

Your being intoxicated me in my solitude! Now!
 Everyone calls me a drunkard

You can watch me now from the eternity!
 See how my soul has lost its way

You were the flower! Now!
 I am hallucinating on the memory of your scent

You were the happiness! Now!
 The smile I had from you has gone away

We shared the breath of life
 Now I breath for us both! Thanks!

بنی تو ام، جانما! کجا رفتی و من
 با غل و خرن، بمنازه شدم
 چیکر شمع دلم، آتشی زدی
 روح و جانم سوخت، پروانه شدم
 مستی و دلدادگی یادم بر رفت
 بنی شرابِ مست، پیانه شدم
 کج خلوت با تو بودم شد و مست
 انجمن کوید که دیوانه شدم
 زان سرکوی ازل، من را کنکر
 بنی تو با هر دوست، بیگانه شدم
 عطر کلهای تبت، شد خاطره
 با خیال و یاد، مستانه شدم
 سهم از لبند تو، پیمان گرفت
 هم نفس! بنی تو چه ویرانه شدم

Figure 12: Wayfarer performance hand-out

6 CONCLUSIONS

This body of work is my largest installation to date that combines printmaking, shadow, and video. I had experimented with layering these techniques only once before; during my thesis year I developed and improved my abilities with each individual technique to create a truly immersive experience for viewers. In this endeavor, I was successful. Viewers became fellow wayfarers and traveled an emotional, spiritual journey with me.

I feel that I have developed a method in *The Seven Valleys* that works well for the kind of art experience I want to create. The kind of experience I want viewers to have is emotional and psychological. I want them to disconnect from their everyday lives, to help them shift focus to their interior world. Using the layering techniques and immersive installations, I can also continue to seek my place in the universe and look for enlightenment.

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APPENDIX A: THE SEVEN VALLEYS

1. *The Valley of Quest:*

Where the Wayfarer's heart is cleansed and their spiritual quest begins, casting aside all dogma, belief, and unbelief.

2. *The Valley of Love:*

Where reason is abandoned for the sake of love. The fire of love, causing pain and madness reveals the world of spirit.

3. *The Valley of Knowledge:*

This is the last limited valley, where worldly knowledge becomes utterly useless. The Wayfarer begins to face the mystery contained within divinity's revelation.

4. *The Valley of Detachment:*

Where the Wayfarer endowed with wealth and power of the spiritual world gives up all desires and attachments to the world. Here, what is assumed to be "reality" vanishes.

5. *The Valley of Unity:*

Where the Wayfarer realizes that everything is connected and that the Beloved is beyond everything, including harmony, multiplicity, and eternity.

6. *The Valley of Wonderment:*

Where, entranced by the beauty of the Beloved, the Wayfarer becomes conscious of the vastness and glory of creation and finds that he/she has never known or understood anything.

7. *The Valley of Spiritual Richness:*

Where the self disappears into the universe and the Wayfarer becomes timeless, existing in both the past and the future.

APPENDIX B: THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

To everyone's surprise, the Simorgh is not at all as the party expect; faced as they find themselves not with a beautiful – not to mention much anticipated - mystical being, but rather a mirror of their own image: 'And all who come before My splendor see/Themselves, their own unique reality...Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,/It is yourselves you see and what you are.'

The Simorgh continues, ending his revelatory speech with these words:

How much you thought you knew and saw; but you

Now know that all you trusted was untrue.

Though you traversed the Valley's depths and fought

With all the dangers that the journey brought,

The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –

You slept secure in Being's inmost shrine.

And since you came as thirty birds, you see

The Simorgh, Truth's last flawless jewel, the light

In which you will be lost to mortal sight

Dispersed to nothingness until once more

You find me in the selves you were before.'

Then, as they listened to the Simorgh's words,

A trembling dissolution filled the birds –

The substance of their being was undone,

And they were lost like shade before the sun;

Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.

The Simorgh ceased to speak, and silenced reigned.