The otherness among Other

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Table of contents

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Sajad Amini

Examining subjectivity and its association with a relocated body in diasporic circumstances has become the core concept of my work as an artist. I attempt to justify my own *Being* and comprehend the reflection of it through the framework of the *Other*. The historical discourse of otherness is embedded in Hegelian self-consciousness dialectic, which views the self as an impotent entity in recognition of itself. It also introduces the necessity of the Other in the process of the self composing its subjectivity. Although post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers later disputed this dichotomization in the structure of dialectic, the essence of *Othering*[1] remains as a human cultural and historical residue.

Through my research, I have become interested in the dialectic of subjectivity and alterity within society. The inevitability of acknowledging the Other for the subject to recognize its selfhood which defines an individual identity, depends on an individual relationship with the society. As Jeffry L. Powell, an American scholar in his essay *Levinas Representing Husserl on Representation* remarks, the very notion of subjectivity arises only because the subject is responding to the Other, who is prior to the subject in the sense that the other makes possible the transformation from subject to subjectivity (Sarukkai 1997).

Excavating historical and cultural contexts of subjectivity, for me, is an active phenomenological approach that dwells in social relationships. In my work, I'm mostly inspired by Jacques Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. Lacan's method to investigate selfhood and subjectivity compounded through the framework of phenomenology and structuralism. The phenomenological part is associated with the intentionality of consciousness and the active role (*Noesis*[2]) of humans to examine the experience of encountering a phenomenon. The latter stresses the prominent role of the structure of language in the construction of the Real (*Symbolic order*.) From a phenomenological standpoint, the self's dynamic status substantiates the idea of free will, which is later developed by existential phenomenologists such as Jean-Paul Sartre.

Subjectivity is erratic and unstable due to its constitution, which depends on constant examination of self and society. Unlike American psychologists such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, Jacque Lacan rejects the idea of emphasizing the ego and its strong association with the construction of subjectivity. For Lacan, there is no separation between self and society. He believes that subjectivity is not confined to 'the mind' but the whole being. It is impossible to isolate an individual's psychology from their personal history (Sarup 1993).

I was born in the first decade after Islamic Revolution. The dark era of post-revolution fatigue coincided with the Iran-Iraq war that lasted eight years. The external threat of war unified the nation while distracted them from internal fundamental changes after revolution. Sociopolitical upheaval escalated when the new system started to eliminate all its then allies. The machine of terror justified its destructive action by claiming a divergence in the ideological values of victims. A few decades later, the country is still suffering from a gap in time of the first decade after the revolution, making experiencing in the contemporary moment inaccessible. Here, the gap of contemporariness is a struggle between nostalgia and hope that leads to a crisis of identity. There are three main reasons for this limbo of time; 1. Posthumous nature of religion that justified worldly pain and postpones tranquility to the afterlife, 2. the history of power and prosperity attached to the Persian empire and its mythological trajectory, which have been stretched even to pre-revolution era, and 3. antagonizing of contemporary stereotypic Western culture.

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[1] Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. (Brons 2015)

[2] The intentional process of consciousness is called *noesis*, while its ideal content is called *noema*. The noema of an act of consciousness Husserl characterized both as an ideal meaning and as "the object *as* intended". Thus, the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended. (Smith 2016)

For me, the existential question arose when I researched the critical point of Iran's contemporary history through the 1979 referendum. I do believe that there is no well-defined beginning point in history and condemning specific moments of time as a point of departure for an occurrence would be a manner of ignorance. All incidences are the consequences of their precursors and the critical moment is just a fractional emergence of an entity of a rhizome. That being said, the propagated democratic nature of the Islamic revolution as an anti-colonialist movement became a turning point in the contemporary history of Iran. The Islamic Revolution unified a diverse range of opposition groups, from left communist to far-right religious, against the longstanding Western colonialists such as Great Britain and the United States.

The ballots of 1979 Iran Islamic revolution Referendum.
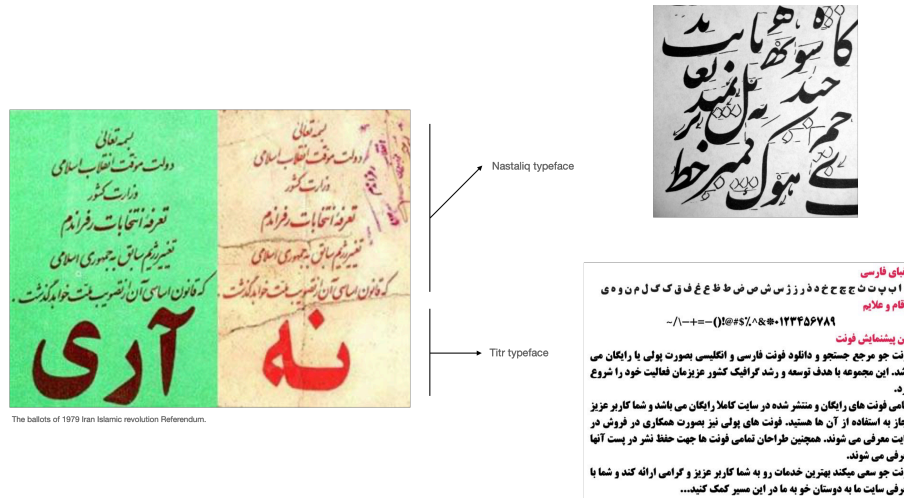
There is a specific linguistic momentum in the structure of the ballots that drew my attention. Announcing the forming of a new government became a question of *Yes* and *No* as listed on the referendum ballot of the 1979. The revolution conveyed an illusion of a democratic system and of freedom (Figure 1) with the phrase *"The constitution of the Islamic Republic will be announced later"* written with a small size Nastaliq typeface on the ballots. Historically, this script is primarily used in poetry and has an organic and decorative quality. Also, the organic and complex shapes of letters compromise this typeface's legibility, which is why it is usually incorporated in a sophisticated poetic context. The typeface of the words *Yes* and *No* is Titr, which became the written voice of the Shah regime's oppositions in announcements and newspaper's front page then. It is bold, strong, and straightforward, which makes it primarily legible (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frontpages of newspaper before 1979 revolution

Public participation was the most mythical aspect of the 1979 referendum. People, without knowing what they were voting for, cast their votes for "Yes" at the rate of 98.2% of those eligible. Since its formation, the IRI's incessant machine of terror has executed more than 12,000 people just in the first ten years for divergence with the revolution's value and has continued to suppress any form of dissent over the past 40 years. Nowadays, the connotative value of that dialectic has turned in the opposite direction, and *No* has become a symbol of hope.

Yes/No is a diptych; two paintings replicated the 1979 Iran referendum ballot (Figure 3). In this painting, I just depicted the words *Yes* and *No* while keeping the original ballot proportions and background color. For me, the vacant space on the top of the paintings intensifies experiencing the emptiness and meaningless of this dialectic of words.

Figure 3. Yes/No, Sajad Amini, 2019

The concrete sculpture of *Nah* is the second iteration of the piece *Yes/No*. The brutalist quality of the concrete becomes an embodiment of the word *Nah*, the modernist solution for creating structures that date back to the same era (Figure 4). The firm belief of a solid, well-defined, and rigid solution with a mythical hope in a bright and prosperous future that constitutes the infrastructure of modernism could be found in the concept of *Yes* of the 1979 revolution. The outcome of brutally dichotomized possibilities of *Yes* and *No* led to the emergence of the new regime's inconceivable entity. With exposing steel rebars, I tried to implement a mythical element of hope to the structure. In the rural regions of Iran and some other countries, sometimes, when a family constructs their home, they leave the rebars on the roof of a concrete structure, hoping that their descendants will build their new home over that first structure. It is part of the structure associated with identity. I believe exposed rebars are signifiers elements of hope in most cases since children leave their parental place to go after their future dream that they couldn't fulfill in that very structure. The similar concept could be found in Abraham Cruzvillegas works, Mexican artist. In his work, he calls the process of identification of construction as *autoconstrucción.* As he explains "Autoconstucción is about self-constructing or constructing your own house," adding, "I like the term because it leads me to think about the construction of identity."

Figure 4. Nah, Sajad Amini, 2021

Diasporic condition introduces a new aspect of subjectivity. As I mentioned before, subjectivity depends on culture, geographic juxtaposition, society, etc. In some cases, an individual is facing conflicts in the values of each of these paradigms. For instance, in relocating from Iran to the US, I left all intangible belonging that I grew up with behind and had to embrace new cultural values. In such a circumstance, I found my body as the only tangible entity that I could relocate. Observing the biological body of an individual in this process exposes the banality of the physical embodiment of the self that one carries every day (Figure 5). Yet conflicts in personal experiences and cultural values could remain with an individual in diaspora. In 2020 in United State, I remember the sound of flying fighter jets over the city saluting first responders during the Covid-19 pandemic which recollected the terrifying sound of fighter jets dropping bombs over the cities during the war for those communities who suffered it.

Figure 5. The Fountain, Sajad Amini, 2018

Being in the diaspora is being among the Other while experiencing the sense of otherness from one's own homeland. This displacement of the body due to social and political upheaval intensifies the sense of loss and lack of ownership. The ephemerality of cultural and geographical connections leads to the crisis of subjectivity. The only mutual element that you can carry in such circumstances is the body, the most banal object for every individual. The question we may ask here is, what is the authentic being when you are living in diaspora? You no longer belong to your homeland or culture, and you cannot identify yourself as part of the other that you're living with. If the subjectivity is the reflection of an integral entity of self and the Other, what is the unique potential of authentic being in diasporic identity?

Cultural assimilation could negatively impact the authenticity of subjectivity in a diasporic condition. Although in some circumstances the adoption of host community's cultural values could be executed voluntarily, for those cornered minorities, who have no other options, it becomes a means of oppression by the majority. In fact, forced assimilation implies not only a "superiority" of what is being imposed (language, values, etc.) but also oppression by those who impose it. The absolute form of oppression is when individuals or groups are identified by a single – real or imaginary – aspect of their identity. This is usually combined with punishment or discrimination against given identities and in general with trying to change one's identity by force and/or to impose a common unique identity with a very rigid definition and very strict rules to respect (Hieronymi 2005). In the work *Myth of civilization*, I tried to concentrate on the structure of language and how it could manipulate subjectivity through the process of cultural assimilation (Figure 6). There are two separate Beings for *A Dog* and a *Good Dog*, which could be identified with only adding an adjective. Here the word *Good* recontextualized the Being of a dog, detaches it from being an animal, and brings it into the world of civilized human interaction. Now a *Good Dog* is not a *Dog* and won't be an integral part of the human world. Its subjectivity is just a reflection of the demand of the Other.

Figure 6. The myth of civilization, Sajad Amini, 2021

The absurd quality of language has a prominent role in my artwork which I am trying to explore. The absurdity of language is not about its structural characteristic but its association with reality. We can find this a similar absurd

gap in Lacan's Register theory between the Symbolic order and the Real[3]. An illusion of a real-world constituted by the structure of language makes it impossible to access the Real. The absurdity of language reveals when it conveys an illusion of meaning with a clear image in the first place, but the meaning is never there. As Jacques Derrida explains in his linguistic theory, there is no truth behind the word, and the process of signification is incessant. He sees the sign as a structure of *differance*: half of it is always 'not there' and the other half is always 'not that'. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations. Signifier and signified relate as if they were two sides of the same sheet of paper. Indeed, there is no fixed distinction between signifiers and signified (Sarup 1993).

The intertextuality of language stretched a gap between the symbolic representation of a sign and its absurd association with the absence of meaning (the Real). There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality demands that we comprehend texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. The theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system. A text refers to "all other texts", these are seen, in turn, as converging with reality, both existing only in textualized form (Alfaro 1996). This characteristic of language intensifies the abstract aspect of it.

In the piece, *THIS IS A TRUE STORY*, a similar paradox is materialized (Figure 7). At first reading, the text makes total sense that the meaning is a factual story that has happened before, but the neon text's further interpretation reveals a paradox between words the *True* and *Story*. It's a doubling where the meaning could be something made up, or a narrative that someone relays. It can be true, it can be fiction. The continues light of the neon sign and interconnection between words and letters in this piece, intensifies the hermeneutic aspect of language for the viewer. The indefinable loop between the artwork and the spectator that they experience of reading the text alters their understanding. This comprehension further modifies their experiences again, which materializes the instability of the language and the never-ending process of signification. If the incident was real, why is it represented as a story? The story is an account of an occurrence through the language, which could not guarantee its real being. These speculative sub-narratives expose nature of intertextuality in language.

Figure 7. THIS IS A TRUE STORY, Sajad Amini, 2021

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[3] In the 1950s, Lacan tends to speak of the Real as an absolute fullness, a pure plenum devoid of the negativities of absences, antagonisms, gaps, lacks, splits, etc. Portrayed thusly, the Symbolic is primarily responsible for injecting such negativities into the Real. (Johnston 2018)

The absurdity of language does not confine to its intertextuality or *differance* characteristic of linguistic structure. Recontextualization of text and mythmaking are two other methods that expose the absurdity of language. Although the former is a necessity condition for the latter, I'm explaining them separately. By naming an object as an artwork, the history of Art apparatus recontextualizes it and introduces new aspects of the very object. Introducing a text as a painting or any other form of an art object, paves the way for interpretative possibilities in diverse contexts. Repetition and reproduction also help to recontextualize a sign and make a new myth. French philosopher Albert Camus's approach to existentialism through absurdism is noteworthy. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus builds an entire worldview on his central assumption that absurdity is an unsurpassable relationship between humans and their world (Aronson 2017). He postulates an inevitable divorce between human consciousness, with its "wild longing for clarity" and the "unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 2018). Camus interprets the world as illogical, which means that it is incomprehensible through reason and logic. (Aronson 2017)

In *Jesus is white*, I tried to reverse the process of recontextualization of a myth through repetition (Figure 8). The mythology of Jesus being White is associated with the historical context of the Western Christian thought, creating Iconography that has privileged the representation of whiteness. Although the religious history of Jesus goes back to the Middle East, the petrified myth could not accept his so-called race as a non-white individual. Thus, in the Western categorization of race, people from the Middle East (colonial label) are considered as a White race. I am curious how my subjectivity is tangled with the White representation of Jesus. This racial categorization does not grant any privilege to those minorities, and its sole aim is to differentiate the identity of Jesus and wash it out from other non-White races. Here imposing assimilation takes advantage of minority immigrant's identity to substantiate the host community's subjectivity.
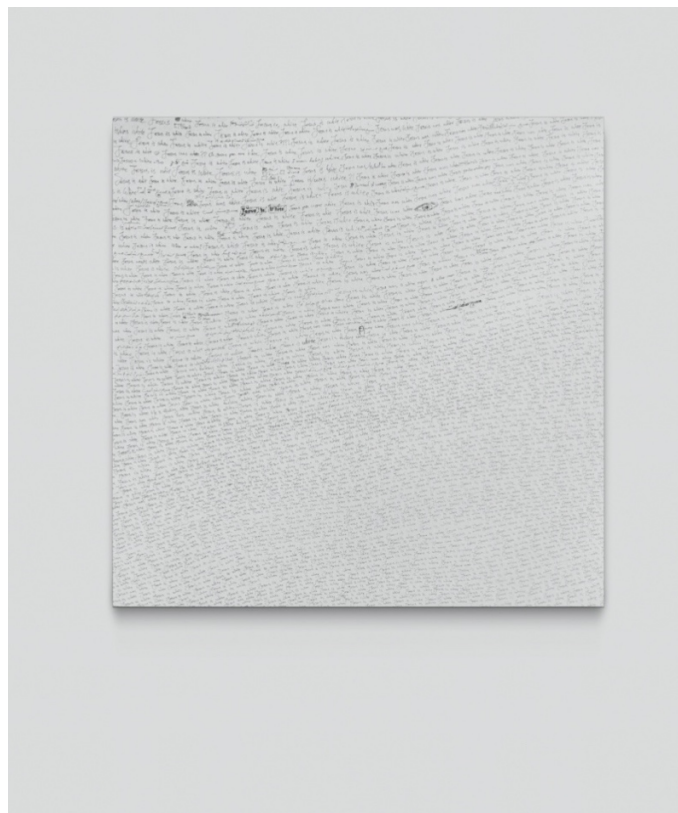

Figure 8. Untitled, Jesus is White, Sajad Amini, 2021

From a formal standpoint, repeating a single sentence for me is intentionally communicating with the unconscious mind. It is also and historical punishment in religious authorities that requires their apostates to rewrite some religious verse or textbook numerous times to believe in them. However, repeating the same action through time

develops into a habit that one may execute unconsciously. In this work, Sisyphean act of repeating *Jesus is White* is absurd but an existential endeavor of claiming this colonial labeling.

The structural instability of language encourages me to explore diasporic identity and crises of subjectivity through absurdist literature. The *trilogy of falling* is triptych transparent panels, each carrying a paragraph (Figure 9). The triangular structure of the hanging acrylic sheets provides enclosed space. There is no order of reading among three paragraphs, and the transparency of the panels conveys illusions of suspended text.

> *One step forward, two steps backward. Am I in proper position? Why do I need to slide to gauge the distance? // Two steps forward. Am I at a proper distance? Dissatisfaction // I want to see the edges, sharp and harsh. I'm thinking of distance in order to feel // One step backward. To feel the edges that define me. Where I'm from, the proper distance. Is what I see sharp though I perceive it as soft and blurry? The proportions. Who am I? Where do I stand? Disappointment. Why have you juxtaposed yourself with this distance? Who are you? Criticizing myself for being myself in order to identify my identity. Devastated. // Five steps backward. I see the edges as I draw closer to the edge. What if I fall? What if the distance keeps increasing as I get closer to the end of the act of falling? Failed.*

> - The trilogy of falling, Sajad Amini, 2018

Figure 9. Trilogy of falling, Sajad Amini 2021

The paragraph above from *the trilogy of falling,* questioning subjectivity, and identity through the metaphor of camera focusing process. Uta Barth, the German photographer, in an interview with Sabine Mirlesse says: "People often refer to my work as "out of focus" and I always counter that it is perfectly in focus, the camera just happens to be focused on an unoccupied point in space. So, I am photographing the volume of a room instead of its walls, the atmosphere of a rainstorm instead of the landscape the rain falls on." The apparatus of camera, regardless of

the agency and intention of photographer, always observes the full spectrum between focus and out-of-focus space. Capturing the blurry space indicate the process of democratizing through the subjective juxtaposition of the camera, which breaks the sharp edge of binary opposition among 'focus' and 'out-of-focus.'

The work *Trilogy of falling* is the installation of three paragraphs with the concept of identity in triangular structure. The transparent attribute of acrylic sheets makes text illegible from the outside and invites the viewer to walk inside the structure. Also, this transparency of material exposes outside space beyond the words and makes a connection between the real atmosphere of the site and the absurd context of the paragraphs. Through this combination of reality and absurdity with triangular installation, I attempt to create a liminal space for an unstable structure of identity.

Throughout my works, I attempt not to make a new sign. My endeavor is all about sharing the moment of hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty. The question of who am I? Defining the identity with discovering its connection with the history and trajectory of my personal life. I found language the most appropriate material for serving this purpose. The history of human efforts to defining all phenomena through the framework of language and yet its unstable structure provides me an opportunity to excavate the uncertain status of individual subjectivity.

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Artist statement

In my work, the issue of identity is a phenomenological attitude towards the authenticity of being, the incessant conscious endeavor of assessment of relation with the Other. Being in the diaspora is being among the Other while experiencing the sense of Otherness from one's own homeland. This displacement of the body due to social and political upheaval intensifies the sense of loss and lack of ownership. The ephemerality of cultural and geographical connections leads to the crisis of subjectivity. The existential reexamination of these connections to achieve the authentic potential of being is my artwork's core concept.

I fill up the gap of loss of ownership and crises of subjectivity by incorporating what I call monumental text. Although the meaning of language is an intangible entity, the myth of a monumental text's meaning deviates itself from the reality and literal translation of words. It exists in the structure of power. Because of its social and political affiliation, the monumental text has a significant impact on the issue of subjectivity and defining the self.

In a monumental text, the hermeneutic loop of meaning influences our understanding and reveals the absurdity of language. The experience of reading a text alters our understanding, and this comprehension again influences our experience of reading. There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text which makes this process infinite. A loop between the reader and text, the endless chain of the signification of language, and time, provides a three-dimensional liminal space that I want to experience and share with the spectator. This absurdity conveys a sensation of the Real, which we construct through the language's symbolic nature.

Artwork documentation

Trilogy of falling
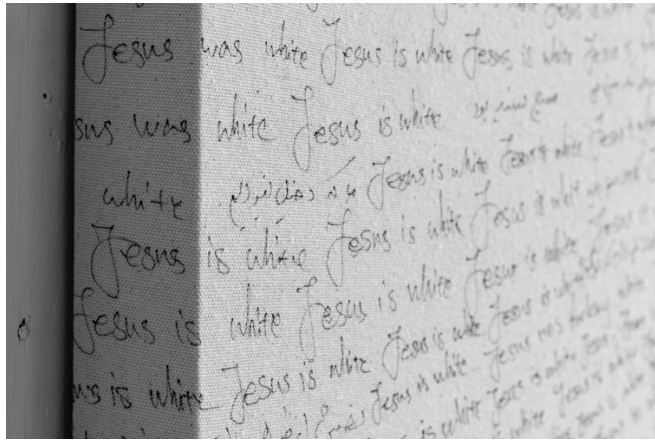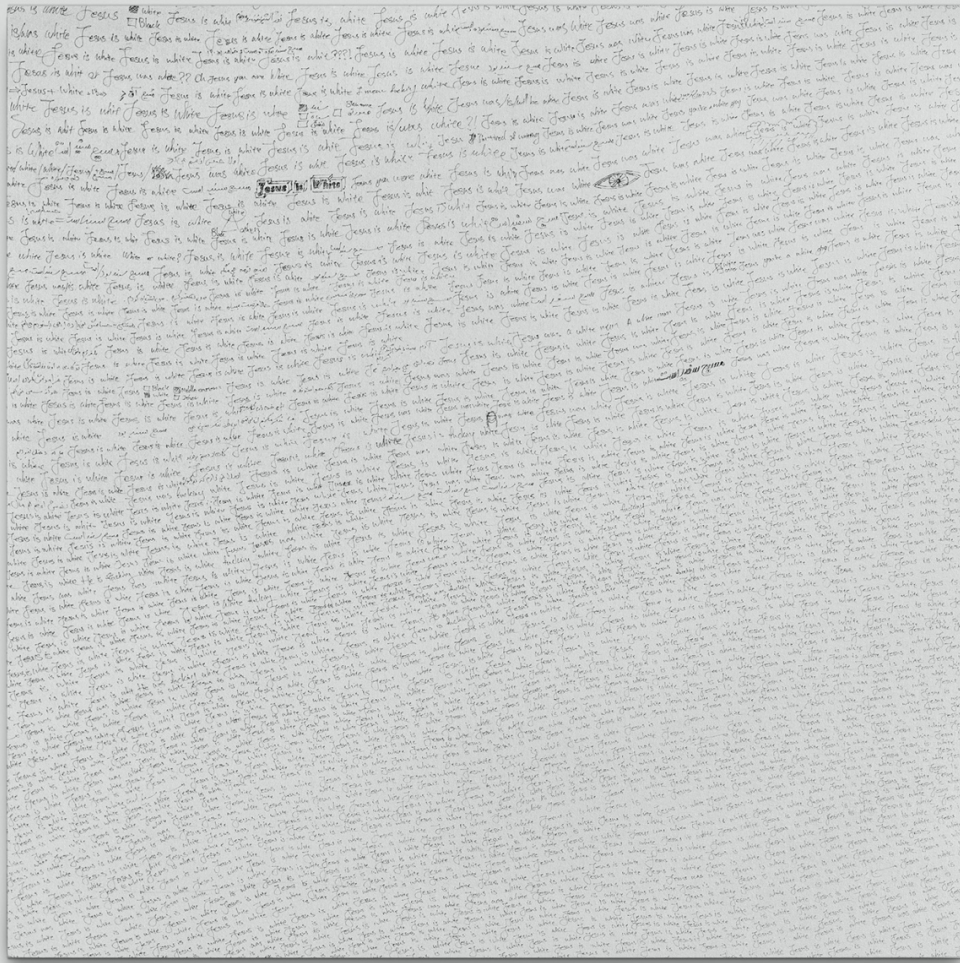*Acrylic sheets, vinyl letters and steel wires*
60" x 60" x 80", 2021

Nah
Concrete and rebars
60" x 42" x 13", 2021

THIS IS A TRUE STORY
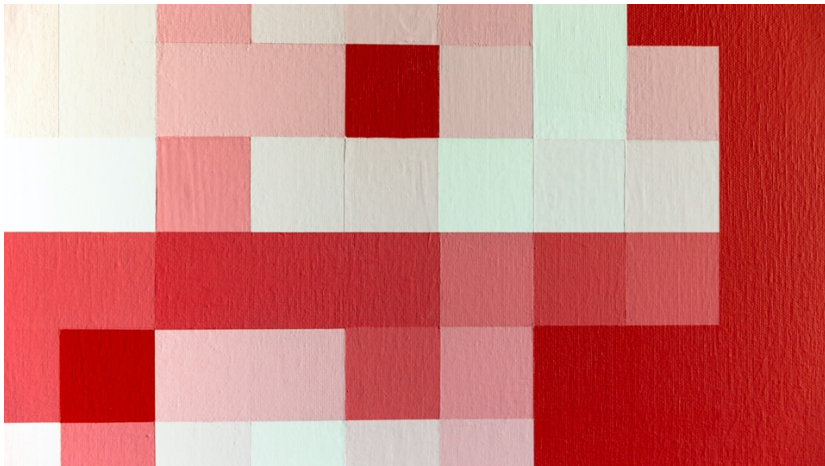*Glass neon lights, wires, transformers*
90" x 60" x 10", 2021

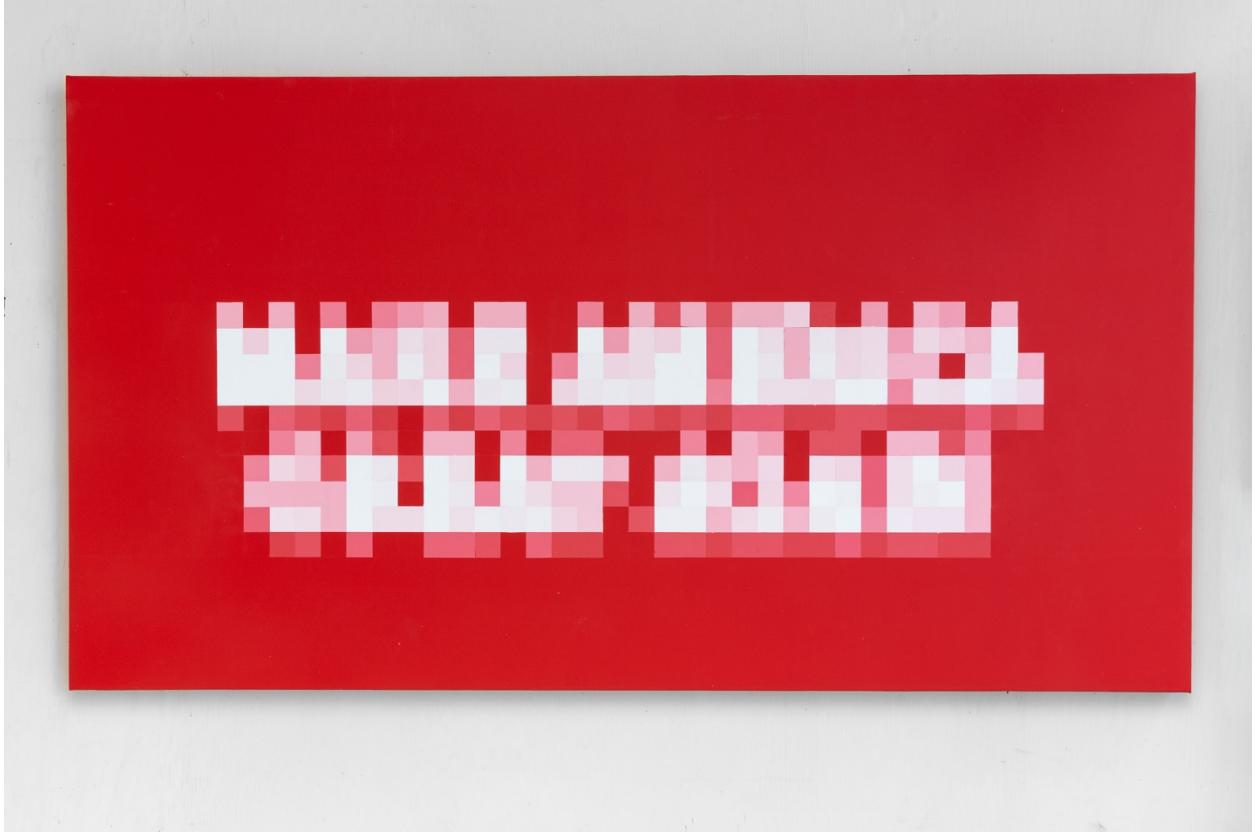**Jesus is White**
Ink on canvas
36" x 36" x 2", 2021

The myth of civilization
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 49", 2020

MAGA
Acrylic on canvas
70" x 35", 2019

Fountain
Inkjet print on luster paper
36" x 24", 2019

Yes/No
Acrylic on canvas
78" x 36", 2021
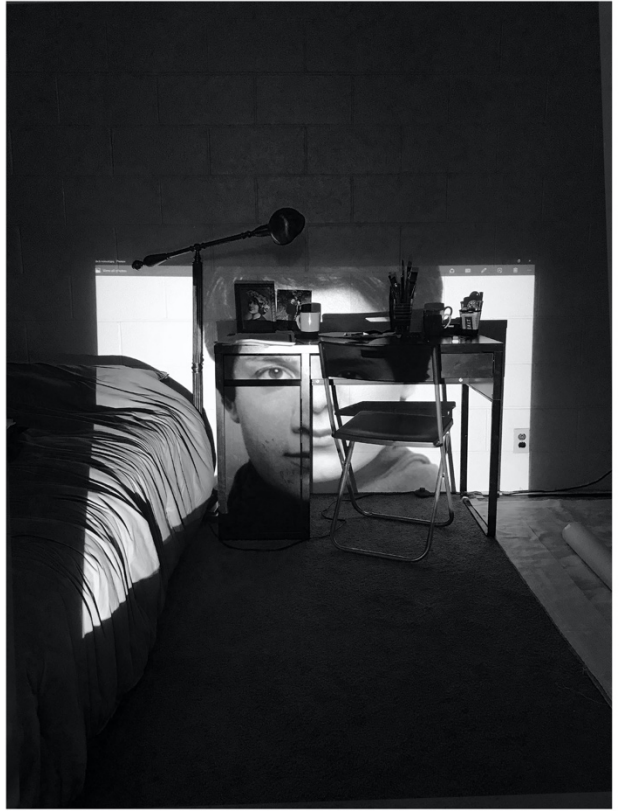
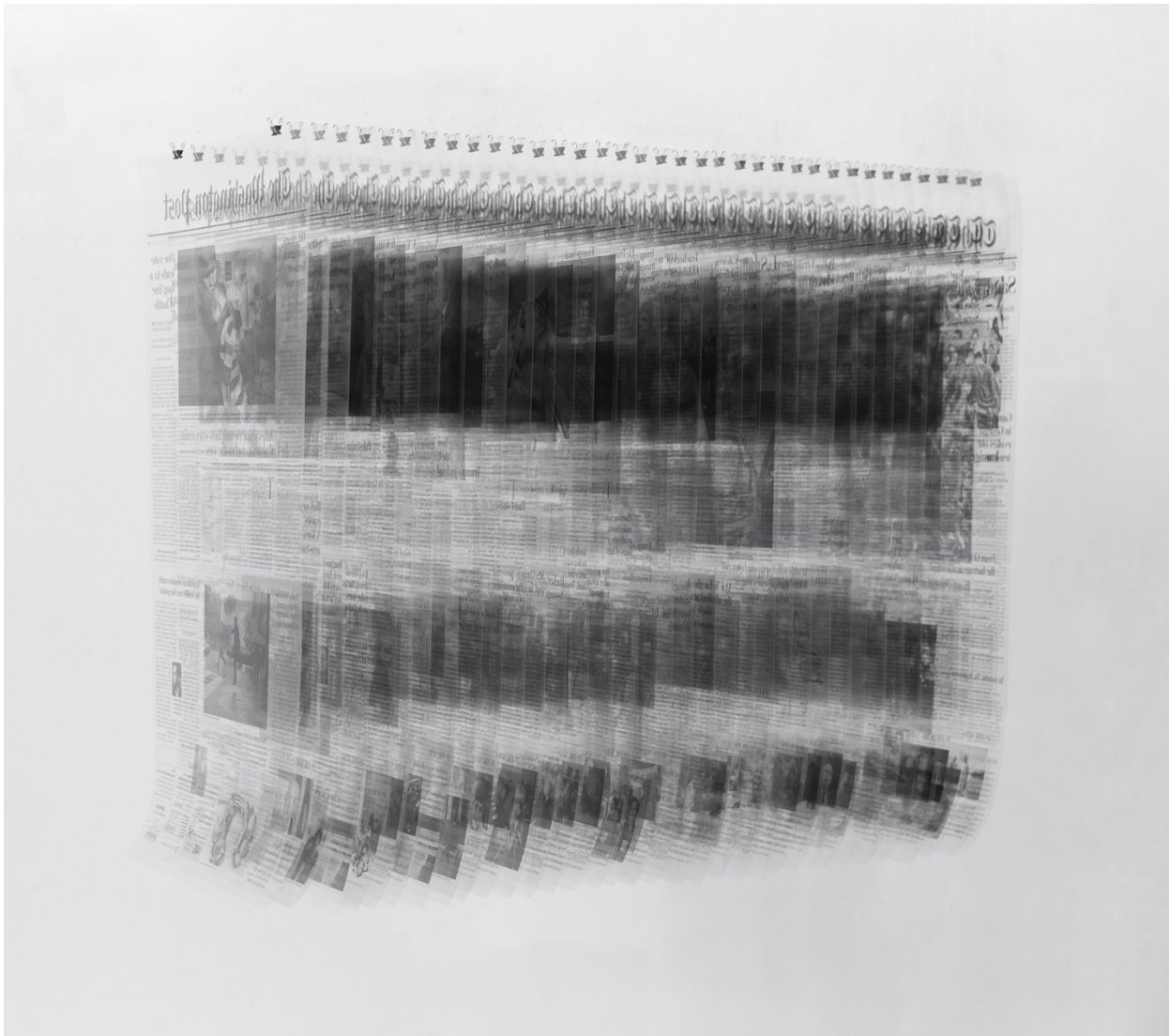**This is us**
Inkjet Print on luster paper
25" x 35", 2017
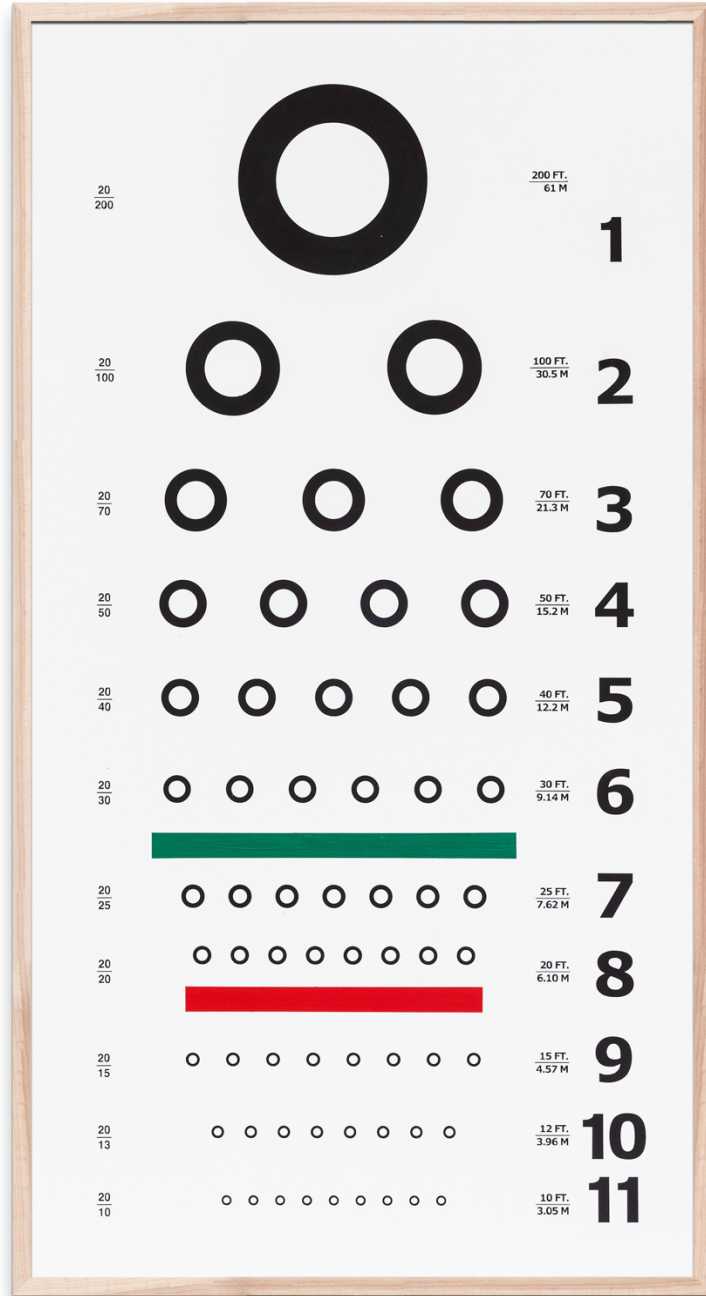
Translation
Acrylic on board
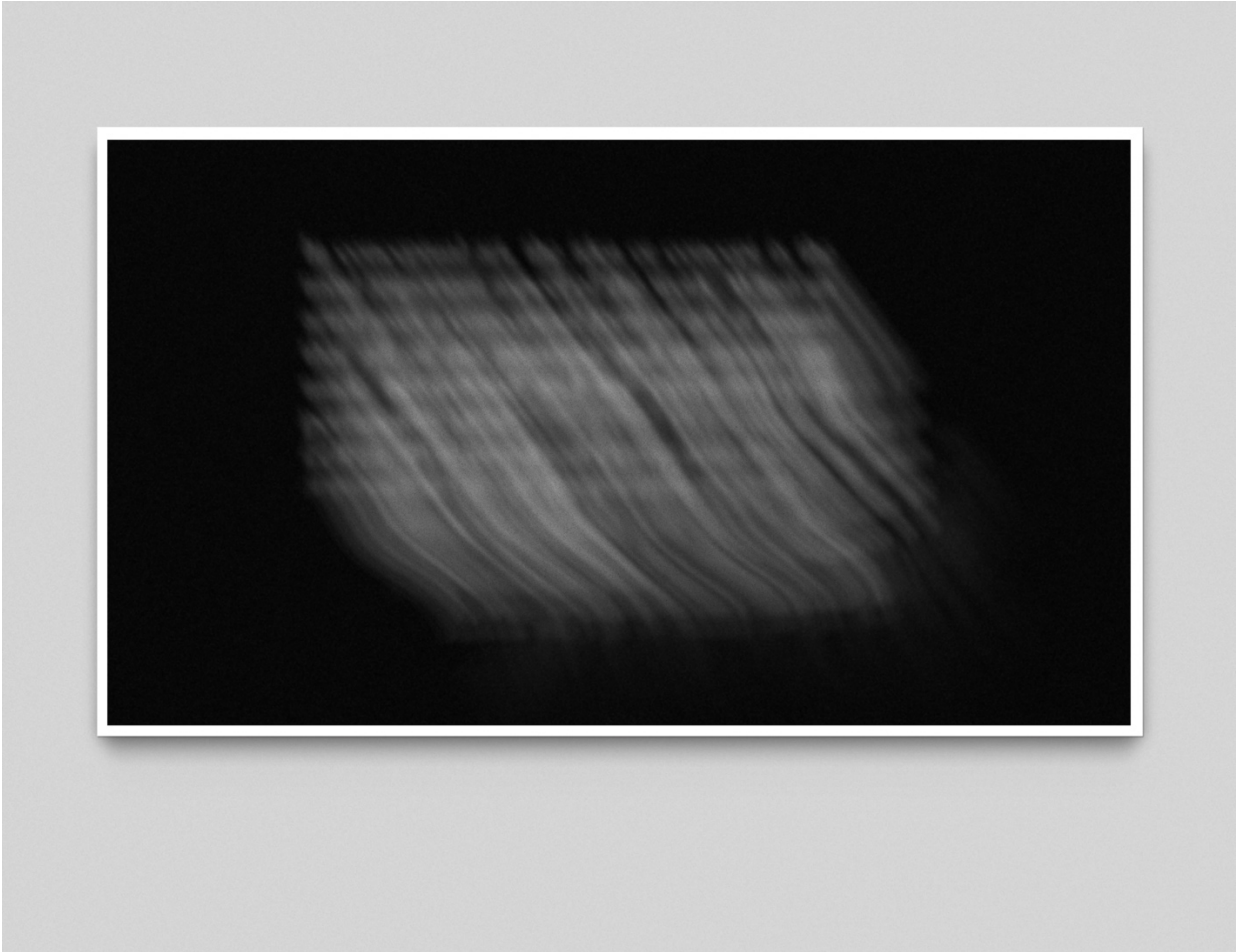*22" x 12", 2018*

Evidence
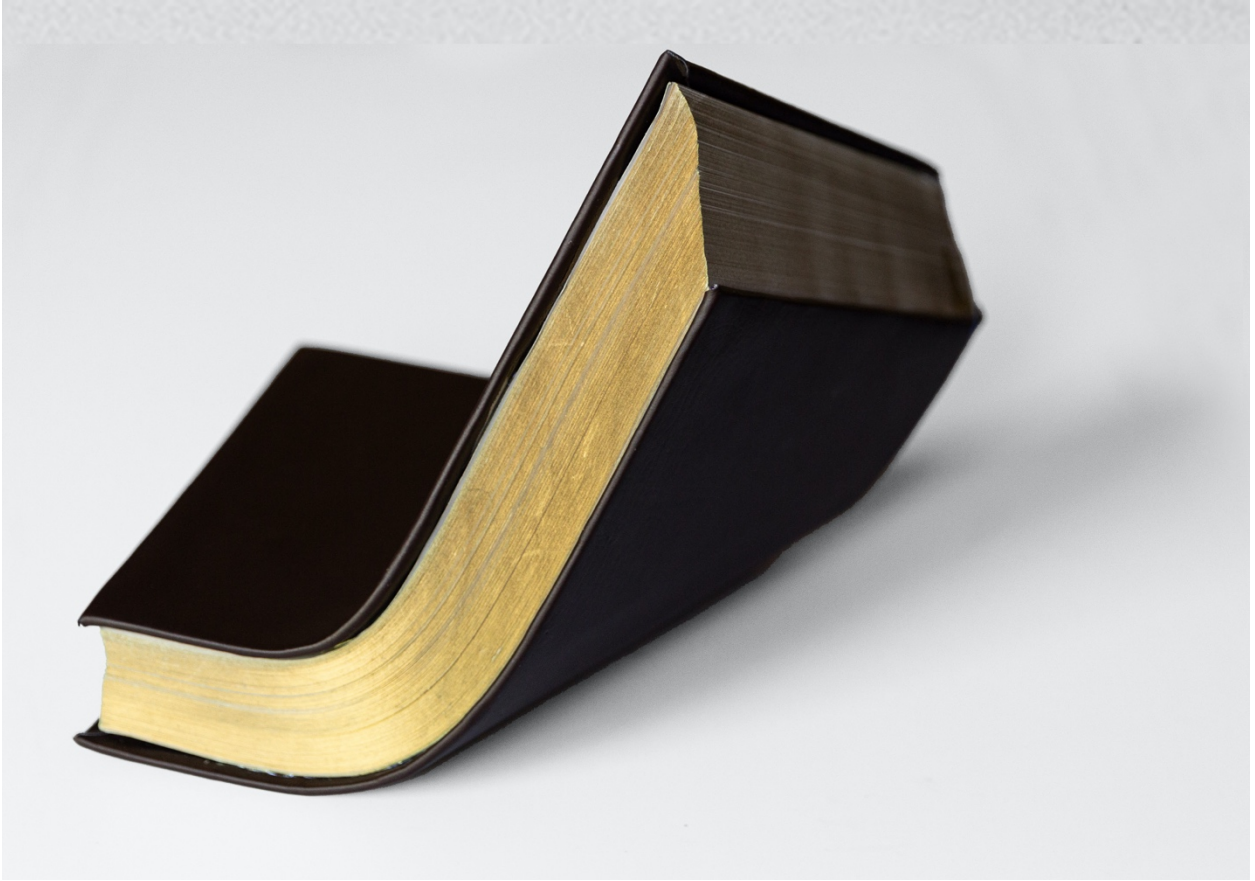*Paper, leather, fabric, and wood*
120" x 30" x 35", 2018

Democracy dies in darkness
Inkjet print on transparent fil and nylon thread
40" x 30" x 18", 2018

Contemporary Conceptual Art
Inkjet print on matte paper
100" x 28", 2018

Untitled
Paper, leather, and cardboard
12" x 8.5" x 5", 2020