

Tell All The Truth But Tell It Slant

An Exhibition of Sculptures and Drawings

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Tell All The Truth But Tell It Slant is an exhibition of sculpture and drawings that focuses attention on the socio-political turmoil brought about by the ruling system in Iran. It also speaks to a shared melancholia in those who self-identify as Iranian. In Iran the oppressive regime continually and deliberately controls its citizens through enforcement of restrictive religious ideology. As a female artist of Iranian descent, using Karen Barad's notion of agential realism, I seek to address power structures, and hegemonic systems of domination, while questioning dualisms and the sharp boundaries they produce that further impact power relations. Addressing life and politics in contemporary Iran, I purposely layer and fuse cultural and historical imagery from Persian and Islamic art and architecture along with contemporary images, ideas, and mass media stories. My practice accentuates the importance of materiality in relation to this political content by questioning subject-object relationships, and by revealing the agency that materials and spaces have.

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Introduction

Tell All The Truth But Tell It Slant is an exhibition that includes sculpture, print and drawings. It consists of four works. *Petrocubical* and *Sacred Oil* are sculptures made of ceramic, oil, plastic and light that reference the oil industry. *A Bad-ass Dictionary* is an installation comprised of woodblock and digital prints on paper that hangs above *Sacred Oil*. The fourth work, *Persian Oilature*, is a series of politically charged ink drawings set into laser-cut acrylic frames. This body of work engages hands-on processes and technological methodologies. By bringing analogue and digital tools together alongside sensory experience, I question subject-object and mind-matter dualism. Thus meaning and material in my practice are woven together in a symbiotic relationship where the political and the material coexist.

Apart from material concerns, allegory and symbolism are used alongside theoretical analysis to critique socio-political structures, power relations, and binary oppositions that underpin the current political climate in Iran. I borrow elements from classical Persian and Islamic art and architecture to create imagery that manifests the principles of symmetry, harmony, balance and consequently order. Aesthetically, these elements please the eye. In contrast, the content of the work—chaotic, turbulent and troubled—exposes the problems that an oppressive power system brings about. As a result, the form subtly and seductively draws the viewers in, opening them up to difficult content.

In my critique of dominant state power, I investigate four categories that I consider means or instruments of power: oil (as the major source of economy in a Middle Eastern case), otherness, censorship and religious ideology. Binaries appear both as a cause and effect of power dynamics within these categories. For this purpose, I use the American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad's notion of agential realism that questions the supremacy of one

phenomenon over the other, and points to the ways in which mind and matter are entangled. I explore how the presence of dualistic structures can cause an imbalance in power, resulting in turmoil, chaos and exclusion. This speaks to the ways in which believing in, and applying dualisms in social relations is generated by abuse of power, which in turn is fortified by the binaries that it produces (fig. 1). Binalization in general, is a way to reduce complexities. It is easier to rule over a simplified belief system comprised of two binaries, than it is to share power in an innately diffused system.

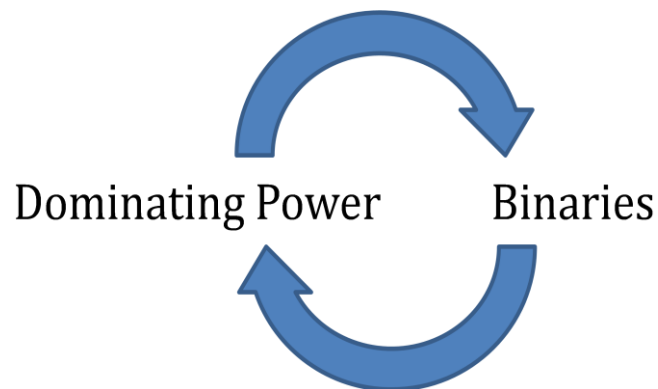


Fig. 1

Onto-epistemology

My study of power dynamics is filtered through personal and shared experiences. As a person who grew up in Iran, I have experienced the power of an oppressive regime and its operation. The questions that have come out of my personal quest for understanding are: How can I reach the truth? Is truth only based in human knowledge? Who tells the truth? Is truth absolute or relative? Where does truth stop and where does the lie/illusion begin? Is the truth measurable? What are the measuring criteria of truth? Are they science? Conscience? The supernatural and/or metaphysical? Part of my answer to these questions comes from Barad's

emphasis on the importance of matter and materiality, and her feminist approach to epistemology. Through my reading of Barad, I concluded that thinking about questions of knowing, calls for the simultaneous study of modes of being. Barad employs the term “onto-epistemology” through which she links the sciences to the humanities. Deploying quantum physics, she deconstructs the determinism of Cartesian epistemology which is based on the dualistic opposition between subject and object, or as she states, representationalism¹. In her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad discusses that particles (or matter) under certain circumstances behave like waves. The Newtonian wave-particle duality is therefore disrupted. In other words, the sharp border between wave and particle gets entangled. Barad concludes that representationalism divides the world into two separate realms of words (meaning) and things (material). She believes that, “representationalism takes the notion of separation as foundational,” continuing that, “[i]t separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things.”² It separates the world into humans and non-humans, giving agency only to humans. Therefore, representationalism creates sharp boundaries.

Barad’s agential realism deconstructs the concept of agency, combining ontology with epistemology. She seeks agency in the relationship between two or more things/phenomena. The term she coins for this kind of relationship is *intra-action*. It differs from interaction in the way that interaction happens between two separate entities, while *intra-action* is between components of the same entity or between two phenomena which do not have determined boundaries (fig. 2). For example, my arm and leg have intra-action rather than interaction. Barad identifies that agency occurs in the intra-action between the perceived separate entities. She then concludes that

¹ Representationalism is a humanist approach to everything—giving agency to humans rather than the rest of the world. In other words, it is the epistemological dualism of inside (our minds) vs. outside (world)

² Barad, Karen. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007. 137

“matter” matters as well as the mind.³ As a result, mind-body or inside-outside dualism is a problematic (and problem generating) binary, stemming from the illusion of anthropocentrism. In a Baradian sense, the relationship between my thoughts and the materials I use in my artworks produces agency and meaning. The meaning thus, does not come merely from my mind, or what I project onto the objects I make, but from the objects themselves and the relationship they have with my thoughts.

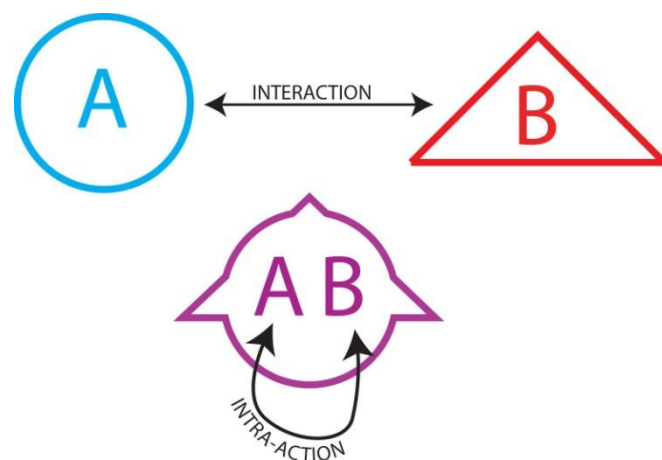


Fig. 2

Materiality and Spatiality

The concept and materiality of oil is a major ingredient of this exhibition. One of the crucial oil related conflicts in Iran’s history was the 1953 US backed coup d’etat orchestrated by the United Kingdom, to overthrow Mohammad Mosaddegh’s⁴ government due to his efforts to limit British control over Iranian oil. Through this coup d’etat, Iran missed the first and so far last chance of a secular democracy in its millennia-long history. Even though currently under Iran’s theocratic system, the oil industry remains nationalized and independent from foreign

³ Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Chapter 4

⁴ Mohammad Mosaddegh (1882-1967) was the progressive prime minister of the time, who was trying to establish a democratic system, restricting monarchy power.

exploitative powers witnessed in the early to mid 20th century, the way that the industry is used by the government for its political goals is highly suspect. Iran's use of oil resources remains a troublesome matter. Only a few select people benefit from the money generated by the oil industry resulting in a deepening gap between the rich and the poor. Iran's middle class has been progressively shrinking over the past few years, leading to an increasing lower-income class. Ironically, through religious ideological propaganda, the regime attributes its own incompetence to the influence and interference of foreign powers, encouraging people to withstand difficulties so God will privilege them as a pious Ummah⁵ in the Afterlife. In short, the regime uses crude political and religious discourse to keep Iranian people in check while continuing its own nefarious activities. A prominent means of control in this context is implementing a good-evil binary. Iran's totalitarian system looks at citizens as either with, or against them. As such, the smallest form of dissidence is not tolerated.

To point to the entanglement between political and religious ideologies, I use a combination of visual metaphors such as the eight corner star, the colour turquoise, and crude oil. The star and turquoise are prevalent in Islamic sacred architecture, found on tiles both on the interior and exterior of mosques since the ancient Persian Empire. The colour turquoise is associated with the divine and heavenly sphere. Oil and religion are two interconnected sources of state power and control. These elements are present in the installation *Sacred Oil* (2019) (fig. 3) where I grapple with this interdependence of oil and religion in Iran's politics. This work

⁵ Ummah is an Islamic term referring to the Muslim communities as a single privileged entity that enjoys being the true obedient to God, and superior to non-Muslims. Members of Ummah do not question authorities of an Islamic state, because in doing so they would be questioning God's commands, and this is considered as blasphemous necessitating the death penalty.



Fig. 3 *Sacred Oil*; 2019; glazed stoneware casting slip, engine oil; 10 x 10 x 3.5 in

is comprised of sixty-four ceramic bowls filled with oil,⁶ arranged in eight staggering rows of eight pieces on the gallery floor. I see them as related and although they have similarities, they are not the same. Brushstrokes, environmental temperature and humidity, firing process, and the duration of production impact each piece, making each slightly different from the other. They are also highly vulnerable; leaving the drying green-ware⁷ exposed for more than 10 minutes (i.e. not covered with plastic wrap), will cause the piece to crack and break. They have agency like any other phenomena. Karen Barad signals that,

⁶ Ideally it would have been crude oil. But obtaining this precious, yet cheap, material was impossible for me. Therefore, I replaced it with used car oil which has a similar look and a strong smell.

⁷ Green-ware is any clay object which has been shaped, but not fired yet.

phenomena—whether lizards, electrons, or humans—exist only as a result of, and as a part of, the world’s ongoing intra-activity... ‘We humans’ don’t make it so, not by dint of our own will, and not on our own. But through our advances we participate in bringing forth the world in its specificity, including ourselves.⁸

Therefore, through the relationship between a material that has agency and myself, and within our intra-action as two participating phenomena—not necessarily as subject vs. object—meaning is produced and the sharp boundaries between subject and object get entangled.

One of the outcomes of Barad’s agential realism is the connection of nature/material to culture/humanity. Oil is a versatile and multifaceted material, whose agency is undeniable. As such it further challenges the subject-object and nature-culture dialectics. Oil’s agency and omnipresence in contemporary human life breaks its material objectiveness, bringing it inside humanity as subjecthood. The relationship between humanity and oil is a complex one; it is hard to determine whether humanity or oil is the subject or the object, and which is ruling or has control over the other. Our inexhaustible demand for travel, heat, and abundance has turned the commodity of oil into a global problem—literally bringing our world to an end through the pollution and destruction it causes. Therefore the boundaries between human/subject and oil as a material/object are blurred. The agency is not only in the oil as a material, but also in its relationship (intra-action) with human through human dependency on oil.

Another potent aspect of materiality in *Sacred Oil* is smell. The gallery is filled with the repellent smell from the oil contained in the ceramic vessels. The space around the piece gets

⁸ Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. 353

more activated by the presence and agency of the smell. It also gives a synaesthetic⁹ quality to the space. The viewers are connected to and confronted by the piece not only by vision, but through smell. While one attracts (vision), the other repels (smell). The surrounding space is therefore neither neutral nor empty.

In analyzing Doris Salcedo's sculptures/installations, Mieke Bal, a contemporary Dutch cultural theorist, states that space must speak. It should not distract the viewers from the work, rather it should mediate and facilitate the dialogue between work and viewers.¹⁰ In Salcedo's case the mediation of space comes from the fact that her work is politically driven. Her sculptures/installations activate the space around them in order to speak to the greater political tension she is pointing to. In the 90s, Salcedo made a series of works titled *La Casa Viuda* (Widowed House) for which she did extensive research on the displaced women in rural Colombia who were forced to abandon their homes due to the threat of violence.¹¹ In *La Casa Viuda III* (1994) (fig. 4), the headboard and footboard of a bed are attached to facing walls of a narrow corridor in a gallery. The bed itself however is absent. Bal notes,

The physical need to step into the space of the bed itself—between headboard and footboard—while, at the same time, simply walking a corridor in the gallery space, forces the visitor to commit the violation, not only of property but also of privacy. This is the privacy that the violence has destroyed.¹²

⁹ involves more than one sense. Here: vision and smell.

¹⁰ Bal, Mieke. *Of what one cannot speak: Doris Salcedo's political art*. University of Chicago Press, 2010. 167

¹¹ Skalitzky, Shauna. "Doris Salcedo." Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/la_casa_viuda/

¹² Bal, *Of what one cannot speak: Doris Salcedo's political art*. 176



Fig. 4 *La Casa Viuda III*; Doris Salcedo; 1994; Wooden doors, wooden bed frame, and clothing; Two parts: 101¾ x 34 x 2⅜ in. and 32¾ x 34 x 2 in.

Walking into the highly activated space between the headboard and footboard of a bed, the viewer literally steps inside the piece. It is unclear whether the viewer is in a state of complicity, acting as an oppressor, or conversely, if they have become the oppressed. In the connection Salcedo makes through the physical and material aspects of the work, the boundary between void and matter, subject and object, and finally oppressed and oppressor is entangled. As a result the space actively constructs a complicated narrative.

Apart from the role of space in the relationship between viewers and the artwork in a gallery setting, space can also impact the connections among artworks. Mieke Bal states that space has a signifying capacity in breaking the boundary between two or more works of art.¹³

¹³ Bal, *Of what one cannot speak: Doris Salcedo's political art*. 161

Depending on their spatial relationship in the shared space of a gallery, or their intra-action, works are not separate from one another. Their aesthetics and interpretations can vary accordingly. Similarly, their boundaries can get intertwined or even blurred. For instance, the installation *A Bad-ass Dictionary* (2018) (fig. 5-6) comprised of prints made from four scanned spreads of the most comprehensive Persian dictionary, *Dehkhoda*, is hung from the gallery ceiling so that it floats above *Sacred Oil*. The space between *Sacred Oil* and *A Bad-ass Dictionary* that might appear void and empty, is actually activated. It gains agency through connecting the two pieces—one on top of the other—allowing meaning to transfer through space. Another important element in this spatial arrangement is the presence of turquoise. We find it high in the space in the form of printed clouds on paper, and low on the ground in the ceramic vessels. As turquoise is the metaphor for the heavenly realm in Islamic semiotics, the divine sphere is not only above but it also descends to the lower ground of the earthly sphere. Thus the divine-earthly dialectic gets muddled.

According to Barad, “[w]hat often appear as separate entities, and separate sets of concerns, with sharp edges does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all.”¹⁴ In other words, exterior and interior are entangled, mixed, and inseparable. Fabricated in black acrylic the sculpture *Petrocubical* (2018-19) (fig.7-8), imitates *Kabaa*’s form.¹⁵ Light projected through the cut-out shapes on the cube sides activates the space between the cube, and the

¹⁴ Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. 93

¹⁵ Kaaba, literally meaning cube, is the holiest site in Islam religion located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims all around the world perform their daily prayers towards its direction and are required to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life, if they can afford it. In 2017, Arabia hosted over 2 million pilgrims from within and outside of the country. Annual pilgrimage to Mecca, called Hajj, is one of the major sources of income after oil for Saudi Arabia. The Hajj employs more people than the oil industry, though temporarily.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Saudi_Arabia

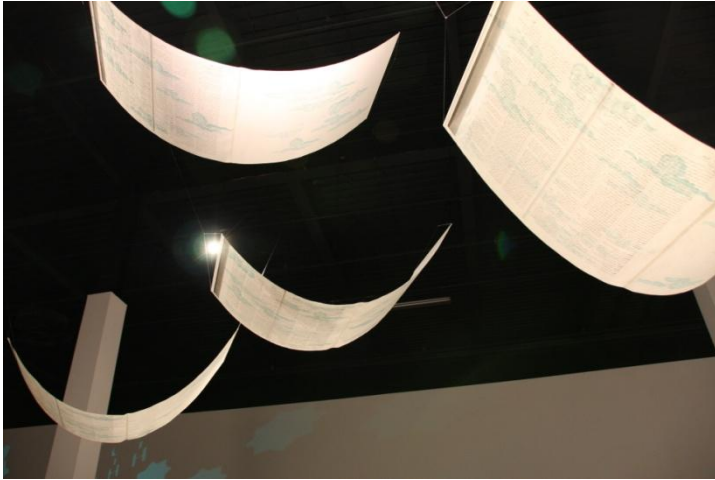


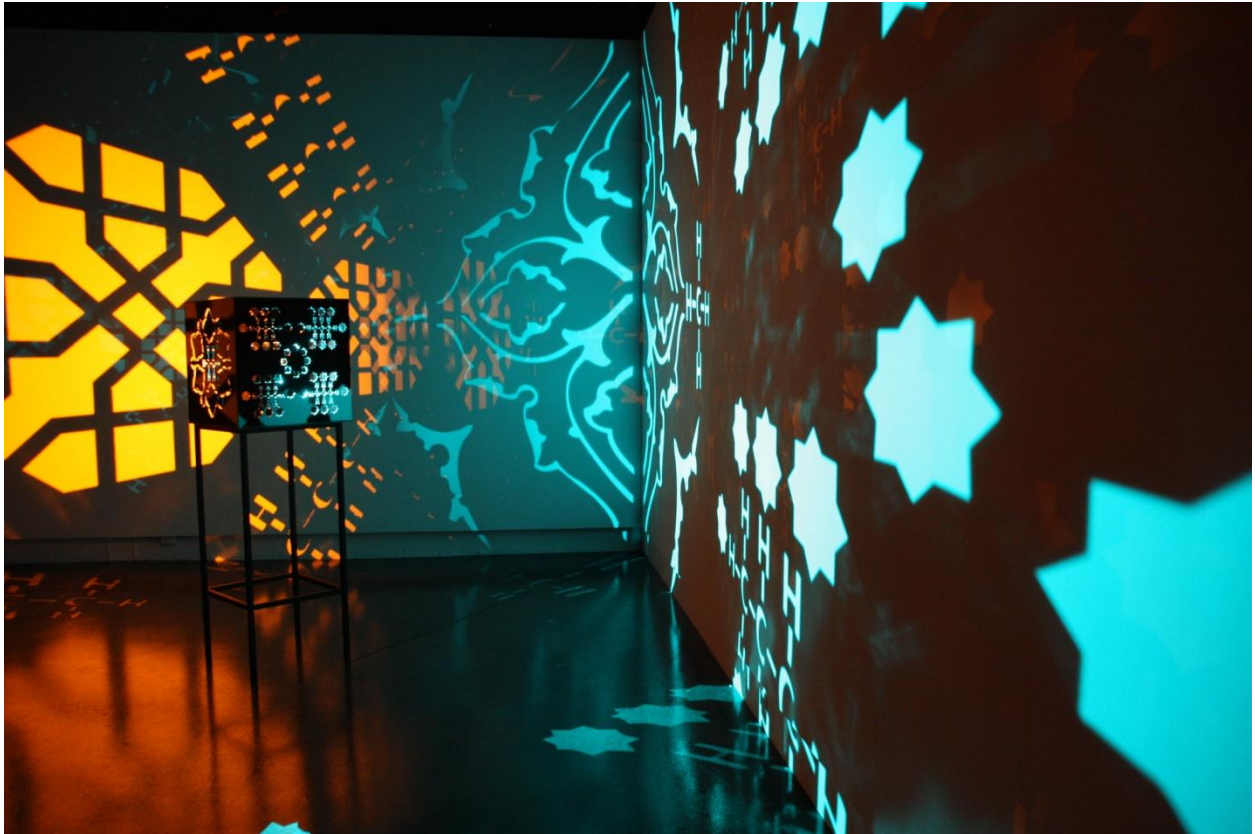
Fig5 *A Bad-ass Dictionary*; 2019; digital and wood-block print on Japanese paper; each sheet: 25 x 72 in



Fig. 6 *A Bad-ass Dictionary*; detail

gallery's walls and floor. As a result, *Petrocubical* is not confined to a closed geometric form. It protrudes further outside bridging the interior and the exterior. When viewers stand in the space, the light is cast on their bodies; they become the surface or playground of light and shadow. The subject-object binary is then more entangled as both the viewer (subject) and the artwork (object) equally participate in bringing forth meaning and agency.

The uniform, ordered, symmetrical arabesques and geometric patterns piercing the walls of *Petrocubical* contrast the political intent. Inside the cube are two high-powered LEDs that cast sharp-edged shapes of the cutouts onto the gallery walls. The colours of the LEDs are turquoise and deep yellow, the closest I could find to ochre which is another iconic colour in Persian architecture symbolizing earth or this world.



Figures7-8: *Petrocubical*; 2018-19; acrylic, electronics; 23.6 x 23.6 x 23.6 in

The mirror-like surfaces of all six sides of the acrylic cube reflect the LED lights in several directions resulting in a chaotic overlapping of forms, when the projected shapes hit the gallery walls. As a result, the inside connects to the outside, order links to chaos, and turquoise overlaps with ochre symbolizing the interconnectedness of the heavenly and the worldly realms. The intra-action between light and shadow therefore, is not a simple dichotomy between two separate and defined phenomena. By disrupting these binaries, my intent is to challenge a dominant state power that benefits from social binaries, such as powerful-weak, male-female, and present-absent. Amongst the iconic arabesques and geometric architectural motifs, I subversively embedded the skeletal formula of hydrocarbons, the petrochemical by-products of petroleum refining which are flammable and explosive. Consequently, *Petrocubical* symbolically brings oil and religion together to speak about a dominating power and its *modi operandi*.

Exclusion and Otherness

Apart from oil and religion, as operating arms of a totalitarian state power, exclusion and censorship are other ways of implementing control. In 2018, authorities in Iran removed the word “کون” (equivalent to “ass” in English) from all online Persian dictionaries. This is aligned with the regime’s rigorous restrictions pertaining to the regulation of Internet and broader media censorship. In addition to the word itself, all the related expressions and idioms were also censored. The majority of the words were only spelled as “کون” but with different pronunciations and meanings. These words constitute eight consecutive pages of the actual hard copy of *Dehkhoda* dictionary. I asked a friend in Iran to scan all “کون” containing pages (18750 to 18757) from the public library in my birth-town, and email the digital files. Ironically, the way I received these images is through the use of the Internet, one of the most controlled and restricted

media in Iran. Through this gesture of collaboration, I reclaim what has been turned into a means of control and omission; I use the oppressors' tool against them.

According to French theorist Michel Foucault, knowledge has been used as a means of control throughout history. He offered a critique of institutions, the Christian church and psychoanalysis in particular, known to exploit confession as a form of knowledge production in order to maintain control over the human body and mind.¹⁶ Foucault's observations are applicable to the current socio-political climate in Iran. In *A Bad-ass Dictionary* I attempt to disrupt state control over knowledge. On the digitally reproduced pages, using laser-cut woodblock, I print these stylized clouds that are prevalent in Persian miniature paintings (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 *The Court of Gayumars*, *Book of Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp I*; Sultan Muhammad; Whole page left, and detail, right; c.1522; opaque watercolor, ink, gold, silver on paper; 18.5 x 12.5 in

¹⁶ Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. Vintage, 1990.

The clouds, which are sourced from some of my ink drawings, symbolize concealment. Overlapping hand prints of clouds with digital prints of the text activates the boundary between the digital and the analogue. In *A Bad-ass Dictionary*, considering an absent-present binary and through the repetition of cloud shapes over words, I hint at censorship and omission as forms of enactment of power. Totalitarian systems omit all other modes of being unless they comply with the dualistic approach of those systems; divisions such as good vs. evil, us vs. others or rulers vs. the ruled.

Exclusion has always been emblematic of oppressive systems and has taken different forms from the physical removal of individuals, the silencing of voices, to media censorship. Recently I started researching contemporary Iranian artists outside of the few globally-recognizable names such as Shirin Neshat. Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, I learned that a lot of Iranian artists have critical approaches in addressing oppressive power structures on a socio-political context. Newsha Tavakolian belongs to the younger generation of artists/photographers working in Iran.¹⁷ Her *Listen* series (fig. 10) focuses on female singers and identifies the problematic nature of the male-female binary resulting in absence and exclusion. Due to Islamic regulations in effect since the 1979 revolution, female singers are not allowed to perform solo nor publish their albums. Drawing on religious moral codes, female voice is regarded as sexually arousing for men, and therefore indecent.



Fig. 10 selected images from *Listen* series, digital photography <https://www.newshatavakolian.com/listen>

¹⁷ Until this essay's date of release

Tavakolian advocates that a woman's ability to sing in a conservative patriarchal structure is a form of empowerment.¹⁸ She invited professional female singers to participate, asking them to imagine they were singing in a concert hall in front of a full audience. In reality, the women were inside Tavakolian's small studio downtown Tehran. The photos depicting female singers with their eyes closed point to a cultural convention based on which a 'good' woman should not see, talk, think, etc. The patriarchal power enforces gender binaries, which sees women as "other." Women's roles are therefore restricted to domesticity resulting in their absence from the public sphere. *Listen* disrupts the male-female binary by giving presence and agency to the absent subject—in this case the female singers.

Dissidence and Raising Awareness

According to Vaclav Havel—writer, dissident and former president of the Czech Republic,

[ideology] is a *specious* way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them... ideology enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position.¹⁹

Ordinary people become both victims and agents of an oppressive ideological system. In order to keep their jobs and positions, or be safe from the harsh punishments within a politically oppressive system, most people submit to the power by internalizing and normalizing it. Havel however, believes that an oppressive regime eventually (be it communist or religious) will create

¹⁸ Tavakolian, Newsha. "Listen." *Newsha Tavakolian Photography* <https://www.newshatavakolian.com/listen>

¹⁹ Havel, Vaclav. "The Power of the Powerless." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol.32, no.2, 2018. 359

dissidents among ordinary citizens. Iranians' awareness of their socio-political environment has risen in recent years as a result of globalization and the ubiquity of information technologies. In his book *Art and Politics Now* Anthony Downey writes,

Central to the heightened awareness of global turmoil has been the rise of information technology and social media, as well as the increased demands of international news corporations, all of which has come to define how we understand and perceive historical events.²⁰

Although there is a strict control over internet and social media in Iran, most people find ways to access Internet through VPNs. This has resulted in a nationwide awareness of the system's corruption, leading to citizens' protest; be it artistic, peaceful, or violent.

Throughout history artistic dissent has been a powerful tool for protest—to criticize oppressive regimes, to depict the devastation of war, poverty, and social injustice, to give presence to the absent, to give a voice to the voiceless and so on. In this way, not only artworks, but also the audience becomes politicized. As a result, these artists raised public awareness through their work. Rafael Lozano Hemmer is a contemporary artist who uses public participation to expose participants to social and political situations. In *Level of Confidence* (fig.11) he uses surveillance technology to commemorate the 2015 mass kidnapping and murder of forty-three male students in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The piece alludes to the vast corruption in Mexico as a result of both the government and the police involvement in drug related crimes.

²⁰ Downey, Anthony. *Art and Politics Now*. London, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014. 21



Fig.11 *Level of Confidence*, Rafael Lozano Hemmer, 2015, Face-recognition algorithms, computer, screen, webcam
www.lozano-hemmer.com

The artist's use of surveillance camera, one of the police's means of research and control, addresses the incompetence and corruption of Mexican police. Using biometric surveillance algorithms, the software detects and matches the viewer's face to the most similar among the missing students. Despite the fact that these students were murdered and their corpses burnt, the symbolic act of searching for them continues through the presence of the viewers and the comparison of likeness (i.e. we are all alike). This intra-action between the alive and the dead, or the present and the absent, is a way of generating political awareness. Most viewers who participate in *Level of Confidence* initially have no idea about the tragic story of those young men. Hemmer politicizes the participating viewers, enacting empathy by revealing a socio-political catastrophe.

Shared Melancholia as a Collective Rebellion

As an artist and a dissident, my motivation to raise awareness in regards to Iran's political problems, comes from lived experience. My artistic practice to date has been the result of the metamorphosis in my own life—I moved from being an ordinary citizen to being a dissident within the recent years. Consequently, my practice is funneled through my perceptions of, and experience with totalitarian theocracy. Born a woman who has lived a good part of her life in Iran, my birthplace always situated me as the “other”—in particular an inferior other. The ramifications of this “othering” included, but were not limited to, experiencing discrimination, segregation, inequality in access to resources and jobs, and so on.²¹ My lack of power and/or my being weak vs. strong, female vs. male, and inferior vs. superior in the socio-cultural structure of Iran led me to confront the oppressive power by questioning its operating means, including oil, religion and exclusion. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier in reviewing Newsha Tavakolian's photo series, this individual experience is also collective. In fact many Iranian artists, both those living in Iran and in the Diaspora, exhibit similar thematic interests and formal characteristics. This made me think of a collective phenomenological experience “we” (i.e. those who identify as Iranian) are undergoing. I identify this collective experience as a shared feeling of melancholia stemming from feeling permanently disconnected from one's country of birth. This exile can be either chosen or involuntary; or for those still living in Iran, it can also be the alienation from the larger society.

²¹ Iran's constitution and criminal law has been based on Sharia since the 1979 revolution. Sharia law is a set of Islamic rules that dictates orders for both private and public life. Some of the regulations according to Sharia in Iran are as follows: A woman's testimony in a court of law is worth half of a man's. Women's share of inheritance from parents is half of their brothers. A married woman needs a husband's legal permission to travel overseas (and apply for a passport). A husband can legally ban his wife from studying and working. A wife inherits one fourth to one eighth of her deceased husband's property, depending on having any children or not. Divorce and child custody is mostly in the husband's hands. Polygamy is legal, but only for men. Child marriage—sometimes for girls before puberty if they are fully 9 years old—is allowed. The hijab is mandatory for all women. However, the strictness of Sharia implementation depends on how hard-line or moderate the government and parliament is.

Since I started to work in a more overtly political manner, I realize that even a short visit to Iran would endanger me (I would most likely be imprisoned, tortured or put to death). In spite of this, I feel more inspired to criticize the state's power. According to Judith Butler, “[m]elancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crushed... [y]et it is not a static affair; it continues as a kind of work that takes place by deflection.”²² In other words, melancholia is a controlled rage, an engine of the rebellion that Butler talks about. By “controlled” I mean it does not necessarily create chaos and violence—it can be used as a generative means of artistic production.

Parastou Forouhar is an Iranian artist who lives in Germany. Her parents were among the eighty dissident intellectuals who were assassinated in the ‘80s and ‘90s by the regime’s hardliners. These murders were later known as the Chain Murders of Iran. Forouhar’s parents’ tortured and mutilated bodies were found in their home in Tehran. Since then Forouhar is not allowed to travel to Iran to commemorate her parents’ deaths as she is considered a political threat by the Iranian state. *I Surrender* (fig. 12) is an ongoing installation started in 2006, that addresses the artist’s painful history. In describing the piece, Matthias Reichelt writes,

a room filled with the lightness of floating, patterned balloons seems like an invitation to play and dream. But on closer inspection, the decorations on the balloons prove to be scenes of torture. The resulting atmosphere is fraught with tension between the conventional associations we make with balloons and the serious message they convey here. What is portrayed, in all its violence and enormity, clashes with the seemingly innocent whimsicality of the installation’s

²² Fitzpatrick, Andrea D. *Performing the Iranian State*. Edited by Staci Gem Scheiwiller, London, Anthem Press, 2013. 165

outward appearance. But the comic-strip style of the drawings and the levity of the balloons have the effect of heightening, rather than tempering, this dark aspect. The viewer is forced to reflect. Here, ornament and terror are as closely linked as orders and obedience in the mind of the unscrupulous, unfeeling torturer.²³



Fig. 12 *I Surrender*; Parastou Forouhar; 2007
<https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/i-surrender/>



Fig. 13 *I Surrender*; detail

The means of torture, ropes and blindfolds printed on the helium balloons (fig. 13) resemble curved thick black lines in Persian calligraphy (fig. 14). Forouhar marries the playfulness of the objects with the horrendous reality of torture. In doing so she entangles the



Fig. 14 An example of Persian calligraphy, <https://www.kojaro.com/2016/9/29/122301/calligraphy-iran/>

boundary between two separate worlds of innocence and violence. The viewers are attracted to the helium balloons and are invited to play with them, only later to become aware of the terror in the content.

²³ Reichelt, Matthias. "I Surrender." *Parastou Forouhar*. 2006
<https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/i-surrender/>

Using a similar method of appropriating visual elements of Persian and Islamic patterns and designs,²⁴ the formal qualities of my works seduce the audience into troublesome territory. This is also how I maintain the subtlety between the formal content of my work and its conceptual background. According to Craig Owens, American art critic, “allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them...[h]e lays claim to the culturally significant.”²⁵ The allegory in my ongoing series of drawings, *Persian Oilature* (2017-)(fig.15,16,17), comes from historical Persian miniatures which are culturally significant imagery. A Persian miniature is a very elaborate small painting on paper or parchment. These paintings were first made popular in the 13th century, but the tradition has persisted throughout the centuries. The paintings illustrated various narratives from everyday life, to historic events, mythical and Quranic stories, done in watercolour or gouache. Unlike sacred architectural spaces, and illuminations in holy scriptures that are restricted to vegetal and geometric motifs, Persian miniature paintings are highly dependent on human and animal

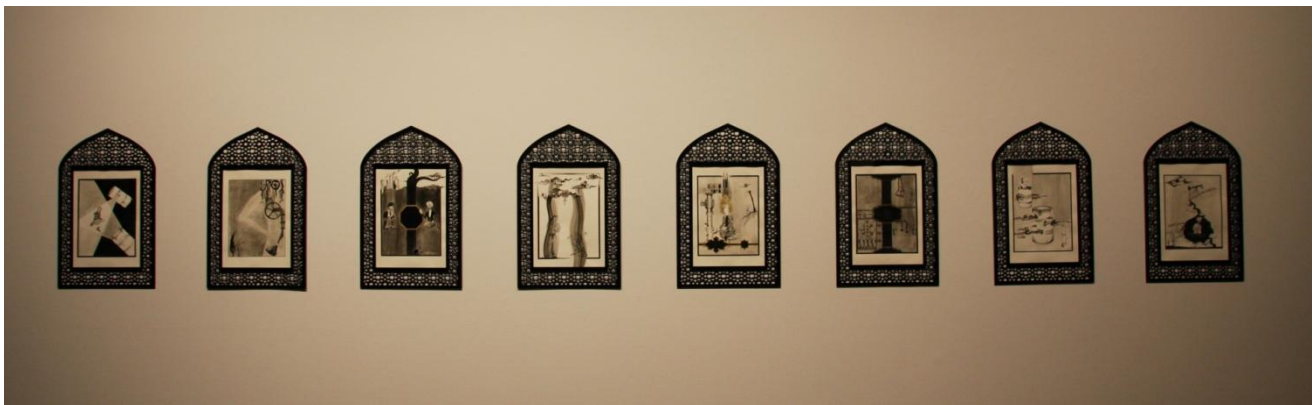


Fig. 15 *Persian Oilature*; Ink and gouache on paper, acrylic (Plexiglas); 2017-2019; 15 x 24 in

²⁴One of the functions of the ornate, elaborate, and awe-inspiring style of sacred architecture in Islam, akin to many other religions, has been to attract the viewers by impressing them through the beauty and sublime quality of the spaces.

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Performing the Iranian State*. 158



Fig. 16-17 *Persian Oilature*; close up view

representations.²⁶ In *Persian Oilature*, I strategically pare down the intricate drawings found in the historical examples. I restrict my colours to black and gold—referencing the oil industry. The drawings are made using thin brushes and felt tip pens, and involve a time-consuming process beginning with researching the archives of Persian miniatures, followed by searching through contemporary images of the oil industry. The drawing is akin to a meditative process, and involves high focus and accuracy. In contrast to the hand-drawn, the laser-cut black acrylic frames reference Christian reliquaries. These ornate and attractive acrylic pieces frame a

²⁶ According to Islamic doctrine, any depictions and representations of human and animal forms is forbidden. The more secular attitude in Persian miniatures is owed to the fact that they were made for private patrons from the upper class, aristocrats and the imperial court.

troubling content that explores hegemonic systems of domination—an oil-dependent economy, theocracy, and social and political hierarchy. Through *Persian Oilature*, I entangle historical and contemporary, Western and Eastern, sacred and profane, and the hand-made and technology. The surreal, fictional, and hybrid representations of human beings and landscapes combined with geometric and ornate frames, interconnect separate entities (images of oil machinery with images of tortured bodies, men and women on oil fields dressed in traditional clothing, together with arabesques and geometric forms).

Conclusion

On conceptual ground *Tell all the Truth but tell it slant* is my truth, told not from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, but rather as one of the interdependent components of the world in its becoming. Expanding from this position of all things having agency, this exhibition exposes the binary oppositions that play an important role in dominating power mechanisms that impact humanity by generating chaos and turmoil. Throughout the various artworks I aim to disrupt the sharp boundaries of binaries in order to dismantle the systems of control that benefit from dualisms. Matter, space, and any non-human “subject” play an important role in this endeavor and as such are present. As Salcedo seeks to bridge the gap between the sufferer and others, and as Forouhar marries delight to fright, for me, it is all about finding agency somewhere in between. I do so by entangling the boundary between beautiful and ugly and through the beautification of a terrifying reality. Therefore, the object/image seductively pulls the unknowing viewer into an obscure and repelling truth. As Emily Dickinson suggests, I purpose to tell the truth, but to “tell it slant”:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind

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