

Voices: Kamrooz Aram

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I first began to recognize my role in and approach to art-making after reading Edward Said's *Orientalism*. I was in college and had seen the work of many artists (from students to well known artists on the biennial circuit) who were approaching identity politics in a direct and in some cases, exploitative manner. Especially among students, it was common to take advantage of the exotic elements of Eastern cultures as seen through Western eyes, resulting in a sort of self-Orientalization. For some artists, the work itself was not so much the problem as was the context, i.e. if the work was seen in the East, it might not be subject to a problematic, Orientalist reading.

From early on I was never interested in addressing "identity politics." However I was also uninterested in what I saw as somewhat frivolous, impersonal, socially disengaged, and wholly apolitical work made by many of my peers in school. (Interestingly, among my own students, I have noticed that there has been shift and many are now focusing on social and cultural concerns and are making critical work.)

It was after having read *Orientalism* that I began to understand and concretize some of the feelings I had about the work I was seeing and I began to develop my own position. Initially my intention was to work against the self-exoticism model by representing the Other in an unromantic, unapologetic, sincere manner, rather than reinforcing stereotypes that had been ingrained into Western minds. It was also important to me that my work referenced cultural issues and was socially engaging, but did not veer into the didactic approach of so-called political art.

Although my work has undergone vast changes and developed significantly since my years as a student, some of the basic intents have remained, namely, an investigation and critique of Orientalism; not only as the ethnocentric manner in which, historically, the West has studied, imitated (also mocked), and dominated Eastern cultures, but also as a contemporary problem that continues to lead to cultural imperialism in the least expected and most progressive environments. Furthermore I am interested in the well-meaning contemporary attempts at understanding the Other, as seen in multi-culturalism and a romanticization of Eastern religions and art forms, such as in New Age spirituality or "World" music.

Much of Iranian art and culture, from traditional poetry to the internationally celebrated Iranian cinema, is laden with symbolism and layered with philosophical significance. Some viewers expect the same from me. However this phenomenon interests me as subject matter rather than an actual approach to art-making. I am interested in the viewers' insistence on finding signifiers for every detail of my work. There is a yearning for explanation, a longing for

decodification, and more problematically, a tendency to locate binaries and create mythologies.

Perhaps I am attempting to create images that are equally mystifying and demystified. My approach is towards the amalgamation of references and the posing of questions. People get hung up on symbols and signifiers, and the challenge for me is to provide material for a multitude of readings. I'm not interested in direct narrative, and I hope that the iconography in my work is not easy to locate specifically. I hope to transcend an indifferent citation of sources and achieve a level of criticality.