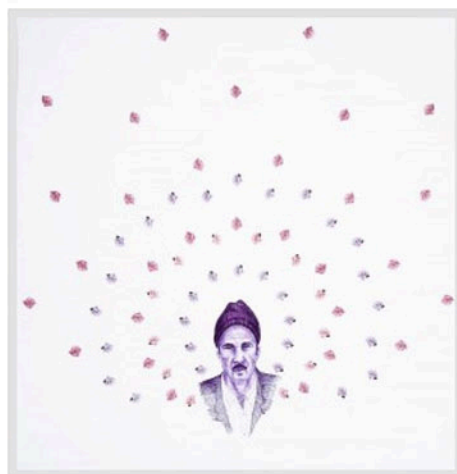


Interview with Kamrooz Aram by Stephanie Sykes and Reem Fekri



showing his most recent work in a solo presentation at Art Dubai 2011. This will be Aram's first presence in the Middle East.

Born in Shiraz, Iran in 1978, Kamrooz Aram completed his MFA from Columbia University in 2003.

Aram has had solo exhibitions at institutions such as LAXART, Los Angeles, CA (2010); the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASSMoCA), North Adams, MA (2006) and Wilkinson Gallery, London (2006). His work has been included in international group exhibitions including roundabout (2010), the Busan Biennale (2006), P.S.1/MoMA's Greater New York 2005, and the Prague Biennale (2003). Green Art Gallery (Booth A5) will

Can you explain your relationship with Iranian culture and imagery? How have you been able to source these, living in New York?

For me, the use of tropes from traditional Iranian and Islamic art has largely been about a critical look at art history and an exploration of my own position within this history. I do not have a direct relationship to traditional Iranian art, as I was trained and educated in Western methods. However, I have also felt a disconnection with the Western history of painting in which I was educated.

Therefore, traditional forms of art have become part of my subject matter. I have been interested in questioning and negotiating my relationship to these forms.

I have always had a research based studio practice. However, I can be more specific and say that I did spend a good deal of time photographing details of Persian carpets in New York carpet stores early on, and I still use this archive. For me, the idea of sourcing images from Persian carpet stores in New York is loaded with significance.

You've mentioned that in this new body of work such as Fana', the process of painting and image creating is integral to the content of the work, and engage in issues more literally on the canvas. Can you elaborate further with regards to the process?

In these recent paintings, I hope that meaning can be found not only in the image, but in the process which results in the image. In the paintings from "Generation After Generation, Revolution After Revelation", or in the Flag paintings, the central form is often destroyed and rebuilt. The final image is the evidence of this process. Sometimes the image is almost completely obliterated, while at other times the image stands quite strong.



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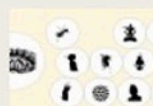
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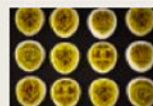
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In the "Fana" paintings, the central form is revealed through the process of destroyed the image. The process for these paintings is mostly subtractive, in that the image is revealed through the process of removing paint. The paint is scraped down, wiped away, and sanded down. None of these paintings actually have white paint added to the canvas. The illusion of light is made through the process of revealing the surface of the primed canvas.

Do you think that the Middle Eastern revolution that is going right now will have an effect on your artistic practice?

It is difficult to say. One never knows what indirectly influences one's work. Much of my work has dealt with nationalist or revolutionary ideologies. I have had one ongoing series of drawings titled "Revolutionary Dreams". I have always thought of this work as exploring the idealization of revolutionary action, often by those who may not have had a direct relationship with revolution, or perhaps those whose revolutionary dreams have failed. It has always been about the "dream" or ideology. The characters in these drawings have ranged from invented portraits of every day people to pop and reggae musicians such as Prince and Linton Kwesi Johnson, to Jane Fonda, who caused a stir when she went to Vietnam and posed for a photograph with the Viet Cong. The revolutions taking place now are very real and this has caught the world by surprise. It has been really fascinating to watch.



You discuss issues of self-Orientalizing in an interview with Lauri Firstenberg, and that you are not concerned with questions of identity, nor are you self-critical. How do you think this applies to other artists from the region, and the rise of the contemporary art market?

I'm glad you ask this question, because I think that some of the things I have said or written about this subject have been misunderstood or misrepresented. Perhaps it would be disingenuous for me to say that my work has absolutely nothing to do with identity. But I don't think that my work is about "identity politics" as such. As I have mentioned, my references to traditional art forms have been in effort to renegotiate certain histories and question the conventional Western view of most traditional Eastern art as "decorative". The problem is that it is just as easy to pick up these tropes and use them exactly in the decorative manner I intend to disrupt. Some artists might even echo traditional Eastern art to present a Western audience with something they might find to be "exotic". This is what I find to be problematic. That contemporary art can become an exotic product for the market does a disservice to all of the artists who work so hard and make so many sacrifices to make meaningful, challenging and culturally relevant art. The art market should be there to support culture. True collectors see themselves as participants in culture and history, not only players in another market.

Despite a lack of concern with questioning an identity, do you think there is an element of you represented within your work?

Absolutely. I think every artist makes work that is somehow a result of who he or she is. The problem is only when the meaning of the artwork is reduced to the identity of the artist.



As symbols and iconography are so central in your work, do you feel they will experience a semiotic shift by exhibiting in Dubai for the first time?

This is an interesting question and I've certainly thought about it, though I'm not exactly sure what to expect. I have had something like 7 solo shows and yet this is my first in the region. Much of my interest in using such symbols and iconography is to explore their dependence on context. I am very much interested in seeing the how the work is read in this context.

There is some very strong repetitive imagery in your work, such as geometric patterning and

the usage of birds – why is this?

I think that symbols essentially become iconic through repetition. The hawk, for example, is an international symbol of power. It is on the US presidential seal, it is on the US passport, it is on the Egyptian flag, etc. The birds that I have painted sometimes resemble the hawk or eagle, other times a falcon, and yet other times they can be interpreted as a mystical bird. There is the biblical representation of the Holy Ghost as a dove and then there is the Persian story of the Simorgh in Attar's "Conference of the Birds."

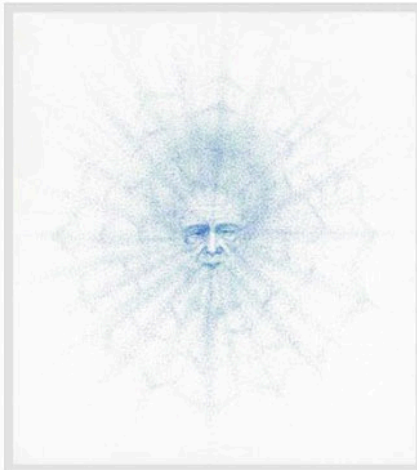
To reveal an interesting anecdote, some of the first images of the falcon that I used came from a combination of a miniature-style scientific illustration of a hawk and images of the tradition of falconry from a book celebrating the accomplishments of Sheikh Zayed.

Some of our personal favorite imagery that you use is the 'Mullah', with an extensive and exaggerated turban, (for example, in the series 'Revolutionary Dreams to the Series Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations'). We think that to some, these would appear as imagery representing religious extremism yet to me, they portray a kind of mysticism, a trail off of Sufi poetry – has this been your intention?

Yes.

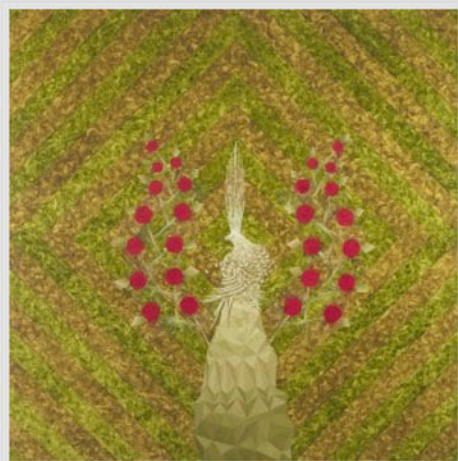
Iranian miniatures have a strong presence in your work yet there are elements of West that are presented as well. In The Gleam of the Mornings First Beam, for example, you repeat and then recycle images to create a completed piece. Can you talk us through this element of your work?

Much of my work is made from a variety of resources brought together with a variety of painting methods. I like the idea of so many familiar images coming together to make an image that you have never seen before.



What is the relationship between Islamic and/or decorative tradition versus contemporary aesthetics in your own practice?

I wish there was a word other than “decorative” that we could use to describe patterns. Islamic geometric pattern was very important to me early on in my work, especially while I was in school. It was my attempt to bring a traditional form of art into a contemporary context. Later, I began exploring Persian carpet patterns after having had a conversation with the late and great Iranian graphic designer, Morteza Momayez, in which he described the composition of a Persian carpet as a map of the spiritual journey to Divine Unification. I thought about the way in which this art form is no longer seen as art, but as a commodity, a luxury good stripped of all meaning. This is where I saw a parallel to painting. The problem of the “decorative” is something that paintings share with carpets. And one can argue that Persian carpets originally had much the same function as paintings do today.



In previous interviews, you do not claim your artworks to be political but you admit they can't escape entirely from politicization. Does titling a series “Flag Paintings” not inherently politicize the work before the viewer even sees it?

I think there is a difference in making work that includes in its content certain political issues and making work that has a political message. I believe art that has a definitive political message is much closer to propaganda. I am interested in raising questions about our relationships to such

issues. I have no political message to share with my audience.

It would be interesting to trace the trajectory of your work to date. What led you to this current stylistic departure and where do you see this current stage leading you next?

I believe in a constantly evolving approach to art-making. I am not interested in having one cohesive “style,” which can just as easily be referred to as a “brand.” We do not expect conceptual artists to have a formal “style”, but we perceive the cohesion of their work mostly through their ideas, which are realized in a variety of forms. The artists I find most interesting are the ones who are constantly challenging themselves and searching for new ways to explore their ideas. If it were common throughout Modernism for artists to approach a variety of subjects through a consistent form or style, perhaps my work sets out to explore similar ideas through a variety of forms. For example, my drawings are much more direct and figurative, while my paintings might be seen as much more open-ended and abstract. Yet the two approaches explore similar general themes. This diversity in form allows me to explore different facets of these themes, and therefore opens up the work to more possibilities. The latest collages open up yet another aspect of the work and they have introduced a geometry that later appeared in the paintings. So the different approaches inform and inspire each other. With this approach, I feel very free and at the same time very focused.

