

ECHOES OF THE VOICELESS

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by
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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

Systematically exploring themes of women's rights, gender, tradition, and religion within the social context of Iran, my work traces the intricacy of how identity is woven along these dimensions. I transgress the norms and rules of religion and traditional culture to mine issues such as the objectified woman, the violation of women's rights, and the psychological and emotional conditions of Iranian women under traditional or religious rules in order to illustrate the historical lack of respect shown to women in Iran. My goal in this body of work is twofold: 1) to highlight the abuse and disrespect women have suffered within traditional Islamic/Iranian culture and, 2) to suggest how women today have become empowered.

I- INTRODUCTION

In our multi-layered, multi-identity existence, we select ranges of behaviors which are meaningful to us and help us to make sense of the world as well as to communicate with others about how we perceive ourselves. The Muslim society I was born into taught me that a woman is both a clean and worthy “diamond,” as well as the more-vulnerable gender. She must keep herself inaccessible to and covered from public society, and must stay untouched until her husband enters her life, at which time he will own her. Then, she must work hard to serve her husband and give birth to her children who must grow up healthy and successful. She should stay calm and silent in public, being careful so that no one hears her voice. She does not speak or laugh loudly, and she must obey whatever is asked of her. This was my personal experience, which was similar to that of other girls in Iranian Islamic society, where many traditional or religious useless norms continue to exist today. Fortunately, despite the many restrictions and harassment against them, many women campaign for change in their workplaces, educational institutes, and public areas. These campaigns have improved the social and legal status of women in Iranian society. Among the participants of these organizations are artists, journalists, lawyers, students, and many other professionals who dedicate their lives to inform and empower women with knowledge about their civil rights.

Throughout the contemporary era, some Iranian artists have made a critique of the social and political condition. These artists consider social issues to be an important part of their ideas, and some have even become activists that have rebelled against the traditional rules, oppressive governments, and social inequalities. For many women artists including myself, it is impossible to remain indifferent to what is happening within

our culture. Being interested in women's issues in Iran, I have aligned my work with other women artists such as Shadi Ghadirian and Shirin Neshat whose work is concerned with women's social status and rights. Through art making, I can present my very deep emotions in response to the social issues in Iran. The "Echoes of the Voiceless" is an MFA thesis exhibition visually representing my concerns. This show contains an installation of paper casted female bodies, a series of two dimensional figurines mounted on the wall, and another series of miniature pieces. As whole, this project simultaneously illustrates the emotional and sometimes physical wounds women suffer as well as their strength to survive it.

II- CULTURE AND HISTORY

The status of women in many cultures is reduced to “personal property”. This abuse of women has led many people to work toward women’s rights. In societies such as Iran, where the law is still based on ideological beliefs, many problems have remained unresolved. There are intellectuals who hail from one corner of the society, only to be confronted by the closed-minded traditional powers spreading from the other side. The greatest tragedy for women’s rights is when the oppression of women is either unrecognized, blatantly ignored, or considered acceptable by society, thus effectively torturing individuals everyday. So, the problem arises when the law itself becomes abusive. This is the situation for Iranian woman. Since ancient times, Iranian woman have experienced the pain of inequality. Most women do not even consider their rights, because their status or role as the lesser undervalued sex has been integral to their role in the family since birth. Education makes the difference as it leads to recognition. When Iranian women learn about their rights, they respond. These women fight and campaign for their rights. This in turn brings violence against these women by the religious government or members of the society itself (Ebadi & Khan, 2007).

Although based on Persian classical texts of Zoroastrianism, women are recognized as “men’s partners in the common struggle against evil”(Boyce, 1972). Despite notions of gender parity rooted in the teachings of the Avesta (Schwartz, 2007), in traditional Iran, a husband is selected for the daughter by her parents (Floor, 2008). The father negotiates with the proposed spouse’s male kin with regard to all financial aspects of the marriage. Loss of virginity by the woman could invalidate these financial agreements. Once the marriage occurs a woman is subordinate to her husband. A man’s

Power in family decisions makes it likely that he can veto the education of his wife and daughters, and police the way that she dresses. In this respect, a man sets the rules and his wife carries out his wishes. The gender roles are thus closely tied to maintaining the rules and upholding the honor of the extended family unit (Floor, 2008). According to the mores of Iranian culture, “The woman who is young who is properly disposed, who is faithful, who is respected, who is good-natured, who enlivens the house, whose modesty and awe are virtuous, a friend of her own father and elders, husband and guardian, handsome and replete with animation, is chief over the women who are her own associates” (Muller, 1884).

In order to understand this cultural philosophy; a brief history of the role of women in Iranian culture is necessary. This chapter addresses the history of Iranian and Islamic traditional cultures to provide a context for the western viewer to understand this project. I discuss women’s social situation throughout a selection of important eras of Iran’s History. Realities of the Iranian tradition and historic social norms are discussed as well as contemporary culture under the influence of Islamic government and the awareness of women in contemporary Iran.

Since the Achaemenid era (559- 330 B.C.E.), marriage was a contract between the husband and bride’s family. The marriage required the authorization of the father of the bride or other guardian who gave the bride’s consent for marriage (Floor, 2008). During this time, polygyny was common. The number of wives was a reflection of wealth and dignity and tended to increase with the person’s socio-political standing. The regular official wife was to bear offspring while the concubines were for pleasure and mostly captives of war (Afary, 2009). Regarding women’s costume in the Achaemenid period

little is known, because Persian monuments do not include representations of women. There are, however, a few contemporary representations in other contexts. Based on these documents, one could guess that they wore an over-garment that, like the modern *chador*, covered the head and neck(Shahbazi, 1992a). An example is the monuments from Ergili in northwestern Anatolia (see Figure 1 on p.32).

During the Parthian period (247 B.C.E.- 224 C.E.) Women are seldom represented in reliefs. But, based on a few examples by writers, we find women of this period covered with either chador or other forms of head dresses. For instance, in the epic Vis o Ramin, dating from the Parthian era we see this explanation: “Vis is not only sitting behind curtains (*parda*) but also wearing a veil (*neqāb*) on her face” (Bijan Gheiby, 1990). The veil is worn also during the Sasanian period (224-651 C.E.), as we see in a rare evidence for head coverings of Sasanian woman in the Boar Hunt relief (see Figure 2 on p.3.) at Tāq-e Bostān (Peck, 1996).

During the Parthian (247 B.C.E.- 224 C.E.) and Sasanian (224-651 C.E.) periods, family relations did not change very much from the Achaemenid period. Polygyny was still permitted, and adultery was severely punished and resulted in the death penalty for women (Floor, 2008). Marriage by proxy was also common. This is when a man dies and his widow was given in marriage to one of his closest next of kin. If the man does not have a wife, but has a daughter, the same thing happens to the daughter, and then the new family inherits the dead man’s property. The property, the wife, and/or the daughter are still the husband’s family’s property. This kind of marriage was a traditional religious obligation (Floor, 2008). Thus, the wife was considered part of the dead husband’s property, which was inherited by his family member. These traditions represent part of

the culture that objectify women and reduce them to the property of men. Traces of these beliefs still exist in some areas even in twenty-first century Iran.

When Islam conquered the Iraq-Iran region (between 640-649 C.E), qualities of the Zoroastrian faith in the Sasanian society fused with the Arab culture. The exchange of mores between the Sasanian society and Islam went both ways, each adopting parts of the other (Ahmed, 1992). Based on Islamic requirements (Koran 24:31 and 33:59), women should not display their ornaments to persons other than their husbands. Therefore, after Islam became prevalent in Iran, women continued to cover their heads even more strictly. In Iran today, women are required by Islamic Republic's law to always have their head covered in public.

The Safavid period (1501-1722) was the beginning of modern Persian history. During this time a concept of patrimonial kingship was introduced, combined with territorial authority and religious legitimacy. Additionally, diplomatic and commercial interactions between Persia and Europe began during this time (Matthee, 2008).

During Safavid there was a growth of Shiism in Iran, which became the official faith of Iran until present. Although, the theory of Shiite Islam had a better attitude towards women compared to Sunni Islam, some specific Shiite practices as well as the social realities of women's lives in Shiite communities were not any different. The social role of women has one of the main points of dispute between Islamic conservatives and modernists. Based on the conservative Shiism, women belonged to the inside of house and were to provide sexual pleasure for their husbands and bring up children. Women were regarded as the weak gender and too emotional to be trusted with important

decisions. They needed to stay veiled because otherwise they might cause arousal of a man's sexual desires (Momen, 2011).

The Qajar era (1785-1925), was linked to current social, religious and intellectual, such as liberalism, nationalism, social democracy, and Babism. There was also an early manifestation of feminism (EIr, 1999). During this period Qorrat-al-Ayn (1814-1852), the outspoken Babi woman leader, removed her veil before audiences (EIr, 1999). Additionally, under the influence of European liberal ideas, intellectuals condemned the practices of veiling and other forms of women's oppression. This struggle for women's rights continue to the present time and has been one of the main forces for democratic change in Iran (EIr, 1999).

While modernity has helped the enhancement of women's rights, the religious fundamentalists continue to stop the improvement of women's rights in Iran. "The Pahlavi regime in Iran (1920-1979) prepared the foundation for considerable improvement of women's rights and life conditions in the 1960-70s"(Sedghi, 1999).

Iran's legal system changed dramatically when the Pahlavi regime was overthrown. Islamic theocracy constitution was established by Ayatollah Khomeini as the final authority. After the 1979 Revolution, several laws favoring women's rights were changed by governmental clerics. Islam became the basis for the legal system. The new constitution viewed women through the lens of Islamic ideology which does not recognize women as individuals but rather as "family" and "women as mothers and wives" (Nayyeri, 2013).

According to Article 20 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, men and women, all shall receive equal human, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

But there is a condition for this which changes everything: “...in conformity with Islamic criteria” (Nayyeri, 2013). After the Islamic Revolution (1979), women have been subject to all of the general obligations of Muslims. Although some laws and rituals are only for women and some performed with the husband’s permission only. To understand these differences between men and women in law, the following are some examples of those laws that are specific to women: the age of criminal responsibility, diya (blood money)¹, punishments², honor killing³, testimony by women⁴, and compulsory hijab. In the present day Islamic Republic of Iran, the legal practices still follow pre-modern traditions that do not treat males and females equally.

Human rights activists have recognized women’s vulnerability under Iranian family law such as the rights and duties of parties to a marriage, the minimum age for marriage, freedom of marriage and polygyny (Nayyeri, 2013). Women are further demoralized because children under Islamic law are perceived as the property of the male. Islamic law reflects this by assigning custody of children to the father. Thus, part of a woman’s concept of her own sexuality is that she is inextricably linked with the

¹ According to the available scholarship, amongst the different laws of Islamic countries, the Iranian Penal Code is the only one that still specifies that a woman’s diya (blood money) is not equal to the blood money of a man. The blood money of a woman is half that of a man.

² One example of a punishment which is applied with more frequency and severity to women is stoning to death for the crime of adultery.

³ Honor killing is an act of murder carried out by a husband, father, brother, or other relatives, to punish a family member perceived to have brought dishonor upon an entire family. By virtue of culture and other factors, women and girls are the primary victims of Honor killings. Husband has right to kill his wife in flagrante.

⁴ According to Islamic Shari'a, the testimony of a man is often given twice the weight of that of a woman. Further, the testimony of a woman is not accepted at all for certain types of crimes. For instance, a homosexual act between men shall only be proved by the testimony of four men (Article 117) and “the testimony of women, whether alone or together with men, shall not prove livat” (Article 119).

production of children; she loves them, and in order to keep them she must not risk rejection by her husband. In this culture the fear of losing her children often sustains the woman's traditional domestic efforts – culinary, domestic, and sexual – to please the husband, at least until the children are adults. This fear of rejection and subsequent expulsion from the home and family is further exacerbated by the lack of acceptable societal opportunities for divorced women. In a country where houses are not rented to single people, especially female, an expelled woman must inevitably return to the home and control of her parents (Francoeur, Drew, & Sadeghpour, 2004).

Despite all the legal, social, and economic handicaps imposed on women, they are nevertheless fighting back for their rights. It is apparent to the careful observer that the legal and social status of Iranian women are very much in transition, which is resulting in an unexpected blend of traditional, Islamic, and modern Western values. Yet, many Iranian women and young girls experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Many refrain from talking about it, because they live in a culture which points the finger of blame on women in such situations. So women become both victim and the responsible party for the social violence. In the eyes of the police and other state officials who investigate social violence the official position is that “woman’s ‘improper’ and ‘provocative’ clothes were the source of the problem” (Samadbeighi, 2012). This leads to more women becoming the victims of violence. The victim’s silence allows the cycle to continue, because men know there will be no penalty even if the violent behavior occurs. For example, when a girl is intentionally pinched or touched by a man in the crowd or while sitting in a taxi, if she openly tries to stop the perpetrator, it is very possible she will be humiliated by the other males surrounding her. So the fundamental problem in the current

Islamic-Iranian culture is that females are considered to be responsible for provoking the sexual desire of men. This is considered one of the explanations for supporting the wearing of the *hijab*, as it is considered to be the savior of women.

In response to these Iranian cultural traditions, this body of work was inspired by the lack of women's right and the powerlessness of women. Through the installation of multiple female figures, the series illustrates how women gain strength and power when they band together to fight for their rights. These women are survivors within the oppression of Iranian society. They present strength through their numbers rather than suggest the victimization due to their circumstance. However, they also suggest the emotional and sometimes physical scars of their lack of respect and status in life.

III- INTRODUCTION TO INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

Questions about the nature of identity, liberation, resistance, survival, mortality, hatred, and belief are some of the issues represented in contemporary Middle Eastern art. In my work I represent multiple ideas of gender, identity, morality and liberation as well. According to Western & Staff (2010) "... The strength of visual art lies precisely in its potential for conceptualizing and generating multiple ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory meanings...". The gender inequality in my culture is linked with the other forms of inequality such as general injustice, and unequal power relations. These issues are embedded in my work through historical Islamic iconography and the contemporary cultural context of the forbidden nude woman. In my work I visually present multiple issues of sexism, power struggle and human rights, as well as my personal stories by engaging the viewer while walking through a space filled with nude female bodies made out of handmade paper. These female torsos are torn or pierced by needles and other materials. They are stitched, scarred and battered. The interior is as important as the exterior in these figures to reveal the psychology of the inner secrets carried by these women while the exterior physical appearance suggests the result of the physical abuse.

Emptiness of the bodies contrasts with their group presence and suggests the contradictory ideas of powerful and powerless. This is similar to the some of the ideas of Magdalena Abakanowicz. In her work she brings together oppression and liberation. The idea of a crowd has many reverberations in her mind. One of them is the transformation of an individual into a cog (Starewicz, 2010). Abakanowicz says: "I immerse in the crowd, like a grain of sand in the friable sands. I am fading among the anonymity of glances, movements, smells, in the common absorption of air, in the common pulsation

of juices under the skin..." (Starewicz, 2010). The entire population of her figures is enough to fill a large public square. They constitute a warning, a lasting anxiety. Very few images in contemporary art are as emotive and as disturbing (Starewicz, 2010).

Abakanowicz changed the meaning of sculpture from object in order to look into the space of experience. I do the same by making a crowd of nude figurines hanging in space. I would like to suggest a loss of self and of individuality. Like Abakanowicz. I also use the same mold to make all my figures, so that each is very similar to the others. However, small degrees of individuality emerge in the slight variations created after I remove them from the mold (see Figure 15 on p. 44). So, each of them has its own expression, with their specific details on the skin. The thick, matted fibers resemble wrinkled skin, knotted muscles, and visceral tissue. The organic quality of each figure emphasizes our physicality and our ties to the natural world to suggest endurance, strength, and survival.

Similar to Abakanowicz, I don't want my work to be seen as objects, but rather as a community experience. I view the entire show as an installation in which each piece supports the other to communicate similar ideas but from different points of view. The show is accompanied with music to place the viewer within the context of Iranian culture and helps to suggest the depth of emotion experienced by these women.

Like the work of Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian (Roberts & Fung, 2012), my work touches upon gender issues in Iranian culture. In her photographs, "Like Every Day" (see Figure 3 on p. 32), she works on ideas of female objectivity and domestic Identity. West by East (see Figure 4 on p.33) is a series of mixed-media work comprised of photos of Iranian women in western clothes, but with most of the models' bodies blacked out in the

pictures. Their hair, arms, and sometimes even clothes are obscured. The photographs appear to have been defaced, illustrating how little of a woman survives the Iranian morality code (Ghadirian, 2009). In my work I also block body parts in different ways to reference the morality code for women in Iranian culture. For instance in some pieces a screening material or pieces of fibers are used to cover parts of the body (see Figure 5 on p.34). In most of my works, breast and vaginal areas are exposed to represent women as they are diminished to sexual objects in my culture. There is in my work an irony of concepts of presence and absence, revealing and covering, exposure and hiding, power and weakness, confidence and shame, as there is in Ghadirian's.

Another artist I am influenced by is Ghada Amer, the Egyptian contemporary artist living and working in New York City. Her works also deals with issues of Gender and Politics (Guralnik, 2010).

“Deeply political, Ghada Amer’s work stands out with its interweaving of sublime aesthetics and disturbing content. Its aesthetics create for the viewer a container for the contradictory identifications she asks us to attend. Its beauty and cultural familiarity demand that we examine the truth. Amer’s work bears on issues of contemporary psychoanalysis, in particular the relationship between ideological messaging and the constitution of subjectivity as played out in gender and world politics” (Guralnik, 2010).

Similar to Amer, I criticize the oppression and roles imposed on women. She uses techniques such as embroidery and gardening as a feminine material. I am mostly influenced by her usage of drawing and stitching, in some of my pieces, I machine stitch female figures. I consider this stitching to be very violent expressive drawings to reference the male gaze at women in the history, as well as the abuse and violence against them. As a woman artist, I feel a position of power when I manipulate and challenge the

myths of the male dominant world by mixing so called “feminine materials” with so called “masculine techniques” of art making.

In her piece “Colored Woman with Gridded Drips” (see Figure 6 on p.35), Amer uses embroidery to draw the figure and acrylic brushstrokes make a grid above the figure showing a woman masturbating. I see this grid as an act of veiling the figure, which is willing to disapprove the act and hide it. The exposure of such imagery in Islamic culture is considered unacceptable. In my piece Havva (see Figure 7 on p.36), I use machine stitching to draw two figures in a private moment. I use the violent act of piercing the fragile paper by a sewing machine to represent the female body. In this way, I suggest the presence of violence on the female body. In my pieces, the beauty of femininity contrasts with the violence, which always suggests the tension between male and female within the Iranian culture.

VI- ECHOES OF THE VOICELESS

In this chapter I will discuss the show and the pieces, as well as materials and process. I explain the choices I make in different pieces. I discuss the ideas I have as well as details of my choices and also the relationship between different bodies of work I have exhibited in this show. Each group is explained separately under its title accompanied with provided images.

MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Artists and crafts people have been exploring paper and its uses for thousands of years. Paper has been a ubiquitous commodity since the introduction of wood-pulp manufacturing almost two centuries ago. We record and preserve our personal and public lives on paper, in the form of documents, books, et cetera. Handmade paper was selected as the material for this project for several reasons. Firstly, the history of paper is an integral aspect of my Iranian culture. It is the basic material used in Persian painting. Secondly, coming from a very historical part of the world, paper is a perfect material to illustrate layered narratives as well as personal diaries about women's issues, stories, and the disenfranchisement of women. Finally, utilization of collage during the process of papermaking, gives me the possibility of making layers upon layers of information imbedded in paper. This technique is used to suggest a metaphor for prolonged emotional, psychological, and cultural impressions of traditions and religions made on the psyche. I require a material that enables me to communicate the fragmented pieces of identity and represent preserved stories of our life. The use of a mixture of materials that are literally embodied into layers of paper during the wet process is the perfect method to simultaneously achieve the effects needed for this project.

My process of making first requires physical labor through the making of sheets of paper using pulps. I mostly use overbeaten flax and abaca to suggest fragility and vulnerability of women's abusive condition in Iranian society. This skin-like material provides connections to women's body (see Figure 8 on p.37). After making the basic material of paper and pulp paint, ready, I collage previously printed patterns and previously stitched and drawn pieces of paper (see Figure 9 on p.38), as well as pieces of magazine imagery that I would like to use into the layers of paper (see Figure 10 on p.39).

Similar to Miriam Schapiro, a pioneer of American feminist art, who transformed into an idiom of female empowerment and the ability to boldly confront sexist thought, I am also interested in dignifying women in my work. Like Schapiro, I used collage materials and reference elements of female domestic culture as practiced for centuries. We both also use materials relating to needlework and clothes. These techniques make use of their historical value in terms of women's artistic heritage. However, my mixed media collage works are shaped as female bodies (see Figure 11 on p.40), with patterns referencing Islamic arts and traditional domestic icons. Stitching and fabric along with freehand expressive drawings are employed using the Islamic iconography. The floral and botanical designs (see Figure 12 on p.41) further accentuate women's traditional art forms, while the use of patterns or decorative elements are a reference to a patriarchal history of art. Additionally, through this fragmented imagery the sense of traumatic experiences and confusion that women experience in Iranian society is suggested. This also evokes how women are seen as a commodity for domestic use and sexual advancement.

For the installation “Bewail” I cast my body (see Figure 13 on p.42), using freshly made sheets of handmade paper and methyl cellulose as glue. While casting layers on top of layers, I add and remove elements by collaging my materials and creating forms and patterns. The layered papers and materials make a history in the body to represent the prolonged damages toward women by the power of traditional and religious male-dominant rules. Some holes and threads are set in between layering and planned based on my intuitive response to the process. The relationship between my hands, the body and materials are very intimate (see Figure 14 & 15 on p.43-44). The flow of my emotions expressively happens directly in the process of making. When I tear up the pieces of paper on the stomach part or make holes on the breast by my hand directly, I repeat the trauma, the pain of the abuse and the violent destruction of the self (see Figure 16 on p.45). Pieces of paper mostly made up of flax, dry to skin-like bodies in a decayed and tortured condition. The making process does not end here, but the cast body continues to be tortured and abused again and again in different processes of machine stitching, tearing, piercing, cutting and punching of holes (see Figure 17 on p.46). The process continues by adding more drawing and detailed paintings as well as attaching more materials such as hanging decorative pieces of fabric, threads and paper (see Figure 18 on p.47). All these processes suggest the continued physical and emotional pain of an abused Iranian woman.

WHO AM I?

My show consists of multiple groups of work which all support each other to communicate different aspects of my story of being a woman in Iranian society. I start

with a piece titled “Who am I?” (see Figure 19 on p.48). In this piece, I present three self-portraits in which I touch on the basic question of identity by a contemporary Iranian woman. The middle piece is veiled by screening pieces in a way to resemble the curtains hanging in front of the face (see Figure 20 on p.49). This piece speaks about a veiled woman, finding her way to be visible. The face is not visible but it has patterns and forms which illustrate an emotional conversation. The piece on the right (see Figure 21 on p.50) has torn facial skin. It is partially uncovered and has some decorative elements. The overall intention of this piece is to question the self as commodity. On the left (see Figure 22 on p.51), I have delicately drawn a self-portrait which represents the beautiful and fragile self, surrounded by black screen, referencing femininity. Black is used as mourning clothing. She mourns for herself. Through this work, I look for different components of the culture and the position of woman in it. Such as women’s emotional and social oppression a woman goes through, while trying to figure out her identity as a young girl who has to wear a Hijab, get married or even staying single or becoming a widow in such society as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

TOGETHER WE STAND

“Together We Stand” (see Figures 23-24 on p. 52-53) is a group of three female figures connected with colorful leaf forms representing pattern and sounds of echoes of a woman’s voice. Different voices become a conversation among the community. The patterns of leaves installed on the wall vibrate as song notes in the space and make a conversation between different works while accompanied by music playing in the gallery, repeating women’s cries and call for respect toward women. This piece is connected to

the group on the opposite wall (hung from the ceiling) named “Voiceless Pain” (see Figure 25 on p. 54). These two pieces are positioned on opposite sides of the 12 hanging cast bodies, in the middle of the gallery, “Bewail” (see Figure 26 on p.55). The wall pieces provide background support for the bodies hung in the center.

BEWAIL

In this installation, the 12 headless female figures have no feet or hands (see Figure 26 on p.55). They are suspended from the ceiling, as if floating in space. They are made out of layered handmade paper, cut, torn, and stitched to speak to the oppression of women as experienced through a postmodern lens- the fragmented individual women within the cultural context of tradition. This work traces the intricacy of how identity is physically and psychologically embedded into the body. Through my work, I transgress the norms and rules of traditional Islamic culture to mine issues such as the objectified woman, the violation of women’s rights, and the psychological and emotional conditions of Iranian women under the current religious rules. In the paper cast bodies this is used as a means to expose the women’s bodies as tortured and abused. Their torn skin represents the wounded psyche of abused and socially disabled sexualized women. Bodies turn into sexualized decorative objects. The ornamental colorful patterns are a direct reference to the Iranian culture. The patterned elements that appear to be tattooed onto bodies, (see Figure 12 on p.41) reference animal decorations in many Iranian nomadic handicrafts usually made by women or children and these reference traditional roles women have had in Iran.

Thread, torn paper and other objects coming off the bodies suggest how these

Iranian women feel about the traditional roles established by the government. They are physically and metaphorically being torn apart by oppression. The holes show the vulnerability, the breasts are torn, the hands are cut. They are still ornamented, as all Iranian women are. Like the other work in this project, the colors, abstracted forms and patterns reference the color and beauty of Iranian visual culture. Additionally the dangling threads hanging from the bodies resemble blood and veins, as well as make a visual connection within different parts of the body, to point out the areas that have priority for being seen. These threads reference emotional wounds in the past of the individual. They become suture-like, holding the body together. True to life, beauty and pain are revealed together. Other bodies are thrown on the floor by neglect and are disrespectfully ignored. Formally, they make a visual connection between the ground and the suspended pieces; metaphorically they represent women who have been discarded. Overall this work, criticizes the sexualized, objectified woman in traditional Iranian-Islamic culture. At the same time, the torn and abused bodies present the impasse between the mystique and the objectified woman.

Each of these 12 bodies shows an individual woman's pain and vulnerability. They are hung collectively from the ceiling to suggest pieces of meat in a butcher's shop presented for sale. They are hung as a group, to show that it is a social condition experienced by many women. They are each different, yet generalized as a whole. Their identity and individuality is intentionally ignored in their presentation as a group. Although they look similar, each has its individual markings to depict personal stories, a collection of abuse and pain, physical and emotional. They are headless and handless, symbolic of the way that women's presence is intellectually limited in the society.

Additionally they are footless, because women are stopped from being present physically in many situations and are unable to step through the social boundaries of the culture.

The private and sexual body parts are exposed to further reveal the objectification of women in the culture. The paper women show all they are in the gaze of men; they are sexual property and extremely vulnerable. And, ironically, they are revealed and unveiled in a way that they are not supposed to be seen normally. Although they are torn, abused, and weakened, they are still strong. They are present to tell their stories and their cry is powerful. They are broken, but they have been strong enough to maintain their existence and presence. They are abused and torn but have no shame.

THE LOVE STORY

Since I moved to the United States, I have been feeling stronger cultural bounds to Iranian culture, while I also observe the gradual influences of western culture and viewpoints in myself and my artistic preference. The contrast between the two cultures is the source of this sharp and recognizable aspect of my work. I am dealing with freedom of visual cultural imagery in the west by presenting my ideas in a way that is new to me. Until I came to the US I was not allowed to portray the nude female figure as it is forbidden in Muslim culture. Being able to represent nudity in my art is exciting to me. While the female figures in my work represent Iranian woman, in no way they do look like Iranian woman we are used to seeing. As an Iranian female artist, I criticize the limitations and lack of rights in Iranian society. I depict naked women, doing what I am not supposed to do in Iranian society. I present the vulnerable women in paper body casts and two-dimensional paper cutouts. These represent Iranian women who have been

limited. I want my Iranian identity in the work and see myself as a representative of all Iranian women who live restricted lives and are suppressed from voicing their true identities. I do this to reference the abuses women have suffered and the necessity for women to come together in a community to gain strength and work toward women's rights of equality.

Islam considers sculptural, realistic works of art to be imitating God's creations, and is thus not acceptable. This is the reason that Islamic art has become abstract and vegetal or geometric. However, Persian art under Islam never completely banned the human figure, and in the miniature tradition the depiction of figures, often in large numbers, is central. This was partly because the miniature is a private form, kept in a book or album and only shown to those the owner chooses. It was therefore possible to be less inhibited with these works than with wall paintings or other works seen by a wider audience. These paintings, done with hand-ground pigments on handmade paper, embody time-honored techniques. Their subjects are tales of love, war, religion and political power. As is to be expected, in this male-dominated society, the classic period artists were exclusively men.

In the "The Love Story" the visual references to Persian and Islamic visual culture are imbedded into the bodies as in the elements of Islamic architecture and Islamic traditional patterns. Influenced by abstract symbols of Iranian folk arts, my figures are exaggerated and deformed while they still keep their identifiable female human body. Most of them are deformed and are fat reminding us of fertility gods and totems.

The two-dimensional collages reminiscent of Persian miniature paintings suggest an unrealistic ambiance that makes the work poetic and representational of Persian

culture. Similar to Persian traditional illustrations, I make balance and harmony between positive and negative shapes. Shapes are usually repeated in regular, consistent, and progressive rhythm. The design has mutual motion of colorful or light-dark areas, as well as the permeation of darkness into lightness (and vice versa). This creates a mutual visual mobility.

I recast the artistic tradition of the Persian miniature with a present-day subject matter for reinterpretation, incorporating both figurative and abstract elements. While I was experimenting with paper and stitching, I developed this series of small pieces depicting multiple figures of female bodies in forms of repose and dancing together.

These pieces are done in handmade paper and collage and found materials such as cardboard, magazines, and other industrial as well as natural materials. Handmade paper is collaged over the cardboard, and cut out images of two female figures embracing are the focus. Machine stitching has been used as a way of drawing, shadowing, and showing the movement of figures as well as creating shallow space in the work. The mixed use of industrial and handmade paper, reference the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, to illustrate the struggle that the contemporary woman experiences to find her personal place in society.

I am also projecting my personal experiences, memories, and emotional reactions toward the female self by depicting female figures in relation to each other (see Figure 27 on p.56). These love-making scenes are presented in the private spaces of small sheets of handmade paper. The bodies are covered and revealed, shown in relation to each other in intimate positions. They are cut-outs of papers, paper dolls, seemingly nude, simple, and beautifully poetic. They are presented in a similar format to Persian miniature paintings.

There is a formal and poetic relationship between their environment and space that is similar to miniature painting, as the surroundings consist of various botanical and natural elements made of stitched lines and patterned background or colorful areas. These women seem to be making love outside, but privately and openly as nature is their bedroom. Some Persian writings are imbedded in their bodies or other parts of the scene, referencing old-age Persian book-illustration. The bodies are flat but the way that they are presented in relation to each other but the space has a three-dimensional, spatial feeling. This is one of the rules in miniature painting, that seemingly two-dimensional objects within the space demonstrate the scene in a very spatial way, thus highlighting and contrasts different aspects of the scene. You might see inside a room while you also see the yard's environment. This unity of time and space in the work creates a very spiritual and poetic feeling.

In “Havva” (see Figure 7 on p.36) two nude women have been produced with machine stitching as a drawn element. The women are facing us but gazing into each other’s eyes. They are superimposed on top of Farsi text that is illegible and used for its textural effect, suggesting these are modern Iranian women who have found their voices because they have been able to overcome the social norms and parameters. They are like two Eves. The darker square is used to provide a scene of deeper space. The abstracted, bird-like, and botanic forms have been incorporated through the collaged layers and the decorative stitching.

This series is intended to present a more positive and optimistic view of womanhood. I am interested in representing my emotional respect and love toward the female gender through this miniature mixed media work, which has undoubtedly been

influenced by Persian poetry and love stories. The male-and-female love or male-to-male love has always been apparent in Persian poetry. But female-to-female love is missing. I have made women present within this genre. These figures are proud women, openly nude, as a protest against current Iranian law where nudity is prohibited. Throughout this body of work I have been questioning the absence of the woman's body within the public society of Iran, in contrast to the over sexualized exposure of women in western society. There is no middle ground in the presentation of a woman's body in either the Iranian or western society. In both cultures they are objectified as sexual objects. As I go forward with my work, my goal is to make poetic, spiritual images of womanhood. I want to celebrate the female body as more of an angel rather than a human. My work is a love story of a voiceless gender, the ones who are punished, who are responsible for the sin and bad of our world, the "Eve" in the Persian story, "Havva."

CONCLUSION

“Art does not solve problems but makes us aware of their existence. It opens our eyes to see and our brain to imagine.” - Magdalena Abakanowicz

In this thesis I discussed the shortcomings of Iran’s Islamic law and tradition, and how it causes lack of basic human rights for women. The influence of modernity on woman’s knowledge about their substantial rights and getting power to fight for them were discussed. After this introduction I discussed how artists as part of this society can act as sources to communicate with the public about the social problems and needs for change in society. My goals for this research and the show were similar. I wanted to create public awareness to prepare the ground for a more constructive action. Iranian women require support from the world. Her limitations are complicated and she needs help. This help and support will not occur without knowledge, a kind of knowledge that immerses deep inside people’s hearts, not only their minds. One way awareness occurs is through art; art that affects viewers intensely, art that communicates the pain of women in middle eastern society, art that keeps influencing and spreading “Echoes of the Voiceless” all around the world.

“Echoes of the Voiceless” as a whole suggests a group prayer and the strength of women when they join forces. The music as well as dramatic lighting of the gallery is intentionally designed to provide the sense of a sacred space. Some spotlights focus on specific pieces to make visual focal points and attract the viewer’s eye to make connections in between the different group of pieces. I plan to exhibit this work again in the future and have it travel the world. My ultimate goal, though, is to one day present

this installation in Iran. This is impossible in the current situation without getting into serious trouble. I wish for that day.

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Figure 1. Drawing, stone relief from Ergili in northwestern Anatolia (Shahbazi, 1992)



Figure 2. Detail of Boar hunt relief. Taq-e-Bostan,
7th century, Photograph by E.H. Peck (Peck, 1992).



Figure 3. Like Every Day, Shadi Ghadirian, 2000 (Ghadirian, 2000)



Figure 4. West by East, Shadi Ghadirian, 2004 (Ghadirian, 2004)



Figure 5. Body part covered by fabric, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013

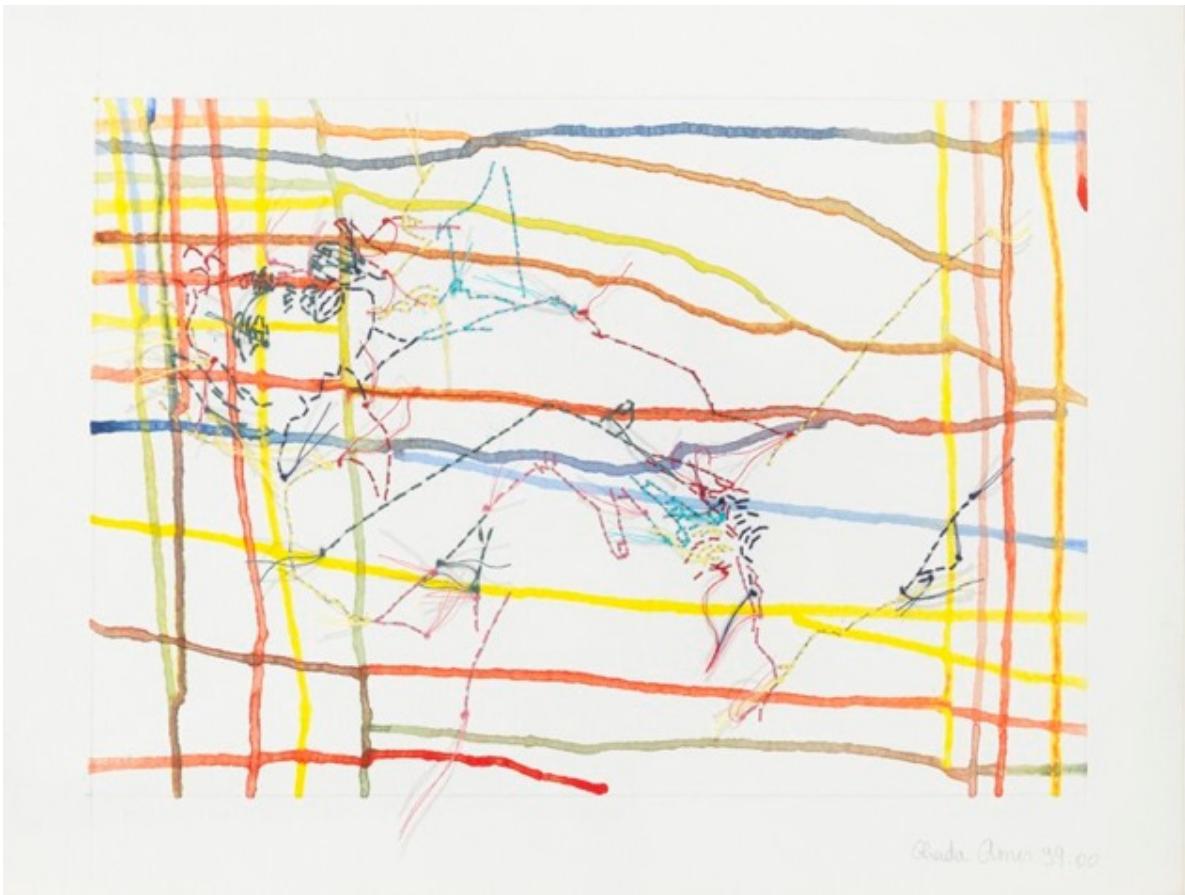


Figure 6. Colored woman with gridded drips, Ghada Amer, Acrylic and embroidery on paper (Amer, 1999-2000)

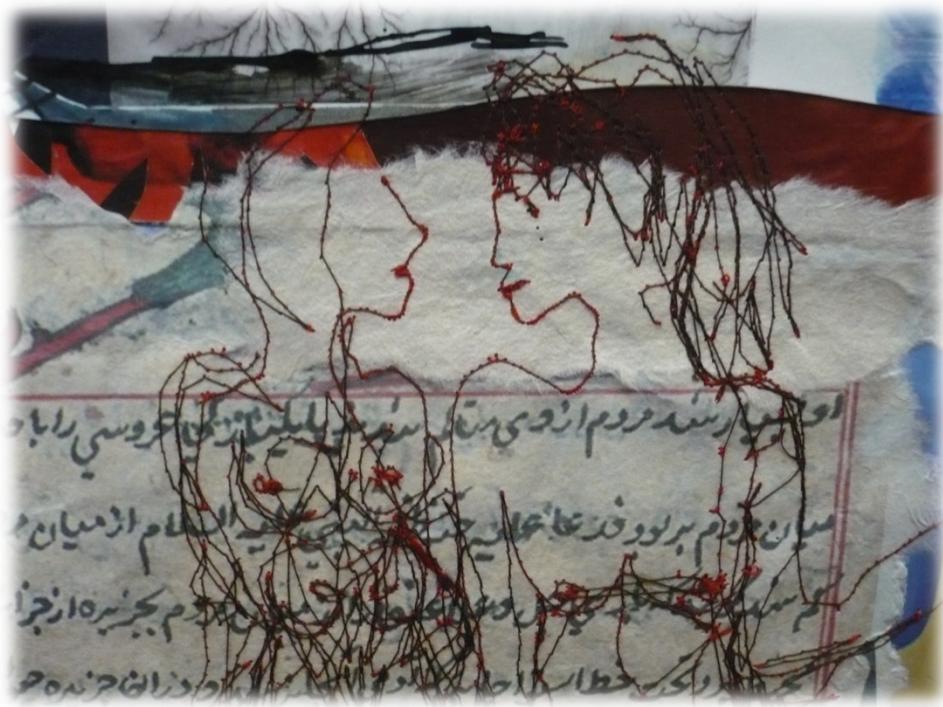


Figure 7. Havva, by Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2012

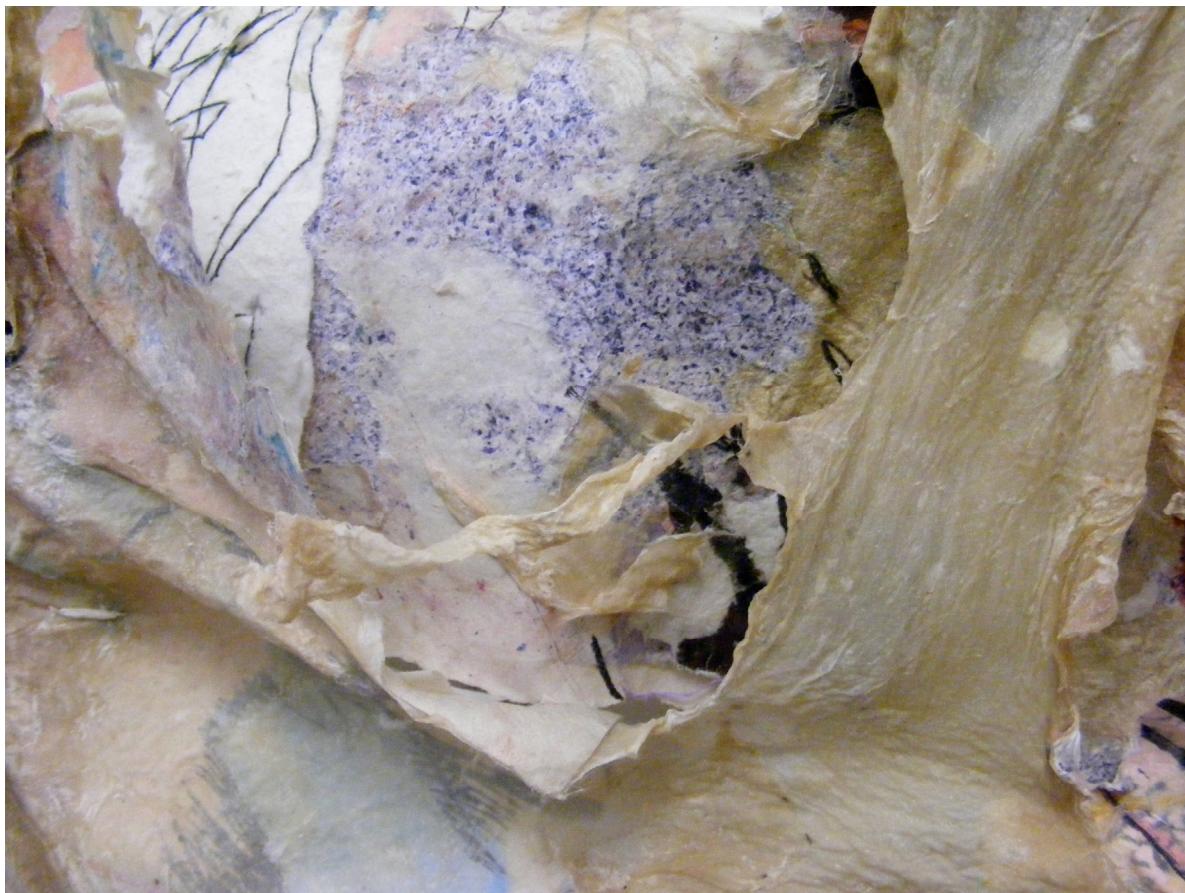


Figure 8. Detail, Bewail, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 9. Detail, Bewail, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013, Use of previously stitched and drawn piece of paper



Figure 10. Detail, Bewail, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013, Pieces of magazine used into the layers of paper



Figure 11. Bewail, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013

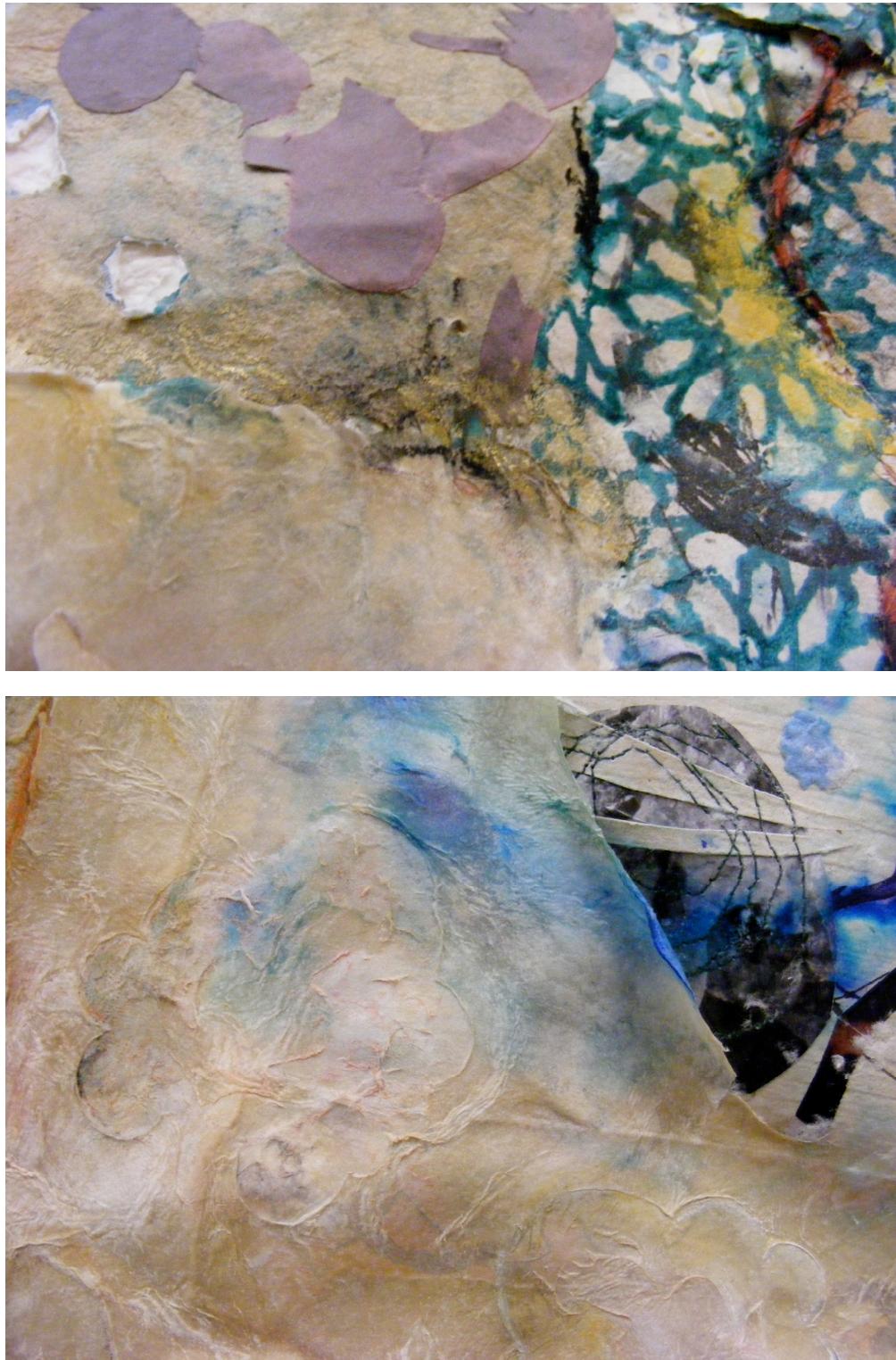


Figure 12. Floral and botanical designs, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 13. Body mold made of duct tape

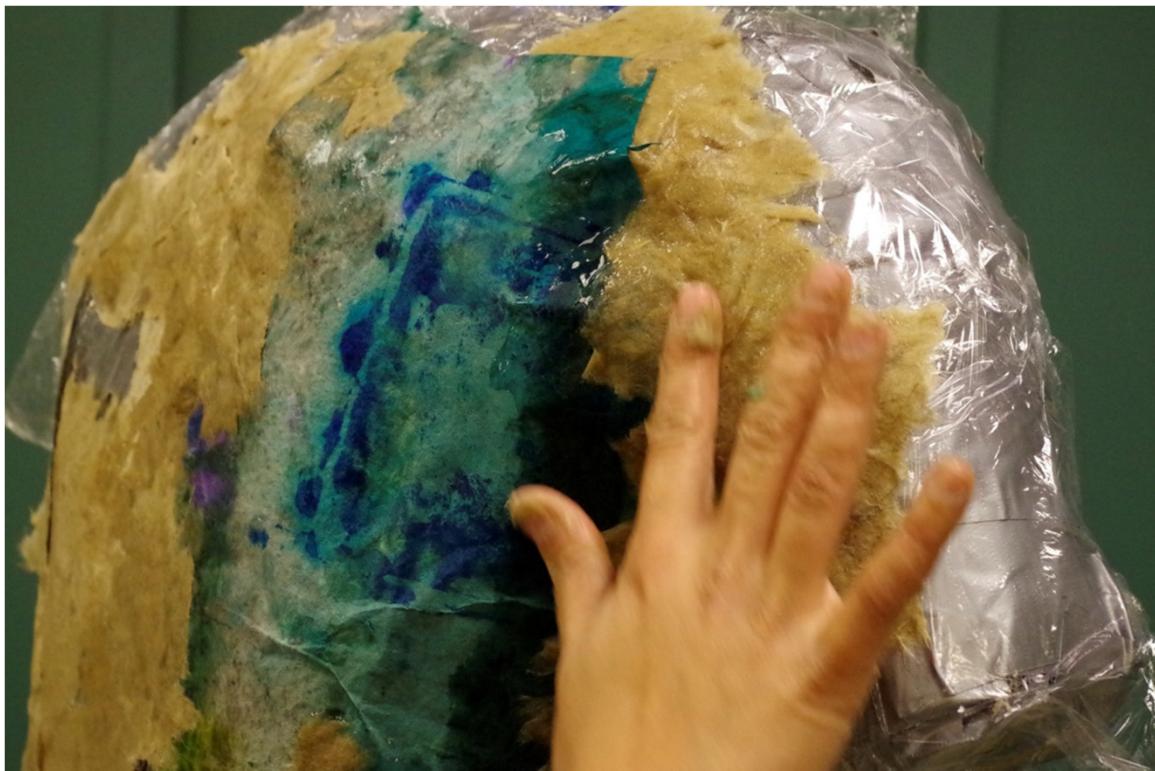


Figure 14. Process of making one of the figures of “Bewail”. Use of wet handmade paper and methyl cellulose, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 15. Process of making “Bewail”, Use of wet handmade paper and methyl cellulose
Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 16. Detail, “voiceless pain”, piercing tearing and destruction of skin-like layers, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 17. Detail, “Together we stand”, Cut and torn skin-like layers,
Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 18. Detail, “Bewail”, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 19. Who am I?, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 20. Detail, Who am I?
Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 21. Detail, Who am I?
Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 22. Detail, Who am I?
Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 23. Together we stand, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 24. Detail, Together we stand, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 25. Voiceless Pain, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 26. Bewail, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013



Figure 27. The Love Story, Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi, 2013

VITA

Zeinab Chaichi Raghimi was born in 1979, just a little after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. She grew up and lived in Tehran, the capital of Iran, until 2009 when she decided to pursue her profession as an artist in the United States. To expand her artistic views, she started her education as an MFA student at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Zeinab Chaichi previously received her BFA in painting and her MA in illustration from the Tehran University of Art in 2005. Chaichi has held numerous exhibitions in different cities of Iran as well as some in the United States. She completed the MFA program at MU as a mixed media artist, working primarily in fibers, painting, and drawing.