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OFFSIDE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Sooreh Art University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art, 2013

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University of Arkansas

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Abstract

OFFSIDE highlights the parallels between artists and athletes, as well as the professional communities in which both operate. Through the use of sports related imagery, the artwork explores notions of ethnicity, gender, and politics. While much of the work is autobiographical, OFFSIDE is able to consider the political and personal views surrounding a young Muslim woman while lives with constant uncertainty in the United States and trying to start a career in one of the most competitive cultural fields.

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OFFSIDE

Introduction

I was warming up

I had been waiting four years for these games

It was important to me

Everyone knew I was the best Iranian Gymnast

My body was completely covered

I wanted to return to Iran after that game

It was too tight; they could see all of my bones

I covered my body with a big flag until the final moment

I heard my name announced from the speakers

MARYAMSADAT AMIRVAGHEFI, from Iran

I arrived at the floor

I somersaulted

There was no applause

Everyone seemed shocked with my perfect form

I was running and jumping

I looked like a butterfly

Everyone started to cheer for me

They showered me with flowers

Without a doubt, I deserved the gold medal

When my feet touched the ground, I bowed

The cheering voices disappeared slowly
For about five minutes, it was pitch black
Suddenly they turned on the lights
They called my name again
I was shocked
I kept performing when the lights went out
Did anyone see my performance?

Whether it is spending countless hours in the studio without visitors or presenting an exhibition and hoping that it will be attended by the public, the statement “Did anyone see my performance”, is one that many artists ponder. In many ways, being an artist parallels certain aspect of the life of athletes. Both often train in isolation for public performances that will be judged or evaluated by others, whether professional critics or laymen. Even if, Intentional or not, this leads to scenarios where the critics determine if someone should be considered successful (i.e. a winner) or unsuccessful (i.e. loser). As our society becomes more global, there has been a shift in the ways in which individuals obtain information or participate in events. Artists and athletes are no longer limited by their geographic location, as technological advances allow both national or international connectivity. If viewer wants to watch a soccer match in the United Kingdom or see images from the most recent Venice Biennial, he or she can do so through a computer, phone, or television. However, this luxury is not without drawbacks. These screens present material that has been filtered and edited. This means that everything that is received can, and should, be seen as ‘second hand information’. Much like the theory of ‘wag the dog’, which means to intentionally distract attention from what would otherwise be of greater importance, to something else of lesser

significance. By doing so, it creates a scenario where information can be curated and viewers can be manipulated for specific intentions.¹

This kind of dissemination of cultural information makes me question who is really 'winning' and 'losing'. As a case in a point, The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).² Show women without hijab in international matches, which caused a problem for broadcasters since showing women in "indecent dress" such as short-sleeved T-shirts and without headscarves is banned. They have tried broadcasting "live" matches with a short delay, letting them cut to replays when cameras pick up problematic shots.³

To me, art is a game. While I wish there were no winners or losers, it is clear that within the art-world there are people deemed successful (winners) and unsuccessful (losers). There are a number of variables, some legitimate and other spurious, which determine the trajectory of a contemporary artist. Politics, gender, social standing, and ethnic background all play a large part in the evaluation of an artist's work while other (important) aspects go overlooked. I cannot help but feel that certain groups of artists are automatically categorized based on the aforementioned classifications. As a female artist that was born in Iran, a predominantly Muslim country known for violent dictators and discriminatory views towards women, I am forced to acknowledge my relationship to masculinity and the perception of individuals around the world (because people judge my work through these stereotypes). There are many generalizations about Middle Eastern art and female artists. While there are groups who share a similar style in their art, content, symbols

¹ Eviatar Zerubavel, "*Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance*," (England: OXFORD University Press, 2015), (Accessed Oct. 2017), 48.

² Mohammad Aboutalebi, "IRIB's Testimony," *The WHO Public Hearings on FCTC*, 2000, (Accesses Dec. 2017), http://www.who.int/tobacco/framework/public_hearings/F0480045.pdf.

³ "Iran: Female fans 'cut from live TV sport," *BBC NEWS*, July 4, 2013, (Accessed Sept. & Oct. 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-23004459>.

or speaking, not every artist presents these views. I'm from a part of the world that is recognizable as a core of the hot political art work. I have to always be prepared to receive comments from curators, gallery visitors, and art enthusiasts about how my work illustrates my gender and nationality. I try to be different from the recognized elements, which are far from the expectations of western viewers. My work is presented as an autobiography that is gender based. As a female artist, and specifically a female artist from the Middle East, I have to deal with the negative view toward Muslim women and women who are from authoritarian regimes. People in the art world expect to see these women as weak and submissive. As a result of these expectations, I often wonder if my viewers have been waiting to see some specific cliché in my works. I wonder if it is possible for me to 'win'; whether in life or the art-world. In trying to reconcile my situation, I have determined that sports, more specifically sports related imagery, are legitimate vehicles for exploring notions of ethnicity, gender, and politics.

By putting myself at the center of the work and by focusing on the autobiographical, I am able to consider the political and personal views surrounding a young Muslim woman who lives under constant uncertainty in the United States.

I have arrived at a place where I now ask the following question: If I were to win (become successful), how does it change the game end?

The Relationship Between Art and Sport

As previously mentioned, the worlds of art and sports are not very different. Both have the ability to convey emotion, illustrate internal conflict, and create lasting memories. In addition, each of them play an important role in the culture and history of my motherland, Iran, as well as in the United States, where I currently live and work. Although at the first glance, arts and sports

seem to be opposite cultural practices, I believe that both are unique in that they often overlap and create new memories that do not fully reside in either genre. Sports and art both require you to use your mind and your body at the same time.⁴ What we do in art and sport is learned through repetition and exercise. Whatever the outcome, you should always take responsibility – your work is your work, not anyone else's. You cannot push responsibility off onto others, or hide behind anyone.

In this body of work, my goal was to explore ways in which art and sports provide a forum to highlight social structure, gender equality, nationality, and political issues. My emphasis is on the way in which artists or athletics create an emotional connection and the effect of gender and nationality on their practice. I propose that certain aspects of being an artist is similar to being athletes.

Both gender and nationality play an important role; they can be both an advantage or disadvantage. Whether international or not, the audience automatically categorizes an artist or athlete based on their ethnicity and sex. The result is not always detrimental, as athletes and artists can obtain a brief celebrity status based solely on these categorizations. This is in and of itself problematic. However, one of the most troubling aspects of discrimination, in both athletics and the arts, is the income discrepancy based on gender. New studies have publicized this well; the income gap between men and women show that women earn an average of 77% of what their male counterparts make.⁵ The U.S. National Soccer team is a good example; the women's and men's teams are paid in different ways. While the women's players have a base salary (\$72,000) that is

⁴ "Art and Sport," *Transformit*, July, 2012, (Accessed Sept 2017), <http://www.transformit.com/newsletter-july-2012/art-and-sport>.

⁵ "A LOOK AT MALE AND FEMALE PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE SALARIES," *ADELPHI University*, 2014, (Accessed Sept. & Oct, 2017), <https://sportsmanagement.adelphi.edu/resources/infographics/a-look-at-male-and-female-professional-athlete-salaries/>.

supplemented by bonuses for winning games (\$1,350 per win), the men receive a per-game bonus whether they lose or win (\$5,000 per game) and receive a bonus for each win (\$3,166 per win).⁶

Moreover, in a country like Iran, which does not have gender equality (like other parts of the world), this gap is even wider. For instance, when Kimia Alizadeh, who is one of the best Taekwondo athletes in the world, received a Bronze medal in Olympic Games of 2016, no one from the National Olympic Committee of Islamic Republic of Iran was present at the venue since they were not expecting her to win. At the same time, Iran men's national volleyball team played against Argentina in their first game at the 2016 Rio Olympics. According to ISNA's Rio reporters, (Islamic Society of North America) Seyedmanaf Hashemi who is the Financial Assistant, Nasrallah Sajjadi, Director of Sports and Championship, Mohammad Shojaei, Treasurer of the National Olympic Committee, Mohammad Reza Davarzani, head of the Volleyball Federation, Gholamreza Amini, Head of the Kayaking Federation and Kaveh Mehrabi, Iranian Member of the IOC, were in the stadium.⁷ These are just a few examples of how gender inequality has a cultural impact on athletics.

Female artists all over the world faced identical challenges to those of their athletic counterparts. For instance, in a country like Iran, that is characterized by a political and social landscape that is rooted in religion, religious figures limit the potential of artists who work both in and outside of Iran. Due to religious and cultural philosophies, it is common to have the government set up rules what censor what content an artist can utilize within their work. Even with these limitations, a recent generation of Iranian artists have created a new language that challenges

⁶ Das Andrew, "Pay Disparity in U.S. Soccer? It's Complicated," *New York Times*, April 21, 2016, (Accessed Sept. & Oct, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/sports/soccer/usmnt-uswnt-soccer-equal-pay.html>.

⁷ Kaveh Mehrabi, "The presence of Iranian officials in the game of the Iranian national volleyball team in Argentina," *Saheb Khabar*, August 18, 2016, (Accessed September 2017), <http://sahebkhavar.ir/news/14522206/>.

what is familiar within popular Iranian culture. One of the disadvantages of the new generation of artists is their willingness to deface the common symbols found within Iranian culture, such as images of veiled women and calligraphy in Persian art⁸. While this provides a certain amount of 'shock value' that can lead to quick success or fame, it is often short lived rather than sustained for long periods of time; or have the ability to dramatically impact the art-world as a whole.

"What You Do Not Ask Iran" is a 2013 article from one successful Iranian artist, Shabahang Tayyari, who is now well into his thirties. This article was published in *White Out Magazine* and has not only played a large role in the development of my visual language, but also allowed me to feel as though I am a member of a new generation of Iranian artists.

In this article, Tayyari outlines the many ways in which Iranian artists fail to obtain the similar opportunities that other international artists do even though their credentials are usually the same.

Due to its existing political and social upheavals, Iran has never benefited much from its cultural potentials and artistic resources as well as it could in the recent century. As a matter of fact, no tangible artistic incident or progress has been accrued in Iran during the last century. Although there are some talented artists living in Iran, Iranian artists have not succeeded in playing important or influential roles in the international contemporary art scene. And if they sometimes had, it was more as a subcultural, stereotyped and "other" Middle Eastern phenomenon. Therefore, talking about the art of Iran in general may seem illogical. Oriental and political art generated in Iran, which superficiality is its main characteristic, is an ordered gift by the West that attempts to highlight the miserable and poor face of Middle-Eastern world. Indeed, it is a banal art that has been created for the Western desire and undoubtedly it has never had any serious position or role in today's art scene, and it may never will.⁹

⁸ Fred Klenier, "Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective," 15th ed. Vol. 2. (Boston, Massachusetts: Cengage Learning, 2016) 883.

⁹ Shabahang Tayyari, "What You Do Not Ask Iran!", *Whitehot Magazine*, 2013, <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/do-not-ask-iran-/2847>.

As a member of the new generation of Iranian artists, I understood that I would not have a chance to be international artist by staying in Iran. After having had several exhibitions in Iran, I figured out that, according to the political issues like sanctions (which do not even allow us to pay the fees to apply for exhibitions), the most probable way to show my work outside of Iran was finding galleries in Dubai and Qatar. These areas, known as the core of the Middle East art, are rich with expression of various types of art and creativity. By doing some quick research, you can determine the tastes of their gallery directors or curators are not far off from the Western idea about the Middle East. They have perfect spaces, connections, and potential, but the way they put together most of their exhibitions makes Western views feel empathetic for us! In my work, I question the validity of making art as an Iranian. It seems like a moot point, a fixed athletic match - you already know who is going to win before the event starts.

As this passage describes, there is an inherent desire to categorize artists (or the work) simply by addressing their nationality. However, simultaneously these same artists are often ignored because of their nationality. As a member of the new generation of Iranian artists, I understood that I would not have a chance to be an international artist by staying in Iran.

It is difficult for me to talk about being a winner or loser, as I have never experienced either completely. I can only estimate the result but it is based on previous evidence. With all these doubts and uncertainties, I keep making art because I find myself as a woman who is a fighter and prefer to change the situation or rules of the game rather than accepts a result that everybody expects. When faced with a condition in which I feel that here is no chance to succeed, I often end up feeling a sense of pity. When I reach this point, I have to make a decision: either accept the situation and pity myself; or become a fighter that does not look over her shoulder and pushes forward trying to prove the naysayers wrong.

Hope is the only weapon that I have. For those of us who have been in the fight (figuratively and literal), the prospect of more warfare will generally seem impossible; battling against extraordinary clichés, taboos and the inequality of women's rights. I have always known that these issues were not going to be easy to contend with, but, I have to keep fighting, because otherwise, there will be no future. For someone like me who has chosen art as the only and best language for communication, accepting the unequal situation would mean the end of the world.

In addition, I have lots of questions in such as: Does the presence of so many talented female artists mean that the culture is changing in the Middle East? If women now have greater public presence and independence freedom to travel and pursue a profession, does that signify freedom from patriarchal and familial authority? Is perceived gender discrimination simply due to cultural differences? I do not have an answer for these questions but I believe they are like a beam of hope. One of the best examples of a female artist from the Middle East to pursue a career is Ala Dehghan. Dehghan born in 1970 in Iran, graduated from Yale University lives and works in New York City. As she mentioned in her artist statement, her work features a new language that highlights the effect of social and political issues:

Socio- Political perceptions are inevitable when you are on a ground full of political seeds. However I do not want to critique the Socio-Political, but to reflect what I see; and what I see is not normal, these unnatural experience has psychological and unnatural sediments, precipitating in the human Soul so much that they make the normal totally abnormal, hence I can not see things normally. The more sensitive a soul, the more it is fragmented, to the point of disintegration, consisting a sort of daily lunacy. I walk with the umbrella of my paintings under the rays of madness.¹⁰

I believe that a new generation of contemporary artists is currently working hard to break through the negative stereotypes, striving instead to put a positive, empowered face forward. I do

¹⁰ Ala Dehghan, "MOP CAP 2009 Shortlist," *Magic of Persia*, September 2009, (Accessed September 2017), <http://mopcap.com/artist/2009-ala-dehghan/>.

not think my work is quite free of calligraphy, traditional influence or voices of protest. I try to create a new visual language, which does not use these items just as a shock value. Instead, I challenge the viewer's preconceived notions of my idea through works possessing a fresh and vibrant sense of fantasy. For instance, I use Farsi in my drawings as one of the tools and elements to make it stranger, and by covering parts of the body, I illustrate the censorship, which is part of the stereotypes.

One of the most visible aspects of Iran's complicated cultural and social system is discrimination. The funding for the female Iranian athletic teams is substantially lower than their male counterparts. The research published on 2016 shows that Maryam Rahimi, the best female soccer player in Iran is doing so well on the field that she may earn \$6,000 for a session¹¹. This may seem substantial until you compare it to the \$2 million that Mehdi Taremi receives as the highest paid male player in the Iran league.¹² This sexism is also evident in televised broadcasts and other media outlets. Culturally, seeing women play sports sparks a feeling of ire that is felt throughout the various religious sects of Iran as well as the government. In 2013, the Iranian government issued the following statement that questioned the worthiness of females athletes participating in Taekwondo competitions: "A woman's and girl's virtue is not in extending her leg to kick someone and bring us medals."¹³ This kind of statement highlights the gender bias found in Iranian culture, as well as in their sports. With the 2009 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which signed a return to a more fundamentalist society, the bigotry and intolerance only increased.

¹¹ "Who is the most expensive Iranian female athletes?" *Jamejamonline.ir*, Sep 13, 2016, (Accessed October 2017), <http://jamejamonline.ir/sport/1643151816161914036>.

¹² Transfer Market, "Top Market Values Persian Gulf Pri League," *Transfer Market*, 2017, (Accessed September 2017), <https://www.transfermarkt.com/iranian-pro-league/marktwerte/wettbewerb/IRN1>.

¹³ "Iranian women and sport: every obstacle an opportunity," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2015, (Accessed August 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/apr/19/iran-women-sports-stadium-competitive-obstacles>.

Many female athletes understood the impact the Ahmadinejad election would have on their clothing and access to the facilities, therefore they chose to cancel their matches. The oppression found within Woman sports is not only felt within Iran, but also throughout the world. In 2011, The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) did not allow the Iranian women's soccer team to play their final qualifying match for the London Olympics due to their hijab. FIFA claimed the hijab violated uniform regulation.¹⁴

This duality of having to live within two ideals that may often be at odds has plagued women's sport in Iran for decades. Traditional clerics believed that the participation of women in sports is contrary to Islamic teachings. Another example of this phenomenon is that of Niloufar Ardalan, an Iranian female football star that was banned from traveling to an international tournament by her husband. His unwillingness to sign the necessary papers for renewing her passport resulted in her not being able to play in the Asian Cup.¹⁵ Even through Iranian women athletes faced religious and cultural opposition, they continue to participate in sports and challenge norms. While the decision may come at a personal cost, their presence on the international stage can and should be seen as triumphant. These women are forging a path to pursue their dreams free from any political and cultural obligations.

Sadly, the oppression of women has become systemic and infiltrates all aspects of Iranian culture. This discrimination is even found at death, when a woman's family is entitled to only half

¹⁴ Arash Sedighi, "Fifa's ruling on women's Islamic strip sends out the wrong message," *The Guardian*, Jun 13, 2013, (Accessed August 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/13/fifa-iran-women-football-strip>.

¹⁵ "Out of Play," *New York Times*, Sep17, 2015, (Accessed August 2017), <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/09/17/husband-of-iranian-womens-soccer-captain-prevents-her-attending-asian-cup/>.

the payment of that they would get when a male counterpart dies. So, clearly, a woman's life is not seen as valuable as that of men within Iranian society.¹⁶

Winners and Losers

Over the past three years, the concept of "winner" and "loser" has become more interesting to me. I have found that both athletics and the art-world are similar because there are winners and losers in both professions. Throughout my life, I have always seen myself as a fighter, as a person who refuses to quit or to stop regardless of the circumstances. With this ideology in mind, I see a parallel in both sports and arts: An athlete is supposed to keep playing as hard as possible regardless of the games' score and an artist is expected to continue working despite the critical reception of their exhibitions.

As a member of the "*Green Group Movement*", a political movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election and demanded the removal of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from office, I have an intimate relationship with the wining, losing, and the necessity to keep pushing forward. The *Green Group Movement* protests were major events in Iran's political history and observers claim that these protests were the largest since the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979.¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, the election of President Ahmadinejad signified a cultural shift that championed religious norms that subjugated women and other reforms. I, in good conscience, could no longer stay in Iran. Therefore, with just a suitcase and few belongings, I left my country to pursue my education and escape the persecution within Iran.

¹⁶ "Freedom in the World 2009," *Freedom House*, 2009, (Accessed Sept. & oct. 2017), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2009>.

¹⁷ Peter Rothberg, "Protest in Iran," *The Nation*, February 4, 2010, (Accessed Sept. & oct. 2017), <https://www.thenation.com/article/protests-iran/>.

I was born and raised in Iran and have spent 25 of my 28 years in the Middle East. Growing up in the Middle East taught me how everything are related to politics - art is no exception. As I mentioned before, the political rules in Iran are against the human rights, especially women's right. For example, women need their husband or father's permission to leave the country and it is against the idea of being an artist, which means exhibiting your work worldwide and having a chance to make a connection with art world. In addition, based on a written document the number of the Iranian women who have a master degree or Ph.D. are more than men but outside of academic area and in a real art world, they are under the magnifier and censorship razor more than men in Iran.¹⁸ One of the results of these pressures is that we do not have enough active female performance artist in Iran, due to all the rules for hijab, attitude, and behavior, making it impossible to have a powerful impact and performance.

I was born and raised in Iran and have spent 25 of my 28 years in the Middle East. Growing up in the Middle East taught me how everything are related to politics - art is no exception. As I mentioned before, the political rules in Iran are against the human rights, especially women's right. For example, women need their husband or father's permission to leave the country and it is against the idea of being an artist, which means exhibiting your work worldwide and having a chance to make a connection with art world. In addition, based on a written document such as the article that was published in the "*Middle East Institute*" the number of the Iranian women who have either a master degree or Ph.D. is higher than men. But outside of academia and the art world, they are under the magnifying glasses and censorship razor more than men in Iran. One of the results of these pressures is that we do not have enough active female performance artists in Iran, due to all

¹⁸ Zahra Elmi, "Educational Attainment in Iran," *Middle East Institute*, Jan 29, 2009, (Accessed 2017), <http://www.mei.edu/content/educational-attainment-iran>.

the rules for hijab, attitude, and behavior, making it impossible to have a powerful impact and performance.

I do not believe that the story of my life is a special one but it is one that I know intimately and feel like I can explore with depth in my work. The fact that I am a Muslim woman living in the United States during one of the most uncertain social and political times, seems worthy of investigation. I am worried about the future, and specifically, about my life in both the United States and Iran. Will there be a cultural shift in both countries that allow women to have equal rights and experience less discrimination? If so, does that mean that we (women) “win”? If not, do we “lose”? More than anything, one question seems even more pressing than the rest. I wonder if I will have the incentive to continue to persevere regardless of the outcome?

Why Sport?

As long as I can remember, sports have always been a part of my life. Throughout my childhood, my two brothers were continuously watching sports. However, being a girl and living in the Middle East, it was understood that I would not play sports. As it is possible imagine, this was a difficult situation for me to understand and accept as a child. Therefore, when my brother was attending college and had to work on his studies, I was thrilled to be in charge of watching sporting events on TV and “reporting” what was happening to my brother. Looking back to this, I find that the most interesting aspect of my time as a reporter was the way in which information was being filtered. I received the details second-hand, as the Iranian networks were already filtering what was being shown, and then I was presenting the data to my brother. In this way, he was receiving knowledge through three filters that contained their own bias. Even when I tried to present the information in a manner that mimicked his personality, I was never successful. It was during these days of watching sporting events on TV that I started to consider what it must have

felt like to be on the winning and losing teams. Even though I was not in the stadium, I was still a spectator, I feel that this situation is similar to my life now; I am watching television to see how the match will end and which team I will be joining.

Art as a Game

I believe that art is a game; one in which some artists are successful while others do not attract any attention. However, knowing that items like technical proficiency, gender, or professional contacts can only benefit an artist to a certain degree, keeps me running in the proverbial marathon.

Because now I now reside in Arkansas, I find myself as a part of a new generation of artists who have left Iran to work in the United States. This is strange, as I now fall into a number of categories that provide new limitations, expectations, and advantages for me. As Vahid Sharifian, a well-known Iranian artist and curator that resides in both Iran and the United States, described in an article that was published on the *Gallery Info* website, the new generation of Iranian artists is different from that of their predecessors. Sharifian states that for the new generation of Iranian artists, the purpose should not be to created something pre-defined, holy, or ritual. Rather, an everyday endeavor develops skill and consciousness over many years. This constant pursuit has create a structure in which these artists have created their own ‘games’ in the studio and they can now destroy, renew, or discard whenever they wish. Anything can be found and in their artworks; from the portrayal of a spaceship to the questioning and playing with taboos, memories, poetry, and pure art itself.¹⁹

¹⁹ Vahid Sharfian, "Domestic Sunset," *Gallery Info*, October 2014, (Accessed Sept. & oct. 2017), <http://galleryinfo.ir/Event.aspx?Id=669>.

This notion of ‘anything goes’ has played a vital role within my studio practice. Not only am I free to bounce from medium to medium, but I can also play with a variety of materials and techniques. Over the past three years, I have worked to create a visual language that is authentic and unique.

During this time, I have explored the use of clay, paint, collage, video, and installation within my practice. This diversity has allowed me to create a very large amount of work with the hopes of finding a successful vehicle for my content. While I am not certain if painting or drawing are the most effective mediums to do so, I do find they are the most compelling at this moment. During the past six months, I have been working to align my drawing and collage within the painted works. This has required me to develop new ways of approaching painting. Rather than moving quickly without any clear plan, I am now thinking about how paintings will be composed and executed (technically). As a result, I found that digital technology is an excellent tool to quickly move through ideas without having commit to something on canvas or panel. Once I figure out the composition of a painting (what is included, where it will be positioned, palette, etc.), I can proceed to the large-scale paintings. This has allowed me to have a roadmap for the goals I would like to achieve, and at the same time have the freedom and flexibility to make edits in real time. I feel that the result pf this strategy is the production of paintings that have parallels to my drawing and collages; there is a balance of quick and intentional, sophisticated but nut overlabeled, and fulfilling for the viewer.

Why A Screen?

While the work from my first two years at University of Arkansas featured original imagery that was conceived without overt source material, over the past year I have been more interested in utilizing source material within my studio practice. By selecting images from the internet or

other digital sources, I can manipulate the existing images to create a new narrative that is more aligned with my content. The use of a screen, such as my laptop or cellphone, allows me to highlight the barrier and distance between me (the receiver) and the original event. This also permits me to blur the line between what is fiction and reality.

As a female, I was not allowed to go to any stadium or public sporting venue in Iran. For this reason, as default, TV and social media became my primary source for any sports related information. This also created a situation where I was not watching in ‘real time’; but rather I was watching content sometimes that had already been edited and censored. To make matters worse, whenever I watched the rebroadcast of a sporting event online, it was in low- resolution. While I could talk in length about the chauvinism surrounding this situation, what I would like to emphasize in my current work is the impact of digital technology on the way in which I obtain information.

Both digital images and the screens we see them on have had a huge impact on my personal and artistic life. I am not alone, as many contemporary artist have also spoken about their relationship to technology. Hito Steyerl, a German filmmaker, visual artist and writer, often addressed the role of image and the new technology using a sarcastic language in her videos. *In Defense of the Poor Images*, an essay that Steyerl wrote in 2009 for *E-Flux* journal, describes the idea of a ‘poor image’ as an image with substandard resolution but is readily disseminated. In the essay, Steyerl states,

The poor image is a rag or rip’ an AVU or JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearance, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded downloaded, shared, reformed, and edited. It transforms quality into accessibility; exhibition value into cult value, films into clips transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance.

The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming. The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place.²⁰

I found the notion of giving value to an image according to its quality very interesting. Since I am often relying upon the internet, and images with substandard resolution, for my information. I have an affinity for the ‘poor image’. The theory that resolution for quality is essential for successful synthesis of information seems both outdated and incorrect. However, I do acknowledge that context plays an ever-increasing role in the comprehension of what is being seen or presented. The digital landscape, especially the one that exists in the internet, is ripe for manipulating information and, as such, can be used as a means or tool to discriminate. With this in mind, I am often looking for images online that I can manipulate for benefit of my work. These images, almost always low in quality and featuring some aspect of sports, become the metaphor highlighting aspects of gender, inequality, political intolerance, and other prejudice found in both Iranian and American society.

²⁰ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of The Poor Image," *E-Flux*. No 10, November 2009, (Accessed August 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *KICKOFF*, 18 x 24in, Mixed Media on Paper, 2017.



Figure 2: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *Injured During Warm Up*, 20 x 26 in, Mixed Media on Paper, 2017.



Figure 3: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *GOOOAL*, 18 X 24in, Mixed Media on Paper, 2017.

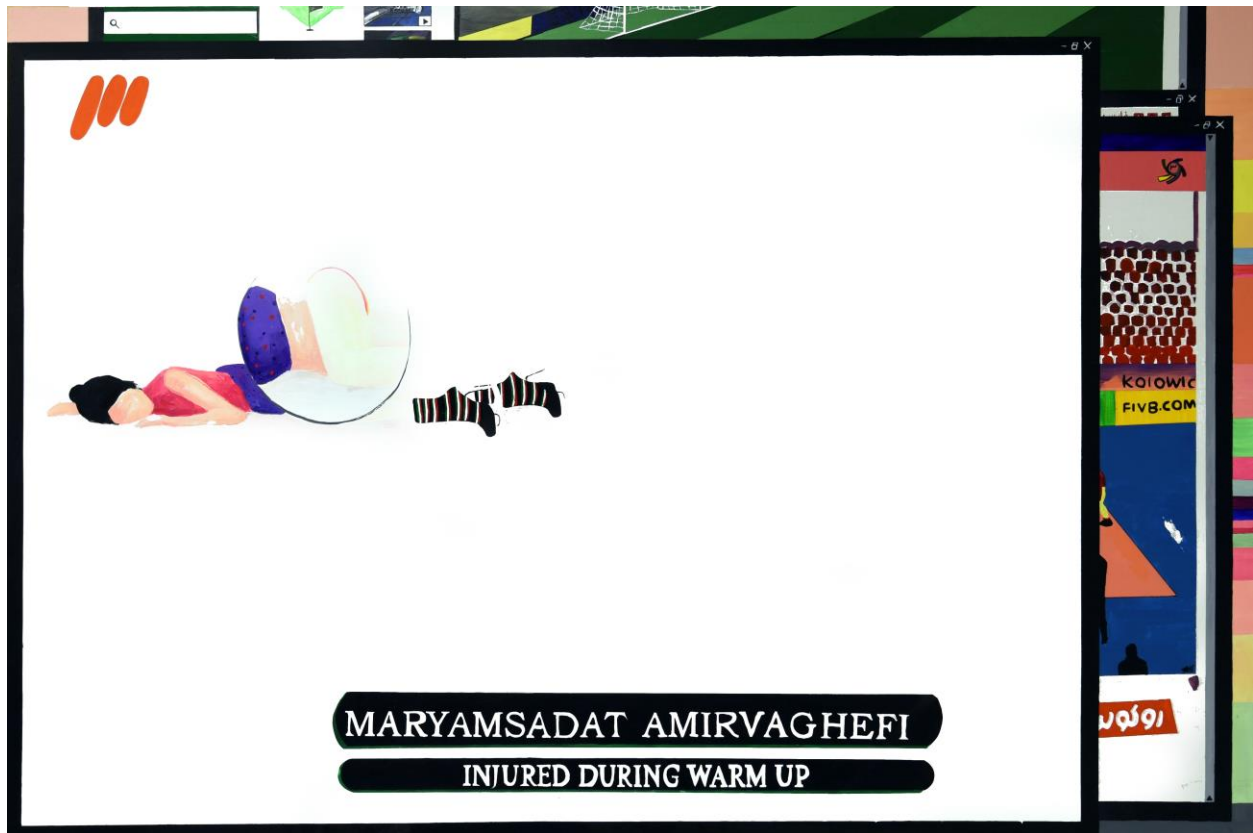


Figure 4: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *Maryamsadat Injured*, 48 x 72 in, Acrylic on Panel, 2017.



Figure 5: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *You Will Miss Her So Bad*, 48 x 72in, Acrylic on Panel, 2017.

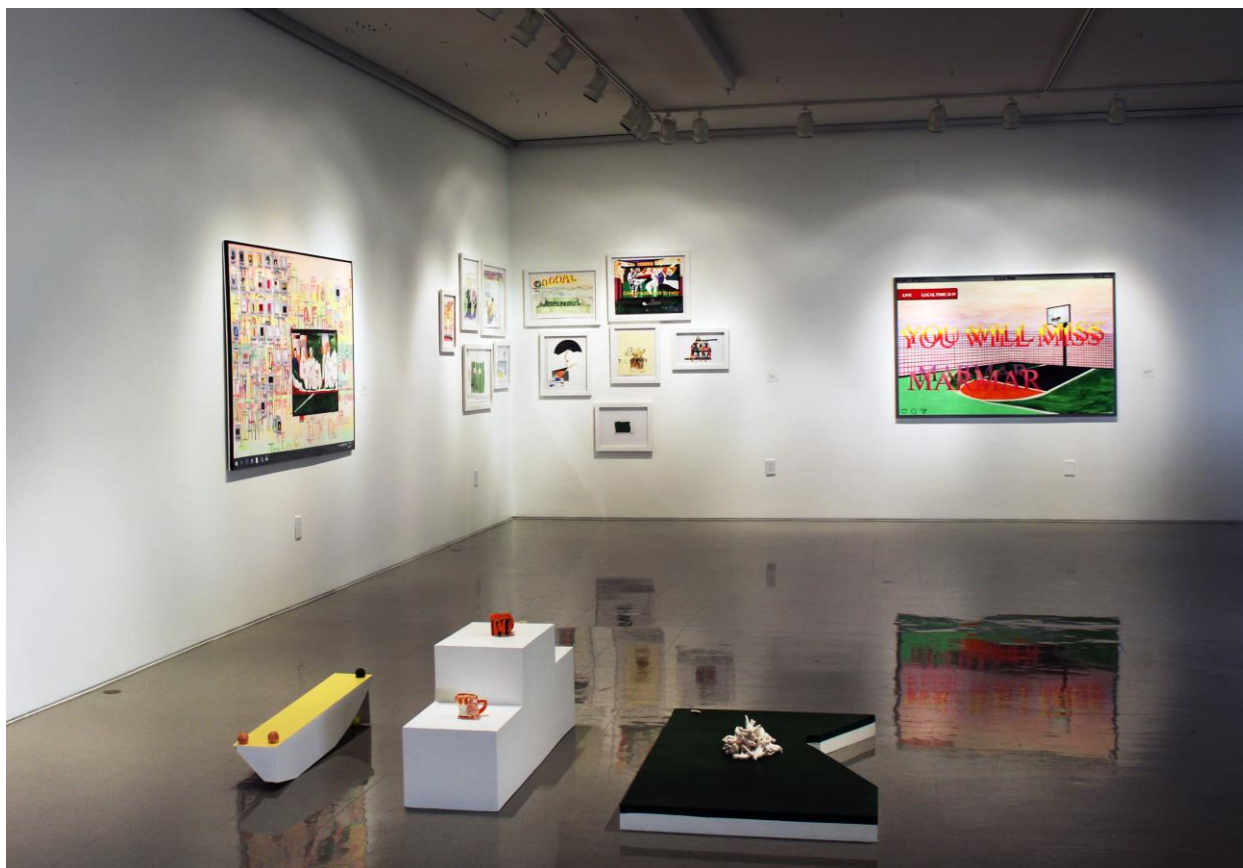


Figure 6: Maryamsadat Amirvaghei, *OFFSIDE* (Gallery View), 2017.

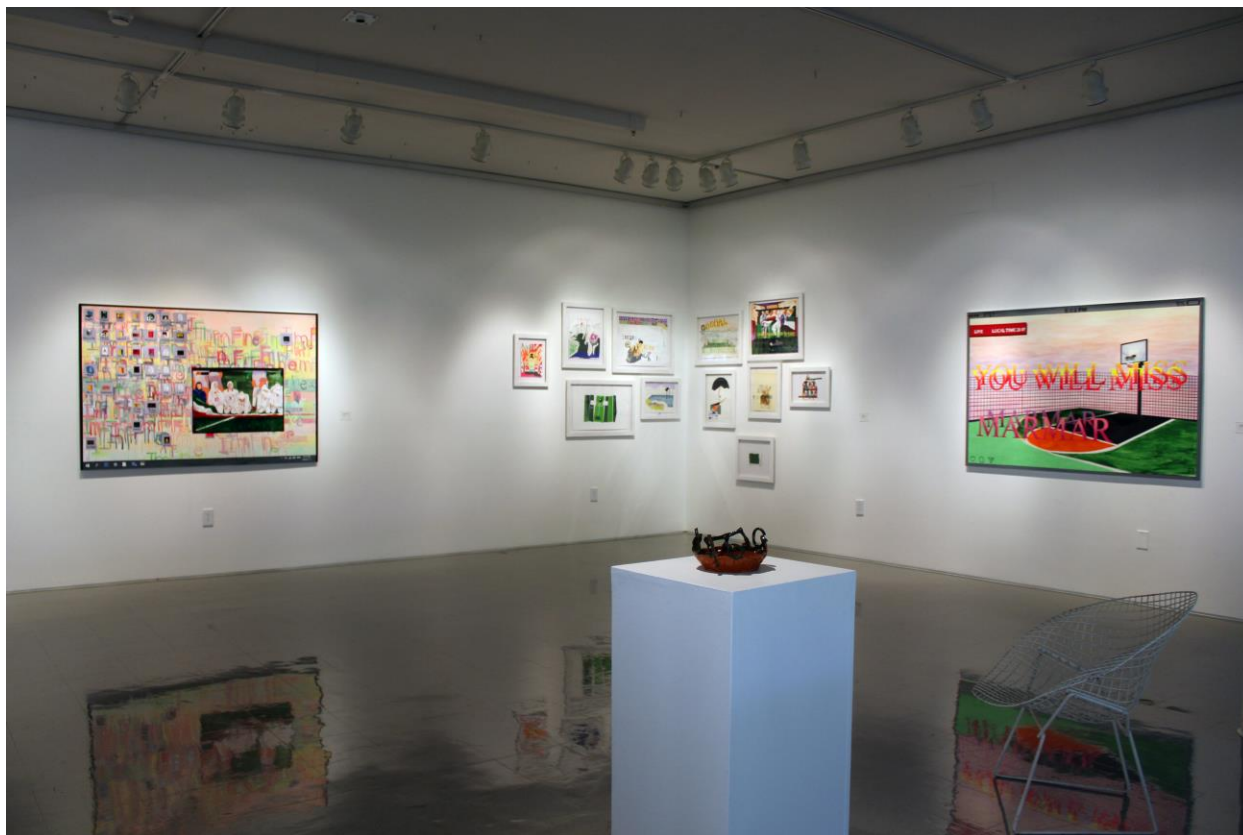


Figure 7: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *OFFSIDE* (Gallery View), 2017.



Figure 8: Maryamsadat Amirvaghefi, *OFFSIDE* (Gallery View), 2017.