

12-2019

When They Sing a Song of Joy with Sorrow

Ziba Rajabi
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Citation

Rajabi, Z. (2019). When They Sing a Song of Joy with Sorrow. *Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/3553>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact ccmiddle@uark.edu.

When They Sing a Song of Joy with Sorrow

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

by

Ziba Rajabi
Soore University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, 2014

December 2019
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Marc Mitchell, MFA
Chair of Thesis Committee

Linda Lopez, MFA
Committee Member

Sam King, MFA
Committee Member

Kristin Musgnug, MFA
Committee Member

Ana Pulido Rull, Ph.D
Committee Member

Abstract

As an Iranian female artist, my work revolves around my desire to reconcile my relationship with two distinctive places, Tehran (my native land) and Arkansas (where I reside now). In my paintings and installations, I re-create intimate moments culled from my home and neighborhood in Iran. Due to a situation where I am far away from my homeland and not allowed to return without being forced to remain in Iran, I can feel my memories of home fading away. By utilizing memories from my past, I take aspects of images that are no longer recognizable and, therefore, are abstracted into shapes that allude to elements found in my homeland. Consequently, aspects of everyday life such as architecture, furniture, gardens, or a specific time of a day become the basis for my work. My relationship with my surroundings has changed; consequently, my involvement with my medium, painting, has altered. In this paper, I will explain the transformation of my practice due to the alternation of my living circumstances, such as my association with culture and history, as well as the physical features of the land.

Acknowledgments

I would also like to thank my thesis committee chair, Marc Mitchell, who, to me, has been beyond just a professor and more as a mentor whom I could always trust. Marc, with his knowledge and honest critiques, always set the horizon above and made me work harder to seek for better resolution.

I would also like to acknowledge my thesis committee, Sam King, Linda Lopez, Kristin Musgnug, and Ana Pulido Rull. This accomplishment would not have been possible without their guidance.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents, who let me leave and explore the unknown.

Thank You,

Ziba Rajabi

Table of Content

Introduction	1
Notes on Change: Painting after 1967	2
Notes on Materiality	3
Notes on Craft	4
Notes on the bleeding painting: Toranj	5
Notes on layered History	7
Notes on weaving	7
Notes on the Draping Painting: Misordered Story	8
Notes on the body of the painting as the body of the artist	9
Notes on Personal History	10
Notes on Poetry	11
Notes on My Practice	11
References	13

Introduction

Jenni Sorkin, in the introduction of her book, *Live Form*, cited from Toril Moi's words:

"philosophy proceeds from everyday language" (Sorkin 2016, VII). I borrow the same logic here to justify my type of writing.

My art revolves around my life experiences. My thesis paper strives to explain the relationship between my complicated emotions and their physical embodiment as a product of art.

Therefore, this text consists of notes from my memoir of specific happenings; artists and art movements that influenced me; and an explanation of particular works of mine and the decision making that went into them.

I made my first real painting after my first trip to the Ozark in the second month of living in Arkansas. I grew up in Tehran, the capital and largest city in Iran. This region is known for its arid landscape in the Iranian plateau. I was born and raised in Tehran and continued to live there until graduate school. Except for a short yearly trip to the north of Iran, I had not been exposed to a lot of green landscapes. Therefore, moving to Arkansas and being surrounded by an abundance of plants and vegetation caused extreme excitement for me. The first distinction between where I came from and where I am, occurred from observing the physical space and land features.

As time went by, my observation of differences and similarities between the Arkansas and Teheran became deeper. I focused more on abstract concepts, such as language and culture. I employed more abstract features than representational ones in my paintings, because I needed pure and neutral abstract means to convey meanings interculturally with the least possible misinterpretations.

Moreover, the new method of art education in the US expanded my understanding of contemporary discourses, especially about my medium: Painting. At the University of Arkansas, I have been introduced to art movements and contemporary painting that we did not cover in

our art education in Iran, such as Provisional Painters, New Casualists, and the Pattern and Decoration movement.

Finally, what led me to this body of work and exhibition was a studio visit with Carrie Moyer in my studio at the University of Arkansas, in which we talked about painting, physicality, body, and space. In the end, she introduced me to a list of books, including one by *Katy Siegel: High Times, Hard Times, New York Painting 1967-1975*.

My thesis exhibition, "When They Sing a Song of Joy with Sorrow", is the outcome of the study of the work of artists represented in that book, such as Alan Shields, Mary Heilman, Franz Erhard Walther, and Sam Gilliam.

Notes on Change: Painting after 1967

So much of what artists were trying to do during this time was related to the social-political protests and anti-war activism, which made it seem necessary for things to change in order to make any progress. It did not seem logical to continue to paint a painting and hang it on a nail in the living room. At least, not to me--Alan Shields (Siegel 2007, 51)

I constantly state that my work revolves around my experience of living in two distinctive places, Iran and Arkansas. But besides history, what exactly does this mean in a formal and practical definition? I flew thirty hours from an arid area in the Middle East, where I used to speak Persian and took the subway; I then landed on a humid green region in another continent. Ever since then, I have had to communicate using a foreign language, walk on dark streets at night, and accept that my sense of humor does not always translate in this new language. I also came from a Muslim-governed country; however, we still celebrate ancient Iranian holidays. This unique culture is celebrated by the 80 million Iranians who live within the country and abroad. Our new year is not Christmas, nor Hanukkah, neither the lunar year. It is Nowruz on the first day of spring. We do not use pumpkin spice, but a lot of saffron and rose water. I moved to a university in which even the art history professors did not realize that my country had never been colonized.

I moved to the heart of misunderstandings where neither I, nor others, could understand each other thoroughly due to cultural differences, language barriers, and, most importantly, past life experiences.

Not only have my surroundings changed drastically, but my relationship with space has also been altered. This change was evident in the studio, as I could not paint in the way that I used to. As a result, I looked for a counterpart in contemporary art history in order to understand my evolution. I was searching for an era when artists' relationships with their media changed due to the surrounding conversion.

In late 1960, the climax of social-political awareness and protests, the AIDS crisis, and the Vietnam war marked a profound change in American social enlightenment. As Alan Shields stated:

"Everybody at that time was thinking about change anyway. We were thinking about changing the social structure, thinking about changing the legal system. We tried to change, through protest and various other things, the way in which our government did business... (it was) fairly evident for me to say, "well, I'd like to change the format of painting." (Siegel 2007, 29)

To me, I have not been aiming to change anything, I happened to be in the middle of the changes, so I naturally reacted.

Notes on Materiality

Mary Heilmann's work, *The Book of Night*, is a painting made by multiple layers of cloth sewn together to form a giant book that consists of constellation forms. The work is placed on the floor instead of the wall. The viewer should turn the page to see all the constellations and comprehend the whole painting. In doing so, the viewer is able to interact with the piece and allowed to touch the surface of the art, which is often seen as taboo. Historically, the traditional interplay with a work of art was through looking, and grasping was possible through perceiving visible spectrums of the light wave.

The title of the work is poetic: *The Book of Night*. It is literally a depiction of the night sky.

However, the question that remains is: Is this painting only about the night?

Speaking of canvas as the flesh of the picture, Franz Erhard Walther and his performative piece in East Broadway in 1976 is an excellent example to mention. He is a German artist who lived in New York from 1960-1970. In the *Gegenüber (means opposite)*, the artist had two participants lying down on two pieces of the canvas while pulling each other with a rod that they were holding. He stated about his work as a work of art that is hard to put under a specific definition:

"They were not Minimal art, even though they seemed to contain such form. They were not Conceptual art, though they were conceptual. They were not body art, though the body is present in the actions. They could not be counted as performance, though they have an innate performance quality." (Siegel 2007, 55)

Franz Erhard Walther's practice is also influential for me because he worked primarily with fabric. In that piece, the role of the body, the interaction, and the sense of touch was inspiring. In his later works, he still has wearable art pieces that are installed on the wall while visitors are supposed to fit into them or wear them. There is always a place designated to the human body in his works--human flesh interacts with the tissue of the art.

His work also possesses a nomadic quality. One can easily fold them, put them in a bag, and travel with them. Molly Zuckerman Hartung once told me that my works are portable and easy to travel. Right, I am ready to leave.

Notes on Craft

In the *"Live Form"*, the author Jenni Sorkin states that social-political references differentiate fine art from craft. She believes that craft is most closely linked to fiscal policy, labor, production, and skill resulting in improved economic conditions while avant-garde art is related to social policy, and it is succeeding disputes of morality.

Jenni Sorkin puts process-based objects beside the rich dimensionality of the collective practice of 1960 and 1970 that was aiming to dematerialize conceptual art, such as 'Happenings', and body-based feminist performance art. (Sorkin 2016, 2-4)

The author also mentions a playful quality, and trial-and-error process of craft as opposed to those artists who isolate their practice in painting, drawing, and sculpture.

I found the playfulness, materiality, and process-based quality of crafts very relatable to my practice. I employ weaving and sewing in my work that primarily references female artists' works, although men also incorporated these techniques in their art as well, such as Alan Shields and Al Lovin.

Notes on the bleeding painting: Toranj

Although I am steadily questioning the principles of painting, there is usually a personal story engaged with the painting. *Toranj* is based on a song by Mohsen Namjoo. The song embodies a part of the contemporary Iranian history that I, as a part of a generation known as Dahe Shasti (which means: "Born in the eighties"), have not only experienced but also thoroughly lived that. *Toranj* is not an ordinary song; it is organic and has changed through time. It feels that there are multiple layers in this piece of art that reveal themselves through time and one's experience. I started working on the painting the morning that I saw a video of Namjoo's performance at San Francisco in April 2019, in which he learned about his mother's death just a couple of hours before the concert.

Namjoo is a musician, thinker, and critic who has published a number of books and articles that influenced my understanding of young contemporary Iranian artists' practice outside of Iran, especially in North America. In his last book, "*Four Essays*", he discusses nostalgia and its relationship with one's experience of time and, accordingly, history. One of his albums, *Personal Cipher*, includes poems and songs about his personal history and family, specifically his relationship with his mother.

Toranj means bergamot in the Persian language. But, like all the components in Persian culture and especially Persian poetry, that does not only imply bergamot. It is an allegory. *Toranj*, in this poem, refers to the poet's beloved one. This 700-year-old poem is a conversation between two people: the poet and his loved one and have been narrated in the first-person. The poet recounts his conversation with his *Toranj* for us. Khajooye Kermani is a less-well-known poet than Hafez and Rumi; still, he is one of my favorites. Like all Persian poems, *Toranj* is quite grandiloquent, although, it narrates its story more subtly.

The first time that I heard this song was shortly after its underground release. This aligned with the Iranian presidential election in 2009 when all hopes of reform turned into disappointment after the election was rigged by those in power. The music is a fusion of western and Iranian music. Iranian classical singers always sing in the very subtle, precise notes, yet the singer screams instead of following styles found in traditional Iranian music. He broke Iranian music traditions at the same time that youth from his generation were protesting on the streets to break social-political rules. He screamed in his songs like we were screaming in the streets. Namjoo howled as a representative of his generation; he screamed all our pain. My first experience of listening to *Toranj* is intertwined with my generation's collective memory of happenings after the election--the election that has changed our lives forever.

Namjoo was out of the country when the election happened. He sang songs about the election, supported the people, and blamed the government. Then, during an absentia court, Iran's government sentenced him to five years in prison. He has not been able to return to Iran since this sentence. (Afshang 2009)

One morning I went to the studio and was scrolling through twitter and saw a video of Namjoo's live performance in San Francisco the night before, in which he learned about his mother's death a couple of hours before the concert. At first, he did not want to perform but decided to sing. The video was a two-minute excerpt from the last part of *Toranj*. He was crying, singing, and screaming, all while the crowd was singing and crying with him. It was an example of

shared pain coming out in the form of art. For Iranians, either in Iran or overseas, the death of a loved one does not only mean grief. It was a collective sorrow that all of us either already experienced it or expecting to experience. Due to the political issues both in Iran and the US, Namjoo and his mother were not able to visit each other.

There is a word in Persian, "Zolm"; that does not have a proper translation in English; it means both injustice and cruelty. Namjoo was an example of so many people experiencing the same thing. Keivan, a good friend of mine, had his father passed away while studying in the US. Because of political mandates, he could not travel to Iran and attend his father's burial. This is something that many Iranians in the US experience.

This bleeding painting, Toranj, performs in the abstract world in the same way that my body performs in the real world.

Notes on layered History

I usually do not start painting on a blank canvas. I paint on the floor while two or three layers of cloth/canvas are underneath. So, the canvases below would absorb extra paint gradually and capture the history of the painting. Then, when I finished top work, I will start making a new painting on the canvas beneath. I capture the tiny-history of every painting.

Notes on weaving

Weaving came from the idea of alternative mark-making. I wanted a linear quality in my work but not from direct mark making with paint and brush. Moreover, I was exploring the shallow physical space in a painting as well. That means I wanted some linear quality that is not illusionary in the picture, while the physical distance is close to the surface of the canvas. So, I started making lines with pieces of torn fabrics. After a while, I began using found threads. Then, I realized that I could also make shapes with lines, and I started making simple knots. Later, simple knots evolved into weaving.

Weaving also reflects my relationship with the material: the body of the painting that I put pigment on. In other words, if my body is made by the flesh, blood, and bones, the painting's body is made of fabric. This practice has forced me to explore a wider range of fibers and textiles.

Matt Saunders in *Painting Beyond Itself* states that the traditional media is frequently disengaged from means (paint does not regularly create a painting, and for painting, one does not demand paint); however, medium hunts artist (Saunders 2016, 171-183) Accordingly, I still consider my practice painting, even when I weave, because my work is based on the principle of painting.

Notes on the Draping Painting: Misordered Story

This work explores bodily gestures in painting, history both as general and personal, and public and private spaces. In this work, I wanted to explore different ways of protecting personal information through selectively concealing and revealing; misordering information, creating confusion, and eventually misleading viewer.

This painting also investigates history through both layering and bringing poetry to work — poetry as a thing that already has its own history.

In this work, I explore different ways of protecting personal information as I define the boundaries of private spaces. There is a variety of ways in which one is able to protect the data. For instance, artists can selectively conceal and reveal, disorder information, create confusion, and eventually mislead viewers from reaching a certain point through a variety of means.

I grew up a few years after the Iranian revolution with a political environment where the authoritarian regime controlled every aspect of people's personal life. As a kid, I had been taught that I should not say anything about my personal life in the school or to anyone who is not a relative or whom my parents already trusted. For instance, if you have a birthday party in your house and alcoholic drinks are served, or men and women were dancing together, you

should forget what happened before you go to school the next day. People do this in order to protect themselves, as they are scared of the government's severe punishments. For instance, if the police learn there is a party in someone's house, they would break into the party and search the home for alcoholic drinks. If they find anything deemed illegal, they would arrest those who possess the items as well as the host of the party. No one wants that. Consequently, since childhood, you learn different ways of protecting yours and your family's private information. You learn how to conceal or sometimes selectively reveal; how to fix any leak of information, how to lie (if needed), and how to confuse strangers.

In my paintings, I use the same strategies for protecting private information to represent the idea of public and private spaces abstractly. I started painting on a large canvas, as a frame to embrace a whole narrative, including both abstract visual elements such as color, line, texture, and hand-written poetry. After multiple layers, I started writing poetry on the body of the painting — written form as an actual narrative. Then, I tore the canvas into thirty strips and then rearranged the pieces. Since the shapes are cut and misplaced, the written words lost their order, and each part became disconnected from its original location. Among this vast mural, one can barely find two pieces that fit each other. Through misordering, I create confusion and chaos. I initially mislead the viewer from reaching to any specific point. So, they never will be able to rejoin the misplaced pieces, find the original narrative, and, ultimately, the truth.

Notes on the body of the painting as the body of the artist

In my work, the body of the painting is often supposed to represent the way my body exists within the real world. In other words, in this painting, I wanted to express human gestures—not only painting as a flat surface with an illusion of the real world, but also a physical entity in the tangible world. I want the painting to perform in the physical world and get involved with its surroundings. So, I let the surface to bend and move forward or backward in order to engage with real space. These physical gestures (of the painting) abstractly reference the human body

and its gestures. It mimics how the body moves in space; whether it bends, stretches, or even rests.

In my practice, I always want to explore the vast possibilities of making a painting. In this specific artwork, I wanted to investigate how a painting can perform by itself without being controlled by its maker. So, I designed a system and criteria that the painting can perform. Due to the way in which I create work, making it in the studio and then having to reinstall it in the gallery, it creates two phases of production. When the work is installed (gallery or studio) performs by itself. It obeys the law of gravity and interacts with space. I have allocated specific space between holes, certain tightness or looseness, added extra control some part by a hand made painted canvas stripes that were tighter. They enabled me to control where they can spread apart and where two strips should be closer together. However, there will be some elements that I am not able to control, such as gravity.

Notes on personal history

This painting also explores history through both layerings and bringing poetry to work. Poetry as a form that already has its own history. It is about history, both my personal history and history in general.

Ever since I moved to the US, I miss history. I miss walking on the street and looking at a building that I already know its history as well as its relationship with my personal history. For instance, a building in which my grandparents walked and shopped, my parents too--the building where my father, as a kid, saw an escalator for the first time in his life. Then the Iran revolution in 1979 broke out, the building got confiscated, and the owner got executed. It has been abandoned and intact from that time until now.

Further, I added my own history to that place as well. I walked thousands of times on that sidewalk, with friends or alone, thinking, laughing, or crying; in regular days or during protests. Ever since I moved to the US, I lost my connections with space.

I refused to stretch any painting on a stretcher-bar from the first semester because I did not want to believe it was permanent. I tried to keep everything temporary as my life here. Easy to pack, easy to go, easy to leave. Light and foldable. Packable.

Notes on poetry

The other day I was listening to a new Persian song by a band with young members called Palette. In that song, the singer sang 700-year-old poetry. My friend commented that what other people in the world would sing a 700-year-old lyrics in a piece of Modern fusion music? It made me ponder. Those words to us, Iranian people, do not sound obsolete. It is still fresh, understandable. You would hear people citing hundreds-of-year-old poetries or pieces of prose regularly in everyday conversations. For us, history is not in the books and among texts. It is what we live with every day.

Notes on my practice

I am not an eagle, nor am I a dove, but
In this land of dust and exile when I feel my soul beneath my flesh
The whimsical wing of poetry
The fanciful wing of love
Lift me to the sublime

I rise high, high
Distancing myself from the land of dust, far in the distance
I fly to a world filled with the music of the soul
Filled with blooming lights and the songs of joy...
The wave of passion allows me to taste the sublime

But, before I spread my wings over the roof of the universe
The memory of the caged birds
Drags me back to the land of dust!

Fereydoon Moshiri

Translated by Leila Sadegh Beigi

I chose this poem as my artist statement on the wall since it accurately describes what I have been experiencing every day in my studio ever since I moved to the US. The poet, Fereydoon Moshiri, wrote this poem in exile. He speaks about the experience of ecstasy arising from the moment of artistic creation. However, he cannot enjoy that, because as soon as he remembers about his family and friends in pain, in prison, he would lose all those delights.

Ecstasy would be traded with sorrow.

Ziba Rajabi

Fall 2019

References

Afshang, Maryam. "Mohsen Namjoo: I Will Not Apologize Anymore." In BBC News [database online]. 2009. Available from https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2009/07/090713_maf_iran_namjoo.shtml.

Saunders, Matt. 2016. Thread, Pixel, Grain. In *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition.*, eds. Isabelle Graw, Ewa Lajer-Burchard, 171-183, Sternberg Press.

Siegel, Katy. 2007. *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975.*, 51. Independent Curators International.

———. 2007. *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975.*, 29. Independent Curators International.

———. 2007. *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975.*, 55. Independent Curators International.

Sorkin, Jenni. 2016. Acknowledgments. In *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community.* Illustrated ed., VII. University of Chicago Press.

———. 2016. Introduction. In *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community.* Illustrated ed., 2-4. University of Chicago Press.