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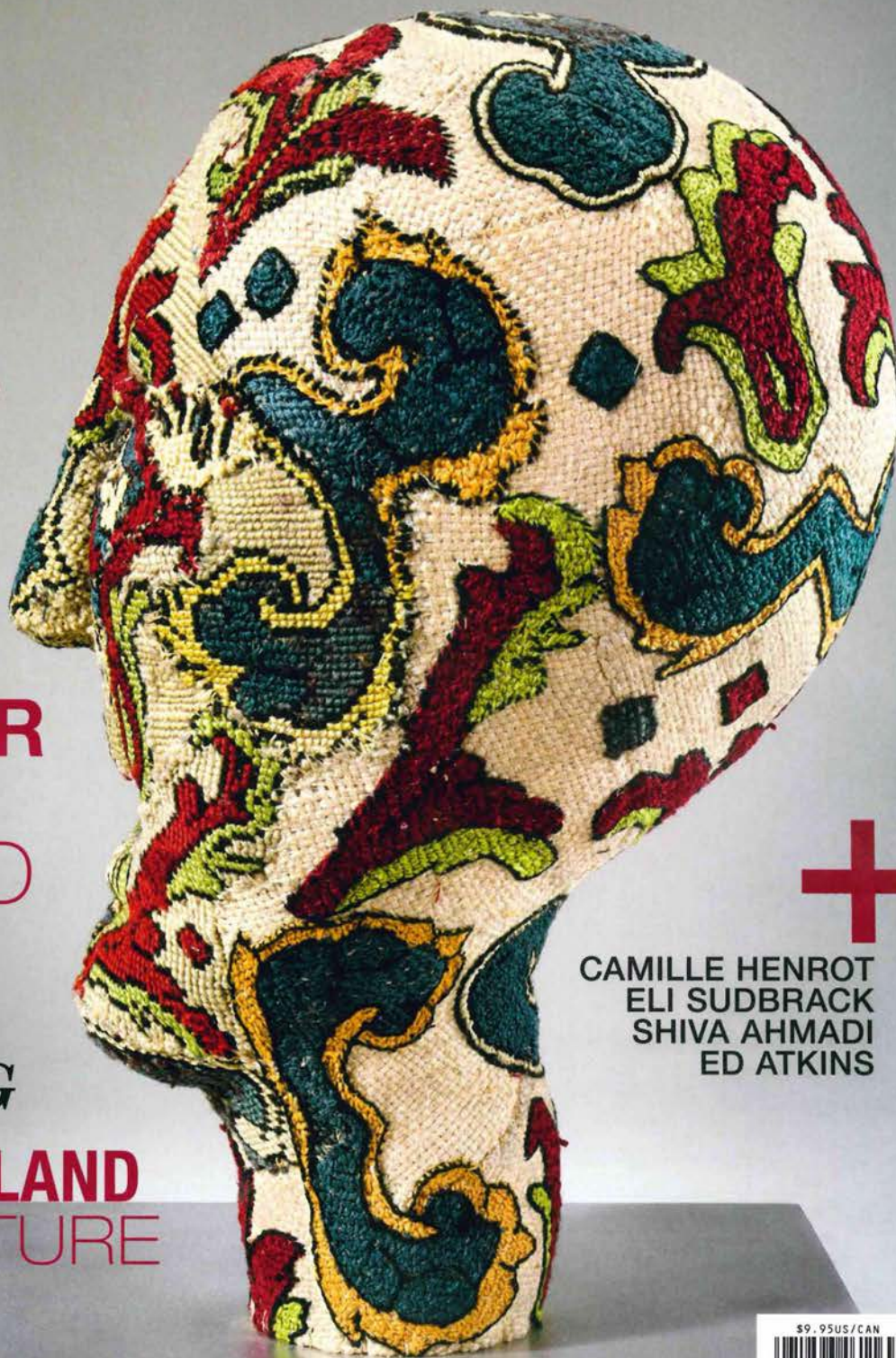
AT HOME WITH
LOUISE BOURGEOIS

JOHN ALTOON'S
BEAUTIFUL PERVERSITY

A.L. STEINER
QUEERING THE WORLD

OKWUI ENWEZOR
ON CURATING

DOUGLAS COUPLAND
PAINTS A PICTURE

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Graceful Grenades

Shiva Ahmadi animates tales of violence and beauty
By Sehba Mohammad

"SUGARCOATING A GROTESQUE MESSAGE" is how Detroit-based Shiva Ahmadi, in her strong Farsi accent, describes her aesthetic trickery. Populated by folkloric creatures, the artist's pastel-hued fantasyscapes in watercolor on Aquabord—a textured hardboard panel coated with clay—reveal dark undertones that assert themselves in washes of blood-red ink and carefully rendered grenades.

Ahmadi's recent work addresses ideas she has been toying with for eight years: the selfish motives, masked in moral ideology, that drive armed conflict; the pervasive nature of corruption; and the political dynamics of social injustice. *Lotus*, 2013, portrays, on a wildly patterned pistachio ground, an enthroned leader, turbaned and faceless, his body dissolving into velvety-maroon abstraction. His ornate throne, inscribed with *Allah*, sits on a bed of lotus flowers similar to those found in 18th-century Tibeto-Chinese Buddha statuettes. An array of underlings—horses, birds, and monkeys—surrounding him make offerings of ticking time bombs. The turmoil and fantastical use of animals in the three-panel work echo both the *Garden of Earthly Delights* of Hieronymus Bosch and the ancient Persian epic *Hamzanama*.

After completing *Lotus*, Ahmadi came to feel that transmission of her message—unchecked political power backed by dogma inevitably ends in social destruction—was restricted by the static quality of painting, so she decided to convert it into animation. The resulting 10-minute film, *Lotus*, 2014, is on view this summer at the Asia Society in New York. "I don't consider myself a digital artist," she declares, "but for the sake of my concepts, animation is the perfect medium."

Ahmadi's notions of violence and armed hostility, along with her stockpile of conflict imagery, are drawn from tumultuous life experiences. When she was four, the Islamic revolution ravaged Iran, culminating in the overthrow of the secular and corrupt Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Soon afterward, the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq broke out, marring her formative years. "It was as if a black funerary fabric covered the country. There were bombings all the time.

ABOVE:
Cube, 2013. Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on Aquabord, 3¼ x 10 ft.

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:
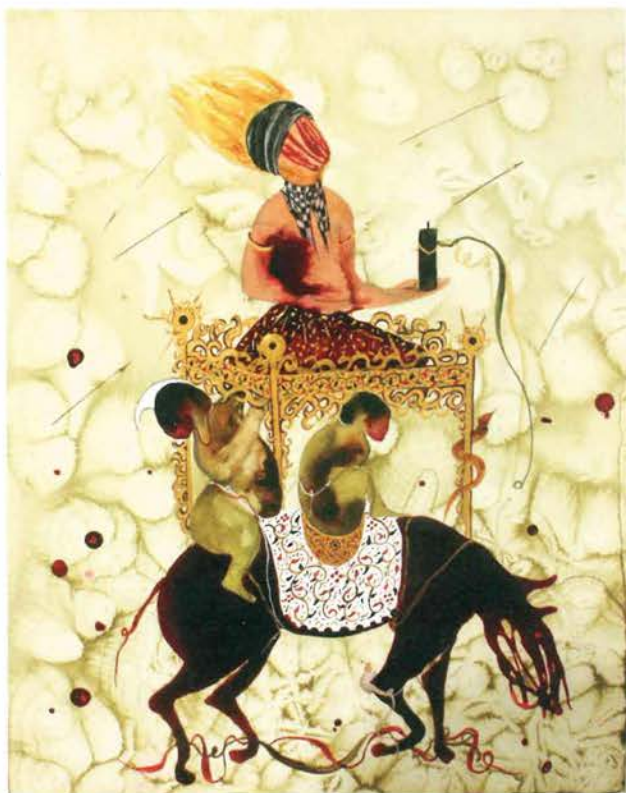Shiva Ahmadi in her studio, 2014.

Oil Barrel #6, 2009. Oil on steel, 34½ x 23½ x 23½ in.
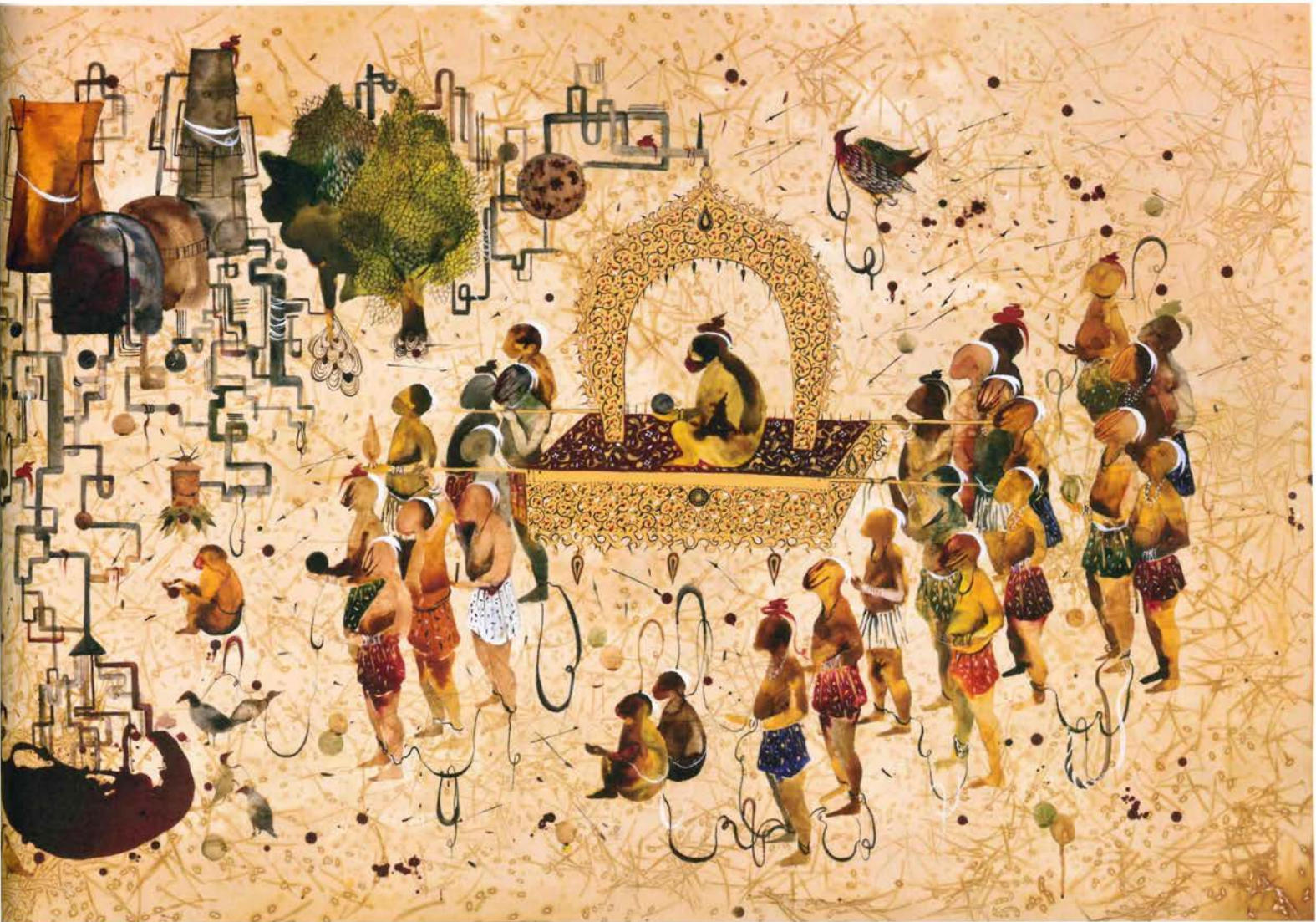
Women were screaming, and people were struggling," Ahmadi recalls. "When the war was over, I tried to put it behind me, but the post-traumatic stress stays with you. I don't notice it until I'm in a creative space, then it pours out."

She earned a degree in painting at Azad University in Tehran, where her education focused strictly on technique. Her teachers encouraged abstraction and still life, discouraged figural representation, and forbade the depiction of nudes—indeed, any female over nine had to be rendered fully clothed, with her head covered. The censorship laws that enforce such restrictions are based partially on the conviction that the creation of all living forms is unique to God alone.

From Tehran, Ahmadi moved to the United States to study fine art at Wayne State University and, later, the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Not surprisingly, once in the West, Ahmadi became obsessed with figure drawing, lapping up the naked contours to which she had never been exposed. Her newfound freedom led her to develop progressive feminist values. These surfaced first in her "Veil" series, which depicts a woman crouching in the corner of a picture plane wearing an oversize head scarf that spreads out across the rest of the composition. Paradoxically, the vibrant veil—richly patterned and seemingly lavish—weighs the woman down, restricting her movement. It becomes a metaphor for the social confines of morality and beauty that entrap women.

The serenity of the basement studio in her two-story suburban Detroit house seems far removed from the chaos of Ahmadi's

childhood. The large rectangular space is mostly bare except for a few paintings propped against off-white walls and two wide shelves—one with Farsi and English books, the other with color-coded art supplies. The relatively low real-estate prices in the area were a draw when she moved in two years ago. Ahmadi makes regular trips to Ann Arbor, where she teaches fine art to freshmen at the University of Michigan, and visits New York occasionally to see her dealer, Leila Heller.
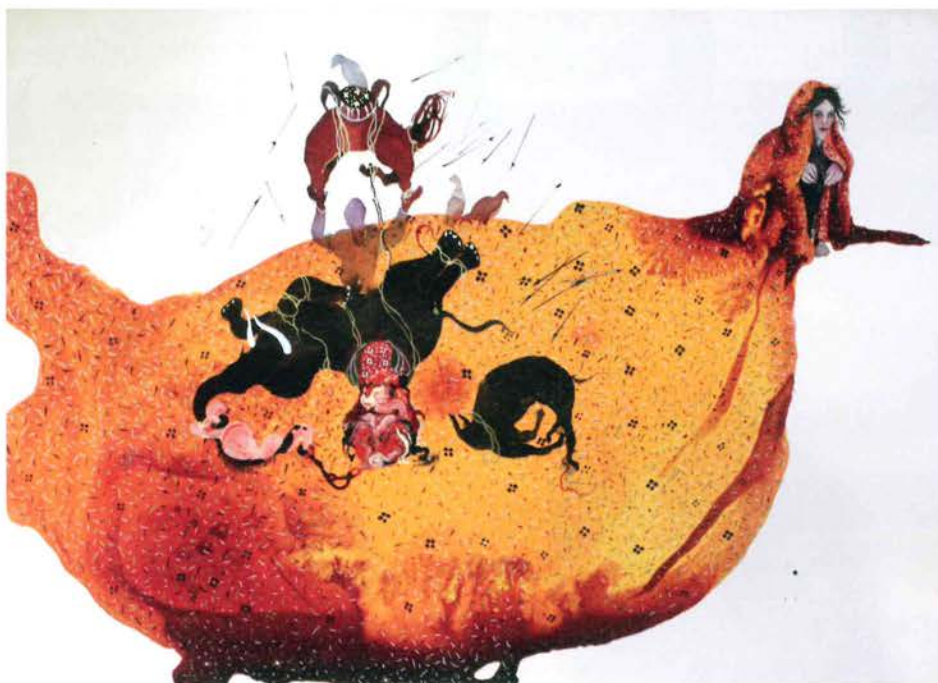
Yet in the West, Ahmadi says, she often feels disconnected from her audience: "Most Americans don't even know where Iran is. Their understanding of the Middle East is confined to war and violence." Her renditions of weapons and camouflage and the spatterings of carmine-red ink, eerily similar to blood, might seem to perpetuate these stereotypes, perhaps giving her viewers a familiar point of reference. However, Ahmadi's choice of subject matter—faceless rulers and mindless armed subordinates—is an attempt to unearth the causes behind the violence, making her an advocate of awareness and peace. "I am against war, invasion, and violence in any form, mainly because I have experienced them firsthand," she says.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 triggered Ahmadi to develop the illusionary aesthetic and antiwar themes she employs today. The violence caused by the attack made her homesick, and, like most immigrants, she was forced to reassess her identity. She did this by immersing herself in the Islamic artistic traditions of her homeland. She says she hated the kitschy miniature paintings of such artists as Mahmoud Farshchian that surrounded her when she was growing up in Tehran. Still, after the invasion, she decided to revisit Persian book art and miniatures of the 15th and 16th centuries; she was drawn to their two-dimensionality and aerial perspectives and inspired by the vegetal patterns that cover every surface in Islamic art. From the 50,000 verses of the Persian classic *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), she adopted battle scenes and princely pursuits. Her symbolic use of animals was influenced by the *Hamzanama*, a chronicle of the adventures of the Islamic Prophet's uncle, as well as by Rumi's poetry and the Orwellian Iranian tale *Shahr-e ghesseh* (The Story Land).

She discovered neo-miniaturists like Shahzia Sikander, who in the 1990s was one of the first to give traditional miniature formats a contemporary framework. Ahmadi falls only loosely into the rubric of neo-miniaturist, mainly because of her lack of formal training in traditional miniature painting. Her works are, rather, best seen as contemporary Islamic art—made by a Muslim artist commenting on the culture created by the faith, and incorporating some of the basic elements of the genre, such as floral patterns and calligraphy. Her foreboding watercolor *Al-Khidr*, 2010, portrays a tangle of demonic creatures under the command of a ferocious dervish whose features are replaced with streaks of blood. In a corner, enclosed by rocks, crouches Al-Khidr, an angelic guide for those who seek God. The work hangs opposite the entrance to the Islamic wing of the Detroit Institute of Arts, paying homage to centuries of Islamic spiritual enlightenment while nodding at the dark ages the religion has entered.

Ahmadi's "Oil Barrel" series comments on the U.S involvement in the Middle East. The three-dimensional works consist of recycled sheet-metal oil barrels painted in black, gold, and primary colors. They are seductively decorated with delicate floral designs interlaced with her characteristic fanciful camel-like creatures. The pleasant visual is rudely interrupted by images of combat boots, bombs, and bullet holes oozing blood, reminding us of the works' piercing significance. In Ahmadi's own words: "If the Middle East didn't have oil, nobody would care about it."

According to the artist, the U.S. presence in the region and other similarly conflicted areas is not primarily to protect civilians but to guarantee its own stability. Her opinions have not always been well received, especially when they are not disguised in a charming visual veneer. "Once, after a talk about the invasion and my work in Oregon, people became really angry," she recollects. "They asked me what right I had to comment on issues relating to America when I was a foreigner and an outsider. They hold Muslims responsible for so much violence in the world, but they don't really see the U.S. as a problem."

Ahmadi wanted to translate her iconography—miniature riffs and military motifs—onto other symbolic objects, such as drones and tanks. But her ambitions were thwarted. "I called the U.S. Army to see if they had a spare drone to give me. I am not sure if it was my accent, but the officer freaked out, got suspicious, and started questioning me: 'What's your name? What's your social security number? Where are you calling from?' I was like, 'I don't want a functional one, I'm an artist!'"

Shelving the idea of working with weapons, she decided to focus her attention on watercolors and animation. Her process for both is largely intuitive. She does not plan her paintings but fleshes out the images in her mind directly on the board with a mixture of unbridled strokes and controlled rendering. Her command of the medium makes up for her lack of preconceived composition.

The same instincts drive her animation. It took her 10 minutes to decide exactly which elements of the painting *Lotus* to animate. She used a traditional animation technique, which requires 12 drawings on paper for each second of film. She did all the drawing and rendering but hired a professional animator, Sharad Patel, to help with production. "Painting allows you to capture a moment," she says, "but animation gives you a sense of time that no other medium can." Bill Viola's "Water Portraits" series inspired her to incorporate elements of time and motion into her practice.

The animation starts peacefully. A glistening Buddha sits on a throne. Near him, candylike bubbles float past playful monkeys. Slowly, the film takes an apocalyptic turn. Coiled snakes begin to slither; the bubbles mutate into bombs, which the now sinister-looking monkeys start to juggle; blood stains the ground; and gradually the benevolent Buddha mutates into a tyrant. This account is rooted in a real-world realization that "everywhere you look there are governmental systems with heads of state on top. They make disconnected decisions, and regular people suffer the consequences," Ahmadi says, with both anger and empathy, as she continues her struggle to unveil the narratives behind injustice. MP

ABOVE:
Yellow Veil, 2009. Mixed media on Aquabord, 22 x 30 in.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:
Untitled 5 (from Throne), 2012. Mixed media on Aquabord, 14 x 11 in.

Al-Khidr, 2010. Mixed media on Aquabord, 30 x 60 in.