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## FOR-SITE Is 20/20

The Presidio, once tasked with defending San Francisco from naval attack, is now the site of a powerful exhibit critiquing the national security state.

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*Fire Martyr, 2014 (still), from Bill Viola's series Martyrs. Photo by Kira Perov. © Bill Viola*

"Welcome to Home Land Security," said a docent with a soothing voice.

Visitors gallivanted into a building in the Presidio — where Cold War generals once planned missile campaigns — hearing words that were disarming and oddly funny, a brief preamble to a setting in which artists critique the often hellish scope of government security measures that have saved some lives while ruining many others. The antithesis of security is insecurity, and the 18 artists selected for "Home Land Security" portray a society that has unraveled and is on the edge of madness.

What does madness look like? It can be beautiful at first. Absolutely beautiful, as in Shiva Ahmadi's *Lotus*, a video animation that shows a benevolent Buddha figure installed on a throne only to see him evolve into a corrupt, turbaned figure whose minions sway him with bombs and grenades. Music and movement drive Ahmadi's vivid watercolors, which borrow from traditional Persian and Indian miniature painting to narrate a wordless parable about the vicissitudes of power, where red sparkles from the figure's clothing but also from drops of blood that appear later on. The "beauty" approach relates directly to Ahmadi's upbringing.

"My childhood was not at a very easy time in the history of my country," says Ahmadi, an assistant professor of art at UC Davis who was raised during Iran's 1979 revolution and its eight-year war with Iraq, when one million people were killed. "It was city bombings and chaos all the time. And everyone in their homes was trying to make things as smooth and nice as possible for the families. You sugarcoat things. You make things more beautiful though it is ugly outside.

"When I started painting, I never wanted to make artwork that is very political and goes right to the point," she adds. "I wanted to seduce the viewer and engage them in a more playful process, so they'd say, 'Wow, look at all these really vibrant colors and decoration.' And then they get closer and they see that the vibrant red is blood. It's really not anything beautiful. It goes back to the culture and how I grew up."

Living in the United States, Ahmadi is conscious of her status as a native Iranian who speaks with an accent. "As an Iranian, when I go to the airport," she says, "I never read anything in Farsi, because I'd make people around me very uncomfortable."

While Ahmadi's bedazzling animation — as unique as anything ever created for a gallery setting — can be thought of as a specific indictment of Iran, and the way that "savior" leaders who've promised change have succumbed to political gridlock, she tells *SF Weekly* that *Lotus* — which was

originally made in 2014 for New York's Asia Society — is not country-specific, and that its themes of power, corruption, and group dynamics apply around the world.

"I don't specifically say, 'This is a mullah or a tyrant,' because it's not just happening in the Middle East — it's happening all over the world. It's just that it's more obvious in the Middle East right now," she says. "In the animation, I also have robots. I have camels. I have a nice horse carrying beautiful robots that is moving. I use high-tech things from more advanced countries."

This same kind of universalism is evident in Tammam Azzam's room-sized *Storeys* paintings, which depict massive neighborhood destructions in which whole buildings are bombed or leveled. Clearly, Azzam's three Presidio canvases are an artistic primal scream about his native Syria, where an ongoing war has destroyed swaths of Aleppo and other cities. But Azzam, who left Syria in 2011, seven months after the country's uprising began, doesn't label his paintings with the words "Syria" — and he doesn't want art-goers to think only of his homeland when they enter the "Home Land Security" room devoted to his art. Indeed. Azzam's canvases — harrowing and haunting, a jumble of black-and-white shards and shadows — could be a stand-in for Hiroshima after the nuclear bomb, or Dresden after U.S. and allied planes decimated the German city in 1945.

"It's about this world — about what is happening now, and that's Syria, because that's my memory," Azzam tells *SF Weekly* by video chat from Germany. "How can art save the country? No way. It's just words. We believe that as artists (they can). But the real world is not like that."

"As a Syrian who grew up there," says Azzam, who is in contact every day with family who remain in the country, "when we hear about 'homeland security,' these are funny words — like 'democracy' and 'freedom' — that are something from another planet."

Cheryl Haines, executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation — which organized Ai Weiwei's monumental Alcatraz exhibit in 2014 — also orchestrated "Home Land Security." FOR-SITE worked with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, but also with the Presidio Trust to use five deactivated structures at Fort Winfield Scott to house the exhibit. Just as with Ai's "Large," "Home Land Security" gains much of its impact from its setting amid old, rusting buildings that were originally meant to enforce government edicts.

A subtext of "Home Land Security" is "the other," and the way military leaders frequently demonize someone or some people to create public buy-in. That dynamic plays out in security campaigns around the world, with a prime example being the 1994 Rwanda genocide, where Hutus killed an estimated 800,000 people, most of whom were Tutsi. While Rwanda has stabilized over the past two decades, a neighboring country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, has experienced ongoing strife, particularly in its eastern part, which has led to a flood of refugees — "internally displaced people," in UN parlance. For her Refugee Street Studio project, South African photographer Alexia Webster visited a refugee camp near Goma, close to Congo's border with Rwanda, and photographed residents against a make-believe background of flowers and calm. For a few minutes, Webster's subjects posed for her. Webster's images were taken for the refugees themselves, not for a gallery or museum. Rather than show intense suffering, Webster wants to show the human capacity to endure, and the humanity that is still alive in people who've been through so much. From a printer she takes with her, Webster gifts each person a photo from the session. The work upended Webster's own view of photography, and the role it can directly play in people's lives. The photos' inclusion in "Home Land Security" extends their ability to publicize the refugees' lives.

In another room, artist Tirtzah Bassel uses nothing but duct tape to portray airport security patting down passengers, and passengers with their arms held up, as if under arrest. Nearby, in a 12-minute video titled *Disintegration*, Iranian artist Yashar Azar Emdadian puts down a

Persian carpet in a Paris park — not far from where Napoleon once held military parades — and shaves his body hair in front of the camera. Clever, poignant, and darkly funny, Bassel and Emdadian offer a kind of bookend to the docent's cheerful opening-day greeting and bring to mind the aesthetic of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, where Kubrick, actor Peter Sellers, and an ensemble cast elevated the art of war to its most absurd. Humor is an especially powerful approach when critiquing a serious subject like homeland security.

Laughs, though, are few and far between in this show. More common are contemplation and feelings of sadness and anger. In a sound piece called *2487*, Luz María Sánchez gives voice to the names of people who died while trying to cross the U.S.–Mexico border between 1993 and 2006. In Bill Viola's *Fire Martyr* video, a sitting man endures flames that dollop around him before turning into a full-fledged fire. And in *Veterans' Flame*, Krzysztof Wodiczko gets soldiers to speak about their actions against a flame that symbolizes both tribute and loss.

Silence is a welcome escape at "Home Land Security," and that's to be found in the Fort Scott Chapel, where hybridized objects resembling stylized missiles and drones hang in the air. Built by Iranian artist Shahpour Pouyan for his *Projectiles* series, the objects feature striking metal details, floral patterns, Persian writing, and bases and tops that resemble old, Persian military helmets. After the United States began the Iraq war in 2003, U.S. military leaders talked about striking Iran, too. It never happened. And in this religious building meant for U.S. military personnel, Pouyan — who has an MFA from New York's Pratt Institute, and divides his time between New York and Tehran — has assembled work that reflects the light emanating from the chapel's stained-glass windows. Soldiers have prayed in this space. Perhaps they prayed for peace. They could never have imagined that Pouyan's art would one day be welcomed inside.

*"Home Land Security" Through Dec. 18, at Fort Winfield Scott in the Presidio. Free; [for-site.org](http://for-site.org).*