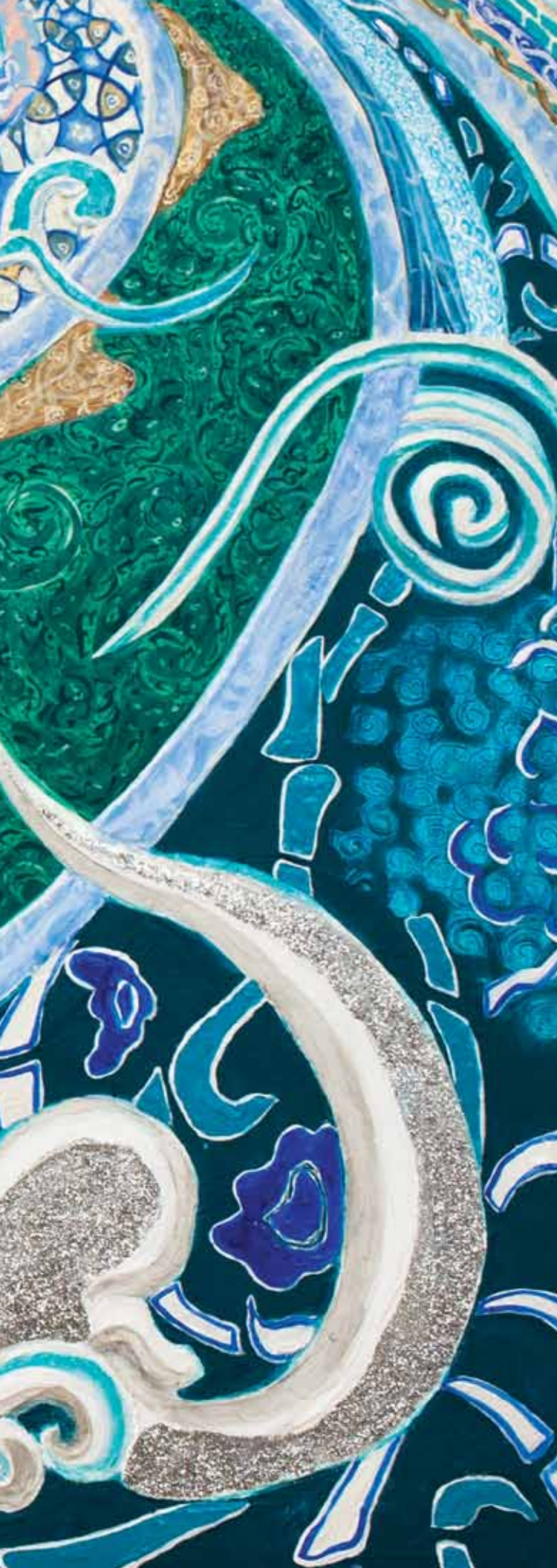




Negar Ahkami
The Consumption



Cover Image:

The Water Is Turbid From Its Source (detail), 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on canvas stretched on panel
60 x 90 in / 152.4 x 228.6 cm

Negar Ahkami

The Consumption

June 6 – July 6, 2013

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Negar Ahkami’s

Conspicuous Consumption

The new body of work by painter Negar Ahkami will strike viewers as simultaneously familiar yet unexpected. These twelve works, dramatically ranging in size and medium, carefully expand the artist’s previous interests, iconography, and painterly impulses while developing these ideas in new and ambitious directions. And consistent with Ahkami’s earlier solo shows, these paintings—which, without the close attention demanded by these artistic ambitions, may initially read as a disparate collection of works—represent a carefully-articulated arrangement of puzzle pieces, interacting and borrowing from one another to achieve, finally, a surprising coherence. Ahkami successfully introduces a broad range of ideas and imagery while providing a unified body of work for the viewer to digest and consider.

For over a decade, Ahkami’s work has successfully fused elements of her Persian background and identity with the more immediate reality of her life in the United States, where she was raised in suburban New Jersey. Often more culturally driven than consistently political, Ahkami routinely cites Persian-Islamic art influences as essential to her output—influences that include an expressive use of color, pattern, detail, and ceramic textures. Ahkami’s obsessive reworking of this source material into visually complex compositions, with both humor and elements of cultural critique, results in work she describes as “simultaneously precious and messy.”¹ As she has explained, “My paintings embrace cultural baggage with a flamboyant pride, recalling the expressive elements of Iranian culture that counteract its repressive systems.”² For Ahkami, this duality is at the very core of her practice and surfaces again and again in varied oppositions. While many artists contemporary with Ahkami have similarly looked to fuse varying cultural experiences and tropes into a single vision, particularly as related to the Islamic world and the challenge it inevitably entails, Ahkami has uniquely done so with a visual vocabulary that is entirely her own—deliberately emphasizing the expressive and “unslick” capacity of her own hand—a stylistic element that further supports her complicated, often untidy message. The cacophonous and unsettling formal aspects of the work mimic her interest in a realm (both experienced and imagined) that is flawed, ambiguous, messy and riddled with binary oppositions.

Ahkami is perhaps best known for her unsettling depictions of melting mosque-like cityscapes, works that she began in 2003 in the days leading up to the war in Iraq. This powerful motif—and one that she has carefully reworked in varied versions over the past decade—uniquely conveys her complex understanding of American perceptions of Iranian culture while also embodying her attraction to the distinctive architecture and elaborate tilework of the Persian mosque. Ahkami has been strongly influenced by the visual experience of being physically within these mosques—and has attributed her interest in pattern, in part, to what she

describes as “this feeling in your gut that comes from being surrounded by entrancing, rhythmic, pattern” when inside.³ Often partially autobiographical, these layered compositions are laboriously rendered using varied patterning that is drawn from Persian-Islamic influences, (while similarly seeming to echo the early 20th century work of an artist such as Henri Matisse). Ahkami creates psychedelic-like realms in which the careful and elegant architecture of the mosque becomes difficult to discern amidst her swirling, obsessively layered, all-over composition. (Additionally, she also acknowledges her nostalgia for 1970s bedding, with its riot of mismatched patterns, as a source of inspiration for her garish use of seemingly dissonant patterns.) For Ahkami, the view of an Iranian civilization—a view that is often misunderstood from a distance—is transformed into what the artist has described as a “flamboyant landscape,” implicitly countering stereotypes about the nature of Iranian culture. By repurposing this source material, her painting becomes hyper-expressive, conveying a sense of unbridled art-making—a sophisticated (and essential) subtext that at first might be overlooked and undervalued within the framework of her larger practice.

In a more recent rendering of the melting mosque motif, a work entitled *Retroactive Autorretrato*, 2013 (“autorretrato” or self-portrait), Ahkami invokes memories of a roller disco, creating an assemblage of pattern and palette that is linked to her personal experience of the 1980s, and her own affinity for street art—a less explicit influence that permeates her aesthetic more broadly. This re-envisioned rendering of the mosque is a compositionally simplified version, in contrast to earlier examples that often included cityscapes or clusters of miniature figures. Now the motif is more engaged with her own consideration of color and a particular moment in time—evident through the inclusion of “retroactive” in her title. The familiar imagery is successfully made surprising and even strange given her use of saturated pinks and oranges—Ahkami’s landscape appears almost illuminated from within.



Mosque, 2003
Mixed media on canvas
10 x 8 in / 25.4 x 20.32 cm

Indeed, throughout this recent work, Ahkami has moved beyond explicit political imagery and into a more personalized realm that continues to engage with cultural spheres. For example, the motif of water has impacted Ahkami’s work dramatically, in a range of highly varied works that feel distinct from

her earlier practice. Water cleverly functions as yet another landscape against which to explore her sophisticated experimentation with patterning. This motif is featured prominently in the work *Family Dynamic*, 2012, a narrative, fantastical scene including the depiction of several figures—a number of them more naturalistic looking children—situated against the dizzying pattern of water that here seems to suggest both struggle and passion. While in her earlier work Ahkami has borrowed from Persian motifs to create a cityscape or mosque, here she has inventively created water and sky, a format similar to that which is used in *Mrs. Claws*, 2013. Ahkami’s signature ornamentation naturally adapts to water’s swirling and engulfing quality—her figures are subsumed by the force of the patterning just as they might experience water.

Ahkami’s painting process supports her larger conceptual goal of creating something exuberant and expressive, while still exhibiting more controlled, delicate aspects. In an example such as *Coupling*, 2013, which is as much about the complex architecture of the relief-like surface (virtually impossible to appreciate in reproduction) as it is about the imagery, Ahkami forcefully asserts her interest in using the formal to reiterate her conceptual or theoretical interests. She augments the surface with molding paste and gesso, a process used frequently by the artist (and influenced by the surfaces of monumental Near Eastern rock reliefs and molded-relief ceramics) to further develop contrasting textures, here differentiating the central abstracted figures, now made into precious, almost fragile, objects. In addition, during the preliminary stages of creating the work, Ahkami similarly constructed a mihrab-like structure at the top of the canvas, within which to carefully frame her composition—providing it with the architectural heft that has personally so impressed her. Here, Ahkami employs yet another element borrowed from Iran’s mosques, subtly introduced into her work’s structure, and used for more fundamental effect within the painting.

Arguably Ahkami’s most ambitious departure from her pre-existing body of work is *The Ecstasy of Doris Duke*, 2012. This painting, a more subdued composition compared to much of the other work in the show (and in contrast to Ahkami’s oeuvre in general), is an homage to the socialite Doris Duke, an outsized figure long revered by the artist and whose lavish estate she visited in 2005. For Ahkami, Duke embodies several interests and ideals essential to her own practice: her collection of Persian objects reappropriated into her estate in Honolulu, along with what Ahkami describes as an “ecstasy and intense pleasure in surrounding oneself with patterning.”⁴ are phenomena similar to what she strives to achieve in her own work—through rhythm, movement, and a dizzying use of color and form, all visible elements within this particular composition. Ahkami, presents Duke’s figure swirling around in watery ecstasy, literally submerged in a sea of patterning; few artists have so successfully translated abstract form into a conceptual role

vis-à-vis the figure. While less cacophonous than other examples in the show, Ahkami again revisits the appropriation of the Persian patterning so precious to her, and asserts the visceral power this can convey within a composition.

For Ahkami, Iran has served as an unwavering and fundamental influence at the core of her work, both through her personal experience and her understanding of American misperceptions and simplifications of the culture. Much of Ahkami’s interest in oppositional frameworks stems from what she perceives as the “mixed messaging” related to Iran, particularly acute during her adolescence.⁵ While Ahkami came to appreciate through her family that Iran was an essential and formidable presence within our global culture and collective history, by contrast American news has portrayed Iran as a villainous nuclear threat—a complex, influential culture reduced to a one-dimensional entity. But Ahkami’s work is further complicated by a simultaneous interest in not only the opposition of, but also a more productive intersection of Western and Iranian influences. Much like her attraction to Doris Duke’s appropriation of Persian objects assembled into her American estate, Ahkami has routinely been attracted to instances where a Persian aesthetic has surfaced in popular culture or in Western examples. As she explains, “I am interested in moments when the two disparate entities touch or connect—the shaded part of the Venn diagram.”⁶ For Ahkami, the relationship is never so straightforward as to be merely oppositional, but is equally indebted to the hybrid fusion of seemingly unrelated elements. Ultimately, Ahkami’s willingness to engage both aspects of the cultural relationship allow for work that is layered and complex in ways that may not be immediately discernable. More than simply considering the intersection *or* opposition of Western and Iranian culture, Ahkami ponders the impossibility of simplifying or reducing this exchange to one conversation—an ambition cleverly mirrored in her formal decisions and powerful and imaginative iconography.

Jane Panetta

Jane Panetta is an independent art historian living in New York.

¹ Conversation with the artist, April 2013.

² Correspondence with the artist, April 2013.

³ Conversation with the artist, April 2013.

⁴ Conversation with the artist, April 2013.

⁵ Conversation with the artist, April 2013.

⁶ Email correspondence with the artist, April 2013.



Retroactive Autorretrato, 2013
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on canvas stretched on panel
48 x 66 in / 121.9 x 167.6 cm

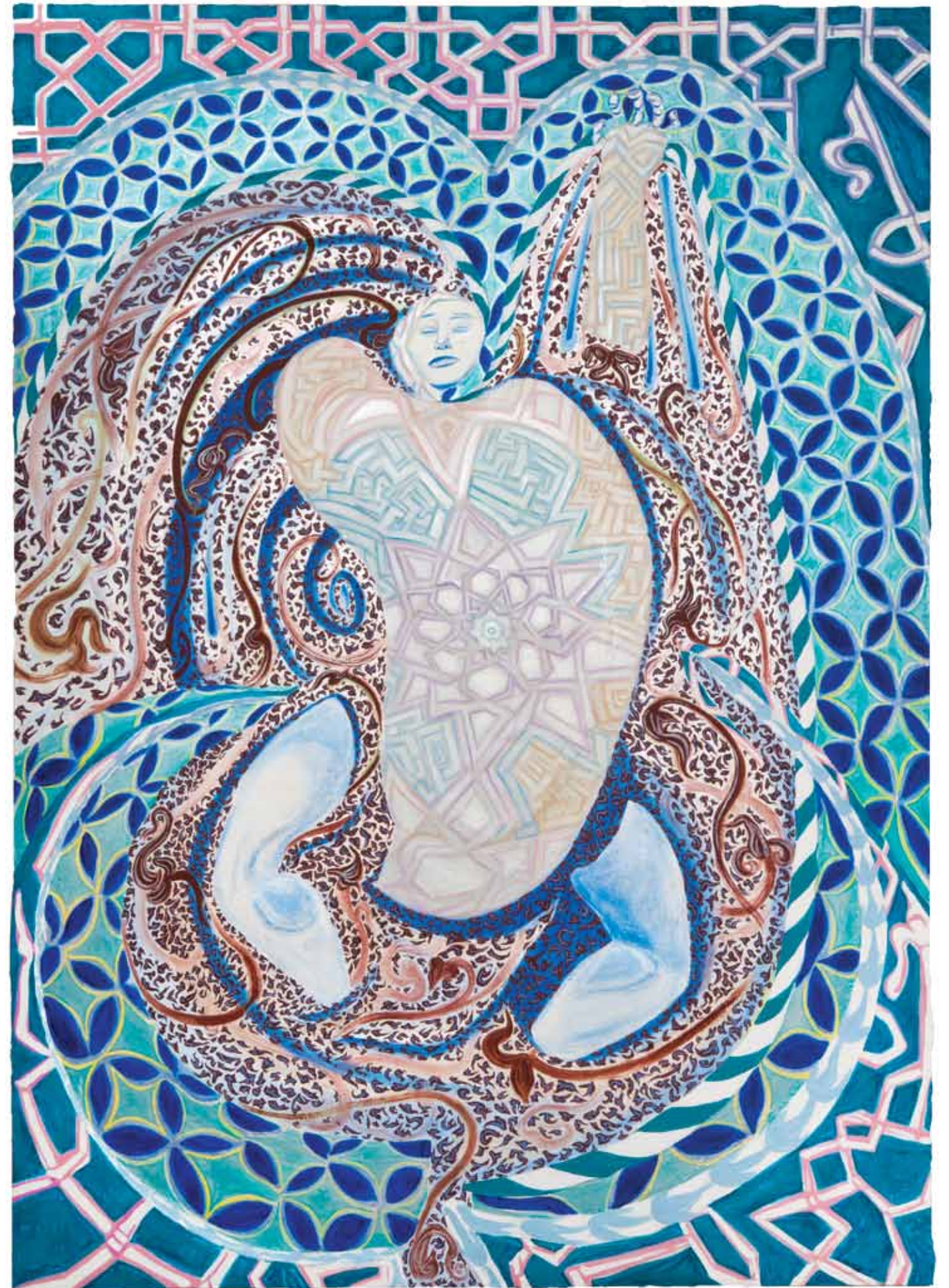


Mrs. Claws, 2013
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on panel
54 x 48 in / 137.2 x 121.9 cm



Family Dynamic, 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on canvas stretched on panel
78 x 48 in / 198.1 x 121.9 cm

Coupling, 2013
Gesso and acrylic on canvas stretched on panel
84 x 60 in / 213.4 x 152.4 cm

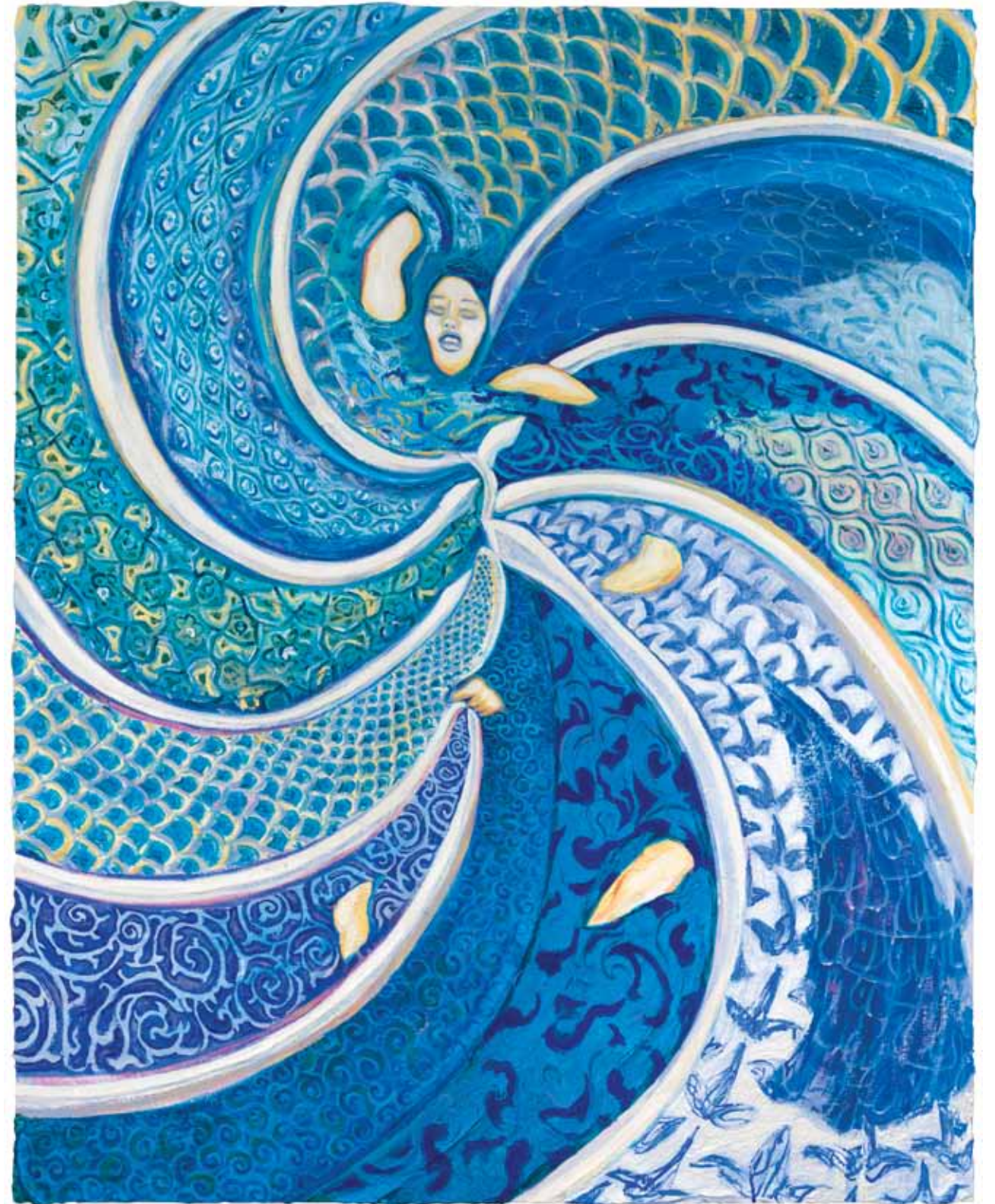




Previous page:
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60 x 90 in / 152.4 x 228.6 cm



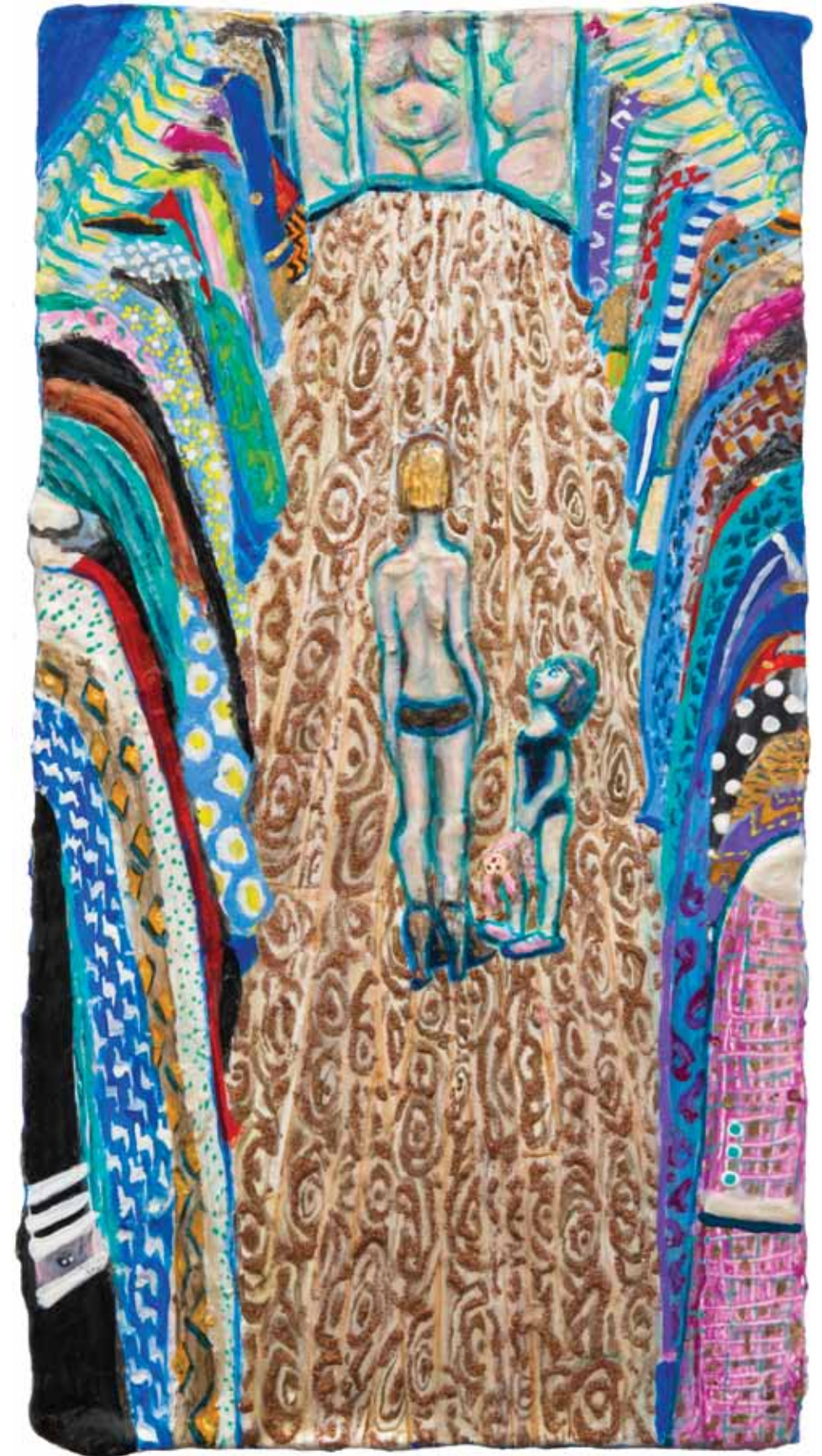
The Ecstasy of Doris Duke, 2012
Gesso and acrylic on canvas stretched on panel
72 x 60 in / 182.9 x 152.4 cm



Surround Sound, 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on canvas stretched on panel
60 x 48 in / 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Fragment 1, 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on found Styrofoam
9.5 x 9.5 x 2.25 in / 24.1 x 24.1 x 5.72 cm



Fragment 2, 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on found Styrofoam
10 x 5.25 x 2 in / 25.4 x 13.3 x 5.1 cm



Fragment 3, 2013
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on found Styrofoam
5 x 18.5 x 2.3 in / 12.7 x 47 x 5.8 cm



Mother and Child, 2012
Gesso, acrylic and glitter on canvas
11 x 14 in / 27.9 x 35.6 cm

Negar Ahkami

B. 1971, Baltimore, MD
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

EDUCATION

2006	School of Visual Arts, Fine Arts, New York, NY, M.F.A.
2004	Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
1997	Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, DC, J.D.
1992	Columbia University, New York, NY, B.A. Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures

ART RESIDENCIES

2013	Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Swing Space, Governor’s Island, New York, NY
2006–07	Workspace, residency program of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, NY
2003	Jentel Artist Residency Program, Banner, WY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013	<i>The Consumption</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2009	<i>Pride and Fall</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2007	<i>The Birth of Pattern</i> , curated by Sara Reisman, LMAK Projects, Brooklyn, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012	<i>The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society in the Middle East Diaspora</i> , Rutgers University Douglas Library, New Brunswick, NJ and The Bernstein Gallery, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ <i>The Rule and Its Exception</i> , Leila Heller Gallery / Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, TX
2011	<i>Dis(locating) Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in America</i> , Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA <i>WOMENARTISTS@NEWBRITAINMUSEUM</i> , New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT
2010	<i>East Meets West On The East End</i> , Tripoli Gallery of Contemporary Art, Southampton, NY <i>Tehran-New York</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE <i>Iran Inside Out</i> , Farjam Collection, Dubai, UAE
2009	<i>Iran Inside Out</i> , Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY and Depaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL <i>If I Didn’t Care: Multigenerational Artists Discuss Cultural Histories</i> , Richman Gallery, The Park School, Baltimore, MD <i>The Seen and the Hidden: (Dis)Covering the Veil</i> , Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, NY <i>Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2008	<i>A Precious Passing: Negar Ahkami & Kyung Jeon</i> , Miki Wick Kim, Zurich, Switzerland <i>Weaving The Common Thread</i> , Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY <i>How Soon Is Now?: AIM 28</i> , The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY <i>Firewalkers</i> , Stefan Stux Gallery, New York, NY <i>East West Dialogues</i> , curated by Dr. Layla Diba, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2007	<i>Pink Polemic</i> , Kravets/Wehby Gallery, New York, NY
2006	<i>Iconoclastic</i> , curated by Eddie Torres, Longwood Art Gallery, Bronx, NY <i>Wrest-stops Along the Intrastate</i> , curated by Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Visual Arts Gallery, New York, NY <i>Do You Think I’m Disco</i> , Longwood Art Gallery, Bronx, NY <i>Prime Time</i> , curated by Amy Smith-Stewart, Visual Arts Gallery, New York, NY <i>A Delicate Arrangement</i> , curated by Dan Cameron and David Zwirner, New York, NY
2005	<i>Politics as Usual</i> , Foreman Gallery, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY
2004	<i>A Conversation</i> , curated by Michael St. John, Marvelli Gallery, New York, NY <i>Simply Drawn</i> , Luxe Gallery, New York, NY
2000	<i>Le visage caché de la femme afghane</i> , UNESCO, Paris, France
1999	<i>Panj</i> , curated by Nicky Nodjoumi, Center for Iranian Modern Arts, New York, NY

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2007–08	AIM 28, Artists In The Marketplace, Bronx, NY
2006	Ushio Shinohara Juror Award, ISE Cultural Foundation, New York, NY
2004	Partial Fellowship, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME

VISITING ARTIST LECTURES / PANELS

2012	Panelist, “The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society in the Middle East Diaspora,” moderated by Alison Bernstein, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University Panelist, “The Fertile Crescent: A New York Public Library Book Event”, New York, NY
	Panelist, “Transnationalism and Women Artists in Diaspora,” moderated by Judith K. Brodsky and Julie Lohnes, Tribeca Performing Arts Center, New York, NY
2011	Panelist, “Dis[Locating] Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in America,” Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA Visiting Artist Lecture, Bloomfield College, Bloomfield, NJ
2009	Panelist, “Iran Inside Out: Influences on Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists,” Depaul University, Chicago, Illinois Panelist, “The Seen and the Hidden: (Dis)covering the Veil,” Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, NY Visiting Artist Lecture, Chapin School, New York, NY
2008	Panelist, Artist Talk On Art, “Middle Eastern Voices of Change: Artists as Activists,” moderated by Ayse Turgut, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY Panelist, moderated by Prof. Shiva Balaghi, New York Academy of Art, New York, NY
2004	Panelist, “Culture & Power: an Artists Roundtable,” moderated by Prof. Shiva Balaghi, Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, New York University, New York, NY
2003	Panelist, “Popular Culture in the Middle East,” moderated by Prof. Shiva Balaghi, Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, New York University, New York, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Grigor, Talinn, *Contemporary Iranian Visual Artists: Street, Studio, and Exile*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013

Brodsky, Judith K. and Ferris Olin, *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society*. Rutgers University Insitute for Women and Art, 2012

Kusnecov, Saskia, “Negar Ahkami Explores Human Neuroticism Through Her Art,” *Inside Beat (The Daily Targum)*, Oct. 11, 2012

Dube, Ilene, “The Fertile Crescent: Model of Collaboration,” *The Princeton Magazine*, Oct. 8, 2012

Butera, Virginia Fabbri, “Politics, Society and Sexuality in Middle Eastern Feminist Art,” *Ragazines.cc*, Nov-Dec. 2012

Gold, Sylviane, “A Female, but Not Mainly Feminine, Eye,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 7 2011

Buckberrough, Sherry and Nancy Noble, *WOMENARTISTS@NEWBRITAINMUSEUM Catalogue*, New Britain Museum of American Art, January 2011

Baron, Jeff, “A Bold Hand’ Making a Mark in the Art World,” *America.gov*, May 21 2010

Smith, Roberta, “Painting in the 21st Century: It’s Not Dry Yet,” (Image) *The New York Times*, March 28 2010

Flandrin, Antoine, “Le Voile Devoilé,” *Le Courier de l’Atlas*, March 2010

Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists Catalogue, Chelsea Museum of Art, June 2009

Sontag, Deborah, “The Intersection of Islam, America and Identity,” *The New York Times*, June 7 2009

Wei, Lily, “Selseleh/Selzeleh at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery,” *ArtNews*, Oct. 2009

Cotter, Holland, “Iran Inside Out,” *The New York Times*, July 28 2009

Kino, Carol, “Iranians Shine, Assisted by Expatriate,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 15 2009

Ebstein, Alex, “Her Stories: Group Show Presents and Examines Women’s Voice and Identity,” *Baltimore City Paper*, Feb. 18 2009

Davis, Ben, “Iranian Art Now,” *artnet.com*, July 20 2009

Neuschler, Chris, “Iran Inside Out inside Chelsea Art Museum, New York,” *premierartscene.com*, June 2009

Passariello, Micol, “News: Arte Da Mille E Una Notte,” *Cosmopolitan (Italia)*, Sept. 2009

Balaghi, Shiva, “What Fills Emptiness? Reflections on Iranian-American Women Artists Since 1979,” *30 Years of Solitude* Catalogue, Asia House, UK, 2008

Riley-Lopez, Erin, “How Soon Is Now?,” *How Soon Is Now?: AIM 28 Catalogue*, 2008

Smith, Roberta, “Artists Leap Into the Moment,” *The New York Times*, July 25 2008

Torres, Eddie, “Iconoclastic: Answering to a Higher Calling,” *South Bronx Contemporary: A Catalogue of Essays*, 2007

Genocchio, Benjamin, “Exploring the Effects if Disco’s Beat,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 19 2006

Cotter, Holland, “Do You Think I’m Disco,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 3 2006

Richardson, Denise, “Exhibit Mixes Politics and Art,” *The Daily Star*, Sept. 15 2005

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