

The MAKER

AN INTERVIEW WITH HADIEH SHAFIE



Block 3, 2015. Wood, ink, acrylic, and paper with printed and handwritten Farsi text Eshgh ("Love/Passion"). 76.2 x 76.2 x 14 cm

Iranian artist **Hadieh Shafie's** works entice the viewer through their startling forms. Made with a multitude of painted strips of paper, they incorporate long hand-written texts referring to subjects of loss, love and devotion. **Sarah Hassan** meets the artist in New York and discovers the intricacies behind her dizzying compositions.



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adieh Shafie is a maker. The Iranian-born, US-based artist has been mesmerizing private and public art collectors alike for nearly a decade with her iconic three-dimensional works comprised of thousands of hand painted strips of paper rolled into spools and spikes. Arranged in large-scale circular forms or housed in heavy wooden frames, the compositions are primed to entice. From a distance, the works could be anything; saturated mosaics, undulating tapestries, multi-hued sea creatures, a thousand eyes or portals to worlds unknown. The colorful shapes simultaneously conceal and reveal the loops of handwritten text along the edge of the wrapped paper; *eshgh*, or ‘love’ in Farsi barely surfaces, a secret, almost forbidden message in Shafie’s *ketabs* – as she calls her scrolls. Echoing the ancient art of bookbinding and the repetitive, spherical nature of the whirling dervishes – whose performances left a profoundly influential mark on the artist – Shafie’s dizzying compositions resist simple classification. Both painting and sculpture, the works challenge contemporary notions of devotion, loss and longing with a passionate eye for detail.

Weeks from debuting *Surfaced*, her – surprisingly – first solo show in New York City at Leila Heller Gallery, Shafie met with me to discuss her process and the origins of the twenty works that will be on display. A continuation of her celebrated oeuvre while tackling new multi-dimensional concepts, *Surfaced* promises to be a maturation of the artist’s already impressive techniques. Akin to a ‘reverse growing up,’ the viewer will encounter the familiar spools and spikes alongside newer works combining blocks of color and the watery painted verse of Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri, two of Iran’s most beloved and influential modernist poets. With equal parts of mystery and candor, Shafie pieced together her personal history and present, spellbinding artistry.

Surfaced has been a year in the making – an impressively short amount of time when considering the scope of Shafie’s projects – and we touched on this immediately. ‘I didn’t set out to make this

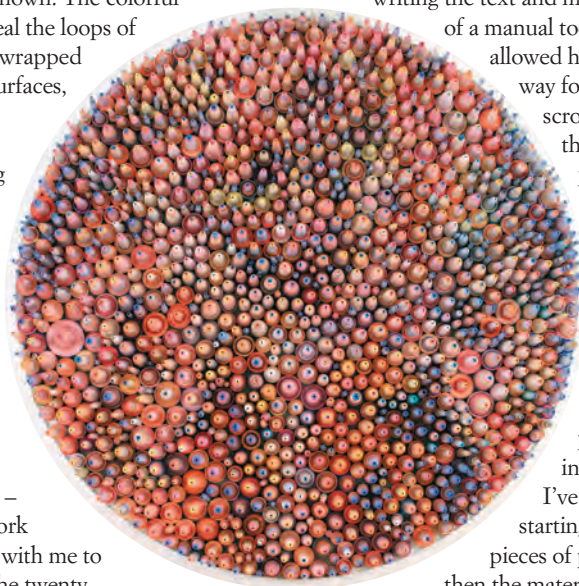
work,’ she tells me over a steaming cup of tea. ‘I’ve always wanted to be an artist, that was never a question, but...I never set out to make work that was this labor intensive or took this much time; a year is not a long time to conceptually produce your ideas.’ Ideas alone, Shafie’s work demands the presence of the artist moment by moment. From conception to the studio to the finished product, the art is the result of countless hours of handiwork. When she first began making the paper scrolls, Shafie was hand painting the edges, writing the text and manually rolling each piece. The creation

of a manual tool supported the rolling process and allowed her to expand on this process and make way for new accidents, such as pushing the scroll out from the center and achieving the spiked shape, and saturating the paper after dropping a piece in a pool of ink and watching the gradation.

“Art school made me think in terms of series,” Shafie explains – she attended the University of Maryland before obtaining her MFA in Painting at The Pratt Institute in New York. “I arrived at my ideas naturally through play in the studio, producing work...and the work that is in this show is an extension of the work I’ve been making for the last four years, starting with the paper pieces, these rolled pieces of paper with text, changing the surface, then the materials and depth.” The artist admits to naturally gravitating to repetition in her work and the work she admires. One telling memory is of a five-year old Shafie making cookies with her grandmother. Her grandmother, who made so many batches at a time to have sweets on hand for unexpected visitors, gave Hadieh the task of putting

a spot of saffron infused with rosewater in the center of each cookie. This simple childhood responsibility is echoed in her present monumental works; the layers upon layers of rolled paper, the spiraling shapes arranged just so. This repetition is something she enjoys. “It’s escapist,” she says. “It’s playful and fun.” This is something she doesn’t want to give up.

“People always ask me, ‘why don’t you get help?’ she laughs. ‘And I think, why do I want to do this...why do I want to make this



Spike 8, 2015.
Ink, acrylic, and paper with
printed and handwritten Farsi
text *Eshgh* (“Love/Passion”).
91.4 x 19 cm.

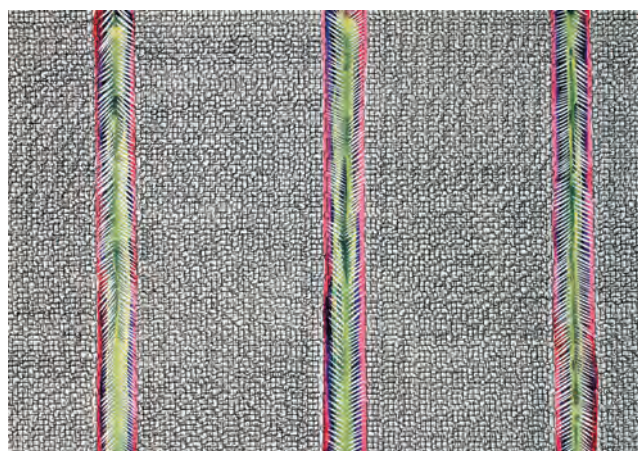




work?’ Shafie reveals that the work has done nothing for her physically; the materials are demanding and heavy and the repetitive motions have her either sitting for hours at a time or constantly moving back and forth. “In the past year I’ve slept maybe four hours each night, but I’ve been so happy.’ This natural high comes from producing work that one loves, and Shafie is not about to relinquish control over her creations. She most recently had an intern during the winter months who would mix the paint – after Shafie chose the palette – and then paint the edges of the paper the artist would eventually roll. But this is the extent of it; Shafie is unwilling to transfer her labors into the hands of another, unlike so many of her contemporaries, who seem more interested in becoming multi-staffed factories rather than singular, well-oiled machines. “I’d rather get the right tools to help me make the work and expand the work than have someone else do it for me,” Shafie declares. “I shy away from any art that I can’t have my hands fully in’ I don’t want to be a director or a CEO, this is what I love to do...I can’t imagine having someone do something for me if I could learn it myself”

When talking about the nature of producing her work, the artist admits ‘It’s obsessive.’ There is no better example of this than Shafie’s use of ‘eshgh’ which more than ‘love’ defines a deep passion. ‘With eshgh there are three letters and not a break in the body of the word, so it lends itself beautifully to repetition.’ This is evident in her larger scale, grid-like drawings of the word which have been compared to so many skeleton keys and tattooed on reverent admirers. In the newer works which see the word rise to the surface of the paper’s edge, the script undulates and flows like an Ikat pattern, blending against a bound field of color. Housed in white wooden frames and containers with shaped spiked sides – built by Shafie’s partner, Jason – these works pay homage to the artist’s earliest heroes which include, Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin. When coupled with the spirals and spikes of her earlier works, the viewer sees the verse once tightly protected blossom into poetry, spilling over pages and running down the length of the bindings.

Shafie calls these pieces ‘controlled deconstruction.’ “You would’ve thought I started where these new works are, the sheafs of paper,” she admits. “I was thinking about activating the surface, wanting to visually respond to two poems that were very important to me especially in my late teens and early twenties when I was coming into my own and trying to figure out who I was, one of them was *In the Garden*. And these aren’t traditional poems, unlike Rumi or Hafiz, they use everyday language and when I was listening to these poems, I realized they were paintings.’ When showing me a



(Above) *Forugh 3*. 2014. Ink, acrylic, and paper with printed and handwritten Farsi text from the poem “Tavalodi Digar” (“Another Birth”). 31 x 223.5 x 11.4 cm.

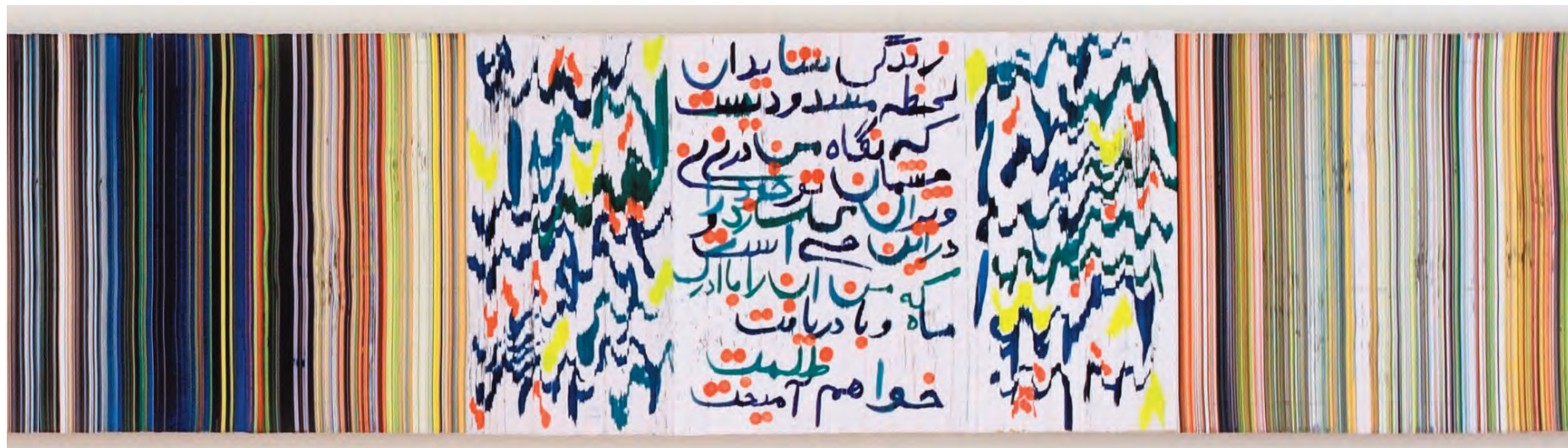
(Left) *Grid/Cut 2* (detail). 2014. Ink, acrylic on mat board. 121.9 x 248.9 cm.

video of this new process, fanning the pages fresh with ink and slapping them closed, Shafie grinned and said, ‘I love that sound!’

Resisting the impulse to pin down her work into a singular category, Shafie instead calls herself ‘intertwined.’ “I’m an artist; it isn’t any one thing,” she says. “I started as a painter – the painter in me wants to arrange the works in color – put things next to each other, see the abstraction.” She then goes more in depth. “I would say I’m a maker of things, but I can’t deny the fact that so much of the work in its different stages resembles painting, choosing the palette, dissolving the colors and arranging the spools.’ This is where Shafie’s work, though so contemporary, harkens back to the idea of a well- rounded artist, the ecole student who could not by nature of his or her interests be specialized. Her work reflects both the past – the nod to Sufism, the traditional, talismanic shapes, the calligraphy – and the future – the contemporary design, the focus on color, and the experimentation with form. This is why the work is so fresh, so very alive. The dialogue between the materials is unexpected, and the work is an ongoing conversation the artist is having with herself.

“People ask me how can I do all the work I am meant to do if I don’t give up some of the more laborious aspects,” she says and I wonder what does that mean, is there a quota for every artist? Does there have to be? “It has to be a natural growth,” she clarifies. “The work has to demand it – the labor...when I’m hanging a piece of work on the wall, I’m looking for that, does it have a presence? Those are the artists and work I admire, you feel their fingerprints. The talent is in the room.”

The ‘talent in the room’ takes on a highly charged, highly political nature when the talent is an Iranian woman – Shafie admits



'IT'S POLITICAL TO BE MIDDLE EASTERN; IT'S POLITICAL TO BE IRANIAN, BUT MORE THAN THAT IT'S POLITICAL TO BE AN ARTIST.'

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON FAGAN.



to being more 'American Iranian' than 'Iranian American' thanks to her thirty years in the US versus her fourteen years in Iran. In contemporary times, artists from the Middle East are expected to shed light on certain truths and decipher certain customs, bearing the responsibility of speaking on behalf of their countrymen – more importantly to the West where they are viewed with a critical, leering eye – and Shafie is forthcoming with her ideas of identity in face of these challenges. "It's political to be a woman," she starts, "It's political to be Middle Eastern; it's political to be Iranian, but more than that, it is political to be an artist. You are choosing to live a way of life that not everybody chooses. I am first and foremost a maker. Then I am a woman. Then I would say I am Iranian-American, or currently, American-Iranian...still Farsi is my mother tongue and the first language I learned. Time makes those feelings more raw, the longing difficult; when I was younger I wanted to leave Iran, no child wants to live in war. But I have deep, deep roots in my motherland."

This straddling of two worlds – the exile of childhood, her embracing of the West – and the interplay between the concealed and the revealed all contribute to a glimmering artistry that will no doubt feel just as overwhelmingly familiar yet excitingly new in the coming decades. Shafie doesn't view her pieces as multiples, nor does she desire to manipulate media to take any short cuts. Her compositions are talismanic. Shafie collects antique jewelry, her collection includes Berber and Turkmen jewelry, some of which is known for their protective symbology – and marry the idea of something aggressive and beautiful happening. "The work has to belong to something," she declares. "This is life experience – love, loss of love, longing, fear." She comes back to *eshgh*, this 'one word, like a mantra...love, we die for it. Lovers die for a lost lover, people die for their country. We all know what love is.' Indeed, we do, especially when faced with a repetitive passion such as Shafie's, and an uncompromising zeal for merely existing. **HEA**

(Left) A side view of *Block 3*, 2015. Wood, ink, acrylic, and paper with printed and handwritten Farsi text *Eshgh* ("Love/Passion"). 76.2 x 76.2 x 14 cm.

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