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Brock, Hovey. "Hadieh Shafie *Surfaced*." *The Brooklyn Rail*. (April 2, 2015).



ARTSEEN

APRIL 2ND, 2015

HADIEH SHAFIE *Surfaced*

by Hovey Brock

Hadieh Shafie's recent works—brilliantly colored rolls and stacks of paper packed into white rectangles, squares, tondos, and even a cube—managed to walk a thin line between painting and object, concept and image, Iran and the West, with rare stumbles. In several works, Shafie introduced quotes from poems in Farsi. The poets she quoted, Sohrab Sepehri and Forugh Farrokhzad, were leading members of Iran's New Poetry movement from the 1960s and 1970s. In a conversation about their significance to her work, Ms. Shafie helped to trace the complex journey she has successfully negotiated across a cultural divide.

Born in Tehran, Shafie came to the United States at age 14, four years after Iran's Islamic revolution. During her teens, she rebelled by becoming a punk, and in young adulthood, an artist in a family of engineers and doctors. Shafie discovered Iran's New Poetry in Ms. Farrokhzad's short '62 documentary about a leper colony, *The House is Black*. The soundtrack to the film included readings from Farrokhzad's poetry. For the first time, a contemporary woman's voice spoke to Shafie, in Farsi, about the most intimate aspects of falling in love.



"Spike 9," 2015. Ink, acrylic and paper with printed and handwritten Farsi text "Eshgh" (Passionate Love)
17 x 17 x 3.5 inches.

Iran's New Poetry drew Shafie to "eshgh," the Farsi for passionate love. "Eshgh" has a long history in Persian love poetry's distinctive mix of the spiritual and the sensual, figuring prominently, for example, in Rumi's verse. The word carries connotations of sadness and yearning—the tinge of pain that comes at the very hint of separation from the beloved. The actual marks in Farsi consist of (from right to left) a small hook, a line with three bumps, followed by a big loop.

For Shafie, these letters in Farsi created a complete, closed gesture. In some works, she repeated "eshgh" on the 1-by-11 inch sheets, which she coiled into rolls, or else placed into a stack with other sheets. In others, such as "Grid/Cut 3" (2014), she repeated "eshgh" in rows across an open surface to build a shimmering lattice of marks.

Shafie found the freedom to approach writing "eshgh" on her own terms through the work of Brice Marden and Cy Twombly. She was reluctant to learn Middle Eastern calligraphy, a high art form that requires long training to master, worried that the discipline would bog down her practice. Marden's relationship to Chinese monochrome ink painting in the *Cold Mountain* series struck just the right tone for her. He was clearly paying homage to that tradition, but at the same time kept his distance by making an abstract field out of his marks.

If Marden provided the right relationship to gesture, Twombly provided the right attitude in his openness and spontaneity, giving her the permission to turn written Farsi into something personal. A standout conceptually and visually, "Sohrab 1" (2014), quoted from Sepehri's poem "Dar Golestaneh" ("In the Garden"), is presented on the right-hand side. The left-hand side had the same Farsi text painted on the edge of paper sheets, but Shafie then rolled the sheets up into tight coils, creating multiple associations, including the rolling calligraphy of the word "eshgh," or the Mewlewi Sufi dancers who never got dizzy as they made their hearts the center of their spinning movements. The intervention of chance, to her delight, left spiral patterns on the rolls where the brush had marked the edge of the sheet, setting up a vibrant contrast to the text.

Shafie has welcomed chance elsewhere in her process. "Forugh 3" (2014), with sections of quotes from the poem "Tavalodi Digar" ("Another Birth") by Farrokhzad, had some sections painted on deliberately misaligned sheets, which when realigned top to bottom, suggested the off-register glitter of ikats, traditional fabrics from Persianate Central Asia. However the lack of a strong rhythm in "Forugh 3"'s frieze-like shape (11-by-88 inches) never delivered on the promise of

pulsating transitions from vertical stripes to horizontal text, something Shafie evidently intended with the ikat-like text. Instead, the different sections read as isolated elements without relationship to the whole.

The combination of bold color, minute accidental variations, and restless formal invention came together best in “Spike 9” (2015). Shafie not only rolled the paper, but also pulled out the centers to create a series of spikes, bringing to mind a birds-eye view of some strange city dotted with towers. The stripe in the top-left quadrant could have been some kind of landing strip, or maybe a set of roadways. Her signature saturated colors of yellow, orange, cobalt blue, cobalt violet, dioxazine purple, and others, glowed in concert. The elements in this small piece—more than her overtly referential works with text—spoke to an intense sensuality in the service of steely determination. That same steely determination gave Shafie the strength to bend Western abstract painting conventions to her purpose of honoring New Poetry’s intimate, modern verse. Her work’s defiance of expectations on either side of the Iran/America cultural divide has proved Shafie’s most powerful statement.

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