

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Brady, Anna "Shiva Ahmadi Combines The Beautiful And The Violent" *Harper's Bazar* (April 12, 2017)

# BAZAAR

Harper's  
ARABIA

## Shiva Ahmadi Combines The Beautiful And The Violent



Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Shiva Ahmadi. The Mesh. 2016. Leila Heller Gallery

The Iranian-American artist's latest works, on show at Leila Heller in New York, were triggered by her outrage at the death of three-year-old Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi

Shiva Ahmadi's delicate watercolours tread a fine line between the ethereal and the terrible, oscillate between the beautiful and the shocking. The Iranian-American artist fuses the ancient tradition of Persian painting with very contemporary themes, the delicate tones of her watercolour and ink works harking back to Persian miniatures in their technique and motifs while depicting modern political events. Ahmadi's paintings and objects are complex and multi-layered, not to mention violent. These apparently beautiful works are filled with images of terrorism, refugees, global capitalism, and corruption. At first glance, they appear playful, but that only renders them more chilling when their dark sub context reveals itself, the thread of a fantastical perpetrator and ordinary helpless victim running through many.

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*Shiva Ahmadi. Pump. 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery*

As the academic Talinn Grigor writes in her introduction to the accompanying monograph, “Ahmadi’s painterly language transforms monkeys into despots, thrones into bigoted states, bubbles into bombs, paint into blood, and hospitality into global violence.”

The artist was deeply struck by the image of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee whose body was washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean in 2015. Ahmadi channelled her outrage at the tragic unfairness of his death into the new body of work currently on show at Leila Heller Gallery in New York until 22 April. The exhibition’s title, *Ascend*, plays upon the alliteration of the boy’s name in ancient Arabic, meaning ‘high one’, or ‘to ascend’.



*Shiva Ahmadi. The Knot. 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery*

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Ahmadi may take a leaf from the Persian miniature tradition stylistically, but these latest watercolours, *The Mesh*, *The Wall* and *The Knot*, are vast. In the last, a vast 40 by 60 inch watercolour and ink on paper, figures float across a background, a figure sits upon a golden throne, a symbol reminiscent of both traditional Iranian hospitality and autocratic rule. Faceless attendants hold ambiguous objects in tribute (are they bombs or balloons?) and look up to a winged figure holding a little boy, a narrative explored further in *Ascend*, an accompanying short animation with sound.

Alongside these watercolours, perhaps most provocative are the metal objects made from commercial pressure cookers, powerfully symbolic of homemade terrorist weapons, acid-etched with verses from the Quran traditionally recited by the dying. Again, beauty and violence combined, not reconciled by their juxtaposition, but sharpened.