A sand painting of a human figure, possibly a woman, in a dark, textured environment. The figure is composed of fine, light-colored sand, creating a soft, ethereal glow against the dark background. The figure's form is somewhat abstract, with a head, torso, and limbs suggested by the sand's placement. The background is a deep black, speckled with fine white particles, giving it a grainy, night-like texture. The overall effect is one of quiet contemplation and artistic craftsmanship.

# Silence of the Night

Sand Paintings by Reza Derakshani



*Peacock Throne*, 2012  
Black sand and enamel on canvas  
80 x 70 in / 203 x 178 cm

COVER:  
*Void Gold* (detail), 2012  
Black sand and gold paste on canvas  
86 x 36 in / 218 x 91 cm





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Silence of the Night  
Sand Paintings by Reza Derakshani  
September 6 - October 6, 2012  
Leila Heller Gallery, New York

**Silence of the Night**

Sand Paintings by Reza Derakshani

# The Sound of Silence

Looking back at the artist Reza Derakshani's work over the last decade, one can't help but note a remarkable and existential breadth. Derakshani, who lives and works between Austin and Dubai, has treated subjects ranging from medieval hunters to exiled kings and queens to fall leaves executed in the impressionistic mode.

His latest series, entitled *Khak e Siah* (Dark Soil), has nothing of the warm primary colors many of us have come to know him for. Mostly rendered in stark black and white, these tableaux communicate a vast emptiness, a void, and even, in the darkest moments, death. Foregoing his traditional painterly practice, Derakshani has instead used fine grains of sand in these renderings. Absent too, is the familiar treatment of Persian iconography—pomegranates, peacocks, and more—that we have come to expect.

The desert, probably the ultimate setting in which to stage emptiness, was an inspiration for this series. Derakshani, who grew up in the northeastern Iranian city of Sangsar, had long been taken by the punishingly barren salt deserts of *Dasht e Loot* in the south of the country. It was in 2010, after a trip into the Emirati desert, that Derakshani was again struck by sand's simultaneous tangibility and ephemerality. It was literally everywhere and everything, but also in its infinite nature, frustratingly ungraspable. Experimenting with industrial-grade black sand grains in his studio some weeks later, he began to throw them onto canvases coated with paste, finding that some would stick, while the rest fell to the floor. Herein was a game of chance inflected with the logic of loss, of stripping down, of truth. Whatever sand would remain at the end of this process was inevitably revealing—and formed the basis of the pieces assembled here.

These ten sand works reflect a deliberate tendency toward abstraction. The instinct to attach a meaning to each of them is foiled by their enigmatic and, again, utterly ephemeral nature. What appears at once as a skull also suggests a playful configuration of Farsi script. What appears as a washed-away textile pattern carries within it the faintest outlines of a face. Another work looks a bit like a satellite image of a vast empty surface, with only the smallest hint of color suggesting an oasis below. What these works actually represent or aim to evoke is, in truth, mostly beside the point. It is their failure to represent, to be, and to breathe, that may be more at the heart of Derakshani's current practice and thinking.

And yet still, there are subtle traces of past preoccupations here. A 2007 show at the Khak Gallery in Tehran, for example, resonates with the new series. *Beyond the Darkness* consisted of works characterized by layers of thick textured paint that seemed to be obstructing, even smothering, images below. The rich Persian symbolism that has appeared in previous works – such as the *Gol e Bol Bol*, literally the flower and the nightingale so ubiquitous in poetry – had disappeared, or in some cases, was just barely visible under the weight of this darkness. It was as if suddenly, there were fewer birds in Tehran. It is probably no coincidence that the country was bearing the weight of a new president at the time, along with heightened restrictions

on visual culture. Likewise, Derakshani had worked on skulls prior to this series, sometimes rendering them in such a way that a mass of them appears as a quilt of wilted flowers. In those works, there are signs of the sudden contraction of horizon that was to come.

In the 2010 series *Identity Crisis*, Derakshani also evoked the ravages of the post-revolutionary period. Working on record albums he had collected from Tehran's dense Friday market, a repository for all manner of eclectica and detritus of the pre-revolutionary period, he lingered especially over the faces of Iran's female singers of lore—Delkash, Googoosh, or Qamar ol Molook Vaziri —gracing various record covers. These works, consisting of portraits of these epic women of song painted over and, in turn, perverted, spoke volumes about the altered texture of life in Iran. Lines of paint streaming over their faces seemed to summon up both tears and fearsome prisons bars at once.

The universe of Iranian culture is littered throughout Derakshani's work. On occasion, the artist takes the familiar Persian miniature as his point of departure, enlarging, repeating, and distorting an original image. A grand pictorial tradition as old as the 13th century is at the heart of these works, but very often, through Derakshani's intervention, that very tradition seems to have been hijacked, abused, even forgotten. In his own words, it sometimes looks as if one is gazing at these scenes through the distorted lens of a car's rear view mirror. Some have been stretched beyond recognition. These are anything but pure neatly cropped and illuminated forms, appearing instead as dull and beaten-up copies, scarred by the passage of time.

In all its various forms, Derakshani's practice—what you might call the production of peculiar and ghostly landmarks—represents a tableau of loss and, in the end, weaves a tale about a world forever altered. It is, not surprisingly, a texture that speaks eloquently and powerfully to a life lived in exile. Critics have lingered over the musicality of Derakshani's works—for he is a gifted and prolific musician, too—but if this series communicates any sound, it is only one marked by deafening silence.

**Negar Azimi**

*Negar Azimi is Senior Editor of Bidoun.*

*Faith*, 2012  
Black sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
100 x 80 in / 254 x 203 cm





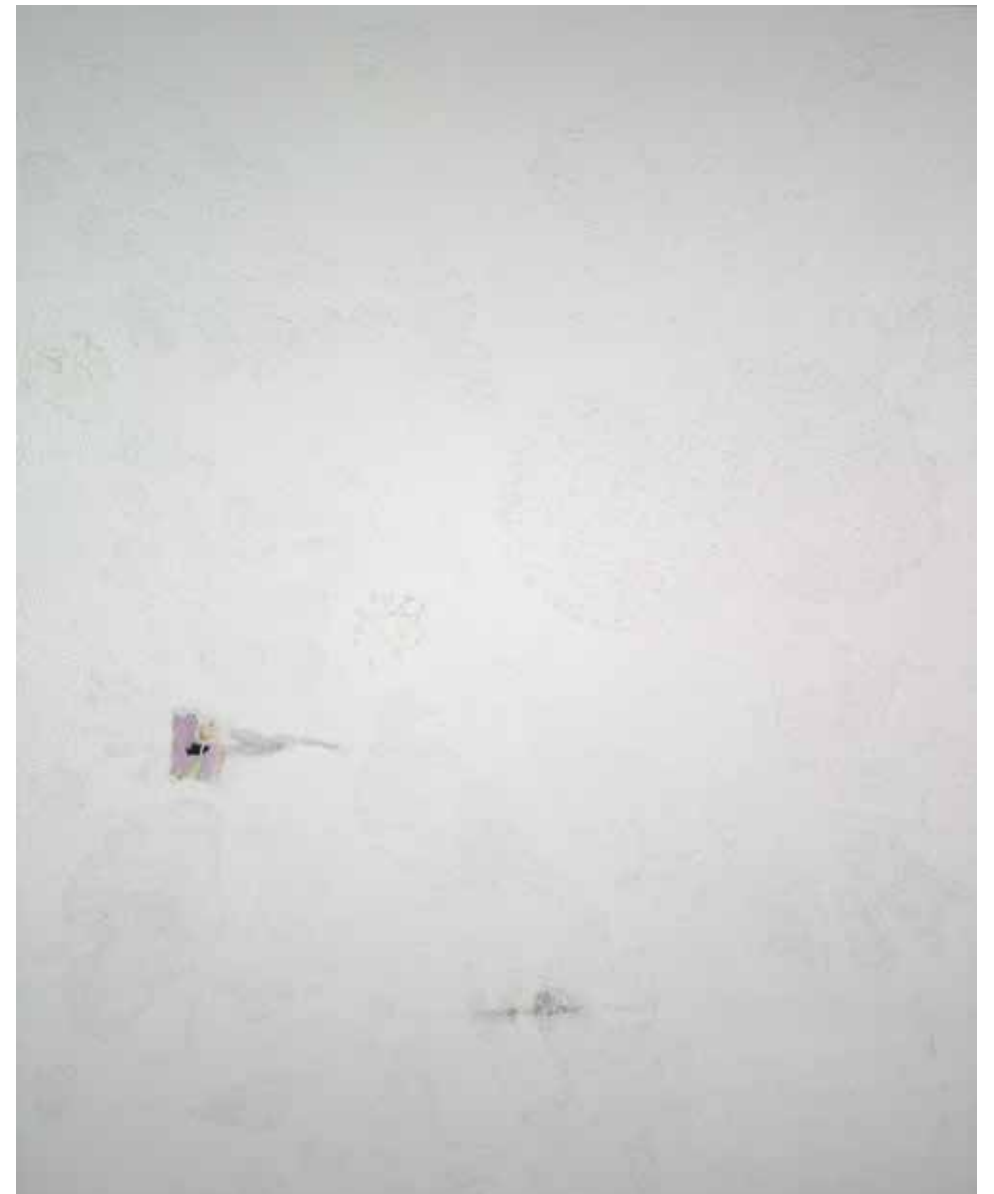
*Faith (detail)*, 2012  
Black sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
100 x 80 in / 254 x 203 cm



*Faith (detail), 2012*  
Black sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
100 x 80 in / 254 x 203 cm



*Land of the Rose & Nightingale*, 2012  
Sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
100 x 80 in / 254 x 203 cm



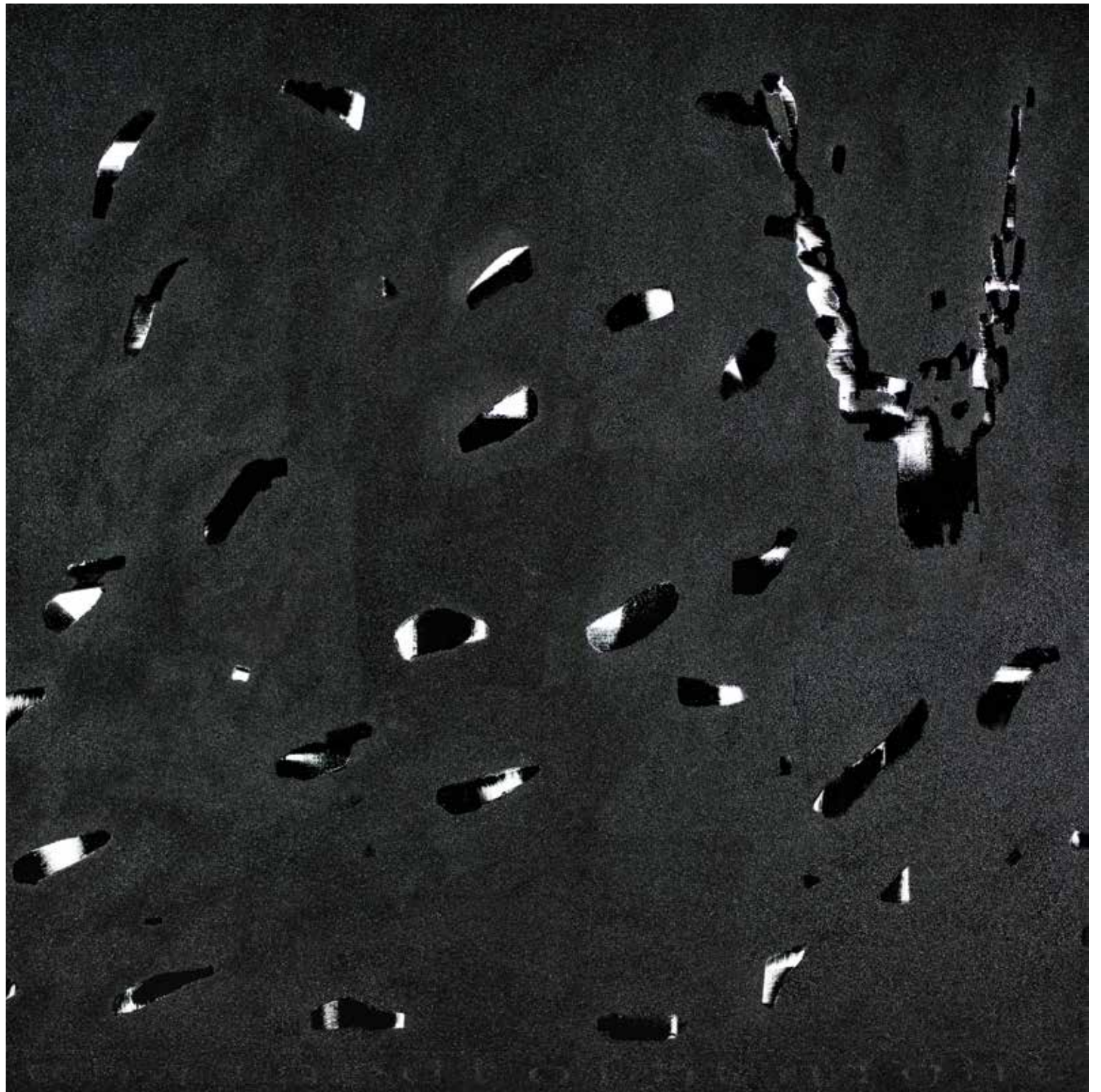


*Land of the Rose & Nightingale (detail), 2012*  
Sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
100 x 80 in / 254 x 203 cm





*Chained to the Night*, 2012  
Black sand and enamel on canvas  
80 x 80 in / 203 x 203 cm





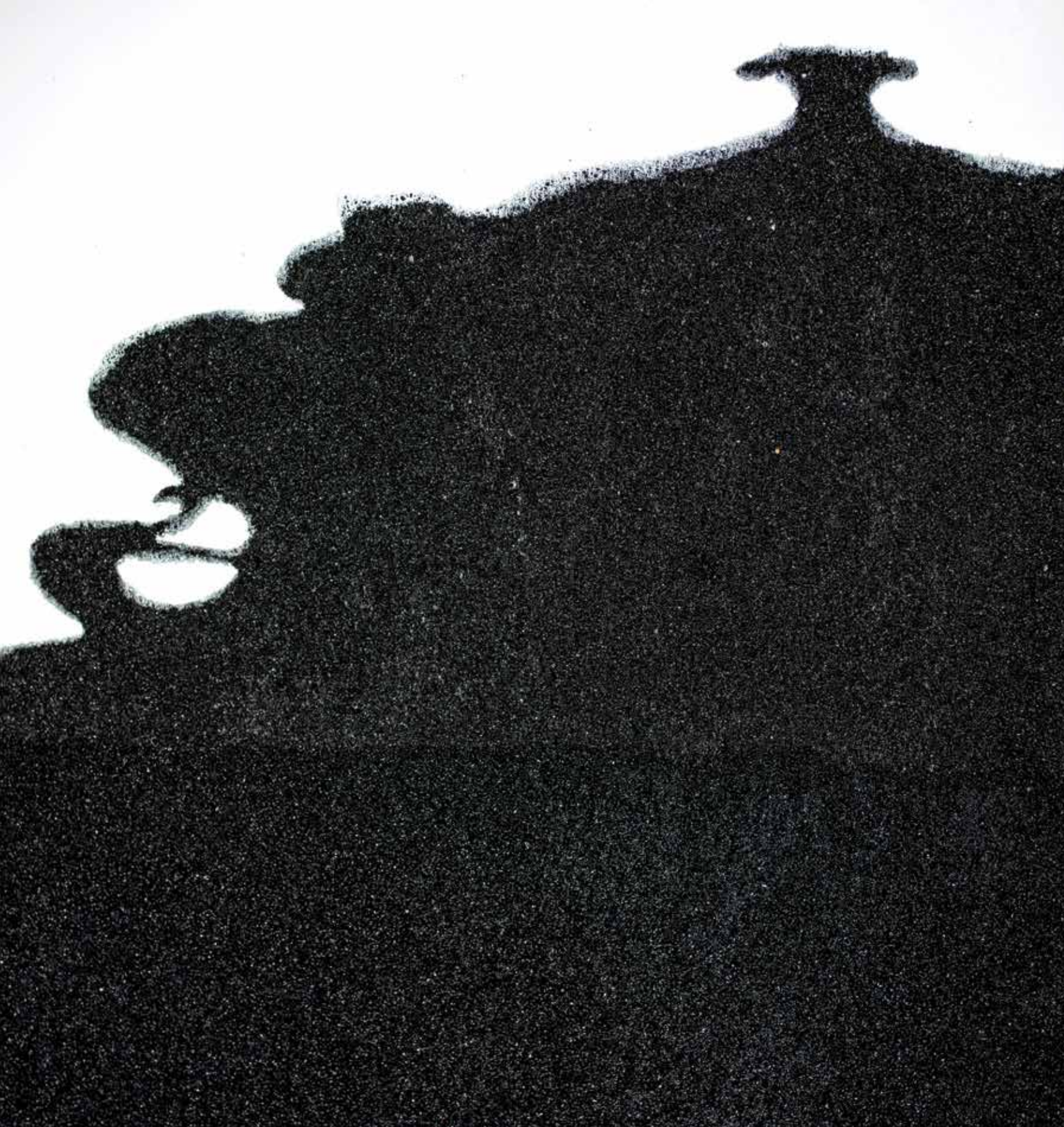


*Chained to the Night (detail), 2012*  
Black sand and enamel on canvas  
80 x 80 in / 203 x 203 cm

*Peacock Throne, 2012*  
Black sand and enamel on canvas  
80 x 70 in / 203 x 178 cm





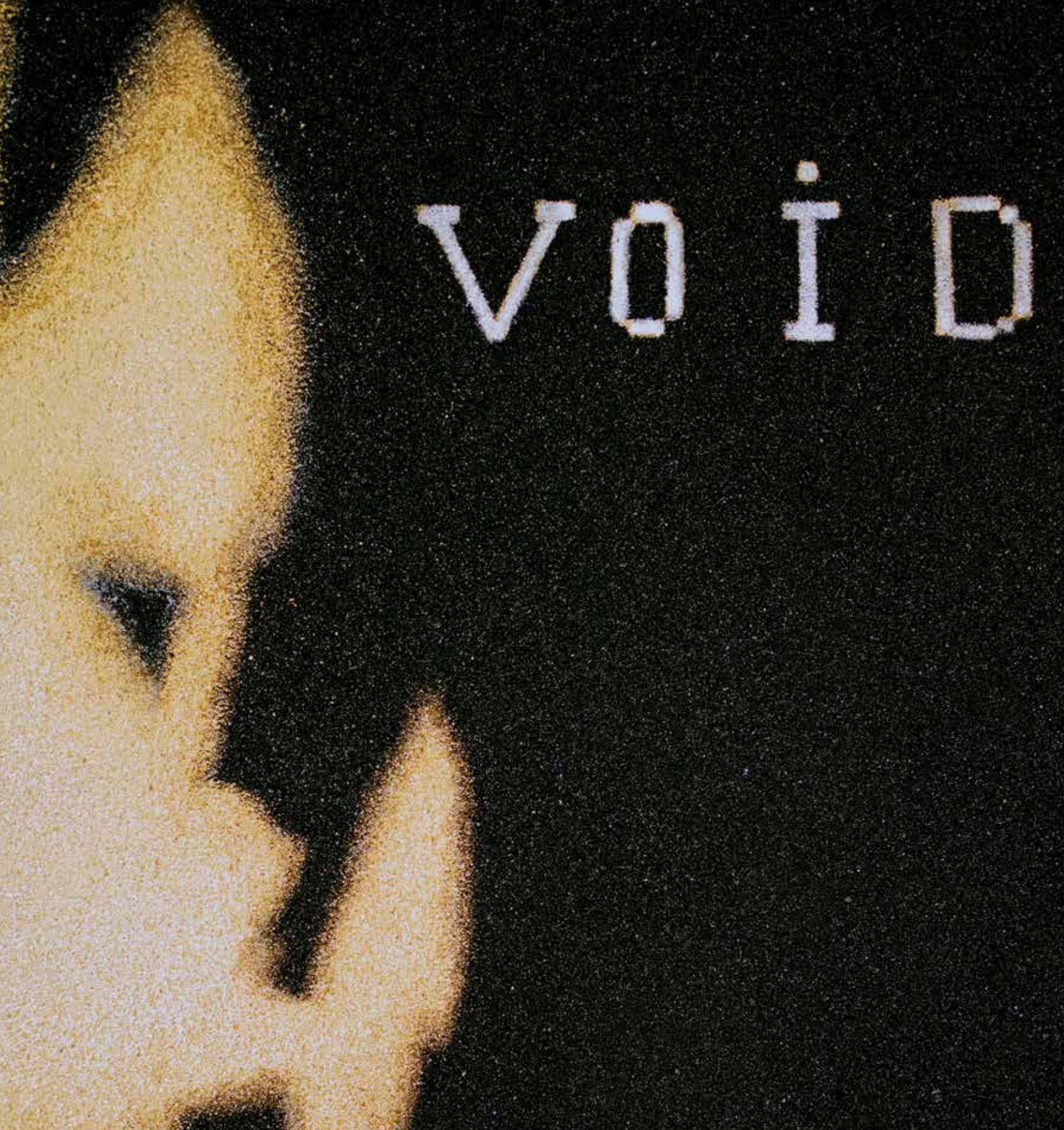


*Peacock Throne (detail), 2012*  
Black sand and enamel on canvas  
80 x 70 in / 203 x 178 cm

*Void Gold*, 2012  
Black sand and gold paste on canvas  
86 x 36 in / 218 x 91 cm



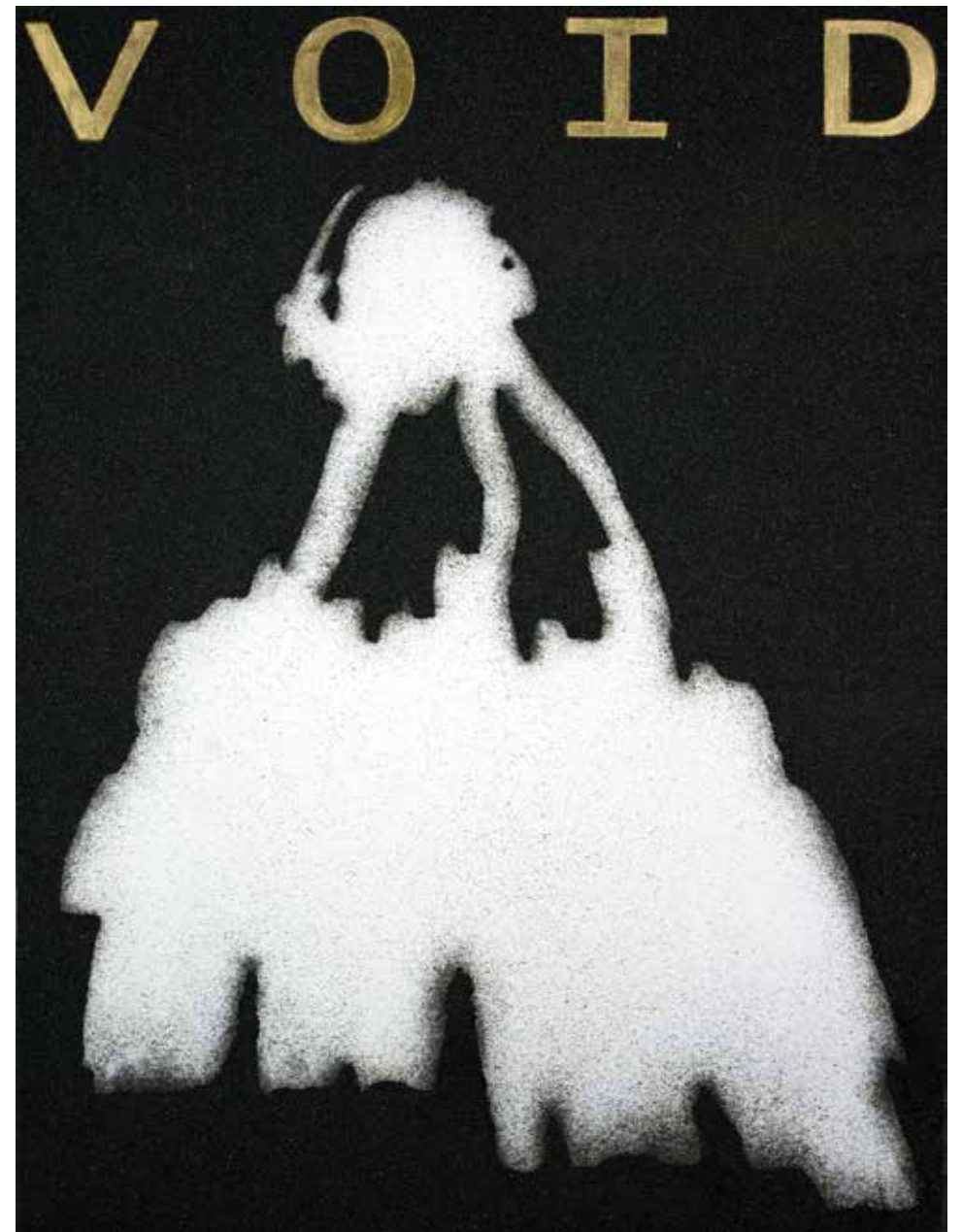




*Void Gold* (detail), 2012  
Black sand and gold paste on canvas  
86 x 36 in / 218 x 91 cm



*Void*, 2012  
Black sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
80 x 60 in / 203 x 152 cm





*Void* (detail), 2012  
Black sand, enamel and gold on canvas  
80 x 60 in / 203 x 152 cm





## Q&A with Reza Derakshani

**There is something to be said about speed in your paintings. From your highly prolific production, to the gestural quality of some of your brush strokes... At the same time, many of your paintings are highly textured, and involve a layering and building up of the surface. Can you talk about how you negotiate those seemingly contradictory aspects that your work demands?**

That means each work has layers of action and that adds to the excitement, every layer I add to a work is like doing a new work except that it becomes richer and more juicy. Contradictory circumstances create more tension and the whole thing becomes more challenging. I have to say that the process of my work is in a way a building, destruction and rebuilding that gives the work the feeling of age, maturity and time. It's like the painting was created long ago and came back to life, bringing stories with it and becoming more and more engaging because of the depth that different layers create, flashbacks of a different time and space. It's very much like bringing a historic building back to life and giving it a contemporary taste, there will always be surprising corners and elements to be discovered.

**In addition to being a visual artist, you are also a musician. How would you say that your background as a musician has informed your painting? Do you listen to music in the studio, and if so, what do you listen to?**

In fact, I was a painter long before I became a musician, but the music took over for a period of time before I returned to the visual arts. Of course music is there all the time, either I play, record or listen. I can't help that. I think that music affects every aspect of a human being's life, and when it comes to another form of art the effect is even much stronger. It may have been stealing time from my art, but it has also been contributing to it. Because of the instant touch of the music, it evokes spirituality, abstraction and many other feelings. All of these qualities affect the visual and conceptual part of the brain, and consequently, the painting. In colors I hear sounds, and in sounds I see shades of color. It is a circle, in that my experiences in visual art have also been equally affecting my music. Listening to some form of music most of the time when I paint makes me more focused and brings fluidity. Long hours of listening to music daily means I listen to lots of different sounds, with no boundaries, and it changes based on the art I am doing. There are times that Bach feels right--and if not I switch to Rock, Jazz, Audio Books the News and all kinds of ethnic classical. It really depends on the painting mood.

**We were asking about the layering in your paintings, could you talk about the works of sand on paper? There is something much more iconic and immediate about them. They are not as labored or as layered. Can you talk about the difference in approach?**



The sand works started on paper, and evolved to large-scale canvas. Periodically I crave to do clean works and that's when my skills in classical art and my graphic design experience kick in, but normally that doesn't last long. The sand works seem very clean and articulated but the process of these works requires quite a lot of action as I paint first and then throw sand on the canvas, more like a performance for each piece. There are some layering techniques involved, but of course it is a different process for this series. As it is in progress, it will probably go where my emotions take me and I am sure it will get more messy and layered...I am already feeling it. It's quite risky and a whole lot of work to move on and make changes in your work, but it's fun. At the end of the day I care about what makes a good solid piece of art. Whatever can get me there, I'll take the ride.

**Can you talk a little about your use of symbols and characters? From birds, to horsemen and hunters, musicians to nightingales... What sort of environments are you looking to construct for viewers?**

What you are referring to is just a portion of what I have done. It's true that I love the beauty, the nature and poetry which is the core of my work but that is not all I have done. Practically those are elements you find in the series I have done based on my cultural heritage and each one has its own reasons and stories. The series IDENTITY CRISIS which is dealing with the issues of women and the CIRCUS OF LIFE and the VOICE series which are about the social/psychological highlights of our doomed homeland are just some examples. However, even dealing with these kind of heavy issues I will never sacrifice the artistic values and the poetry within my art, in spite of the fact that the fashion of the day might be the Calligraphy, the Hejaab or any other known cliché. I think it would be more help to the process and future of Art in Iran and that region if the International Art institutions look more into the substance and quality of work rather than the political message the work is delivering.

As per my viewers, I would like to make it clear that I am a visual artist not a writer, a journalist or storyteller. I don't like to give a very obvious message or information. To me visual arts and painting in particular has different values and not made for giving day by day information, that's why we have graphic design to do the job. Art is wholesome inspirations and creativity to purify the soul whether it's representational or abstract, happy or sad, dark or bright. At the end of the day I care about what makes a good solid piece of art. Whatever can get me there, I'll take the ride.



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