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APOCALYPTIC PLAYLAND

SHIVA AHMADI
LEILA HELLER GALLERY
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THE FLOWERS OF EVIL

BY HEATHER ECKER
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For the past seven years, the Iranian painter, Shiva Ahmadi (Tehran, 1975), has focused her work on a search for an objectivity of corruption. In many ways, this show is a culmination of her explorations.

For Ahmadi, corruption is an integral cancer linking East and West, fed through the arteries with petrol, and stoked with the apparatuses of nuclear power, war and the increasingly uneasy pressures applied to societies that are forced to sustain it. The expressions of corruption in these works seem familiar: here, the bloody, enthroned ruler holds a grenade, and there, the witless, dependent servant takes orders and creates webs of intrigue and mayhem. Two parties and two equal, interdependent forces are at work, creating an anxious atmosphere of instability and uncertainty.

Colours, figures and perspectives drawn from traditional Persian painting provide Ahmadi's archetypal repertoire. But, hers is not a jaded critique of Iran. Her elegant calculations seem to predict the same painful result everywhere, despite a different décor. Fear and opportunism are the universal human weaknesses that fuel corruption; their global connections are suggested in these works by industrial pipes linking power plants, monuments and nations. The principal figures hover over coloured washes in the ground—complex, layered, earthy surfaces—insinuating their relocation anywhere. In 2006, Ahmadi began these explorations by painting oil barrels with stunning colours, patterns and figures, creating objects that from a distance seemed purely decorative. Up close, one saw the tears, rendered with difficulty, in the resistant sheet metal of the barrel walls and the red paint that dripped from them. War wounds—someone had to get hurt in this enterprise—or female blood? Does it matter? The altered barrels

easily encapsulated the ties between oil, money, and violence. It was a simple message, quickly assimilated and nicely compacted, though perhaps not loud enough. When she came to the end of the oil barrel series, Ahmadi asked me one day, "Do you know where I can find a small tank to paint?"

Turning her back on oil, Ahmadi embraced water. With watercolours and inks on Aquaboard, she began to reconsider the tradition of Iranian painting as a means of gaining distance and perspective, but also to define the field of battle. Make no mistake, Ahmadi is a street-fighter.

In her fascinating painting, *Al-Khidr* (2009), which I acquired as a curator for the Detroit Institute of Arts, the field is a liquid green. Two principal figures are seated within the green ground. Enthroned in the center is a faceless, turbaned dignitary with blood dripping where the features should be. The dignitary is encircled by ambiguous underlings in the form of monkeys. Ominous snakes slither before his throne. In the lower left, a figure in a meditative pose sits alone in a grotto. His flaming halo and the title of the painting identify him as al-Khidr, the Green One, a perennial and immortal prophet and mystical guide to enlightenment. By giving us al-Khidr, Ahmadi recalls the redemption of the great cycles of time and fate, and wisdom traditions that survive the distortions of organized religion. There is a love of country and culture here, too. The underlying discursive description of a world gone awry is more traditional than Ahmadi might like us to recognize, drawn from Persian literature and shi'i thought.

In Iranian book-painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, scenes with multiple figures, particularly outdoor scenes, were painted from the perspective of a high angle. The viewer looks down at the action of the story, and takes in multiple narratives from a position

Untitled 2 (from Throne), 2012
Mixed media on Aquaboard
14 x 11 in (35.6 x 27.9 cm)





Al-Khidr, 2009
Mixed media on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in (101.6 x 152.4 cm)

above the picture plane. Ahmadi conflates two of these modes: the enthroned prince in a pleasure garden surrounded by his courtly companions, and battle scenes. In her works, the enthroned prince is no longer a cultivated ruler whose legitimacy is recognized and whose pleasant company sought, but a usurper dressed in sumptuous clothes who lacks the moral compass and obligation of princes: generosity, lawful actions, and protection of the defenseless. Instead of pious humility, the grandeur of the usurper increases with the monumentality and menace of his throne. His field of action expands beyond normal proportions, and he insures the loyalty of the creatures that serve him with blood and humiliation. The armies of monkey figures that Ahmadi uses to symbolize the degradation of servants of corrupt masters are drawn from illustrations of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, though the levels of meaning given to them are unrelated to their original context.

Behind the ruler posed on an exaggerated throne in *Lotus*, a traditional Iranian cityscape is strapped up with pipes leading to ominous shapes, nuclear silos, crucibles, missiles and towers. The small bomb or grenade held in the hand of the principal figure is a trigger for the larger, darker structures. In *Pipes*, the concentric rings held in the hand of the enthroned, bloody ruler are like an emblem of the atomic age. The focus is white hot, and the danger, collective.

These shared archetypes are concentrated in her most challenging diptych to date, *Cube*, also the subject of an animation. Here, an enthroned monkey with followers standing in a prayer posture face toward a Ka'aba with monkey pilgrims. The monkey figures wear white caps, and there is no doubt that Ahmadi's critique is directed toward the corruption of religion for the sake of power. Linking the two scenes are industrial pipes, silos, and

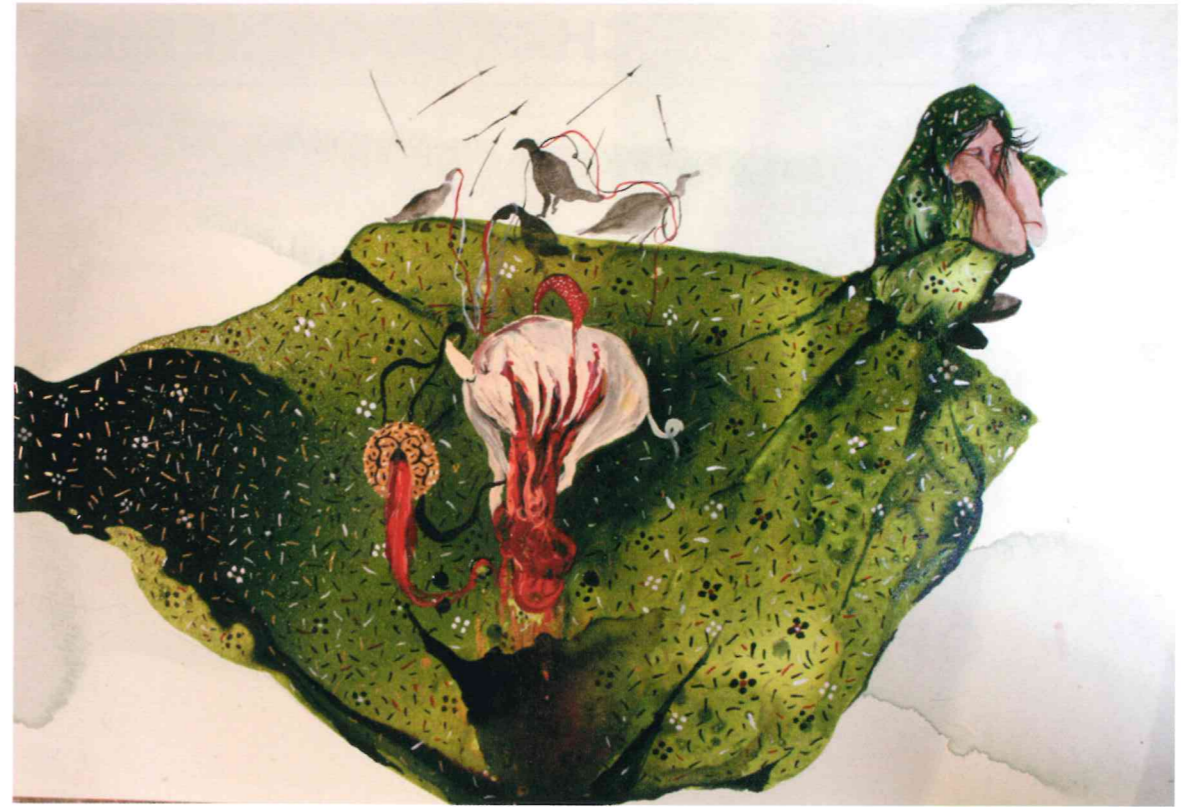
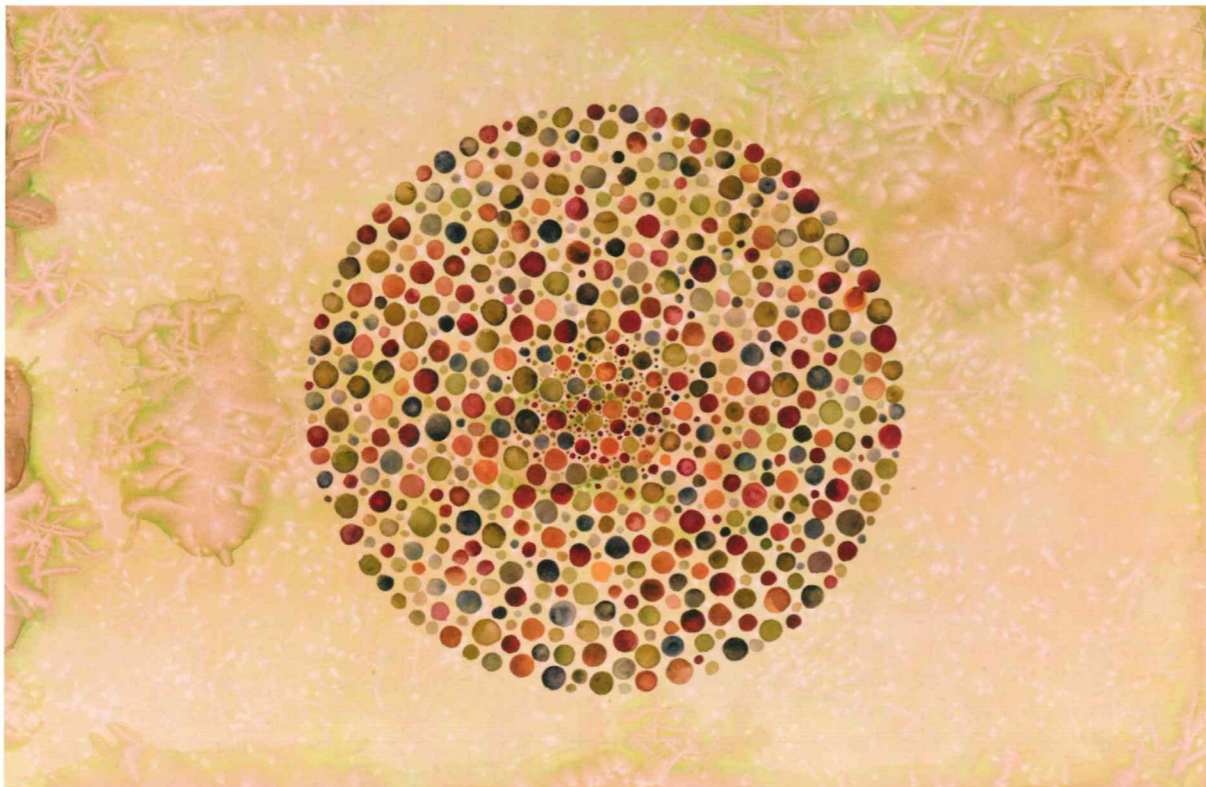


Untitled 3, 2013
Graphite on paper, 14 x 11 in (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

Pipes, 2013, watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in (101 x 152.4 cm)



Circles, 2013, watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in (101.6 x 152.4 cm)



Green Veil #4, 2010
Mixed media on Aquaboard
18 x 22 in (45.7 x 55.8 cm)

reactors, with pipes emerging even out of the Ka'aba itself, the most holy shrine and focal point of the Muslim world. Where does one go from here? Surely this work is the brave consummation of the series.

Ahmadi may draw on sixteenth-century perspectives and twenty-first-century tokens of power, but the dramatic expression in the larger works—tighter in the smaller vignettes—feels closer to history painting of the eighteenth century, a baroque hyperbole of blood and flowers. As in Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra*, these events are witnessed and recorded. But Ahmadi shows us the sources of suffering rather than its miseries. We find ourselves breathing a dangerous and fatal air in the midst of perfumed flasks and sequined fabrics—a hideous bouquet of hypocrisies, *Les Fleurs du Mal*.¹ One still hopes for redemption and resolution, and perhaps in Ahmadi's next works,

the benediction of the poet may also find a place.

Ahmadi is not a literalist, but rather offers signs and clues, she has called it “sugar-coating” and “science fiction.” Her medium—watercolour—is the same chosen by the masters of Persian and Indian painting, and her figures respond to a code which she has created herself from the established repertoire. Missing from among the stock characters is an audience—a well-established mode in Shirazi painting whereby a spectator looks onto the main event from behind a hill, finger raised to the mouth. The gesture indicates that here, there is something crucial that requires attention. We are that passer-by.

¹“A Martyr. Drawing by an unknown master,” from *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*), Charles Baudelaire (1857), trans. William Aggeler, Fresno, California: Academy Library Guild, 1954, p.375.

SHIVA AHMADI

Untitled 12 (from Throne), 2012

Mixed media on Aquaboard, 17 x 11.5 in (43.1 x 29.2 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Lella Heller Gallery, New York

