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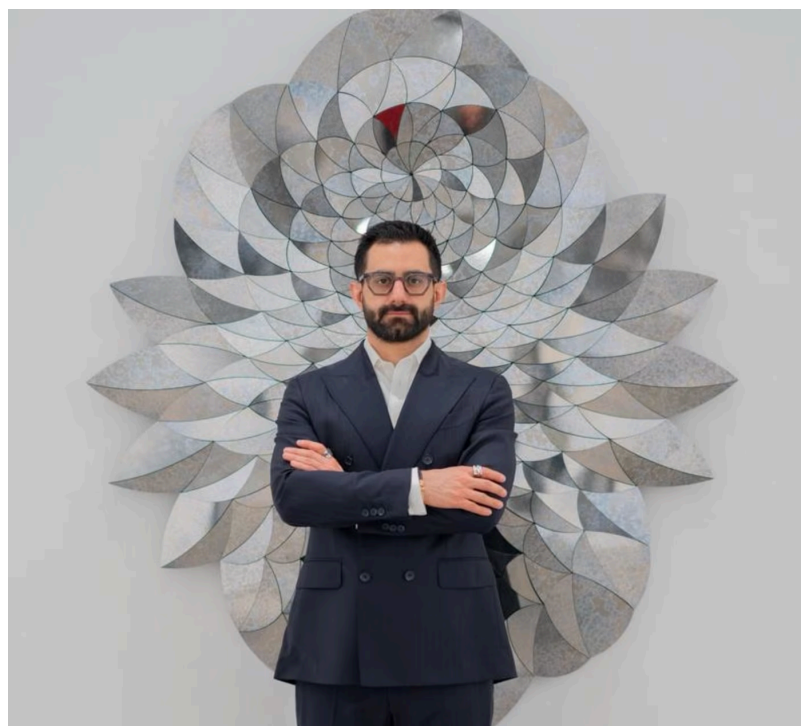
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War Threatens a Rising Iranian Sculptor's Breakthrough

In Tehran, artist Aref Montazeri faces postponed shows and scarce supplies as conflict grinds on.

By Kelly Crow [Follow](#)

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Aref Montazeri uses robotic welding tools and his hands to cut the thousands of mirrored shards in his pieces, including 2024's 'Immortal Mirror 2.'

Aref Montazeri, a rising-star artist, had just finished breakfast in his fifth-floor apartment overlooking Tehran when he heard the first crackle of war nearly two months ago. He thought it was a late-winter storm until the whoosh of jet fighters overhead were followed by thundering booms and smoky plumes billowing in the city center to the south.

Montazeri had no idea what had been hit, yet everything in his own life and career has since been upended by the conflict, caught between siege and shaky cease-fire. After a difficult childhood, the 39-year-old sculptor had

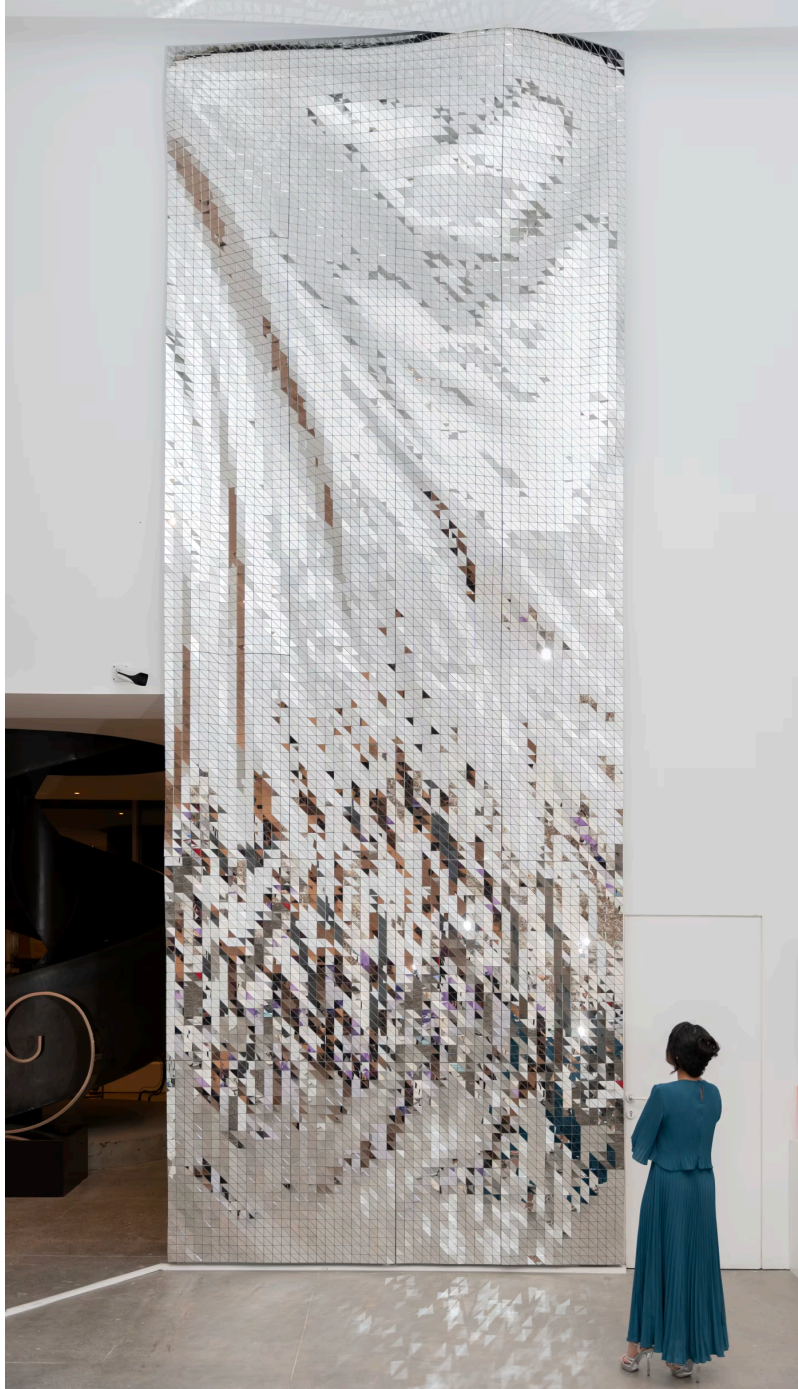
started gaining momentum on the international art circuit with his intricately mirrored works, some of which have sold for as much as \$1.5 million apiece. Three years ago he expanded into a larger studio to create towering sculptures built from thousands of tiny, hand cut mirrored shards that can stretch up to 27 feet tall and weigh a ton.

Now, he's doing whatever he can to keep his fragile life's work intact, knowing it is one errant aftershock away from shattering. In a series of interviews conducted over several weeks throughout the war, Montazeri paints a plucky portrait of himself, determined and capable of navigating the geopolitical tensions without getting into trouble.

His art isn't even subtly political; it is futuristic, with a kind of sci-fi gleam. He's known for using both sides of mirrors—both reflective and matte—to make a contortion of geometric forms that curve, arc, jut and ripple.

But the war is derailing his chances at a major career moment. Art supplies, expensive before amid financial sanctions, have largely disappeared from local shops, he said. He can't ship his art anywhere, so his planned solo show at Leila Heller Gallery in New York this fall has been postponed indefinitely, said Heller, his dealer. Montazeri can't travel to Dubai or Abu Dhabi, where he once regularly attended art fairs and mingled with his major collectors, including pharmaceutical magnate Farhad Farjam and financier and philanthropist Mohammed Afkhami.

“He wants to break through so badly,” Afkhami said of the artist and the global art stage. “But once a mirror breaks, you can't put it back together the same way.”



Montazeri's 2023 work 'Fluid Wall' stretches nearly 23 feet high.

It remains to be seen how the war will change art in Iran, though airstrikes and exploding drones have already damaged several Unesco-protected palaces and historic sites. For now, contemporary artists such as Montazeri are focused on enduring it.

“I always arrive at the studio early in the morning,” he said last week.

“Nothing, not even war, should prevent us from pursuing what we aim for.”

No place feels safe

Initially, Montazeri freaked out. The morning after the U.S.-Israeli bombings began, he and his girlfriend packed a few things and drove to a friend's house in Shemshak, a small town surrounded by ski resorts an hour and a half north of Tehran. They stayed two weeks. "I could hear planes overhead, though the explosions were less intense." He returned home briefly to pack more things, and the couple headed farther north, to Kelardasht, a mountainous city closer to the Caspian Sea. Their first day there, "a nearby village was targeted," he said.

He decided to return to Tehran. His girlfriend chose to stay in northern Iran with relatives. They try to speak daily by telephone when there's a connection. Aside from a cactus he waters once a month, he's alone.

Solitude is a familiar state for Montazeri, as he has been largely on his own since his parents separated when he was 15. He said he came home from school one day to find that most of the family's household belongings were gone, divided between his split-up parents. There were a few pots and pans and a couple mattresses left for him and his older half-brother Hatef, but otherwise the apartment was emptied. "The only item that remained completely intact was my mother's vanity with its mirror," he said.

His contact with his mother winnowed for a few years, though they are now reconnected; his father, Iranian folk musician Hadi Montazeri, remained in close contact, sending his sons weekly groceries. The teenagers otherwise took care of themselves.

Montazeri grieved by sitting in front of his mother's vanity, imagining she was sitting behind the mirror asking him everyday questions about homework or chores. It led him to notice the rarely-seen, blue-matte finish on the reverse of a mirror. He also started tilting the tri-fold mirrors in ways that multiplied whatever he placed in front, be it toy cars or pencils. He felt richer, surrounded by multiplied, phantom additions. "People inevitably lose valuable things," he said, "but they can learn how to replace them with something that adds meaning."



Detail of 'Shahzad,' a 2025 work that plays on the old and new names for the iconic Tehran building formerly known as Shahyad Tower, renamed Azadi Tower.

Farmanfarmaian and modernist sculptor Parviz Tanavoli. Farmanfarmaian is a museum darling the world over, and Tanavoli's sculpture of the Farsi word for nothing, "Heech," is as instantly recognizable in the Middle East as Robert Indiana's pop "Love."

By the time he started making his own art full time around 2012, he spoke English, wore funky eyeglasses and was determined to push the physics of what was possible in reshaping sharp, mirrored shards into forms that appeared wavelike and pliable.

In college, he studied architecture, graduating from the University of Tehran in 2009, but eventually pivoted to art. Heller said the vanity loomed large years later when she met this likable, young man who only spoke Farsi but wanted to make sculptures mainly from mirrors. She encouraged him to learn English and experiment with the material. "That vanity mirror was his mental savior," she said. "That's how he coped."

Montazeri went on to apprentice for two of Iran's most important contemporary artists—mirrored mosaic maker Monir Shahroudy



Since he can't ship his art or travel during the conflict, Montazeri said he's focusing on researching new fabrication methods.

In 2021, Afkhami, the collector, paid him roughly \$75,000 for an undulating wall work from Montazeri's first "Mirror" series. Subsequent sales and patrons have enabled the artist to invest in robotic welding arms, 3-D printers and other fabricating technology. He started taking better care of his hands, once bloodied and calloused from mirror cuts. He hired studio assistants of his own.

They are one of the main reasons he returned to Tehran, despite the continuing airstrikes. He has seven workers, and together they cut mirrors and play loud music in his studio all day long—he prefers Hans Zimmer film scores—and "it feels such as a second home and a space where we function as a close-knit family," he said.

Creating in a Shaken City

The war is changing how they work, though. Two women on his team have yet to return, in part because of the emotional strain the fighting and uneasy cease-fire have placed on their families. Schools also remain closed.

Those who do come in start earlier alongside him but leave before nightfall. He avoids driving anywhere near military centers. Before the war, the 40-minute drive between his home in northern Tehran and his studio farther

east a trip took twice as long, but so many people have fled the city that the streets are now comparatively empty, he said.



The artist working on a new piece, named 'Simorgh 3,' in his studio.

His studio neighbor is a carpenter, and the two of them have carefully tucked each of his artworks into custom crates and then filled in the remaining voids with several layers of foam designed to absorb shock and vibration. He was used to taking such precautions before the war; it takes three to six months to complete one of his larger pieces, and nearly all of them get shipped abroad. Today, they line his studio walls, waiting.

He sublimates by focusing on new fabrication methods and by researching casting and molding techniques. He is attempting to create mirrored sculptures that move or evoke figures. He exercises to wear himself out physically, so he can sleep.

“I miss calm mornings, the freedom to move through the city and visiting museums,” he said. He’s checked and his family remain unharmed, but no

one else cares as much about his career—his art—than him, and he needs something good to come out of all this.

“I may not be able to control everything,” he said, “but the studio remains a place where I can hold on to hope.”

[Kelly Crow](#) is a staff reporter covering the art market for The Wall Street Journal. She reports on sales at auction houses including Sotheby’s and Christie’s as well as analyzes the funding and art-buying activities of the world’s major museums, art fairs, artists and collectors around the world. Kelly has...



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