

NARRATIVES OF THE SELF: A WALK THROUGH A LABYRINTH

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ABSTRACT

This paper parallels my thesis exhibition entitled *Narratives of the Self: A Walk Through a Labyrinth*. This expansive installation of wooden sculpture frames embedded with hand-dyed fabric, explores notions of ‘private’ and ‘public’, in relation to my personal experience of growing up in Iran. In this thesis support paper I address how notions of private and public could be perceived as fluid, unfixed and in the state of flux, yet they tend to be perceived as fixed entities. When referring to ‘private’, I mean the idea of home as a realm that belongs to the inside world, and ‘public’ as it belongs to the state’s patriarchal authority. Drawing from my art practice, the notions of private and public are addressed metaphorically by the use of narrative allusions, expressive materials and processes such as dying, stretching, cutting and knotting.

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INTRODUCTION

My installation, *Narratives of the Self: A Walk Through a Labyrinth*, examines the concepts of ‘private’ and ‘public’, in relation to my personal experience of growing up in Iran. When referring to ‘private’, I refer to the concept of home as it translates into a personal interior space, and ‘public’ as it refers to patriarchal states of authority. I examine these notions through the questions, ‘How is one’s subjectivity constructed within the limitations of two distinct worlds – the inside and the outside?’ Moreover, ‘how might my art practice of merging painting and sculpture resonate with these themes both materially and metaphorically?’ And finally, through my artwork I explore how notions of private and public can be perceived as fluid, unfixed and in a constant state of flux, despite perceptions of fixity.

The exhibition, *Narratives of the Self: A Walk Through a Labyrinth*, consists of twenty wooden and metal frames, embedded with assorted hues of hand-dyed fabrics, and five smaller sculptural paintings engaging with four different light sources that are placed on the floor. The installation uses these materials as a means to investigate how metaphors, narratives and materials inspire one to re-imagine the meanings associated with the concepts of private (home) and public (the state). My interest in the relationship between the aforementioned notions stems from my interest in George Simmel’s¹ *Bridge and Door* (1909) in which he refers to the human desire to connect, separate and border. I engage with Simmel’s description of the ‘door’ as it indicates the necessity of being able to connect and separate (Simmel 5). This could be further translated into symbolic

¹ A German sociologist, philosopher, and critic (1858 – 1918).

experiences of the door representing both limitations and freedom, depending on what each place offers the individual.

To properly frame notions of ‘private’ and ‘public’, within specific Iranian contexts, my thesis paper is paralleled with autobiographical, literal and metaphorical narratives. I examine my personal narratives attached to the ideas of ‘private’ referring to my childhood home and ‘public’, as it refers to the school’s authority. I trace autobiographical memories by incorporating sections from Samad Behrangi’s *The Little Black Fish* (1967)² and Medieval Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*³. I have selected these stories because of their broader metaphoric, imaginative resonance and their importance in my personal memory. The selected books represent the nexus of the adverse public/private territories in my childhood. *The Little Black Fish* speaks metaphorically to the idea of freedom and imagination, while Dante’s *Divine Comedy* represents the psychology of divine rewards and retributions. The significance of choosing these books lies in their symbolic connections to what I experienced as a child in private (home) and public (school).

These symbolic narratives are the imaginative heart of my exhibition, *Narratives of the Self: A Walk Through a Labyrinth*. Together, narrative resonance and generative material form assist me in investigating states of oscillation between the private and public realm in a highly regulatory society. The installation generates a psychological state similar to navigating a labyrinth, creating passages, obstacles and dead ends within the exhibition space; speaking metaphorically to the idea of a highly regulatory moral system. The title of the exhibition alludes to a walk within a

² A well-known Persian language children's book written in 1967.

³ A long Italian narrative poem by Dante Alighieri, begun c. 1308 and completed in 1320.

labyrinth, using the metaphors of labyrinth and the Minotaur⁴ as imaginative passages and obstacles, suggestive of the myth. The labyrinth refers metaphorically to a restricted society, while the Minotaur is a metaphor for the patriarchal society that is not only capable of regulation but also discipline and punishment.

I have divided this thesis into three chapters: In chapter one, I consider the tension between notions of home (private) and school (public) through examining personal, historical and metaphorical narratives. This chapter covers the historical background of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran with special attention to its effects on the education system, individual and social life. I interweave stories from Samad Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish* and *The Divine Comedy* that touch on the significance of the particular cultural influences that my work carries. Chapter two covers the work I created before starting my MFA, creating a dialogue and a link between my previous work and my current installation. Furthermore, this chapter also reviews my artistic inspirations, my creative process, material choices and elaborates on the experience of the viewers who engage with the installation. In Chapter 3, I reflect on the importance of the different stories I have chosen to be part of my paper. This chapter is a reflection on how various formal and conceptual elements come together in my writing as well as my installation.

⁴ A mythical creature portrayed in classical times with the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man.

CHAPTER ONE:

Between Memory and History: Reflections On Iran After the 1979 revolution⁵

After the authoritarian state of Iran was completely seized by the Islamic party --revolutionizing the country in 1979-- the successors began enforcing a framework of new laws that upheld new legislations in accordance with Islamic Shi'ism⁶. These changes affected social and cultural life, namely the education system, which was a key component of the adjustments ordering reform and radical measurements. Prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, universities in Iran were symbols of "modern society" and played an important role in "generating political debate" (Razavi 2). Despite being financially supported by the state, they had levels of independence from the government (Razavi 3). During the period referred to as the 'cultural revolution' (1979 -1983), all universities were shut down for three years to be adjusted with Shi'a laws. During this time of closure, the education system was redesigned to become tailored toward Islamic Shi'a values. Deepening its roots in the legacy of Sharia law⁷, the system aimed at training and later indoctrinating students in accordance with its brand of theocratic values. The textbooks were altered by removing and editing humanities' subjects and adding religion studies instead (Razavi 5). Establishing theocracy in its immediate socio-political context, the government claimed to be guided by divine forces. At the height of this transformation, a large number of students and lecturers were expelled from universities, or imprisoned (Razavi 5). The academic institutions were purged of Western influences. Book burning rallies became celebrations and personally

⁵ The social, historical and political facts mentioned in this chapter are reflections on my lived experience, having left Iran in my early 30s. To expand on further historical, social, and political discussions on Iran's social history before and after the 1979 revolution is outside this paper's focus. To write this chapter I have consulted various sources that their historical, sociological, and political views resonate with my lived experience including *Us and Modernism* (1997) ما و مدرنییت, Dariush Ashoori, and *The Cultural Revolution in Iran* (2009) by Reza Razavi.

⁶ One of the two main branches of Islam.

⁷ Sharia law, or Islamic Law, is a religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition.

owning books whose ideas were perceived as critical to Sharia laws could result in imprisonment. Upon the reopening in 1983, the academia of Iran became a platform for politicized ideologies and a site of legitimation of power and control. Various non-Islamic influences in areas such as the visual arts, literature and philosophy were censored in schools and universities. A report in 2006 prepared by Article 19,⁸ *Unveiled: Art and Censorship in Iran*, provides an in-depth research on the lasting effect of censorship on artistic expression in Iran. The report refers to the term ‘artistic licence’ as it translates to obtaining a permission from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Information Guidance, in order to exhibit or produce any kind of artwork, movie, music, or even to publish a book. Authorization can take as long as months and years, or it can be denied altogether (Article 19 14).

Amongst the various groups that were affected by the revolution, women found themselves in a peculiarly drastic situation. Characterized by exclusion and inequality, the new legislation placed numerous barriers for women, denying their access to basic human rights in areas such as education, employment, marriage, and travelling. Girls age seven and up were ordered to wear the hijab in public, including schools, which continues to be a requirement today (Fig.1). At this time, Iranian society transitioned into a new political sphere, as an expanding branch of the government was created: the morality police. Women and men were prohibited from freely socializing together in public. The establishment of new political orders through intrusive forces such as the morality police widened the gap between the public authority and the non-political private. Under the new rules, various activities that were considered significant elements of Persian culture and history became illegal including dancing, drinking, and mixed gender

⁸ A global campaign for free expression based in London, UK.

socializing. In public, men and women were required to show proof of marital or familial- relations to the morality police or face being arrested and jailed. As reflective of these regulating policies, all “illegal” activities were carried on behind closed doors and practiced secretly in private. As a consequence, a border was drawn between the interior and exterior domains where the two entities continue to stand detached for the last 42 years. As the public sphere limited the freedom of citizens, private life expanded. In *The Private, the Public and Civil Society: Social Realms and Power Structures* (1991), Arnaud Sales discusses the intertwined seesaw relationship between the two spheres and how one could expand freedom at the expense of diminishing the other. Sales points out the private realm as it “encompasses the fields of human activity that are not specifically political”. He goes on to mention the tension between the two notions as:

The relationship between the two spheres cannot be analyzed in a reductive or simplistic manner. Even if the state becomes tentacular and pervasive, it can never completely absorb the private or modify its nature or power. (Sales 6)



Figure 1, an example of schoolgirls wearing the hijab from the graphic novel *Persepolis*, Marjan Satrapi, 2000.

This framing of the relationship between the two notions by Sales, informs how home --as a place that belongs to the private realm-- could have certain powers to stand the public.

In the following, *Narratives of Home*, I contextualize my personal childhood memories from the late 1980's. In this section I incorporate parts of the stories from *The Little Black Fish* and *The Divine Comedy* as they symbolically and metaphorically speak to my experience of the concept of home vs. school.

Narratives of Home

Yet there exists also a spiritual black beside the material one. That is the black light, the mīr-e sīāh, šab-e rowšan,⁹ which cannot be seen but causes one to see. (www.iranicaonline.org)

Once upon a time a little black fish lived with her mother in a small pond on the side of a mountain. Their home was behind a black, moss-covered rock, under which they both slept at night. The little fish longed to see the moonlight in their home just once. From morning till evening, the mother and child swam after each other. Sometimes they joined other fish and rapidly darted in and out of small crevices. (Behrangi 1)

I am seven and my mother is reading the lines from Samad Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish*, my eyes follow every word as I hear her voice reading aloud. I remember the illustrations on the worn pages looked simple. Later on, I would gather my pencil crayons to fill the parts that were not impregnated with colour. In pre-revolutionary Iran *The Little Black Fish* was banned and widely considered a political allegory of the struggles for freedom within a restrictive society. It was informally declared a manifestation of the OIPFG (Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas); an underground communist party active between 1963 - 1981. Written in 1967, the

⁹ Black Night

book utilizes a little black fish to illustrate centuries of struggle in Iran, and through stories of the black fish, opposing inequality and oppression. Hidden behind allusions, the story is of a so-called utopian place that bears ideal perfections for its fish citizens, living in the safety of a small stream. The little black fish, however, is in search of the sea: “You know, Mother, I’ve been wondering where the end of the stream is...I want to go see where [it] ends” (Behrangi 2). To his community he speaks of the uncertainty of a dream that contributes to the sense of longing the unknown, the perilous. Everyone in the local community of the stream is happy inasmuch as darkness translates for them the idea of safety and comfort. When the little fish speaks of its fantasy to venture out into the unknown world, the fish society responds with indignation as his own mother expresses “The world is right here where we are. Life is just as we have it...” (Behrangi 2). Upon starting his journey, the little fish finds many friends and also faces struggles and terrifying dangers. Along his path, he escapes from predators such as swordfish, pelican, and a heron. In *Political and Social features of the allegorical Short Story Little Black Fish* (2013), Azam Jahangiri points out at the allegorical interpretations of the book. According to Jahangiri the little fish is the representative of the young generation in the society, while the pelican,



Figure 2, *The Little Black Fish*, Illustration by Farshid Mesghali, 1967.

swordfish and heron symbolize the ruling power and oppressors (Jahangiri, elixirpublishers.com).

The story of the black little fish stood as a manifestation of hope in an age of despair. The story fostered hope in Iranian children, when the classrooms failed to do so. After the revolution, religion was strongly presented in Iranian education system and was part of the universities and schools' curriculum. During the weekly religion hours, the teachers would use holy scripts for storytelling, implanting morals and religious values on students. Belonging to a middle-class family, I had access to various educational materials including a wide selection of books at home. These books exposed me to a broader range of stories outside the classroom and expanded my understanding of the world around me.

The following section focuses on some of my stories from the late 1980's and early 1990's. These narratives detail the personal memories associated with my childhood home, and the religious extremism I witnessed at school.

Bubbles of Unspoken Words

Through me is the way into the doleful city; through me the way into the eternal pain; through me the way among the people lost. Justice moved my High Maker; Divine Power made me, Wisdom Supreme, and Primal Love. Before me no things were created, but eternal; and eternal I endure: leave all hope, ye that enter. (Alighieri, *Canto III*, 22)

I'm climbing my father's library shelves when no one is paying attention. The large bookcase shelters a variety of books extending across the walls and the ceiling in the living room. I am

fixated on one book in particular on the top shelf. I carefully place my feet on the edge of each rack to climb up the shelves, while stretching my one hand to reach the heavy weighted, hardcover volume. This is a Farsi translation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* accompanied by Sandro Botticelli's¹¹ illustrations. I am particularly interested in this book for its many drawings of human beings. My childlike curiosity leads me to *Inferno* – the section that includes sinister and horrifying drawings. Every time I set eyes on this section of visual horror and dread, I'd focus on the illustrations of human torment – who appear chained and tortured by monstrous creatures. I read the accompanying lines as Dante describes his journey through hell. In the seventh circle of hell, the medieval poet and his guide --the Roman poet Virgil¹²-- encounter the Minotaur. The Minotaur appears as the guardian of the circle of violence. Virgil's mention of the monster's executioner --the King of Athens-- brings out Minotaur's rage. As the Minotaur becomes distracted by his own rage, the two poets pass the circle unharmed.

In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart describes the relationship between the narratives and the reader as:

In writing, description must serve the function of context. The locus of speech and action must be “filled in” for the reader, who suffers from the exteriority of print; the distance between the situation of reading and the situation of the description is bridged by description, the use of a field of familiar signs. What disappears in writing is the body and what the body knows—the visual, tactile, and aural knowledge of lived experience. (Stewart 44)

At the time that I first encountered *The Divine Comedy*, in the context of what I was hearing during the weekly religion hours at school, Botticelli's drawings became for me what Stewart refers to as “a field of familiar signs”. Tempted by the red-attired Shaytan (Satan), the

¹¹ An Italian Painter of the Early Renaissance (1445 - 1510).

¹² Publius Vergilius Maro(70 BC – 19 BC), known as Virgil, was an ancient Roman poet of the Augustan period.

elementary school religion teacher would explain how torture in hell is the consequence of human sin. Every day at noon, this teacher would line up the students toward the school's prayer room to perform one of their five daily prayers. The worship rituals are done in Arabic-- a language I do not speak. As I stand in between other students in straight rows, I conceal my difficulties in reciting the prayers. Hollow bubbles of unspoken words ascend from my mouth, like bubbles of air rising from a fish's mouth. I pretend to recite the prayers as my mouth opens and closes with no words coming out. The school authorities instruct us to perform the other prayers at home and with our parent's supervision. Nonetheless, I am not required by my parents to perform any prayers at home. Behind the closed doors of our home, I am free from practicing what I am forced to practice at school.

I was witnessing an unsettled relationship that existed between my childhood home and my school. In school I was forced to believe and practice particular sets of beliefs and rituals. At home I could nurture my imagination through the wide range of literature that I had access to. In *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Gaston Bachelard introduces the concept of "oneiric house" as a place that contains dream and memory: "The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams" (Bachelard 7). My childhood house helped me develop a love and passion for reading which later gave rise to my imaginative and artistic creativity. As Bachelard believes: "True images are en-gravings. Imagination engraves them in our memory. They elaborate lived memories, displace lived memories, to become memories of imagination" (Bachelard 46). The narratives and visual expressions associated with the books I had access to during my childhood implanted in me an imaginative mind and seeds of what Bachelard calls "memories of imagination".



Figure 4, Sandro Botticelli, *Inferno, XXVIII*, detail. Staatliche Museen Berlin, Photo: Jorg P. Andres.

The following chapter outlines my previous body of work and how my work has evolved during the last few years. It provides analysis of concepts, materials, colours and form that binds the previous work to my current MFA project. The chapter follows on by the metaphors of labyrinth and the Minotaur and what they communicate in my work.

CHAPTER 2: Chasing My Memories of the Sun

Previous Work 2018 – 2019

I treat painting as a system for imagining, remembering, and building new imaginaries. My paintings allude to the themes of diasporic identity, belonging, and memory. Each painting explores the same thematic thread with special interest in personal and cultural narratives. Every body of work explores memory and autobiographical photographic sources through their passages and rhythms of time. They function as a personal and cultural archive, one to be remembered and re-imagined through the act of painting. Through the process of making, the paintings expand upon through imagination, as they are reborn in a new realm that holds both memory and imaginations. My recollections are distortions which rupture through imagination, transmitting new images I have not yet foreseen. Every painting is unique but informs and inspires the next body of work. Fundamental to all my paintings' projects is an interest in the interplay between colour, shapes, and layers.

Rays of SunLight (2018)

Such evocations of memory and place can be traced in *Rays of Sunlight* (2018) (fig.4). The painting belongs to a body of work that alludes to memories of places and people. In this series of work, I came to realize the emotional and imaginative connectedness to memory and place. Building from the frailty of the memory of my grandmother, the paintings are given physical form to an intangible realm that no longer exists. Gestural movements and flat surfaces also play an important role in my compositional strategies, giving the impressions of the transformational

and transient qualities of memory. The paintings are newly imagined, straddling the lines between memory, imagery and perception. Basing my palette on my recollections of the colours

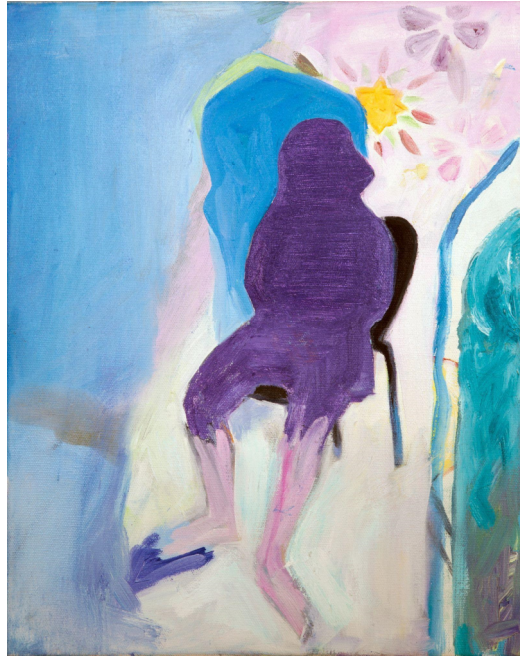


Figure 6, Niloo Inalouei, *Rays of Sunlight*, Oil on Canvas, 11" x 14", 2018.

of my memories, I underscore the emotional feeling of remembrance. In *The Colours of Our Memories* (2010), Michel Pastoureau references the colour to personal experiences as he points out: “color only exists if it is perceived, that is to say if it is not only seen by the eyes but also, and most importantly, apprehended and coded by the memory, one’s knowledge and one’s imagination” (Pastoureau 26). Listening to my grandmother’s voice reciting classical poetry through a 35 years old cassette, I imagine the colours of her voice, her sensorial surroundings and my recollections of them. My visualizations bring together my frail memories and my imagined picture of her to the surface of the canvas. The title of the painting implies the poetic

imaginations of this childhood memory: the afternoon light reflects from the coloured windows on my grandmother's old body while she's napping by the window on her old chair.

The Endless Flowers of the Sun (2019)

Alluding to the ideas of memory, places, and people, *The Endless Flowers of the Sun* (2019), is influenced and informed by my previous body of work. In this series of paintings, I question how one's memories of people can be explored as a product of imagination, rather than being a fixed memory. I explore the idea of fluid memory as something that could be constructed through the act of painting by personal narratives and imaginations. The process of layering paint is my



Figure 7, Niloo Inalouei, *The Endless Flowers of Sun*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 22" x 26", 2019.

primary mode of translation in this series of work. I start with a fluid memory and I continue with improvisational steps that create a dialogue between my initial recollections and my

layering gestures of mark-making. The title of the work *The Endless Flowers of the Sun*, alludes to the idea of my childhood momentary experiences. The painting depicts a memory from my childhood in which I woke up on our terrace from the rays of sun stroking upon my eyelids. I remember looking up, watching the interplay between the sun and the white clouds, and my mother watering flowers. The painting started with this fluid memory of the sunrays, the clouds, and my mother. I applied multitude layers of paint to create emotional states that metaphorically refers to the process of remembering —something that is not fixed but rather in a constant state of flux. I consciously and continuously keep track of these layers through photographic documentation, in addition to writing. I study these steps of documentation to better understand the process of remembering and imagining. Furthermore examining and asking myself questions throughout including: why have I decided to stop or begin (again) at this point?

Let Me Not Forget (2019)

Let me Not Forget, is an example of my experimentation with painting form, cutting and stitching the canvas that lead me to my current thesis project. The painting explores the same conceptual threads as *The Endless Flowers of the Sun*. In this painting I examine layering and cutting out pieces of canvas as these artistic decisions suggest ideas of re-imagining and a search for remembering. In particular, I explore how memory can be erased and at the same time be re-imagined through the act of painting, which I incorporate into my title that alludes to my struggle over remembering.



Figure 6, Niloo Inalouei, *Let me Not Forget*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 30" x 30", 2019.

The Sheer and Imaginary Skin

In my current thesis work I further explore the possibilities of “sculptural paintings” by placing greater emphasis on the materials used. My investigations with dyed textiles are informed by the aesthetic strategies of my painting practice. I see these works as creating resonances with my process of painting. Each piece of sheer fabric is dyed with ink and acrylic paint, then layered upon with several other pieces of fabric. The textiles are then stitched together, cut, knotted and altered, creating illusionistic depth through form and colour. I consider such alterations, not only an embodied presence of a memory, but as part of my attempt to remember and re-imagine.

Pastoureau refers to the situations where memory and imaginations clash and “follow opposed

paths, entering into conflict as each struggles to impose its own feelings about the past”. But he also refers to circumstances where:

The imagination stimulates the memory, accompanying it in its meandering and jolts and helping it to seek within itself some recollection buried beneath several layers of daily realities that are inevitably trivial and burdensome. (Pastoureau 142)

My installation works as an imaginary place in which not only I explore thoughts, ideas, and narrative allusions, but also imaginations and memories whether their paths cross or not.



Figure 7, Niloo Inalouei, *The Sheer and imaginary Skin*, 2021.

The textile sculptures are explorations of various arrays of hand-dyed fabrics to metal hooks. These light-weighted, fragile assemblages of fabrics are hung from butcher hooks, performing as obstacles, intentionally limiting movement in the space. Once moving between them, they look

deformed beneath the instruments of slaughter – the butcher hooks. Overcome by a sense of degradation, some look like balloons deflated and weightless, suspended from the walls and the ceilings. In the squeezed posture of a personage that has been silenced, altered and reconstructed, they appear as utterly alien and as deliberately contorted creatures. Through elucidating the fragments from my childhood memories, the fabric pieces stand in silence appearing as ‘unspoken bubbles of air’, as if they are arising from my mouth (not unlike I did as a child—pretending to say my daily prayers). Each piece is embedded with various hand-dyed pieces of sheer curtain – stitched, fully muted and dysfunctional. Maintaining their distinct uniqueness, there is a silent conversation between the pieces, as they all share a visual dialogue that lies in their shapes, forms, and colours. The fabrics of the pieces become the site of absence for the spaces that were formerly associated with, constructing the artwork as a form of commemoration. Modifying the fabrics converts them into such stillness that they can no longer function as utilitarian objects and their ordinary performance is altered. When close to the artworks, one can see the miniatures of the details through the sheerness of the fabric with utmost clarity. The cuts, holes and stitches give the artwork human-like characteristics, as if one is looking at the exteriority and interiority of the flesh at the same time. They speak a metaphorical language; one that both unveils and conceals its meaning.



Figure 8 and 9, Niloo Inalouei, *The Sheer and imaginary Skin*, 2021.

In the Gallery

Upon entering Gales Gallery, one encounters a dim space with four light sources situated on the floor. The lights are situated within an architectural structure comprised of fourteen wooden white frames and six smaller metal frames. The enlarged shadows of the structure are cast on the walls of the gallery. The frames are embedded with hand-dyed sheer fabrics, in a soft and subtle combination of yellows, oranges, greens and blues. Together, the rigidity of the architectural elements and the softness of the fabrics create a harmony, communicating a transcendent emotional experience of colours and architecture.

The first piece a visitor might encounter is a human-sized wooden frame standing by itself on the left-to-center part of the gallery. The visitor's journey starts by walking through the first frame and continues among the ones that follow. Moving clockwise among the frames, the viewers are met by pieces of fabric hanging in the space. Some of the frames arranged in a zigzag format, or leaned against one another. A human-size frame is hanging from the ceiling, making it impossible for viewers to physically pass through it. As they move through the gallery larger than life shadows of the viewers along with the enlarged shadows of the structures are cast on the walls. The magnified shadows cast from the floors and extend to the walls, creating a linear pattern. They reflect variegated perspectives of the rigid frames and the viewer's body, and create a complex gridwork of structure and shadows— like an enormous birdcage. The viewers inevitably are caught in these spatial knots of frames, fabrics and large-scaled shadows in a cage-like space.



Figure 10, Niloo Inalouei, Installation View, 2021.

In relation to the viewer's body, the frames metaphorically suggest of door-like forms. They allow bodily movement and simultaneously represent enclosure and restrictions. Becoming smaller in size and covered by pieces of fabric, they refuse to grant the body free movement through them.

Engaging with Simmel's essay, *Bridge and Door* (1994), I draw parallel connections to the door-forms I use in my installation. Simmel refers to human beings as "connecting creatures who must always separate and cannot connect without separating". Simmel goes on to refer to the mobility of the door as it illustrates "a possibility at any moment of stepping out of limitation into freedom" (Simmel 8). I pause upon reading 'stepping out' because it translates into going outside or leaving a building. Informed by my personal experience of growing up in Iran, the door-forms act as my internal search to understand the fragmented relationship between home and public. Being in a constant position of flux, the aforementioned notions could change roles as they both stand for the ideas of freedom as well as enclosure and limits. According to Simmel:

The door becomes the image of the boundary point at which human beings actually always stand or can stand. The finite unity, to which we have connected a part of infinite space designated for us, reconnects it to this latter, the bounded and the boundaryless adjoint one another not in the dead geometrical form of a mere separating wall, but rather as the possibility of a permanent interchange. (Simmel 8)

The door-forms in my installation work as objects of dialect, creating a conversation between two seemingly opposed spaces – the interior and the exterior – as these territories appear reversible, and in a constant position of flux. Susan Stewart has also addressed notions of the inner and outer space, following her theories of the miniature as metaphor for interior space, she envelopes the era of the bourgeois subject and the gigantic as metaphor for the abstract authority of the state and the collective public (Stewart xxi). Stewart goes on to say that:

The major function of the enclosed space is always to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public, between the space of the subject and the space of the social. (Stewart 12)

My work has a particular relationship with Simmel and Stewart's narratives, as the installation articulates social, cultural and political points of view invoking binaries of domestic spheres, versus the public sphere of patriarchal authority. *Narratives of the Self: A Walk Through a Labyrinth*, sets up dynamic passages through the exhibition space that are metaphorically



Figure 11, Niloo Inalouei, Installation View, 2021.

informed by their ability to create a borderline between the two spaces, allowing one to 'step in' into a new state, and leaving the other behind.

Prior to creating my art installation, I took inspiration from the work of Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, in particular her installation, *Homebound* (2000), which is an explicit exploration of the concept of 'home'. The installation addresses Hatoum's personal life along with the political situation of her era and territory; an assemblage of household furniture, constituting a domestic

layout with metallic furniture such as chairs, bed frames, a dining table, side tables, lamps, hangers and cooking utensils, that are all connected to each other through live wires. The light sources are electrified by wires and flash along with the sounds of electric humming. Fused with electricity, the empty eerie chairs, metal bed frames, dining table and kitchen utensils have been transmuted into unusable objects and intensify an uncomfortable atmosphere. The electrical humming sound escalates the discomfoting atmosphere of the layout. The access to the installation is restricted through wires stretching horizontally across the walls of the entrance, implying restraint. Hatoum's installation, blurring the border between private and public spheres, shares similar interests found in my work. In *Homebound*, she amplifies the private space into a public political phenomenon. The domestic space in Hatoum's work is no longer separated from the public yet the viewer (public) is prevented from navigating through it. Edward Said refers to Hatoum's *Homebound* as "familiarity and strangeness locked together in the oddest way, adjacent and irreconcilable at the same time" (Said 2).

In *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, Claire Bishop critiques the Relational Aesthetics Art Movement, originally theorized by French art critic Nicholas Bourriaud. Bishop criticizes the lack of political engagement in Bourriaud's theory and introduces 'relational antagonism' as a critical theory that is identified by senses of unease, and confrontationally:

In the case of antagonism...the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that the other represents transforms my *own* sense of self into something questionable. (Bishop 66)

Bishop takes the example of artists such as Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn and describes their "disruptive" approach in art making as:

Their work acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society... This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical ground for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other. (Bishop 79)

I align Bishop's 'relational antagonism' with Hatoum's installation as it is marked by sensation of unease and discomfort. Similarly, Claudet Lauzon points out the disconcerting atmosphere in Hatoum's work as "fractured, fragile, or otherwise unsettled space of impossible inhabitation" (Lauzon 4).



Figure 12, Mona Hatoum, *Homebound*, 2000, kitchen utensils, furniture, electrical wire, light bulbs, dimmer unit, amplifier, and two speakers, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Rennie Collection, Vancouver © Mona Hatoum.

Inside the Studio

I draw parallel connections to Bishop's 'relational antagonism' with the material experimentations I explored in my thesis work and installation. My initial plans for my installation started with chemically preserving animal intestines (caul fat), to be later stitched to the hand-dyed fabric and hung from the wooden frames. The use of animal fibre in the work



Figure 13 and 14, Niloo Inalouei, experimentations with caul fat, 2020



Figure 15, Niloo Inalouei, ink and pencil crayon on watercolour paper, 2020.

expresses uncomfortable and distressing sensitivities. The process of preserving the animal intestines included a weekly ritual of washing and re-applying the chemicals --acquiring an

uncomfortable knowledge as a reminder of the brutal process of slaughtering and bleeding. I documented the stages of preservation through writing and drawing. The documentations not only echo the image of the preserving caul fat but are also embedded with my imaginations of the animal's embedded pain and distress. After following a series of procedures, I have realized that further continuation of the project, needs specific kinds of personal protective equipment. Since this was happening at the height of COVID-19 pandemic and a shortage for respirators, I have eventually decided to peruse my ideas in a different way.

Labyrinth and Minotaur

A tense relationship between the rigidity of the wooden frames and the softness of the textile, *Narratives of the Self: A Walk through a Labyrinth*, brings together the divergent but intertwined material elements. Twirling around one another, when, as in a maze, the body travels through the frames facing obstacles and barriers on its way. Together, the body and the artwork construct a visceral link, connecting the materiality of the sculptural forms to the physicality of the body. Acting as a metaphor, the thresholds are arranged in a maze-like pattern, laid out in a collection of paths that lead to one another. The viewer is confronted with different-size rectangle-frames, winding through different directions in the exhibition space. Some of the frames are leaning on one another; others slanted and attached to the wall through a hook. Some are exhibited in an obscure pathway resembling the passages of a labyrinth, with false paths and dead ends. The way they are arranged in the exhibition space, makes one aware of a firm yet gentle decline of navigation. The gates fail their very own promise of granting access to a gateway as they reduce in size and the act of moving through and between them becomes radically compromised. The

decline continues as some frames are actively blocked out with the tangled fabric. The bewilderment stands as an unprecedented maze, where the circling adventures of finding a pathway is afflicted, not only by the fear of perpetual imprisonment in the maze, but also for the fear of confronting the Minotaur. In the exhibition the Minotaur is an absent, yet antagonistic figure that still could be felt through various elements: the doubling of the viewer through their cast shadows, the tense and knotted fabric, the metal hooks. The absent beast represents a highly regulated moral society, where the patriarchal authorities are not only capable of control and regulation but also arresting and punishing citizens.

Half human, half bull, the Greek monster Minotaur was the offspring of Pasiphae (Minos' wife) and a white bull that was sent by the sea god to be sacrificed. Minos refused to sacrifice the white bull and as a punishment, the sea god made his wife fall in love with the animal. Minotaur was the result of the affair between Pasiphae and the white bull. Becoming enraged by this affair, Minos constructed a sophisticated labyrinth to constrict their offspring, as Minotaur desperately sought a way out of the mythical maze. Each time he attempted an escape through a new pathway within the constructed puzzle, with hopes of finding his way out of the perpetual labyrinth. The monster was eventually killed by the Athenian hero Theseus (Rusten 332).



Figure 16, Pasiphae nurses her monstrous son, The Minotaur, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris, ca 340 -320.



Figure 17, Edward Brune-Jones's illustration of Theseus and the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, 1861.

Standing between narrative and myth, the installation works metaphorically as surrogates for the human body. The entangled fabrics appear as surrogates of muscular figures, resisting the diffracting forces of the frames. They appear as shadow images of the human figure, resembling the flesh, the tissue, and the muscles, except caught between wooden frames. Belonging to an alien world, the installation has the potential to be felt as a human alternate. This makes it impossible for the body to escape the prison of its own surrogate. The power of this labyrinth serves to maintain a system from which it originated. A structure of power that simultaneously restricts and becomes restricted.

CONCLUSION:

In the last plot of the *Little Black Fish*, the small fish is carried down a waterfall, swims along the length of the river and lands on his dream destination: the sea. Along his journey, the little fish experiences alluring adventures, struggles and terrifying dangers. His experience is a story of bravery fulfilling his wildest imaginations of freedom—even if the price of risk is his life. In this plot of the story, Behrangi reveals that the story is told by a grandmother to her 12000 grandfish. The author leaves the reader with the lines:

But there was no sign of the little black fish, and since that time, nothing has been heard... Eleven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine little fish said goodnight and went to sleep... But try as she might, a little red fish couldn't get to sleep. All night long she thought about the sea. (Behrangi 14)

This paper is a repository of myths, narratives, and metaphors through which I examined how one can re-imagine the meanings associated with the private state of home and the public sphere of school. These places hold an important place in my memory for their significant role in constructing knowledge and life experience at an early age. In chapter one, I introduced the political attitude of the Iranian government after 1979 revolution and the impacts of imposed political ideologies on the life of citizens. I have drawn upon my own experience of living under societal regulations, through personal narratives of home and school. I traced my personal memories as well as fragments of stories from *The Little Black Fish* and *Divine Comedy*. The aforementioned books have significant importance in representing divisions and connotations that are associated with the two seemingly disparate territories. *The Little Black Fish* represents the power of hope, courage and imagination, while *Divine Comedy* refers to assignments of holy rewards and punishments. The first is representative of my experience from personal interior

space, while the latter refers to the public sphere of moral authority. In chapter two, *Chasing My Memories of the Sun*, I outlined my previous body of work (paintings) and how my work evolved toward objects of painting. This was followed by describing the features of my paintings, and the use of allusions, memory, and poetic imaginations in the imagery and titles. In this chapter, I discussed how the installation collectively explores narratives, metaphors and distinct materials to invoke experiences that are similar to navigating a labyrinth, where the absent figure of the Minotaur is felt. I have described this in relation to my art practice and the way my work merges painting and sculpture – both materially and metaphorically. My “sculptural paintings” are informed by the aesthetic strategies of painting as their creation echoes the process of painting. The material and processes in my installation are guided by narratives and metaphors associated with the paradoxical life I experienced growing up in Iran. The processes of dying, cutting, knotting, stitching, reforming and rehabilitating the fabric are my pivotal attempts to remember, re-imagine and understand the notions of home and school and their inevitable impact on my life as an adult. Moreover, I discussed Mona Hatoum’s *Homebound* underlying similarities between our practice of invoking foundational experience regarding the concepts of home and public. I drew upon these similarities, describing my studio experimentations of chemically preserving animal fibre, which aligns with Bishop’s concept of ‘relational antagonism’.

This work both investigates and experiments with meanings of *home* and the state's moral authority in public life, yet it does not function as an end point to my artistic investigations. In flux, these interpretations continue to develop in material ways between painting, sculpture and wor(l)ds.

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Appendix: Supplementary Image



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



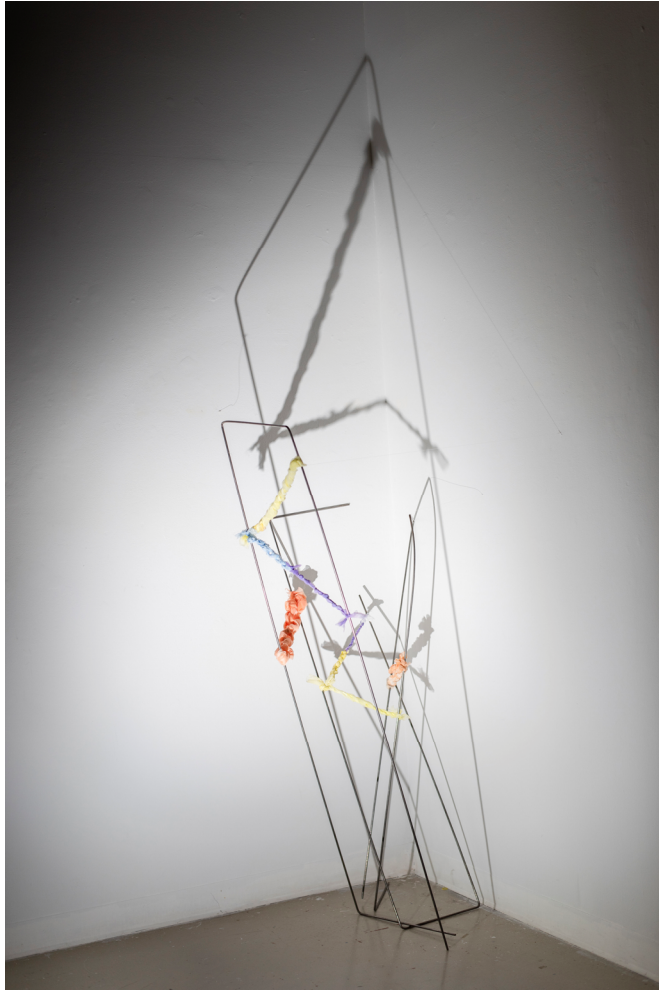
Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, Installation view, 2021.



Niloo Inalouei, *The Sheer and Imaginary Skin*, Installation view, 2021.