

Strange Singularity

“Anyone who knows a strange fact shares in its singularity.”
Jean Genet

The difference between an object that is a work of art and an object that is an appliance is the way in which we look at the object. The nature of each object is defined in relation to other objects and through the declaration of its function. Vision helps us define the material, but at the same time it is an object for the material. Hence, any object can only be defined within its context.

The crux of Shahpour Pouyan’s work is power. In the “Towers” series, power is evoked through his recollection of ruins, in the “Hooves” series, it is transformed into an icon, while in his latest series, the “Projectiles”, it is an overtly threatening entity. In addition to the subject of power, Pouyan has also been widely affected by his extensive travels throughout Iran, where in his wanderings it is the phallic aspect of Iranian architecture that has fascinated him.

“This has been a patriarchal society throughout its history. I found these phallic forms which seem to be assaulting the landscape, emphasizing the culture of an era that lives in the past.”

Brought up in Isfahan as a child, Pouyan was enchanted by the ornaments and decoration of classical Iranian art and architecture. Before the “Towers” for example, Pouyan studied the miniature, which led to his black and white series, based on the depictions of Iranian gardens and architecture in miniature painting. It is the epic fashion in which this architecture transforms this symbolic eroticism through abstract means that inspired Pouyan to paint his “Towers” series.

“I find architecture the most important visual expression of a civilization. In Islamic art the figurative aspect is omitted and instead it is the abstract elements, such as minarets, which carry symbolic value in architecture.”

In 2010, Pouyan produced and exhibited his “Hooves” series, a combination of heterogeneous paintings of bull hooves each topped with hilarious helmets. Here he engages the dialectic and synergy between the twin concepts of “power” and “wealth”. At that time Pouyan was looking for a new process to create new aesthetics in his work and was reminded of the psychologist Wilhelm Reich who first identified the phallic narcissistic

personality type with an excessively inflated self-image: such an individual was an elitist, a social climber, an admiration seeker, and a self-promoter, empowered by social success, just like each of these hooves once placed under the spotlight.

“Wealth and power can reform and define aesthetics, like what happened in the Renaissance or what is happening now in our region.”

Pouyan’s interest lies in singling out particular objects whose images captivate him, and it is only by painting them that he releases his mind from them. Medieval engravings and illustrations, ritual accessories and the eroticism of Aubrey Beardsley have all had an immense effect on these works.

Meanwhile, Pouyan’s sculptures – the “Projectiles” - are a fusion of traditional weaponry, armory and helmets, with the modern form of missiles and warheads. Through this juxtaposition he seeks to find a new definition for the projectile, his material a combination of both classical war-ware and the modern costume of “passion play”. The wings of Pouyan’s “Projectiles” are etched with flowers and birds, their bodies made of strings of chainmail, and the helmets of solid metal, carved and inlaid with gold. Indeed, calligraphy and ornamentation are the basic elements of eastern decoration, having long been used to decorate all types of objects, including weapons and armor. They stand as metaphors for the narrow boundary that lies between sophisticated poeticism and extreme barbarism. Looking at these works, phallic symbols of power, we can find the trait unaire that links all of Pouyan’s works.

“We grew up in a war. Our whole our childhood was filled with the panic of bombardment. Then in school, they used to teach us military courses. After that, military service. TV was showing maneuvers all the time, documentaries of war, martyrs museum... I have the right to be obsessed with war wares.”

Hence, Pouyan’s subjects emphasize the superego of violence throughout the centuries, not just within a region, but universally and for whole the human race.

Another common theme that runs throughout his works is the beauty of sexuality, glory in sexual forms and the hegemony of eroticism. All his works can be interpreted as ornamented toys, shining in a tableau, at their core a confrontation of this sexual desire. Pouyan’s work is thus a mirror of the subconscious,

reminding the viewer of this, and in many ways his work remind us of the Marquis de Sade, Jean Genet, or a modern day Katsushika Hokusai.

Raymond Bayer once wrote:

“What each and every aesthetic object imposes upon us, in appropriate rhythms, is a unique and singular formula for the flow of our energy...every work of art embodies a principle of proceeding, of stopping, of scanning; an image of energy or relaxation, the imprint of a caressing or destroying hand which is the artist's alone.”

These deconstructive tendencies mark much of Pouyan's work.

Ali Bakhtiari
Curator
Tehran, April 2011

Refined Power

The expression of power and its disguise behind a veneer of “culture” is a central theme in Shahpour Pouyan’s work. His careful study of the long and varied visual culture of Iran gives him a rich pool of references from which to draw, as he demonstrates in the works from the three series that comprise this exhibition, the “Towers” and “Hooves” paintings and the “Projectile” installations. Pouyan does not quote directly, instead making oblique reference to Iranian culture from various centuries, often more than one in the same work.

The “Towers” and the “Hooves” are two related series of paintings, and both juxtapose an aggressive and eroticized dominant form with intricately worked decoration reminiscent of Persian miniature painting. Some of the fictional buildings in the “Towers” series recall the 11th century tomb towers of Eastern Iran, notably phallic in their outline, whilst others resemble more the twin minarets of the Ilkhanid Friday Mosque in Yazd or even the Mosallah mosque in Tehran, a huge unfinished concrete construction. The forms may vary but the language remains the same- imposing colossal towers, which by their very nature dominate and subjugate the surrounding landscape.

The “Hooves” are similar in form to the “Towers”, although the content is quite different. In these paintings Pouyan is looking back further, to the mysticism of the pre-Islamic Near East. These severed hooves symbolize the Golden Bull, that most sacred of beasts for the ancient cultures of Sumer, Babylon and Iran, which survives to this day in Hinduism. They also bear overtones of sacrifice and ritual slaughter, while their attenuated forms allude to the traditional Persian symbols of male strength and potency. Each one is crowned with a comical helmet, decorated in traditional Persian patterns with the delicacy of a miniaturist. Several of them are festooned with streamers, which resemble both those of the headdress of the ancient Sassanian kings (224-651 AD) and also the mourning banners carried in processions during the month of Muharram.

The juxtaposition of exquisite refinement with gruesome violence has a long and distinguished history in Persian miniature painting. This tendency has its roots in the illustrations of Timurid period manuscripts of the 15th century, but it was under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1572) that the great royal Shahnama (“Book of Kings”) manuscripts were produced, made for the rulers Shah Tahmasp (1514-1576) and Shah Ismail II (1576-1577). The artists quite visibly relished any opportunity to portray disemboweling, dismemberment and beheadings, all of the

most grisly aspects of medieval warfare. These miniatures were painted with extreme delicacy, sometimes by brushes of only one or two hairs that could precisely manipulate the paint. The level of minute detail is so great that even when viewed under high magnification, they lose little of their resolution. The illustrations in these Shahnamas include a wide range of subject matter such as courtly scenes, romances and architectural ensembles, but it is the depictions of warfare that are surely the most striking. Executed in bright colours and further embellished with gold and silver leaf, the jewel-like quality of their appearance is in shocking contrast to their gory content. Thus these miniatures portray two very different projections of power: on the one hand through their lavish detail and careful execution, which could be afforded only by a royal patron; on the other, military force that is the prerogative of the ruler.

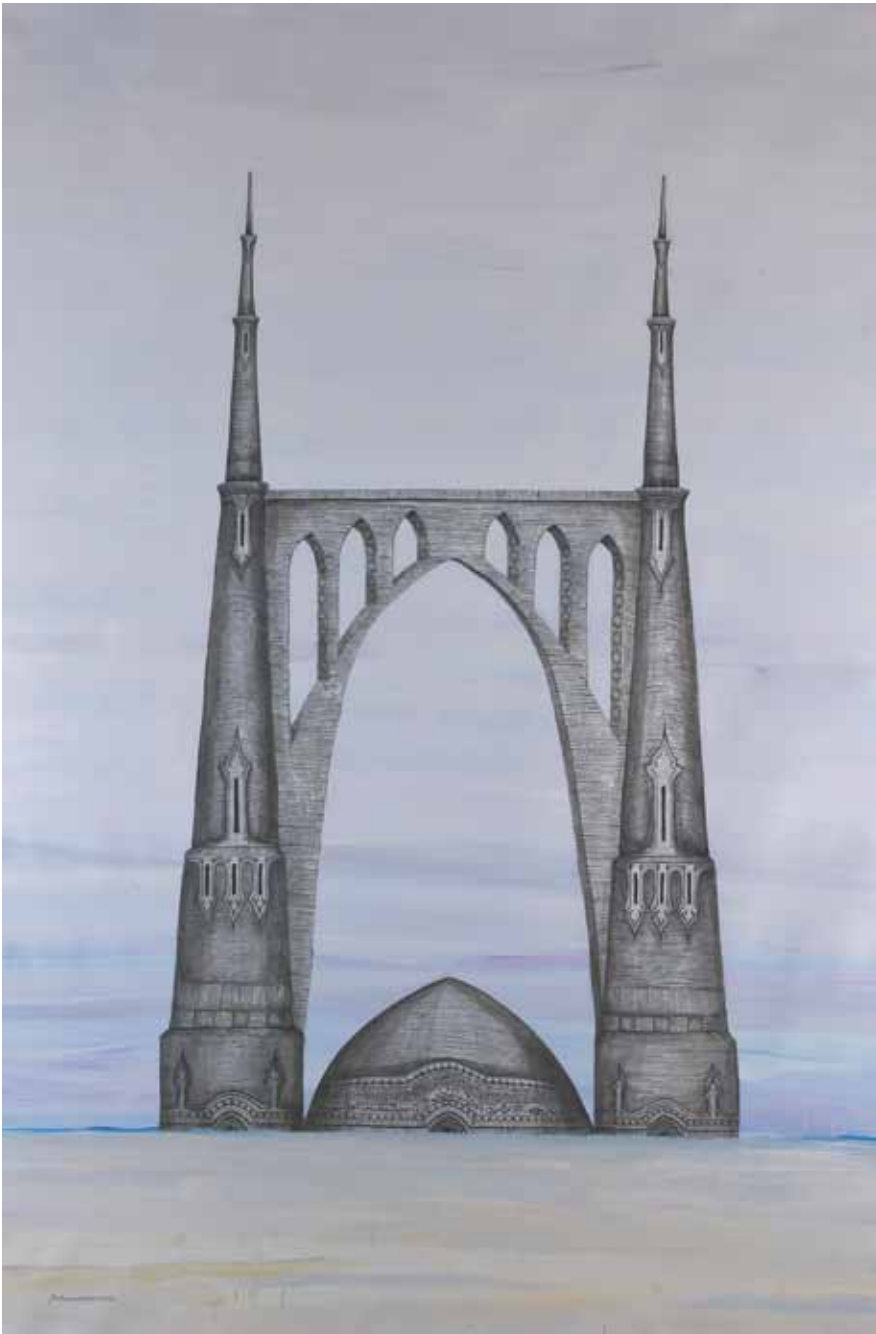
In his “Projectiles” Pouyan again demonstrates his wry sense of humour through references to high Persian culture, bringing the same spirit to these three dimensional works. Each is part sculpture, part installation, monumental yet suspended. Working closely with traditional armourers and metal-smiths and taking intricately decorated costume armour and military helmets, he has morphed them into the shape of modern projectiles. The component parts of each “Projectile” closely resemble those worn by actors in the “Taziyeh” (passion play), which is performed to this day during the month of Muharram and commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. This type of armour has its origins in the medieval Iran, with calligraphic and floral decoration meticulously inlaid in gold and silver, or etched into the flat surfaces of the metal. Pouyan’s use of helmets and chainmail, normally worn by soldiers or actors, gives his “Projectiles” an unsettling human-like appearance. Though obvious symbols of dominance and power, at the same time they are light, refined and have an unmistakable air of luxury.

*William Lawrie
Director Lawrie Shabibi
Dubai, April 2011*

Towers

Bahram Gour Tower
2010
acrylic on canvas
102 x 145cm





The Tower
2011
acrylic and silver leaf on canvas
200 x 135cm



The Tower
2011
acrylic and gold leaf on canvas
200 x 135cm

The publication of this catalogue coincides with an exhibition of the same title at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai 18 April - 8 June, 2011.
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