Points of Departure

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis
Painting & Drawing

State University of New York at New Paltz
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Thesis Show Card

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
Alice and Horace Chandler + North Galleries
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, New York, 12561

ZAHRA NAZARI
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MFA Thesis Exhibition
Opening Reception: Friday, May 9, 2014
5-7:00 pm

Museum Hours: Friday-Tuesday, 11am to 5pm
www.newpaltz.edu/museum
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Statement

Spending my childhood in an ancient Iranian city bounded by historic ruins encouraged my inquisitiveness about various architectural forms and their adjacent landscapes, and led me to consider how passing time repossesses and reshapes all things.

The stimulation and intensity of modern-day cities became another inspiration for my paintings and installations: while travelling and living in America, I viewed skyscrapers, bridges and signs reflected in glass facades and became aware of the shifting elusiveness of contemporary urban spaces.

Starting with earlier memories of my youth, then moving on to the unsettled emotions created by the transition between two dissimilar cultures, I use buildings and space as metaphors to convey those complex sensations of dislocation. Postmodern ideas concerning the outer surfaces, or skin of constructed buildings have become associated with kite making traditions in the Middle East. My work merges these ancient and contemporary architectural forms and the results are large painted structures surrounded by suspended architectonic, kite-like shapes placed in variable environments.

The intensity of my own life history, with its wealth of experiences and recollections is being united with new ways of thinking and questioning the relationships between all things, intensifying and extending my individual vision while generating art that alters the way humans observe and consider the world.
Table of Contents

Statement & Introduction ................................................................. 5
Linkages ......................................................................................... 7
Thinking and Questioning ............................................................... 8
The Present Situation ..................................................................... 8
Construction .................................................................................. 9
Central Inspirations ....................................................................... 12
Bibliography .................................................................................. 15
Images of Points of Departure’s Installation, Samuel Dorsky Museum .............................................. 17
Statement & Introduction

“Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams…”

In art and life there often seem to be many different truths present in the same moment. I believe what is accepted as outer reality is just one small piece of a much larger worldview. Artistic focus is a way of constructing viewpoints with diverse conceptual and visual possibilities. My art plays with aspects of this belief by pulling together different events in my life that occurred years apart and thousands of kilometers away from each other. Stylistic mixtures by artists who have motivated me in the past also find their way into my works.

I have been investigating ideas related to large-scale installations to expand my ideas about painting and architectural relationships. *Points of Departure* has gone through many different stages, from recalling memories of visits to the ancient historical sites of Iran, especially the ruins of Persepolis and its architectural scale, powerful space and silence, to observing some of the highest skyscrapers in the world, in Dubai, New York City and Chicago.

Personally experiencing and gaining a clearer understanding of the power, complexity and beauty of Iran’s architectural traditions greatly influenced my later vision because this knowledge supplied themes in my work. I have traveled to the Ali Qapu Palace in Isfahan, where both its unusual interior and exterior spaces demonstrate the originality of Persian architecture and decoration. They translated their knowledge of the world of art and science into arabesque and geometric patterns. In Persian thought, when added together, these designs produced an always expanding series of arrangements that continued uninterrupted beyond the visible world.

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The unique characteristics of the Persian architectural system created stimulating forms combined with a strong sense of scale and also an originality in the way buildings were constructed. The intelligence and beauty of their patterning was not seen in other categories of architectural design. Space, not form, was the most significant focal point; so their designers paid special attention to the spaces between buildings, and the notion of a solitary structure did not exist in Persian architectural planning. Space was ‘cut out’ from the surrounding buildings and then described by the interior surfaces of these forms. An important inspiration is the Music Room on the sixth floor of the Ali Qapu Palace, built by order of Shah Abbas the Great in the early part of the seventeenth century. I am stimulated by the distinctive inventiveness and beauty of this space. The ceiling is layered with stucco and carved with intricate shapes of vases and long-necked bottles. As the royal musicians performed on the ground floor, Shah Abbas sat on a stage on the sixth floor, listening while observing festivities in the square below. The sounds traveled upward through hollow tubes built into the walls and were then dispersed around the Music Room through the niches engraved into the stucco. The carvings were calculated to produce echoes and as a result, expand the musical sound quality. I have been intrigued by the layering of design, the idea of music flowing upward with its resonance echoing throughout the Music Room interior, and the silhouettes of the stucco patterns.

Starting with earlier memories of my youth, and then moving onto the unsettled sensations created by my transition between two different cultures, my earlier Persian experiences generated ideas for images that have served either as direct influences or as metaphors for the emotions I experienced after moving to America. My aim has been to merge ancient and modern architectural forms to produce convincing images, combining painted structures surrounded by variable environments. Additional influences arrived with newly acquired knowledge about modern and contemporary art. Antiquated ruins, old and new cities,
and contemporary architecture either contain, or are in the process of accumulating, multiple layers of history.

Now the majority of human beings live in cities, and these metropolitan areas provide the backdrop where people work and play, fall in love and taste both success and failure in their lives on a daily basis. While reading the astonishing accounts of imaginary cities by Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, childhood memories of my mother’s own tales of whimsy and make-believe came back to me and I realize those youthful experiences encouraged the beginnings of my imagination and led to the kind of art I dream about now. A speeding up of the information stream influenced my artistic vision during my initial presence in this country. While exploring American cities and trying to process all of their massive structures, my thoughts led me to the theme of spatial ambiguity and change. An elusive kind of space surrounded the buildings, bridges and other monumental structures I was encountering, and these disrupted views tested my sense of identity because I was experiencing excitement and confusion at the same time.

Those emotions influenced my manner of thinking about the world and I expressed those sensations by depicting disjointed environments that included both old and new building forms, resulting in paintings of made-up cities.

**Linkages**

“Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.”

Within my perception of Italo Calvino’s book, *Invisible Cities*, the author repeatedly spoke about how passing time takes its toll on all things. I remembered my explorations of Persepolis, where I was deeply moved while exploring the ruins of this immense palace. This

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experience connected me to its ancient, monumental presence. In my imagination, visitors who scrutinize my art also act as explorers, and the stories that I have situated within each of my works can be considered as a layered ruin, where each explorer may discover their own adventures. I also believe that every viewer brings along his or her own preconceptions whenever they view any artwork. Clearly, there can be many different stories, forever expanding outward from paintings and extending far beyond the range of the original intentions.

**Thinking and Questioning**

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

My installation aims to lead the viewer towards complex visual and conceptual relationships by using abstracted architectural structures surrounded by ambiguous space. Renaissance ideas of space are of less interest to today’s viewers because everything in such space is static, while in the contemporary world, individuals have familiarity with the speed of computers, airplanes, cars, trains and satellites. All of these inventions have expanded the ability to perceive space and dream about the world in new and important ways.

**The Present Situation**

“Our current modernity can no longer be characterized by either the modern discourse of the universal gaze of the white, western male or its postmodern deconstruction along the heterogeneous lines of race, gender, class and locality. Instead, it is exemplified by globalized perception, cultural nomadism, and creolization. The altermodernist (artist) is a homo viator, liberated from (an obsession with) his/her origins, free to travel and explore, perceiving anew the global landscape and the “terra incognita” of history.”

Notes on metamodernism co-authors Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker articulate what they describe as another modernism with feeling. They write that their dissertation is more of an invitation to debate ideas than a dogmatic collection of rules.

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They describe several different art critics, philosophers and cultural theorists’ opinions considering the death of postmodernism and quote all of them at some length. I am most interested in the Romantic direction that Vermeulen and van den Akker say is occurring within contemporary aesthetics. They state that the current situation in art making is neither modernism nor postmodernism, but is a going beyond the old concerns without the irony or despair of previous situations. The following description of the works of ‘‘starchitects’’ Herzog and De Meuron clearly connected with my current mindset because there are so many overlapping similarities:

“These buildings attempt to negotiate between such opposite poles as culture and nature, the finite and the infinite, the commonplace and the ethereal, a formal structure, and a formalist unstructuring (as opposed to deconstruction). Crucially, these attempts are unsuccessful as the buildings never so much seem to balance these distinct poles as oscillate between them. Fragile (bird’s nest), disappearing (iceberg), or perishing (eroded rock) natural phenomena question the solidity of structures more or less built for permanence; while a mythical building (castle) from the days of old seems to be either resurrected from the past or mysteriously unaffected by time. Some edifices seem to be either left to the elements (oxidizing copper, rust) or seamlessly integrated with nature (overgrown walls, hanging gardens); yet others seem to defy the basic laws of geometry and gravity by means of their torsions. Lucid surfaces, radiating with light, give the most of ordinary sites a mysterious appearance; while ancient symbols (Pyramid) points toward transient cultures and the infinity of the cosmos.”

Construction

“Painting and sculpture are very archaic forms. It’s the only thing left in our industrial society where an individual alone can make something with not just his own hands, but brains, imagination, heart maybe…”

The construction of my installation combines craft and fine art mediums and techniques. My materials list includes Asian paper, cardboard, canvas, wood, acrylic and ink. The relationships between the different parts of the installation positioned in the museum space were intuitive and their placement improvised as I worked from the inside out, putting the entire structure together. This was a very different experience from that of hanging paintings in

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a traditional manner and then walking back in order to see them from a distance. In my earlier architectural paintings, I made use of a cutaway device revealing the interior abstraction of the buildings. In the installation, both sides of the canvas and papers for the kite-making contain double-sided images, producing the look of transparency and movement while further complicating the space of the installation.

The large scale of this work is meant to alter the spatial dynamics of the surrounding space as much as possible. Like all of the echos between sounds and shapes contained within the Ali Qapu Music Room, I created deliberate echoes between structures through repetition of shape, rhythms in placement, and spaces between structures. A number of architectural elements are depicted, while the size creates feelings of immersion within the observer. I view installation as an extension of painting, where every onlooker can be inside and interact as if becoming a part of the entire piece.

The two (100”x73”x30” and 73”x210”x32”) shaped canvas structures positioned in the center of the museum contradict the inherent flatness of traditional painting and are associated with architectonic configurations. These forms utilize painted geometric and flowing shapes, taut and loose surfaces, and glimpses of the underlying painted wooden support framework can be observed. I have appropriated variations of the engraved stucco shapes found in the Ali Qapu Music Room, repeatedly painting them over the surfaces of all of the elements making up the installation. The pyramidal structure relates to prominent design elements contained in the Hearst Tower and the ICA building, both residing in New York City.

The positioning of all the installation elements in my work relates to the way Persian architectural designers focused more upon the spaces between each building, and this approach alters the way observers think about foreground, middle ground, and background spaces in the installation, because there are no longer barriers behind the objects, thus creating more complex and direct relationships between the viewer, the canvas-objects, and the surrounding
environment. Within this tradition, Frank Stella’s shaped, freestanding architectonic work of the mid-90s making use of mixed media on Fiberglass is an important influence.

Twenty-five shaped kite-like constructions hang from the ceiling and range in size from 60” x 35” to 18” x 40.” The term “kite-like” is accurate because their forms are not meant to fly but rather, to approximate distant physical echoes of the shapes and surfaces of deconstructive structures. I visualize these forms as being alive, escaping their links to gravity and moving into the spiritual process of becoming, transforming themselves into new categories of energy.

These forms are suspended both individually and in groups.

The resulting space is fluid and supple rather than solid and fixed, and appears to move around the viewers as much as they move in and around the museum. Cords connected to the kite bodies from the ceiling act as drawn lines, and directed lighting casts shadows that bend, distort and alter the environment in unexpected ways.

When arranging the pieces of my installation I felt that I was literally designing in space, with the various objects taking the place of brushstrokes in my paintings. Consideration of different strategies regarding composition, the placement of objects to form relationships, color connections and linear organization were all equal to the approaches needed to produce a painting. Constructing an installation is more surprising than painting because nothing is set or static as are the essential elements of painting. The creator can play with different situations and materials, while components can be made to relate to each other through trial and error.

I simplified my color palette and made use of Burnt Siennas, Raw Umbers, and Yellow Ochres that relate to ancient architectural ruins, and I also used various Cobalt, Phthalocyanine, and Ultramarine blues connected to ancient Persian decoration and to glass found in contemporary architecture.

Just as the viewer is an explorer, every artist becomes an explorer attempting to understand and become familiar with his or her vision. An artist needs to spend countless hours
developing and deciphering their own concepts and vision for achieving a consistently powerful image and space, while recognizing the value of personal experience and self-awareness. The real difficulty is in taking complex ideas and turning them into forms which resonate and challenge beyond the first encounter of the work.

Central Inspirations

“If you wanna talk about influence, man, then you've got to realize that influence is not influence. It's simply someone's idea going through my new mind.’’

How does an artist explain influences and inspirations? It seems that cataloging and describing formal elements in artworks can be far easier than revealing all of the influential individuals who have impacted an artist’s life and work in important and positive ways.

My initial aesthetic interest in creating installations flows out of Postmodern, Deconstructive architecture and everything exclusive that is associated with that style: uncertainty, absurdity and incongruity plus the blending of a variety of styles together that might include ancient and conventional, modern and contemporary, or even completely new and inventive forms. I am especially attracted to the works of Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind. Both fragmentation and the reassembling of elements in surprising and unexpected ways have strong parallels to my own post Iranian view of the world, beginning with my arrival in America. Postmodern ideas about the construction of buildings and their skin, or outer surfaces became connected in my mind to similarities in kite-making and memories of Middle Eastern kite flying traditions in Iran and Afghanistan.

Beside exploring ideas taken from architects, cities, ruins, movies, novels plus many newfound artists’ work, I realize that I am instantly drawn to the greatest expressionist artists because of the energy, color sense and immediacy of their images. The layered symbols, complexity and significance of my current work is the result of a more expansive way of observing the world.

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7 Jean-Michel Basquiat, Art Quotes, Presented by the Painter’s Keys
This change comes from realizing the immense web of connections binding all things together.

From this point forward, I will take this all-encompassing approach of recognizing relationships between every experience instead of seeing solitary things existing by themselves. The richness of my own history with its fullness of memories and life experiences will be combined with notions based upon new encounters with methods of exploration, thinking and questioning. In my art practice, the goals are to deepen and develop my personal vision while creating art which challenges the way viewers perceive the world.

Below is a listing of my central inspirations:

- **Italo Calvino’s novel, *Invisible Cities* (1972) because even though his language was difficult, his stories gave me unexpected pleasure. *Imaginary conversations between Marco Polo and his host, the Chinese ruler Kublai Khan, conjure up cities of magical times. ‘Of all tasks, describing the contents of a book is the most difficult and in the case of a marvelous invention like Invisible Cities, perfectly irrelevant’* (Gore Vidal).

- **Inception**, a 2010 science fiction film directed by Christopher Nolan. Leonardo DiCaprio played a thief who commits corporate espionage by going inside the minds of his targets. The special effects were tremendously fascinating because of the way the Paris buildings rotated, rise-up vertically, and then bend over. They moved exactly like a giant child’s pop-up book.

- **Zaha Hadid** (October 31, 1950) Iraqi born, British architect who her buildings are distinctively neofuturistic, characterized by the "powerful, curving forms of her elongated structures" with " multiple perspective points and fragmented geometry to evoke the chaos of modern life" (Wikipedia Source).

- **Frank Gehry** (February 28, 1929) Canadian born, American architect. He is considered one of the most important architects in the world. One of Gehry’s best-known works is the titanium-covered Gugenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

- **Oskar Kokoschka** (1 March 1886 – 22 February 1980) was an Austrian painter of forceful expressionistic landscapes, which established various vanishing points that produced a wide, curving space.

- **Guillermo Kuitca** (born 1961) Argentinean artist born in Buenos Aires. Recurrent themes of travel, maps, memory, and migration can be found in Kuitca’s work.

• Gerhard Richter (born February 9, 1932) is a German visual artist and one of the pioneers of the New European Painting that has emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Richter’s *Townscapes*, all produced between 1968 and 1970.

• Sarah Sze (born 1969) American artist born in Boston, Massachusetts uses ordinary objects to create sculptures and site-specific installations.

• Judy Pfaff (born 1946) in London, England, is an American artist, known for her installation art. Her installation art has been compared to that of "a collagist in space." (Wikipedia Source)
Bibliography


Pope, Arthur Upham. “Persian Architecture, the triumph of form and color.” New York, printed in USA.


Points of Departure Installation, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art