

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Kurchanova, Natasha. "Hadieh Shafie: 'I take things from my culture and marry them to my western art education'."

Studio International. (March 19, 2015).

studio international

Visual Arts, Design and Architecture

Published 19/03/2015

Hadieh Shafie: 'I take things from my culture and marry them to my western art education'

Hadieh Shafie makes transformative objects that hover between painting and sculpture, integrating her roots in Persian culture and her training in the west

Hadieh Shafie: Surfaced

Leila Heller Gallery, New York City

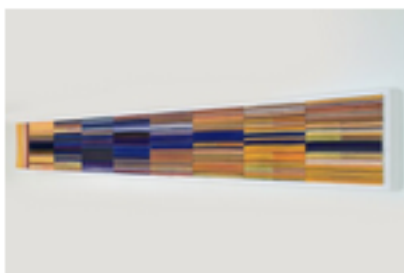
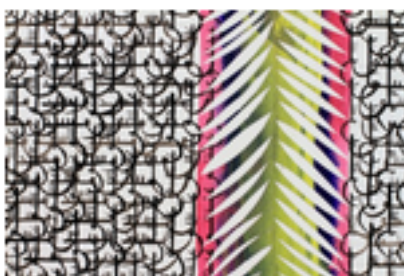
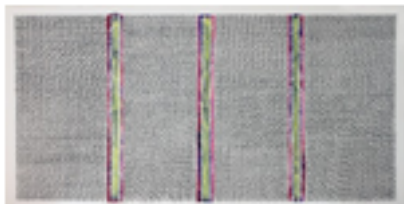
26 February – 11 April 2015

by NATASHA KURCHANOVA

How is it possible for someone from a non-western culture to integrate her history into her art when that art developed under the premises of western schooling? One answer can be found in the work of Hadieh Shafie, an Iranian-born artist who moved to the United States when she was 13. *Surfaced*, an exhibition of her recent work at the Leila Heller Gallery, offers a glimpse into a practice that is process-based, but also object-oriented. Each work of this strikingly original artist reveals not only a particular story that lies behind it, but a more general mode of thinking that absorbs influences and practices from the past and the present.

Surfaced includes 20 new works by Shafie, in which she uses paper, some in stacks and some rolled into tiny scrolls packed tightly into a frame. Relationship between text and image is crucial for Shafie, as all of her work contains writing inspired by Persian poetry and hidden from our view inside the stacks and scrolls. The artist loves colour; for this exhibition she chose nine colours and used them in various proportions in different works, creating a bright and variegated yet unified palette. Shafie's works are not only





multicoloured, but also multifaceted, hovering in the indefinite space between painting and sculpture and offering multiple ways to approach them. In connection with the exhibition, the artist has kindly agreed to speak to Studio International.

Natasha Kurchanova: I came to see this exhibition for the first time yesterday. I was impressed and surprised. I was surprised, because I had expected everything to be flat. So, I want to ask you about the tensions between the appearance of flatness and the actual depth in your works – is it intentional? When you look at your works in reproduction, on a page, they look like paintings – unless the photographs are taken very closely or from the side.

Hadieh Shafie: No, flatness in the reproductions of the work is not intentional. Works such as Spike 8 are very difficult to photograph. When we are standing in front of the work, we see that it is 3D, but somehow photography flattens everything. This work in particular has two profiles: a side profile that shows the depth of the work and a front profile that flattens the work.

NK: It looks almost like an op art piece in a way. Could you tell me a little about your training? Are you a painter?

HS: Yes, I started in painting and still consider myself a painter. I was trained in a more traditional kind of painting: I never intentionally set out to make work that had depth or approached sculptural forms. It's just the nature of material I use – that's where it wants to go. For example, these newer pieces [she points to Forugh 5 and Sohrab 3] are, to me, very painterly, but they are created by using material, by alternating pieces of paper in the stack to create the final image.

NK: Could you tell me how you made them?

HS: Of course. This piece [Forugh 5] is composed of the same paper I use throughout my work. They are 11in x 11in [2.5cm x 28cm] strips; I refer to them as pages, like pages in a book. I zeroed in on one word and wanted just one line of text. I realised that 1in width of paper was enough. Everything that you see is happening on the fore-edge of the book. This work [she points to Forugh 5] contains a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad, who was an Iranian poet; the poem is titled Another Birth, and this work is my visual response to the poem.



Technically, it is made in the following way. First, I use a tool with a pointy end, which enters the work, because its form is repeated in spikes on each end of the frame – in the photographs, you can see its repeated volumetric shape more easily in 3D works, such as Block 2, for example. I use a tool like this to put the paper in a zigzag shape. Then, in a very traditional form of painting on a surface, I paint/write text from the poem. When I straighten the paper and push it back together, forming a stack, most of the text disappears from view, except those parts that are at the very edge of the paper, saturating it and coming to the surface of the stack. So, I begin in the tradition of painting and drawing, but then I push the sheets together, an action which creates an undulation, shifting within the text itself, because it displaces the lines. To create the final image after this first step, I have to stand back and look at the stack with multiple areas of soaked ink at the edges. I then decide that I want to have a broken rhythm to the pattern. So, I take a section of paper and move it up. After I do this, I think about other ways I can interrupt the rhythm of the work. The next step may be taking a chunk out and flipping it, so here you see the back side of a portion of the stack flipped. At the end, the viewer is faced with a stack of paper with abstract pattern formed by ink of hidden text appearing at the edges and re-arranged by me.

NK: I see – you are actually manipulating them.

HS: Yes. Here, if you come up close, you will see white lines running across the work. Do you know how you shuffle a deck of cards? It is similar to that process. I push the new paper in, and it creates lines in the work.

NK: So the resulting lines are almost incidental.

HS: Yes, there is chance, but there is also control. Once I do a small section, I look at it, I see something I like, then I skip a little bit, then I do it again. I make decisions about where to distort and interrupt the surface image.

NK: Because these are pages of the book, essentially. What are the references to these pieces?

HS: There are two poems I am using. One is the one by Forugh Farrokhzad and the other is by Sohrab Sepehri. What is interesting is that I knew Forugh Farrokhzad first as a film-maker. She made a

very important film in 1963 called *The House is Black*, about a leper colony in Iran. It was not until later that I realised that her main work was in poetry. Similarly, I knew Sohrab Sepehri only as a poet, and then I realised he was a painter as well. So, it is interesting that both poets were also visual. The poem that inspired this work [pointing to Sohrab 3] has a story behind it. I was 19 years old, and my father gave me a tape with the poem. At that time, I was a rebellious teenager, listening only to punk rock music. I was trying to find my place as an Iranian girl, having left Iran and moved to the US. This tape [changed my life], because it led me to discover Persian poetry that was using everyday language. The difference between a modern Iranian poet, someone like Sohrab Sepehri or Forugh Farrokhzad, and a traditional one, such as Rumi, is comparable to the difference between Sylvia Plath and Shakespeare. This poem opened up the way to take things from my culture and marry them to my western art education.

NK: Some of the words that we could see on the edges of the pages are readable [pointing to Sohrab 3]?

HS: You can read only the first line. This is perhaps the most painterly work in the traditional sense of painting.

NK: How did you find paper as your material?

HS: I came to New York in 1993 to study painting at the Pratt Institute for my master's degree. When I was at Pratt, I was working on canvas with paints. My images at that time were influenced by traditional Persian miniature painting – the bright colour scheme and the idea of *horror vacui*, the fear of empty space. My canvases were busy, packed. When I arrived in New York, I thought that, in the spirit of renewal, I was going to strip everything down to bare essentials. During this process of starting anew, I let go of paints and of colour. I just used black ink on paper. That's when I started to fall in love with paper. I had some experience making paper, so I was already being challenged as a painter by this material. I loved how, in the process of my work, the ink was being absorbed by paper and was not sitting on its surface any more, but had become part of it. I started making prints and doing colour graphs.

Around 1994, I stopped painting. Instead, I was using ink on paper to do the drawings with the same word – *eshgh* – which means “passionate love” in Persian, repeating it endless times. Its meaning was not even that important any more. It was just this form that

wanted to be repeated. I was also doing a lot of performative work at that time. These performances had to do with the text and the body. For example, in one of them, I was writing the word on a plate, pouring water on it and drinking it. I started a piece where I was taking pages from a children's book, highlighting certain passages, and then placing them in cracks in my studio, in the floor, the walls – anywhere. Also, I was taking pages with drawings, going to public libraries, and placing them in random books for people to find. As I was doing this, I was thinking of Sophie Calle and Adrian Piper, the way they were doing action things with language and sending out messages into the world. In my studio, back to installation work, I started to insert pages into objects. I had a table I had inherited. I thought it would be very interesting to raise this table on books. The table had cracks in it, and I wanted to fold paper and put it into the cracks. This table was missing a bolt, and the wall next to it was missing a pipe. In order to get paper into those spaces, I had to roll it. I rolled the page of the book, and I pushed it into that space. It was an incredible moment for me, because all of a sudden I saw a drawing that had disappeared. All I saw were concentric rings of paper. This really spoke to me. So I set out to make this body of work, with the idea of hidden text. Some things were rolled, some were flat; some were folded in clothing ...

I had a show in Baltimore in 2003; Alison Knowles, a Fluxus artist, was the juror for it. I presented an installation on a table raised on books, clothing with text hidden, and the very first paper-roll piece. It was a group of paper rolls on the floor, measuring 4in x 4in. This body of work started off on the floor as a piece of sculpture. I kept thinking about this new form I had found, and then I thought: what would happen if I took it from the floor and brought it back to the wall, to painting? When I brought the work back to the wall, I started thinking about colour. I thought about not using actual pages from found books, but material that originated from me. One thing led to another, and I started making the rolled paper pieces.

So, the form of the work with rolled paper goes back to my early work. What is different with this show is that even with the pieces that are *ketabs* ["book" in Farsi], the surface is now activated, because you have a directional, a colour movement [she points to Ghalb 7].

NK: When did you first start painting these paper works?

HS: In 2002. In 2005, colour has come in.

NK: Is there any particular significance to the colours you choose? In the press release for *Surfaced*, colours were enumerated one by one, and it was mentioned that you used nine colours to paint the work in this exhibition.

HS: I use a limited colour palette. When colour came into the work, I realised that I could use five colours straight out of the tube, without mixing them. The way you alternate them when you are rolling the paper creates secondary and tertiary colours. Your eye mixes the solid colours. If you photograph the work and look at it closely, you see colours separated; but if you are in front of a work, your eye is mixing the colour. I found this very interesting.

NK: What is the focus of this exhibition?

HS: With this show, the main thread is the surface. This means bringing out the text that was hidden to the surface; focusing on colour movement across the surface; and with the drawings, introducing the cut surface and negation as a way of drawing.

NK: Because I studied western art, the influence of minimalism and conceptual art on you is clear to me. In terms of traditional Persian culture, what are the influences? Sufism for example?

HS: When I make work, so many things feed me! When I stripped everything away and focused on this word, *eshgh*, passionate love, I thought it might be too sweet. But I kept going back to it. I read a quote from Che Guevara, who said that without love there was no revolution. I also recognised that this word was overly used in calligraphy and in poetry. Then, one day, I saw a dance of whirling dervishes at New York University, which impressed me tremendously. Dervishes turn around the heart; they practise this dance so that they forget the body. Women are not allowed to do this. I did a performance piece where I turned and, because I did not practise, I fell. That was the point of my turning. I was in awe of that experience of circular, concentric dance in connection with the paper pieces I was making.

So, to answer your question about influences – I cannot cite one influence, but there are so many that enter my life in significant ways. What I try to do is let inspirations go through a filter that is my life experience, education, and my process of creating. I am in awe of the use of repetition in eastern art and architecture. Of course, repetition exists also in western art. The grid exists in eastern art as well. However, in the east, the grid is concealed by the all-over pattern. When you look at miniature painting, a Persian carpet, or architecture from the east, you will see that every inch of the work is covered with design elements. I grew up in a home decorated in this way. I have been successful in integrating handwritten text into the grid. For example, if I take a lyrical text from Persian tradition, I put it in a straight line of a grid instead of preserving its calligraphic nature. Among artists who influenced my work with grid and patterns are Agnes Martin and Brice Marden.

NK: Thank you, Hadieh. You opened up a new world for me! I do not know for sure, but it seems to me that eventually you will be doing something like sculpture.

HS: Have you been to the back room? That's a very new territory for me [she points to Block 2]. This is the last piece I made for the show. I like what I see, but it is the hardest piece to figure out.

NK: It seems as if you are afraid of it – the physicality of it scares you a little.

HS: Yes, maybe in some way. But to think of it, the piece is not very different from my 3D paintings ... If the facets of the cube were hung on the wall, they would be just paintings or drawings. It's just this format that is still strange to me, but it has a lot of potential.

NK: Thank you for your time and a great interview, Hadieh.

HS: Thank you for the opportunity.