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BLOOD AND TEARS

SARA RAHBAR



Born in Iran and brought up in New York, Sara Rahbar first distorted the iconicity and flatness of flags with her hand-sewn patchworks. **Shirine Saad** meets the artist who now exposes the semantics of war and pain with the sculptural *War and Confessions of a Sinner* series, cathartically transforming violence into beauty.



Sara Rahbar created her *Flag* series in 2005, a collection of nearly 50 monumental patchworks juxtaposing objects and textiles, which she had collected over a long period of time. These include the American flag's blue stars, strips of Oriental rugs and textiles, embroidery, Persian poetry, figurines of Jesus Christ, armament and other adornments. These elements are used repetitively to create semi-abstract mosaics or geometric compositions. While Rahbar claims that she was then unconscious of any precedents, the series was reminiscent of Jasper Johns's flat flags, of the ready-mades and assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg, and especially of the work of first-generation feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro, who used traditionally 'domestic crafts' like quilting and patchwork to validate the role of women in the history of art.

Rahbar, who sees herself as a painter, treated each flag as a soft painting, intricately composing it, meticulously applying lace and embroidery, pompoms and jewels. Each piece is strikingly beautiful, breathtaking in its rich layers of colours, textiles and forms and in its perfect composition. The poetry is such that, on first encounter, the viewer can overlook their provocative content. But of course those layers also expose rhetorics of power and violence, of identity and religion, of guilt and redemption, and of the endless war between post 9/11 America and Iran, both Rahbar's homelands and both of which, says the artist, she has a love-hate relationship with.

PATRIOT WARS

In *Flag #41, Whatever we Had to Lose we Lost, and in a Moonless Sky we Marched*, portraits of John F Kennedy and Robert F Kennedy and an image of the White House are sewn under the American flag's star banner. The flag is a patchwork of Persian rugs and verses from the Qur'an and decorated with jewelled belts, rows of bullets, ammunition pockets and military badges. Near one of Kennedy's portraits, a rudimentary catapult renders a raw image of brutality. On the top right side, a figure of Jesus Christ on a cross hangs with coloured necklaces, representing humanity's collective sins. This could be a flag of war or peace, a talisman or a monument to violent memorabilia. Mixing elements of Eastern and Western popular culture, the flag reflects the nomadism of the artist and of many Iranians' exodus towards the so-called Promised Land. It is incomprehensible and absurd, yet through the bright pompoms and embroideries, a dark truth emerges: that of a world dominated by power and war, where dialogue is null. A world of testosterone and bullets and treacherous ideologies painstakingly broken up and pieced together by a woman.

Opening spread: *Flag # 32, Did You See What Love Did to us Once Again?* 2008. Textiles and mixed media. 185 x 120 cm.

Facing page: *Flag # 41 Whatever we Had to Lose we Lost, and in a Moonless Sky we Marched.* 2009. Textiles and mixed media. 188 x 125 cm.

"Art gives you unlimited freedom."





Catherine Grenier, Adjunct Director of Centre Pompidou, wrote an introduction to Rahbar's first book in which she lauds her aesthetic as "always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo."

The *Flag* series was an immediate critical and commercial success and has been exhibited worldwide, including at the Devi Art Foundation, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, the Saatchi Gallery and the Centre Pompidou in Paris; the latter two galleries also own several pieces. Rahbar has since moved to a different format in her two most recent series: *War* and *Confessions of a Sinner* – raw, violent and deeply personal soft assemblages that tend towards the sculptural. Links have been made by critics to Arte Povera, Folk art, Assemblage art and Neo-Dada, but Rahbar hates labels. Refusing to be categorised as political, feminist, anti-imperialistic, or as a Muslim or Iranian or American or even Iranian-American artist, Rahbar insists that her work first draws on deep personal demons and experiences. Here lies its power: it is personal and political, poetic and conceptual, intimate and provokingly engaged. It defies categorisations and binary analysis. It is visceral.

DARK ARRIVAL

Rahbar's life, as she describes it, has been a series of traumas. First, her family fled Iran when she was five years old, one year after the Islamic Revolution. "The way

"These works reflect the pain and violence that I am seeing everywhere. They punch you and bring you to your knees."



we left was always strange, filled with anxiety, and dangerous and stressful," she says. The family finally settled in New York with very little money. None spoke English; Rahbar was continuously bullied at school and felt that she didn't belong. Yet she didn't consider that she was in exile; for her, America was home. She enrolled at the Fashion Institute of Technology. "I loved colours and textures, objects and piecing things together," she says. "And I also loved Galliano and McQueen, and felt that their work was more like art and sculpture, rather than fashion."

Rahbar then decided she wanted to focus on art, and for the short time that she studied fashion, made sculptural things and took photography, sculpture and painting classes as well. "Everything was very loose, freelance and up in the air; I was all over the place, playing around with everything and testing it all in order to find my place. I can't remember how, but I stumbled onto this amazing, brilliant place called Central Saint Martins (CSM), and I thought it's now or never and I have to give this thing a go or die trying," she says. "I knew that there would be an unlimited amount of freedom there, and that in that space of anything and everything being possible, I could find my voice, and that's exactly what happened." Until she moved to London to

attend CSM in 2004, Rahbar "was in discomfort and confused by my identity and family tensions", but at CSM she found a channel for her emotions. "They never taught us how to make anything," she says. "They taught us how to think and showed us that anything was possible, and that's all I needed to know."

When she started working on her final year project, Rahbar decided to try to create something new and unique. "I was super depressed," says the artist, who is now 36 and lives in Long Island. "I had no clue, but the pieces came together. It was all about breaking everything and starting again. Art gives you unlimited freedom." She has thick black hair, kohl-lined eyes, full lips, and on her wrists, tribal tattoos and a stack of gold bangles. Rahbar had grown up sewing on her mother's machine and obsessively collecting objects from her travels in India, Iran and Europe. She created the *Flag* series to express her anger with the obligation that she had to salute the American flag and developed complex symbolic nets from that anger, linking it to her Iranian identity, politics and personal issues such as love and betrayal.

Confused, and feeling the need to go back to Iran to learn more about her culture, Rahbar travelled back and forth to Tehran after her stud-

Facing page: *They Take us Wherever They Want us to Go*. 2010. Textiles and mixed media. 104 x 71 cm.

Above: (Detail) *Overcome me Sweet Oblivion, I am Ashamed, Humbled and Unstable*. 2011. Mixed media and wood. 56 x 208 cm.



ies in 2005. "It was very important for me to go back at that stage," she says. "But it's always love and hate with Iran. It's like an abusive husband that you love; you keep going back and taking the punches." She spent six years going back and forth between New York and Tehran, taking thousands of photographs and sound bites. "I was going back like a schizophrenic," she says. "But then there was a point when I couldn't go back anymore. I stopped. The more I stayed there, the more I accepted where I am in New York. I don't need to go back anymore."

STORMING BARRICADES


Rahbar then focused on military themes and questions of guilt and sin with the *War* and *Confessions of a Sinner* series, needing to make her work more aggressive to reflect life as she saw it. She abandoned the decorative *Flags* and started working with straitjackets, bronze Jesus Christ figures, wooden batons, saddle stirrups, muzzles, obstetrical forceps, bayonets, whips, ammo pouches, back braces, knives, guns and gas masks, among others, sometimes hand-sewing them onto tarpaulin stained with wine and coffee. It reflected her state of mind, darker than ever, seeing violence and brashness everywhere. "My life has always been so harsh and so aggressive," she says. "These works reflect the pain and violence that I am seeing everywhere. They punch you and bring you to your knees."

In *They Take us Wherever They Want us to go*, a gas mask, a whip, a gun etui and army belt dangle from a large US army backpack. The long tan leather whip contrasts with the industrial black mask and green ammunition bags; the title is typically poetic, evasive and accusatory. Similarly, *Over me Sweet Oblivion, I am Ashamed, Humbled and Unstable*, a bloodstained map of the world painted on a vertically hung army stretcher expresses the artist's disillusionment with life. "These are harsher works, more universal, especially touching and bringing out all the universal concerns and fears we have," says Kourosh Nouri, Rahbar's gallerist at Carbon 12 in Dubai. "Concerns about daily violence, fear of war, contemporary slavery... The first works were still aesthetically softer, also a touch more decorative, despite the departure from more feminine elements like the textiles. Then the tone was set in 2011. The *War* series became what Sara was planning it to become – merciless and genuine, with absolutely no compromise and tri-dimensional sculptures. There is not one work that doesn't touch or create an intensive emotional connection with viewers."

Rahbar, who treats her art as personal therapy and often uses terms such

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as ‘angst,’ ‘schizophrenic,’ ‘aggressive’ and ‘emotional,’ says she has come closest to healing with the latest series. “*Confessions of a Sinner* and *War* are two very important series for me, emotionally, contextually and medium-wise,” she says. “I have really experimented quite a bit with them; I have pushed myself to go above and beyond what was comfortable for me.” Her *You Deserted me Like a Corpse* is a highly symbolic collage on brown-stained tarpaulin. Six broken wooden feet create an abstract form. They are centred between two white plastic hands. Beneath, a back brace, ice skates and metal rings threaten to torture. The dismemberment of the body and the stained canvas evoke images of rape and crime, and are reminiscent of the grotesque dolls that Hans Bellmer created as exaggerated objects of perverse fetishism. And though in *Confessions of a Sinner* the sinner/aggressor seems to be another person, Rahbar takes the blame, in a typical feminine act of shame. “With *Confessions of a Sinner* specifically, it’s a very intimate, aggressive and raw series for me. I’m confessing a lot through this series, it’s my own private catharsis,” says Rahbar. The tarpaulins, covered in the dirt and violence that are part of life, also express a universal *malaise* of a world ravaged by hatred, intolerance and injustice. 

Facing page: *Flag #1*. 2006. Textile and mixed media. 165 x 89 cm.

This page: *You Deserted me Like a Corpse*. 2011. Textile and mixed media. 105 x 173 cm.

All images courtesy Carbon 12, Dubai.

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