

**SARA RAHBAR IN CONVERSATION WITH ANA FINEL HONIGMAN**  
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*Sara Rahbar, 'Cycles Flag#7, 2007*  
*Textile/mixed media, 60x30*

[Sara Rahbar](#) confronts raw political concerns and cultural realities in her photography, video and striking textile sculptures that affect much of the world yet are rarely addressed by contemporary American artists. As an Iranian-American woman artist, it would be difficult for Rahbar's work to be viewed in a political vacuum even if she chose to be apolitical herself. But few artists with her background and ability are creating work that grapples more directly and confidently with Middle Eastern and American identity. For Rahbar, the American flag is like a magic carpet that enables her to survey the global impact of America's most potent symbol. As her take-off point, she has produced a series of American flags from strips of beautifully ornate antique Middle-Eastern textiles. These richly colorful and tactile works appear physically heavy as well as weighted with symbolism. Their rootedness in a grave ancient heritage plays against America's identity as a cocky young country that exports flippant versions of its own culture.

In other work with the flag, Rahbar offers a series of meditations about personal identity. A series of self-portraits show her wearing various flags as a *hajib*, while her 2008 "Prayer Mat Flag #12" consists of shredded American and Iranian flags mixed together on a rectangular stand. This year, she also embroidered a keffiyeh print onto an American flag. In these works with the flag, Rahbar approaches its tangled meanings from the uneasy vantage point of someone who was raised in America, but never felt fully American.

Born in Tehran in 1976, Rahbar left Iran with her family when she was five years old. After training in fashion design at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, she went on to earn a Masters in Fine Art degree at London's prestigious Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. After turning away from fashion as superficial, Rahbar redirected her talents to film, photography, textile sculpture and installation art. But as an outgrowth of her fashion background, fabric, touch and texture play prominent roles in Rahbar's work, working within the framework of a didactic foundation engrained at Saint Martins. Though her work is visually compelling and her sensitivity to color and composition produces arrestingly beautiful images, her fundamental goals are intellectual. The sensually seductive aspects of Rahbar's flag sculptures lured me to her ideas when she sent me an introduction to her work through the email address on my Saatchi Online contributor's profile. At that time, Rahbar was representing her work primarily through Saatchi Online while she embarked on a tour of American universities organized as part of the [Human Rights Awareness Tour](#) program. Her signature flag sculptures were also set to appear on the cover of activist attorney and author Melody Moezzi's 'War on error: real stories of American Muslims' and an album by Iranian hip hop star YAS. I was so taken with the images and her courageous confrontation of deeply divisive politics that I invited her to an interview for 'Alef', the Middle Eastern fashion and art magazine for which I was Arts editor. And though Rahbar's work was indisputedly more political than any artist 'Alef' had featured before, we met for lunch at Manhattan's Café Gitain, the Moroccan restaurant in Nolita which serves as a stylish canteen for much of Manhattan's art and fashion community.

She was a scintillating conversationalist. We discussed the symbolism in "Oppression," a broad series of photographs in which Rahbar posed in the Khakhe Golestan wearing traditional Iranian clothing while holding a pomegranate, a powerful symbol in Persian cultural history. I invited her to participate in "Regional Delicacies: Alef's Art Messe," the show I curated last March for Dubai's Creek Art Fair. The ensuing profile in 'Alef' stimulated more positive feedback than anything I had previously run for the magazine, and the response to her work was wide, warm and respectful.

Since that time, Rahbar has earned pledges of allegiance from collectors including Charles Saatchi and the young and dynamic Chinese-American and London-based collector Jason Lee, and has been widely shown in venues throughout the world. Here we



*Sara Rahbar, 'Flag #5, 2007  
Textile/mixed media, 65x35*

**ANA FINEL HONIGMAN:** What kind of responses have you gotten for the flags?

**SARA RAHBAR:** I have had nothing but positive responses to the work. I think that the work's physical appearance attracts people and draws them in. My goal with my work in general is to start a thought process and to show another perspective, rather than attempt to force-feed any one idea or any one way of looking.

**AFH:** Why do you choose the mediums you do for the statements you make?

**SR:** My background is painting, and I still feel as if I am painting.

**AFH:** But you're not.

**SR:** But I am still working with color and composition. I am still weaving a story. Some of the flags are also a bit like tapestries. I am weaving history.

**AFH:** How do you select the precise textiles you use for each individual flag?

**SR:** I have no system for selecting the fabrics. The work is created organically. I used to create these pieces while traveling around Iran and working as a freelance photographer. In the process of living, traveling and working with various filmmakers all over Iran the work would be created. I would just collect various fabrics, metals and other unique pieces as I went from place to place. Now I create the work in the process of going back and forth between America and Iran. And I select the fabrics according to the stories that I want to tell. It's all a very natural process of living and allowing the work to flow effortlessly from my life.

**AFH:** And like tapestry, is the narrative as important as the images' visual impact?

**SR:** I am using these pieces to tell a story. The series are like books, they take time to develop and each piece is a page, and all together they complete something; a story, a time, a moment. Each flag is like a page.

**AFH:** Are each of the flags telling distinctly different stories from one another?

**SR:** Yes and no. Sometimes a single piece tells its own particular story. But most of the time I do the work in series and in that context, each piece relates and communicates with the other pieces. It is a story told through fabrics and memories.

**AFH:** Are these memories yours or are you referring to broader cultural memories?

**SR:** These pieces are a direct reflection of my history of going back and forth between Iran and America. The flags tell the story of my life living in between these borders. They are an organic bi-product of my life.

**AFH:** Are they only representations of your process in making them, and actually traveling between American and Iran to create

**SR:** Being born in Iran and escaping during a war, and after a destructive revolution, and finding refuge in the very country that sponsored it all, this is my life and my work is my story told. The work occurs somewhere traveling between the two countries. Somewhere between the invisible borders, and somewhere between the distances, is where the meaning is formed. For me, the meaning is born upon coming back from an Iran, where everyday commodities like rice and fruit have become too expensive for some people to buy. In Iran, poverty high and morale is at an all-time low. And then I return to America's mass consumption, acted-out theatrical elections, and all of its propaganda, brainwashing and chaos. That is when the work happens. It happens as a result of what I am exposed to and of what I choose to focus on. The ideas punch me in the face. And then the work just comes together somehow. That is now the stories form.

**AFH:** Do you see your flags as a more authentic representation of America's strong immigrant history than the standard red, white and blue?

**SR:** "Authentic" is a tricky, tricky word, as who is to say what is real and what is "authentic". We live in a world filled with different interpretations of things. It's all so strange isn't it? There are all of these recorded memories that we are all holding so tightly. We are all not living in the present. We are only reacting to the past. All of these flags, colors, symbols and shapes are so strange to me. But, what's even stranger to me is the way we react to them and the value that we give to them. I do not fully understand all of this. But I am beginning to through my work and through this process of deconstructing and reconstructing my intentions. There is no right or wrong.

**AFH:** So your work is only intended to raise questions?

**SR:** In the end, art only offers another interpretation. We are all standing on different sides of the same cup, so we all have different perspectives on the cup's contents. My work is my perspective on things. It is only my own personal interpretation.

**AFH:** Can you elaborate on that perspective? What are you hoping to convey through the flags?

**SR:** It's quite difficult for me to put the processes behind my work into words. It's just a gut instinct, a natural way of being and a natural response to my surroundings. What I really want is to shift viewers' perception and their perspective. I tell my own private and sometime public stories through the work. But everyone does not always see what I saw when I create the work and therefore, they do not always read my exact intended messages. But, that doesn't particularly worry me. I am not attached to the specifics of my meaning. I create the work and then, the rest is out of my hands. It's something that comes from within, flashes of concepts, colors and images; it's all quite abstract and organic. There is just an unexplainable process that occurs in my head that no one can see but me, and I try to get it out as best as I can through the work.

**AFH:** Have you selected materials from your cultural origins as an attempt to familiarize yourself with the flag, and its symbolic significance?

**SR:** Perhaps that is why I made the very first piece. But later on, the work just took on its own life. Now it's much more than that. I am recording history with this work. It's not just about me any more. The work addresses a bigger picture now.

**AFH:** What is your emotional response when you see an American flag?

**SR:** I used to feel anger, but now it's just a beautiful curiosity. I can say that it's also now a bit of an obsession. I am questioning something, and trying to understand it.

**AFH:** What were your early associations with the American flag?

**SR:** I first came to America I was very young. When I arrived here, I did not know the language and had a great deal of difficulty fitting in. School was a complete nightmare for me. And it was in the very beginning of my time in America when that I had my first run in with the American flag. I have a very distinct memory of that encounter. At a very young age I was asked to stand and salute the American flag in school and when I refused, I was told that either I salute or I have to leave school. This memory stayed with me. I'll never forget it.

**AFH:** When you were a child, were the children more xenophobic or did you also feel animosity from adults?

**SR:** I think in that time it wasn't about any certain age group there was just a general ignorance regarding the Middle East. At that time that people still thought that Iran and Iraq were the same country, and that the entire Middle East was just Arab.

**AFH:** As Winston Churchill said, "War is God's way of teaching Americans geography."

**SR:** Well, I think that most people are a direct reflection of their geographic location's influences. People's government, their media, their political atmosphere and so on, influence them. Let's just use the situation of possible war with Iran as an example. The average American may react and feel differently than let's just say, the average German. So, we must consider a country's relationships with war, their history, their educational systems and the media's role as all of these factors forming their people. We



*Sara Rahbar, 'Love Arrived And How Red', 2008  
series of 11 photographs, edition of 6  
60x30 ins and 30x20 ins*



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**AFH: Do you think sensitivity towards otherness has increased in America? Or have things not really changed?**

**SR: When 9/11 occurred, I remember my fear of speaking Farsi in the streets. We received threats if we did not put the American flag up by our home. There were conversations about, "whose side are you on" and "are you with them or with us." Iranians were threatened and terrorized at airports, and so on. All this just re-triggered everything. And the obsession began.**

**AFH: Do you think America is dishonest about the degree of creative and personal expression it makes possible for dissenting voices?**

**SR: YES....Wait, is this a trick question?**

**AFH: Ha. Answer honestly.**

**SR: Then "YES." Although, if I were to compare, things could be a lot worse.**

**AFH: Right, as John Stewart said, ""War is the American Way to Teach Geography."**

**SR: That is true. But in America things are hidden beneath the surface, so we don't see them. And sometimes these hidden factors**

hidden beneath a river of pink frosting, so sometimes you forget a lack of freedom exists. But I must say that the more I travel to different countries, the more I see how similar we are. We all have much more in common than we would like to think.

AFH: I remember you and I talking about different beauty rituals and concerns shared by Middle Eastern and Jewish women. Treading and sugaring could bring peace in the Middle East if women were only encouraged to discuss how we have more in common with each other than with any fair, fine, haired European. Do you self-identify as a feminist?

SR: No, the last thing I want to do is to take on another label. I care about certain issues and choose to take on certain subjects that are important to me and that I am passionate about. But I feel like all of these labels and names are causing so much separation between us, they create unnecessary spaces and gaps, they cause boarders and barriers to go up. And I feel that they play a major role in keeping us divided, and separate. They put into place this mindset, that we are so different from one another. I don't believe in the borders created by the devotion towards a flag, a country, or, a religion. The only thing I want to do with these titles that have created so much separation between us, is shed them.

AFH: But isn't the purpose of language to express belief? If you eliminate "labels" then don't you also eliminate people's ability to declare themselves?

SR: As J. Krishnamurti wrote, "The difficulty is the desire to live in a certain frame. Can I break the frame? I can do so only when I see the truth: that the frame is causing fear and that this is strengthening the frame. Identification is an escape from the self."

AFH: Or isn't identification just a demonstration of self-awareness?

SR: Things are a lot simpler than we would like to see them. I think that "labels" and this whole idea of "the declaration of the self", is not so much about language & communication. Rather it is a form of security. We love to fold, label, nip and tuck. We want to place things into organized little drawers next to our underwear. We need to process and define everything. We live in a constant state of the fear of the unknown, of not being able to control and understanding everything. And our only solution to this is defining, labeling and putting things into categories and groups. And this is fine when it comes to things, the only problem is when that when we do this with people, they begin to appear like things to us, and we disconnect from one another.

AFH: Are words and symbols separating people, or are they simply the surface manifestation of the complexities they represent? How will removing the signs cure problems?

SR: The displaced object, is it really displaced in its space, or is it only displaced in the narrowness of our minds...it's not so much about curing problems as it is about progression or perhaps just another way of looking at things. Once we realize that we do not need these signs, these symbols, these definitions we will see that we have been walk through life thick with misconceptions sentencing ourselves to obsolete lies that we have labeled as truths. Just like when we are cut and our blood begins to clot in order to save us and prevent us from loosing more blood. We begin building wall after wall as a defense mechanism. Partitioning our true self from others and from our selves. Hiding away our natural way of being thinking we will be safer this way, only numbing our selves more and more creating gaps within ourselves we create gaps with others. Unable to breath as the layers get thicker and thicker, unable to connect with others, looking every which where for the answers, except within our selves.



Sara Rahbar, 'Flag #19, Memories without Recollection, 2008  
Textile /mixed media, 80x46

AFH: What do you see as universal human qualities which we all need to acknowledge, in order to undercut feelings of "separation" or division?

SR: It's not a thought process, but a state of being. We do not fall into it or out of it, and it isn't something that causes us grief or pain. There is no suffering when it comes to it, and it's not something that happens to us so much as it is a part of us. It is not something to control, to dissect or to understand, and it exists in each and every one of us. If neurons are our building blocks, than this is our foundation, it's what everything else is built upon. It is in essence the lack of fear, the unknowingness of a child, it is tranquil and serene, and it exists in a place where our judgments, memories and stories are meaningless. It exists in that place where we all have but have hidden underneath blankets of fear that have now become our blind spots. The key is to learn from our experiences to grow from them and not become jaded and stopped by them. It is Love, and it is what is left after the storm.

AFH: Are you interested in, and influenced by, the work of artists from the seventies through the nineties who explicitly and intensely deconstructed identity? Or do you distance yourself from that school of art thought?

SR: I respect these artists and their work greatly. But I don't feel that any one specific group of artists, or any one specific train of thought has influenced me. My work comes directly from my life and from my experiences. I did not have formal training in art, and I have always been influenced by a very random assortment of things. I am figuring it all out as I go along and as I live, and the not knowing and the newness of it all is the best part. With every new idea a new world opens up.

AFH: How important is your identity to the message of your work?

SR: To be quite honest this whole concept of identity does not ever cross my mind when I am working, and it is not even a factor for me. I see a bigger picture when I am working and sometimes it philosophical, sometimes its historical and other times it's all quite abstract. But I never specifically think about my identity when I am working. When I was younger this was important to me, but after a certain age it just seemed so irrelevant, small and silly, to put that much focus on me. I work and the message comes out organically after, I just have flashes of concepts, colors and ideas, certain subjects, issues, shapes, colors and objects just stand out to me and the work just organically happens as I live my life. Yes I was born in Iran and I live I America and this plays a role in my work, but it is not the core of my work and by all means not the entire focus of it. We are all human beings, we are from the same fiber, and all of this other stuff we have made up to some how make sense of things, to some how be able to understand and explain things, and I think its all quite funny and ironic, so I am just playing around with it all like a cat does with a ball of yarn.

AFH: How does your heritage influence your art?

SR: My work is a mirror image of my life; my geographic locations, my history, my present, my environments, and my memories. And my heritage is a part of that, it is a part of my life, and so it plays a role in the background of my work.

AFH: Do you consider yourself Persian or Iranian?

SR: This morning I asked my mother and brother this very question as it was haunting me when I first read it. I wanted to just write, "I consider myself neither, I only consider myself a human being. " But over this 10 hour debate over breakfast of what makes us who we are, and that this concept of being "Iranian American", or "African America" and renaming ourselves according to our passport status, and layering on your identities, well the whole thing just confuses the hell out of me, and leads me to my first instinctual response to all of this: " Neither, I consider myself a human being". These titles - feminist, female, Iranian, American, straight, Muslim, Buddhist, democratic leftist and so on - exhaust me. I am human and so are we all. The rest is just our lifestyle preferences. They do not need to come between us. And we do not need to put so much emphasis on them. We need to stop building new borders on top of new barriers, and stop separating from each other so much. This is what is causing all of this chaos between us, and this is the cause of all of these wars. We no longer relate to one another, as we see our selves as so very different from one another when in the end we are not, we are exactly the same. We need to stop getting so caught up in all of this bullshit that we have made up our selves. In the end it's just, colors, shapes and symbols. It's like me punching out another artist because his work looks different from mine. We live in a strange, strange world my friend and I am just observing and reacting to it and the outcome of it all is my work