



<http://middleeastcontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2010/04/exhibit-03-whatever-we-had-to-lose-we.html>  
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EXHIBIT 03 - WHATEVER WE HAD TO LOSE WE LOST, AND IN A MOONLESS SKY WE MARCHED  
Exhibition Text by Shaheen Merali

Beyond the moral crossroad of war, atrocity and surveillance the exterminating angel looks on...

Rahbar's passionate encounters seem to overflow from the pages of her notebooks, which resemble an ethnographer's sketchbook, to the folds, straps and stripes that make up her predominantly textile assemblages. The need for the term, "Predominantly", can be attributed to the fact that textiles form only a part of the everyday and everywhere that finds itself caught in the crossfire of these magnificent and beautifully observed, layered works. Flags form the basis of much of her work and, increasingly since 2007; she has worked with embroidered cloth in the form of rectangular pieces. All of these embroideries have their origins either in domestic usage or are employed ritually in ceremonies for the family, tribe or nation or on religious occasions. The fact that they form a basis for the concept of identity in her furtherance of their role and purpose in her artworks imbues them with even greater significance and appeal as we ultimately recognise ourselves within them.

The flags and these embroidered pieces both provide a loaded plane, a cultivated form, of difference but definitely recognisable as heritage; they allow the viewer to identify their place of origin, possibly arousing the first stirrings of prejudice. To a lay-person, the embroideries seem to reflect a certain type of Middle - Eastness or a part of central Asia, in the way the motifs, colours and stitches crisscross the moody background hues to make abstract shapes informed by land and natural forms. A prime example is the textile work I wait for the sun to return, and for another birth, which from its title symbolically asks for a regeneration and the notion of waiting and time. It seems that Rahbar, like many artists of our time, is in this limbo of observing an unleashing with unpredictable results; one that is affecting the global standard like a virus. In the work mentioned above, small groups of similar people enact similar, often violent, acts on each other. Hooded and masked men look out from their work in postures of a heightened masculinity, carrying their weapons of choice, guns, sticks and rocks. The viewer is left to question - are these protestors or civil police? Against a gory backdrop of a diagonal grid that resembles a sun-kissed mosaic, a kaleidoscope of terror and terrorists becomes an ingrained pattern like that of eventualities, which are currently working on creating a new cold world.



In the cases of the flags, prejudices are frighteningly mixed with a sense of patriotism (depending on who and where you are)- of the reality of nation states that seem to be on the verge of war, if not disturbingly close to the vacuity of a stand-off that has already succumbed to a diplomatic disaster. The two countries implicated in the work are, of course, the two places that Rahbar inhabits as an artist, a citizen and as an observer- the USA and the Islamic Republic of Iran. A duelling treatise indeed.

The work, flag# 41 what ever we had to loose we lost, and in a moonless sky we marched, is another typical use of morose wit within a poetic stoma as a title for her work. The main subjects of this work are the iconic beauties of the American democrats, the assassinated presidents- the Kennedy brothers, JFK and RFK. They feature as portraits in a heavy, dark, nearly pomegranate red background of stitched saddle-bags and gun belts. In the midst of this portraiture a flying eagle tries to land on the White House, whilst, in one corner, a crucifix with army appellations hangs sadly over the whole composition. Rahbar has a penchant for dramatic compositions that are blazoned with the symbolic glaze of Americana, where violence contrasts with the folkloric, almost innocuous, richness of tribal artefacts from Iran. These flags are territorial markers of her understanding of a fractious history between the two nations, which now remains encased like the basis for the designs and symbols, employed in a hidden past of violated glories and inexperience of global domination. These textile works like seepages, numbered as this one is as #41, forty first evaluations of past specters that have come to haunt contemporary atrocities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and nearby Iran.

The final suite of images is a recent series of photographs, all against a dark, barren, black background. Here the subject is the artist herself - to be more precise the artist's back is the subject. Dressed in a number of differing costumes, a continuous obsession with texture, destiny and design is further explored by a series of performative poses, using a number of props and stylisations. Similar to the flags and embroidered textile works, the title for the series prepares the viewer for its intent. I lay in the darkness of an anonymous grave, stripped of you, I remain is at first glance a pared-down, quieter, even meditative work in its relationship to the busy overbearing of the textile work. On closer inspection, the photographic works carry an amended set of information but still flex within an existing, if not a heavily symbolic, space of motif that carries on playing an important part of carriage for Rahbar. The visual, which leaps between flags and embroidered spaces, allows the viewer to fix and multiply meanings in those contradictory procrastinations that appeal to our temporal senses of space, in relation to these spectral times. A further reasoning is quietly introduced in these photographic revelations of a female back, its face turned, its identity no longer of value whilst a striking intention of time develops. They are symbolically reminiscent of the famous 1988 painting by Gerhard Richter, Betty, - a romantic but powerful portrayal of his daughter looking out of the frame and into time itself. Like Rahbar's work, Betty, is adorned by a richly embroidered jacket that becomes as important as the mystery of the averted gaze.

The sartorial rage.

In folding all her works into this trifocal embrace, Rahbar makes apparent that she is, after all, a product of an unevenness that has exploded in our faces; an inequity of disruption and uncertainties that evaluates us as we try to comprehend how it 'plays' with our lives and values. Her explorations in all three medias, textile works, new embroideries and photography allows a space in which to evaluate her notion of aesthetic continuity within a context. For Rahbar, like many of her contemporaries, this context is mindful and interested in asserting its right to speak freely and openly about the advancing strategies that no longer upgrade freedom or values of democracy but rather strangulate peace. These works speak of the processes that have currently been fortified within a shock doctrine that is burying long-fought battle cries that had seemingly permitted civility and diplomacy.

Her work is important for it acts like a witness box, informing us of the shameful reversal of fortunes, Like a visual human cry, leaping between the incensed anxieties of un-belonging and the dark clouds remaining over our heads, her work captivates us with its devilish intentions.

POSTED BY S BHAGCHANDANI AT 12:49 PM

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