

# A FADED UTOPIA

SARA RAHBAR REFLECTS ON HER CHILDHOOD EXILE FROM IRAN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HER WORK.

BY THORSTEN ALBERTZ



As she walks hundreds of miles through the northern mountains of Iran, a young girl's heavy steps sink her light boots—manufactured for dusty desert roads—deep into the snow. With the sun about to rise, a family of four makes its way across the hostile landscape, anxiously looking for shelter, a cave where they can hide during the day before setting off again at night.

It sounds like the opening sequence of yet another docudrama, but this is the true story of Sara Rahbar, her father, mother and baby brother as they fled Iran in 1982. In the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and during the early stages of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), Rahbar's parents decided to escape. They had been forced to make a covert exit as the visas they had previously been granted were destroyed when Iranian militants took over the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979. Selling everything in their home, the Rahbars paid smugglers to take them to the Turkish border. The traffickers were supposed to guide them from one tiny mountain village to the next, but after a week they abandoned them.

"We were left to die," Rahbar remembers. Luckily, however, one of the smugglers returned to help them. "His name was Ali. For the rest of the trip until we crossed the border, I rode on his back—leaving hell for heaven, leaving Iran for the US."

But the US never became the utopia her parents had promised her. Rahbar's mother, a social worker, continued her studies in the US but eventually gave up in order to open an Iranian restaurant with Rahbar's father. He, however, could not accustom himself to the new culture. Rahbar remembers that it felt as if her father had never really left Iran. He constantly traveled back and tried to convince the family to return with him, but Rahbar's mother decided to stay in the US with the children. Eventually, in 2002, he decided to return to Iran permanently. "My heart was breaking into a million little pieces," the artist recalls. "So was my family and my life."

Rahbar studied design at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology and in 2004 she continued her studies at London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. From there, she flew to Tehran for the first time since she had fled, arriving in the middle of the 2005 presidential elections that brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. Working as a photographer, she documented the event.

After six months in Iran, she returned to New York, where she began to create the emblematic flag series for which she is now well-known. For *Flag #1* (2006), Rahbar tore and shredded various fabrics from Tehran's bazaars and sewed them onto a US flag, covering the red and white stripes and revealing only the stars in the top-right corner.

Rahbar created *Flag #1* at the height of international discontent with the Bush administration. Hence, one could easily misinterpret her works as a statement against the occupation of Iraq. The shredding and tearing was in fact the long-needed catharsis for her disappointment with her parents' divorce. She sewed symbols of her Iranian heritage onto the US flag, a metaphor for the way she was forced to live in a different country as a young child and the unresolved memories she harbored thereafter.

Many might also mistake the applied textiles as merely "Middle Eastern." However, most of them are

specifically Persian. *Flag #37* (2008), for example, subtitled "The wind will carry us home," shows two metal figurations of the Persian lion as it appeared on the Iranian flag and in passports until the current, post-Revolution flag was adopted. Other subtitles, such as "Use this distance to forget who I am" (*Flag #16*, 2008), "Memories without recollection" (*Flag #19*, 2008) and "Whatever we had to lose we lost and in a moonless sky we marched" (*Flag #41*, 2009), unmistakably allude to the artist's autobiography. The latter has an embroidered image of the White House, an American eagle flying over it and portraits of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. Together with US military epaulettes, verses from the Quran cover the left-hand side of the flag, reading: "There is only one God and Mohammad is his prophet." A small crucifix is attached to the top-right corner.

The juxtaposition of such iconic and highly charged symbols throughout her work invites a multitude of interpretations. Because of her biography, Rahbar's work personifies contemporary political anxieties—the conflict between Western nations and numerous Islamic governments and extremist groups in West Asia.

Rahbar's flags gained her recognition in the art world in very little time—a heavy burden on any young artist's career. "I'm ready to move on," she says. "I'm ready to grow and I hope that people are ready to grow with me." Looking to the future, she continues: "I'm based in New York, staying here for now, and building my studio. I will never really be able to sit still in one place, as that is just my nature. But I have moved on from the need to go back to my past—my questions about it have been answered. I'm at a new chapter in my life."

Even though in her "Flag" series she was simply trying to come to terms with her personal history, the mood of the times led her audience to think of her as a politically motivated artist. Ironically, now that she has achieved closure on her past, her new work



is transforming her into exactly the kind of figure her audience thought she was all along: an admonitory conscience of our times.

In "War Series" (2008–10), Rahbar attaches predominately military objects, such as holsters, whips and water canteens, to army backpacks. One work, *They Take Us Wherever They Want Us to Go* (2010), features a gas mask in the center of a backpack. Various gun holsters and cartridge belts surround the eerie-looking mask. Rahbar's work records history, reflecting on the conflicts of our time. Yet, sometimes there is so much she wishes to express that she does not know how to voice it all; she explains that at those moments she feels as if she were suffocating. "That is why I started using gas masks." The "War Series" is a poignant but troubling fusion of the artist's background and a broader pacifist outlook on contemporary global events.

While the use of textiles has become Rahbar's trademark, her oeuvre perfectly balances the aesthetic appeal with making viewers contemplate the global sociopolitical context of our times. Nevertheless, Rahbar remembers herself as a seven-year-old who started to paint to articulate her thoughts and emotions. "I began as a painter," she says, "and I still feel like a painter—only now it's with textiles."

**SARA RAHBAR** with selected artworks from her studio in New York, 2009. Photo by Curtis Hamilton for ArtAsiaPacific.

**SARA RAHBAR** in front of two US flags hung on the walls of her New York studio, 2009. Photo by Curtis Hamilton for ArtAsiaPacific.



# WORDS UNBOUND

A CENTURY-OLD CHINESE DICTIONARY INSPIRES XU BING TO INVENT HIS OWN LEXICON.

BY DON J. COHN



Xu Bing is a man of many words. For his mixed-media installation *Book From the Sky* (1987–91), he singlehandedly created a new, absurd Chinese font of some 4,000 characters. This form of written double-talk combines the phonetic and significant elements of the written language in random ways, rendering them meaningless—English equivalents might look like: florapyre, sincemound, manualsix, praydog. From 1994 to 1996 Xu invented *Square Word Calligraphy*, a script that uses Chinese brushstrokes and graphic forms to spell words in the Western alphabet, and made it accessible to the public via gallery classrooms and online tutorials. He has also broadened the reach of his proprietary languages with *Book From the Ground* (2003–), a computer program that translates sentences typed in English into a hieroglyphic-like font of icons and internationally recognized signs.

Xu's work with the Chinese language comprises papermaking, printing, binding—and unbinding—books, scrolls, prints and rubbings, and extends to silkworms, pigs, sheep and mythological Chinese phoenixes. It has generated hundreds of thousands of critical words in many languages, and won him a USD 500,000 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 1999, the first ever given to a Chinese artist. While *Book from the Sky* leaves Chinese readers entertained and discombobulated, *Square Word Calligraphy* is an attempt to teach non-Chinese readers something about the structure of their own alphabetic languages and about Chinese at the same time. Compared to *Book from the Sky*, which, presented in mausoleum-like solemnity, is often read as a critique of the absurdity and blasphemy of the Cultural Revolution and a denial of Chinese tradition, *Square Word Calligraphy* proposes a mild, resigned yet didactic form of interaction that does little to disguise a plea for universal intelligibility.

But Xu Bing is also a man of few words. Nerdy, in the best sense of the word, he maintains a thoughtful, quiescent demeanor, and his pauses after questions are eight months pregnant. But this is not surprising, as his works—and thus, one assumes his life—bear the vast, complex, neurotic burden of Chinese literati culture. The son of a professor of history at Peking University, Xu is now vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, the most prestigious art institution in China.

Another fruitful site of ambivalence in his career is his dual identity as scholar and craftsman. In prerevolutionary China, the educated classes disdained physical labor of any kind; calligraphy and painting, strumming a lute or zither and literary pursuits were encouraged. Farming, weaving and manufacturing were carried out by specialist craftsmen. Xu clearly works with his hands, but the elegance of his presentations leaves little trace of manual labor. He demonstrated monastic patience and dexterity, both manual and mental, in carving the woodblocks from which *Book from the Sky* was printed; he mastered the life-cycle of silkworms for the “American Silkworm” series (1994–), in which hundreds of the creatures spun unnaturally large cocoons around books, computers and newspapers in a micro-Christo project. Xu even became intimate enough with pigs to stencil his faux languages on their flesh and encourage them to mate in a sort of barnyard Babel.

Returning to academic life in Beijing in 2008 after 18 years in the United States has put much pressure on the time Xu devotes to his work. He maintains a studio and home in Brooklyn, New York, in a former Italian bakery, where his assistants proudly show visitors the remains

of a walk-in brick oven. He manufactured a huge pair of phoenixes, male and female, out of discarded metal parts, which he showed at Beijing's Today Art Museum in March and at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. He also has commissions for the new US Embassy in Beijing and the new, IM Pei-designed Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC.

In November, Xu will visit the US to brush up his calligraphy in Boston, joining nine other Chinese artists invited to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) to react to and interact with the museum's collection of Chinese masterpieces, and create new works. For “Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition,” the MFA will display traditional objects alongside their commissioned counterparts. No savvy artist would disclose his brainstorm a few months before an opening, and that would spoil the fun anyway. But of the ten artists selected—Li Huayi, Arnold Chang, Liu Dan, Qin Feng, Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong among them—Xu is the only one who has, in his nonintrusive way, meticulously retraced the footprints of the mythological founders of Chinese civilization.

In his New York home is a copy of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, a reference tool of more than 45,000 characters first compiled in the 18th century and frequently reprinted during the remaining two centuries of the Qing dynasty, when it was considered the standard lexicon, the Webster's or Oxford English Dictionary of its time, complete with citations. As the most extensive Chinese fonts today contain no more than around 12,000 characters, the majority of the entries in *Kangxi*, named after the Qing emperor who sponsored the work, are archaic—or, perhaps to describe them more accurately, dead, extinct.

Xu's reliance on an outdated but once canonical dictionary, the tool of a social system in which literacy was for the most part confined to a tiny, ruling elite, offers a comment on the current state of the written language in China. In the 1950s, the written forms of



thousands of Chinese characters were “simplified” in an attempt to make reading and writing easier for the masses; in the 1950s, more than 70 percent of the Chinese population, and some 25 percent of Communist Party members, were functionally illiterate. Simplification and mass education increased partial literacy rates, but at the same time, the Chinese Communist Party kept a tight rein on what could be printed, and the fact that the masses only had exposure to propaganda, only further distorted the notion of “literacy.”

Xu's copy of *Kangxi* is a pocket-sized lithographic edition, printed in Shanghai more than a century ago. Lithographic printing, introduced to Shanghai in the 1870s by British entrepreneurs, revolutionized both the printing industry and educational system at the time by making available inexpensive, portable versions, bound in Western fashion, of formerly costly, lengthy texts that were an essential part of the curriculum of the civil-service examinations that were only abolished in 1903. Today there is even an online version of the dictionary ([www.kangxizidian.com](http://www.kangxizidian.com)).

While a visitor examined the publication data in the book, Xu remarked that the copy belonged to one of his ancestors, and that *Kangxi* was the only book he referred to when creating the printing blocks for *Book from the Sky*. It is no small irony, then, that a Chinese artist whose life spans the 20th and 21st centuries should be pulling extinct locutions, perhaps 1,500 years old, from an 18th century book, reprinted with 19th-century Western technology. No matter how many pages he turns, and in what direction he turns them, the next page has something new to say.

A 19th-century edition of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, a reference tool of more than 45,000 characters first compiled in 18th century China. Collection of Xu Bing.

Photography by Pete Deevakul for ArtAsiaPacific.