

April 7, 2016

A nomad returns to her roots

by Jyoti Kalsi

<http://gulfnews.com/culture/arts/a-nomad-returns-to-her-roots-1.1705227>

Iranian artist Ghazel's exhibition 'Mea Culpa' reflects the feeling of guilt that has driven her work ever since she left her homeland amid war



Iranian artist Ghazel has been living in Europe since 1986, when she went to France to study art. As an artist, she has channelled her own experiences of living away from home to explore themes of displacement, identity and alienation. She is known for her tongue-in-cheek performance videos and installations and her use of symbols such as maps produced in Iran, and childlike drawings of trees, roots, tents and suitcases to comment on these issues.

After years of living a nomadic life abroad, Ghazel has now returned to Tehran, and is in the process of reconnecting with her roots as an Iranian and as an artist. This is reflected in her latest exhibition, "Mea Culpa". The title, which is Latin for "It is my fault", refers to the feeling of guilt that has been a driving force behind her work.

Establishing the link between her guilty conscience and her work is a print of a piece she did in 1990. It features a photocopy of a map of Iran on which she has pasted telex messages sent by her father telling her that the family is fine. "During the Iran-Iraq war there were missile attacks on Tehran. I was in my first year at art school and worried sick about my family. I also lost some friends in the war. I felt very guilty about leaving my family and my country at such a time, and tried to resolve my guilt and grief by doing very serious, complex works filled with typically Iranian symbols. So guilt was the central point of my work from the beginning," Ghazel says. Realising that people did not understand her work, she made a conscious effort to simplify her vocabulary by using childlike drawings, easily understood symbols and a dose of humour. "The first time I drew roots in my work was after I got my French passport, and I was feeling guilty about betraying my father's roots and my identity as an Iranian. The maps I use are printed in Iran and they are metaphors for boundaries, divisions, belonging and being uprooted. I always cover all the flags with ink or paint as a symbolic erasure of borders," Ghazel says.

In this show she has used the maps to create paper planes. "I painted the maps black to represent the darkness around us, ranging from corruption, pollution and political problems to the exodus of refugees and rising rightwing extremism in Europe," Ghazel says.

The planes also appear in a video, where the artist is seen repeatedly trying to fly them in a small claustrophobic space. "These planes symbolise my life. Since 1986 I have been constantly navigating different cities, countries, languages, cultures, and my multiple imperfect identities. I am now studying Rumi in Iran because I felt that after being away for so long I needed the Persian language as a navigation tool to find my roots again in this land," Ghazel says.

The maps also appear in two series titled "Dyslexia" and "Phoenix". In "Dyslexia", world maps covered with black paint are arranged in different orientations to form diptychs, commenting on our dyslexic world and the changing balance of power. In the "Phoenix" series, maps of Iran are painted blue. "I have used various shades of blue to match the colours of the sky and of the blue tiles in different Iranian cities," she says.

Ghazel has also returned to her roots as a film student and a sculptor through sculptures that mimic a "tracking shot" of a row of houses, and a bird in flight, representing mobility, migration and freedom to cross borders.