

At NADA New York, an Iranian-American Artist Uses Tools to Question Social Structures

May 15th, 2015 | Bridget Gleeson

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-at-nada-new-york-an-iranian-american-artist>



"Man is a tool-making animal," wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1778. Philosophers and scientists from Marx to Darwin have elaborated on the definition, and this weekend at NADA New York, the Iranian-American artist Sarah Rahbar explores the theme in a contemporary context.

Rahbar's sculptures, composed of vintage tools and objects including pieces of wood, scraps of bronze, wheels, batons, shoe forms, and rifle stocks, are at once familiar and mildly disorienting. One piece in particular, *Trespassers* (2013), bears a striking resemblance to a standard wall-mounted rack taken from a garage or a tool shed—save for a crucifix planted in the middle. Other sculptures, like *The Comfort of Feeling Safe* (2015), employ similar materials, but the pieces are arranged in a way that's illogical, even bewildering. And the title provokes further questions; after all, the concept of "feeling safe" is not typically associated with a range of objects, like axes, saws, and rifles, that could be used as weapons. Unless, of course, those same objects are used to protect you, or to tame and beautify the wild world around you.

Indeed, Rahbar's works conjure up childhood memories—and intriguing questions about the relationship between child and parent, the vulnerable and the protected, the natural world and the ways we've invented to control it. Memory, and basic human needs, are themes that the artist has arrived at partly due to personal circumstance. Rahbar was born in Tehran; amid the turmoil following the Iranian revolution, her family fled the country. Years later, she pieced together Iranian and American flags for her evocative "Flag" textile series. "Years and years of memories, experiences and attachments and what is the work but a direct reflection of my life? What I'm focusing on, and what is boiling, twisting and turning inside of me," she has said of these collages.

Rahbar's current exhibition, featured at NADA New York by the Dubai gallery Carbon 12, is a satisfying thematic extension of both the "Flag" series and her later "War" series of sculptures and installations built with military paraphernalia. "In the end we are all just visiting and we all come to this world alone and we leave alone," she writes in her artist's statement. "But while we are here we try so desperately to belong to something, to someone and to somewhere." Life is a battle, Rahbar suggests—but only some of the battlefields are easily recognizable.