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LOVE IS SOMETHING HEAVY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MIXED MEDIA ARTIST SARA RAHBAR

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Sara Rahbar is an artist who bravely transverses borders and permeates boundaries. Though often labeled an “Iranian American artist” (her family fled Iran in 1982 during the beginning of the Revolution), she prefers to relocate herself in a collective humanity. Transcending genre, her work ranges from photography and paint to textiles and sculpture. Rahbar’s work reflects this permeability, combining seemingly antithetical ideas – American flags sewn together with traditional Middle Eastern fabrics, hearts made out of military backpacks – in a beautiful and generative juxtaposition.

At the same time that Rahbar moves fluidly between varying geographies and ideations, she maintains immovable strength in herself and her work. She says, “I love strong things.” Here, she’s talking about working with bronze in sculpture. But this statement speaks to the artist’s attitude towards art, selfhood, and humanity at large. In a world where pervasive pain and violence can feel crippling, Rahbar is able to find peace – by going vegan, by thinking critically, and namely, by concretizing our anxieties through art.

Sara Rahbar will be showing new work from now until May 6th at NADA in New York City for Carbon 12 Dubai Gallery. We got to talk to the artist before the opening about exploring identity, documenting history through art, and communicating emotion in the age of superficiality.

OLIVER KUPPER: Your work deals a lot with conflict and identity loss. This sense of tumult has really seeped into your upbringing. Do you have really clear memories of leaving Iran during the revolution?

SARA RAHBAR: No, I really don’t. I have blacked out a lot. I left Iran when I was like four and a half or five. And I can barely remember anything from that whole time period. In the beginning people just assumed that my work was about identity because my first body of work was the flag series, but I wasn’t thinking about identity at all when I made them, it was always about so much more than that for me.

KUPPER: That’s really interesting.

RAHBAR: It's more about what I've witnessed. I'm recording, like a camera, this history that's happening around me. I don't think much about my identity. I don't care much about it, to be honest with you. The only time I care about it is when I am being labeled. Being labeled as "Iranian American" really bothers me. I just don't feel like I'm any of those things. I'm just a human being living on the planet earth.

KUPPER: So at that age, you really had no memory of that. The art you're making now came from a later period. And it was just a circumstance.

RAHBAR: I don't consciously try to bring anything back into my work. Iran is such a faded memory for me. The last couple of times that I was there, I felt so disconnected. The memories are gone and it doesn't feel like home. I've stopped going back. I don't remember anything enough to actually be able to use it in my work. But there's something there. The memories are gone, but the feelings are left. There's a lot that is subconscious – frustration, anger, fear, confusion. But I'm definitely not trying to mesh any two cultures or identities together, I just follow my instincts when it comes to my work.

KUPPER: How old were you when you started to communicate your ideas through art?

RAHBAR: I think I started drawing when I was very little. I think that I was around five or six years old. I remember collecting stuff and drawing. Of course, I didn't think it was anything serious. I just always liked making things.

KUPPER: You were being creative.

RAHBAR: Yeah. I think it was an instinct.

KUPPER: Were your parents really traditional, or did they support you being creative?

RAHBAR: They weren't very traditional. My mom, and my brother were always very supportive. At the same time, I don't think anyone really understood what the hell I was doing or why, including me. There definitely was a fear of, "How the hell are you going to be able to support yourself doing this?" I wouldn't say anyone was religious, traditional, or conservative. Nothing like that at all.

KUPPER: It's rare when a kid wants to become an artist.

RAHBAR: Unless you have a family that has a background in the arts, it can be a kind of scary thing. It's hard to imagine how you're actually going to sustain yourself from doing this. There is a lot of unknown, like everything else in life.

KUPPER: What did your parents do?

RAHBAR: My mom was a social worker in Iran. She worked with runaways and abused children. But when she came to the US with my father they went into the restaurant business. You have your degree when you're in your home country, and you come to a new country and you have to start from scratch. When we came here, we had nothing, and my uncle owned a restaurant. So that's where my father went to work. It was easy and it paid the bills for a family of four. And later on they eventually went on to own their own restaurant.

KUPPER: Well, Americans love to eat. You open a restaurant, and Americans will be there to eat the food.

RAHBAR: [Laughs.] Yeah, you figure, it's a basic necessity...

KUPPER: You went back to Iran, and you worked on a really interesting photography series. What did you discover about your return and this work? What did you discover about yourself?

RAHBAR: That was when I finished school. And by "finished school," I mean I ran out of money. So I had to figure some things out. I didn't understand what it meant to have a body of work, or to do a series. I just knew that I had to find my own voice. My first instinct – and I always go by instinct – was to take a plane right from school in London to Iran. Everything happened like a domino effect. It was the 2015 election, so there was a combination of influences. First, I would go into the studio with all these things I had collected – costumes, objects and decorations that were used for horses and donkeys, random things I'd find in flea markets. At the same time, I was documenting the elections with sound and photography. For some reason, the camera was the first thing that I picked up when I went there. I always painted and drew, but it wasn't enough for me. So I figured, I'll do photography, sound, and projection. Painting always left me feeling like I needed more. Also, in Iran, I had a lack of space, so it was just easier to photograph. Everything was so new and different. I kept going back and forth, photographing and documenting. Now, when I look back on it, I think, "What the hell was that?" Not the stuff on the streets with the election, but the stuff in the studio. I don't know what the hell that was. It was just about objects and color. I was trying to sort some things out. I'm more connected to the sculptures I'm doing now. I feel like the photographs were me trying to resolve something in my head.

KUPPER: Or it was an experiment.

RAHBAR: That period was very experimental. I was also super young. This was ten years ago. It was very raw. Like, "I like this. So I'm going to put it on my head and take a photo." But then again I was just following my very basic and immediate instincts, and I still am. [Laughs.]

KUPPER: Did you ever feel like what you were doing was going to be censored while you were there?

RAHBAR: For sure. But I always knew that I would leave eventually. There was always this angst and discomfort that I felt when I was in Iran. I was always reminded somehow that I was a foreigner and a woman, and this always made me feel very uncomfortable. So I always knew that I could never show the work there, or stay there long term.

KUPPER: Is that why you left, to be able to show that work?

RAHBAR: No. It was like a relationship that comes to an end. It just ran its course. I remember waking up and being like, "I'm done." I'm getting a plane ticket and not coming back.

KUPPER: Interesting. And you went to New York after that?

RAHBAR: Anywhere can be your home; it's for you to decide what "home" means to you. You can restart anywhere. And for me, New York has always felt like my home.

KUPPER: Did the flag series become before or after that? Or during?

RAHBAR: I made my first flag for my graduation project when I was still in London. It was right around that time of the crazy chaos of 9/11. I never thought that in 10 years I would make 52 flags.

KUPPER: As a mixed media artist, what do you enjoy about each medium that you employ, and what are some of their limitations?

RAHBAR: I can't think of too many limitations. I love bronze, and I love wood, and there are so many different kinds of wood and bronze, and so many different techniques that can be used, I'm learning more and more every day. I didn't specifically study art. So I don't have any specific technical skills. I make things and I learn as I go along. And I don't think that that is necessarily a bad thing. I make mistakes, I figure things out and I don't let anything stop me, I keep moving forward no matter what. And I like that freedom. Sometimes, it's a limitation and it can be frustrating. With bronze especially, because it's expensive, definite, and time-consuming. But I feel like it's good to make mistakes, learn and make your own way. Sometimes the mistakes are the best things that can possibly happen, good things can happen when you let go and let things come on their own, naturally.

I always knew that I was going to do sculpture. Working with textiles, painting, and taking photos, always felt safer for me somehow, it took me a while to make that jump to bronze and wood. I had to work up the courage, but now I feel completely free.

KUPPER: There's a lot of freedom, but you also have a lot of control over your materials. It seems like control is also an integral part of your work. Would you say that's true?

RAHBAR: I have issues with control. It's a very strong underlying theme in my work— guns, police nightsticks— objects that hold things down, hold things together, and contain things. I use these objects a lot. It definitely stems from my childhood. I don't like to feel controlled. I have issues with police and authority. It comes through in my work.

KUPPER: What can we expect with your new work being shown with Carbon 12 at NADA?

RAHBAR: It's new work. I'm recording a history that is taking shape and form around me. There are a lot of old tools and guns used in these works. They are like these historical sculptural totem poles. There are so many different elements at play— violence, workers, pain, love; it's the human condition. Being alive on this planet and trying to go from one day to the next. I don't really think it through too much. It's instinctual. It comes from what I'm witnessing around me. And if I sit there and analyze it too much, I will kill it.

KUPPER: It's hard to live sometimes. It's a very intense world.

RAHBAR: [Laughs.] Not to be depressing and negative, but that's how it is.

KUPPER: It seems like we have art to be able to put those pieces together, like a psychological puzzle.

RAHBAR: Exactly.

KUPPER: Which is why your work is so interesting. Is your work about finding peace or coping with war?

RAHBAR: I would like to find peace. I find peace when I'm making the work. I was definitely not at peace when I was younger. I'm getting closer to it as I get older. As long as I'm working, there is peace within me. I'm very aware, that when I'm not working, I'm uncomfortable in my own skin. The work makes me feel comfortable, and allows me to be able to be with myself, and the world around me. My work is very therapeutic for me. It saves me from myself time and time again.

I'm very sensitive, I don't like seeing humans or animals in pain. I'm a vegan, and it upsets me tremendously when I see animals being slaughtered and tortured. Images of war upset me, violence kills me, sometimes it feels like we are constantly trying to kill and eat everything around us. And there is so much happening at the same time, that it's easy to become overwhelmed and feel exhausted and paralyzed.

KUPPER: I agree with you. There's a lot happening.

RAHBAR: You just want to hit pause, and tell everybody to stop what ever it is that they're doing.

KUPPER: You just want to stop and have a moment to think, and get people to consider what they're doing.

RAHBAR: Humans behave very badly. We are constantly attempting to kill off each other, this plant and all the living things that live on this plant with us.

KUPPER: The animal torture, the war– with the Internet, you have so much access to what's going on. It gets even more intense because you can't hide from it.

RAHBAR: Exactly. I go on Instagram, and I get so overwhelmed sometimes. The images, the videos – there's so much access and information. And just because you aren't looking at it doesn't mean that it's not happening.

KUPPER: Do you have any other series that you're working on? Or are you continuing to work with these materials? Do you have a dream project you want to work on?

RAHBAR: I feel like bronze is my dream material. I love strong things. Glass makes me super uncomfortable. Lace, soft fragile things make me uncomfortable. Bronze makes me so happy. I feel like I found my material. And mixing wood and bronze together, that's my happy place. Right now, I'm working on a lot of isolated body parts in bronze. I read this quote the other day by Benjamin Alire Saenz that really got to me: "Love was always something heavy for me. Something that I had to carry." ...That hit me super hard when I read it, and it has been the inspiration for the body of work that I'm working on currently.

Bronze, on its own, can feel cold, but when I combine the bronze with wood and the objects that I collect, it softens it somehow. Making objects with bronze and wood, that's my happy place.