WHEN ‘NO SPACE’ BECOMES ‘TOO MUCH SPACE’

Katrina Kusler meets Sara Rahbar ahead of her new Carbon 12 exhibition and finds the artist having found peace and calm... or has she?
‘In extreme moments of anxiety, I curl my toes, make tight fists...it only felt right (to cast them)’
Sara Rahbar toes categorical lines that the art world is eager to impress upon the dent in contemporary art that she is making (two works recently acquired by the British Museum, current presence at the Centre Pompidou). Call her neo-dada for intuitive assemblage, reference German practice for materials and haven’t Rauschenberg or Marisol been thrown into the mix too? Rahbar’s practice is unintentionally shrewd, offering itself to potentially everything, but fitting nothing in actuality. Her trademark use of conflict-mimediated forms permits enough plausible clarity that should be easily definable, but counter-intuitively, there is isolation in her multi-faceted ‘belonging’.

Belonging to an art historical categorisation, not contextualisation, is restrictive, she laments. This applies to her being, too. Rahbar is ‘Artist’ first and last. ‘[My work is] layered with life, definitions and meaning,’ she says. ‘We have enough boundaries, borders and limitations in this world. I want someone 400 years from now to still understand and connect to [my work]. It’s about being human, not ‘Iranian’, ‘American’, ‘Woman’ nor ‘Immigrant’. It’s about being alive on this planet and trying to survive yourself, life and the world.’

Before we consider those secondary factors anyway, we have to rectify where her practice even art historically exists... if she’ll let us.

Belonging is a curious thing; culturally, an amalgamation of globalised (ancient and present) influences; artistically, a seminal text and retrospect. Belonging is something that is easy to say and easier to take for granted... but what happens when you cannot? ‘Third Culture Kids’, a term coined in the 1950’s for children raised outside of their own culture/country reveals a phenomenon of individuals who rapidly absorb and assimilate but lack concrete ‘roots’ to identify fully with anything. They constitute a new ‘non-culture’ culture, a position of permanent flux... fragments that make a new kind of whole.

It doesn’t pertain to the pain of lacking, how can one miss what one never had, rather, the search for cohesion, often clinging to what parts they can. For, as Rahbar objects. ‘Because of experiences in my first few years, I’ve spent the rest obsessively collecting and piecing together in a way that made sense to me... as if I was reliving something, trying to crazy-glue a broken lamp back together.’

Rahbar is referencing fleeing Iran with her family at age four due to the Iran-Iraq war, and merely does what TCKs do best: re-evaluate the parameters of belonging.

Identity is fluid: the nature of existence, the fact we age, acquire life experience, move, and even if we do not, the world around us does. We may passively absorb the changes with our senses, but our mind’s eye pays attention, periodically leaking latent influences. Rahbar’s mind’s eye has been on overdrive, gravitating towards objects instinctively, perhaps referencing the circumstances of her relocation, possibly just indicative of her aesthetic. It causes her

'Unraveling, Confessions' (2013)
works to emerge organically, focusing on one at a time until it reaches the apex. This completes sublimation and catharsis, but Rahbar isn’t sure ‘why’ or ‘how’, this is just way it is. There is no subduing ‘the Beast’ (latent memories) so one must let it be, ‘I just trust and listen when it needs to be heard’.

Rahbar’s oeuvre consists of carefully collected, curated and hoarded objects found at flea markets, vintage auctions and dealers that ‘tackle subjects I want to address, initiating a conversation in my head, building a universe. But it also comes from memory, that feeling of longing, a place I can’t touch or hold onto. With scientific precision, she meticulously reorganises disconnected materials with surprising tenderness… the kind of love expected when creating a state of stable permanence. Juxtaposition is poignant - Rahbar unites objects by hand (drilling, sewing, etc.), an obsessive fix ensuring ‘they’ (her inner, creative and external worlds) do not fall apart. But it is an unsettling harmony, created with objects that are by nature destructive. The stability is instability, what sustains simultaneously destroys in an inescapable catch-22.

‘It’s a vicious cycle. I want and desperately need security and safety, yet I am drawn to things and people that aren’t. I don’t want pain, yet I cause myself pain and am attracted to painful things. You repeat what you know and have learned.’

The paradoxical tone is unmistakable; as is the blunt statement of fact via retrospectively captured moments of anguish. ‘I’m not necessarily trying to be an artist, [but] simply attempting to visually communicate my traumas and emotions… turning something ugly into something beautiful.’ It is beautiful, but it is terrifying; this is the Kantian sublime, embodied in the form of adorned flags, stained tarps, repurposed gas masks, makeshift guns and contorted feet.

The violent materiality does not overwhelm the poetry though, from lengthy emotive titles to the compositionally considered musings on the human condition. While her 2005 flags were heavily-populated with textiles and varying cultural elements exploring her origins, she moved forward with her ‘War’ series (2009-), assemblage using almost exclusively military materials copiously adorned with metal weaponry, abrupt script and ‘blood’ splatters. If ‘War’ was the instigator, the following ‘Confessions’ (2011-) is the aftermath immortalised in sepia-hued mixed media. More sculptural, more humanly identifiable… and thus more agonised with bronzes of her own hands, feet and head attached to chains, rods and boards to represent shoulders, arms and legs with a plethora of near-piercing spikes.

Her choice of appendages, often used historically to indicate vulnerability and
suffering, are body parts that can have pain inflicted upon them without leaving physical traces - much like psychological trauma. Mental discomfort rises exponentially at the awareness of pain but with an inability to see exactly what/why/how. Rahbar associates tension to these irreplaceable essential corporeal elements, 'in extreme moments of anxiety, I curl my toes, make tight fists... it only felt right [to cast them]. Everything that I do requires all three (feet, hands, head)... they are so fragile, so easily broken.'

The artworks may cut into your space, but Rahbar brings you into them, transferring trauma from artist to work to viewer, allowing the spectator to finish the story. Rahbar's memories are hers; we do not need her past in ours to awaken the universally accessible existential quest for stabilising belonging that the works incite. Even superficially, the works beg the question, 'where did these objects come from, why are they together now?'

'I remember when I was a child at museums, I didn't know the artists' names, never read any wall texts,' says Rahbar. 'I was simply moved beyond words by something visually strong, sometimes beautiful. I want that for my work, to surpass labels, time, my - or any - back story. In the end it's 'visual art'... it needs to be visually potent. Anything else is extra. I like works that keep giving every time you see it... like a great book that you never get tired of, discovering new things every time you read it.'

Given the quantity of components substantiating her works, viewers have a rich starting point from which to incite their own sensorial memories.

Memory is also curiously fickle. Residing in your mind, but coming alive through your senses. The art world may decree 'look, don't touch', but you don't need your eyes to understand a Rahbar; they play to each sense; inviting your eyes to rest as you carefully hold that cast-white bronze hand dangling from a chain; asking your sense of smell to cast aside the must of historic patriotic textiles in favour of the gentle jingling of ethnic bells; keeping your fingertips pocketed as your eyes grow accustomed to the accosting...
SARA RAHBAR

‘BUT MY PRACTICE ISN’T DEPENDENT ON ANY ONE THING. AS LONG AS I AM ALIVE I’LL MAKE WORK’

dense unification of stuff. She uses her experience to create an external visceral one, capturing that internalized lacuna both before and after trauma.

‘206 Bones’ (2013), although the next logical step in her trajectory is also a noteworthy shift away from shattering and towards regeneration. Objects no longer lie side-by-side in solitary impersonal confinement. Her body casts, expanded to reference labourers, are still dismembered but not disjointed, now interacting with each other, reassembling into forms that resemble but will never quite be the way they were before… but one step closer to finding a more complete state of being. Rahbar challenges the fragility and inevitable ephemerality of something that should last or exist but doesn’t, gently rebuilding and redefining sustainability with her metaphorical ‘crazy-glue’. Is she transfixed in the past, or does she understand that stability may not exist without instability? Every push has its pull; what happens when the pain stops and the cycle ends?

‘I am calmer and clearer, and as a result, the work is too. Time is also a strong factor. [For] 18 years, I’ve been working, pushing myself to experiment rather than stagnate; the recent series are a more in-depth continuation of the same conversation as flags. This inner voice kept telling me that I’m going in the right direction despite any fears, there is definitely a calm, less resistance, more trust, in my life and work because they are and always will always be intertwined.

But my practice isn’t dependent on any one thing. As long as I’m alive I’ll make work. It’s as natural as breathing, a reflection of where I am emotionally, physically, mentally. I address a lot of heavy subjects but… for the first time in my life, I have found my peace.

Belonging may not need the pre-determination; Rahbar shows it forges itself a new space when there is none. And so it seems, for a moment at least, ‘the Beast’ can finally go to sleep.

Sara Rahbar can be seen 19 October 19 giving a lecture at the British Museum (London), and in 2 November at Carbon 12 with a solo exhibition, ‘Swarming’. [Web: saranahbar.com]

‘Stay, Confessions’ (2014)