Mixed-media innovator Sara Rahbar transitions from textiles to wooden guns to examine economic and political tension in contemporary society.

Sara Rahbar, well-known for her pivotal "Flag" series, has recently moved from working primarily with textiles to wooden and metal assemblages. Art Radar spoke with the artist to learn more about why she is collecting nineteenth-century objects and how her escape from Iran in the 1980s impacted both her life and her artwork.
Iranian-born artist Sara Rahbar roared onto the international art stage in 2005 with her emblematic "Flag" series. Residing in New York for the past 33 years, Rahbar has recently been exploring sculptures made of wood and metal in response to societal tension and violence.

The artist's work has been widely shown throughout the world, including recent offerings at Art Dubai and Art Brussels and is a part of prominent international collections, including those at the Centre Pompidou, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art and the Sharjah Art Foundation.

Art Radar sat down with Rahbar to learn more about her newest series "206 Bones" and "Confessions", what catches her eye at remote flea markets throughout the United States, and the cathartic manifestations of her artwork.

**Origins**

Please tell our readers about your family’s escape from Iran to the United States in 1981, and how that experience plays out in each piece of art that you create.

I don’t believe that I consciously think about the impact on each individual piece or even the impact on my life in general. When I left [Iran], I was four years old, and I’ve been in the United States for 33 years. So, I don’t even think about it. It’s just automatic.

My work is always a reflection of my life: what I’m focusing on, and what is boiling, twisting and turning inside of me. Sometimes I feel like I’m falling apart, coming apart, piece-by-piece. I always feel like I’m right on the edge. Yet, through it all, somehow the work keeps me together. It’s my own private catharsis.

I work so intimately, from my deepest, personal feelings and memories. It’s very emotional. This way, I think, everything has an impact, in every part of my life. Even things that I don’t consciously think I am incorporating, are being incorporated because everything is very deep-rooted. The things that you think have disappeared sometimes show up again and again. This is like therapy for me, this work. It’s all playing a role, even if I am not aware of it.

Regarding how we left [Iran], basically we had all of our paperwork and visas but the Iranian hostage crisis happened and the Iran-Iraq war had started and they closed the borders. We had to escape. We escaped on foot, and it took about seven days. It was not what we anticipated. We were promised cars, airplanes and things which would make it easy, but it was not that way. We were tricked.

There was one point when we were in the mountains, and we ran out of money. Our smugglers pretty much took everything that we had brought. We thought we had enough to get us through. They wanted more, and we didn’t have it, so they left us.

A lot of people died in those mountains. We got lucky. I guess the guy felt sorry because my brother was a baby, and I was four. There was a moment when somebody actually felt bad, and this one guy helped us get to the border. We went from Turkey to Dubai to New York.
Is your artwork a blend of Persian and American motifs, or do you think you’ve been in the United States long enough that you’re drawing primarily from American symbolism at this point?

My immediate surroundings definitely effect me. There are always things that pop up from my childhood when I least expect it. We [just] talked about borders and boundaries. I am working on a piece right now that’s about borders and boundaries and lines that we should and shouldn’t cross. I am remembering every day, things that have to do with our escape and that time. It’s not specific and not conscious. I have to sit there and analyse it, or it just goes right by, like a soft wind, always there in the background. It’s very instinctual. I am not always aware of why I do something, I just trust my instincts.
Would you say you work organically?

Yes, it’s very organic. I don’t map, sketch, analyse or plan things out. I see an object, it triggers something, and I just go with it. Sometimes, I know why. Most of the time, I don’t know why. Years pass and still I don’t know why. I work with what I am drawn to. It’s very organic, and it just comes together.

At this point, as an artist, are you accessing your ideas from a place of trust? How are you guided by the pieces that you choose intuitively?

Exactly. As you said, there’s a trust. That’s something that just comes with time, age and experience. When I was younger, there was a lot of doubt and a lot of confusion. As time passed by and [I created] piece after piece after piece, I just became more in tune with my intuition, and I listen because it never leads you astray. If something’s showing up over and over again, if something is pushing me towards something, there’s a reason for it. I just trust, and now it’s so smooth.

The only bumps in the road now are actually troubleshooting, [such as] figuring out how to attach the pieces together and make the work. The technical stuff. My ideas are so much smoother, I listen now.

You are a mixed-media artist. What found-objects, in specific, interest you most? Why?

It’s hard to say that one object specifically moves me or interests me more than another because it’s constantly in transition and changing. Basically, wherever I am, whatever I see; it’s random.

At the moment, I am working with a lot of wood and metal and objects that hold and tie things together, like chains, a lot of tools. I like objects that are very strong, things that aren’t going to break or fall apart.

I know I am attracted to them for different reasons. I go towards things that are strong, help hold or piece things together and hold them in place. It has a lot to do with ideas of control. Someone once told me that when I was sewing, I was in a state of mind that things around me were constantly falling apart. So sewing was cathartic and I was trying to hold things together.
Whenever I finish something, there’s a [feeling of] ease. There is a calm in the ocean for a short period of time.

**A very full studio**

Are there any interesting or surprising stories behind one specific piece or found-object that you’d like to share?

Actually, this is the only question that you sent that I couldn’t think of anything specific for. It’s because of the amount of objects that I accumulate. I am a borderline hoarder right now. I’ve been thinking of getting a booth at a flea market, or figuring out some other way of getting rid of all of this stuff. I go to places in the middle of nowhere, and compared to the amount of stuff that I see, I don’t buy that much, but still my shelves and tables at my studio are filled, and there are objects and things everywhere.

Sometimes [collecting] is hit or miss. You think something is amazing. You think it’s a great idea, but it doesn’t go through. What do you do? I can’t throw it out! So, you collect and become a hoarder.
Many know of your work through your "Flag" series (2005-2013), a fifty-two piece series using American and Iranian flags. Would you say these pieces are “deconstructed?”

I am just piecing things together and deconstructing something at the same time. Some things are falling apart, and other things are coming together again and deconstruction is definitely a part of it.

How has this series been received by Americans?

I have been asked this question a lot, because it is the American flag, because I live in the United States and because of the extreme sensitivity that surrounds the American flag.

I have been showing this body of work for around ten years now, and I have had a mix of reactions to the work. It was the first body of work that I ever did, and it was a really successful series for me; from the first flag to the last flag.

In no way was this series meant to be angry, hateful or negative in any way. It was just a reflection of my life, as all my work is, in the end. I was just recording history, my history.
Is there a meditative quality to sewing together pieces or painstakingly adding a found object/s to complete a piece? How?

Definitely. I think all of the work is meditative, soothing and cathartic. First of all, I have to do it. I don’t think there was [ever] a point where I thought “I choose to do this.” Find broken things, mend them and put them together. It’s an obsession. When it’s complete, I definitely feel lighter. If I didn’t do this, I can’t imagine what I would do with my life. There’s nothing else that would really get me out of bed.

I am a bit all over the place when I am thinking, processing and planning – especially when pieces are complicated. But when it’s done or when I am working on it, and it’s working smoothly, it’s definitely so soothing and relaxing.

How do you know when a piece is done?

I just know. There are definitely some pieces that I have done immediately. Others, I’ll go back to in a year or so and I’ll think, “That’s what it was!” Sometimes it happens with one or two [pieces] and it bothers you like that name that you forgot and you can’t sleep until you remember it. I just put it aside and keep looking at it. Now, I am calmer. I just let go. If it’s not finished, it’s not finished. I can’t force it but when it’s done, I am so sure. There’s no doubt in my mind.

As a female artist born in Iran and residing in the United States, which visual artist has inspired you most?

I may have to email you a list. I have so many! I don’t ever think about those type of labels such as “Iranian” or “female artists born in Iran and living in the United States.” I always had problems with Middle Eastern shows putting me in the “Iranian” section. When I think of my favourite artists, I never
think about where they are from. I just remember the pieces that moved me.

Sara Rahbar, ‘You gently ripped me to shreds’ from the "Confessions" series, 2013, mixed-media, 42 x 4 x 5 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Carbon 12 Dubai.

New series, new materials
Pieces from your “Confession” series were just shown at Art Brussels 2014. Could you talk about the work *You gently ripped me to shreds* and what the series is about?

When I started sculpture, I immediately went to my hands, feet and head. It was very instinctual. I cast my hands and feet, the positions that my hands and feet are in when I am stressed, angry or nervous. I caught myself doing that once and realised, “I do this every single time.” When I began making [these] sculptures, that was the first thing that I wanted to do.

In *You gently ripped me to shreds*, it’s this tense position with my hands, and the object it’s hanging off of is called a ratchet strap. It’s a device that is used to hold things down or tie things down. It uses tension to hold things in place. They use it for caravans, huge trucks, trailer homes, tie-down packages or to move heavy things like sand or dirt.

[It’s] the same idea with the chains, too. There were so many things in my mind. I was thinking about jail and control and things that make you feel chained down or feel tension. That’s where that came from. "206 Bones“ and the “Confession“ series came from this feeling of tension, violence and pain.

Tell us about your newest series, “206 Bones”. Does the title reference the two hundred and six bones found in the human body?

Yes. I don’t know why this came so naturally. The body parts were all cast in metal but [the title] worked for me. It was all about hands and feet and workers working with their hands and feet. I’ve been working on it for two years, but it seems like it just started. For the first time, I am working with wood. I have fifteen pieces now but I have a long way to go. There are a lot of found objects and [I spend] a lot of the time piecing the wood and metal together with very old pieces of wood. Many of these pieces, tools and things, are from the nineteenth century. So there’s a lot of troubleshooting.

In the beginning, I had no clue. I’d buy these aggressive drills from Home Depot. I’d drill something, and the thing would crack in half [because] it was super old. Basically, I was just learning how to work with the wood. I’ve worked with textiles my whole life, so I was just figuring it out. One of the reasons that I went towards wood was because at one point, I couldn’t ship guns and grenades anymore. If the X-ray machine saw that shape, they’d just send it back, and it was a big hassle.

I was talking with my mom about this and she said, “What about deconstructed guns?” I was in Pennsylvania then, and I started seeing these incomplete wooden guns. I realised I could work with these. Then, I started finding old, wooden batons. There was this idea of force, control and violence. It all kind of stemmed from there and just escalated.

It has to do with this idea of “the worker.” Coal miners, construction workers and making a living wage. There’s been a lot of stuff going on in the last couple of years in America, and all over the world, regarding the economy and how people’s lives have changed; health, education and having a basic quality of life. Taxes. The prison system. All these things. Just the levels of stress and tension on people. Working night and day, year after year and for what? What do we really have at the end of the day? Our governments have become bullies, taking everything that they can by force.

On a personal level, I was feeling it myself with my friends and family. These things really took their toll. Then war and nationalism entered the conversation. I also saw soldiers as workers. Most people do not necessarily want to go to war. The places where they recruit people are in poor neighbourhoods. They go there with promises of education or money for their families. All these things started coming into play, and they really began to play their part in this series.
Sara Rahbar, ‘Those silent and snowy days I watched, it all melt and melt away’, from the “War” series, 2010, mixed-media, 76 x 64 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Carbon 12 Dubai.

Your work is currently exhibited at the Centre Pompidou through 2016. Where else can our readers see your work in 2014 and beyond?

I am having a solo show at Carbon 12 Dubai in November 2014, where I am showing “206 Bones” and “Confessions”. This will be the first time I’ll be able to properly show these series outside of Art Dubai and Art Brussels.

Lisa Pollman