Irreversible violence 2012. Mixed media 41x52 in
By Jesc Bunyard

With work in various media, ranging from photography to installation,
artist Sara Rahbar uses her personal experiences to explore ideas of nationality and belonging.

Tehran born Rahbar has been living in New York for over 30 years. Her most recognizable works are her ‘Flag’ series in which she crafted the American flag from objects and torn fabrics sourced from all over the world, but particularly from Iran and America. I interview her to discuss the themes behind her practice.

What concepts and thoughts drive your practice?

My work is a very instinctive, and its roots stem my life.

I have this deep obsession with piecing and holding things together. Maybe I’m afraid that things are always falling apart around me and by sewing and welding things together, they will some how stay together, and that some how I will stay together. It’s cathartic and very therapeutic for me. I have to do it and I can’t seem to stop doing it, it’s my lifeline, my sanity.

I think that when we are nakedly honest and sharing our basic human emotions, ideas and feelings become borderless. That’s how I make-work; I am just nakedly sharing all that I am witnessing.

Your practice explores autobiographical elements whilst reworking ideas of nationalism. Can you explain a little more about how these aspects interact?

The work is a direct reflection of my life, and I focus on ideas that are important to me and that I am passionate about. Memory also plays its role; what I have lived through and experienced for the last 30 something years has its effects as well.

I am constantly in a state of questioning, dissecting and attempting to understand myself, and all that I see taking shape and form around me.

I have this obsession with flags and ideas of nationality and this need for belonging to something, to someone or to somewhere. My work addresses the human condition, love, pain, fear and violence, attempting to survive ourselves, our lives and our geographic locations.

I have always just wanted to feel a feeling of being safe, a feeling of
security. I haven been running since I was a child, to and away from, people, circumstances and life in general. And I have always longed to just be able to sit and stay for a while and feel like I can trust and let go. I have never felt like that and that longing shows up in my work allot, staring me right in the eyes. I know a piece is complete when I reach a point of salvation and closure; it’s instinctual, like love.

Land of opportunity Flag#12. Mixed media 66x38 in 2008-2013
America Sweet America
God Shed His Light
On Thee

America Sweet America 2011 41.5×68 in
Your work deals with political themes in an aesthetically pleasing or poetical method. Has this always been a concern and why?

It’s not so much a concern, as it’s just my natural way of working.

I’m obsessed with colour and composition and strive for some kind of balance and order in the midst of all of the chaos, and in the whirlwind in my mind where violence, pain and love all live in the same place. I strive to make sense of it all, and in the balancing and composing of the work I find balance and peace, even if only for a short while.

Your flags are probably you most recognizable works. Can you explain a little more about them?

I have been working and experimenting with various types of textiles and collected objects for over 15 years now. The first textile that I began working with was the American flag. I had so much emotional attachment to America, the idea of the American dream and the American flag, that it was the most natural thing for me to do. I was instantly drawn to it and worked with it for about 10 years.

I need to piece things together, to put them back together again in a way that makes sense to me. The flag series was my way of trying to understand something and to find completion with it.

Which medium do you prefer to work with a why?

I don’t really have any preferred medium. I work with whatever moves me and best communicates that which I wish to communicate. I work with materials and objects that I am excited to work with. I love a wide array of textures, colours and shapes and am not attached to anything specific.

Everything is constantly in a state of motion and change. At the moment I like wood and metal, I like tough, heavy duty, strong materials that have lived and survived, and stood the test of time.

Where do you see your work going next?

My best guess would be sculpture. A continuation of what I am currently working on, but perhaps at a much larger scale.
What’s next for you?

My life and work always surprise me and particularly when I think that I have it all figured out, mapped out and planned and organized. What I would really love is a proper studio where I can work at a really large scale and really go above and beyond what I ever thought was possible.
Comfortably numb 2011 38x24 in. Mixed media. War series