

Sara Rahbar on 'Art and Life' at the British Museum

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Similar to masses of individuals born in the twentieth or twenty-first century, Sara Rahbar, a contemporary mixed-media artist, carries the haunting burdens of migration and exile. Yet Rahbar compulsively embroiders, intertwines, and attaches a pastiche of collected objects onto textiles in a somatic process that negotiates her fragmented experience of memory, history, and identity—and lifts its symbolic weight.

Born in Tehran in 1976, Rahbar arrived in America as a child after her family fled a volatile Iran in light of the Hostage Crisis and the start of the Iran-Iraq War. At a lecture entitled 'Art and Life' from 'Different Perspectives on Modern and Contemporary Iranian Artists' at The British Museum on October 19, the artist intimately recalled the chaos that pervaded her life following her displacement from Iran and the tension of belonging to a 'nation' or 'home' imbued in her body of collage, installation, and sculpture.

Rahbar exhibits an autobiographical obsession over situating herself in a time and place obscured by memories of the past and moments of the present. The artist recounted enduring a constant state of flux between Tehran and New York—a state of perpetual bargain and loss—and the confusion it evoked in her.

From memories of "Death to America" chants in Iran, to the visible spectacle of American nationalism during the aftermath of 9/11, Rahbar internalised the exilic condition of altering environments. As she confessed at the lecture, it "... soaked into my skin." She called to mind an impinging sense of unrest as she navigated the pressure to conform and display the American flag or to brave humiliation and discrimination.

Rahbar is an extraordinarily self-aware artist, a "ticking-time bomb," as she labels herself. In the midst of a politically sensitive climate, she selected the American flag as her canvas, to deconstruct the ideology of nationalism and to decipher her complicated notion of



Sara Rahbar, *Narcissist*. Photo: British Museum

belonging.

Flags (2005-14) is a manifestation of subconscious and muddled memories of shifting time and place—a symbolically multi-layered and textured patchwork of collected objects and textiles from Iran and America. The lecture, supported by The Magic of Persia Foundation, marked the

occasion of The British Museum's recent acquisition of two textiles in the series, *Narcissist* (2014) and *Texas Flowers, Flag #22* (2008).

In *Narcissist*, the artist creates an intricate collage of military badges from America, military buttons and bullets from the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, and traditional textiles and hair accessories from Iran. The cascade of survived metal and soft cloth from Iran and America evokes notions of masculinity and femininity that Rahbar attributes to subconscious memories

of her father, mother, and grandmother. The collage is at once rooted in instinct, yet carefully balanced and composed as if a painting. The culminating piece in the series, *Narcissist* embodies Rahbar's transformation from fixating on the emblem of the American flag to appreciating its beauty; it also highlights her ability

to piece and attach seemingly incongruous fragments of her history and identity together.

Rahbar began embroidering *Texas Flowers, Flag #22* during the Bush Presidency, at a time when Texas was popular as a micro-symbol of America. The colorfully rich and roving composition of ethnic floral patterns represents swirling military tanks superimposed upon the American flag. However, Rahbar emphasises that her artwork is never subject to a fixed or static reading. As if remembering during the act of retelling, Rahbar spoke of her automatic impulse to repeat motifs in clusters of three—the number of times her family attempted to flee Iran.

In a postmodernist understanding, translation and interpretation produce meaning. Truth or direct knowledge of the world is impossible and reality is lodged in the individual. As Rahbar poetically reminds us in her artistic statement, "...in the end we are all just visiting, and we all come to this world alone and we leave alone."