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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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From Classroom to Gallery Floor: A Processual Exploration of  
Rene Saheb's (Meta)physical Engagements with Clay

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

### FROM CLASSROOM TO GALLERY FLOOR: A PROCESSUAL EXPLORATION OF RENE SAHEB'S (META) PHYSICAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH CLAY

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**Abstract** | This article presents a case study detailing the creative process of Iranian artist Rene Saheb. It analyses the various stages, developments, and challenges which Saheb went through while she explored the medium of clay which was new to her artistic repertoire. Rather than focusing on outward properties of ceramics such as style or technique, the artist's inward experiences of her medium and creative process are foregrounded by means of interviews. As Saheb frequently turns to Islamic mysticism and poetry as conceptual anchorage throughout her creative process, her engagements with the ceramic medium will be discussed in light of relevant Islamic discourses on materiality, metaphysics, agency and idolatry. Farid ud-Din 'Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, will provide a narrative as well as conceptual backbone throughout the article, as Saheb turned to the text at critical junctures and unforeseen events during her process.

**Keywords** | Iranian contemporary art, pottery, mystical poetry, Farid ud-Din 'Attar, agency, indexicality, idolatry

**Résumé** | Cet article présente une étude de cas qui détaille le processus créatif de l'artiste iranien Rene Saheb. Le texte analyse le développement et les défis que Saheb a relevé en explorant le médium de l'argile qu'il utilisait pour la première fois. Au lieu de se concentrer sur les propriétés extérieures de la céramique (style et technique), ce sont les expériences intérieures de l'artiste et son processus créatif qui sont analysés à partir d'entretiens. Alors que Saheb s'inspire du mysticisme et de la poésie musulmane et les utilise comme point d'ancrage conceptuel durant son processus créatif, son emploi de la céramique sera discuté à la lumière des discours musulmans sur la matérialité, la métaphysique, l'agentivité et l'idolâtrie. La conférence des oiseaux de Farid Ud-Din 'Attar fournit une trame narrative et conceptuelle à l'article, pendant que Saheb revient au texte dans les moments critiques de son processus.

**Mots clés** | Art contemporain iranien – Céramique – Poésie mystique – Farid ud-Din 'Attar – Agentivité – Indexicalité – Idolâtrie

This article will present a case study of the Iranian artist Rene Saheb, as she explores the medium of clay new to her artistic repertoire. Her ceramic experimentations resulted in a solo exhibition titled *Valley of Knowledge*, organised at Aaran Projects in Tehran in 2021, where Saheb presented 25 sculptures in an installation. Instead of historicising her artworks with regard to specific ceramic traditions in Iran, the focus here will be on the processual dimension of the artist's practice and her subjective experiences that have guided its way.

The emphasis on artistic process was motivated by interviews with the artist, in which she expressed her dissatisfaction with ceramics in her country as a tradition of mastery rather than one of inspired and spontaneous creation. She states: "mostly with ceramics in Iran [...] people follow the rules for pottery, they follow what lectures tell them, they're really professional in technique, but they can't create from their inner site."<sup>1</sup> Though this may be interpreted as an iconoclastic attitude towards 'tradition' typical of a contemporary artist, Saheb's preoccupation with the realm of inner experience may actually be seen as an adoption of very traditional attitudes towards creativity. Attitudes which centre the soul as the locus upon which experiences of the world impress themselves, as well as an agent that is the driving force of the artistic process. This centring of the soul becomes more traditional still, for Saheb understands its creative force through the conceptual frameworks of Islamic mysticism and poetry. In making her sculpture installation, she was especially engaged with Farid ud-Din 'Attar's poetic work titled *The Conference of the Birds*, returning back to it at critical junctures and unforeseen events during her process.

What follows is a processual exploration of Saheb's creative journey divided into three parts. The first covers her selection of artistic medium and her enrolment in pottery classes. Examining her initial experiences with clay, this section will discuss the role of materiality and its metaphysical correspondence with human beings, from the perspective of Islamic philosophy and mysticism. The second part marks Saheb's moment of crisis when she is forced to continue working in the isolation of her studio due to the coronavirus pandemic. Her engagements with pieces of pottery as if animated beings will be analysed in terms of agency and indexicality. The focus of this inquiry is to explore the significance of inward-looking experiences in these mostly outward-centred theories. The final section analyzes Saheb's completed *Valley of Knowledge* installation as it is exhibited at Aaran Projects. The sculptures are brought into dialogue with 'Attar's metaphor of the idol-house and discussed with regard to various discourses on idolatry. *The Conference of the Birds* will be referenced throughout the article as the principle narrative guiding Saheb's creative process, as well as to motivate the author's theoretical discussion.

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1- Interview with Saheb on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

## Saheb's life and works

But first, let us shortly introduce Rene Saheb (b. 1987, Tehran) and her artistic work. She studied computer graphics in Tehran and later moved to Malaysia to focus on graphic design, markedly different fields than multimedia art which she became involved in later on. Her background in graphic design may however be discerned in her paintings, whether on canvas, ceramics or *objets trouvés*. When Saheb chose to leave graphic design behind to develop herself as an autonomous artist, she returned home to practice and seek opportunities for exhibiting her works. At the Aaran Gallery in downtown Tehran, she participated in various exhibitions from 2012 onwards.<sup>2</sup> Saheb became inspired to expand her range of artistic media and created *Khoram Shahr*, a sculpture made out of bronze, plastic, and a music box, which testifies to personal and collective traumas of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, Saheb traveled extensively and became involved in several international residency projects. She became fascinated with metaphors, expressions, and idioms, some particular to local languages and others shared across cultures, through which she attempts to conceptually and affectively ground herself in foreign lands. Persian poetry in particular forms an important repository of linguistic figures and meanings by which Saheb makes sense of the world in her creative process. Worth mentioning are her artistic activities at the Organhouse in Chongqing, China, in 2018. There she created a sculpture series called *Story of the Cane*, made of bamboo shoots with painted surfaces.<sup>4</sup> It represents Saheb's re-reading of Rumi's *Story of the Reed*, and marks her exploration of rootedness and displacement in the cultural and natural landscapes of China.

So how does *Valley of Knowledge*, our current object of study, fit into these developments? (Fig. 1) First of all, the installation is the result of another one of Saheb's experimentations with a medium unknown to her. As we can see, the outcome of this process is a series of semi-abstract standing figures, each of which consists of multiple ceramic pots (or shards thereof) stacked on top of each other. The one reproduced on the following page has three distinct segments, differentiated by the use of coloured glazes. Their surfaces are painted with designs of bird silhouettes and peacock feathers in Saheb's characteristic line work. The pots show clear signs of wear which, rather than covered up, are marked with glazes of contrasting colours. Saheb benefitted from the variety of ceramic shapes, including those caused by damage, using the protruding part of the middle segment and the narrow tube at the top to

2- Rene Saheb. Exhibitions, accessed July 13th, 2022. At: <https://renesaheb.com/exhibitions/>

3- Nazila Noebashari, *A Few Credible Stories* (Tehran: Aaran Gallery, 2017), 17.

4- Rene Saheb. *Story of the Cane*, consulted on July 13, 2022. At <https://renesaheb.com/exhibitions/story-of-the-cane/>



Figure. 1. Rene Saheb, sculpture from the *Valley of Knowledge* series, composite of ceramic pots and shards, painted with coloured glazes, Aaran Projects, Tehran, 2021.

evoke the beak and crest of a bird. It is the sculpture's suggestion of avian forms that firmly situates it among Saheb's earlier artistic engagements with mystical poetry, in this particular instance with 'Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The remainder of the article will explore why Saheb's pottery-sculptures turned out the way they did, by tracing her creative journey from her initial acquaintance with her medium to the final form in which she exhibited her installation.

### **Clay, between materiality and transcendence**

When Saheb returned to Tehran after her last major residency project in 2018, she started reflecting on her artistic practice up to that point. She found that her process was too planned and structured, always working towards predetermined themes with set techniques and media. Abroad she had learned the value of a more dialogical process, responding to social interactions, cultural experiences, and creative challenges spontaneously throughout her stay. Engaging with new artistic means and modes in foreign places re-oriented Saheb's experiences, such

that she was forced to come up with new conceptual frames to anchor them. She became obsessed with the idea of 'being in the present',<sup>5</sup> a term circulating in New Age culture with roots in various faith traditions, which Saheb explores alternatively through creative practice. Back home she began voraciously exploring new techniques, none of which managed to 'touch' or challenge her like she was abroad. When she enrolled in pottery classes, however, she was soon triggered by the haptic experiences of kneading and moulding, which she recalls finally restored her to the flow of the present.<sup>6</sup>

But how are these wheel-throwing procedures to be understood in terms of a particular experience of temporality? The answer may lie in the notion of 'presence', a meditative state sometimes induced by repetitive movements. Saheb herself was fascinated by the spinning of the pottery wheel, likening it to the whirling of Mevlevi initiates during *sama*.<sup>7</sup> Both practices are geared towards a continual moulding of the object situated at the centre of the turning motion (clay/the soul), and move practitioners into a trance-like state of 'presence', with the divine through the actualised Self. In his study of ibn al-'Arabi's development of the concept of *hudur* (presence), William Chittick quotes the Qur'an as stating "He [God] is with you wherever you are", but insists that "to say that God is present with us is not the same as saying that we are present with Him. Presence with God needs to be achieved. It is the object of the spiritual quest."<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, what Chittick describes conceptually, Saheb understood implicitly when her pottery classes inspired her to re-read a work of poetry wherein the spiritual quest to achieve presence is a central motive: Farid ud-Din 'Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. As this work will be referenced throughout the article, it requires a short introduction.

'Attar lived in Neyshabur (Khorasan province, Iran) during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries a period in which the Islamic faith became increasingly institutionalised and formalised under the influence of the Seljuq court.<sup>9</sup> This had a great impact on the organisation of spiritual life in the Persianate world, instituting state-sponsored madrasas and Sufi brotherhoods, while disaffecting those who believed that the spiritual journey was one of inner purification, rather than outward ritual.<sup>10</sup> 'Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* metaphorically indicates a spiritual path towards divine unification, beyond the observance of the prescribed rites of formal religion that would only get in the way of spiritual fulfilment.

5- Rene Saheb. *About me*, accessed July 14th, 2022. <https://renesaheb.com/about-me/>

6- Interview with Saheb, November 8th, 2021.

7- Ibid.

8- William Chittick, « Presence with God », *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*, 20, 1996 accessed March 18th, 2022. <https://ibnarabisociety.org/presence-with-god-william-chittick/>

9- Christian Lange, *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 129.

10- Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Masnavi, Book One*, trans Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118-119.

‘Attar’s main narrative describes how a group of birds is rallied together by their leader, the Hoopoe, to undertake a journey to mount Qaf to meet their king, the legendary Simorgh. Along their daunting quest, they are faced with the increasing challenges of navigating mountains and valleys, causing many birds to lose hope, give up, or even perish. When the remaining birds finally make it to their destination, they find no sign of the Simorgh. Looking down at their reflections in the water, however, they realise that they number thirty birds (‘*si morgh*’ in Persian) who, through their hardships, perseverance and overcoming of the ego, have themselves transformed into “vessels” through which their king becomes “present” to them.

Their souls rose free of all they’d been before;  
The past and all its actions were no more.  
Their life came from that close, insistent sun  
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.  
[...]  
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend  
They were the Simorgh and the journey’s end.”<sup>11</sup>

Saheb became fascinated with the Simorgh and decided to continue her classes in order to master ceramic techniques, including glazing, so that she could fashion a great brightly coloured Simorgh in clay.<sup>12</sup> Though historically represented in miniatures as a phoenix, the endeavour of artistically rendering the Simorgh is problematic from a conceptual viewpoint<sup>13</sup>. The otherwise transcendent creature manifests within the birds, yet no individual bird can be perceived to ‘be’ the Simorgh. Even ‘Attar cast doubts on representability in his story about the Simorgh feather that landed in China, which all artisans rushed to make an image of:

Throughout the world men separately conceived  
An image of its shape, and all believed  
Their private fantasies uniquely true!  
In China still this feather is on view<sup>14</sup>

This criticism is supported by the conclusion of ‘Attar’s story, for it was only when the birds had transcended their earthy existences that they gained access to the court of Real Truth, where they caught a glimpse of the Simorgh. Chittick supports this view, stating that *hudur*, presence with the divine, can only be

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11- Farid ud-Din ‘Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Dick DAVIS (London: Penguin Group, 2011), 234.

12- Interview with Saheb, August 26, 2021.

13- In the miniature painting tradition, the Simorgh was frequently represented as a phoenix, particularly after the Mongol invasion which introduced Chinese monarchical symbols (dragons, phoenixes) into iconographies of the Persianate world. Examples include a sleeping Simorgh in Madhu Khazanad’s sixteenth-century painting for a manuscript of the *Khamsa* by Nezami of Ganj; and the one that appears in the sixteenth-century painted folios illustrating the story of Zal in the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp.

14- Farid ud-Din ‘Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 45.



understood in relation to its opposite, *ghayba* (absence) and that, “to be present with one thing is to be absent from something else”. Chittick implies that the believer should become present with the divine and thereby absent from creation, as the transformative goal of the spiritual journey.<sup>15</sup>

How then can artists work in material media to render the transcendent, like Saheb planned to?<sup>16</sup> Wendy Shaw's analysis of Quranic statements about materiality is informative here. From them, Shaw deduces that, “religion cannot function in pure immateriality, since the distinction between humankind and the divine relies on matter.”<sup>17</sup> The spiritual life, in other words, necessarily takes place within the material world, which becomes an interface *through which* to interact with higher orders of existence. ‘Attar metaphorically describes this as a process of kneading, of interacting deeply with the substances of the earth in order to discern transcendent unity underneath its seeming multiplicity.

This various world is like a toy –  
A coloured palm-tree given to a boy,  
But made of wax – now knead it in your fist,  
And there's the wax of which its shapes consist;  
The lovely forms and colours are undone,  
And what seemed many things is only one.<sup>18</sup>

It must be noted however that ‘Attar and his contemporaries would not have understood this artistic metaphor in modern terms, by which the artist and the world exist as two separate beings, the former acting out her will upon the latter. On the contrary, mystics and philosophers alike believed in the concept of *munasaba*, describing the metaphysical correspondence between the world as macrocosm, and the human being as microcosm which unites all things of the world within her.<sup>19</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes that, “[t]he correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm is based upon an inner sympathy and harmony which exist between them. The sympathy, which is hidden to most men, becomes more evident as the soul increases in purity...”<sup>20</sup>

The expression of sympathy in correspondence with the material world is aptly illustrated in one of Saheb's anecdotes. During pottery classes, she noticed

19- See also the introduction to *Mafatih al-Ghayb* by the thirteenth century Sufi philosopher Sadr ad-Din al-Qunawi, as well as Samir Mahmoud's lecture series on the metaphysical relationships between human beings and their built environment: Youtube (2021). *Architecture & the Luminous Ground – Samir Mahmoud – Session 2: Human Being as Microcosm*. Location: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGRGlc-d8k&list=RDLVcDvfK-Yt83Q&index=7>

20- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (London: Publishing Co. and Thorsons Publishers. Ltd., 1976), 260. Nasr explores works of Islamic philosophy, casting correspondences between the macro and microcosms in terms of knowledge. He writes: “Man cannot know all that is in the Universe by going around and studying it because life is too short and the world too large; only by studying himself can he come to the knowledge of all things which already exist within him” (p. 98). For the current discussion of embodied engagements with the material world, these correspondences are explored in terms of *fitra* and the return thereto.



how her fellow students would treat their projects as mere exercises and the clay they worked with, as expendable stuff. Whenever their pots turned out imperfect or cracked, they discarded them. Saheb asked them not to, but when they ignored her, she started collecting the ceramic fragments. Dwelling on such expressions of sympathy, Saheb remarked that her experience with clay had ultimately enabled her to explore a deepened state of humanity.<sup>21</sup>

Such a state may be understood in terms of *fitra*, a term which describes the panhuman intuition by which we aspire to live in accordance with our own creation and, in metaphysical correspondence, with that of the cosmos.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly the Qur'an describes our creation in terms of the primordial elements: 'indeed We created man (Adam) out of an extract of clay (water and earth)'<sup>23</sup>. It may therefore be argued that embodied interactions with these elements effectuate a return to the 'fitraic' state of divine creation, much as the ablution performed with water or earth returns us to a state of ritual purity.<sup>24</sup> This 'return' to the original Self marks a recurring theme in mystical poetry. Jalal ud-Din Rumi, who followed in the poetic tradition of 'Attar, connects this return to the elements of creation (earth), while adding to this that the fitraic human being is soft in character (like earth), and capable of growth, flourishing, and beauty.

Don't claim in spring on stone some verdure grows  
Be soft like soil to raise a lovely rose—  
For years you've been a stony-hearted man  
Try being like the soil now if you can!<sup>25</sup>

Already in Saheb's choice of artistic medium and her exploration of it in class, we discern themes of spiritual quest, introspection, and purification. The dialogic correspondences between the being of the artist and the clay urge us to rethink Saheb's goal of "mastering" ceramics. Traditional art-historical analyses emphasise "the artists' mastery over a medium" as a form of "authorial control"<sup>26</sup>. Such a view can be understood to have resulted from a series of peculiarly European philosophical developments which presumed an ontological distance between human beings and the world, enabling them to know, master,

21- Interview with Saheb on March 12th, 2022.

22- Oliver Leaman, *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 210-211.

23- Quran 23:12 – perhaps you should cite the translation you are using

24- Islamic law prescribes that, whenever water is not accessible, the ritual ablution may be performed with earth as well. This practice is called *tayammum*.

25- Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Masnavi, Book One*, Jawid Mojaddedi (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118-119.

26- Christine Mugnolo, « Reading Richard Felton Outcault's «Yellow Kid» Through Perception of the Image », in Maggie Gray, Ian Horton (eds.), *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 121-141, 123.

and own the world.<sup>27</sup> Thus arises a form of artistic mastery that is cast in purely technical terms, by which artists use skills to manipulate media, engendering otherness and hierarchy in the unidirectional transfer of action from agent to patient. In the next part we will examine a multidirectional conception of agency more appropriate to Saheb's relationship with her medium.

### The potter's workshop

In the midst of Saheb's quest to render the likeness of the elusive Simorgh, the coronavirus pandemic unexpectedly forced the pottery classes to close down. The students had to abandon their works in progress overnight. When the studio contacted them to come and take home their creations before they were destroyed, nobody showed up. Unable to accept their destruction, Saheb collected all of the pots and brought them to her studio. (Fig. 2) There, Saheb envisioned her studio the way Omar Khayyam describes the potter's workshop in his *Kuze-nameh* (Book of Pots).<sup>28</sup>



Figure. 2. Instagram video promoting Saheb's Valley of Knowledge exhibition. The pots, in various conditions from undamaged to mere shards, can be seen lying on a table in Saheb's studio.

27- See also Hans Gumbrecht's insightful discussion of these developments in European philosophy, theology and aesthetics, in his chapter « Metaphysics: A Brief Prehistory of what Is Now Changing », in Hans Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

28- Interview with Saheb on November 8th, 2021.

As, under cover of departing day,  
Slunk hunger-stricken Ramazan away,  
Once more within the Potter's house alone  
I stood, surrounded by the shapes of clay.<sup>29</sup>

The pots start speaking as if individuals, some criticising the potter for their misshapen form. Another one questioned whether there even is a difference between themselves and their maker: "All this of Pot and Potter! Tell me, then, [w]ho is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"<sup>30</sup>

Khayyam provides a crucial insight for understanding Saheb's relationship to the broken ceramics in her studio, namely her discernment of individuality within them. This may be explained in terms of 'living presence response', described by Caroline van Eck as a viewer's attribution of 'animacy' to artworks, enabling the objects to "act on those who enter into contact with them."<sup>31</sup> Van Eck's study focuses on historical accounts of viewers' responses to classical statuary. This distinguishes her cases from Saheb's because the statues' agency originates in their lifelikeness. After all, viewers' responses are due to their iconic representation of human beings. The pots in Saheb's studio, on the other hand, achieved a sense of animacy not as icons but as indexes.

Charles Sanders Peirce conceptualised indexes as signs that sustain a physical, existential relation to the thing they represent.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the pottery, the indexes can be understood as the physical traces which Saheb's classmates had inevitably left in the clay during their creative process; the 'hand' of the maker referring back to the maker, which caused the pots to make present a glimpse of Saheb's classmates within her studio.<sup>33</sup> This makes for a complex web of agential relations between the pots, their makers, and Saheb herself: One that cannot be understood with reference to Van Eck's historical study of artwork-viewer interactions in formal public exhibitions rather than studio practice. Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of agency is better equipped for such purposes, because it situates agent-patient relationships in social nexuses between multiple actors (patrons, artists, artworks, subjects, viewers etc).<sup>34</sup> In his book *Art and Agency*, Gell was mainly preoccupied with how actors causally affect one another, and how art too can be seen as an agent of action within this dynamic.<sup>35</sup> Saheb's studio situation would have been rendered by Gell as: makers causally imbue passive ceramics with traces bearing their prototypes (their 'hand'), which activate in passive spectator Saheb a recognition of the makers.

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32- Mary A. Doane, « Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction », *differences*, 18:1 (2007), 1-6, 2.

33- Interview with Saheb on November 8th, 2021.

34- Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 28-29.

35- Gell defined art as "a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it." (p. 6) as an alternative to understanding artworks as iconic or symbolic representations.

But how is this “recognition”, this perceptual process occurring within the subject, to be understood? Joan Gibbons describes how causal traces are “heavily impregnated with memory” which, “due to the traces of lived experience captured in the casting, [are] as much redolent with somatic memories as with emotional associations.”<sup>36</sup> The notion of “memory in the trace” would explain why the pots’ individual designs and imperfections reminded Saheb of her classmates. However, Gibbons misplaces the site of memory from the subject to the trace and deprives traces of their agency to evoke them in a subject. In other words, Gibbons fails to theorise how a physical trace may turn into a causal agent that leaves a metaphysical trace on us.

Gell himself dealt primarily with causation in the exterior world and seemed uncomfortable with the idea of the metaphysical as a patient/agent that co-exists with it. Coming from a different disciplinary angle, however, Wendy Shaw describes pre-modern systems of representation concerned with inward forms of ‘mimesis’, by which “the world as agent enters human subjectivity.”<sup>37</sup> Shaw’s theory complements the idea of metaphysical correspondence by which the clay pots in the macrocosm already exist within Saheb’s being as a microcosm, but adds to this the agency of the pots to ‘imprint’ themselves upon the heart of the artist, if indeed that heart is returned from stone to impressionable clay. This marks the importance of interdisciplinary inquiries between various epistemological horizons, including those within which inner subjective worlds are meaningfully discussed. As will become clear below, it is an understanding of the inner being of the artist which helps trace processes of perception, intention, and action leading to a radical revision of artistic trajectories.

Saheb’s long period of seclusion in her studio had taken a toll on her. In Iran the Coronavirus struck particularly hard in the early months of 2020, and Saheb kept herself informed of its developments and its many casualties. This depressed her and made it hard for her to find any creative inspiration. Her extensive ‘dialogues’ with the orphaned pots finally gave her a crucial insight. She slowly began to realise that it was not ‘Attar’s Simorgh that interested her anymore. After all, in their unfulfilled potential and broken condition, the pots were hardly able to tell the story of the thirty birds who had successfully reached their destination as enlightened beings. Rather, Saheb realised, these pots indicated the birds who never made it to mount Qaf, the ones who were

36- Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 30-31.

37- Wendy Shaw, *What Is «Islamic» Art? Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 55. Van Eck shortly discusses to the Stoic understanding of perception with a metaphor: “Sense perceptions create images (phantasiai) in the mind, just as a seal creates an impression in soft wax.” Although the metaphor of physical ‘tracing’ is shared between the Stoics and the Islamic mystics, for the latter the locus of imprints is the heart. Van Eck describes that some subsequent philosopher found the imagery of wax prints inadequate, as it negated the role of the imagination to change what is remembered. See Van Eck’s chapter « Perception, Memory and Emotion», in Caroline v. Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015).

flawed and weak; those who died in their quest for spiritual fulfilment. The ones who, like the increasing number of victims of the coronavirus at the time, were so unceremoniously erased from existence.<sup>38</sup> Saheb had come to empathize with the fallen birds, characters which 'Attar mentions only briefly and with disdain, it might be added.

A handful lived until the voyage was done –  
Of every thousand there remained but one.  
Of many who set out no trace was found.  
Some deep within the ocean's depths were drowned;  
Some died on mountain-tops; some died of heat;  
Some flew too near the sun in their conceit<sup>39</sup>

When she was at her lowest point emotionally, reaching the spiritual heights of the Simorgh seemed unattainable to Saheb. However, in having become drawn increasingly inwards throughout her practice, she did reach a type of 'presence'. Not perhaps divine, but rather an introspective knowledge which taught her to recognise the frailty, fear, and pain that beings suffer in the face of uncertainty and failure as her own, whereby she gained a radical form of empathy with them. It was this empathy that inspired her counter-reading of 'Attar's story, guiding her towards the will to revive the fallen birds/Corona victims/abandoned pots.

Part of Saheb's secluded self-study was reading up on ceramic techniques. One of her books instructed her about fibre clay. This helped her restore the pots in her studio, which had become dry and brittle. She also found out that the broken pieces could be clay-glued together with this technique.<sup>40</sup> By stacking and connecting the pots with one another in various compositions, Saheb began to return the broken ceramics to glorious forms which stood proudly before her in her studio (Fig. 3). She took the care to apply coloured glazes to them, adding individual bird features such as feathers, eyes, and claws, in an effort to restore them back to the cycle of 'life'. 'Attar's fallen birds were now ready to go on new adventures.

When Saheb had finished her sculptures, she invited Aaran Gallery director Nazila Noebashari to come see them in her studio. Expecting to see the Simorgh, Noebashari counted them to find out that there were only 25. When Saheb explained the twists and turns that her process had drawn her into, Noebashari became extremely impressed. That very day she wrote a curatorial statement describing Saheb's creative practice as "an act of recovery; to soothe the pain of abandonment."<sup>41</sup>

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38- Interview with Saheb on November 8th, 2021.

39- Farid ud-Din 'Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 229.

40- Interview with Saheb on March 12th, 2022.

41- Darz (2021). Valley of Knowledge Rene Saheb - Solo Show, accessed March 18th, 2022. Location: <https://darz.art/en/shows/10115>





Figure. 3. Instagram video promoting Saheb's *Valley of Knowledge* exhibition. Saheb starts building her sculptures by way of stacking and gluing various pots together.

## Rebuilding 'Attar's house of idols

This brings us to the final stage in Saheb's process: the exhibition of her sculptures. Saheb decided to show her works at Aaran Projects in Tehran, which Noebashari opened in 2015 as an auxiliary space to the main gallery she had founded seven years earlier. Saheb designed her sculpture installation in such a way that dignity would be restored to the once orphaned ceramics. As such, each individual sculpture received its own pedestal, the sum of which were then arranged together in a circle. (Fig. 4). This gave the installation an air of solemnity, much like an idol temple, a geometrically ordered space of ritual engagement with divine icons. Saheb titled her installation *Valley of Knowledge*, referring to one of the valleys 'Attar's birds had to navigate. Interestingly, 'Attar suggests that our pathways to knowledge of the ultimate Mystery are numerous and different, stating:

Our insight comes to us by different signs;  
One prays in mosques and one in idols' shrines<sup>42</sup>

42- Farid ud-Din 'Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 194.



Figure. 4. An overview of Saheb's sculpture installation at Aaran Projects in Tehran, 2021.

'Attar suggests that, before we transcend the multiplicity of this world in a mystical union with the Simorgh, our paths of knowledge towards the Mystery remain limited and multiple. Even idolatry may be a path towards divine insight! Saheb, having consciously rejected the Simorgh as her ultimate creative goal, embraces this multiplicity and restores to her sculptures the sense of individuality she had discerned in the broken forms that had faced her in her studio. She even marked cracks and imperfections with differently coloured glazes as cherished traces left there by her classmates. Fatemeh Keshavarz remarks how 'Attar's choice for birds as his main characters allows for individual traits and differences in character to be explored: "They can be as rare and mysterious as a heron, or as ordinary as a duck. Physically speaking, there are no limits to the colours, shapes and sizes in which they can be portrayed, or to the variety of the tunes they can sing."<sup>43</sup> In *Valley of Knowledge*, they stand proudly, restored to their individual strengths, weaknesses, beauty, and flaws, ready for new adventures.

It seems that, in her restorative practice, Saheb assumed the role of 'Attar, who in turn assumed the role of a Zoroastrian at the house of idols.

That ancient Zoroastrian  
I am. It's me who raised on high

43- Fatemeh Keshavarz, « Flight of the Birds: The Poetic Animating the Spiritual in 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* », in Leonard Lewisohn, Christopher Shackle (eds), *'Aṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006), 112-134, 117.



The idol-house - pagoda - then  
 Up on its roof I gave a cry,  
 Declaimed to all the world's folk,  
 Sounding 'infidelity' abroad:  
 "O Muslims! Those idols I've rebuilt,  
 Put varnish on their fusty paint again..."<sup>44</sup>

The poetic imagery of erecting the idols of other faith traditions may, according to Siep Stuurman, be an expression of empathy towards the Others of Islam.<sup>45</sup> However, it may just as well be considered a provocation of 'ulama and a ridicule of the outward Islamic rituals they prescribe.<sup>46</sup> In other words, it is like fashioning idols for the sake of smashing the idols of religious chauvinism and public piety. 'Attar's idol metaphor suggests that Islamic discourses on idolatry are complex and sometimes paradoxical. If indeed Saheb follows in 'Attar's footsteps to build another idol-house with her installation, how does it navigate those discourses in the context of contemporary Iranian society?

As we have seen, Saheb attributes animacy to the inanimate pots that make up her sculptures, which is the essential characteristic of idolatry. In the guise of idols, her statuettes seem to stand like the "exalted birds" similar to the ones that would have stood near the Holy Kaaba before their ultimate destruction as symbols of idolatry with the coming of Islam.<sup>47</sup> Saheb even painted their surfaces with decorative patterns and stylised figures suggestive of the ritual character of these objects. The eyes that Saheb painted on some of them may be understood non-mimetically, not as the eyes of the bird depicted, but as apotropaic symbols on the idol's surface that "watches out" for the well-being of the believer (figure. 5).<sup>48</sup>

44- Lewisohn, 256.

45- Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 176.

46- Asghar Seyed Gohrab, *Soefisme: een Levende Traditie* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015), 96.

47- The phrase "exalted birds" was taken from the controversial story of the Satanic verses, which has the prophet Muhammad recite "These are the exalted cranes whose intercession is to be hoped for!", seemingly attributing divine animacy to the pagan statues surrounding the Kaaba.

48- The Nazar is one such apotropaic symbol that is widely displayed in the MENA-region.



figure. 5. Rene Saheb, sculpture from the *Valley of Knowledge* series, composite of ceramic pots and shards, painted with coloured glazes, Aaran Projects, Tehran, 2021.

In their avian forms, they generate inter-textual interplay between the Quranic story of the prophet Isa who blew souls into clay figures of birds,<sup>49</sup> and the hadith of the prophet Muhammad and his wife which discourages the fashioning of bird images.<sup>50</sup> Both stories describe practices of human creation that seem to be in vain competition with the divine creative act, that moreover risks violating *tawhid*, God's status as the only being worthy of worship.<sup>51</sup> The bird figures in both stories have the potential to become the objects of idolatry, like the bird images in Mecca. What distinguishes the Qur'anic story, however, is the miraculous transformative act that, rather than Isa's innate talent, becomes divinely granted to him. When Isa's birds receive a soul they change into living creatures, turning them from objects of possible idolatry into *ayat*, signs that indicate and thus distance the divine.

This illustrates a crucial distinction, described by François Lemée in his *Traité des statues* as one between statues and idols. While statues are representations of living beings, idolatry is "the confusion of a statue with what it represents."<sup>52</sup> When, in 1888, Nasr ad-Din Shah revealed an equestrian statue of his likeness on

49- Quran 5:110

50- Sahih Muslim 2107.

51- The first phrase of the *shahada*, the Islamic testimony of faith, is often translated as, "There is no god but God." This is often contested by Muslim scholars who state that a more exact rendering would be: "There is no being (*ilah*) worthy of being worshipped other than God (*Allah*).

52- Caroline v. Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, Boston, De Gruyter, 2015, p. 55.

a public square in Tehran, the 'ulama who protested the monument evidently did not make this distinction.<sup>53</sup> However, in the century that followed many monumental statues, some of them representing poets like 'Attar, were erected that yet stand in today's Islamic Republic. Sven Lütticken's provocative expansion of the concept of iconoclasm may help explain this. Lütticken describes our modern attitudes towards statues, which negate animacy and ritual engagement, and transform them into 'art', as an overlooked form of idol-smashing.<sup>54</sup> In other words, statues that were once agents within the social life of human beings become distanced in modernity and mediated by discourse, whether art-historical, Islamist, or nationalist.

It is against this background that Saheb's exhibition at Aaran Projects gains a critical potential, because her 'Attar-esque restoration of the idol-house, so to say, "smash[es] the frame that suffocates the image"<sup>55</sup>. That is to say that Saheb returns 'Attar's poetry,<sup>56</sup> bird imagery and the clay medium,<sup>57</sup> appropriated and linguistically scripted by the Iranian nationalist project, back into the realm of lived experience; A space in which 'animated objects' can once again affect and re-orient us onto the social world as empathetic creatures. Some of Saheb's pottery classmates came to the *Valley of Knowledge* exhibition opening. After talking to Saheb about her process, some recognised their own works, their own 'hands' in Saheb's. In Gell's terms of agency, their creative acts had left physical traces marking the pots with an individuality which animated them in Saheb's experience, in turn tracing her heart with a radical empathy; a wish to return the downtrodden, broken and deceased back into the realm of the living. Her sculptures are the end result: traces of traces of traces. Mary Ann Doane asserts that "[i]n the trace, things speak themselves; they are not spoken", suggesting an agency powerful enough to override any attempt at linguistic framing.<sup>58</sup> Saheb's classmates finally recognised the innate value and potential of what they had discarded, seeing it revived in beautiful form.

53- Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran: Between two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 41.

54- Ibid, 51.

55- Sven Lütticken, *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*, 51.

56- Ali Ferdowsi wrote an insightful article on the nationalisation of mystical poetry, with a focus on Hafez: Ali Ferdowsi, « The «Emblem of the Manifestation of the Iranian Spirit»: Hafiz and the Rise of the National Cult of Persian Poetry », *Iranian Studies*, 41:5, December 2008, 667-691.

57- Jillian Echlin mentions that, to Iranian neo-traditionalists of the 1960s, pottery was the national artform par excellence. This inspired artists of the *Saqqa-khaneh* group, such as Massoud Arabshahi and Parviz Tanavoli, to adopt ceramics as a medium for making modern Iranian sculptures. It might be argued that, if at all understood in any artistic tradition, Saheb's practices with ceramics could be placed in theirs. The *Saqqa-khaneh* artists were known to experiment with symbols of Persian cultural heritage and Islamic mysticism on the surfaces of their sculptures and paintings. Such symbols were widely legible among Iranian art audiences, having been encoded into nationalist narratives concerning Persian kingship, mythology and spirituality. Saheb on the other hand tends to shun such collectivist formalism, being instead driven by narratives, metaphors and expressions in meaningful dialogue with events in society and her personal life. See also: ECHLIN Jillian, « A New Language for Clay: mid-century Iranian Ceramic Artists in Dialogue with British Potters », *The Decorative Arts Society Journal*, 2019, 150-169.

58- Mary A. Doane, « Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction », *differences*, 18:1 (2007), 1-6, 3.

It must be mentioned that the Aaran Gallery spaces have a history of salvaging affective art practices from the grips of national abstraction and collectivisation. Ali Reza Ghani curated Parisa Taghipour's exhibition *The Truth Shall Set Us Free* wherein she alludes to characters from poetry and mythology. Ghani contests the idea that the Iranian collective consciousness is the primary structure in which these characters ultimately manifest. Instead, he suggests that they mark different emotional states within the soul of the artist; hidden, but expressed in the artwork.<sup>59</sup> In her own curatorial statement of *Valley of Knowledge*, Nazila Noebashari writes that Saheb's engagements with 'Attar represent, "a journey through a primal valley, where her inner self is unfolded and Knowledge is sought and found."<sup>60</sup> It thus seems that notions like metaphysical correspondence and inward mimesis are understood implicitly by these curators, and re-articulated in exhibition statements in poetic styles. Saheb's sculptures are very much at home in their care. She seems uninterested in making works that directly engage the outward sphere of power and ideology. Instead, Saheb's sculptures project us inward, into a space where we discern correspondences between ourselves and others, and cherish the traces they imprint upon our souls. Through us they return to the cycle of life so that their stories, once cut short, may continue.

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59- Galleryinfo (2020). *The Truth Shall Set Us Free*, accessed March 8, 2022. <https://galleryinfo.ir/Event/en/14034#about>. The statement reads as follows:  
Divinities, Demons, The Devil and Angels, all appear in myths to paint the picture of this never ending contest in the collective memory of we the mortals. This series of works aims to challenge this preconceived notion.

Akvan, Angra Mainyu and Zahhak, the everlasting symbols of decay and destruction, are not recalled from the world of myth, here the artist aims to display hidden aspects of her soul, and to attach them to the final object. The Demons of [the] artist appear from the saturated tunnels of the unconsciousness of the artist, from her inner depths. They speak of fears and pains, of a great loss.

60- Darz (2021). *Valley of Knowledge Rene Saheb - Solo Show*. Location: <https://darz.art/en/shows/10115> (consulted on March 18th, 2022).

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**ملخص** | يقدم هذا المقال دراسة تفصيلية للعملية الإبداعية للفنان الإيراني رينيه صاحب. يحلل النص التطور والتحديات التي واجهها صاحب أثناء استخدامه الطين لأول مرة. بدلاً من التركيز على الخصائص الخارجية للسيراميك (الأسلوب والتقنية)، يتم تحليل التجارب الداخلية للفنان وعمليته الإبداعية من خلال المقابلات. في حين أن صاحب يستوحى من التصوف والشعر الإسلامي ويستخدمه كممرسة مفاهيمية خلال عملية الإبداعية، فإن استخدامه للسيراميك سيناقش في ضوء الخطابات الإسلامية حول المادية والميتافيزيقيا والوكالة والوثنية. إن محاضرة الطيور لفريد الدين عطار إطاراً سردياً ومفاهيمياً للمقال، بينما يلجأ صاحب إلى النص في اللحظات الحرجة من عملية.

**كلمات مفتاحية** | الفن الإيراني المعاصر - الطين - الشعر الصوفي - فريد الدين العطار - الوكالة - الفهرسية - الوثنية

**Notice biographique** | Kasper Tromp (b. 1992) is an art historian educated at Leiden University. In 2018 he finished his Master's in Art of the Contemporary World / World Art Studies. His thesis examines the complex intercultural entanglements between the United States and Saudi Arabia underlying Ayman Yossri Daydban's Subtitles series. Kasper specialises in contemporary art from the MENA region. He shows particular interest in how artists construct modern subjectivities and navigate intercultural encounters in dialogue with Islamic traditions. He lives and works in the Netherlands.