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“I SAW NOTHING BUT BEAUTY”: EXPLORING THE ZAYNAB PARADIGM IN IRANIAN AESTHETICS OF PROTEST

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Abstract | This article explores an Iranian aesthetics of protest that, alternative to intervening in the public space as political agent, confers a spiritual agency that aids in recovering a sense of humanity while dehumanizing laws are upheld. The artistic practices under scrutiny occur between rather than during moments of protest and offer more reflective, metaphorical accounts of the injustices of authoritarian rule. I associate this particular aesthetics with the Shiite figure Zaynab bint ‘Ali, who accused tyrants, strengthened the moral resolve of her community, commanded to accept God’s decree and recognize beauty in His works. In so doing, I challenge Hamid Dabashi’s secular-materialist view of Shiism as a religion of protest geared solely towards changing society, by demonstrating that some artists favor what I call the Zaynab Paradigm of protest aesthetics that work inwardly to inspire recovery and perseverance.

Keywords | Iranian contemporary art, protest aesthetics, Shiism, Hamid Dabashi, Zaynab bint ‘Ali, agency, decay

Résumé | Cet article examine une esthétique iranienne de la protestation qui, au lieu d'intervenir dans l'espace public en tant qu'agent politique, confère un pouvoir spirituel qui aide à retrouver un sens de l'humanité dans un contexte d'ordres déshumanisants. Les pratiques artistiques examinées se manifestent entre les moments de protestation plutôt que durant ceux-ci et proposent des récits plus réfléchis et métaphoriques des injustices du régime autoritaire. J'associe cette esthétique particulière à la figure chiite Zaynab bint 'Ali, qui a accusé les tyrans, renforcé la détermination morale de sa communauté, ordonné d'accepter le commandement de Dieu et de reconnaître la beauté dans ses œuvres. Ce faisant, je remets en question la vision matérialiste et séculière de Hamid Dabashi, qui considère le chiisme comme une religion de protestation visant uniquement à changer la société, en démontrant que certains artistes favorisent ce que j'appelle le paradigme Zaynab d'une esthétique de la protestation qui agit à l'intérieur pour inspirer le rétablissement et la persévérance.

Mots-clés | Art contemporain iranien, esthétique contestataire, chiisme, Hamid Dabashi, Zaynab bint 'Ali, agence, décadence

“I Saw Nothing but Beauty”: Exploring the Zaynab Paradigm in Iranian Aesthetics of Protest

During Iran’s Green Movement of 2009, the artist Siamak Filizadeh exhibited his installation of sheep sculptures submerged in a red liquid. With this work, the artist reimagined the violent repression of protests in the light of a medieval fable in which animals testify against the cruelties of humanity to a higher power. The artwork does not document the Iranian government oppression of its people, nor does it subvert state power in any counter-hegemonic intervention. Rather, it intertextually explores a collective literary imaginary through which it bears witness to repression and strengthens the moral resolve of those forced to persevere in it, while leaving judgement to higher authorities.

The primary objective of this study is to examine artworks that deal with popular uprising, produced by artists who refrain from direct involvement in protests, and instead favor an aesthetics of reflection and recovery. The central theme in each of their work is decay, which is typically evoked by depicting animals and objects, trapped, broken or deceased, as metaphors for Iranian protesters. Such aesthetic practices do not pretend to imagine or design an ideal society, but rather acknowledge socio-political relations as they are. Hence, they offer a research avenue alternative to academic preoccupations with the capacity of art to intervene in politics and transform the public space. I will argue that these artworks, rather than changing outward realities work deep down to inspire spiritual perseverance and moral fortitude in the absence of material success.

This is a typical Shiite ethic which remains notably absent in Hamid Dabashi’s work on Shiism as a religion of protest. While I accept Dabashi’s view that sublated forms of Shiite doctrine can be discerned in a broad range of contemporary aesthetic expressions, I reject the secular-materialist attitude by which he overlooks artistic practices that inspire healing rather than revolution. Dabashi privileges the figure of Imam Husayn as the archetypal revolutionary fighting for material change. On the contrary, I argue that the artworks discussed below gain agency through a spiritual epistemology, that I will refer to as the “Zaynab paradigm” of protest aesthetics. While Husayn constituted the central figure in an uprising for world change, his sister Zaynab lived in the wake of its bloody suppression, eloquently criticizing tyranny while finding beauty in accepting the world as it is. This article explores this Zaynab paradigm as an alternative aesthetic mode that deals with the Iranian political reality of suspended protests, and adopts a shared metaphorical language through which it inspires perseverance in the face of human frailties, tyranny and the interruption of civic ideals.

The Aesthetic Paradigm of Zaynab bint ‘Ali

The last decade has seen increased academic interest in the notion that protest art might bring about social change whether by imagining alternative futures or by direct performative interventions, among other strategies. This may have

been inspired by the highly publicized protest movements of the early 2010s, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, which adopted visual (mass) media as a means of expressing dissent. According to Paula Serafini, such movements “reiterated the value of art and creativity as tools for political action”, prompting researchers to address, beyond the well-documented association of art with politics, “the ways in which art is explicitly incorporated into activist strategies as a political instrument”.¹ Metaphors like “tool” or “instrument” suggest that art can be wielded to improve society, thereby relegating its aesthetics to a secondary position in the presumably nobler arena of politics.² Prefigured by the anthropologist Alfred Gell, who described art as “a system of action, intended to change the world”,³ scholars in the social sciences who share such an instrumental view often favor interdisciplinary research into how art transforms the public space. They envision an outward-looking art that participates in the public contestation of signs, pushing back against representations by hegemonic orders while enhancing the visibility of the marginalized.

In the case of the Iranian Revolution (1979), a large number of cultural theorists have examined how popular religious aesthetics were turned into symbolic languages by which protesters countered the secular order of Mohammad Reza Shah. The public space played a prominent role during the uprising, because it provided an arena for various dissenting voices and symbols to circulate and compete, which included nationalist, socialist as well as liberalist ideas. In the end however, it were the popular religious speakers who successfully accommodated a variety of those ideas in their visions of a future society, and hence managed to transform the public space into a “theater” in which acts of protest became increasingly framed as re-enactments of Shiite rituals. For example, mourning ceremonies, traditionally reserved for commemorating Shiite martyrs, were held continually at set times after protesters were killed by the Shah’s security forces, gradually accommodating Iranian citizens into the temporal rhythms of the revolution.⁴

After the Iranian Revolution, the new Islamic Republican order cultivated the notion of Shiite martyrdom as a way of cohering the national collective according to revolutionary ideals, and to legitimize the war effort against Iraq (1980-1988), during which many young men lost their lives. According to Andrea Duranti, during the war years, “nuptial rooms were mounted along the streets of Tehran to allow the “martyrs” to consummate spiritually a wedding”, transforming

1- SERAFINI Paula. Subversion through performance: performance activism in London. In : WEBNER Pnina, Martin WEBB and Kathryn SPELLMAN-POOTS (eds.), *The political aesthetics of global protest : the Arab Spring and beyond*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 320-321.

2- So far, the “instrumentalisation” of the arts is discussed primarily in the field of cultural policy research. See for example: BELFIORE, Eleonora. Art as a means of alleviating social exclusion : does it really work? a critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK. *International journal of cultural policy*. 2002, vol. 8, n° 1, pp. 91-106.

3- GELL Alfred. *Art and agency : an anthropological theory*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 6.

4- KEDDIE Nikki R. *Modern Iran : roots and results of revolution*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 2006, p. 226.

the urban space into a vision of paradise.⁵ Eventually, Shiite imagery passed from the theatrical and dramatic into the ordinary and everyday, appearing on “stamps, banknotes, and chewing gum wrappers”.⁶ At the same time, so-called “*mota’ahed* artists (literally: “dedicated” to the ideals of the Revolution) painted monumental portraits of the “martyrs” on walls, symbolically claiming the public space for the new Islamic Republic. Here we note how particular visual cultures become so enmeshed with the everyday lives of protesters that they survive the revolutionary struggle to become the dominant symbolic order of the new regime.

This is where Hamid Dabashi’s critique of contemporary Shiite aesthetics becomes pertinent. Dabashi describes Shiism as a religion of perpetual protest, ever striving for, yet failing to achieve, social justice in an unjust cosmic order, and constantly negates itself anytime it comes to power⁷ Dabashi contends that Shiism, as an archetypal narrative of the struggle against injustice, is a continual work in progress, sublating into new cultural forms that allow it to engage in public reason in every given age.⁸ He observes that, during the (post)colonial period, a split occurred between Shiism’s increasingly self-indulgent, sectarian and dogmatic politics (“politics of despair”) and its formalist aesthetics, alienated from the revolutionary spirit at its heart.⁹ One might agree with Dabashi that the aforementioned Shiite aesthetics in the Islamic Republic, have indeed become formalist rituals upholding state power. They are largely bereft of an emancipatory spirit that projects itself ahead of the machinations of the ruling orthodoxy, to explore ever new possibilities of achieving justice in society. While Shiite martyrdom imagery provided protesters access to public reason during the Pahlavi era, it began to smother dissenting voices in the public space after the Republican regime had come to power.

My critique of Dabashi’s argument stems from what I discern as a secular-materialist mindset by which he reduces the emancipatory “spirit” of Shiism to an agent of social transformation. For Dabashi, Shiism is only successful if it manages to change society by engaging in public reason, yet this perspective overlooks its impact on the immaterial inner dimension: the human soul. Therefore the strong association in academic research between Iranian Shiism and political change is well established. The cultural theorist Babak Rahimi notes that, during the period in which the Islamic Revolution unfolded, “a number of works were produced with the aim to identify the relationship between religion and revolutionary politics within Iranian socio-cultural life.”¹⁰ Scholars recognized that the prominent soteriological dimension of Shiism offered the Iranian people

5- DURANTI Andrea. The green screen : Neda and the lost voices. *International journal of communication*. 2013, vol 7, p. 1357.

6- CHELKOWSKI Peter and Hamid DABASHI. *Staging a revolution : the art of persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. London : Booth-Clibborn, 2000, p. 6.

7- DABASHI Hamid. *Shi’ism : a religion of protest*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 80.

8- *Ibid.*, p. 56

9- *Ibid.*, p. 310-311

10- RAHIMI Babak. *Theater state and the formation of early modern public sphere in Iran : studies on Safavid muharram rituals, 1590–1641*. New York : E.J. Brill, 2011, p. 37.

a way of redeeming the suffering endured under the Shah's rule, not as a mere promise of future salvation but as a call for direct political action. However, Rahimi suggests that some of their works, like that of Mahmoud Ayoub for example, were of a less political and more properly theological nature, and thereby foregrounded the "sacred orientation" of suffering in a more spiritual and devotional sense, rather than treating it as a "paradigm for action".¹¹

It is conceivable that Dabashi's perspective on Shiite soteriology seems less interested in the devotional and emotional, and more concerned with the dialectical dynamic of the struggle for social justice, that inevitably turns from a world-negating revolution to a world-affirming order.¹² The pole around which this perpetual struggle turns, in Dabashi's view, is the archetypal figure of Imam Husayn (626-680), whose revolutionary spirit manifests differently in each protest movement. Husayn's martyrdom, sometimes described by scholars as the "Karbala paradigm", is often presented as the master narrative for understanding Shiite militant movements and political uprisings. The Shiite version of the story sets the Imam, being the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the legitimate leader of the Muslim community, in a fateful struggle for justice against the forces of the usurper caliph Yazid at the plains of Karbala (in modern-day Iraq). Vastly outnumbered, Husayn and his family and followers are massacred after having endured various humiliations and hardships.¹³

In his understanding of Shiism as a religion of perpetual protest, Dabashi centers Imam Husayn as the archetypal revolutionary striving to change the outward, material conditions of society. However, he fails to theorize an inter-revolutionary Shiism that restores a sense of humanity that is lost after each uprising. In his Jungian quest for a primordial masculine agent of change,¹⁴ Dabashi posits a historical structure in which new Imam Husayns will strive and fail to instill an order of justice, but shows little interest in the feminine archetypes who lead the community to persevere in the aftermath of crushed rebellions.

11- *Ibid.*, p. 42

12- This dialectical dynamic of the oppressed becoming the oppressor may reveal a Marxist inclination in Dabashi's religious thought, akin to the Frankfurt School's critical theory. Fundamental in this historical structure, is the difference between religions that are *adversus mundi* (resisting the world) and *pro mundi* (conforming to the world). According to Dustin Byrd, all Abrahamic faiths came into being to resist the slavery, barbarism and oppression of the worldly orders in which they were revealed. However, he continues, "these faiths can be co-opted by the worldliness of power, status and wealth", whereby they lose their "revolutionary and emancipatory potentials" that made them so attractive to the "victims of history".

See BYRD Dustin J. Malcolm X and revolutionary religion : Christianity, Islam and their emancipatory potentials. In : BYRD Dustin J. and Seyed J. MIRI (eds.). *Malcolm X : from political eschatology to religious revolutionary*. Boston : Brill, 2016, pp. 91-130.

13- EGGER Vernon, *A history of the Muslim world to 1405 : the making of a civilization*. New York : Routledge, 2004, pp. 68-69.

14- In order to describe the archetypal figures of Islam, like the prophet Muhammad and Imam Husayn, Dabashi uses the term "charismatic authority" (p. 57), which may be akin to the more proper Islamic term *sunna* ("authoritative example"). In the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, following the *sunna* of leading members of the family of the Prophet inspired resistance and uprising, but authoritative example was never limited to Imam Husayn, but to others as well. Case in point is a lecture series Ali Shariati gave in the early 1970s about Fatima az-Zahra as a feminine ideal for Iranian women.

Imam Husayn’s sister Zaynab bint ‘Ali (626-682) perhaps best exemplifies such a figure. After the violent death of the imam and his followers, Zaynab supported the group of survivors during their period as hostages, as they were taken from the plains of Karbala to the capital city of Damascus. Unable to take down the tyrant ruler Yazid and create a just order, Zaynab gave a series of sermons in the caliph’s palace, that delegitimized his authority, strengthened the moral resolve of her followers, commanded to accept God’s decree and recognize beauty in His works. In Dabashi’s term of “sublation”, the Zaynab archetype would sublimate into cultural forms that, rather than intervene directly in the public space as political agents, engage in an inward form of agency that soothes, heals and helps persevere. An art “as agent [that] enters human subjectivity”,¹⁵ engaging the soul rather than the public contestation of signs.

This artistic disposition, what I call the Zaynab paradigm of Iranian protest aesthetics, will be the focus of case studies in the following section; artworks that explore death and decay as phenomena that recover empathy, beauty and humanity in the inter-revolutionary phases when dehumanizing orders are reinstated. These artworks help expand Dabashi’s perspective on revolutionary religion beyond secular-materialist reductionisms, into a spiritual framework of recovery. Importantly, they (re-)locate this framework *within* the dynamics of protest, rather than accepting the traditional divide between Shiite quietism (private piety) and revolution (religious activism). In both Shiite political thought as well as historical studies of Shiism in politics, the more quietist, salvific and passive disposition is often contrasted with a more active revolutionary mode compatible with modern society and civic responsibility.¹⁶ The former has been satirized and criticized, by activists such as Azar Tabari as well as the revolutionary speaker Ali Shariati, to halt Iran’s progress into modernity and leave it open to colonial incursions.¹⁷ Indeed Shiite quietism has been associated with backwardness, passivity and accommodation to power, making somewhat understandable Dabashi’s choice to shun that particular dimension in his discussion of Shiism as an agent of change in modern politics. As the case studies below will demonstrate however, the aesthetic paradigm of Zaynab bint ‘Ali engenders new intersections between spiritual recovery and civil engagement, setting the more introspective modality into revolutionary new light.

15- SHAW Wendy. *What is “Islamic” art ? : between religion and perception*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 55.

16- GILSENAN Michael. *Recognizing Islam: religion and society in the modern Middle East*. New York : I.B. Tauris, 2000, p. 61.

17- See for example Tabari’s article on the Shia clergy in Iranian politics, <https://libcom.org/article/role-shii-clergy-modern-iranian-politics-azar-tabari>, and Shariati’s book *Fatima Is Fatima*, in which he writes: “Other than a few responsible and committed scholars, they failed to bring the essence of Islam to light. That is, Islam stresses inner as well as outer freedom. When presented in the form that the Prophet received it, it brings self respect. It opposes tyranny, oppression and colonialism for they foster dependence upon a man made system. These scholars failed to uncover the forgotten concepts of Islam. They ignored its revolutionary dimension.” SHARIATI Ali. *Ali Shariati’s Fatima Is Fatima*. Tehran : Shariati Foundation, 2001, p. 7.

The Case of the Animals

When in 2009 people took to the streets of Tehran over what they perceived to be manipulated election results, many cultural institutions refrained from joining this nascent Green Movement, possibly because of their strong government ties or out of fear of being shut down. An exceptional case therefore was Siamak Filizadeh's solo exhibition, *Sacrificial Lamb*, which used a slaughterhouse metaphor to comment on the violent crackdown on protesters by security forces. The gallery in which it was hosted included a garden with a *howz*, a traditional water pond that provides cleanliness and refreshment. Quite contrary to that association however, the pond became the harrowing site of Filizadeh's sheep sculptures submerged in red liquid.

In order to properly address this case, this work perfectly exemplifies the “Zaynab paradigm” of protest aesthetics, because it metaphorically “veils” the raw images of protest, and refuses to directly challenge the Iranian government in a struggle over visibility in the public space. Moreover, it presents its metaphorical subjects in a state of captivity, ruin or decay, signaling a lost battle. This locates the artwork, temporally, after the uprising of Imam Husayn and in the period of recovery presided over by Zaynab. Contrary to the imam, but like Zaynab's utterances, Filizadeh's exhibition was meant, not to intervene in a particular incident, but to connect to broader aesthetic and political themes. Indeed the artist states that he was inspired by “oppression that is done to writers in different governments throughout history.” Filizadeh emphasizes: “I don't work about a specific [event] that happened at a specific time, and I'm not interested in this way of working because [then] the final work has a specific use-by date [...], and there is no more room for expansion and expansion of meaning.”¹⁸

If indeed Zaynab's model might shed light on certain artistic engagements with protests, how may we discern her aesthetics of recovery in Filizadeh's installation and what kind of agency does it confer upon gallery visitors? The answer lies in the artwork's reference to the tenth-century fable, *The Case of the Animals Versus Man*, written by a collective of Persian philosophers who called themselves the *Ikhwan al-Safa'* (Brethren of Purity).¹⁹ This story portrays animals as rational and eloquent beings, who place humanity on trial for capturing, abusing and killing them. Interestingly, arguments on both sides of the aisle are based on the Quran, the animals emphasizing that they constitute “*umammun amthalakum*”, communities like yourselves,²⁰ suggesting that they are bound to certain basic rights like human beings. Humanity defends its elevated position

18- Interview between author and Siamak Filizadeh, August 18th, 2023. Filizadeh did admit that the work he installed in the gallery's *howz* is, to a certain degree, anchored in the episodes of state violence that occurred before Filizadeh's exhibition opened. He states: “the idea and performance of the gallery pool, and especially the work that was performed in the pool, came to my mind after the protests...”

19- *The Case of the Animals Versus Man* is epistle number 22 in the Brethren's larger collection of 52 treatises, that was written in Arabic in the second half of the tenth century and published under the title *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā'*.

20- Quran 6 : 38



Fig. 1, Siamak Filizadeh, *Sacrificial Lamb* (overview), Tehran, 2009.

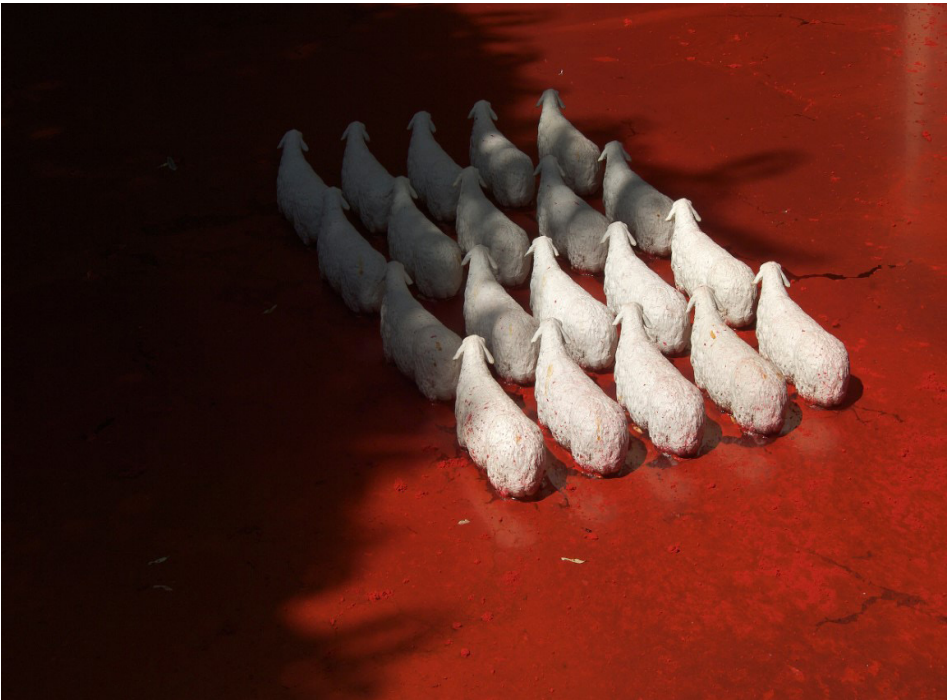


Fig. 2, Siamak Filizadeh, *Sacrificial Lamb*, Tehran, 2009

over the animals by claiming that they are God's chosen creatures, receivers of His revelation and thus knowers of what is good and what is evil. Strikingly, the animals retort that they are in no need for revelation, claiming that they are "virtuous by nature" (God has extended his dispensation to all creatures), while man's so-called blessing of rationality and argumentation has led him astray, most choosing evil over good.²¹

Based on such arguments, Janne Mattila suggests "that the suffering of the animals at the hands of human beings symbolizes for the authors the suffering of virtuous believers at the hands of human tyrants."²² We may forget how poignant this story becomes in the context of the Green Movement, since protests in Iran are frequently framed as anti-religious resistance to a theocratic order. However, far from rejecting the Islamic Republic's Constitution, the leaders of the Green Movement frequently invoked the constitutional rights enshrined in it,²³ stating "Shooting into crowds, the militarization of city space, creating fear, and showcasing power are all the illegitimate offspring of an aversion to the law."²⁴ Like the animals in the

Brethren's fable, the protesters upheld Islamic (constitutional) rights and challenged those in power who claimed to uphold an Islamic order of justice, but actually resorted to tyranny.

Filizadeh's sheep sculptures, then, are not lined up to be slaughtered, but stand to accuse Iran's leaders for failing to uphold the laws they themselves instituted during the Islamic Revolution. The suggested blood is not their own, but their fellow civilians'; the Imam Husayn whose martyrdoms set the stage for the appearance of Zaynab; the one who confers spiritual agency when all possibilities for political change are cut off. Like the animals in the Brethren's fable, Zaynab displays an eloquence of speech and knowledge of the Quran by which she restores human dignity to her community and claims her rights as family of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵ Much like the animals' petition to the wise king of the Jinns, Zaynab turns to a higher power with a *du'ah*: "Allah, Grant us our rights and punish those who have oppressed us" and, finally leaves her oppressor with the words "Allah is sufficient to deal with you."²⁶

Filizadeh's evocation of a courtroom setting emphasizes the question of rights and the absence thereof, yet places the accusers in a position of eloquence and

21- MATTILA Janne. The animal fable of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' in context : the ontological and moral status of animals in early Islamic thought. In : MATTILA Raija, Sanae ITO and Sebastian FINK (eds.). *Animals and their relation to gods, humans and things in the ancient world*. Wiesbaden : Springer Fachmedien, 2019, p. 460.

22- *Ibid.*, p. 462

23- MOKHTARI Shadi. "This government Is neither Islamic nor a republic" : responses to the 2009 postelection crackdown. in BRUMBERG Daniel and Farideh FARHI, *Power and change in Iran : politics of contention and conciliation*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2016, p. 259.

24- *Ibid.*

25- Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission. Sermon of Lady Zaynab (a) in the court of Yazid. In : *Ahlulbayt Islamic mission*. [consulted on August 14th, 2023]. Location : <https://www.aimislam.com/sermon-of-lady-zaynab-a-in-the-court-of-yazid/>

26- *Ibid.*

moral strength. This may be similar to what Edith Szanto describes as “qualified lives” in her article about female refugees at Zaynab’s shrine. Szanto argues that these women, who are without rights and reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, retain a kind of agency that allows them to live qualified instead of “bare” lives. She states that the women recognized themselves in Zaynab and her followers, since they too had been reduced to bare life (people without rights). Yet, Szanto argues, “the ahl al-bayt’s dispossession, oppression, and lack of protection from being killed also became central conditions for their attainment of an exemplary, saintly status. Their suffering became proof of their piety and their “sacredness,” the means by which they gained their powers of healing and intercession, whereby they gained the ability to help their followers to lead good lives in states of exception.”²⁷

Similarly, Filizadeh’s installation reminded visitors that knowledge of rights, beauty of speech and moral fortitude keeps Iranians fastened to a deep sense of humanity to persevere in times of suppression and violence. He remembers that “most of the visitors, who were part of the protests at that time, were transformed when they encountered my works”, many of them crying when they empathized with the animals, who remained so steadfast in their oppression.²⁸

Bird Traps

Another important case is that of bird traps. The reason for Iranian artists to deal with the topic of protest in metaphorical ways may be twofold. Metaphors have a long history in Persian painting and poetry and are widely understood, but at the same time “veil” direct political statements in art, so as not to draw any undesirable considerations from the authorities. The artist Hamed Jaberha states: “In this way, I’m both safe from the potential dangers of social positioning and I’m able to communicate my ideas to the audience, so in this [geography], metaphors keep our minds and our bodies alive!”²⁹

In his *Decay* series, Jaberha uses metaphors in two distinct ways, one processual and the other symbolic. He uses organic materials, like the bodies of dead animals, because to him, decomposition as a biological process, mirrors the history of civic uprisings, which are born, grow and die to serve as the incubator for new life, for new social movements. At the same time, Jaberha states, those perishable materials are symbols of the “bodies and people who, over the years and even centuries of struggle, have still not been able to reach the freedom they aspire to”.³⁰ In *Gol-o-Morgh* he places these “bodies”, in the form of dead birds and rose buds, in industrial gelatin encased in plexiglass, creating conditions in which the process of decay is slowed down yet closely observable. Placing the

27- SZANTO Edith. Sayyida Zaynab in the state of exception : Shi’i sainthood as “qualified life” in contemporary Syria. *International Journal of Middle East studies*. 2012, vol. 44, n° 2, p. 294-295.

28- Interview between author and Filizadeh, August 18th, 2023.

29- Interview between author and Hamed Jaberha, September 5th, 2023.

30- *Ibid*.

biological “afterlife” of the creature under a “loop”, Jaberha offers a suspended moment of reflection on what he calls “this wild cruel entity rooted in us [...] that thrives on the remains of wars, revolutions, and upheavals.”³¹

Like in the surprising forms decomposition may take on, Jaberha finds beauty in letting the post-revolutionary temporality run its course to unveil unforeseen modern outcomes

His assertion that “decay means [new] life”,³² mirrors Zaynab’s reflection on those killed on the plains of Karbala, when she uttered the Quranic maxim “Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living.”³³ It is often noted that Zaynab remained patient in situations of hardship, as those



Fig. 3, Hamed Jaberha, *Gol-o-Morgh*, from exhibition: *Decay, Chapter two: Rend*, Tehran, 2017.

31- JABERHA Hamed. *Decay, chapter two: rend*, Tehran : Aaran Art Gallery, p. 3.

32- Jaberha states: “in my point of view [...] decay means life, and it’s the exact opposite of nothingness, in the sense that I see the world evolving and struggling, and I see decay as its lifeblood.”

33- Quran 3 : 169, Translation by Pickthall.



Fig. 4, Hamed Jaberha, Gol-o-Morgh (detail), from exhibition: Decay, Chapter two: Rend, Tehran, 2017.

situations were nothing more than a “manifestation of Allah’s attributes”.³⁴ Even when she was in chains, taunted by Yazid’s governor of Kufa, ibn Ziyad, who asked her about her feelings towards the bloodbath of Karbala, she responded by saying: “I saw nothing but beauty”,³⁵ since the outcome of the battle was a manifestation of *al-Jamil* (“the Beautiful”), one of the names of God.

Far from resorting to fatalism, Zaynab’s utterance emphasizes the human disposition towards beauty, discerned in responsibility, struggle and sacrifice, as

34- ADIBZADEH Shameema. *The journey of beauty towards perfection : Zaynab Bint ‘Alī Ibn Abi Tālib and the model of human changes towards developing attributes of walīyat Allāh and al-insān al-kāmil*. Dissertation, Temple University, 2013, p. 101.

35- FAIYAZ Jaffer. *Timeless Lessons from Karbala*. In : *Al-Islam*. [consulted on September 5th, 2023]. Location : <https://www.al-islam.org/media/timeless-lessons-karbala-lesson-15-god-consciousness>

well as in the flowers of a future generation that take root within them; one that may eventually suspend the suspension of protests. It is this in-between moment of suspension that Jaberha quite literally “captures”, much like the mystical love poets when they wrote about longing. The poet Hafez for example, wrote of the nightingale who, like Zaynab, was patient and content in his admiration of the rose’s beauty:

The patient nightingale on a branch atop the tree
For the well being of the rose made its plea.
Praise your goodness O rose, and your beauty,
Let not your pride make the nightingale flee.
I complain not of being apart from thee,
In hope of union, I’ll be apart for eternity.
Others delight in pleasure and luxury,
Pain of separation is what delights me.³⁶

In Jaberha’s sculpture installation, the bird seems stuck, surrounded by its precious roses which remain permanently in sight yet always out of reach, leaving the bird in a continual state of longing. This idea of longing for, yet not achieving unification with the beloved object is a central theme in mystical love poems, a suspension that engenders beauty, spiritual realization and, according to Rumi, even healing:

Longing is the core of mystery.
Longing itself brings the cure.
The only rule is, suffer the pain.³⁷

Another artist who uses taxidermized birds to explore the notion of suspended protests is Saleh Tasbihi. In his *Birds of the Garden of Shah*, he places their bodies in wooden enclosures, ensnaring them with pins and clamps. In the Iranian collective consciousness this exhibition title may bring to mind the pleasantness of royal gardens, with birds perched in lofty cypress trees and courtiers indulging in wine ceremonies and poetry recitals. The prophet-king Suleyman was noted for his ability to speak with the birds in his court, treating them fairly as respected subjects of his divinely granted rule.

Tasbihi inserts this mythological imagery into a contemporary Iranian reality in which assertive citizens are rounded up by authoritarian rulers. Describing the telling power of metaphor, he states: “If we want to show the glory of man, whose only weapon was the pen, his only crime to speak about the people’s rights, and his only fate execution, I have no other choice but to take refuge in

36- HAFIZ Shamseddin Mohammad. Ghazaliyat. In : *Sattor*. [consulted on September 13th, 2023]. Location : <https://www.sattor.com/english/ghazaliatofhafiz.htm>

37- GROOT Rokus d. Rumi and the abyss of longing. *Mawlana Rumi review*. 2011, vol. 2, n° 1, p. 61.



Fig. 5, Saleh Tasbihi, *Birds from the Garden of Shah*, Tehran, 2016.



Fig. 6, Saleh Tasbihi, *Birds from the Garden of Shah*, Tehran, 2016.

the unseen signs of metaphor and myth.”³⁸ It remains doubtful however whether Tasbihi truly succeeds in “veiling” the gruesome reality of executed bodies in the loftier clothes of mythology, since his birds, like Jaberha’s, remain organic lumps of flesh and feathers. In other words, unlike the stylized bird images we find in medieval manuscript paintings, which often stand as symbols for the unseen, the elevated and the paradisiacal, Tasbihi’s birds are first and foremost experienced as physical bodies, clouding the birds’ symbolic potential. In fact, the anatomical reality of the animals’ pierced flesh and snapped necks may trigger in its viewers an “embodied” response through sight. Such embodied or “haptic” perception removes the symbolic veils between the audience and the artwork, revealing the naked reality of protester’s bodies, no matter how symbolic Tasbihi’s choice of animal and title may be. As Laura Marks suggests: “While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image.”³⁹

Thus, seemingly aspiring to the transcendent, the works of both Jaberha and Tasbihi actually seem to oscillate between the symbolic and the physical; between mystical ideas of longing on the one hand, and the acceptance of societal realities on the other. Reflecting on the ambiguous state of his artworks, Jaberha states: “[by exposing the birds to decay] I challenged the subject of paradise! Or did I ask the question, how can paradise exist at a time when birds and flowers have outgrown their picturesque beauty and are in a process of decay?”⁴⁰

The Ruins of Civil Histories

Even though Zaynab is patient and content with God’s suspended yet immanent justice (the future), she also speaks of the past to bestow nobility and authority on her family. In Yazid’s palace, the women of the family of the Prophet Muhammad stood unveiled, bound and humiliated before the mighty caliph of the Islamic community. However, as a sage steeped in knowledge of history and genealogy, she reverses these positions by citing her prophetic heritage, while casting the Battle of Badr (624) as the decisive moment at which the forebears of Yazid had stood against, killed and even ate the liver of her noble ancestors. A witness of history, Zaynab traces key moments of friction, secession and struggle to explain, as well as persevere in, the conditions of the present.

Maryam Farzadian’s recent exhibition, *Dialectic of Decay*, reflects this tendency to historicize in order to rationalize and legitimize a political position. Among the many objects in this exhibition were a series of stone slabs Farzadian collected from ruined mansions and graveyards, upon which she painted scenes from

38- TASBIHI Saleh. Husayn Ganji’s notes on my exhibition “Birds of the Garden of Shah in Azma Magazine. In : *Instagram*. [consulted on February 27th, 2024]. Location : https://www.instagram.com/p/BFJYgD_jYdH/

39- MARKS Laura U. *Touch : sensuous theory and multisensory media*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. 163.

40- Interview between author and Hamed Jaberha, September 5th, 2023.

historical photographs using oil paint. She opens her series with an image of Nasr al-Din Shah's European excursion in the 1870s that she painted on white marble shards. This was a well-documented and unique moment of political and cultural interaction with various European states that had gone through phases of constitutionalism, republicanism and democracy. One may have hoped that the shah be inspired towards a more civic-centered and parliamentary style of politics current in the states he visited. As Afshin Marashi argues however, he instead adopted the European model of public monarchy, creating a more intimate relationship between state and society based on the king's public visibility and the people's dynastic loyalty.⁴¹ In short, if during his travels, Nasr al-Din Shah was interested in political innovation at all, it was in increasing his legitimacy before his subjects, not in facilitating their political emancipation and representation.

Farzadian's next scene depicts the shah and his assassin, Mirza Reza Kermani, about whom she states that his firing of a bullet was not supported by a greater civic ideal and thus failed to inspire any social change.⁴² Real change came only a decade later, when the Constitutional Movement mobilized wide civic engagement and public resistance against the random rule of the Qajar



Fig. 7, Maryam Farzadian, *Broken into a Hundred Pieces* (Nasser Eddin Shah's European excursions), from exhibition *Dialectic of Decay*, Tehran, 2022.

41- MARASHI Afshin. *Nationalizing Iran : culture, power, and the state, 1870-1940*. Seattle : University of Washington Press, 2008, p. 12.

42- Interview between author and Maryam Farzadian, August 21st, 2023.



Fig. 8, Maryam Farzadian, *Broken into a Hundred Pieces* (Nasser Eddin Shah and his assassin Mirza Reza Kermani), from exhibition *Dialectic of Decay*, Tehran, 2022.



Fig. 9, Maryam Farzadian, *Broken into a Hundred Pieces* (The first Parliament of Iran), from exhibition *Dialectic of Decay*, Tehran, 2022.

monarchy.⁴³ Farzadian depicts key scenes from the Constitutional period, such as Mozaffar al-Din Shah signing the Constitutional Decree and the first consultative assembly in front of the parliament building, but also the consequent Russian-backed monarchist crackdown on constitutionalists in Tabriz and the imprisonment of parliament members.

43- BELLAIGUE Christopher d. *The Islamic enlightenment : the modern struggle between faith and reason*. New York : Random House, 2017, pp. 238-239.



Fig. 10, Maryam Farzadian, *Broken into a Hundred Pieces* (Executions in Tabriz in 1911, and death of Saqatall Eslam, one of the leaders of the Revolution.), from exhibition *Dialectic of Decay*, Tehran, 2022.

Farzadian's minute documentation of the flourishing and waning of historical protest movements reveals an anxiety over an imminent collective amnesia that leaves the Iranian government with space to distort history for its own benefit.⁴⁴ The crumbling stone carriers of her paintings make this fear all the more pressing as they stand, yet proud, but at the point of ruin. Farzadian salvages these architectural fragments, sometimes with their original inscriptions still intact, because they "have witnessed what events" have happened before them.⁴⁵ The idea that monuments are the exalted witnesses of history that "look" upon the people can be traced back to the Romantic age, and is a subject of criticism and deconstruction among some artists in Iran. For example, according to Abbas Daneshvari, the photo series *Where the Heads of the Renowned Rest* by Mohammad Ghazali, must be seen as a typical postmodern reversal. Ghazali's photographs do not look up towards monumental sculptures as repositories of the national narrative, but downward from their stone heads onto the quotidian lives on the streets, denying any sense of Romanticism.⁴⁶ Farzadian however seems to do the exact opposite. Far from deconstructing a "grand narrative", she

44- Interview between author and Maryam Farzadian, August 21st, 2023.

45- *Ibid.*

46- DANESHVARI Abbas. Deconstruction and the contemporary arts of Iran : reversal of the hierarchy. In : KESHMIRSHEKAN Hamid (ed.). *Contemporary art from the Middle East : regional interactions with global art discourses*. London : I.B. Tauris, 2015, p. 161.

uses the weathered stones that were always close to their Iranian inhabitants. They witnessed the everyday as well as the remarkable; the historical junctures of civic assemblies and uprisings, and the personal sacrifices that have led to the particular configuration of Iranian civil life in the present.

That present condition is precisely the subject of Farzadian’s painted fragments. She asks her audience to care about the state of historical preservation and documentation in Iran, and to learn about Iranian histories of civil resistance. Her exhibition statement suggests that a people “without any memories of [the] past [are] without any outlook for [a] future”, and are bound to restart from “point zero” every time people rise up in protest.⁴⁷ Three months after her exhibition opening, the Mahsa Amini protests broke out, forcing Iranians, once again, to consider their arduous histories of resistance in order to navigate new roads ahead. As I have argued in this article, those roads may not lead to a cosmic order of justice, but may yet strengthen the wanderer to better persevere in the many injustices to come.

Conclusion

This article has examined a particular paradigm of Iranian protest aesthetics that engages the human soul to inspire a renewed sensitivity to beauty, a sense of embeddedness in history, law and (dignified) humanity, as well as perseverance in authoritarian states wherein all of those things are under constant threat of erasure. This “Zaynab paradigm” accepts that Shiism may yet provide a potent framework for understanding protest aesthetics in the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, it broadens the expressive scope, from outward revolution to inner recovery and healing. It is, emphatically, in the inter-revolutionary stage, when dehumanizing orders are reinstated, that artists adopt Zaynab’s aesthetic paradigm to recover a sense of humanity. After all, when protests are suspended, the revolutionary archetype of Imam Husayn disappears and sets the stage for the appearance of his sister; the one who confers spiritual agency when all possibilities for political change are cut off.

I have pinpointed three distinct ways in which Zaynab’s “spirit” manifests in the selected artworks, all of which deal with the themes of death and decay. It is Zaynab’s accusation of the ruling hegemony and her petition to a higher power, that speaks through Siamak Filizadeh’s sheep sculptures. The artist places the animals in a position of eloquence, dignity and divine providence, taking their leaders to trial for not abiding by the lofty laws they had themselves instated. Secondly, it is Zaynab’s recognition of beauty in accepting the way things are, that we discern in the artworks of Hamed Jaberha and Saleh Tasbihi. Their taxidermized birds oscillate between a suspended longing for a cosmic justice to come, and a stark negation of that paradisiacal state in their earthly, embodied and decomposing forms. Finally, in Maryam Farzadian’s painting series, we

47- FARZADIAN Maryam. Statement. In : *Darz : The Iranian art platform*. [consulted on September 7th, 2022]. Location: <https://darz.art/en/shows/11066>

recognize Zaynab's tendency to evoke certain lineages and histories in order to legitimize a political position. Decay in Farzadian's work suggests that, what binds the Iranian people to histories of civic uprisings are material sources that are inherently fragile and subject to hegemonic misreading. She urges her audiences to study those sources so that future protest movements may be embedded in Iranian histories of civic engagement, instead of consequently returning to an ahistorical point zero. Until then, the spirit of Zaynab bint 'Ali will keep pointing to shimmers of beauty and humanity that yet linger below the surface of the status quo.

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Figure credits

- Figure 1. <https://siamakfilizadeh.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/instalation3.jpg>
- Figure 2. <https://siamakfilizadeh.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/instalation.jpg>
- Figure 3. Photograph provided by Hamed Jaberha
- Figure 4. Photograph provided by Hamed Jaberha
- Figure 5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BBXT1rwDYUI/>
- Figure 6. https://www.instagram.com/p/BBvIgnLjYa_/
- Figure 7. Photograph provided by Maryam Farzadian
- Figure 8. Photograph provided by Maryam Farzadian
- Figure 9. Photograph provided by Maryam Farzadian
- Figure 10. Photograph provided by Maryam Farzadian

الملخص | يبحث هذا المقال في جمالية الاحتجاج الإيرانية التي، بدلاً من التدخل في الفضاء العام كعامل سياسي، تضيف قوة روحية تساعد على استعادة الإحساس بالإنسانية في سياق أنظمة مجردة من الإنسانية.

تجري الممارسات الفنية التي تم تناولها هنا بين لحظات الاحتجاج، وليس خلالها، وتقدم روايات أكثر تأملاً ومجازية عن ظلم الحكم الاستبدادي. إنني أربط هذه الجمالية الخاصة بالشخصية الشيعية زينب بنت علي التي وجهت الاتهام إلى الطغاة، وعززت العزيمة الأخلاقية لطائفتها، وأمرت بقبول أمر الله والاعتراف بالجمال في أعماله. وبذلك، فإنني بذلك أتحدى رؤية حميد دباشي المادية والعلمانية للتشيع كدين احتجاج يهدف فقط إلى تغيير المجتمع، من خلال إظهار أن بعض الفنانين يروجون لما أسميه نموذج زينب لجمالية الاحتجاج الذي ينطلق من الداخل لإلهام التعافي والمثابرة.

الكلمات الرئيسية | الفن الإيراني المعاصر، جماليات الاحتجاج، التشيع، حميد دباشي، زينب بنت علي، تأنيث، الانحطاط

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