Under My Veil

MINOO EMAM

"(نتفرداچ ريز اي يرداچمه) (نتفرگرداچ ريز اي يرداچمه)" (نتفرگردا saying, traditionally exchanged among Iranian women, is simultaneously an acknowledgment of a shared female experience—the veil being a customary (and now compulsory) element of women's everyday attire in the Islamic Republic of Iran—just as it is a message of support and care. Contemporary artist Minoo Emami's artwork is made in that spirit, in support of humans everywhere who have been subjected to systemic oppression and to violence. Minoo Emami: Under My Veil is the largest exhibition of the artist's work to date, spanning her early career as a self-taught painter to more recent experiments in sculpture, photography, printmaking, video, and

In 2015, Emami moved to the U.S. to pursue an education in art. She earned her BFA from Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and her MFA from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She now resides in Providence, Rhode Island, where she teaches studio art classes at the Rhode Island School of Design and Roger Williams University. Living abroad has given Emami a rich conceptual and discursive framework to enhance and expand her artistic practice. It was in art school that she began to refer to herself as an "antiwar artist" and to understand that many of the sociopolitical issues that her work engages are, indeed, universal struggles.

installation art.

Born in 1964 in Kermanshah, Iran, Minoo Emami's teenage years and early adulthood were defined by social upheaval and war. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 ousted the Pahlavi monarchy, replacing the state's secular rule with an Islamic system of law that led to the increased control and monitoring of everyday lives, as well as the severe curtailment of women's civil rights. Following the Revolution, in 1980, Iraq invaded Iran over a territorial dispute, resulting in what is considered to be the longest and deadliest conventional war since World War II. By the war's end in 1988, Emami was married to a veteran who had lost his right leg. She had taught herself to draw and ran underground art classes for women out of her home. For nearly two decades, she produced moody ink drawings and acrylic paintings portraying absent limbs and prosthetics as symbols of the physical and psychological toll of a war that no one wanted.

If the Iran-Iraq War marks the beginning of Minoo Emami's artistic journey, the ongoing Women's Rights Movement bookends it. Sparked in September 2022 after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police, the current demonstrations in Iran are the most pervasive the country has seen since 1979. Significantly, this exhibition includes new, neverbefore-seen work that the artist has created over the past year in response to this unprecedented social movement, alongside her previous work related to female empowerment in Iran and beyond. In Emami's words, her artwork "transforms moments of trauma into objects of beauty and resilience." Born out of conflict, all of the artwork on view here brings us under her veil, where we find hope for a future sustained by shared human dignity, understanding, and peace.

Visit Silpe Gallery in Taub Hall through October 21 to view recent video work by Minoo Emami and to participate in a collective quilt-making project that will culminate in a performance by the artist at the University of Hartford on November 11. For more information, visit the HAS Galleries' website: www.hartford.edu/gallery.

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Women's Rights in Iran and Beyond

Women's rights in modern Iran have ebbed and flowed according to the political agenda of those in power, making for a turbulent history. When Emami was born in 1964, Iran was in a period of modernization led by a monarch who actively elevated the role of women in society: women were admitted to universities, won suffrage, participated in parliament, gained more legal rights in marriage, and were not subject to a dress code. As journalist Azadeh Moaveni notes of this time, "For many, state feminism became associated with state repression and forced Westernization." As such, the Islamic radicals who overthrew the Shah's reign in 1979 "shaped their project for Iranian society around women's subordination." The current, unrelenting Women's Rights Movement in Iran—signified by the protest slogan "Women, life, freedom," and the presence of unveiled women in public—is a sign of the Islamic Republic's weakening hold on social mores and of more changes to come.

In her art, Minoo Emami draws on a deep history of visual, environmental, and social structures designed to monitor, contain, and control women's bodies. While motifs in the series 4 Walls and #74 make explicit reference to forms of violence against women permitted by Islamic law, other works explore architecture (specifically, the traditional *andaruni courtyard*) as a metaphor for the numerous ways in which women worldwide are controlled by domestic expectations and obligations. She started working on the series *Andaruni Landscapes* during the Covid-19 pandemic, when reports of domestic abuse rose significantly in the U.S. and elsewhere. Yet, in these artworks' women are not pictured as victims; rather, they fight, dance, sing, and bare their bodies.

Minoo Emami's Antiwar Art

The Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 is considered to be the deadliest and most destructive war waged between two Muslim states in history. Then-Iraqi president Saddam Hussein deployed chemical weapons and a strategy of aerial bombardment directed at Iranian cities and civilians, while Iran mounted a campaign of mass mobilization, recruiting young and old alike, to overwhelm the drastically outnumbered Iraqi infantry. For these reasons, the conflict was popularly referred to as the "Imposed War." By the war's end, 87 Iranian cities were in utter ruins, an estimated 5 million Iranian people were homeless, and a total of 3 million people had lost their lives for nothing; the war ended in a stalemate, and both sides claimed victory.

Minoo Emami is representative of a generation of Iranians who confront and cope with this collective trauma through art. Her early paintings and drawings of dismembered body parts and prosthetics amidst an unforgiving darkness ruminate on the carnage of war, while more recent sculptures deploy colorful tiles, textiles, and motifs to honor individual stories of survival and resilience. Art historian Talinn Grigor has observed the significant role played by Iranian women in memorializing the war, and Emami's incorporation of vernacular photographs in recent works *So, I Can Fly* and *Families of War* similarly positions women as central to the complex and intergenerational process of witnessing and surviving trauma.

Sing a Song with Me, 2022

Installation with printed chiffon, fabric sculptures, light, and audio

Minoo Emami envisions gardens as spaces of safety, healing, and growth. In this immersive installation, a بقچه Emami fills her garden with boghcheh traditional fabric container that Iranian women use to store their personal belongings, such as prayer stones and chadors, or carry everyday items, from meals to wedding trousseaus. The audio pairs sounds of domesticity-the washing of dishes or closing of cabinets—with recordings of the artist and her mother singing soothing lullabies and love songs from Emami's childhood. The green light that emanates from the *boghcheh*, and which reappears throughout the exhibition, symbolizes gardens, growth, and spirituality. In recent social movements in Iran, green has also become the color of resistance and opposition.

<u>בבקשה תעזור לעצמך</u> (*Please Help Yourself*), 2019 Colored pencil on paper

In the series, *Please Help Yourself*, Emami depicts women from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds in bridal gowns, their faces veiled, as they offer an apple to the viewer. "Living under the Iranian regime, I feel women are still punished for their original sin," Emami states, referring to the Biblical story of Eve tasting the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden. Yet, the apple in Emami's drawing is just that—a drawing, a depiction, a representation. Emami thus calls into question the mythical apple's grasp on our contemporary reality.

So, I Can Fly, 2021

Digital collage and transfer photo images on canvas and wood with acrylic paint and a green neon light

This multimedia work begins with a warm brown foreground that funnels our vision to a stylized door the entryway to Emami's grandmother's home. The door, rendered from memory, is a portal onto other memories; the expanse of vernacular photographs in the background gathers together generations of women from Emami's family. The photographs, while cheery and playful as one would expect from family snapshots, have also been wounded. The surface of the collage is torn and punctuated by a jarring neon green light—an abstract rendering of the word *Allah*.

4 Walls #1, 2022

4 Walls #3, 2022

4 Walls #4, 2022

Assemblages of screen-prints on acrylic and patina copper plates with hand-painted tiles mounted on plywood

Emami's series *4 Walls* explores the *andaruni*, or courtyard, as a metaphor for societal attempts to contain, control, and monitor women and their bodies. The *andaruni*, a courtyard at the center of the house, is the space in Islamic architecture traditionally reserved for women. Emami offers a window onto this space, layering it with visual and textual references to marriage laws, domestic violence, and household labor. Fighting back against these restraints are her resilient female avatars. In one, a figure holds up a veil—an offering of support that transforms the *andaruni* from a space of repression into one of strength and resistance.

In a Heartbeat, 2022-23

Laser-etched prints on handmade Abaca paper with light

Emami created this installation in step with the global uprising responding to the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini while in the custody of Iran's morality police for a dress code violation last September. Emami describes these women as her "real life avatars"—those who have been blinded, tortured, or killed by the so-called morality police and the government.

This piece is an example of Emami's expansive approach to artistic media. She continuously learns new skills in search of materials and techniques that align with the thematic content of her work. Here, handmade Abaca paper conveys a texture and transparency similar to human skin; etching and burning with a laser is a subtle reference to the violence sustained by the women; and sourcing their portraits from social media manifests the important role of the Internet for maintaining subversive networks of communication in a world of surveillance and censorship.

Lamea, 2016

Blown glass, gold and kiln paint, resin, and prosthetic feet

Emami's ongoing series of prosthetic sculptures translate her early "antiwar" paintings and drawings into three dimensions. Each piece is named for an individual who suffered loss in the Iran-Iraq War; many are civilians, including women and children. Emami crafts the sculptures with a variety of colors, motifs, and materials—from fabric to ceramic tiles—that represent the individual's story, creating a unique portrait that celebrates human survival and perseverance in the face of the physical and psychological tolls of war.

#74, 2019

Series of archival inkjet prints on paper

74 is the number of lashes a woman can legally receive for dress code violations in Iran. In this disquieting series of work, Emami depicts portraits of nude women dancing, singing, and reciting poetry beneath streaks of black paint lashed onto the surface by the artist herself. The resulting tension between violence and resistance is felt most keenly in a video piece, where a woman calmly twirls and sways beneath the lashes. In connection with the series, Emami has created an oversized, weighty hijab that translates the psychological burden of living under Islamic law into physical terms.

I Put a Spell on You, 2020

Acrylic, marker, and collage on canvas

This work is an example of Emami's study and critique of the superstitious beliefs that pervade the domestic life of women in Iran. The figurine is composed of household pieces and tapestry elements, while the drawings on the carpet are inspired by Islamic rituals. Now an *émigré*, Emami sourced the images online through the open recourses of Iran's National Library.