

By Emily Avery-Miller



This page and opposite:
Body Quilt: A Fire for Peace,
 performance at the Hartford
 Art School, University of
 Hartford, 2023. Photos:
 Michael Vahrenwald.

Minoo Emami: Under My Veil

The scene was both idyllic and startling on the quadrangle outside the Joseloff Gallery at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford. A rainbow shimmered in the afternoon sunshine, refracted in the arc of mist from a fire hose. The water pattered onto a smoldering canvas, the air tinged with the tang of paraffin oil and burnt cloth. In a matter of minutes, years' worth of Minoo Emami's work were ignited, burned, and drenched.

The artist missed the conflagration. "I didn't see the fire or the rainbow. When I turned, it was only the ashes." While firefighters torched a 21 x 26 foot quilt of 22 of her original paintings, Ms. Emami moved through the crowd that encircled the platform for the ceremony. She locked eyes with each person, clutched their hands, embraced them, and thanked them for being there.

For Minoo Emami, connection is as much a core substance of the work. Her creations take

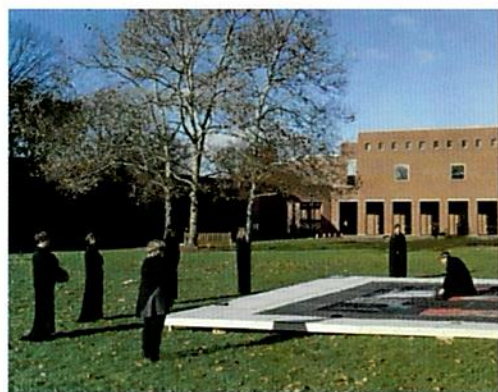
on numerous forms; for more than three decades as an artist she has worked in paint, glass, video, photo, and more. Her multimedia oeuvre, recently on display in the *Minoo Emami: Under My Veil* exhibition at the Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford School of Art, was captivating for both its diversity and its cohesion. Each of the pieces has a distinct voice, and yet they ring out as a chorus, a cry of sorrow and a song of hope.

The quilt demonstrates how Emami's approach transforms and transcends traditional boundaries and labels. At the material level, the object was paint and canvas. Within each piece, the most consistent motif is a solid black or bright red background, and the presence of a beige-colored prosthetic leg. Layered on top of those basic forms, and their overt confrontations with war and violence, was a tapestry of symbolism, carrying threads from the masculine and feminine, daily domestic and the divine.

Through Emami's paint strokes, one prosthetic leg was transformed into a commode. Another lay casually under a well-worn sitting-room chair. One leg tangoed with the feminine curves of a red-and-white striped bathing suit. A pair of baggy, khaki pants in a military-fatigues style lay torn, with haunting gaps at the shin and thigh.

For Emami, no doubt, those blank spaces are filled with vivid memories. She has lived war, beginning in her native Iran. She came of age during the Iranian Revolution. She was married to a war veteran, and she mothered a child through decades of conflict. She painted through that time as well. Although Emami has been studying and creating art in the U.S. since 2015, she and her work make clear that war is not a distant or abstract past. It's a physical present. She ensures viewers know and feel this, too. Expanding on seventeen years of painting prosthetic legs and other anti-war images as part of her project,

War Collection, Emami began *Peace March* in 2013. It features three-dimensional pieces, mostly arms and legs. The pieces are inspired by real people and their stories. As she writes in an artist's statement: "In this project, by using diverse artistic, modern, and traditional techniques... I transform trauma into objects of beauty and resilience. *Peace March* aims to highlight people's devastation by the consequences of ongoing wars in the Middle East, especially women, whose role has always been undermined in their societies." With intricate painted patterns on blown glass, lacy metalwork, and dazzling mirrors, each piece is a lavish tribute to the spirit, attached to undeniably human toes and fingertips. Emami's art stays close to the body; the human form that we all share becomes the vessel of her message of the brutal realities of war and oppression and a resounding call for peace and connection.



The quilt project springs from that desire for connection. "The quilt for me is a discourse," Emami says. It's a conversation and, fundamentally, a group project. Students and faculty at University of Hartford School of Art participated in stitching together the paintings that formed the quilt and "suturing" them. "I love collaborating with people of different generations and backgrounds," Emami says. "We gathered together and created a new piece...it still has a message...a hope of something beautiful."

Uplifting beauty together requires a collective reckoning. Emami makes clear, "Nobody can say, 'This is not related to me.' Every country is related to war consequences through global issues like the economy or refugees. For example," she says, "people must decide how they can help to prevent more hate and violence in the world, and leaders must find peaceful political solutions instead of supporting wars. The loss and price are extreme for ordinary people." The quilt-burning took place on November 11, Veterans Day in the U.S., when the sacrifices of war are front-of-mind for military personnel and their loved ones. "My goal with this performance was to bring people together, recall the power of collective harmonic presence, and share a moment of my grief."

Emami's performance expanded and deepened that reflective moment, bringing it beyond battlefields and uniforms, and embodying how heavily war sits in the hearts of people around the world, especially women.

"I was in my teenage years when the Iranian Revolution happened," says Emami, "and since then, like many other Iranian women, many other women who are not believers but have been forced [to follow] the moral and social rules, I felt my body is the tool of control, of the authorities controlling me. That's why I speak of Iranian women's resilience and resisting this oppression." Her *Hav'a* (which translates to Eve in Farsi) series of photographs centers on this resilience and resistance. The collection #74 (2019) features a naked woman twirling behind black slashes that slice across the print. Emami explains in her artist statement that these "whip marks" repre-



sent the seventy-four lashes sentence for "a lousy hijab or no hijab in public in Iran." In the photos, the woman's body and posture are marred yet also undeterred.

The first stage was a calling-in. Emami and a sisterhood of nine assistants, women of diverse heritages, shrouded in black robes, processed to the platform, surrounding it. They anointed one another with mud handprints, recalling a Kurdish mourning tradition from Emami's mother's side of the family. Emami paced across the quilt, singing love songs from her childhood. Two other women sang lullabies in their native languages. They poured paraffin oil from glass vessels Emami made in Iran last summer; the vessels were inspired by a traditional "tear catcher" said to be used by women to collect their tears when their men went to war.

The women in the ceremony stood clear when it came time to burn the quilt. Firefighters with torches set the canvas ablaze. The women embraced each other and then moved into the

crowd, embracing and clasping hands with others in attendance. Thus, each person present was transformed into a mourner of war and co-celebrant of hope—both in the moment, and Emami hopes, in their daily lives going forward. "Now next time they see on the screen these videos from a home that is bombed and people are digging that ruin to find something to take, at least they feel different. They remember witness[ing] the grief and hold hands against this binary vision of 'us and others.'"

Back in the gallery after the ceremony, visitors reflected on Emami's other artwork and were invited to trace their own hands and "write a letter in it for someone who has a remnant of war and conflict in their lives." Emami promises on her website that she will upload contributions "to add your voice to our collective anti-war message."

Emami will also bring the remnants of the



quilt with her. "I wanted to take something back with me. I never can forget the war price, what happens to families and children..." she says, and yet, she carries on and so will her work. She will send pieces of the quilt's remains to other artists, with an invitation to use them to create new art. "I'm hoping a phoenix rises from these ashes with the beautiful pieces of art these beautiful women will make."

In the meantime, those who would like to experience Emami's work first-hand can visit two upcoming group shows that feature female-identifying artists: *On Her Terms: Feminine Power Embodied*, curated by Lauren Szumita at Fitchburg Art Museum in (February 3–June 2, 2024) and *Unfinished Business* at the Newport Art Museum curated by Francine Weiss, Ph.D (through May 26, 2024).

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hartford.edu/academics/schools-colleges/art/galleries/minoo-emami.aspx**

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What is your word or phrase to focus on throughout the new year? One word can carry more power than a list of resolutions.

My word remains **catalyst**. It kept me inspired and proactive last year. I connected more 'dots' and experienced many 'aha' moments. My to-do list for 2024 is ambitious. When you're open to catalysts, one cool thing triggers another and by following where the catalysts take you, your world becomes bigger. I want to always be a student and follow the sparks.
— Rita A. Fucillo

My word this year is **community**. I hope to build stronger connections, create meaningful bonds and find out what I can do for my community.
— Autumn Duke

My word is **opulence** and I am keeping that from last year. While that word is usually associated with wealth, socioeconomically, for me, it's about framing it into a question. How can I attain or live the opulence of mind, of spirit, of creative practice? And, especially, how can I gain clarity on a quality, instead of quantity, life?
— Shanta Lee

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My word for 2024 is more of a phrase. It's **the value of time**. This past year has taught me what is important and where I want to focus my time. It's so limited. I want to spend more time with friends and family, time creating, sharing, and making new memories. Understanding the value of my time as well as the value of others time and making the most of every minute.
— Lori Pedrick

My word for the year is **Peace**. At home. And all over the world. To quote Peter Schumann (see page 14), "Call out to your neighbors in three directions and invite them to the table before you start eating..."
— Kelly Holt

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