



Sara Rahbar: Weaving the Flag

"This is exactly what it looks like," remarked the shaken American soldier, recollecting moments from his recent tour of duty in Iraq as he stood inside Sara Rahbar's recreation of a war-ravaged home, *Nobody's Enemy* (2006). Constructed for the exhibition "Queens International 2006: Everything All at Once" at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, *Nobody's Enemy* is a simulacrum of a war-ravaged living room scrawled with graffiti and riddled with bullet holes; actual casings are strewn on the floor among abandoned toys, family photographs, teacups, knitting projects and other domestic debris. Rahbar spent two weeks gathering projects and other domestic debris. Rahbar spent two weeks gathering projects and other domestic debris. Rahbar spent two weeks gathering projects and other domestic debris. Rahbar spent two weeks gathering projects and other domestic debris. Rahbar spent two weeks gathering projects and other domestic debris.

Straddling two countries whose political leaders remain hostile to another, Iran-born Rahbar responds to violence in the Middle East and the war in Iraq in both her art and human rights activism. Rahbar's family fled Tehran to New York following the Islamic Revolution when she was just three-years-old; she returned in 2005 to document the presidential elections there and to work on a film about Iranian youth culture. Now living between Tehran and New York, Rahbar channels the complexities of her dual residency into her work with a directness that echoes her daily encounters with oppressive structures in both countries.

Like other Muslims in post-9/11 America, Rahbar and her family came under intense pressure to publicly state their allegiance to their adopted nation, even receiving death threats for their refusal to display the American flag. The flag has since become a recurring motif in Rahbar's work, overtly in a recent series of stark self-portraits, "Oppression Series 2" (2007), for which Rahbar wore hijabs made from American and Iranian flags. Rahbar also creates fabric collages such as *Cycles* (2007), stitching an antique Middle Eastern textiles over an Iranian flag. In her series "Flag" (2007), Rahbar fashions ragged American flags from found materials gathered during her travels through Iran. By incorporating both Iranian and American flags into her work, Rahbar has turned a critical gaze in both directions, rebelling against the use of flags as symbols of what she perceives to be dangerous nationalism.

Urgent political and feminist convictions underlie all of Rahbar's endeavors. A graduate of both New York's Fashion Institute of Technology and London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Rahbar draws from both her fashion and artistic training. She is currently fabricating a chandelier from bullets and guns that will be accompanied by a rug made of shredded flags for upcoming group exhibitions at the Queens Museum in New York, *Raid Projects* in Los Angeles and a traveling show, "The Veil: Visible and Invisible Spaces." Growing artistic success hasn't sidelined her activist commitments. This year, Rahbar embarks on a national tour of US universities with the Human Rights Awareness Tour, a traveling education program about the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

■ Jaishri Abichandani

Jaishri Abichandani was the co-curator of the "Queens International 2006" and worked with Sara Rahbar in that capacity. Also an artist, she is the founding director of SAWCC, South Asian Woman's Creative Collective.

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