

Comfortably NUMB?

Ahead of her new collections of work at Dubai's Carbon 12 Arsalan Mohammad speaks to the brilliantly idiosyncratic installationist Sara Rahbar about guilt, Jesus, art, ice-skates and disembodied hands...

A woman is the central figure, wearing a voluminous white fur hat that covers her eyes. She is dressed in a red and white striped, patterned jacket over a black top. Her chest is covered in a dense layer of silver coins. She holds a long, dark sword horizontally across her shoulders with both hands. In her right hand, she also holds two large brass spheres. She wears multiple gold bangles on her right wrist and a ring on her right hand. The background is a plain, light color.

1 Lay In The Darkness Of An Anonymous Grave, Stripped Of You, I Remain / #4 (2009) by Sara Rahbar (Courtesy Ramin Salsali Private Collection)

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EHHRAN-BORN NEW YORKER Sara Rahbar's international profile really shifted into gear around seven years ago, when her series of shaggy textile collages, fashioned after national flags snagged the antennae of critics and collectors in the Middle East and US alike. Their immediacy belied a profound depth of impassioned spirit, the work of an artist caught in a swirling vortex of clashing identities, searching for an elusive reconciliation of East (Iran) and West (USA), through their respective standards of nationality. By building up vast blends of found fabrics, assorted textiles and slogans, she deconstructed and distilled the insidious power of these banners with a richly-textured representation of what it meant to be adrift amidst

two diametrically-opposed histories, each with a claim upon her existence, neither fully realizing itself as a complete spiritual home and salvation.

In examining what flags actually represented, in relation to her own turbulent past – her family fled post-revolutionary Iran in the early 1980s for a new life in the United States – Rahbar got pretty well known internationally. Flags ended up in collections worldwide, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Saatchi Collection in London, The Burger Collection in Hong Kong, the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon, India, The Taiwan National Museum of Fine Arts, Salsali Private Museum and The Farook Collection, the latter, both in Dubai.

But just when it seemed that she'd hit her stride – she abandoned the form and took off in a new direction. Her new show draws on her innermost emotions and reactions to discord, tension and anxiety, from personal to global perspectives, the new series of works is raw, coruscating and urgent. Retaining her love of collage – here, utilising found objects linking to war, violence, human frailty and emotional and physical repression – she's debuting two new series at Dubai's Carbon 12 gallery this month in "Restless Violence" a show that marks a major artistic advance. Textiles have been downplayed in favour of an assortment of macabre prosthetic limbs, gas masks, handcuffs, Christ figures and near-lethal ice-skates. Tarpaulins and canvases hang from the wall, weighed down with meticulously-ordered items, a painterly sense of composition assembles the disparate elements into dynamic wholes. The effect is physically arresting, the works leap from the walls with almost violent energy. I put this observation, as well as a few more to the charmingly effusive, yet self-deprecating Rahbar in New York in between last-minute preparations for her trip to the Middle East. 'If I didn't do this,' she shoots back with a rich, deep chuckle, 'I'd have to kill myself! Or somebody...'



Internationally, you're best known for your series of 'Flag' pieces. Are you completely finished with that series now? How have you progressed into these new works from that point?

Well, yes, the flag series is now completely finished. And that was

mainly textile-based, whereas now, it's more sculptural. And these objects I'm using now, the reason that they're on very heavy-duty materials like canvases and tarps, is that they're very heavy. They are articles from war, various found objects. And for me, it's become completely about the objects. Finding these objects has become as important for me as making the work.

It's a strange panoply of found objects here, this paraphernalia of warfare and violence. Where do you find these things?

I go everywhere. Before, it was a lot of going back and forth to Iran but that's over now. I'm based in New York and I go all over, around New York, up to Pennsylvania. Outdoor flea markets, Vietnam vets, old women whose husbands have died and they're clearing stuff out – it's such a wide range of random places I wind up in and find stuff. Before I was going over to India and different places, now it's very much around America.

And you come back with prosthetic limbs, knives and giant figurines of Christ...

OK, there's a lot of knives, whips and holsters in this series. You should see all this stuff in my studio. Seriously, I forget what I have lying around here. Like, I've been working with Jesus Christs a lot in this new series. A lot. They're mostly bronze, heavy-duty. Right now I'm trying to figure it out... My work comes from somewhere I can't explain and sometimes it takes





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[Clockwise, from bottom left] 'Love Left As Easily As It Came, Darkness Fell And We Had No One Left To Blame' (2011), 'Vanishing in a False Dawn' (2011), 'America, Sweet America' (2011), 'The Scar Of Your Kiss' (2011), 'In God We Trust' (2011), 'Solitary' (2011), 'You Deserted Me Like A Corpse' (2011), 'Restless Violence' (2011). (All artworks courtesy Carbon 12 and Sara Rahbar)



years... sometimes, I look and wonder why I work with these materials.

Why do you think that is?

It's funny, I was talking to Ramin [Salsali] about this. I have incredible feelings of guilt. I'm not religious, but when I see this Christ figure, I get this feeling of wanting to surrender control, to just give in. But I can't get myself to surrender and let go. Yet, when I see that figure, it represents all the emotions I feel in my head on a daily basis!

But isn't this a key aspect of Catholicism, that inherent sense of guilt? Is that something also represented here by aggressive symbols of punishment, such as the handcuffs, you use?

Right, the handcuffs! I forgot about those - I've got boxes and boxes of handcuffs in my studio! How could I have forgotten about them!

The new work has a lot of angst, a lot of passionate anger directed at violence, pain and suffering. And I find it really interesting that you almost subconsciously process all this into your work and then almost have to stand back and figure out what it all means...

Exactly - when I see, why I am I buying these things. I kind of get obsessed by them - like, when I need to buy a Jesus Christ, knife or handcuffs, it becomes insane. I can't sleep at night. I'm thinking of it, I need to have these things! When I find them, it's like a release, almost! Once I make this piece and have these objects and it's complete, yeah, it's a catharsis, something's been resolved. The last couple of years, my life's been very heavy and harsh and the work's definitely reflecting that anger I have. If I didn't do this, I would have to *kill* myself. Or somebody! *[laughs]*

A piece such as 'America Sweet America God Shed His Light On Thee' also features symbolism that strongly represents constraint, repression, confinement. Could you expand on this a little?

Well, what we have in the centre here is a back brace, an old metal back brace. Back in the day, when your back broke, you were screwed, as the stuff you had to attach to your body was very uncomfortable, probably almost as painful as the original experience of breaking or losing your body part! We're very weak and yet we're also very barbaric and what you just said made me think of the level of violence that we're seeing. It's so violent! I'm in America and it's insane to me how harsh and violent things have become. And this is all over the world! The world is on fire!

Your titles are typically dense and rich in themselves...



THIS PAGE: 'Flag #11, Rescue Me From Who I Am, and From What I Am Becoming' (2008) (Courtesy Carbon 12)

OPPOSITE: 'An Armful of Freedom, a Fistful of Lies' (work in progress, 2011)

Yeah and you know what? I was going to name my show 'Comfortably Numb' but coming after 'The Dark Side Of The Moon', [the last show at Carbon 12 was titled, in German, 'The Dark Side Of The Moon'] I thought, no, that would be too much! But 'comfortably numb' – that pretty much describes the point I got to in my mind when I finished the last piece in the 'Confessions Of A Sinner' series. I had the title right there. It was 'War' and then it became 'Confessions Of A Sinner'. I literally felt, I was confessing so many things that I was scared, or embarrassed about for whatever reason, things I can't say out loud, but that here, are coming through in a more honest way than in the flags. I was just in a particular state of mind with the flags. But with these, there was so much – I felt that after the last couple of years, the pain, anxiety that was going on in my mind was – I was right on the edge. I really felt like – if one more thing happens, I'm done! That's why there is the straitjacket and the muzzle. All these things were very much from my life.

Hence the 'cathartic' aspect to your work...

I wasn't thinking about anything other than getting it done and out, so I don't cross that red line. Because my mind was – well, we all have limits of how much we can take. And you know, you become stronger and you survive and keep going – or sometimes, you just fall over at the edge. It's a very fine line.

Do you find that the factors that were driving you to this state have been resolved then by producing these works?

Definitely – I feel better in a way, having done this series. It's almost like giving birth, in a way. All this stuff piles up and I mean, imagine you were pregnant for nine months and then you kept the baby in there and – what would happen? You'd blow up! [Laughs] So when I've finished, that's a good feeling, I feel lighter, different, I'm seeing things different. Yet things are getting darker and darker and I realise now I'm almost frozen in a state of anxiety. That's why that 'Comfortably Numb' title came back to me. It's like 'I'm here, but I'm so numb. I don't know, I can't explain...

That song though, it's about finding safety cocooned within a sense of indifference, whereas you clearly feel sensitive and affected by these things...

Yeah – you're right, I always thought that was a negative aspect, but then if I didn't have that I wouldn't be able to make work. I already find myself to be over the top, sensitive. Every little thing comes across so hugely, so if things happen that are overwhelming and on top of that, I have that enhanced sensitivity to it, it becomes heavy and hard to digest!

You have these ultra-sensitive antennae but then this process works through into your art. Could you talk me through one piece that maybe demonstrates this?

I want to talk about the one called 'You Deserted Me Like A Corpse'. It's the one with the back brace that's coming off from the tarp. You know, it's like the back brace that Frida Kahlo had, I didn't realise, from that time that's how back braces were. There are also the ice skates at the bottom, and it has the hands on top. When your back breaks, it's like, the middle of your body, it's what holds you together. It's your core. The ice skates – and these have repeated a lot throughout the works – are very old, with the sharp metal. This idea is of being on very thin ice, it's not solid. Not like a skating rink, but dangerous, like a lake, if it cracks – you just go through it. In my mind it was always like that, so I started collecting ice

skates. The two rings represented handcuffs. Its two metal rings – you really have to see it in person. And then, at the top are three feet! Sawm in half and flattened.

Again, the body parts!

Yeah, they're three prosthetic feet flattened, going in a cycle. I've worked with hands, feet and legs a lot. See, the hands have been cut off, up close, they're like Jesus Christ hands. And I'm doing those again and again. It's like wanting something, not being greedy, but its like you've given up. Like a serene sense I get from the exact gesture of the hands. And right beneath them are handcuffs. There is this sense of surrender.

Hence the resigned gesture of the hands...

Exactly – the back is broken, the hands are resigned, the feet just don't know which way to go and they're broken in half – and beneath it all are these ice skates, like the ground beneath your feet is uncertain. Oh, I wish I had the guts to tell all in my next work, instead of having all these intellectual conversations about the meaning of, you know, Neo-dada in this or that! I just want to be like, this is what's going on in my life! Art would be so much more powerful. When you understand something, it's really not that complicated!

It's really interesting how you zoom in on the hands and invest so much meaning in them...

Yeah, exactly! I'm obsessed with that gesture on the hands. I can't tell you, I don't even know where that's coming from! It's funny that's how the flags came about. It started from anger and then came an obsession. And that's how this came about. Too extreme anger and pain and it turned into an obsession. I don't know if I enjoy seeing the pieces, but when I'm doing it, I'm edgy about

getting it out, getting it done.

Can sense you work fast!

[Laughs] Yes, exactly! I feel its like painting, in a way, but, yeah, I want to get it out fast, it frustrates me when it takes a while, it's like I have to release this thing and just have it out!

What other media do you work in?

Originally, I started as a painter, doing very abstract, very aggressive paintings. Lots of splattering. I was doing this for a long time, but then I stopped as I felt I was hitting a brick wall. I was unsatisfied. I wanted to add sound, light or objects – paintings always felt flat. So from the painting, I completely stopped, now I think sometimes – well, I would never go back to the paintings, but I do love collage-style things, with paper and kind of like, things I collect that I lay on top of each other, I do a lot of that. I did photography for a while after painting, but I felt I couldn't communicate all the things I wanted to, it felt flat, incomplete. I used to show photography with textiles, with objects, as that would finish the conversation. Without it, it felt empty to me.

You couldn't find the right direction in these media?

Life is so – well, I'm not perfect. I'm rough around the corners. I have a lot of stains. Life is dirty. It's messy. When I saw these photographs, everything was so clean, pristine – that's not life! So here, I have rough edges, these tarps are all stained, all the objects are used. I never buy anything new unless I can't help it. They're all used, lived-in, damaged and that for me felt more complete. It's like mixed-media collage, it's a more chaotic thing and I feel I've really communicated, I feel complete with these objects. I never got the feeling that I've completed and released something as much from painting, photography and collage that I get from this.

Having finished these works, and felt that release you describe earlier, do you still keenly feel that anger and emotion that drives you to create?

Yeah, whatever is bubbling inside me is still not completed, it's still inside me! The same objects are still pushing to be remade over and over again. And when an object keeps pushing, I know it's not resolved yet and God knows when that guilt is going to go away, so for now, Jesus Christ is here to stay! ■

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