

Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

ARTISTS VS. NATIONS

VENICE BIENNALE • THE RED PALACE • HAVANA BIENNIAL
THE GAME: ALL THINGS TRUMP

NUJOOM ALGHANEM • TAHA HEYDARI • RYOJI IKEDA
GIUSEPPE PENONE • SARA RAHBAR • JALAL BIN THANEYA
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CONTRIBUTING TO THIS ISSUE

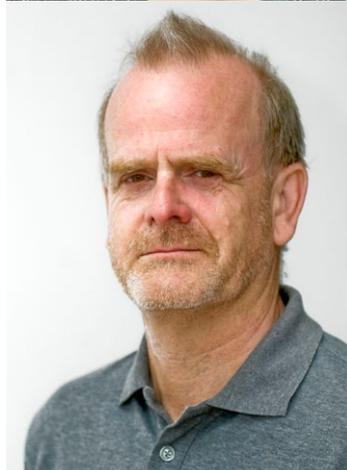
It was an eerie feeling when **William Corwin** walked into the former Lotus Club on 14th street, where he had spent many an evening in the early 1980s, and found it filled with Donald Trump memorabilia. It was a thoroughly New York experience to see an artist, Andres Serrano, who has riveted the city with his imagery since the late 80s, analyzing a New York subject, Trump, in a former Meatpacking district hangout. William's first book, *A History of the & Model Gallery*, comes out this fall.



Nada Raza is Artistic Director of Ishara by day and PhD candidate by night, mostly in her dreams. She can't make up her mind where to grow old, and so has found her way back to Dubai. She also hopes one day to meet all her deadlines and still have time to go chasing after the artists and tangents that allow her to keep learning something new. She hopes to finish writing her PhD on a boat in the Indian Ocean, which might solve the problem of where to live.



The last time **Tim Cornwell** was at the Venice Biennale was in an eight-bed hostel room, in a lower bunk. The upper bed was occupied by the art correspondent for a leading South American publication, and both gentlemen emerged crumpled, but dignified, for their Venice perambulations. This time he upgraded to a modest canal-side hotel. While running around to give *Canvas* his highlights for this issue, he unpatriotically skipped the British Pavilion after having queued for 90 minutes for the French.



Brooklyn-based curator and writer **Fawz Kabra** writes about the Havana Biennial, a growing art event that's not shy to controversy and where she spent two weeks. For half of it, she was in bed with a sore throat, and the other half she experienced a serious antibiotic stupor. Fawz reveals the challenges of the 13th edition of this historically critical exhibition, the first to focus on postcolonial issues, nationalism and the internationale, featuring artists from the developing world.



Spending the majority of her adult life between Paris and New York, **Ruba Al-Sweel** elbowed her way into the cultural scene by telling everyone that she is "from Dubai" in what ultimately became a self-fulfilling prophecy. A cultural consultant and writer from Saudi Arabia, when she is not writing about the aesthetics of GCC accelerationism, dystopian art and internet culture, she is creating playlists or being pleasantly perplexed by mumblecore.



Nujoom Alghanem is an award-winning poet, filmmaker and artist from the UAE. She has directed and produced art and fiction films, as well as feature documentaries. Her film *Sharp Tools* (2017), which centred on Hassan Sharif, won ten regional and international awards. Previously, she was included in the group exhibition *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play* at the National Pavilion UAE at the 2017 Biennale. Two years later, she now represents the UAE at the Venice Biennale 2019 with her film *Passage*.



Pixellated broken TV images, caused by Iranian government satellite jamming, triggered **Taha Heydari's** fascination with the moment of glitch, as a visible instance of the separation between the technology of fabricating and presenting images. He creates complex, highly detailed canvasses where he can accentuate the significance of tools, material and technology in the act of representation. Born and raised in Tehran, Taha pursued his MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). He now works full-time in his Baltimore studio.



Sara Rahbar left her birthplace of Iran during a period of upheaval that followed the Iranian revolution. These experiences deeply influenced her understanding of the world. The absurdity of organised religion, deception of political regulations, inhumane cruelty toward mankind and animals all moulded her into an artist and an activist. Her work ranges from photography to sculpture to installation, all of which transform her personal experiences and are intimately autobiographical. Now, her practice has evolved to address issues of the human condition on a broader scale.

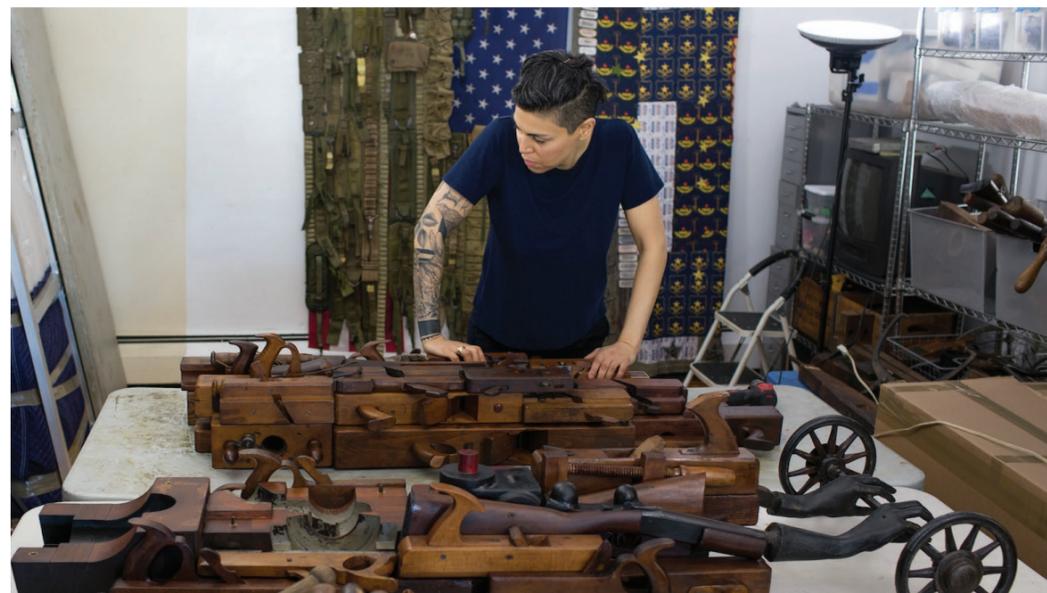


Expanding on the theme of nationalism and national identity, *Canvas* speaks to artists who critique, investigate or draw influence from nation states and their surrounding power structures. Sara Rahbar uses sculpture, installation and assemblage as a way to address her own shift in cultural identity, having fled her birthplace of Iran after the country's revolution to settle in the US. Another Iranian artist, Taha Heydari, who is now based in Baltimore, considers how image-making and representation can be technologically manipulated by state media for their own ends. London-based SKU's most recent exhibition at Saatchi Gallery plays on world conflicts, pitting Islamic references against American iconography, and examines how propaganda alters values in society. Meanwhile, Emirati filmmaker Nujoom Alghanem reflects on her work and the meaning of representation, as she was selected to present a solo exhibition for the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019.

Nujoom Alghanem	148
SKU	150
Sara Rahbar	152
Taha Heydari	154

SARA RAHBAR

Born in Tehran. Based in New York. Drawing from personal experiences to speak to contemporary socio-political conditions, Rahbar's work comprises sculpture, photography and installation.



Sara Rahbar.
Image courtesy
of the artist

Alexandra Chaves: The flag is a prominent motif in your work. Why did you choose it as a symbol and what does it represent for you?

Sara Rahbar: I have been living in the US for almost 40 years. The American flag has always been in the background of my life, so the *Flag* series came naturally to me. I used to paint, and the series was a place where I could continue to do that using textiles and objects. My work stems from what I see, what surrounds me, and what I decide to hold onto. A flag is just a piece of fabric – I think people lose sight of that. Like art or any other object or idea, its value solely depends on the value we give it.

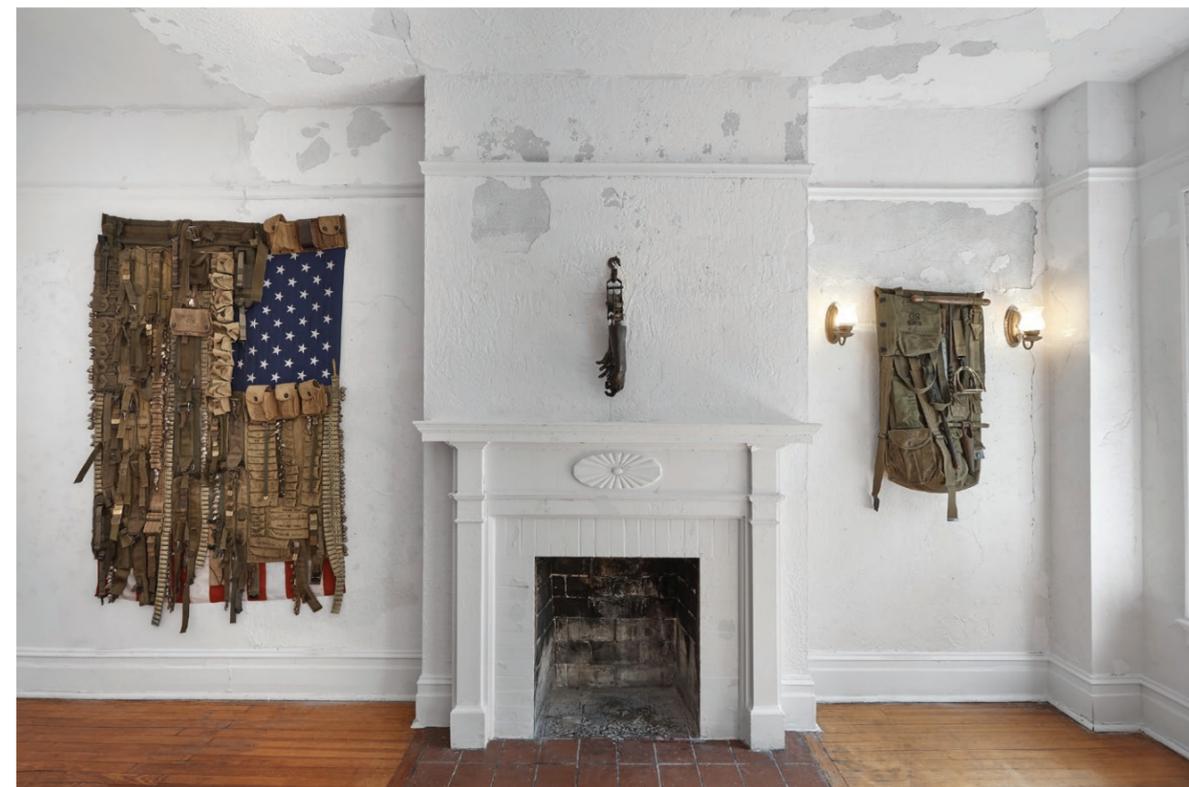
AC: Tell us more about your relationship with textiles and found materials, and the process of putting these together. How do these visuals come to you?

SR: I began with textiles, but have moved on to

bronze and wood, which is the main foundation of my practice. For me, the constant has always been the collected objects. I prefer beaten-up objects with stains and scars, and am drawn to objects that have lived and survived the test of time. Life is aggressive and harsh, and I want my work to reflect that. Even when I work with bronze, my current material of choice, I stain it and beat it up. I often work in series, including *War*, *206 Bones*, *Flag*, etc. These bodies of work occur organically; I slowly begin to see it all come together in my mind, piecing it together until I feel the conversation is complete.

AC: What role does your personal history – of your family fleeing Iran in 1980 – play in your work?

SR: I don't think that any one event plays a significant role in my work. The first five years of my life did have an impact – but so



Left to right: Sara Rahbar. *Flag #59, I don't trust you anymore*. 2019. Collected vintage objects on US vintage flag. 198.1 x 121.9 cm; *Empty Handed*. 2017. Mixed media. 64 x 20 x 36 cm; *Everything around me has turned to ash*. 2010. Mixed media. 114 x 58 cm. Installation view at New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) House, Governors Island 2019. © Sara Rahbar. Image courtesy of the artist and Carbon 12

much has changed and happened since then. There are endless layers and filters that have been added. For me, art is a reflection of life. This work comes from 43 years of living. My work addresses a broader conversation: the human condition, being alive on this planet and surviving each other, ourselves and our geographic locations.

AC: Nationalism is one of today's most challenging issues. How do you see contemporary art responding?

SR: There needs to be a shift in consciousness. We have completely lost sight of the fact that we are all interconnected, and that the only limitations that exist are the ones we've created. I don't believe in nationalities or organised religion. I believe that we are all equal – a man, a worm, a dog, a cow. It is about a shift in perception, and anything can trigger that.

AC: Though your works are often inspired by personal experiences, they also reflect contemporary sociopolitical events. How do you translate an individual perspective to a collective one? Is it done consciously?

SR: I don't analyse or overthink my work. I know in my gut when something feels right or wrong. I make what I feel passionate and over the moon about – if I'm not crazy excited, I'm not making it. I envision things and play with materials as if they are pieces to a very large puzzle, then I move them around until everything fits into place. I know when something is complete. I can feel it. Yes, this work is very personal to me. Yet, I think that these feelings that hit me like a tornado are universal to us all. In the end, we are all just visiting. We all simply want and need to belong – to something, to someone and to somewhere while we are here.