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## FLOATING SIGNIFIER

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<http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/folio/floating-signifier.php>



When the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA)\* opted this past May to, for a second year in a row, skip a Frieze-adjacent fair presence and again set up shop at Colonels Row on Governor's Island, New York City, Dubai's Carbon 12 Gallery knew the ace up their sleeve held a hometown advantage. Sara Rahbar emigrated to New York City in the early 80s (as a 5-year old) after the revolution in her native Iran, amid its burgeoning war with Iraq that would last most of the decade. Her practice is rooted in the post-industrial history of American labour, immigration, and particularly, war. Here her show does something essential by being in the right place at the right time—a decommissioned military garrison, in 2019—dropping site-specific references and suggesting multitudinous lines of enquiry into burningly relevant topics, without leading, but by simply existing.

Formerly known as Pagganuck, Governors Island was only seasonally inhabited by the indigenous Lenape people for the purpose of fishing trips and nut harvesting. Renamed by British Imperialists in the late 1600s after securing claim of it over the Dutch, the National Parks Service reveals the bellicose beginnings behind “the silent sentinel in New York Harbour”; “Recognising the island's pastoral qualities, it was set aside for ‘the benefit and accommodation of his Majesty's Governors’ and from then on would be known as Governors Island.”

Still an exceptional setting for a stroll across its 172 acres, after spending 300 subsequent years of private use by both British and U.S. military, as a stockade, a POW camp, and housing for the U.S. Coast Guard, one can now, finally, purchase street tacos and frozen drinks with little umbrellas to drink dockside with uncanny views of lower Manhattan and Battery Park, or go glamping facing the Statue of Liberty to the tune of many hundreds of dollars per night. The City of New York is only beginning to figure out how to make the spot a tourist destination, even once considering turning it into a golf course. Perhaps, Current Administration could advise? These accoutrements can't keep Rahbar's work from easily slipping into a cosmic thermal along with the rest of the weird history of the island—a new pup playing with old war dogs—which is not to say the artist first jumped at the opportunity: “I've been here forty years, I've never been to Governors Island. In New York? I have no idea what you're talking about. It feels like an abandoned city.” Rahbar, who almost never shows outside *the white cube*, here savvily squeezes into derelict officers' quarters—nestled in a single small living room with a fireplace, upstairs in one of three houses comprising the NADA show. Rahbar transcends what, for other artists in the exhibition, feels like another DIY set-up. Witnessing the prevailing synergy of these worn artworks hanging inside de-militarised space is unshakeable. Her works chew up and spit out scenery, speaking truth on barracks one can imagine were once a party-town deployment; a cushy station coveted by bootlickers and rich twits, nationwide. As though a distortion of the gravitational field ripped the rifle stocks and wooden components catalogued in her 206 *Bones* sculptural series from deep within the armory stockpiles on the island, the room feels alien, forbidden, like something out of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Rahbar's formal approach places primacy on the allure of exquisite

patinas polished by extensive use—an homage to the labourers conscripted to the service of nation-building in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her editorial eye dictates a completed work that can seem both random and mystical in its assembly of debris. Stocks aren't affixed with any apparent serial number, their brigade assignments are essentially untraceable. Make and model are irrelevant. "I don't want to know what kind of rifle it is, the name of the tool or what war it came from. I collect solely on instinct."

Perhaps surrendered to the flea markets she sources from by initial bearers, all arms beg the question of how they got there. Were they smuggled through a clandestine post-war black market between discharged enterprising enlistees or simply by despondent descendants clearing out attics? These fingerprints of commerce and exchange sit atop those of the users, unnamed collaborators bewitching each piece further still. Sewing by hand takes months. Stitching verse for her *War* pieces from nationalist hymns, Rahbar must long contend with commonly accepted rationale for war during assembly. For *Flag #59, I Don't Trust You Anymore*, the American flag, a motif often loaded with symbolism, is here loaded with actual *stuff*. The things soldiers carried, the flag now holds up for them. Withered and worn, nothing is pristine, ever. Rahbar bemoans the *en vogue* smooth grooves of Jeff Koons; "I'm old school. I came from that Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Francis Bacon, *you make work, with your own hands* school." The artist doesn't just make her work with her hands; her *Confessions* series are her hands, her feet. Each piece shaped from the artist's own body is made of bronze; a material for making monuments. She does not defer to models, less about telling her own story and more about sparing others from hours of discomfort at the foundry. Subtle wrinkles, prints, calluses, and scars are rendered for the ages, further complicating the artist's fascination with surface. "I like strong solid materials that can stand the test of time—that can survive this life and many more." Achieving an ecstatic symbiosis of space and time that museum collections and art fairs fail at often, Rahbar's soulful works finesse broadly connected ideas into an intimate, thoroughly unexpected setting for the audience to work through. The works' embodiment of history, discovery, reanimation of the discarded all fit serendipitously. So why isn't the artist happy with it all? If art cannot intrinsically *resist*, it can still inspire connections to resistance in its audience and on Governors Island, Rahbar's connections are effortless. As an audience member it's improbable to consider the artist possessing anything but nerves of steel. Nevertheless, the artist has balked at continuing her contribution to the conversation—one that is constant and consistently swallows subtlety.

"I can't keep regurgitating what I'm seeing on the news, seeing around me. I want a deeper understanding. After this show I realised I don't want to continue that conversation of war and violence. That's just our history. Like, for ever. It will never end, that's the human condition. We can't stop killing and eating everything that lives on this planet. But is that what I want my life's work to be about? Violence and war? I just walked away from Governors Island and thought, *I think I'm done*." Since the show went up, a stones-throw away from Ellis Island, U.S.-Iran relations have plummeted. Five-year-old asylum-seekers now could face death entering the United States—certainly less likely under the stately liberal shadow of NYC—but now none of them come from Iran. Whose voices are we erasing from our future? If a POW could have, say, in a vision, looked forward in time from his cell like the apostle John from *The Book of Revelation* and seen the freedom on display in Sara Rahbar's examination of U.S. military involvement on the retired base, would he be cheered? Can art bust up the ghosts of past conflict? Perhaps. However. Standing today in House 404A, would audiences be cheered to see free society place militaristic art upon the de-militarised zones of the future? As the U.S. military expands its presence at home and abroad, so it extrapolates these potential sites of contention and grappling.

Not one to shift their practice as a cynical move, Rahbar, who is vegan, fondly anticipates visiting Peru or Central West Africa for the express purpose of ritually taking plant medicines to psychologically detox, reasoning, change must first come from within; "First of all nobody is doing that for fun. It's terrifying. You're throwing up and you're just facing *all* your fears. It helps you to let go and grow." This desire for interior peace in an exterior world that has seemingly become exponentially more combative, between nations and international trade alliances, between parties, even between left and right factions within parties, the artist knows she is not alone. "Everyone feels like they are being gaslighted, questioning their own sanity, if what is being seen is real. I think it's in the air. Everyone is sick of themselves. Confronting everything about yourself until you puke." NADA House closes 4 August.