

Naso Art Journal  
11 February 2026

## Naso Interviews: Amir Khojasteh On Playing with the Monster

by Soraya

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### On Roots, Distance, and the Formation of a Visual Language

Born and raised in Iran, Amir is an artist whose practice moves between painting and sculpture, shaped by early encounters with image-making and storytelling. Now based in Ghent, Belgium, he lives and works at a physical and emotional distance from his place of origin, a distance that has sharpened rather than diluted his connection to it.

"I am an Iranian artist working primarily with painting and sculpture," he explains. "I was born and raised in Iran, where my roots are deeply connected to cultural history, visual traditions, and storytelling."

This sense of rootedness, intensified by migration, has become increasingly visible in his recent work. Distance, he notes, has made the idea of home more fragile and therefore more valuable. "Being away made my roots feel more visible, almost like something fragile that remains from my past life." The notion of shelter, specifically the Iranian garden historically conceived as an oasis of order within chaos, has emerged as a central metaphor in his new body of work.

### **On Early Encounters: From Copying Caricatures to Claiming Art**

Amir's commitment to art did not arrive as a sudden decision, but as a gradual deepening of a childhood instinct. "As a child, I was always drawing or trying to make things with my hands," he recalls, describing hours spent copying caricatures from newspapers his father brought home.

A formative moment arrived during middle school on a school trip to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Encountering works by Warhol, Picasso, Bacon, and Magritte for the first time, he experienced what he describes as stepping into a world he had long imagined. "That experience stayed with me, making art feel like a space I could truly enter."

From then on, drawing shifted from habit to intention, eventually leading him toward formal art studies.

### **On Contradictions as Material: Power, Failure, and the Everyday**

At the core of Amir's practice lies a fascination with contradiction, between public and private life, image and reality, authority and fragility. Growing up in Iran meant living within unresolved dualities, where images constructed to project power and grandeur routinely collapsed under lived experience.

"These idealized images repeatedly failed to match lived experience," he says, "and this failure became central to how I understand power and representation."

Though rooted in a specific geography, Amir now understands this tension as global. His visual language draws freely from Iranian narrative traditions, Western art history, classical sculpture, popular culture, and everyday observation. He treats these references as raw material rather than fixed symbols. "I consider these influences as materials to play with," he explains, emphasizing that play, through exaggeration, collision, and distortion, is fundamental to his method.

### **On Dark Humor and Formal Transformation**

Fear appears repeatedly in Amir's work, not only as subject matter, but as something actively reshaped. Rather than confronting fear head-on, he approaches it through dark humor and formal play.

"I start playing formally with the fear, giving it shape, stretching, and exaggerating it, until it detaches from its original essence," he explains. While it was central to his earlier work, the term feels less precise in relation to his recent practice. What was once fear has shifted into something more diffuse - closer to tension, pressure, or unease. Rather than engaging with fear as a direct or singular emotion, he is now more interested in disarming this sensation through play, exaggeration, and dark humor, allowing it to loosen, mutate, and lose its authority.

## **On Fantasy, Politics, and the Refusal of Direct Statements**

Political reality is inseparable from daily life, and Amir does not attempt to separate his work from this condition. Yet he resists the idea of making declarative political art. "I don't approach these subjects by making political statements," he says. Instead, his work functions as a defensive mechanism, a form of resistance through play.

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## **On the Div: Reclaiming the Monster**

One of the most striking presences in Amir's recent work is the Div, a mythological figure from Persian culture traditionally associated with chaos and evil. As a child, the Div functioned as a disciplinary threat: "If you do this, the Div will come for you." Over time, it evolved into a symbol of systemic power, especially during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, when, as Amir notes, "the monster was no longer a myth, but a visible reality."

In the studio, his engagement with the Div is intensely physical. "I don't want to merely illustrate a demon; I want to strip it of its traditional, terrifying identity." Through pushing, pulling, and exaggerating the clay, he transforms the figure until it loses its authority. "I decide a figure has moved from 'monstrous' to 'comical' at the precise moment it loses its ability to intimidate."

Casting these forms in bronze becomes an act of preservation and conquest. The sculptures stand as trophies, permanent witnesses to a struggle in which power has been mocked, broken, and reconfigured.

## **On Color, Gesture, and the Strategy of Play**

Despite recurring themes of violence and oppression, Amir's paintings are often exuberant, colorful, and gestural. This contrast is deliberate. "The tension between content and form, violence and play, seriousness and humor, is itself an artistic strategy," he explains.

Color and gesture prevent the work from becoming a direct transfer of trauma onto the viewer. Instead, they open space for reflection, fantasy, and ambiguity. Play, for Amir, is not a stylistic choice but a survival strategy, rooted as much in lived experience as in conscious decision-making.

## **On Inheritance and Permission**

When asked about inheritance, Amir resists the idea of lineage as a clear or stable transmission. What he has inherited, he says, is an accumulation of images, stories, and ways of seeing drawn from sources as diverse as the Shahnameh, One Thousand and One Nights, Mohammad Siyah Ghalam, and Western and Japanese animation.

Within this inheritance lies endurance, the ability to continue without certainty, step by step.

What he hopes to pass on is not instruction but permission. Permission to manipulate, distort, combine, and question without limitation. In that freedom, he believes, new worlds can emerge.