



SHAHPOUR POUYAN

in the
STUDIO
Interview by **Jordan Amirkhani**
Studio photography by
Will Amlot

Photo: Will Amlot

A SKILLED PAINTER, CERAMICIST, DRAFTSMAN, sculptor, and conceptualist, Shahpour Pouyan makes art that crosses genres, historical traditions, and cultural borders. Born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution, Pouyan engages long-standing concerns about power – whether military, political, or religious – and the historical traces of collective and individual memory that objects and monuments possess. Trained in mathematics and physics, he studied Neoplatonist philosophy at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy,

and holds an MFA in painting from the Art University of Tehran as well as an MFA in integrated practices and new forms from Pratt Institute in New York. Pouyan's interdisciplinary education serves to ground not only the vast network of historical references and cross-pollinations in his work, but also his sensitivity to the poetry and complexity alive in Islamic art, architecture, and visual culture.

Pouyan's recent work makes historical media present by way of contemporary means. His recent projects – an extension of earlier work comprising a series of delicately rendered towers and ceramic domes modeled after historic Islamic architecture, as well as vessels reminiscent of ancient artifacts and contemporary military weapons (sometimes simultaneously) – seek to address how new technologies of production and craftsmanship might destabilize or reanimate the past. His 2018 installation for the Lahore Biennale in Pakistan presented renderings of canonical miniature paintings culled from classical Persian manuscripts, laboriously crafted using a combination of modern technology such as Photoshop and traditional painterly techniques.

Pouyan repeated the process in other projects, including "Incarnation of the Body Politic," an installation for the 2018 Armory Show in New York that included miniatures alongside an enormous hybrid sculpture reminiscent of a variety of Western and Eastern military weapons and capital punishment machineries. Pouyan's allusions to different aesthetic and visual vocabularies resonate with the reality that, for many artists from the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, politics is unavoidable, ever-present, and never far away.

Currently based in London as part of the Kenneth Armitage Foundation Fellowship program, Pouyan spoke to me at the height of the women-led protests in Iran, as Iranians across the world watched an intersectional resistance unfold in the streets, met by horrific backlash from the Islamic Republic. Our conversation touched on the future of Iran and the ways that belief, failure, authenticity, and doubt form the foundations of his work.

JORDAN AMIRKHANI What is your earliest encounter with art or visual culture that you can remember?

SHAHPOUR POUYAN At four or five, I received a

View of Shahpour Pouyan's installation at the 2018 Lahore Biennale, showing several of his Miniatures drawings.

Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai (6)

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painting notebook and colored pencils from my parents. I remember I painted a horse or a cow or something. The next day, I painted exactly the same thing. While I was having afternoon tea with my parents, I would paint, and it soon became a ritual. My father was a military officer and an electronic engineer of the F-14 in the Iranian Air Force, and one day he asked me, "Why don't you paint a battleship?" I started to make a very simple shape of a boat, and then he told me I had to add a gun to it, so I made the forms of the guns. I remember he told me about the only major battleship that Iran had at the time, which was sunk during the "Tanker War" [1984–1988] by the American military as the Iran-Iraq War was unfolding. It was at that moment that I remember my art changed toward something different, toward something political. I must have been five or six by this time.

AMIRKHANI You've studied mathematics, physics, and Neoplatonist philosophy. Did this take place during or after art school in Tehran?

POUYAN My high school diplomas are in math and physics, so when I entered art school, I went with the

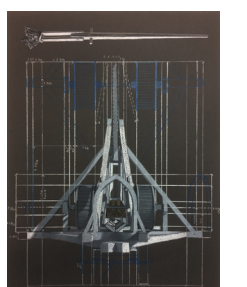
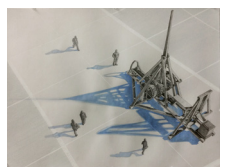
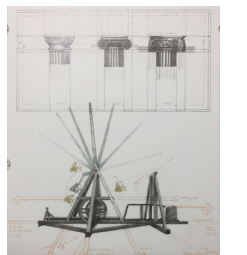
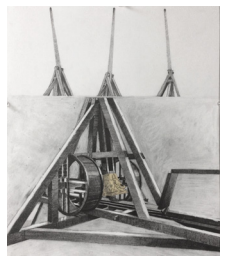
logic of mathematics. Simultaneous to art school, I took classes at the Iranian philosophy center and studied Neoplatonism, specifically. You could study and take classes with the best professors they had in Iran for free.

AMIRKHANI Did you recognize that Neoplatonist thought and philosophical traditions might be helpful to you as an artist? What pushed you to study outside your discipline?

POUYAN At the time, in the early 2000s, it was very common to read philosophy and mythology in Iran. Many books circulated in the popular sphere about psychology and philosophy. I started reading philosophy as a way to supplement my art education in the same way that I was also reading Western art history. I remember I bought *Gardner's Art in the Passage of Time*, which was almost 600 pages in Farsi, and tried to synthesize everything I learned. I realized I didn't understand many of the religious references in Western art. I knew about some of the saints, but we never studied the Bible. How could I understand Caravaggio without Christian context? I bought a Bible on the black

Below left, view of Lawrie Shabibi's booth at the Armory Show, 2018, showing (center) *Incarnation of the Body Politic*, 2018, surrounded by several "Miniatures" drawings.

Below, four drawings related to Pouyan's sculpture *Incarnation of the Body Politic*, 2018.



market and read it. I enjoyed the stupidity, or let's call it simplicity, of the text – I couldn't believe so much of civilization is built on this single text.

I started reading widely – mythology, Indo-Eastern and Semitic religious texts, and, finally, Neoplatonism, which is the place where Western and Eastern philosophies meet. I read Plato, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and modern philosophers such as Henry Corbin. It taught me that nothing is pure, that cultures have been influencing each other for centuries. The beauty of Sufism is that, while the form is modeled after Islam, it is deeply shaped and made complex by facets of Zoroastrianism, Platonism, and other things. Philosophical thought is such a beautiful history of interactions across cultures, languages, and political systems. From there, I became very interested in Hegel and his theory of synthesis, and started reading Michel Foucault's critique of representation, *This Is Not a Pipe*. These philosophical pathways and texts continue to be fundamental to my art practice.

AMIRKHANI Present in your practice are the ways in which you take, borrow, and learn from multiple genres of knowledge and artistic production. When you are

working with ceramics or metal, paint or charcoal, each requires a different set of skills and a sensitivity to the historical contexts and developments of these media in different places and times.

POUYAN Shortly after arriving at art school in Tehran, I remember our classroom had a bust of [Michelangelo's] *David*, and we were asked to draw it. I tried, but I couldn't draw it properly. I also remember my teacher couldn't correct my mistakes. Because we were an art-loving family, we had a book on a very cheesy commercial painter from Tehran, Morteza Katouzian. To this day, Katouzian is the greatest draftsman and painter I've ever seen. All these years in the West, I have never seen anyone match his technique. My sister encouraged me to find him, so I called his studio and asked if I could come to his class. He gave me an interview, accepted me, but told me not to tell his students that I was enrolled in the art university – his students were completely against art school and modern art. At the same time, I couldn't tell my friends at art school that I was in Katouzian's class – they thought he was a joke. But after a summer studying with Katouzian, I went back to university and asked my teacher to correct my work in life-drawing class.



Above, cover of the book *Art in the Passage of Time* by Helen Gardner, translated by Mohammad Taghi Faramarzi (Tehran, Negah Publications, 2015).

Below left, *Ardeshir Red Tower*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 37 7/8 by 57 1/4 inches.

Below right, *Khosrou Tower*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 40 1/4 by 57 1/4 inches.

He took a look at it and said it was “perfect.” It was an example for me that I was not going to learn everything I needed at university. You can see that later in my metal sculptures, after I went to work with two master metalsmiths in the south of Tehran, whose specialty was in making chainmail. They were not educated at any university, but they had craft.

AMIRKHANI Your work references many different art historical traditions, and history seems to form the foundations of how and through what means you make a work.

POUYAN In all my projects, you can see the traces of history. After university, I realized how ignorant I was of Iranian art history and architecture. I started traveling to different parts of the country to visit cities with important examples of Iranian architecture. I was fascinated by the beauty of these historical ruins. I soon began my first project, titled *Towers* (2008), which turned into works that were a synthesis between real Iranian architectural examples and my own surreal constructions of towers. These “monuments” became a place where the real and the imagined could come together. Since the majority of pre-Islamic architecture in

Pouyan sculpting a ceramic dome in his London studio, 2022.

Iran is gone, I used the remnants of these monuments to create individual imagined “portraits” of the pre-Islamic kings. I think of them as a love letter to the history of Iran – much of my work now is still based in this feeling.

It's funny: So many people continue to ask me, “Where are these towers?” Often the towers are fragments of many different architectural examples brought together or constructed from my own memories and poor remembrances of Iranian ruins. This is why Hegel has been so important to me: These works are pure synthesis of the real and the imagined. I think this is my reaction to the regime, which completely forbids anyone to speak the names of or learn about these pre-Islamic Iranian kings even today. Can you imagine, in England, not being able to say the name of King Charles? Or in America, not being able to learn about or utter the name of any former president? I felt my own history was completely robbed from me. I couldn't paint these kings as figures, so the towers take on the history and characteristics of that king architecturally. It was then that I realized that architecture is a better language to use for illustrating something.

AMIRKHANI Your series “Monday Recollections of the Muqarnas Dome” (2015) consists of drawings made from memory of the 11th-century Sharaf al-Dawla Shiite mausoleum near Mosul, Iraq. Is this series a kind of portraiture for you?

POUYAN Yes. Before ISIS destroyed the dome in 2014 as part of strategic attacks on artistic and cultural sites in the country, I had an image of this dome pinned to my studio wall. I loved it. It was an extraordinary architectural monument – a powerful example of human achievement in the sciences and an amazing synthesis of religious and state power that shapes so much of the Islamic world. Its destruction had a major effect on me – I felt incredibly sad and powerless. So, almost mindlessly, I kept drawing it each week without looking at any images or any of my previous drawings. I was testing myself. It recalls the ways in which explorers of the past often drew sites or objects from memory after a long span of time, and the ways in which oral histories are often recollections from a past long before. That gap between then and now, what was and what is, is a major part of this project. It is something that I think about a lot, like many Middle Easterners do. It's not nostalgia, its loss.

AMIRKHANI How did your engagement with architecture shift when you moved to New York to continue your studies? That was when you began your work in ceramics as well.

POUYAN After I moved to New York, I realized that the *Towers* project was not finished. I began spending time with Mesopotamian clay architectural models – I saw many of them in the National Museum in Tehran, and would later spend time with the ones in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I felt immediately that I should start working with clay models in order to bring ceramics and architecture together. I wanted to bring these practices into the present.

AMIRKHANI Your works aren't exact copies but images formed by intervening and mediating. I'm thinking



From top: Courtesy Negah Publications; Courtesy Shalpour Pouyan (2)

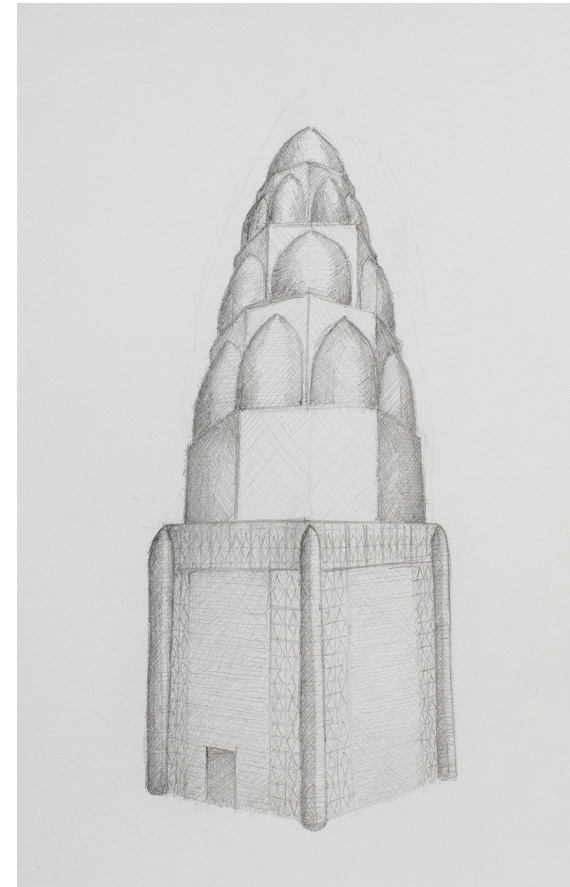


Photo Will Anliet



Top shelf: glazed ceramics from the installation *My Place is the Placeless*, 2017, dimensions variable. Second and third shelves: glazed ceramics from the series "Monday Recollections of Muqarnas Dome," 2022, dimensions variable.

Photo Will Amiot



Pouyan: Photo Will Amiot; Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai (2)



Above, Pouyan working in his London studio.

Left, two drawings from the series "Monday Recollections of the Muqarnas Dome," 2015–16, mixed mediums on paper, 11 1/8 by 9 1/4 inches each.

specifically of your works referencing canonical Persian miniature paintings found in illuminated manuscripts from the first and second centuries, in which you removed the human figures from the tableau. This gesture completely shifts the narrative and emotional mood of the original works. It also draws attention to details you would perhaps not notice, and made me realize that there is a whole universe in those paintings, even without the figures. It is beautiful and haunting at the same time. The void is integral.

POUYAN I realized that the genre of landscape was unknown to Persian art and miniature painters, as it was forbidden by Islamic clerics, and thus there was no use or context for it. The role of court painters was to serve and honor the patron, the king, and the literature. It kept court painters within very strict bounds. To erase the figures was a strange form of taboo – it was political. Once I removed the figures, I felt I could suddenly see the composition of the work – the details, the architecture, everything – and I could also engage these paintings without fear. I also knew that viewers would be able to imagine figures in the works themselves, and that a kind of imaginative work could be done. The works could open up or resonate with things happening today, which is why I kept the titles as references to the original subject matter.

AMIRKHANI Do you intervene in the original Persian miniature paintings manually and digitally?

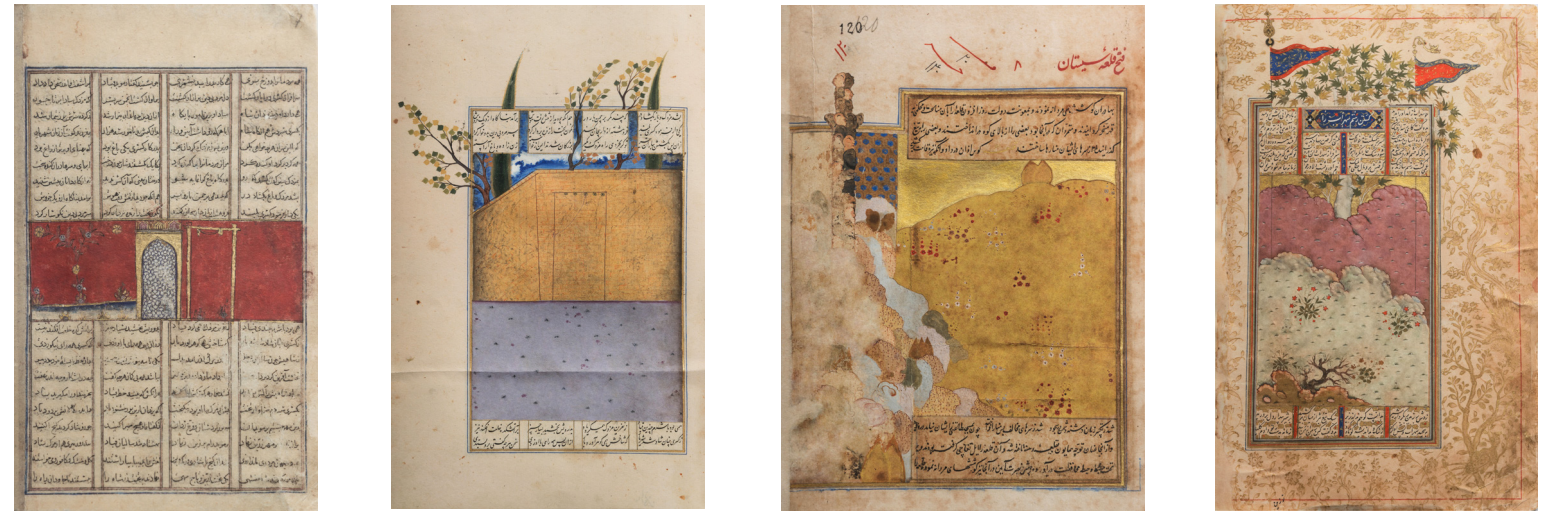
POUYAN To begin with, I spend lots of time researching which images to use and then the museum collections that these images are held in, which are often in the West. I then ask for a high-resolution file of the miniature, and then, via a computer, I carefully remove the figures from the painting. I then repair all the "holes" that I have made, filling in patterns on the carpets, completing the background ornamentation, and fixing the landscape. I make sure that any wrinkles or damages to the original work are there too. Then I print the new, altered image in the exact dimensions of the original painting. It's layers and layers of work to check that the colors are correct, and additional steps to paint in the gold-leaf details as well. Basically, it is a very high-quality copy of a miniature – a very laborious fake.



Pouyan in his studio, next to an untitled 2016 sculpture, steel, ink, and rust, 7½ by 4½ feet by 9½ inches.

Photo Will Amlot

Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai (4)



Above, left to right:

After the execution of Mazdak, The arch-heretic and communist has been hoisted on a gallows by his feet and his apostles buried upside down and their feet are out of the grave, 2018, mixed mediums on paper, 8¼ by 5¼ inches.

After the execution of Mazdak before Nushirwan, The arch-heretic and communist has been hoisted on a gallows by his feet and is being shot full of arrows, 2018, mixed mediums on paper, 13⅜ by 7⅞ inches.

After, Captives thrown over a precipice after Timur's capture of a fortress in Sistan; a tower of severed heads behind, 2018, mixed mediums on paper, 9¾ by 7 inches.

After, Rustam slays his son, Suhrah, 2018, mixed mediums on paper, 12¾ by 8¼ inches.

AMIRKHANI For me, your removal of the figures creates a kind of elastic space where absence, loss, interruption, destruction, intervention, and uncertainty can be understood in an expansive, emotional, and political way.

POUYAN The miniature is a medium for me to talk about the repetition of errors made throughout history. It's amazing: Each time I select a miniature painting to work on, it ends up being somehow related to something happening today, whether it's the seizure of Baghdad, the killing of political dissidents, capital punishment, or the violence of religio-fascist sects. I am trying to say "We have been through all this before." My work is a way of saying it again, differently.

AMIRKHANI In certain ways, the paintings are laborious fakes asking all kinds of questions about authenticity and originality—but they are also, strangely, like a weird form of repair.

POUYAN I am trying to be very loyal to the original document. But it is also a form of deceit. I am asking about what it means to make a fake image, what it means to say that a work of art is "true." When you see these works in person, it is very difficult to tell them from "real" historical miniature paintings, and this is the space that I am very interested in. Are these works good, bad, failed? Or are they helping us realize something about what art can do, how art can show us what resistance is?

AMIRKHANI Your work is also heavily critiquing the politics of display and the ways in which Western museums and institutions contextualize Persian and Islamic art. What role does display have in your work?

POUYAN Very often, I am thinking about the ways in which genealogies are visualized—the way that lines of descent are constructed from an origin to the present. Museums and archaeological institutions do this when they present works on long study tables for inspection and classification. But I also noticed that the police do this when they confiscate weapons or illicit drugs—the photographs they take often display the materials in a way that feels like a similar aesthetic. They lay everything out as evidence. When I install my works, I am often thinking of these multiple methods of display.

AMIRKHANI Your methods point to the ways in which many non-Western cultures are contextualized in museums—with objects under glass, or entombed in dark rooms as if they are "evidence" of something not alive and not relevant to a viewer today.

POUYAN I am relying on the display conditions of religious relics to tell the story of these objects as well. These things that can't be touched are considered valuable and significant, but are often fake, constructed, belated copies of something gone. This question of loss [often] comes up in my work—how images and objects come to have and lose power over time, across history.

AMIRKHANI You made a series of small ceramic works, titled "Failed Objects," that put their use into doubt. The objects resist their perceived functions in the world—a bowl or vessel might contain a pin-size hole, or be completely sealed off—or are hybrid objects that shift utility into something ambiguous or violent. These ideas of failure, uselessness, absurdity, and meaninglessness are philosophical, religious. In what way is your work a form of philosophical thinking for you?

POUYAN I am questioning everything as I get older. Everyone thinks about what legacy we will leave behind. I often think I make art to communicate that what the world thinks of Iran and Iranians is wrong. I don't know if art can fix anything, but the uselessness of art is fascinating to me. It's fantastic PR for civilization—but I can also see how belief in art could also just be a replacement for religion in some cases. And I have doubts about both.

AMIRKHANI Art is a kind of work to tell the truth.

POUYAN Yes, and so is philosophy. The whole point of philosophy is doubt—which is why I love philosophy in contrast to religion, which is about belief. Belief is the most dangerous thing. And it's also the most precious thing we have as humans. ●

Jordan Amirkhani is curator of the New Orleans-based nonprofit Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought. See Contributors page.