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# SHIVA AHMADI

## *Burning Song*

September 6 - October 27, 2018

Opening Reception: Thursday, September 6, 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm

Haines Gallery is proud to present ***Burning Song***, our first solo exhibition by Iranian American artist **Shiva Ahmadi** (b. 1975, Tehran, Iran; lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area). Ahmadi draws from the artistic traditions of the Middle East to reflect on contemporary geopolitical tensions. Featuring a new body of work that is at once humorous, scathing, and heartbreaking, *Burning Song* is Ahmadi's response to a world in turmoil.

Working across a variety of media that includes painting, digital animation, and sculpture, Ahmadi addresses the machinations of despotic regimes (and the complicity of their drone-like followers), the horrors of war, and their effects on innocent lives—using beauty to seduce the viewer into her exquisitely crafted scenes. The vibrant fantasy realms in Ahmadi's works are, upon closer inspection, macabre theaters of conflict. The artist appropriates and subverts imagery derived from Persian and Indian miniature paintings, which traditionally depict courtly scenes, mythological epics, and the heroic feats of rulers. By contrast, in Ahmadi's works, figures are faceless, bloodied, and enchained, linked together in endless cycles of violence. Headless horses drag chariots of fire and rubble. Overlaying washes of atmospheric watercolor with precisely applied inks and acrylic paint, Ahmadi conjures a world where fortified walls open to reveal not palaces, but oil refineries and nuclear power plants—allusions to modern seats of power.

Since 2015, Ahmadi has been concerned with the escalating refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe and, more recently, the plight of detainees at the US-Mexico Border. Having come to the US from Iran in 1998, the immigrant experience is one that she is keenly aware of and sympathetic to. In a nod to the perpetual state of uncertainty that so many people are now experiencing, her new works see an growing tendency towards abstraction, with figures and scenes that are suggestive rather than descriptive. Tightly controlled tableaux are increasingly destabilized, with floating masses of rubble and viscera that suggest the aftermath of an explosion, the scattered pieces of what was once whole. *Flying Carpet* (2018), for example, depicts an ornate Persian rug, burning as onlookers point and pick. Such carpets are objects of cultural and historical significance in Iranian homes; throughout the exhibition, Ahmadi's paintings speak to the anxiety of dislocation and the insecurities that arise when crossing into unfamiliar (and sometimes unwelcoming) lands.



*Flying Carpet*, 2018  
Acrylic and watercolor on Aquaboard  
30 x 22 inches

The exhibition also includes Ahmadi's latest animated video *Ascend* (2017), inspired in part by the now famous photograph of the Kurdish-Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, who tragically drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as his family sought to escape the Syrian Civil War. In the seven-minute work, which was recently exhibited at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, an idyllic and tranquil scene of playful monkeys descends into darkness, with floating bubbles and balloons morphing into bombs—familiar motifs in Ahmadi's work, akin to the candy-colored confetti that appears in several of her new paintings, which the artist describes as a device for “sugarcoating” ugly truths.



Video still from *Ascend*, 2017  
Animation with sound  
6 minutes 48 seconds

These works are exhibited in dialogue with new sculptures from Ahmadi's *Pressure Cooker* series, first begun in 2016. These striking works have been meticulously decorated, every inch of their rounded surfaces hand-inscribed with delicate intaglio etchings. The works are created from Afghan pressure cookers, sourced from markets in Iran—a reference to real-world tools of violence, and more generally to the domesticity of terror. As with the rest of Ahmadi's works in *Burning Song*, the potency of these sculptures lie in the tension between ornamentation and destruction.



*Pressure Cooker #9*, 2018  
Intaglio hand-etching on metal pressure cooker from Afghanistan  
17 x 12 x 12 inches

Shiva Ahmadi received her BFA from Azad University (Tehran), and MFAs from Wayne State University and Cranbrook Academy. In addition to solo exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Asia Society Museum in New York, she has been included in important group shows at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University; Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Ketchum, ID; Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada; and Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (forthcoming). Her work is collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Detroit Institute of Arts; and the Farjam Collection, Dubai, among others. In 2016, Ahmadi was awarded the *Anonymous Was A Woman* Award and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. *Shiva Ahmadi*, a new hardbound monograph of her work, was recently published by Skira.