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ABSTRACT

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NAFTOON: REFLECTIONS ON OIL
IN IRANIAN SOCIETY.

Ghazaleh Keshavarz, Master of Fine Arts,
2017

Directed By:

Professor Mark Alice Durant, Department
of Visual Arts

Naftoon is a multimedia art project in which I integrate video, audio, photo, and animation to explore the essential role of oil in Iranian society. Using the natural substance of oil as a medium and a metaphor, I consider concepts of personal and national identity. My intention is to emphasize the role of oil on a social, more than political or economic, level, but the latter issues necessarily seep through. With a focus on nature and time, as well as processes of reflection, repetition, and absorption, I aim for this site-specific installation to simultaneously mesmerize and elicit thoughtful engagement.

NAFTOON:
REFLECTIONS ON OIL IN IRANIAN SOCIETY.

By

Ghazaleh Keshavarz

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in
Intermedia and Digital Arts
2017

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2017

Dedication

Naftoon is dedicated to my family and fellow Persians.

A special feeling of gratitude to my beloved parents,

Fatemeh and Hamid

for their endless support and encouragement.

Your love is lasting and inspiring.

Acknowledgement

With my sincere pleasure, I would like to give thanks to my great thesis committee Mark Alice Durant (chair), Kathy O'Dell, and Corrie Francis Parks who were more than thoughtful and generous, and tirelessly contributed to the improvement of the thesis. Thanks for your insight and patience, and challenging and trusting me through all the constructive discussion we had.

I wish to thank to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Visual Arts department, IMDA, and all my fellow classmates who made the last three years special and unforgettable for me. I am grateful for Preminda Jacob, Lisa Moren, and Calla Thompson whose support and assistance were unwavering. I should also thank my questioners Dan Bailey, Ida Meftahi, and Timothy Nohe for the great exchanges I had with them. To my Iranian friends, Ali Abdolrahmani, Nasrin Attaran, Ehsan Jamali, Ahmad Mousavi, Fatomeh Oreizi-Esfahani, Ronak Razavi, and Azin Semsar, thank you all for your sincerity and willingness to participate in my interview piece. I would like to thank James Zuber and Symmes Gardner to make my project and exhibition possible.

And a final thanks to my family and friends in Iran for your continuing long distance emotional and moral supports. Miles apart even, I have always felt you here in my heart. I cannot thank each and every one of you enough.

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Introduction

At the end of high school, I had a final exam in my “Contemporary History of Iran” class. I was not able to study for it until the night before. This challenge seemed overwhelming. Luckily, my mother, who had a degree in economics, was willing to explain recent events in our country chronologically and in modest words. Her family had lost their wealth during the Islamic Revolution and, thus, she had strong feelings about the historical events she shared with me that night. Despite her emotions, the information she provided was accurate. She started her explanation with the word “oil.” She then proceeded to describe how this substance had played a major role in most of the nation’s events. The wealth that oil generated had led the country to development and modernization, but primary reliance on oil revenues created a weak economic foundation in Iran and rough international relations, all of which led, in turn, to flawed contracts, riots, two main revolutions within the country, and wars with others.

Hearing these facts allowed me to pass my history exam, after which I started to follow oil-related events in Iran more closely. As I became more knowledgeable, I realized that political and economic conditions were not the only factors under the influence of oil. The vital role this abundant resource plays in the region has had tangible effects on cultural elements, social situations, educational systems, and many other aspects of people’s everyday lives.

In 2014, I came to the U.S. to continue my education and obtain a Master in Fine Arts degree (M.F.A.). As traced in Appendix A of this thesis, through my

first two years in the Intermedia and Digital Arts (IMDA) program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), I created self-portraits for site-specific photo installations, the dominant theme of which was “identity.” These works entailed a constant reproduction of images of myself, aimed at evaluating the relationship of identity to vulnerability, art, and territory. Building on this theme for my thesis project during my third year, I decided to research other factors that my identity has been rooted in, directly or indirectly.

In my thesis exhibition, I explore the role of oil as a natural substance and a metaphor, using oil as a medium through which to consider concepts of personal and national identity. Positioned on the gallery floor are large trays of oil, onto which videos examining Iranian society and its relation to oil are projected/reflected. Also situated in the gallery are: columnar piles of newspapers, posters, drawings, and other papers soaked in oil; and a monitor showing an oil-imbued self-portrait in the form of a stop motion animation is projected. My intention in all these works is to emphasize the role of oil on a social, more than political or economic, level, but the latter issues necessarily seep through. In addition to oil, I use clay, sand, rocks, and thread to create a space for contemplation of whatever issues emerge for the viewer. Relying on nature and time, as well as processes of reflection, repetition, and absorption, I aim for this site-specific installation to simultaneously mesmerize and elicit thoughtful engagement.

The History of Iran's Oil Industry

“In ancient times, traders from distant lands crossed this region in dusty caravans. Today, most traders come in huge tanker ships looking for only one product: Oil.”¹

“1908: A British company strikes oil in Persia (now Iran). It's the first big petroleum find in the Middle East, and it sets off a wave of exploration, extraction and exploitation that will change the region's — and the world's — history.”²

In 700 BC, Zoroastrians found a place in southwest Persia where they could keep eternal flames without using wood or animal fat as fuel. “There is no dispute that there has been surface petroleum in the region and that the people were aware of its burning capabilities for several millennia.”³ The phenomenon of oil naturally emerging from underground provided the opportunity to make and preserve fire, the agent of purity in the Zoroastrian religion, and to create eternal flames, some of which have burned for thousands of years.

Centuries later, in 1901, during the Qajar dynasty, the King of Persia Muzaffar al-Din Shah made a 60-year concession with the British speculator

¹ Teachers' Curriculum Institute, “How Oil Has Shaped Life in Southwest Asia,” video transcript, accessed November 27, 2016,

<http://www.dentonisd.org/cms/lib/TX21000245/Centricity/Domain/6894/How%20Oil%20Has%20Shaped%20Life%20in%20Southwest%20Asia%20Notes.pdf>.

² Randy Alfred, “May 26, 1908: Mideast Oil Discovered — There Will Be Blood,” *Wired*, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2008/05/dayintech-0526/>.

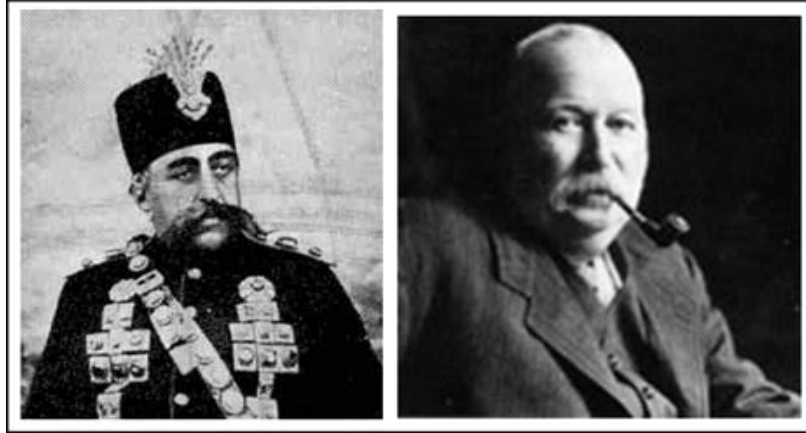
³ Joseph J. St. Marie, and Shahdad Naghshpour, *Revolutionary Iran and the United States: Low-intensity Conflict in the Persian Gulf* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 47.

William D'Arcy to explore and develop Iranian oil resources. For the British company investigating these resources, natural gas leaking from the ground, plus the presence of thousands-years-old natural tar pools, were strong evidence of huge resources of natural oil and gas.

After eight years of exploring the region, including numerous failures, in 1908 oil was discovered near the southwest city of Naftoon, now Masjed Soleiman. “From the dramatic moment in the early hours of 26 May 1908 when a British geologist, George Reynolds, was suddenly woken in his tent by the earth tremors and the sound of something violently bursting through the ground outside, Iran’s oil has always been an intensely political commodity.”⁴ The discovery led to the formation of the London-based Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), with the British holding direct control over the Iranian oil industry until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Another 60-year agreement, signed in 1933, denied any rights to the Iranian government to control oil exportation, but assured a flat payment of four British pounds for every ton of exported crude oil.⁵

⁴ Roger Howard, *Iran Oil* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 1.

⁵ Glen E. Curtis and Eric Hooglund, eds., *Iran: A Country Study*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Library of Congress, 2008), 160.



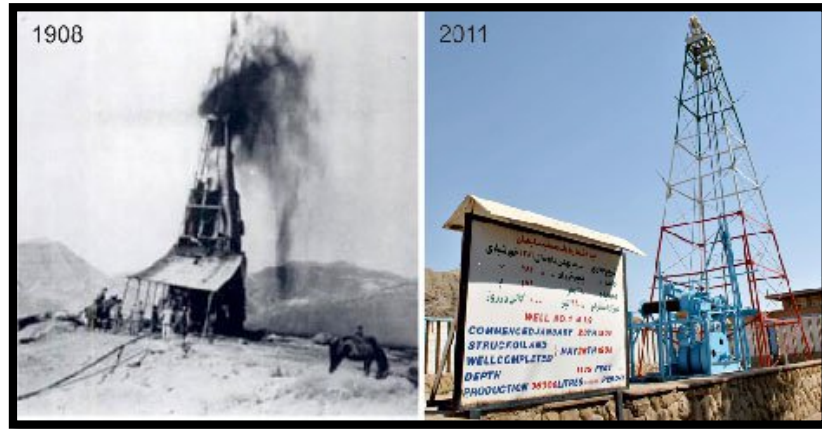
Muzaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (left), king of Persia from 1897-1907, granted a concession in 1901 to William Knox D'Arcy (1849-1917) (right), a British investor, to explore for oil in southwestern Iran. D'Arcy never visited Iran or any part of the Middle East. He became the first director of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909.⁶

After the discovery of oil, the country's economy shifted from being agriculture-based to oil-based. Oil extraction and utilization altered the country's situation dramatically, causing an extraordinary influx of money that funded modernization and increased the nation's fortune. Although "the exploitation of a natural resource and the development of a rentier economy tends to strengthen and entrench the existing form of government,"⁷ things went differently in Iran and some other countries in the Middle East. The wealth created by oil and natural gas revenues freed citizens from having to pay taxes while creating a government financially dependent on those revenues. Relying so heavily on oil exports incurred domestic economic instabilities like fluctuations in inflation, unsustainable growth, and unemployment. These financial struggles, and other conflicts between the government and the people, hindered production of anything other than oil and

⁶ Rasoul Sorkhabi, "The Centenary of the First Oil Well in the Middle East," *Geoexpro*, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.geoexpro.com/articles/2008/05/the-centenary-of-the-first-oil-well-in-the-middle-east>.

⁷ Craig Jackson, "Have Oil Reserves in the Middle East Created Economic Modernization and Political Stagnation?" *e-ir*, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/28/have-oil-reserves-in-the-middle-east-created-economic-modernisation-and-political-stagnation/>.

natural gas. All these conditions have deeply affected the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of Iranian citizens.



The first Middle East drilling oil field: Well No. 1 of Naftoon (Masjid Suleiman) in 1908 (left) and in 2011 (right). Left Source: Anglo-Persian Oil; Right Source: Mehr news agency.

As Iran had limited control over its most precious natural resource from the first concession during the Qajar dynasty, the British government effectively used Iran's oil to its own advantage for decades. In the middle of the twentieth century, when the country was under the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), a growing tide of discontent provoked sentiment for nationalizing the oil industry. Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, the Prime Minister under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, started to negotiate and establish a range of progressive social and political reforms. Mossadegh was the first Iranian to receive a Ph.D. in Law from a European university and Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister. One month after he took office in 1951, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) was formed, supplanting the APOC and triggering strong resistance from governments in the UK, as well as the US. While domestic employees took full control of the oil industry's affairs, external opposition was abundant. Iran faced problems selling

crude oil to foreign countries, and Iran's economic crisis worsened. Two years later, in 1953, Mossadegh, who had led the takeover, was overthrown by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service. The CIA's choice for Prime Minister was installed, giving power back to the Shah and restoring foreign oil firms – until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, when the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power.

Under the Ayatollah, all international oil agreements were canceled, and the Ministry of Petroleum and NIOC renationalized the country's oil industry. By the mid-1980s, a few foreign oil companies had been permitted to operate in Iran, but only under strict and limited contracts, and when increasing political instabilities began to outweigh cost benefits, these companies stopped operating in Iran. In more recent years, a series of sanctions has been instituted that target the oil sector, further hurting sales of Iranian crude oil, which is still the most active industry in the country. The extended period of international sanctions has severely weakened the economy, directly affecting people's daily lives. The decrease in citizens' access to services and commodities has created a huge humanitarian crisis.

Iranian Modern and Contemporary Art

“Iran’s turbulent political history is no match for the development of an innovative contemporary art scene. Iranian contemporary artists – many of whom have had to move out of the country due to the Islamic Revolution – have found ways to bridge their rich traditional cultural heritage with modern multidisciplinary practices.”⁸

The history of art shows that political, economic, and social conditions of a region have always played a major role in the emergence of new artistic subject matter, styles, and tastes. In Iran, the social and political alterations of the last century radically transformed the evolution of the country’s art, entirely changing its path.

Up to the middle of the twentieth century, the most popular art forms were traditional painting and storytelling in coffeehouses. Gradually, a modern art movement began that reflected Western influences. The Iranian aristocracy’s exposure to the international art world resulted in a number of artists dedicating themselves to creating a distinctive, modern Iranian style. However, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 changed the art atmosphere in the country. As art historian Talinn Grigor asserts: “Accused of mindless formalism and lack of commitment to

⁸ C. A. Xuan Mai Ardia, “10 Iranian Artists You Should Know,” *Culture Trip*, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/iran/articles/10-best-iranian-artists-and-where-to-find-them/>.

social justice by the revolutionary state, the work of the diverse groups of avant-garde artists, including painters, sculptors, architects, film-makers, poets and musicians of the 1960s and '70s, was tossed to one side.”⁹

Many of the artists who remained in Iran either took a break from making art or stopped entirely. Some devoted their time to writing and documenting the former or current art situation in the region; others adapted their aesthetics and themes to the dominant new environment.¹⁰ Subject matter mostly focused on the Islamic Revolution, religion, and the horrors of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988 – a departure from the modernism movement that had been developing under the previous regime.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, there were major developments in Iranian art, due to connections with the outside world, new artistic modes of presentation, and artists’ increased attention to cultural/artistic identity and the role that the Islamic situation was playing in it. New galleries were founded, local artists started participating in national and international art fairs, and foreign collectors became familiar with the new flow of art from Iran.¹¹

Numerous Iranian artists who left just before or after the Islamic Revolution still work outside the country, some representing their discontent through their art as they remain “committed to ensuring the continued existence of the diaspora through isolation,... produc[ing] their own version of populist art that sees itself as

⁹ Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014), 95.

¹⁰ Rosa Issa, Ruyin Pakbaz, and Daryush Shaygan, *Iranian Contemporary Art* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2001), 25.

¹¹ Daniel Rechtschaffen, “The 10 Best Contemporary Art Galleries In Iran,” *Culture Trip*, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/iran/articles/art-during-political-strife-the-10-best-contemporary-galleries-in-iran/>.

an antidote to the populist art back home,” Grigor writes.¹² Artists in these “diaspora communities labor to produce a pictorial discourse of their own that draws a different picture of Iran and Iranian identity from that of the Islamic Republic.”¹³ Some of these artists do return to Iran, and for them, this “homecoming, for many their first since 1979, [has been] a transformative experience that revolutionized their work.”¹⁴

Like most revolutions, the effects of the 1979 political and religious upheaval in Iran are enormous. Many of the artists in the groups I have just cited have influenced my own artistic development, as I discuss in Appendix B.

Oil Pool

In 2008, I was accepted into the undergraduate photography program at Tehran University of Art. That same year, as an enthusiastic freshman, I visited the Tehran Contemporary Museum of Art (TMoCA) for the first time. Following the long winding corridor of the majestic museum’s entrance, I descended to its central, octagonal space. I noticed that this path adhered to the traditional Iranian architectural principle of *Hashti*,¹⁵ wherein a hallway functions as a transitional space to reorient the visitor from outside to inside. Turning toward the interior octagonal space, on the floor before me, I saw an image of an old-style skylight. I

¹² Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, 165.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Hashti* means vestibule, a small enclosed area or lobby between the outer door and the main interior space of the building that serves as a waiting room in general, but also for keeping members of the household, especially women, away from the exterior.

quickly realized it was the mirror image of the very skylight above me, being reflected not on the floor but on the slick surface of black oil that filled a pool in the center of the room. Amazed, impressed, and excited, I rushed to read the wall label: Noriyuki Haraguchi (b. 1946), *Oil Pool* (1977).



Noriyuki Haraguchi, *Oil Pool*, 1977.

I recalled this experience vividly during my thesis research as I read *A Garden Between Two Streets*, by Kamran Diba,¹⁶ TMOCA's architect.¹⁷ Diba's account of the building and its opening in 1977 underscored for me just how poignantly *Oil Pool* stands as a symbol of Iran's history and oil's role in it. He explains how by the 1970s, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), founded by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela in 1960 to assure sovereignty over their oil assets, was flourishing.¹⁸ Huge infusions of oil

¹⁶ Kamran Diba is a leading figure in the modern and contemporary architecture of Iran who moved to Paris after the Islamic Revolution. He is the cousin of the former queen of Iran, Empress Farah (Diba) Pahlavi.

¹⁷ Kamran Diba, *A Garden Between two Streets: 4001 Days of the Life of Kamran Diba*, in conversation with Reza Daneshvar, in Farsi (Edition Alborz, 2010), 124.

¹⁸ OPEC's power was proven during the 1973 (or first) oil crisis/shock, which began when the US supported Israel in a war and the OPEC members, in response, embargoed oil for almost six months; oil

money facilitated the Iranian government's investment in art and culture. Empress Farah Pahlavi used part of the oil income to establish TMoCA and to acquire for its collection modern and contemporary works by Iranian and Western artists. The museum could therefore be considered a result of Iran's golden era of oil exportation.

This result is hardly untainted, however, a fact signaled in an ironic moment at the opening of the museum. Diba reports on Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's attendance at the celebration. Finding the reflections on the still surface of the pool remarkable and assuming it was filled with water, he bent over and placed his hand on its surface, only to find when he withdrew his hand that it dripped oil. Diba claims that the image of the Shah's oily hand became the symbol of oil and the role it played in the region. The Shah, in the context of the English idiom, "had blood on his hands." Behind oil-driven cultural gains were lives lost. There is no visual documentation of this moment at TMoCA's opening, but the poignancy of the story and Haraguchi's piece instilled in me a desire to enrich my own work on the complexity of oil with as much symbolic poignancy as possible.

prices quadrupled in the US. The second oil crisis in 1979 occurred after the Iranian Revolution, resulting in a reduction in oil production and exportation; oil prices doubled in the US.

About *NAFTOON*

Naft

“Oil has been flowing above ground for centuries in several parts of Iran.... [A]t some time in ancient history, the people of the region worshiped fire, which was naturally burning in the mountains due to the flow of ‘Naft.’ ‘Naft’ is still the term used to refer to ‘petroleum’ both in Iran and most of its neighboring countries....”¹⁹

Nobody knows the exact origin of the Farsi word نفت, Naft /næft/. Linguists believe that it came from the word نپتا/nepta in Avesta, the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism, and over time was changed to نفتا Nafta, and then نفت Naft.²⁰ The related English word “naphtha” means “any of various volatile often flammable liquid hydrocarbon mixtures used chiefly as solvents and diluents. First Known Use: 1543, the origin and etymology of naphtha is in Latin, from Greek, of Iranian origin; akin to Persian *neft* naphtha.”²¹

The first known use of the word “petroleum” in English also goes back to the sixteenth century, its origin and etymology in Medieval Latin. Petroleum means

¹⁹ St. Marie and Naghshpour, *Revolutionary Iran and the United States: Low-intensity Conflict in the Persian Gulf*, 47.

²⁰ “نفت چیست؟”, *Aftabir*, accessed February 28, 2017, http://www.aftabir.com/articles/view/science_education/other/c3c1220419943_petroleum_p1.php/نفت-چیست-petroleum.

²¹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003). Also available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/naphtha>.

rock oil, equivalent to Latin *petr (a)* rock (< Greek *pétra*) + *oleum* oil.²²

The suffix “-oon” means similar, alike, or resembling in Farsi.

Putting these elements together yields Naftoon, the name of the city near which the British first discovered oil in Iran in 1908, the place that so resembled oil with its leaking petroleum and gas that it earned its name from the Zoroastrians who built a temple there named Eternal Fire-Temple, a site wherein to keep, protect, and respect their sacred long-lasting flame. They prayed and practiced in the presence of fire as the medium through which, it was believed, spiritual insight and wisdom were gained.

In the timeline of Iran’s history, oil sits alongside almost all major historical events. From the birth of Persian civilization to the ruling of its empires, the attack of Arabs in 633 and process of Islamization, the invasion of Mongols in 1219, and the attack of Afghans in 1722, oil is the catalyst of the last big event to have deeply affected the destiny of this region and people. As Iranian continue to experience a declining quality of life, it is difficult not to think that oil will serve the same role in events yet to unfold.

Naftoon Project

After coming to the US, I moved into a Baltimore apartment, which happens

²² Dictionary, Dictionary.com, accessed: March 5, 2017, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/petroleum?s=ts>.

to be across from a gas station. Every morning, I look out the window to check the station's display of gas prices. My first thought is not how much it will cost to fill my tank, but my mother saying: When the price of oil comes down, the price of gold goes up, and vice versa. Living in a single-product economy, Iranians see how decreasing oil prices detrimentally impact the quality of life. Whether or not my mother's statement is always accurate, the gas station sign reminds me daily of the conditions of fellow Iranians' lives back home. Instead of being happy to pay less for gas here, I feel sad about life there.



Before starting the *Naftoon* project, I recognized oil as an important topic in the news and though I had, as mentioned earlier, followed oil-related events more closely after high school, my knowledge of its complicated social, economic, political, cultural, and scientific implications was not deep. I began to consume articles, books, movies, documentaries, and interviews – anything related to oil. At

the center of my research: the role of oil in the everyday lives of people. Although my firsthand experience of the dominant role of oil in the single-product economy of Iran had shown me that the implications mentioned are closely intertwined, I chose to focus my thesis work on the impacts of oil on Iranian society, more than on its economy or politics.

Personal stories, practices, habits, and experiences are at the heart of social impact. One such story: In our house, every year before the beginning of spring and Persian New Year (Nowruz), my father brings home gasoline (petrol) to clean the oil leakages off the garage floor. He then washes down the whole garage and surrounding area with detergent. Within minutes, a colorful mixture of soapy water, petrol, and oil begins to swirl, eventually disappearing down the drain. The smell, however, usually lasts for days.²³

Starting to work with oil for *Naftoon* triggered this and other personal, sensory experiences. As I continued to experiment with the substance, its intense smell, stubborn stickiness, slow absorption rate, lasting wetness, high density, and phenomenal capacity for reflection fascinated me. These qualities could be considered strengths: Oil is a resistant substance, defying efforts to be cleaned, removed, or absorbed. But these strengths are also its greatest weakness: Oil leaks, and when it does, can create spills so challenging and time-consuming to clean up that irreparable damage may result.²⁴ For an artist, however, such tension in a

²³ The smell might dissipate sooner if my father rolled back the roof of the garage, but my mother disallows this, believing that the roof blocks the sunlight and keeps the house cooler. I noticed that when I purchased the first gallon of oil for my project, I was careful not to spill even the tiniest amount when I put it in my car, because I was sure that the car roof, which of course blocks sunlight, would keep the sun from helping to dry the spill, prolonging the smell.

²⁴ It's worth pointing out the dark story of an environmental disaster by humans: the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989. The oil tanker carrying oil from California to Alaska ran aground on a reef in Alaska's Prince

material can be compelling.

When I dropped my first self-portrait print into a tray of oil, the sinking process was slower than I even thought it would be. I grabbed a chair and sat, watching my eyes in the image as they began to disappear into the thick liquid. After one full minute, the eyes were gone and then the whole image. Gone girl. I thought of a famous poem: “Wind will carry us!” My versions: “Oil will carry us!” or “Oil has been carrying us!” But this poetic view did not match the complexity of the real-life effects of oil.

Recalling Haraguchi’s *Oil Pool*, I next tried pouring oil into a large shallow tray on the floor and then projecting video onto its surface. The incredible reflective power of this material and the peculiar green hue created by the bright projector light after it hit the dark surface of the oil was exciting. Functioning like a mirror, the oil bounced the imagery up onto the wall behind the tray, showing a slightly distorted, greenish, reversed image. These discoveries led me to use two large (4’x8’) trays of oil for *Naftoon*, each with a projector mounted nearby that bounces videos off the oil surfaces onto the adjacent walls.

For the M.F.A. exhibition, I produced two looping videos that are projected onto the oil trays; a stop motion piece; and sculptural paper stacks. These four elements of *Naftoon* are described below.

William Sound and 11 million gallons of crude oil spilled into the water, killing wildlife and damaging more than 1,300 miles of that remote and unique area.

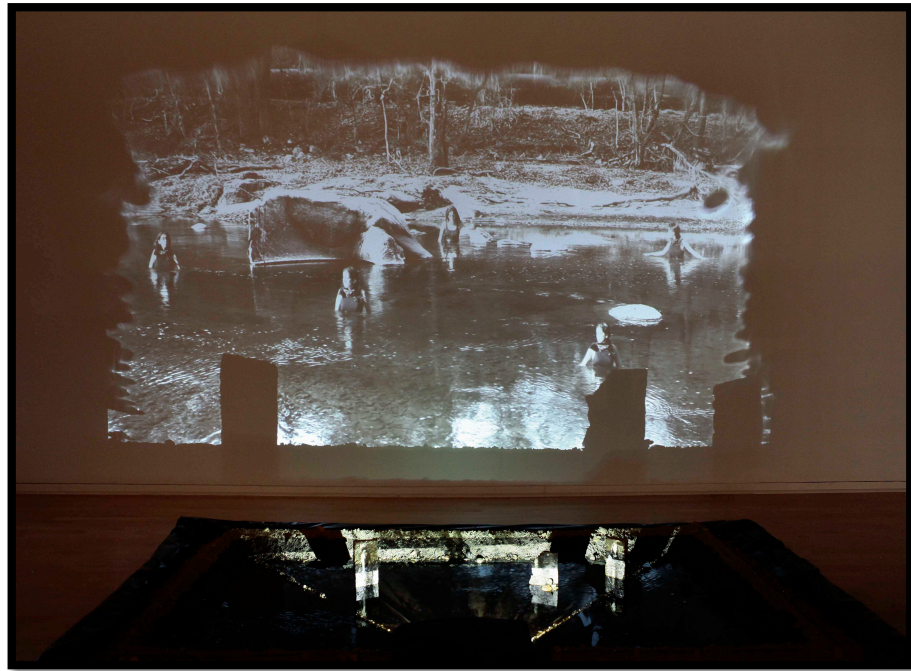
1. Self-Portrait in River

On a riverbank near UMBC, chatting with a fisherman who has been coming to this spot for fifteen years, I hear the sound of a train approaching. The train passes very near us, drowning out the fisherman's response to my question about the safety of the site, which is so close to the tracks that the black train cars seem to loom above us. Once the train is gone, the fisherman explains that several trains come by this spot daily, and these particular cars, which are tankers carrying oil/diesel/gasoline, pass by every day at this exact time.²⁵ What an amazing moment for an artist working on a project about oil!

Two weeks later, I returned, determined to step into the river, even in the chilly weather of early November. I had decided I needed a dozen portraits of myself standing still, up to my waist, in the river. An assistant took many more than a dozen photographs, plus video, as the oil tankers passed in the background. The whole time, I was imagining the final video piece in my mind: an image of the desaturated colors of the flowing river, alluding to the flow of oil and passage of time; the figures multiplied, each facing different directions, fading in and fading out, underscoring the passage of time and hinting at social dependency (the figures seem to look for one other) and wanderlust (ambling into water fully clothed); and the river moving in the opposite direction from the train carrying oil, suggesting the train's goal is far less natural than that of the river and its continual flow. The earth

²⁵ "Fishing is a kind of meditation for me," the fisherman said. "My son makes fun of this habit but it makes me relax. And by the way, a couple of months ago I caught a ten-pound fish from this river...enough for two meals for my family." I was glad he hadn't listened to his son.

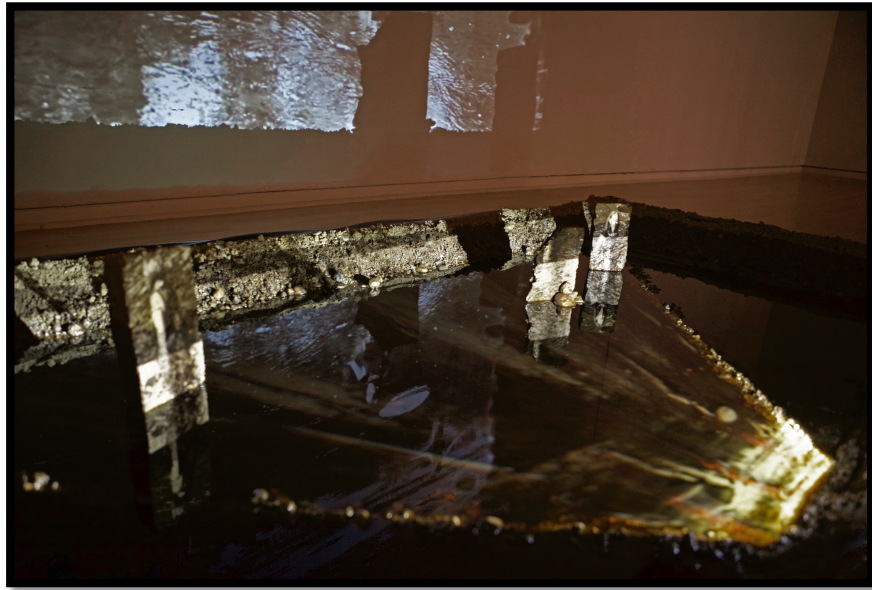
keeps gifting one of its most precious resources – oil – to nations that profit from its exportation. Meanwhile, the flow of oil, like that of water, never stops. Or does it?



Tapping oil in Iran started in 1908 and continues, but by some estimates, the country will run out of oil within the next 50 years. According to a 2005 prediction, “the world holds enough proved reserves for 40 years of supply and at least 60 years of gas supply at current consumption rates.”²⁶ In 2015, British Petroleum announced in its annual report that “drivers whose vehicles rely on burning oil have a little more than a half-century to find alternate sources of energy.

²⁶ John Vidal, “The End of Oil Closer Than You Think,” *Theguardian*, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2005/apr/21/oilandpetrol.news>.

Or walk.”²⁷ The first two-thirds of the oil era is over. Undeniably, nature has its own laws, its own ways, its own orders, and its own limits. But society, in its dependence on industry, transportation, and trade, is dominated by those enterprises’ need for oil and gas. Running out will change the world in radical and unpredictable ways.

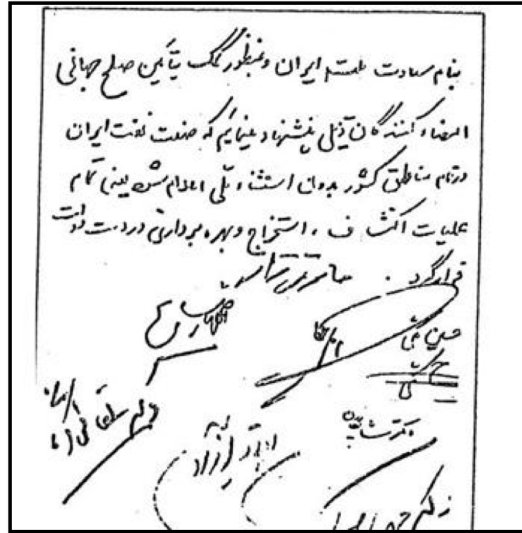


²⁷ Andy Tully, “How Long Will World Oil Reserve Last? 53 Years, Says BP,” *CSMONITOR*, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Energy-Voices/2014/0714/How-long-will-world-s-oil-reserves-last-53-years-says-BP>.



2. In the Name of the Fortune for Iranian Nation

During my research, I located a copy of one of the first announcements of Iran's nationalization of oil, probably written by Mossadegh. This historical document is short, handwritten in Farsi, and dated 1951, the year Mossadegh became Prime Minister of the new, albeit short-lived, democratic government. The document thus highlights a significant turning point in the development of Iranian oil policy for sovereignty over its oil assets and profits.



I asked several Iranians from different backgrounds to participate in this video. I requested they wear white clothing, sit in front of the camera against a white background, and read the document aloud, beginning with the first sentence – “In the name of the fortune for Iranian nation” – and then to talk about whatever came to their minds.

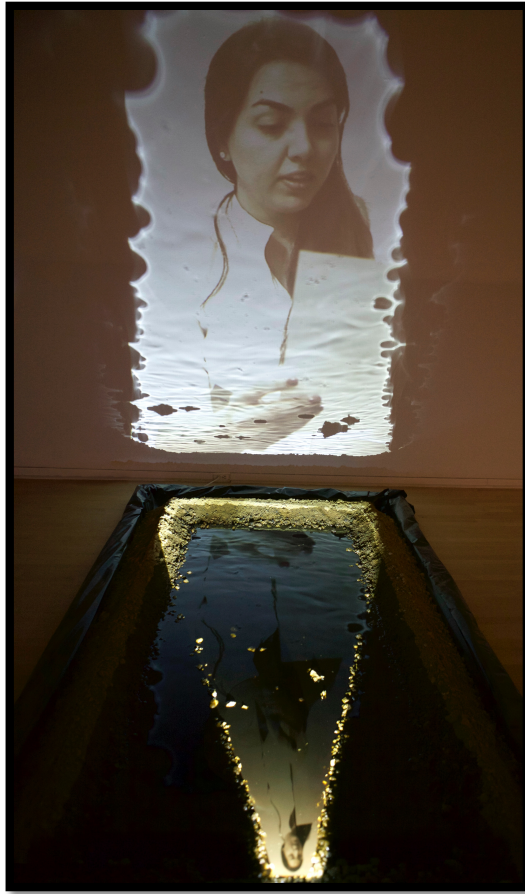
As an observer, I was fascinated to see how the participants struggled with the slightly different style of the 66-year-old handwriting and how some needed a great deal of time to grapple with the text’s general point, let alone analyze and interpret it. Some just rattled off a few sentences to bring an end to the weird and uncomfortable feeling of being in front of the camera. Others had a lot to say.²⁸ But in both instances, even if the participant did not recall the full context of the 1951 event, responses – short or long – were positive and showed how much participants

²⁸ Participants talked about personal, political, economic, infrastructural, social, etc. points: a guy reflects on how, when a country has something valuable, people try to get a little of it for themselves, perhaps because they don’t consider the good of their country but only their own best interests; and a girl wishes Iran hadn’t had oil from the beginning.

valued the issues the document represented.



I ended the session by saying: “If you agree with the content of this note, if you are still positive about it and all the consequences over the last almost 70 years, you may add your signature to the ones at the bottom of the document.” All of them eagerly signed.



3. Self-Portrait in Oil

Pondering a bunch of self-portraits spread out on the table before me, I say to the professor of my stop motion class: “However hard it is for me to manipulate these photographs using oil and water, it is even harder to tear them up, cut them up, or even discard these self-portraits – in effect, deconstructing myself – for this stop motion piece.” She responds: “It is just the beginning!”

From that beginning, I conceded to objectifying myself further, in order to see where this deconstruction process would take me. I photographed myself dressed up, sitting in front of the camera, taking the pictures, editing them with

software, printing them, thinking and talking about them, pouring liquids on them, manipulating the oily papers, tearing them, crumpling them, documenting them, reusing them, and planning for archiving them.

So many things in my country have been constructed and deconstructed by oil. Self-identity and social-identity are two of them. Manipulating and dismantling self-portraits, as well as newspaper texts and images, with oil and capturing the whole process as a performative act became a path to exposing my strengths and limits.

I finished my stop motion tests and the final piece. Left over: a mass of oily papers. I will never get used to discarding unused self-portraits and newspapers; frankly, I never even tried. Instead, I kept them in a pile, considering them documentation of my process (and the result of concerns and fears about throwing Ghazaleh's portraits away). The small pile grew into a large stack of oily, manipulated paper.



4. Sculptural Paper Stacks

In my last days in the studio before installing my M.F.A. exhibition, I took down all the pictures, tests, notes, and documents from the wall of my studio, soaked them in oil and added them to the paper pile. Pictures of politicians from three different regimes in the recent history of Iran. Farsi and English news clippings on the economy, history, culture, anthropology, and art. Copies of pages from articles and books. Emails. Receipts and invoices. One by one, submerged in oil, and added to the ever-growing, columnar-shaped piles.

Three of these paper piles appear in the exhibition, standing as the result of the deconstructions and reconstructions I carried out for *Naftoon* - compact summaries of the topics researched for this project:

Ghazaleh, history, money, Ghazale..., Ghazaleh, and stop. Ghazaleh, Ghaz..., Ghazaleh, Iran, Ghzh..., south, southwest, and Iran. Iran, British, Ghazaleh, Britain, field, contract, yes, power, national, turbulence, power, ...zaleh, game, and people. United States, profit, Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, media, G...leh, time.

development, Gh..., export, Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, dependency, signature, public. Modernization, international, fortune, Gh...leh, economy, Ghazaleh, Influence, Ghazaleh, G..., play, event, petroleum, and Islam. Ghazaleh, Ghaza..., Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, local, Ghazaleh, ...hazale..., Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh.

Ghaz...eh, Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, Ghazaleh, agreement, G...h, Ghazaleh, and foretime, service, international, Ghazaleh, Ghaz... h, years, fortune, revenue, contemporary, education, Ghazaleh, role, self, abundant, economy, and aftertime.

Trade, land, Ghazaleh , ...leh , Ghazaleh, nation, war, explore, decade, surface, fire, preserve, G...leh, and culture. leakage, millennium, Rial, century, black, Ghazaleh, job, absorbency, ...azal..., Ghazal..., change, tax, old, content.

Ghazaleh, exploitation, instabilities, negotiate, permit, Gha..., and today.



“The Beginning of The End of the Oil Age”²⁹

It is impossible to think about the modern history of Iran without considering oil. Nobody can claim definitively that the presence of oil in Iran is a blessing or a curse. Let’s imagine for a moment that it’s a dark curse. For centuries prior to the discovery of oil, Iran had been dealing with economic, political, and cultural challenges. Over the four hundred years of the Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi dynasties, governments gradually became familiar with Western culture. Upper-class and educated Iranians learned about the West and thought about the possibility of similar developments in their own country. Some people knew specifically about the presence and use of oil in Western countries, and after its discovery at Naftoon were excited to accomplish what those countries had. But it didn’t happen. Even if

²⁹ Jess Worth uses this phrase in “Ending the Oil Age,” *New Internationalist Magazine*, November 2014, accessed March 14, 2017, <https://newint.org/features/2014/11/01/extended-oil-keynote/>.

oil had not been discovered in the region, events in Iran may have unfolded as they did in countries like Afghanistan – no oil discovery, but major issues. Or Turkey – no oil discovery, Europeanized/Westernized, not isolated from the world with ridiculous thoughts of independency. If we claim oil as a blessing, why from the first moment of its discovery and all its potential, has it not been utilized properly for the betterment of the country and to improve Iran's cultural and economic statuses?

I think it is not about the presence of oil or the economy with no oil. It is about infrastructure and the culture of using and managing this ironically delicate and elegant natural substance. I strongly believe that the roots of the retrogressive nationwide troubles of Iran are not in oil wells. They are in our culture, our weaknesses, our poor management, and finally in ourselves and our strong tendency toward independence, albeit only achievable through what has proven to be too challenging: our dependency on oil and the need to negotiate effectively with the outside world that wants it. Redefining will take a level of social skill that only comes from close self-analysis on a national scale. Perhaps this is what I have believed all along, and why I wished to focus on social, more than political and economic issues in my thesis research. Again, all these issues are intertwined, but for Iranians to move forward, I believe more reflection as a nation will be needed.

From the beginning of this thesis project, the history of Naftoon has repeatedly reminded me of the history of the whole country. Because of its location and natural resources, it had been advanced for centuries. The emergence of Islam and other events caused it to become less popular. Again, after centuries and the

discovery of oil, it dramatically boomed and became modern, a target of national and international companies and investors. These words can be said about both Naftoon and Iran.

Little by little, after 40 years of drilling for oil in Naftoon, the oil reserves ran dry, the city turned off, and today it is just an ordinary suburb. More and more, the story of Naftoon can, I believe, be seen as a cautionary tale for Iran and its future – a future that may see the end of the nation's God-given gifts of natural resources.



APPENDIX A

From the Beginning to Before Now

My love of art and working with still and moving images began early on, while I was a graphic design major in high school in 2006. The art courses I took and the photography award I won led me to major in photography at university, starting in 2008. My years of studying and practicing photography have allowed me to work on different aspects of the medium, and I have come to understand how a picture in particular, and an artwork in general, can convey more meaning than words are able to. Moving to the US in 2014 for graduate school, I turned my focus to themes of identity and vulnerability, approaching them through conceptual art processes, video as well as photography, and installation formats.

I had explored issues of identity and fragility when I was still working on my bachelor's degree in photography in 2012. I asked an obstetrician friend if I could document her delivering babies, and she agreed. My first time in the surgery room, I was shocked – even frightened – and I skipped taking the picture. I preferred being an observer rather than a photographer. It was such a melancholic atmosphere, seeing the very first moment of life: a creature strong enough to survive, and at the same time a symbol of fragility and vulnerability. I returned numerous times, ultimately photographing fifteen babies in the initial moment of their lives on earth. I tried to capture their similarities, strengths, and vulnerabilities, along with all the blood, fat, and liquids that came with them from their mothers' bodies.

Moving to the unknown surroundings of this country, for a girl who had been so attached to home – even to the light of her bedroom – was strange and disorienting. I started to work on notions of identity and displacement in installation format. In Fall 2015, I investigated the conception and expression of my own identity as an immigrant and the related physical displacement and its psychological consequences, resulting in the work titled *Dispersed Moments*. Exploring the vulnerability and fragility of body and mind within the construct of a new home, and the effects of those sensations, I hung several life-sized transparent color photographs of myself in my studio space and allowed viewers to walk between them. The intent was to engage the viewer physically, formally, and conceptually in the challenging emotional effects of destabilization. The installation also explored the potential of images and the role and perception of others (viewers) by staging a conversation between these elements, as well as by playing with the effects of highlights and shadows on the transparent images.



Researching identity further, I started to read the theories of developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who defines identity as a constant reproduction of images of self and experiences. From his psychoanalytical perspective, identity entails the feeling of having a personal sense of self (“ego-identity”), which is based on two observations: one, the observation of a consistency and continuity of the self; and two, the observation that others recognize this continuity and consistency.³⁰

In a piece titled *All I Can Tell You*, 2016, I tried to evaluate the relationship between identity, vulnerability, art, and territory from my own point of view as an immigrant woman. Being new to a country involves learning how to discern new cultural codes, words, and signs, a process that involves repetition – looking at the same thing twice, three times, and many more. For that reason, the repetition of my self-portraits represents sites of internal tensions, but also of precise attention and concentration. The work was based on information originating from distinct cultural systems in which identity takes form and/or changes.

Furthermore, through this installation, I worked to represent not only the effects of cultural interaction but shifts in identity that begin to take place when a person begins to feel more “at home.” By placing different self-portraits in the format of passport photo, lower than eye-level, I wanted to actualize myself in the position of an observer, one who can look but hardly touch or be touched. This exploration of the theme of immigration was an opportunity to question the relationship between self and other, and the ways to bridge differences between the

³⁰ Erik H Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York London: W.W. Norton, 1980), 17-50.

space we are comfortable sharing, and the territory we prefer to keep private.



In my performance-installation project titled *غزاله كشاورز*, 2016, I provided viewers my full name, written on a piece of paper in my primary language of Farsi, and asked them to use brushes and ink, which I also provided, to duplicate my name on a piece of mesh fabric hanging on the wall. My name in Farsi was the first thing I attempted to write before starting school as a child – just as most children do in their native language. A signature can be defined not only as the most basic written form of identification of oneself, but also as one of the most common representations of ourselves (other than mirror images) that we can see and hold in our minds. I observed visitors' attempts to duplicate that which is most familiar to me and signals my most fundamental presence. People struggled with what to them were the vague forms of my name. The end result was a cloth with multiple alternative versions of my name and the seepage of ink onto the wall behind the

cloth. My basic identity had been manipulated on the surface and existed as a ghostlike apparition behind the scenes.



APPENDIX B

I have found the following Iranian artists compelling and inspiring, and they have significantly informed my work:

Shirin Neshat

“When she returned to her home country in 1990, she found it barely recognizable from the Iran before the 1979 Revolution, a shocking experience that incited the meditations on memory, loss, and contemporary life in Iran that are central to her work.”³¹

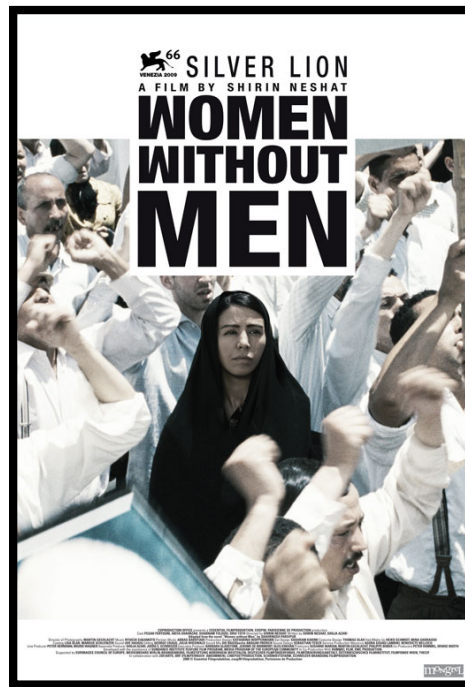
As a freshman photography student, I collected reproductions of national and international photographers’ artworks. Growing up in the historic city of Isfahan, the splendid capital city of great Islamic empires for centuries, and one of the most important architectural centers in the Islamic world, I had seen the elements of Shirin Neshat’s photographs in my everyday life. Nonetheless, her use of these elements in an art context fascinated me. I read how “in the West, Neshat’s calligraphic photographs of female martyrs have become synonymous with contemporary Iranian art.”³² Ironically, she is not allowed to exhibit her work in her country of birth, Iran. It was not until moving to the US that I had the chance to

³¹ “Shirin Neshat,” *Artnet*, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/biography>.

³² Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, 215.

see her original work at the Hirshhorn Museum, which hosted a retrospective of her artworks in 2015.

Before the Islamic Revolution, in 1975, Neshat's father – intellectual, upper middle class, and obsessed with Western culture – sent his 16-year-old daughter to the US to continue her education. She completed her B.A., M.A., and M.F.A. at the University of California, Berkeley, not returning to Iran until 1990. Confronted with the tremendous changes that had taken place since the Revolution, the visit became a turning point in her career. She proceeded to explore the notion of power and the political and social conditions in Iranian/Muslim culture, addressing these themes as conceptual narratives in photographic works, films, and video installations.



Women Without Men, Shirin Neshat, 2009.

Women Without Men, 2009, was her first feature film. In the movie, which won the Silver Lion award for directing at the Venice Film Festival, Neshat looks back at the history of Iran during the nationalization of oil, emphasizing the political factors involved. The film presents the story of four women from different class backgrounds who struggle under oppression in Tehran. The plot takes place in 1953, when Iran still had a democratic government, but Mossadegh was being overthrown in the coup orchestrated by the UK and US. The movie shows how these countries' secret service forces helped overthrow Mossadegh, how his former associates and supporters turned against him, and how massive protests subsequently broke out across the city. Neshat highlights the fact that Mossadegh was known as the leading champion of secular democracy and resistant to foreign domination.

Watching this movie for the second time as I started working on my thesis project was powerful. Regardless of the methods of storytelling and the strength or accuracy of the story, especially for an Iranian audience, Neshat's choice of images, audio elements, and conversations together create an atmosphere of nationalistic sentiment and worries. Tying stories of the personal and political daily lives of four women to the ongoing anti-Mossadegh situation and spreading it out to the whole society, this movie conveys the sensations of emotional, political, and systematic turbulence of the country at that time. It is sensations such as these that I wish to invoke in my work, albeit using different materials.

Abbas

Oil brought a mix of hope, happiness, anxiety, and doubt to Iran. As I researched representations of these contradictory responses, I found it challenging to find more than snapshots of the dramatic changes in lifestyle following the discovery of oil. A limited amount of visual documentation of that era exists.

That said, photojournalist Abbas Attar (known as Abbas), born in Iran in 1944, produced a helpful body of work. Though he moved to Algeria with his family at a young age and moved to France as an adult, he witnessed the Algerian War as he grew up, and these violent and life-altering events deeply informed his professional work for Magnum Photos. He is known for documenting social and economic conflicts throughout the world.

During the 1970s, he made a series of trips to Iran to document the dynamic changes the oil boom and rapid expansion of the oil industry had spurred in his native country. He recorded both the fervent demonstrations of the masses and the dealings of high-level politicians.³³ His documentation provided me a better understanding of Iranian society of that era.

³³ Maryam Ekhtiar and Marika Sardar, "Modern and Contemporary Art in Iran," *TheMet*, October 2004, accessed November 12, 2016, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ciran/hd_ciran.htm.



Abbas, Two armed militia in charge of the protection of oil fields pray, Iran, Ahwaz 1979.

Black Hand

“When Black Hand returned to the scene in north Tehran hours later to take a better look at the finished piece, it had already disappeared. The authorities, who view such graffiti as subversive, were quick to remove it” (*The Guardian*, August 6, 2014).³⁴

Black Hand feels compelled to stay anonymous for security reasons. It is still unclear whether this artist is a man, a woman, or a group of graffiti artists working by night on the roadside walls of Tehran, painting realistic images that comment on issues ranging from the legal marketing of human organs to the ban

³⁴ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Iran's Banksy: 'The walls in my city are the canvas for my paintings,’” *Theguardian*, August 16, 2014, accessed November 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/aug/06/iran-banksy-street-graffiti-tehran-black-hand-interview>.

on women attending stadium events. For decades before and after the Revolution, “street art [was used] to convince many of the merits of continual faith in the republic.”³⁵ But times have changed, and “under the Iranian municipality laws, writing on walls or advertising without official permission is [now] a crime.”³⁶ By Black Hand taking conceptual pieces to public places, he/she/they strive(s) to override government-enforced censorship and lack of freedom of speech.

Given my choice of oil as a material for my thesis project, I was interested to see how Black Hand addressed the role of oil within Iranian society today. One notable wall piece featured a life-size blue barrel, the English word OIL painted on its side, flanked by a Persian calligraphic rendering of a well-known line of poetry by Rumi. Translated, it reads: “Without everyone else, life goes on/without you, life doesn’t go on.” In Black Hand’s typically satirical, subversive style, oil appears here as the center of attention, the poem’s position – as if holding the barrel up from both sides – suggesting Iranians’ full dependency on oil.

Also typical of Black Hand, the following artist statement mixes pronouns to shield identity, while revealing a compelling level of social generosity: “I work on the issues that are happening in my country. We wake up with them, we live with them and we sleep with them. Art aside, being able to express these issues by itself can help you find peace.”³⁷ The way that the artist(s) speak(s) out against the relentlessly dark social and political issues has had a deep influence on me,

³⁵ Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, 109.

³⁶ Dehghan, “Iran’s Banksy: ‘The walls in my city are the canvas for my paintings.’”

³⁷ Ibid.

encouraging me to research these issues and to be equally persistent in addressing them in the *Naftoon* project.



A street graffiti by Iranian artist Black Hand depicting the importance of oil in Iran.

Afsoon

Iranian cultural nationalism, or one might say the cultural heritage of Iranian nationalism, remains an important category in the production of contemporary art.³⁸

Recapturing and decoding Iran's modern history, the artist named Afsoon made the *Fairytale Icon* series (2009), in which, as Grigor proclaims, "historical figures are imprinted on the diasporic psychology of what-ifs."³⁹ In a piece of this series titled "Mohammad Mossadegh," the subject looks proudly at onlookers, while in the background, red blood instead of black oil gushes from the oil tower,

³⁸ Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, 230.

³⁹ Ibid.

pointing to the history of oil and colonization, as well as Mossadegh's story and life.



Afsoon, "Mohammad Mosadegh," from the series *Fairytale Icon*, 2009, mixed media, 59 x 42 cm.

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