

ANALOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

What if we are all trapped in our own worlds, like a matrix, and we can not see the true world? Analogy in definition is a resemblance and comparison between two things. This research focuses mainly on alternative perspectives through which my body of work could be analyzed and interpreted based on perception of the viewer.

This research challenges the viewer by offering different perspectives, a mirrored view-point through which the viewer is challenged to read a text or otherwise analyze an image. In this thesis, sculptures, paintings, and video combine to create a controversial dialog and a sense of ambiguity about notions of the content.

As a conceptual artist, the meaning of my work lies within the mind of the viewer and not within the object itself. Art and the experience of art are social constructions that demand the viewer to engage, and my work would not be complete without the participation of the audience. In other words, the viewer's interactions form an important part in completing the concept, and this interaction is the foundation of my work.

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CHAPTER I

CONCEPT: A CLOSER LOOK INTO PARALLEL CULTURES

My work creates a discussion on the issues of parallel cultures. Artworks in this thesis are a direct reflection from a parallel perspective; a mirrored viewpoint. I aim to establish a bridge between multiple cultures. I use analogies to create a sense of ambiguity that constantly challenges the viewer to search for alternative perspectives through which my work can be seen and criticized. My primary strategy is the mirroring of text. This reversal removes the traditional meaning and context of the words. In fact, a word that is flipped is no longer a word; it becomes an abstract image or symbol that can be interpreted differently based on the cultural backgrounds of the viewer.

Mirroring the texts in my works has both aesthetic and symbolic values. To explain this further, I will offer a brief background on some of the fundamentals in Persian/Farsi language, and explain why this is an interesting issue to me as an Iranian visual artist. From a visual point of view, Persian/Farsi uses the Perso-Arabic alphabet as its writing system, and although there are differences in sounds and some letters, the writing system is mainly based on Arabic script. It is written from right to left, as opposed to the Latin alphabet used in the English language. This particular difference requires a different outlook in reading words. In my thesis, both the Perso-Arabic and Latin alphabets create a bridge for the audience to experience parallel perspectives. In addition to producing a visual style through my work, this approach creates a cross-cultural ambiguity that is intended to intrigue the viewer. I find the situation of confusion for the viewer

fascinating because of the possible opportunities to challenge my audiences to think beyond their usual stances and conventions, and to approach the works from a new and different perspective.

Perso-Arabic script is also loaded with meaning in contemporary America. This kind of text, regardless of the content, seems to be approached with extreme prejudice on the part of average Americans. Individuals who are not familiar with these scripts often would often associate them with negative thoughts, including terrorism, fear, and danger. This is an outcome of such national and international traumas as 9/11 in 2001. Since the attackers during this event were Muslims and communicated in Arabic, the language and Islam are now associated with those attacks. The 9/11 attacks on the United States had a great effect on the cultural and political views of American society. The results of this has lead the American people to believe and worry about an “Islamic threat,” a powerful Muslim enemy that aims to destroy Western values. Today, Islamophobia, or the “hatred of Islam” in Western countries, has developed a great sense of anxiety and hostility toward everything associated with Islam, including the Perso-Arabic script.¹ Audience interpretation of art tends to concentrate on recognizable imagery, ensuring that average viewers are most comfortable discussing art that has recognizable subject matter. However, I challenge this expectation in my work. Iconography and symbolism are apparent in my thesis through the use of colors and popular icons of Iranian and American cultures, but my work shies away from direct representational content. For instance, I incorporate symbolic characters from the literature and mythology of ancient Persia such as Simurgh, Huma, Zal, and Rostam. At the same time, I also draw upon popular contemporary phrases such as Yellow Cake, and LOL, the

¹Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 101.

acronym for “laugh out loud.” These concepts contain hints to help with how my textual objects are read. In *Esgh (Love)*, color choices are made in a specific way to intensify the sense of ambiguity similar to a double-entendre, a figure of speech in which a spoken phrase is devised to be understood in either of two ways. Red is a color that often represents extremes. It is used as a symbol of danger and violence, while it also represents love and passion. Black on the other hand, seems most often to conjure ideas of death and evil, darkness and the unknown. In both *Yellow Cake* and *THIS SHIT*, yellow is used as a color that symbolizes caution and warning about a dangerous problem in the world (such as nuclear war). My main thesis concept concerns the interplay of human interpretations and human perceptions, and how a confusing binary can change the meaning of an artwork. This Project considers semiotics, metaphors, and symbolic materials. How do we read a work of art as beholders? Without all the knowledge received from our cultural background, a painting for example may not be an imitation or mimesis. What makes us understand a work of art relies on our memory and experiences. The process works similarly with pragmatism. In Charles Sanders Pierce’s version of pragmatism, an ideology or concept is accepted as true only if it is experienced satisfactorily and its practical effects are considered. All unpractical ideas are rejected.² Human minds function in a similar way when it comes to understanding content in an artwork. We respond to things the way we expect them to exist, and what we know about things has a lot to do with what we have experienced personally.

All art relies to some extent on what we call “guided projection,” according to Austrian art historian E.H. Gombrich. In fact, without guided projection we would not be able to recog-

² David Plowright, *Charles Sanders Peirce: pragmatism and education* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 13-25.

nize a landscape when looking at the strokes and brush marks of an impressionist painting. Gombrich states, “It is the power of expectation rather than power of conceptual knowledge that molds what we see in life no less than in art. We must always rely on guesses, on the assessment probabilities, and on subsequent tests.”³ We use our imagination and memory to complete an incomplete painting, overlook mistakes when we read a text, or project what is not there. The same technique is used unconsciously to read text that is incomplete or mirrored. Preconditioned cultural experiences also shape our unconscious and greatly change our perception when reading a work of art. For instance, a Perso-Arabic script is no longer a word or phrase to the eyes of someone who cannot read it. It is instead an image, a symbolic form of lines and curves and spaces, which, through ambiguity, might trigger an uncomfortable feeling based on the preconditioned cultural background of the viewer.

Therefore, what we often see or hear is interpreted as meaningful by our memory. This practice in image reading is what psychologists call “the perception of symbolic material.”⁴ Memory is what projects the image as discernable forms for our mind, and makes them able to be read as meaningful. Generally speaking, these two psychological aspects of “image making” and “image reading” allow us to come closer to understanding the reason why no art is free of conventions.

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory of personality, ego (as the conscious mind), and id and superego (as the two aspects of the unconscious mind), together form the three main parts of

³ Sheldon Richmond, *Aesthetic Criteria: Gombrich and the Philosophies of Science of Propper and Polanyi* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 1994), 49.

⁴ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New Jersey: Bollingen Foundation, Princeton University Press, 1969). See especially Part 3, “The Beholder’s Share.”

the human personality that shape the core of who we are and thus have a great impact on how we perceive our world.⁵ What carries our identity is the id, the pleasure principle or what we bring into this world from our generic background. In fact, the id contains everything that is inherited, or is present at birth. The ego has the task of self-preservation; it controls consciousness, primarily with language. The superego is what we learn about ourselves in a larger sense from our parents, and our cultural, social, and economic milieu, our educational institutions and history. So the superego and id are responsible for a great part of our unconscious memory, and the ego is developed from the id and superego to form our conscious minds. These aspects of the human mind also control how humans interact with artworks. In my thesis work, the viewer is provided with a contrast between reading an image and a text simultaneously. My thesis works are based on language, a task that is controlled by the ego or the conscious mind. When interacting with my works, however, viewers refer to their generic and cultural backgrounds unconsciously. In fact, their very first opinion of the works is shaped during their first unconscious interaction. Therefor the effects of viewer perceptions in my works can be traced back to the viewers' identities, superego, and ego.

In sum, my works create analogies by using popular icons of myth, literature, and religion, as well as popular contemporary culture, in both Persian and Western cultures. I use visual aspects of color theory and symbolism to create comparisons between different viewer interpretations, which heavily rely on cultural background, experiences, and memories of the audience for perceptions of my images. And this aspect puts the audience into the work in an active way, where my audience become part of the work itself. Viewers rely on both their conscious and unconscious minds to read the content. Their readings might trigger positive or negative feelings,

⁵ Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History* (New Jersey: Pearson; 2nd edition, 2000), 194-197.

depending upon each person who sees the works. From a visual point of view, each work provides an ironic juxtaposition between reading a text and analyzing an image by providing an image and a text simultaneously. The content is a form of double entendre that can be analyzed in at least two ways and is greatly changeable based on each viewer's cultural and personal history. The play between a sense of anxiety created because of color choices, and the stereotypical fear caused by Perso-Arabic scripts among certain viewers, in comparison to the positivity of content in the works, creates an analogy between human perceptions and expectations or conventions. I see my works as experiences as opposed to a completed or finalized work. Instead, the content of these works are a product of a psychological situation that has no endpoint and continues to develop itself consistently with the interaction of an audience.

CHAPTER II

TECHNIQUE AND PROCESS

I primarily used glass in my sculptures that replicate ancient tablets, and acrylic paint in the paintings. In addition to visual aesthetics, my choices of material enhance the content of my work. There are also historical and cultural analogies between materials and the content itself. Starting with glass, the medium is a substance that can be used both as a transparent and translucent material and this unique aesthetic quality of glass is controllable with the polishing process; the more polished the glass, the more transparent the surface becomes, which allows the viewer to read more of the content from the other side of the material. By creating contrasting textures, I change the way viewer can interact with the content; not every part of the text is readable due to parts of the surface not being polished. This smooth-rough contrast also helps evoke the quality of ancient ruins, worn by time and weather.

I used modelling and casting techniques to create the main forms of glass pieces. First, I modeled the forms out of clay, getting inspired by the worn out shapes of ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets that used the cuneiform alphabet to publish law codes and scripts, or simply for the purpose of documentation, such as *The Code of Hammurabi* (1754 BC) and *The Cyrus Cylinder* (539 BC). The difference here is that in the old cuneiform tablets, scripts were imprinted into the wet clay with a stylus; yet in my pieces the text was not added until after the casting and polishing process. After the mold making and casting process, I retained the natural texture that was a result of modeling and casting process on one side of the pieces, and polished the other side to a

smooth shine. The phrases then were engraved on the back side of the glass using a Dremel tool and from right to the left, which is the normal direction used in writing Persian text. Later, these pieces were installed in the gallery using special metal nails that function as a visual contrasting element to glass and resemble the cuneiform wedges in ancient clay and stone tablets.

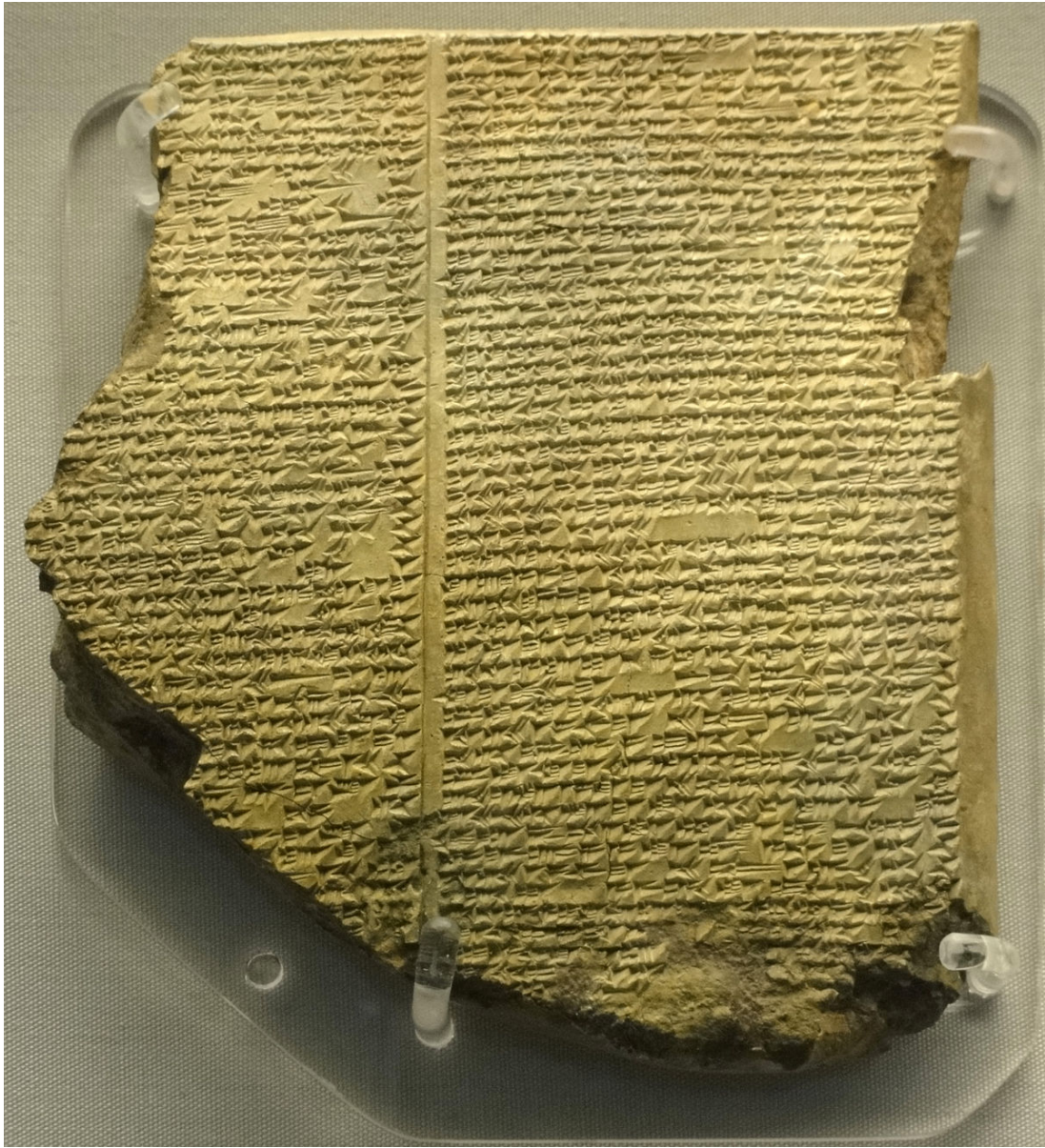


Analogue I, detail of the hanging device.

Viewers see the reversed text because they see it through the transparent glass. Also light casts a shadow of the textured edges onto the walls, an effect that makes parts of the scripts unreadable, similar to an ancient cuneiform tablet with damaged and unreadable parts that requires a historian to decipher incomplete scripts.

As a substance, glass has a historical connection to Middle-Eastern culture; although little is known about the history of the first glass produced, archeological evidence shows that the very first colored or decorative glass originates as glazes in Mesopotamia dated back to 3500 BC. The British Museum currently houses a group of clay tablets that contain ritual instructions for glass-making in a cuneiform script and were made around 3,300 years ago. These scripts are part of library of King Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian king (668-627 BC) who ruled in what in now modern day Iraq. These ancient recipes are still used today as the basic ingredients for glassmaking.⁶

⁶ Hugh Tait, *Five Thousand Years of Glass*, Rev. ed. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 8, 21-22.



Tablet with cuneiform script containing part of the Epic of Gilgamesh, King Ashurbanipal library, British Museum, (7th century BC)

In my thesis paintings, the main medium is acrylic paint. Acrylic paint as a substance is a synthetic material that was invented in the 20th century as an alternative to oil paint, a much

newer material compared to glass.⁷ The material was used specifically during the modern western art movements such as Pop Art, and symbolically it is a contemporary material ideal for pop culture themes. From a technical point of view, because of the flexibility and fast drying qualities offered by the paint, it's an ideal medium to use in my flat text paintings which required precision and clean edge quality.

My painting aesthetics draw on attracting viewer attention. There is an actual texture on the very top layer of paintings that is done by applying several thick layers of clear medium, which is a clear acrylic substance. The clear medium itself applies more saturation resulting in an overall more vibrant and aggressive color pallet that attracts more attention. This aspect of my works functions similarly to commercial art and Pop Art where artists aim for maximum exposure to create images drawing on popular culture that aim to catch one's eye. The clear medium also adds textural patterns that implicitly evoke calligraphic lines in Perso-Arabic text, and are visually apparent more intensely on the darker colors, which helps in dividing the text and the background by creating textural contrast.

⁷ Gerald Ward, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.



Huma, Acrylic on Canvas, 48"x24" (Detail)

The technique of mirroring text, despite creating a visual style, also results in a work that aesthetically offers different perspectives of image reading; the viewer is expected to invest in image reading and create an analogy between a text and an image. Conceptually, these works undermine the cultural conventions implied in a legible text, yet also question the boundaries of traditional text and image.

Both glass and acrylic paint have aesthetic as well as symbolic qualities that produce meaningful analogies for me between ancient Middle-Eastern culture and contemporary western Euro-American culture. The techniques used in my 3D and 2D works, however different, emphasize the same principles of contrast in texture to create visual intensity, an inverted script that challenges conventions of language and meaning, and thus an analogical context between old and new, East and West, Perso-Arabic and English.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUES

As discussed above, my work is in dialogue with works of the ancient past, including carved stele from Mesopotamia. Also, I reference some of the important Persian epics and mythologies in *Shahnameh* (*The Book of Kings*) which is one of the most important pieces in Persian literature. *Shahnameh*, written between c. 977 and 1010 CE by Ferdowsi, the famous Persian poet, is arguably one of the longest poems ever written with 60,000 verses. It contains stories that are relevant to all ages and cultures and not only ancient Persian contexts. My thesis works include symbolic and mythological characters from *Shahnameh* which are reminiscent of similar mythologies or modern characters in the western world. These similarities create a sociocultural analogy between two different platforms—of the dated and contemporary, and of East and West.

At the same time, I work in dialogue with a number of modern and contemporary artists whose approach incorporates text to deal with popular icons and cultural happenings. I also work in a largely conceptual vein, building on the movements of conceptual art where ideas are central to and shape the aesthetic outcomes. In particular, the recent artists who have influenced my body of work are Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and Santiago Sierra.

California-based artist Ed Ruscha emphasizes textual irony in his work in ways that my thesis builds on. Ruscha's exceedingly flat, largely word-based paintings and prints include

phrases that are often comic and satirical sayings, many of them involving perspectives on life in America and especially Los Angeles, such as *Hollywood*, a screen print by Ruscha that he finished in 1968. Ruscha is a hunter of words. He finds ideas from very basic day-to-day activities, and his works reflect modern American culture in a way that has influenced my work as well. A number of my own pieces draw on basic popular phrases or texting language, such as “LOL,” bringing Ruscha’s approach up to the current moment. LOL is an acronym for “laugh out loud” or “lots of laughs,” a way for readers to respond to someone in a shortened but generally understood format, acknowledging the success of a joke made by a sender. This phrase is the product of our social media-based moment, which has now become an essential part of global, and not just western/U.S.-American culture. I view it as a clear referent for the contrived happiness of social-media based society. This short phrase summarizes surface joy but does not at all express deep, profound emotions. People can not actually be laughing out loud every time they use LOL in a sentence, yet they use it as a tool that makes them look happy on social-media even if they are not happy in reality. This contrived happy image of ourselves has become an iconic feature of our generation that is transferring from computer-mediated platform into our face-to-face communications.

Like Ruscha, in my works, I use color and form in a way that aims to attract attention immediately. I apply bold contrasts and hard edges that evoke commercial or computer-based designs. Moreover, Ruscha has used inverted text in *The Back of Hollywood*, an oil painting that he painted in 1977, seemingly demonstrating how such iconic “signs” can be seen from a new perspective. In *LOL*, I created a road sign for pedestrians that awkwardly asks them to laugh out loud. The project was installed on 26th street in Canyon, Texas, a street located on WT campus and for approximately one week, I recorded student’s reactions to the strange sign, which for the

most part was a positive yet thought-provoking experience. This project essentially provided a social media-like discussion platform for pedestrians on urban level. I used this popular internet slang as a road sign and a symbol of a contrived happiness that reflects our emotions in social media platforms. However, *LOL* is not a print or painting, and thus not a material object. Instead it builds a social living space that brings qualities of social media to the urban world and becomes its own social platform.



LOL, washable paint on 26th Street, West Texas A&M Campus, 2014



Ed Ruscha, *The Back of Hollywood*, 1977

I consider myself principally a conceptual artist; for me, the process of making an artwork consists of two clear stages: developing the concept, or as I like to call it, observing the “problem,” and representing the idea in a form understandable to a range of people, hence solving the problem. My artwork is born from the moment that it is created in my mind. Indeed, the work for me does not require an actual material presence in order to be considered art. In “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” American conceptual artist Sol Lewitt writes on the importance of the idea:

Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical. All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art. . . . The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.⁸

In my works, I draw on the importance of the idea. And I believe art, regardless of its form, exists only conceptually. I focus mostly on finding concepts before planning my visual aesthetics, and that is the order I follow in creating my works. These concepts are a result of subconscious experiences or research on a popular issue, and, in the end, some of these ideas will turn into concepts that eventually transition into physical form. Therefore, there is always some spontaneity involved in my work when it comes to the physical appearance. Sometimes unexpected features can eventually become visually pleasing to the viewer. Textural patterns on both my glass pieces and my acrylic paintings are good examples of how part of the aesthetics are shaped in my work in an expressive way, and not always based on a plan. In this, I balance consciously

⁸ Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Art Forum* (1967).

conceptual art, such as that of Joseph Kosuth and Sol Lewitt with the work of expressionist artists, such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Also I recognize that I cannot control how viewers will understand or read the work, and thus there is an activating dialogue between my work and its audiences that forms a core component in my thesis, much like performance art. The viewer is the part of the work and he or she completes the incomplete. LeWitt summarizes this approach in a way that has influenced me:

It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once it is out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.⁹

Kosuth was another pioneer of American conceptual art, and his work also deals with the essence and real meanings of concepts. He forwards tautological statements, where the works literally are what they say they are. Tautologies are truths based on what appears logical, and often satisfactorily practical (drawing on pragmatism, as discussed above): "It is because it is." Kosuth believes that works of art are analytic and tautological propositions and should be approached within their context.¹⁰ They are artworks if he claims them to be. He challenges the viewer by representing different forms of the same concept side by side to create a dialog about the notions of art, logic, and truth. In his series *One and Three* installations, he creates a platform that enables audiences to explore relationships between an object, a photograph of that object, and an enlarged copy of the dictionary definition of the same object. Viewers can compare and contrast the

⁹ Lewitt.

¹⁰ Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, Part I," *Studio International Magazine* (1969), 134-137.

notion and physical presentation of each format. His theories inspire me because I create cultural analogies by providing clues for both image and text reading simultaneously in my works. In my work, *Eshgh*, Eshgh (love) is a phrase that can be perceived and read by the viewer if he or she speaks Persian, but at the same time it can be perceived as an image to western audience for whom it might evoke negative feelings due to the association of Perso-Arabic text with Islam and recent terrorist activities. However, unlike Kosuth, I aim to undermine any truth-assumptions and tautological statements in the content of my work. I do not offer an absolute truth or falsehood in my works. Rather, I explore the complicated meanings of both texts and images, and texts as images, relying on viewers' perceptions and analytic judgments to determine the relative rather than absolute meanings for my works.

My work also has political meaning, unlike Kosuth's work, where the idea of "chair" seems deceptively devoid of political meaning. In this, I draw upon the works of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, who specifically deals with contemporary economic, social and political issues of labor and laborers in capitalist societies, with industrial mass production and post-production digital markets, and, finally, currently political problems such as immigration and immigrant lives. Sierra's art criticizes global capitalistic life in general, and has been an influence for the political contents in my work. He works within the constructs of minimalism and conceptual art. His media include photographs and video that contain messages that evoke biting historical, cultural, political and social implications that I find useful in my works, especially those that deal with contemporary social and political issues, such as nuclear warfare. Sierra depicts global realities rather than his own emotions or desires. For that reason, his work is not traditional in terms of its aesthetics, but forms provocative and criticizing messages that he represents in the most basic forms. *NO*, a wooden sculpture measured about 5 feet high by 13 feet long, is a Sierra sculpture

that was built in 2009 in Italy. The sculpture consists of a simple but forceful word: “NO.” After a two-months-long exhibition, under the name of *No, Global Tour*, it was put on a tow-truck and travelled to Berlin, Germany. As the work travels through different places, it interacts with different people and locations, thus its meanings change. Viewers are called out to fill the letters “NO” with their own reality. It becomes a hero, a movie star, a moving road sign that comments on its surroundings.¹¹ Sierra’s simple yet strong approach inspire my works concept. Similar to Sierra’s *No, Global Tour*, my painting *THIS SHIT* is a politically charged piece that comments on the current nuclear situation and its outcomes in the world. Iran’s nuclear program is one of the most talked-about global concerns that has made the top political news of recent years. In 2002, the UN, EU, and several individual countries, such as the U.S., have imposed economical sanctions on Iran to prevent its nuclear program from developing and potentially becoming a risk to world peace.¹² Yet sanctions like this have specially affected prices of vital necessities such as food and medicine that have had a major impact on the ordinary people of Iran. *THIS SHIT* uses the colors of yellow and black which are the same colors used in uranium barrels, the main element for the creation of nuclear energy/weapons and which is an extremely radioactive material. Yellow and black combination has a very high readability, and thus is generally used in signs that warn of dangerous and unusual conditions. And similarly, *THIS SHIT* is a sign that specifically points attention toward social outcomes of a nuclear war, yet also functions within a multi-cultural and more generalized context, where it allows the audiences to recognize their own “shit” that they deal with every day.

¹¹ Dirk Luckow and Daniel J. Schreiber, *Santiago Sierra: Skulptur, Fotografie, Film/Sculpture, Photography, Film* (Cologne: Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013), 22-23.

¹² See, for instance, “Iran Nuclear Crisis: What are the Sanctions,” *BBC News*, 30 March 2015, online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15983302>.

In conclusion, my work is in dialogue with works and mythologies of the ancient past and with that of numerous contemporary artists who explore text, popular ideas and concepts, and performative audience involvement. By using historical and mythological symbols, pop culture, and political themes with multi-contextual approaches, I create analogies between old and new, East and West, Perso-Arabic and English. By investing in the conceptual values of the work beyond any simplistic visual aesthetics, and leaving room for viewer interpretation, and by relying on the viewer to complete a work of art that is conceptually incomplete, I provide clues for image and text reading simultaneously, but without resorting to any tautological or presented truth for my subject matter.



Santiago Sierra, *No, Global Tour*, 2009



THIS SHIT, Acrylic on Canvas, 60"x60"

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION OF WORKS

Simurgh

The Simurgh, usually compared to the griffin or phoenix of Greek mythology, is an Iranian mythical bird, that appeared in the *Shahname* (*The Book of Kings*) by Ferdowsi, an Iranian poet (c. 940-1020).¹³ *Shahname* is one of the most important works of Persian literature. The Simurgh, usually depicted as female in gender, is a unique creature who has lived for many ages and through many times, and because of this she is extremely enlightened, benevolent, and generous. She is a chimera, or hybrid creature, and is depicted as a large dog-bird with colorful feathers, teeth, and head of a dog or human. She is a symbolic character that represents the union between earth and sky. She can be seen as a bridge, a messenger between two platforms. My painting *Simurgh* doesn't feature her physical form but merely her name in Persian, but written in inverted text thereby challenging the original meaning and context, and creating a potentially meaningless symbol that functions as much as an image as a readable text. The forms become abstracted with this inversion; most English-speaking and non-Persian speaking viewers won't even recognize the inversion, but will read the forms as an abstract image. As a Persian speaking

¹³ Abolqasem Ferdowsi and Dick Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007).

myself, however, I will see another layer to the work, recognizing the inversion that takes meaning away from those who do speak my native language and know the stories of the *Shahname*. Flipping a text both diminishes and adds meaning; it can suggest more content related to a specific word beyond its traditional meaning. In this work, the text, even in its inverted state, is easily read as Simurgh by a Persian-language speaker and yet, because of the mirroring factor, the forms and marks can take on new meaning for any viewer. In fact, it can be seen as an image of the Simurgh with symbolic values, such as hybridity and benevolence embodied in form itself.

The color red on a black background creates extreme contrast, representing the dramatic boundaries between different platforms, such as East and West, or English and Persian. Red is a color of extremes, and while it often symbolizes passion and love, it can also represent violence and evil. My piece is meant to evoke a kind of danger or warning at the same time as a beautiful, bold and even feminine connotation like the Simurgh itself. The script being written in the Perso-Arabic alphabet could be approached with prejudice by western audiences, including the fear of Muslim extremism and terrorism, or, in contrast, it could draw out some sort of curiosity for the viewer. In both ways, my work produces an analogy for the dilemmas of uncertainty and illegibility that plague our interconnected and diverse global world today.



Simurgh, Acrylic on Canvas, 48"x24"

Huma

The Huma bird is a very similar legendary creature to the Simurgh, who has roots in ancient Persian mythology and literature. Like the Greek phoenix, Huma is a mystical bird that consumes itself in fire and rises from its own ashes each time. She, the Huma bird, has lived for many decades and centuries. Like the Simurgh, she is wise and compassionate. In Persian mythology, she is depicted as a gigantic hybrid of a griffin and bird, who is said to have never touched the ground here on Earth, and in fact she flies so high in the skies that she becomes invisible. She is the Persian mythical creature in the sky that turns day to night.

In my work *Huma*, the color red represents the fire in which the Huma burns and then is born once again from the ashes. Yet the color red can also be perceived as evil, dangerous, bloody, or fearful, which again suggests two different perspectives while reading this work. I have also again painted the Huma as a Persian word backwards. Therefore, if the viewer is able to read the Persian content, it is still oddly mirrored, suggesting that the word might not be read simply by its original meaning and thus making the viewer question the true meaning of the work. On the other hand, if the viewer is not familiar with the Persian language and can not read the text, it is just a red symbol, a curved form on a black background, that could represent an unknown and therefore potentially evil concept. Once again, this work creates an analogy that reflects our own uncertainties that can lead to either fear or enlightened discovery.



Huma, Acrylic on Canvas, 48"x24"

Eshgh

Eshgh, meaning love in the Persian language, is the largest piece in my thesis show, measuring 72” x 68”. The larger scale helps to attract attention, as if the work is screaming to be noticed with its saturated bright red color on black background. It is intended to induce at first induce a feeling of negativity in many of my viewers, and thus a sense of anxiety by drawing out biased perceptions of native Middle Eastern languages. The text reads “Love” in Persian, as mentioned before, but since it is written backwards it again becomes an abstract image, leaving room for new and diverse interpretations among those who cannot read Persian.

Red is a continued motif in my work because of its ability to symbolize both positive and negative human emotions. It represents emotions at extreme levels, such as anger and violence, yet it can also symbolize the most profound passion and love. There is no tautological guide here, so viewers will make logical decisions based on their sociocultural backgrounds. Also, the effects of the stereotypical hesitation towards Perso-Arabic script for many Americans today in our post-911 world plays a significant role in perceiving between these two extremely contrasting meanings of color red, especially when that color is used for Arabic or seemingly Arabic words. My viewers are offered an analogy of love and my piece thus challenges the conscious and unconscious approaches to reading a work of art. Conceptually, these contrasting concepts may exist in my work simultaneously, a layered complexity that forms the core of my thesis.

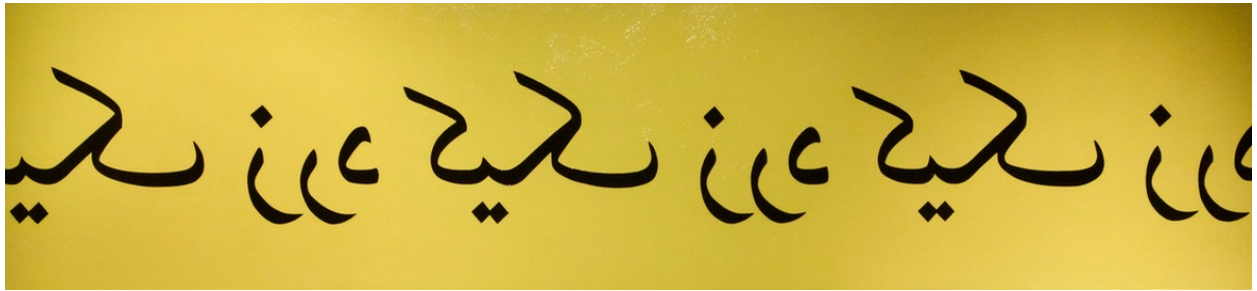


Eshgh (Love), Acrylic on Canvas, 72"x60"

Yellowcake

“Yellowcake” describes the uranium concentrate powder used to create uranium ores that are essential for the production of nuclear weapons. In the early 2000’s, the global international community was concerned that the Iranian government was intending to enrich uranium for weapons production as a direct threat to global peace and the balance of power. As a result, to slow down the process, numerous economic sanctions were applied against Iran from the United States and many European countries, resulting in immense suffering for the Iranian people. Yellowcake quickly gained popularity as a catch word that politicians used regularly in the context of nuclear war and its prevention. My painting, *Yellowcake*, is designed to reflect this sense of incompleteness and a continuation of the situation and the ongoing political anxiety it created. I painted the script in reverse to question the meaning and truth of the claims regarding Iranian nuclear weapons, and thus suggest alternative perspectives. But the script also appears to exceed the boundaries of the canvas, suggesting the continues flow of discussion on this topic, like the never-ending scroll at the bottom of popular news channels.

The color yellow is often used as a caution or warning—such as yield signs on American streets, which like my painting are bright, attention-grabbing yellow with black text—while it is also the color of the yellowcake powder and the uranium barrels used to create nuclear weapons. However, yellowcake as a product can also be used for peaceful purposes, such as creating non-petroleum energy. This analogy I create in this work allows the viewer to take a step back and question whether or not the use of “yellowcake” is negative or positive in the world, a reflection of both war and peace simultaneously.



Yellowcake, Acrylic on Canvas, 96”x24”

THIS SHIT

THIS SHIT continues the dialogue with *Yellowcake*, as both comment on a specific geopolitical situation that had a dramatic effect on the relationships between Iran and America recently, and which resulted in economic sanctions that negatively affected Iranian people. This work is a critical reaction to the outcomes of a stressful period in recent history caused by yellowcake and the Iranian nuclear weapons program. Reading deeper into the work, the script is in the English language but in reverse. It is intended for the American audience, in dialog with the Perso-Arabic text in *Yellowcake*, giving English-speaking audiences a more direct insight into the global situation, and allowing them the comfort of being able to comprehend the text. But the mirroring aspect again suggests that the text directs people's attention to another perspective, or another side to the expected story. Symbolically, yellow represents warning, hesitation, and even cowardice, while black can often symbolize death and destruction, thus the combination of these colors are often used in warning signs. The yellow and black contrast of colors also creates a visual connection to *Yellowcake* and uranium barrels it reflects. There is an evident relationship between the two black and yellow paintings. Contextually, as opposed to *Yellowcake* which focuses mainly within the context of Iran, *THIS SHIT* uses the English alphabet and thus comments more on the global scale of nuclear war as an issue we all share, yet also functions within a multi-cultural and more generalized context of allowing the audiences to recognize their own "shit" that they deal with every day. Viewers may find the text inappropriate and extreme. However, the mirroring of the text has transformed it into an image that is open to interpretation and analysis by the viewer.



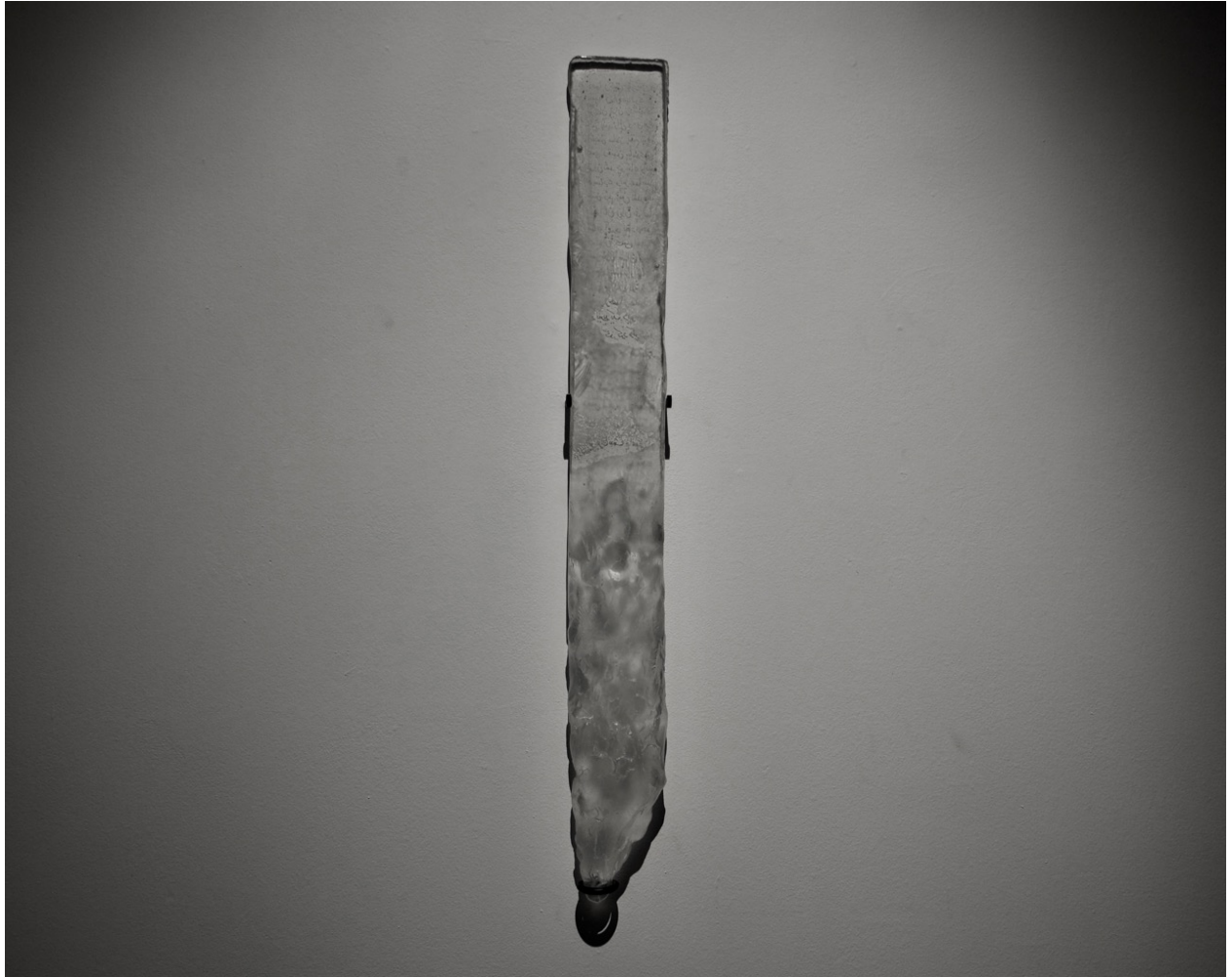
THIS SHIT, Acrylic on Canvas, 60"x60"

Analogue I

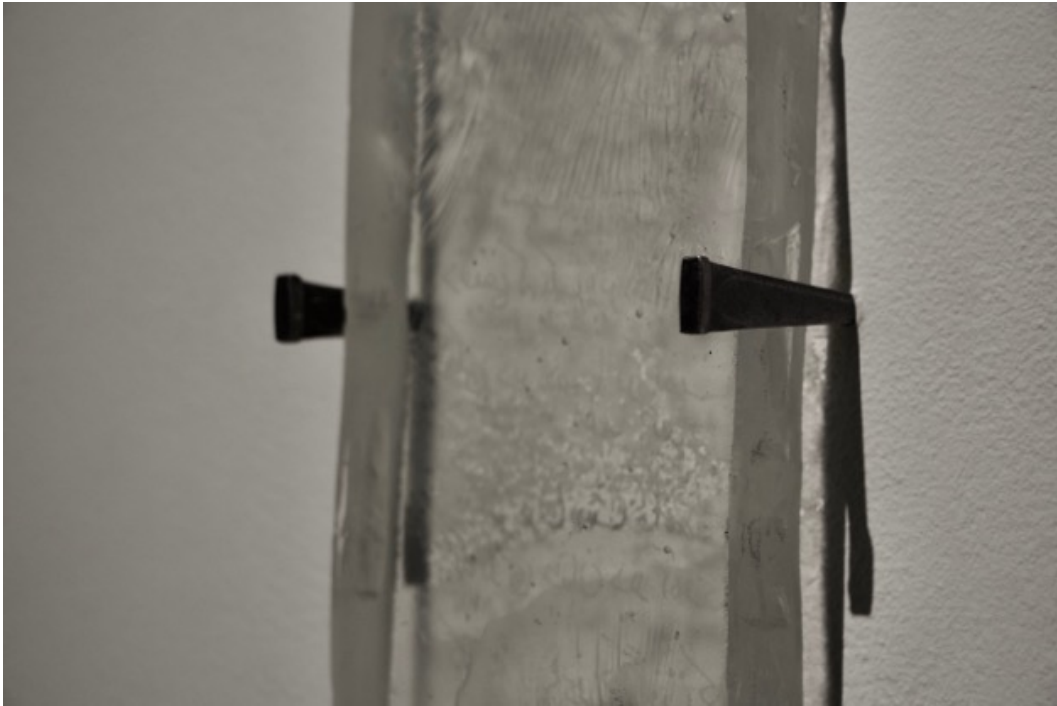
Analogue I is inspired by ancient Mesopotamian tablet forms that contain ancient alphabets such as cuneiform. Such carved relief tablets were used to publish law codes and political scripts such as *The Code of Hammurabi* and *The Cyrus Cylinder*, or simply for the purpose of documentation. An analogue means something that is analogous or similar to something else. These works are documents that respond historically and formally to ancient clay or stone tablets, and which showcase a cultural background of Mesopotamian traditions by incorporating text from an important piece of epic literature in Persian history. In the year 1010 CE, the Persian Poet Ferdowsi wrote *Shahname*. It is one of the biggest poems ever written, with 60,000 heroic verses. The significance of this book is that the content relates to all ages and people and contains universal messages that exceed the boundaries of ancient Persian or Mesopotamia. I have noticed that there is an international interest in mythology and ancient stories today; people worldwide still enjoy stories of global myths; for instance, adults and children of all nations read books as the *Harry Potter* or *Percy Jackson* series, which have been widely translated. So my work in this series builds on mythological characters and stories for their transhistorical and cross-cultural appeal.

Analogue I mentions in its text several symbolic Persian mythological characters, such as Simurgh, Huma, Rostam, and Zal. But my technique of filliping the Persian words invites non-traditional readings for these texts, and also an appreciation of the forms as symbols or images rather than legible words. This is especially true for American audiences, who would approach to read them from right to the left in the way English is read, and yet be unable to decipher the content of the text. My work offers a sociocultural analogy that bridges different platforms of time

and space, past cultures and contemporary contexts. Persian mythologies have been brought together and transformed into abstract images and sculptures.



Analogue I, Glass, 0.5" x 24" x 3.5"



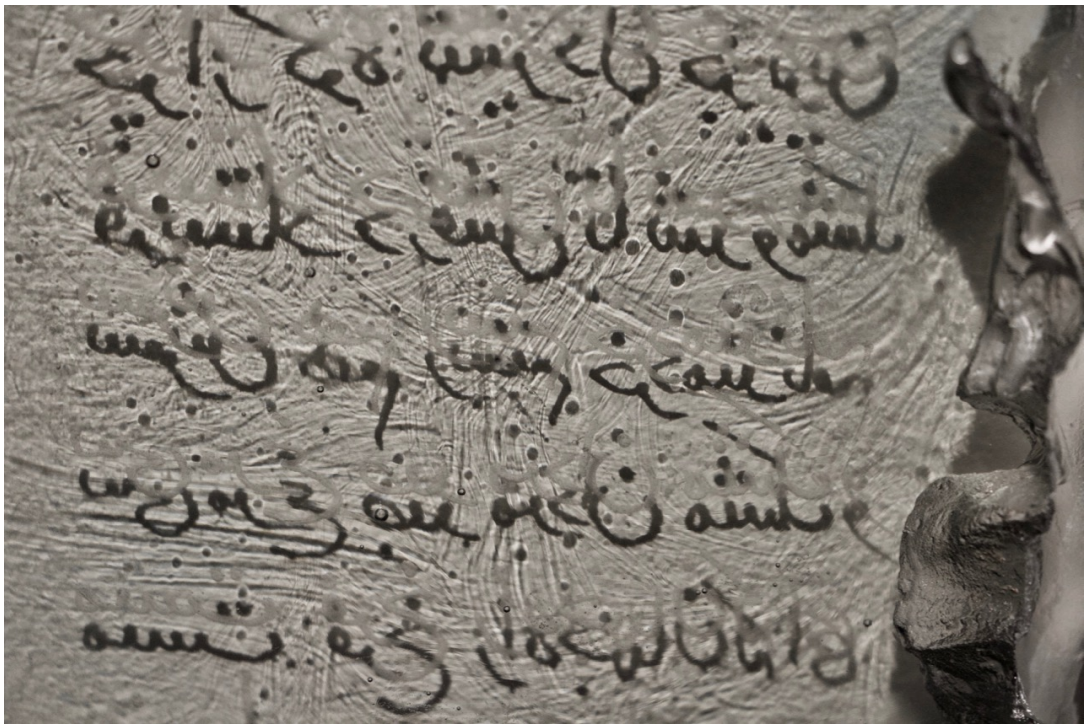
Analogue I, Glass, 0.5" x 24" x 3.5" (Detail)

Analogue II

In *Analogue II*, similarly the content represents iconic characters from *Shahname*, such as Simurgh, Huma, Rustam, Sohrab, and Zal. In *Shahname*, these characters are kings and heroes of the epic, members of the ruling elite that were able to cast themselves as the legitimate heirs of Iran's monarchical tradition, which according to Ferdowsi, the author of the book, dates back to the beginning of time. *Shahname* is a book that is part myth and part history, and its content is fit for the ages. Ferdowsi collected the oral histories, traditions and fables of the Persian-Iranian region that went back thousands of years, and then put them together into one monumental work: *Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings*. By collecting and putting together pieces of and references to symbolic *Shahnameh* characters, I have followed a similar route to create an analogy that compares pages of mythological stories from *Shahnameh* to abstracted forms and shapes that have changeable meaning.



Analogue II, Glass, 0.5" x 20" x 3.5"



Analogue II, Glass, 0.5" x 20" x 3.5" (Detail)

Analogue III

Analogue III also draws on the *Shahnameh*. For instance Rostam, the most celebrated legendary hero in *Shahnameh*, is known for his heroic acts in battles. But he is also a symbol of good that always stands against evil. Simurgh, the legendary phoenix is also by his side and shows him the pathway to victory. Rostam is a touchstone of Iranian national identity even to this day. There is a timeless context in stories of *Shahnameh* that covers global ideas such as heroism, nationalism, and good versus evil. The political messages and cultural significance of the ancient epic poem seem to run parallel to circumstances in today's Iran. Hamid Rahmanian, Iranian graphic designer and filmmaker, has recently created a version of *Shahnameh* with colored illustrations to introduce the Persian mythologies to western audiences in an accessible way.¹⁴ He explains the parallel contexts between stories in *Shahnameh* and current political environment in Iran in an interview with Omid Memarian, an Iranian journalist:

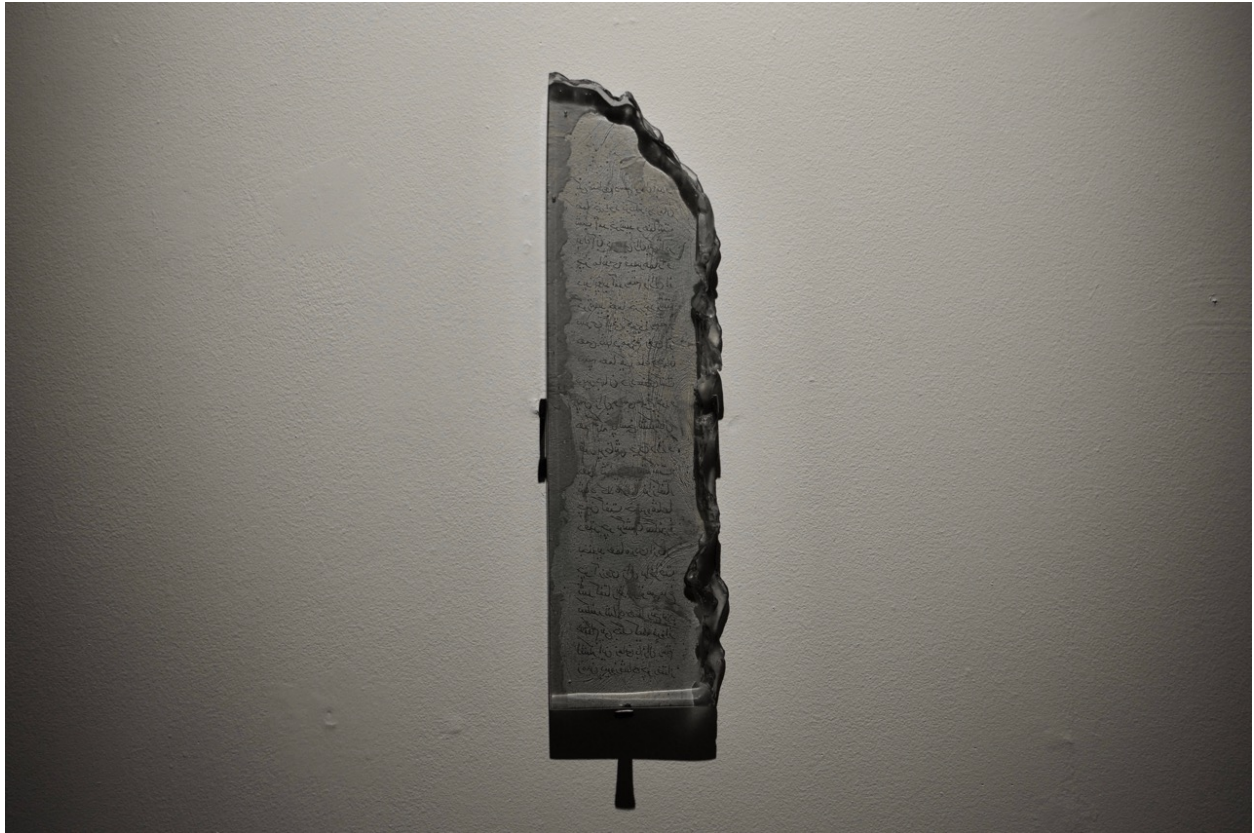
Shahnameh has always been part of Iranian society. Opposing political parties use the stories of *Shahnameh* to gain popularity among the people. There is a quest for justice through out the text, which resonates strongly with the struggles of the current political environment. Even last week, a potential presidential candidate used *Shahnameh* as an analogy in his attempt to win the presidency

¹⁴ Abolqasem Ferdowsi and Hamid Rahmanian, *Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings* (New York: Quantuck Lane Press, 2013)

. . . In the story of Kaveh, the Blacksmith, this lowly artisan raised an army against the tyrannical Serpent-King, Zahhak. Many people today, use this story as a parallel to what his happening today with the current oppressive regime.¹⁵

The text gives the reader an insight to contemporary Iran in its connections with current world politics, even despite its ancient authorship. The general message in all of the stories in *Shahnameh* follows a quest for justice that is timeless and can continue to inspire viewers now as it did when it was first collected. My work makes an analogy between the mythological stories of the ancient world and our modern globally connected world.

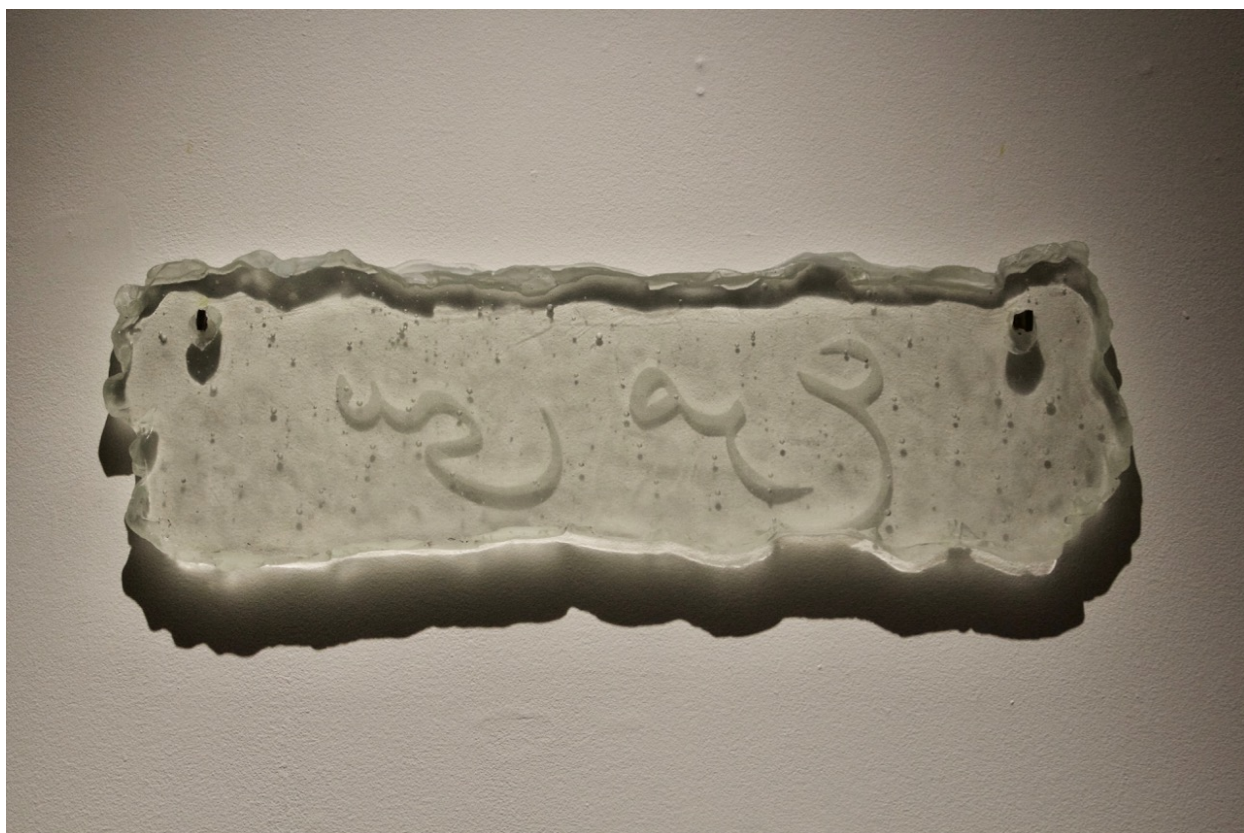
¹⁵ Omid Memarian, “A Shahnameh Fit of the Ages: The Epic of the Persian Kings,” *Huffingto Post*, online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omid-memarian/a-shahnameh-fit-for-the-a_b_3563747.html.



Analogue III, Glass, 0.5" x 15" x 3.5"

Simurgh

Simurgh is a reoccurring theme in my work. This version is in glass, and the transparency of the material and the reflection of light and shadow create the image. The text is etched with laser on the back surface of the piece, allowing the light to pass through and drop the shadow of the text on the wall. This shadow is visible to the viewer as a mirrored text. *Simurgh*, as discussed above, usually equated with griffin or phoenix in ancient Greek mythology, is an Iranian mythical bird that also appeared in the *Shahname*. She functions for me as a bridge, a messenger between two platforms. The flattened, horizontal form itself mirrors the idea of a connection or bridge. Moreover, her name written backwards challenges the original meaning and context. While it is easily viewed as Simurgh for someone who reads Persian, it is no longer endowed with the original meaning of the word. It becomes an abstract image of the *Simurgh* and an analogy with symbolic values. In *Shahnameh*, *Simurgh* is said to be so old that seems like she lives through all ages, and she is so large in scale that whenever she flies, the sky would turn completely dark. With her large scale, she would create a bridge that connects earth and sky. Thus, symbolically, *Simurgh* creates an analogy between Persian mythology and western culture, as she bridges both ages and spaces.



Simurgh, Glass, 0.5" x 18.5" x 7"

Biography

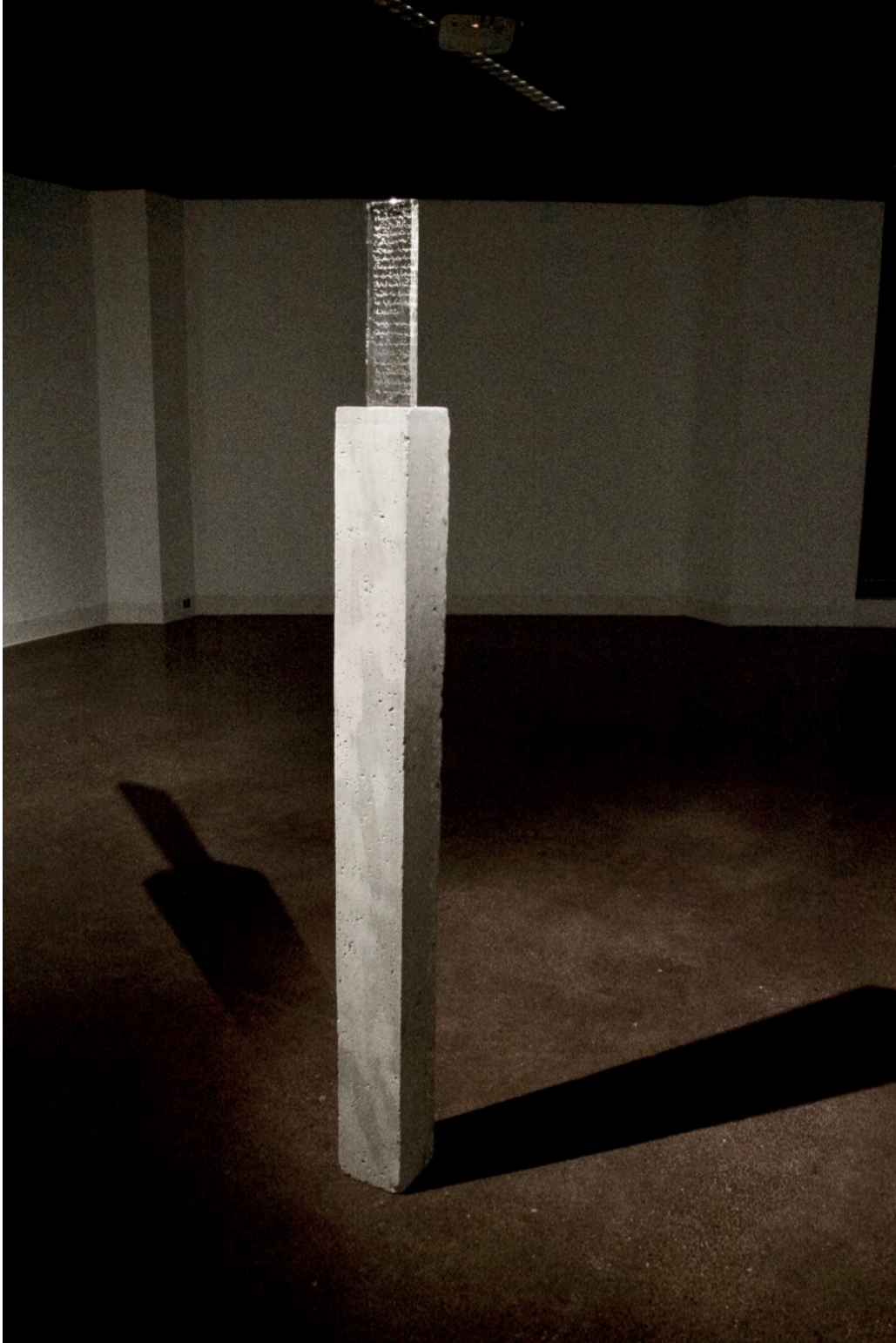
In this work, I take a national but also personal approach to the mythological values of *Shahnameh*. My goal is to integrate this theme of mythological scripts as an analogy to modern history, and in particular my own personal history, into my work. This work was made out of one piece of casted glass with the script carved on the back in the same technique as in my other works and is installed on a 5-feet-tall concrete block. The glass piece stands above standard eye level and creates an impression of a sacred figure, enthroned or elevated atop its base to show importance and status. Part of the significance of the text in *Shahnameh* is that it is believed to have saved Persian culture and language from becoming extinct after the Arab invasion of Persia in 633 AD. Ferdowsi, the author of *Shahnameh*, describes his vision after finishing his epic poem with these words:

I've reached the end of this great history
And all the land will fill with talk of me
I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save
My name and reputation from the grave
And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim
When I have gone, my praises and my fame.¹⁶

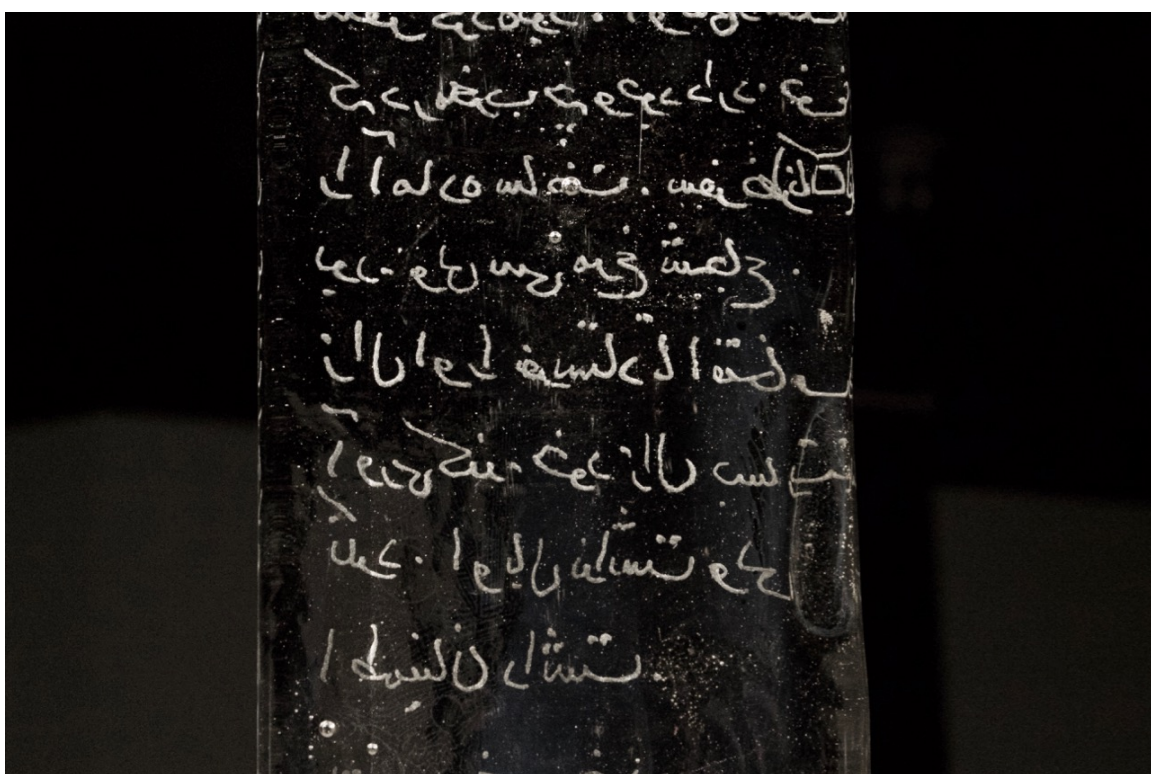
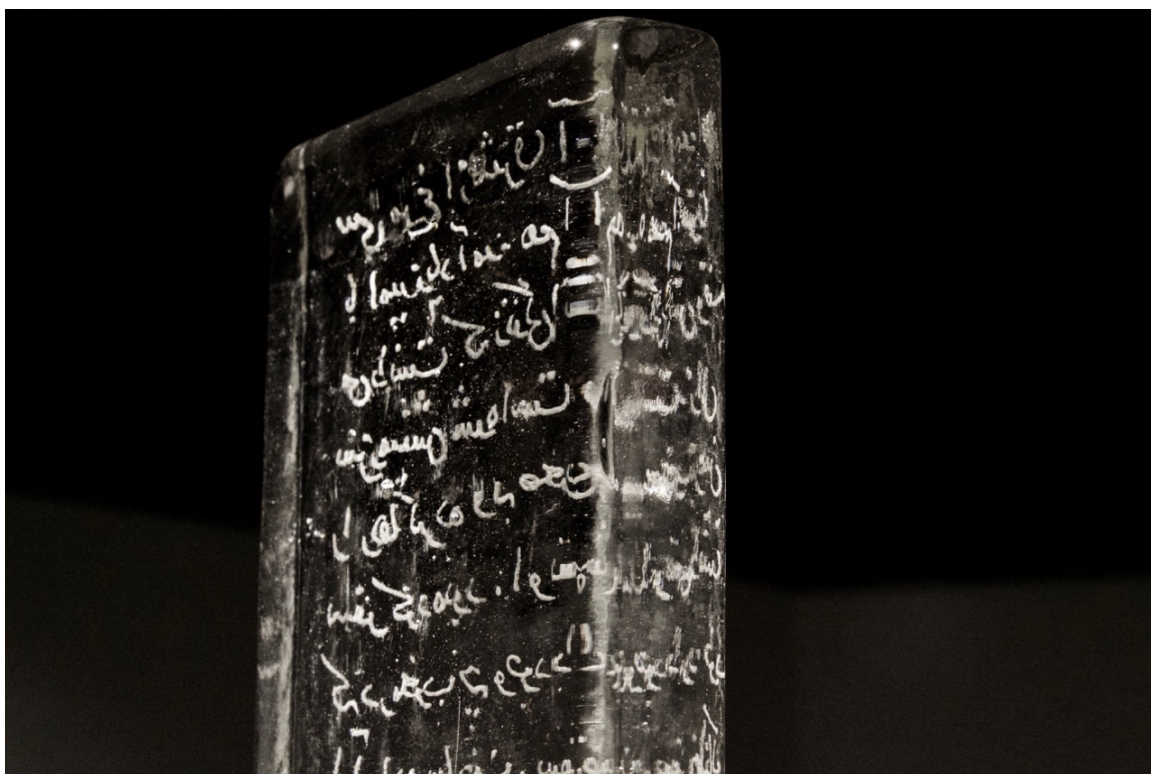
In other words, the poem functions as a monument to the labor and creativity of the author, Ferdowsi, and thus my work likewise creates a monument to his saving of Persian language and

¹⁶ Ferdowsi and Davis, *Shahnameh*.

literature. At the same time, it reflects my own ability to bring the Persian language to an American audience with my thesis work, again extending the influence of Ferdowsi and his poem. By putting the work at an elevated perspective, the viewer can see the world through Ferdowsi's eyes, through Iranian eyes, and through my artistic eyes, as the Persian language poem meets my work before the eyes of the viewer. This work is not a direct or simplistic representation of my true biography, just as the script is not a true representation of the *Shahnameh*. Yet, the image of the script gives the readers an insight into the artist's background that they are likely not familiar with, and thereby creates an analogy, similar to observing a pre-historic artifact in a museum.



Biography, Concrete-Glass, 5" x 72" x 5"



Biography, Concrete-Glass, 5" x 72" x 5" (Detail)

DATED

DATED is a work that criticizes our lifestyles within contemporary human societies. It seems we as people of the world today, regardless of our nationality, race, and culture, cannot keep up with the fast pace of change happening in our cultures. Our political views and understanding of our environment are heavily dependent on media and news. Today almost everything is controlled by computers. Yet, it seems that even by the time we receive our mediated information, it is outdated because of the rapidity of changes in our digital, virtual world. And our culture is formed and controlled by the media. This piece in my thesis was first designed as an installation project. It contains individual cast and polished glass letters that were intended to be placed in different public locations. However, the final version of the work initially consisted of a single cast 3-foot block of cement that was poured around glass letters that were themselves cast and polished individually earlier. After the cement was set, the entire piece was cold worked then placed on the floor with a light source placed behind it to illuminate the letters. Using light made the work shine in the dark and it attracted immediate attention. It also functions as a metaphoric element with meanings of illumination of the mind, liberation, intelligence, wisdom, and knowledge. The work uses light and the negative space of the letters as an analogy for recognizing our dependence on outdated information and the dangers that go along with that state of human existence. It draws on the notion of being “outdated” while “contemporary”.



DATED (Two versions, final version top; initial version bottom). Concrete
- Glass, 1" x 30" x 10"

LOL

LOL is my first outdoor installation piece. The initial goal was to get people involved with art and make them interpret and become a part of an artwork. At first, it was planned to be placed on a road open to traffic, like a road sign for drivers. Due to difficulties getting the required permissions, the project was delayed several times and the university police officers determined that it could be distractive to drivers. Then I decided to make a road sign for the pedestrians instead, and it was installed on 26th street in Canyon, Texas on a street within the boundaries of WT campus that was closed to the car traffic. I wanted the people passing by to see a sign that told them to stop and “laugh out loud” for a minute. Just like when used on texting and social media, this acronym was a reflection of a contrived happiness, a reflection of social media “laughing out loud” in a virtually constructed but not tangibly real social living space. It brings qualities of social media to the exterior material world and becomes its own social platform. People would stop and talk about it, possibly loving it or hating on it. Maybe some of them would actually get the joke and compare their real happiness to *LOL*, the contrived and flipped version of happiness, where the text was inverted as in all of my works. Pedestrians contributed to the project by activating the art in the form of an artistic performance or “happening.” Indeed, it was a happening by the students of WT for the students of WT, and they became the art itself without even being aware of it. The process of putting the text on the road and the various viewer reactions were recorded with a camera and put together as a short movie that I exhibited in my thesis show.

This piece is heavily influenced by Allan Kaprow, an American artist, who first used the term “happening” in his essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in 1958. To Kaprow, happenings were events that, put simply, happen. There was no structured beginning, middle, or end, and there was no distinction or hierarchy between artist and viewer. It was the viewer's reaction that decided the art piece, making each happening a unique experience that cannot be replicated. These happenings came to represent what can be called new media art. It is participatory and interactive, with the goal of tearing down the "the fourth wall" between artist and observers, so observers are not just "reading" the piece, but also interacting with it, becoming part of the art.¹⁷

LOL highlights the influence of social media as a very essential part of our modern culture. This slang word is just an example of many other acronyms which are invented as a form of rapid computer-mediated communication and are also used in our face-to-face communication. This work creates an analogical discussion on the topics that deal with the notion of our human experiences and feelings transcribed into the virtual world through digital platforms.

LOL, Installation / video, 2014

¹⁷ Allan Kaprow and Jeff Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (California: University of California Press, 2003) 1-9.



LOL, Installation / video, 2014

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis focuses on providing variable perspectives for viewers through which my body of work could be analyzed and interpreted based on the perception of each individual viewer. Each work creates analogies, or parallel comparisons, through which viewers can interact with the works. Throughout a series of glass sculptures, acrylic paintings and a video piece, I provide a challenge for my audience that compares analyzing an abstract image to reading a script. I am a conceptual artist, and the meaning of my concepts lies within the mind of the viewer and not merely within the object itself. My concepts are based on sociocultural constructions that rely heavily on a viewer's cultural background, conscious and unconscious mind, memories and analytic judgment. Glass and acrylic paint are two main mediums I used because of their aesthetic and symbolic qualities. I emphasize textural aspects in all my works to create visual intensity. I build spontaneous patterns into my pieces, as opposed to simple polished flat surfaces. I use glass as an ancient material versus acrylic paint that symbolizes modern, mass produced, industrialized civilization. Through these mediums, I create analogical context and comparisons between the past and the present, the dated and the contemporary, the East and the West.

Subject matter in my work covers topics from pop culture and virtual technologies, to historical and mythological symbols, to political themes. As a conceptual artist, I invest more in my

ideas than in pleasing visuals for their own sake, and part of the design process is often spontaneous; my aesthetics foreground their subjective nature. Sometimes something that was thought not to be visually pleasing could be attractive to the viewer if it is functional in providing conceptual meaning. My work gives the audience clues by using symbolism and references to known words or ideas; however, it does not produce a truth, or any sort of tautological statement on the subject matter, thereby leaving room for interpretation. My work is essentially incomplete without the participation of the viewer.

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