

Nargess Hashemi: Everyday Dichotomies

By Minnie McIntyre



Untitled 2, I, in our midst series, 2012, mixed media, 123x184cm - Courtesy of Khak Gallery.

Hashemi's works are intimate observations of the dualities that permeate her daily existence in Iran. The artist, born 1979, Tehran, grew up in a traditional household and went on to study Ancient Persian at the Neyshabour Institute and Fine Art at Tehran University. Through the lenses of her camera, she witnesses and documents a continuum of familial routines and habits that surround her with a conflicted sense of both belonging and detachment. She intertwines these intimate moments with traditional patterned textiles from her upbringing; embroidered tablecloths, furniture upholstery and wrapping paper appear painted, preserved behind glass or drawn on plastic. Hashemi's family members are integrated inextricably with their surroundings, defined only by outlines or

changes in pattern, becoming literal manifestations of the influence of environment and tradition. The fabrics that Hashemi uses to populate her intimate reflections are conventional, repetitive and consistent; they offer a sense of familiarity and security on the one hand, and stagnancy and loss on the other. Her identification with the customary habits of her family is expressed as much in the choice and use of patterns as in the use of layering throughout her work. Her early works explored sensations and impressions with an abstract quality, suggesting forms recollected hazily from her childhood in a dizzying array of patterns painted on canvas. This formative investigation into the elaboration and juxtaposition of different planes of motifs in lieu of perspective reflects the profound influence of her

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Hashemi developed her abstract fields of patterns and human forms into precise outlines of her photographs that render the reality of the gatherings, and the artist's conflicted relationship to them, all the more acute. Layers of traditional fabrics are shielded behind transparent plastic sheets, protected and preserved from the wear of the outside world and from the passing of time, just as the artist herself was as a girl. Hashemi felt safe within her family environment, sheltered from the outside by male relatives, though at the same time, considering modern-day Iran's turbulent developments, acknowledged the illusory existence her family upheld



Untitled 1, I, in our midst series, 2012, mixed media, 123x184cm - Courtesy of Khak Gallery.

by clinging to customs and silencing the chaos outside. The defensive plastic shields serve the two-fold role of protecting her memories and heritage and confining them to a part of her existence that itself is rooted in the past.

In her 'Wrap Me Up in You' series (2009), she used wrapping paper as the backdrop for ritualistic ceremonial gatherings. During the creation of the series, she was back and forth between protesting on the streets of Tehran and attending family weddings, an incongruous routine. The scenes she captures are riddled with overzealous smiles and kitsch patterns that suggest a desperate, contrived struggle to maintain tradition out of denial of the shifts taking place in society.

In recent works, Hashemi removes the familiar fabrics from the backdrop and replaces them with mirrors. The photograph scenes belong to the past while the mirror



Untitled 4, I, in our midst series, 2012, mixed media, 123x184cm - Courtesy of Khak Gallery.

reflects the present moment, intermingling time and relative realities. The viewer mingles with the scene depicted but remains unabashedly disconnected, a sensation mimicking her own experience of the scenes as she lived them. Hashemi explains that her works are depictions of 'a moment between yesterday and today, of what I have seen so far and what I see at this moment'. There is an element of confusion between time, between what is real and imagined, and what is feared and appreciated. The layering of textures, patterns and images create the sense of displacement and conflict the artist carries. Her practice has shifted away from strained ceremonial traditions like wedding ceremonies and family meals to focus on moments that transpire unselfconsciously. Hashemi captures fleeting domestic moments in outlines that she fills with her signature array of patterns. She is interested in the simple gestures and habits with which people live, globally commonplace and yet deeply specific to cultures, and within them,

families. The lazy naps, the cooking before the feast, the grooming for the social gatherings reveal that each contrived event is ingrained in daily habit and propels a consuming, unprogressive existence. Hashemi depicts the dichotomy between what she is and what she wants to be. We sense within her divisions that reflect the conflicts between modernity and tradition, private and public, safety and risk that reverberate across the globe.

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