

Naz Shahrokh: Remembering, Recycling and Roots

By: Sharon L. Parker

*I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.
Mahatma Gandhi*



Naz Shahrokh kneels on Egyptian sands examining the location of her site specific installation *Stairway* (2005). Photo credit: Graham Waite

Naz Shahrokh does not fit nicely into any one classification; she is truly international. Although born in Iran she does not classify herself as an Iranian – American artist. As a child and young adult she lived in Paris and Los Angeles. More recently she has lived and worked in New York City, Cairo and Abu Dhabi. Her advanced degrees in fine art and in art history are from the prestigious Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. Her artworks are housed in private and in public collections in the US, Egypt, and the UAE. Shahrokh's international exhibitions are too numerous to list here and which include artwork shown at The Bronx Museum (NYC), Macy Gallery (Columbia University Teacher's College, NYC), The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art (Boulder, Colorado, USA), University of California Berkeley (USA), The Palace of Art (Cairo Opera House, Egypt), the Alexandria Library (Egypt) RAK Hospital, (Ras Al Khaimah, UAE), Bastikiya Art Fair (Dubai, UAE), Ghaf Gallery (Abu Dhabi, UAE), and many other international settings.

Reviews of Naz Shahrokh's work can be found in a number of publications including Zahrat Al Khaleej, Time Out Abu Dhabi, The National Newspaper, Connecticut Post, New York Times, ART PAPERS and many more. The breadth and depth of her interests and life experiences are reflected in her artworks ranging from miniature paintings on leaves to large scale installations.

Shahrokh's installations, such as Haft-Sin Zazen (Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2010) and Stairway (Dashur, Egypt, 2005) appear deceptively simple until the multiple references embedded in the works are uncovered and explored.

Shahrokh finds inspiration in land art and earthworks, Minimal and Conceptual art, and in ephemeral Native American Navajo sand paintings made of natural materials such as pollen, corn meal and crushed flower petals, which are specifically created for the purpose of healing disease and disorder in ceremonies conducted by medicine men in order to bring the affected person back into balance and harmony with the natural world. Stairway, a site specific installation, can be interpreted as expressing Shahrokh's desire to be in



Stairway (2005) Dashur, Egypt, collected stems and fishing line, 17ft x approx.126"-", Photo credit: Graham Waite

harmony with her environment. Materials used in the creation of this installation include stems from the flowers which were either given to Shahrokh or collected by her. Like most of her work Stairway is engaged in a conversation; it is in communication with its environment including the first sphinx seen in the far distance. But whereas Stairway is related to healing and metaphysical transformations, her more recent installation, Haft-Sin Zazen is a conversation in three parts: a conversation with the German conceptual artist Wolfgang Laib's Pollen Series and the ancient Zoroastrian celebration of the Spring Equinox (Now Ruz or Persian New Year); a conversation with Zazen gardens in Zen Buddhist monasteries; and a conversation with the natural environment of Abu Dhabi, where she currently resides.



Haft-Sin Zazen (2010) detail, gold and silver thread and salt on linen, 200 cm x 401 cm, photo credit: Ayyub Hamilton

Carefully placed on a linen cloth the luminous mounds of salt lay in rows, one after the other. Although this work is directly related to the environment of Abu Dhabi, traces of Egypt can also be found within them. Naz Shahrokh has described her experience driving from Cairo to Alexandria as one of being mesmerized by the landscape, with earth mounds, she passed on her way. To paraphrase Gandhi a number of different cultures are embedded within this particular installation.

According to the artist:

While I was working on this work and conceptualizing and processing the materials, I knew that I wanted the relationship of the linen and organic materials on a floor, placed methodically through a gridded pattern. . . Through the process of searching, I came to the conclusion that the relationship of the salt felt right for several reasons: the material is linked to my direct environment, as in Abu Dhabi I am surrounded by ocean and desert, this salt derives firstly from this, and its connection to the [Gulf] . . .

This room sized installation is a variation on what is traditionally called Sofreh Haft-Sin, set up for the Persian New Year. Sofreh, a cloth which functions in several different ways: as the cloth upon which the Haft Seen, a group of seven symbolic foods, all of which start with the Persian letter “seen,” is placed. These represent new life, health and beauty, good overcoming evil, love and rebirth.

Shahrokh states:

. . . the visual perception of white on white (white linen / kandora material and salt placed on) provided for me a feeling of repose, where I found myself in a tranquil state . . . [and] my mother believes that salt carries negative energy away [as it is] a material that allows for [cleansing].

Cleansing of mind and spirit is the goal of the seated Zazen meditation practice. The orderliness of a Zazen garden, or Shahrokh’s Haft-Sin Zazen (2010) installation quiets the mind of the viewer thereby producing the “feeling of repose.”

In contrast to her large scale installations each of



Leaf Horizon: Study of the Emirates (2010), detail, watercolour and acrylic on Silver Maple leaves, various dimensions.

the artworks in Shahrokh's Leaf Series (2010) is miniature in size. The work shown here is painted on a silver maple leaf.

This is but one of many leaves in the series shown in her 2010 exhibition at Ghaf Gallery, Abu Dhabi. While it is tempting to associate the size of these to Persian miniatures, in fact, this body of work was inspired by the work of the late Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, whose life was interrupted by the 1961 revolution in her home country. It is worth noting that although Naz Shahrokh was not in Iran during the 1979 revolution it certainly caused disruptions within her family. Unlike Mendieta, who died in 1985, Shahrokh has had the opportunity to return to her birthplace in Iran, albeit for a short visit. Mendieta's work was a dialogue with her environment as is Shahrokh's work. And it was a particular artwork created by Mendieta that inspired Shahrokh's leaf series.

Shahrokh states: "While I was in Fiji, I found

a leaf that resembled one of her leaves, thus it was just a natural connection and process of painting . . . [an] important aspect is the notion of pushing materials further, thus, . . . this particular body of work developed.

The impulse to push "materials further," as well as the desire to engage in conversation with other artists and cultures, is a key characteristic of Shahrokh's work. Whether she is talking to two artists, her uncle and Joseph Beuys in *Homage to Dahi and Beuys*, or in conversation with artists in general as in *Artist Palette 3*.

Shahrokh's work is complex and thoughtful. In it she demonstrates her knowledge about other artists and art periods; she is not afraid to push materials to develop a particular concept.

In another installation at Dashur, Egypt, Shahrokh created a carpet made from flower petals collected and assembled and placed on the desert floor.



Leaf Horizon: Study of the Emirates (2010), Installation view, watercolour and acrylic on Silver Maple leaves, various dimensions, photo credit: Ayyub Hamilton

It is said that an ancient Persian King from the north of Iran once had a marvelous carpet made with images of flowers and plants. It was placed on bare ground where visitors came and saw it and marveled at its wonderful colors. The King was the only one allowed to walk upon it, and he did so frequently, strolling as if in an actual garden. Like that ancient carpet, Rhali, must have been a marvel for visitors to behold as it sat on the desert floor of Dashur, communing with a pyramid made for an Egyptian Pharaoh. Naz Shahrokh's house of art is, like Gandhi's, "not walled in on all sides." Rather, her house is open and invites in winds from multiple cultures which mix with her intellectual curiosity and knowledge of places and people, artists and artworks, history and spirituality. Then she mixes and stirs them up as she incorporates

them into her complex and creative artworks.

Conversations with the artist. December 2010.

Email interview with the artist. August 2010.

Sofreh is traditionally a cloth which functions in several different ways: as the cloth upon which the Haft Seen, a group of seven symbolic foods, is placed; all of which start with the Persian letter "seen." These represent new life, health and beauty, good conquering evil, love and rebirth. It also is the cloth upon which a feast placed and consumed in thanks for the successful result of a prayer petition, often related to health issues, made at a Shi'I shrine.

Email interview with the artist. August 2010.

Email interview with the artist. August 2010.

Sharon L. Parker received her M.A. in Medieval Art History and Ph.D. in Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies, with doctoral minors in 19th Century Art History and Cultural Anthropology, from the University of Arizona, U.S.A. She was awarded First Prize for Best Theses on Contemporary Iranian Society from the Iranian Studies Group, M.I.T. and Alumni Association Sherif University of Technology for her dissertation on contemporary Iranian women artists (2005). She lived many years in Iran and has strong appreciation for Iranian art and culture. She has contributed articles to several publications, as well as book chapters, and encyclopedia entries on Iranian art and / or art of the United Arab Emirates. Her research interests include Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art, Orientalism and Contemporary Post-Orientalism, and Contemporary Art Theory. She currently resides in Abu Dhabi where she teaches Art History and Humanities courses to Emirati female university students.



Rhali_Installed_Dashur_2005