

GHOSTS of MIGRATION

An Interview with Samira Abbassy

Deborah Frizzell

Samira Abbassy was born in 1965 in Iran. In 1967 her family moved to Britain, where she was educated and studied painting, first at Birmingham Polytechnic and then at Canterbury College of Art. Abbassy migrated for the second time in 1998 to New York City to help found the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio Program, the international artistic community where, as a lifetime member, her studio space is still based today.

Abbassy's work emerges from her Arab Iranian heritage and émigré upbringing in the UK. Her paintings, drawings, and sculpture draw from panreligious iconography to create layered figurative works subtly reflecting sociopolitical issues and constantly shifting cultural contexts. Her archetypal figures are often mirrored or doubled, suggesting introspection and fragmented identity. The rich patterns, flowing braids, and bodily X-ray motifs speak of psycho-emotional states and migrant histories. Oscillating among multiple cultures simultaneously, Abbassy often straddles differing sign systems, idioms, cultural codes, and notions of perception. Personal experience is transformed into broader languages of art, myth, and popular culture, articulated within individual artistic practices.

During her thirty-year career, Abbassy's work has been shown internationally: the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Her art has been acquired for private and public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the British Government Art Collection, the Burger Collection, the Donald Rubin



Figure 1 *Garden of Eternal Return; Valley of the Shadow* (2019). Oil on two gesso panels, 48 × 72 in. Collection of Naghmeh Shirkan. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist and Naghmeh Shirkan.

collection (Rubin Museum, New York), the Farjam Collection (Dubai, United Arab Emirates), the Devi Foundation (India), the Omid Foundation (Iran), and the Grey Art Gallery's New York University Collection.

Abbassy has been awarded grants and fellowships by Yaddo, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Saltonstall Foundation, and NYFA twice, and an artist-in-residence fellowship at the University of Virginia. In the last few years Abbassy's work has been the subject of six solo shows in New York, London, and Dubai.

Deborah Frizzell: Can you tell me how your background has informed your art?

Samira Abbassy: I am an Arabic Iranian, a small minority from Southwest Iran (Ahwaz), who are culturally and

geographically closer to Iraqis than to Iranians, a majority Persian culture. We speak Arabic, a Semitic language, like Hebrew, not Farsi, an Indo-European language. We are Shiite Muslims, as most Iranians (and Iraqis) are.

The transition from Iran to London was infinitely more difficult than that from London to New York. The first migration from Iran still has aftershocks. Looking "different" has always meant having to explain where I'm from, why and how long ago did I leave. New York City is a place that expects you to come from "elsewhere," but in a small town in Kent, England, we were the only nonwhites, apart from the Chinese restaurant owners. Assimilation was near impossible, as my parents expected me to behave as though I was an Arab Iranian with all the restrictions on female behavior and sexuality.

Dating was out of question. Going out with friends was restricted. There was one culture at home and another at school.

My education was UK based. After graduating from college, I set out to explore the cultural histories of my own heredity: Iran, the Middle East, and India. At first, I was drawn to Persian and Indian miniatures, partly because I recognized myself in the figures they depicted; then I began to discover parallel mythologies.

I was encouraged to research and study—"We came here so that you could have an education"—was so often said that it became instilled. But art was misunderstood and not encouraged, so I became obsessed with drawing at the age of twelve. It was a world, along with writing poetry, in which I could escape. As an immigrant in predominantly white Britain, I was forced to ask myself who I am and where I am from. I felt burdened to interpret the culture of my parents without wholly understanding it. I questioned many aspects of my dueling cultures as I tried to integrate, belong, and bridge gaps. So, I became a "fictional historian," reinterpreting stories about a homeland that I barely knew.

Due to my circumstances, I needed a mirror to see myself; and not finding that mirror, I created my own through art. The canvas became for me a mirror of inclusion, a place to contextualize myself and establish my identity. Yet, in attempting to explain my relationship to my Arab Iranian culture, I found I knew little of what this culture really was. This made me uneasy on both sides of the cultural divide. My work became a kind of "fictional history" stemming from a nonunderstanding of something I was supposed to understand just by osmosis.

DF: Using mirror images as more than a compositional device resonates with all

sorts of dualities. Let's take a look at your diptych painting *Garden of Eternal Return; The Valley of the Shadow*.

SA: One of the functions of the mirror is as a kind of psycho-emotional X-ray, looking into the (Jungian) Self. The best pictorial device for this is the diptych. This device creates a dualistic tension, revealing opposing realities from a myriad of possibilities: real/reflection, inside/outside, then/now, truth/self-dilution. The figures start as mirror images, facing each other, and as the painting progresses, they diverge, even though their differences are defined through the same motifs and patterns.

I think that all along I intended to broaden the "Western canon" to find a place within it for myself and my heritage. This led me to examine the historiographies of Western art history and question the geopolitical origins of the Renaissance, for example. How was the Renaissance linked to its parallel, the Islamic Enlightenment? And how can these two strands be reintegrated in our contemporary global reality? We all are products of cross-cultural pollination. Maybe in my life it's more obvious and recent, but the very idea of culture is that it's a growing, living thing that feeds on cross-pollination. A stylized Chinese cloud floating into compositions relates to the influence of Chinese painting on Persian art, conveying the idea of the porous nature of cultural influence and migration, both historically and in contemporary times.

After a European art education, I decided to focus on art outside the Western canon, starting with Indian and Persian miniatures. I was then led to Hindu iconography and viewed it in parallel to that of Christian and Muslim to find common motifs. I also took Jung's theory of "the collective unconscious" as a premise to

uncover common and divergent ideas instilled in the human psyche.

In the diptych *Garden of Eternal Return; The Valley of the Shadow*, the seemingly gruesome motif of the skulls and body parts on the right is taken from Tibetan Buddhist iconography and contrasts with the idea of the Self as a psycho-emotional being within the narrative. The motif plays with the biological reality of the figure, internalizing and externalizing it simultaneously to show its ephemeral nature. Patterns migrate from one woman's clothing on the right to the background on the left panel and are slightly transformed again on her dress—linked as if by osmosis. Perhaps they represent one person, in her own country and as a migrant in another place, showing what happens as we move across borders, adapting and morphing into new cultures. Sometimes these paintings are about not knowing where you are in the world, a comment on our state of being scattered, either by diaspora or as points on a digital network.

The two main figures are of the same identity but shown in two different states. Both contain the same flower pattern, one with a darkened dress and the other with reds. The same flowers spread over the panels, both as flowers and as a pattern, emphasizing the painting's flat picture plane, despite its suggestion of horizon lines. In the figures, I'm referencing the flatness of nineteenth-century Qajar portrait painting in Iran, influenced by Western portraiture but retaining the flatness of traditional Persian painting and its space/time registers. The internal/external appearance of flowers manifests the dilemma of the dualism of the internal/external realms.¹ The visceral body parts hanging over the dark figure are also trodden underfoot, indicating the overcoming of suffering. The

dark figure is enmeshed in and surrounded by the visceral and psychological difficulties shown as the carnal vine of body parts (taken from Tibetan iconography). The red figure incorporates these limb fragments by displaying them as protective talismans: notches on her belt. Thus she incorporates the power of the fire, which illuminates the halo of purification around the dark figure's head. Below, the embattled third figure emerges, escaping from the mouth of the dragon (taken from a Medieval European alchemical image) that lies beneath the red figure who has tamed the creature, but it continually attempts to swallow her whole.

In these paintings, the main figures are often represented as many selves, or many aspects of one Self united. This idea of repetition came through fourteenth-century hagiographies, where the figure of the saint appears many times, charting his journey in space and time within registers, denoting the landscape or mapping pilgrimage routes. I have used this idea of multiples of the Self to express an array of psychodynamic and existential realities experienced by the figure. Another foundational pictorial device is the use of shallow or flattened space. Rather than employing geometric perspectival space, the flattened figure is like an icon situated in the viewer's space (with feet planted on or disappearing under the bottom of the canvas) rather than inside a perspectival painting. This iconic space implies the suspension of time, a now and always in the diptych.

There's a notion in Dante's *Inferno* that figures are "contorted according to their sin." This implies that figures embody their psychological states; physical states mirror psychological dilemmas. This is the key to my approach to figures. My discovery of pre-Renaissance art fostered a love of the religious art of that period, which led me to the sacred art of all the major religions.



Figure 2 *Eternal War Series #6 On Message* (2016). Oil on eleven gesso panels, 12 × 12 in. each. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist.

Religious imagery gave me visual clues for a way into spiritual and existential states.

The motifs taken from sacred iconography of many denominations have helped me build a visual language. The language of sacred art, such as icons, is better at conveying the metaphorical and metaphysical aspects of being human because figures are more readily identifiable as archetypes rather than individuals. The figures in my work are not me, but rather an archetypal self, which combines autobiographical, cultural, psychological, and biochemical aspects and in which events and narratives become incorporated into the body or fragment it. By fusing disparate languages, societal-cultural conventions and myths, I am seeking an iconography of hybridism, in which the underlying common threads can be found.

DF: Tell me about the genesis and process of *The Eternal War Series, On Message* (2015).

SA: *The Eternal War Series* comprises six sets of multipaneled, monochromatic paintings, made to be displayed closely together to reveal a fragmented overview of a deconstructed story. In theory, the panels can be rearranged in any order to allow multiple interpretations. This format suggests pages torn out of a book: the *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*, from the

fifteenth century) is an illustrated epic poem written in Farsi, blending historical and mythological narratives about the invasions of the Persian Empire. I examine the mythologies around “holy wars,” including the Crusades, and I draw specifically on ideas around the cult of martyrdom in Shia Islam.

History itself can be retold or misrepresented by its presentations in our museums. Manuscript pages are often presented alone and out of context, fragmenting and skewing their historical contexts and narratives. My *Eternal War Series* is as much about “history being retold by the victor” as mythologies around war and martyrdom. The battlefield is viewed through a sepia lens, showing the carnage, detritus, and horror of war in muted monochrome. My choice of materials—brown oil paint on gesso panels—deliberately places this work in the “Western canon,” bringing to mind Goya’s *Disasters of War*, as well as photography of the First and Second World Wars. It exudes both timelessness and repetition: war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, occupation, and exile. Older empires are obliterated and overlaid by new empires with their own cultures, histories, and mythologies. “Progress” is marked by the weapons used, from swords through tanks, guns, and helicopters, to drones.

In the last (sixth) iteration of *The Eternal War Series, On Message* (2015),



I applied the visual language of the *Shahnameh* to current invasions of the American empire in the Middle East. I was influenced by media images and, in particular, the iconic photographs taken by US soldiers of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

Both immediate and medieval, these images open the door to the atrocities of our contemporary wars. *On Message* is a collection of fragmented images of key events such as Saddam's hanging, Osama bin Laden watching himself on a TV, the



Figure 3 *Osama bin Laden Watching Himself on TV*. Panel 8 of *Eternal War Series #6 On Message* (2016). Oil on eleven gesso panels, 12 × 12 in. each. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 *Love and Ammunition II* (2016). Oil on gesso panel, 48 × 36 in. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist.

US president appearing at the podium in the guise of the “many headed angel” (from an omnipotent angel depicted in the manuscript *Mohammad’s Night Journey*), military aircraft delivering soldiers to the battlefields that have already been strewn with destroyed buildings, twisted metal, body parts, and toppled monuments of dictators. An imam addresses his congregation, while Al-Qaeda’s “Jihadi John” carries out a decapitation on camera. Global media empires set up banks of TV cameras on opposing sides, mounted on machine gun tripods, reporting their alternative realities.

DF: A sense of timelessness and eternal repetition within the representation of the local or personal are themes that you mine in most of your work. In your painting, *Love and Ammunition II*, there is a mood of urgency evoking violence, suggesting intimacy or an action of self-harm.

SA: The figure’s belt with its many tools was inspired by a police belt that I saw up close while on jury duty in court. It morphed into the Hindu goddess Kali’s belt of severed limbs. Many uses of the personal tools on the belt describe aspects of the character and her self-protective armor. With one of her three arms, she turns the gun on herself as in the often-reported final act of the archetypal mass shooters on our news feed. The gun here is also a symbol of self-protection and self-possession. The oval white cloud behind her describes the noise and vibration of the gun as it shoots a hole through the picture plane. The floating head is one of the lost aspects of her former self drifting away.

The family portrait trope is used to show many aspects of the Self, past and present, as well as the ability to observe oneself. The protective animal/human

creature from mythology sits within reach. The small upside-down figure reaching around the second figure’s face is a portrait of one of my sculptures titled *Unwanted Want*, a lost and helpless aspect of her innocent childhood self.

Both timelessness and the timely, the urgency of the present moment, are exactly the qualities that I try to capture. They suspend time, and that has been my aim, especially in reference to the iconic as an object that functions as a “heart opener.” An iconic work has a



Figure 5 *Self-Censorship* (2020). From the drawing series *Chemical Hysterical* (2006–). Charcoal on paper, 44 × 30 in. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist.

dual function: to show and yet to relieve suffering for the viewer. It's not just about inspiring faith but about helping instill compassion for others as well as oneself. My figures rest peacefully in their suffering in the belief that their difficult human dilemmas are not only personal but are shared by humanity. And ironically, the more personal the focus, the broader and deeper the impact.

DF: Tell me a bit about your drawing process and how it relates to your paintings. For example, the large-scale drawing *Self-Censorship*, from your series *Chemical Hysterical*.

SA: The drawings came about through playing around with an overhead projector—the old-fashioned kind, which uses transparency sheets. I would photocopy sketchbook drawings, as well as borrowed images and textile designs from my collection of art books, onto transparent paper. The overhead projector lends itself to the mirror image, as by flipping the transparency, you get its perfect opposite, as well as allowing easy enlargement of small fragments. This process started with drawings, and then I used it to make larger paintings. The drawings informed the paintings and vice versa. I also incorporated images of my sculpture through this method. Images of the sculptures make appearances as mythological creatures interacting with the figures in the paintings/drawings.

Self-Censorship reflects ideas about current social unrest and the political and cultural conventions aimed to silence the stories of women and minorities. The braid binds and gags the figure's full self-expression. Her dualistic profile suggests current partisan factionalism. The descending figures below are parts of her

splintered selves, lying in fragments under a cloud of gas beneath her skirt.

Both of these large drawings resonate with memories of my grandmother and mother. My mother lacked education, lacked what I call human rights. She was brought up to be a servant to my father. That was her role. I escaped that through education and "Westernization." On my last trip to Iran, at the age of twelve, I was invited to watch my maternal grandmother unwrap her hijab and carefully loosen long, ornate braids colored with henna. It was like seeing a wise woman's most intimate parts, being delivered wordlessly—"a sturdy knowledge" beyond book learning. The braid symbolizes time and my umbilical connection with my grandmother and my ancestors; ingesting it entails accepting your genealogical code to become a grounded, complete person, which in turn enables you to fly, to take metaphoric flight. But often women tend to turn violence inward, as in this drawing and the painting *Love and Ammunition II*, while men make war, as in the *Eternal War Series*.

DF: You work in many different materials: oil on gessoed board, pigments and collage on paper, charcoal on paper, and sculpture with found objects and ceramic. Can you talk about your materials and process?

SA: I have always made sculpture. Starting in my first year at art school, shrunken head, my first piece was made of a carved avocado stone and some hair. I now see it as a response to my first sighting of an Ecuadorian shrunken head at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. I didn't really consider my three-dimensional works as "sculpture" at this time, and it was many years before I took them seriously enough

to call them that. It feels like the sculptures come from a deeper place than the paintings, as though they were excavated from actual historical places. I often say that I make sculpture because I don't know how to, but I do know how to make paintings, where I can lie and cover up what I don't want to be seen. Objects are more unpromising. Over the years I have come up with ways of presenting the sculptures in pairs or groups to create narratives.

The wordless, materials-led process is a practice in intuition, allowing a loss of self so that I remove myself and allow a greater instinctive force to lead me through the process. Unless my work surprises me, it has no reason to exist. I make work in order to find "a new thing," a manifestation of thought or vision, fused with material. If I successfully lose myself, it leads to that new thing, something I had not predicted and have difficulty articulating. Over time, its meaning starts to emerge like a dream that seems obvious and familiar, yet still defies description.

DF: Since the pandemic you've been prolific despite the narrow parameters required for staying safe. You've been making small mixed-media works on paper and working on large and small oil paintings, for example, *At Sea #1* and *A Night Sea Journey*.

SA: My ocean paintings began as an attempt to imagine the plight of the Syrian refugees at sea. Later, they became less specific to events on our news feed and more timeless and, tragically, universal. The water-crossing motif has been the subject of myths, legends, epic poems, and religious foundational narratives. In our current ecological and socioeconomic crises, it serves as a metaphor of our precarious position within both the immense

power of nature and the ideologies of the nation-state.

When you're painting, you give full credence to the voices you're trained to ignore. It's like wakeful dreaming. But unlike dreams, you're producing something tangible, proof that you've been there.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- Samira Abbassy's images appear on Instagram at www.instagram.com/samiraabbassy/.
1. According to the Brooklyn Museum (1998), the Qajar Era's "beginning roughly coincided with the French Revolution and the drafting of the American Constitution, and its end, after a period of foreign occupation and political turmoil, with World War I. The Qajar dynasty brought a long period of political instability to a conclusion. During this Qajar regime Iran escaped from Europe's colonial domination but was influenced by its diplomacy, intimidated by its armies, and affected by its commercial, cultural, and ideological lure. It began as a tribal society ruled by warlords and evolved into a traditional Persian monarchy with an elaborate court. Like the neighboring Ottoman Empire, Qajar Iran tried to accommodate its political and economic institutions to Western modes."

Reference

- Brooklyn Museum. 1998. "The Qajar Era (1785–1925)." www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/1206.



Figure 6 *Turbulence #1: Alone Together* (2020). Oil on gesso panel, 18 × 24 in. Photograph by Jeanette May. Courtesy of the artist.

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