

BAHAR BEHBAHANI

All water has a perfect memory.



generated@wavehill

Conifer Slope and Herbert and Hyonja Abrons Woodland

SEPTEMBER 15–DECEMBER 1, 2019

About the Project

Bahar Behbahani's installation revives *generated@wavehill*, a program that invites artists to create temporal artwork engaging with Wave Hill's site and programs. Initiated in 1999, past *generated@wavehill* projects have included both visual and performing arts commissions throughout the grounds. Behbahani was invited to engage with the Woodland and Wave Hill's youth programs. Her response to this charge began with her interest in the underground water systems within the garden's ecosystem and parallels the importance of water engineering in Persian gardens. This multi-faceted initiative was informed by intensive walks taken with Wave Hill staff and workshops that she led with interns and students to discuss local and global water concerns. Behbahani collaborated with Forest Project and Woodland Ecology Research Mentorship (WERM) interns who were active during the summer in the Woodland. She worked with Family Art Project's Art, Community and Environmental Stewards (ACES), CUNY Corps and Bloomberg interns, who will continue to activate and maintain the installation throughout the fall. They have also produced a zine full of stories informed by the research they contributed.

During a time when the political borders have become less permeable, *All water has a perfect memory* connects Wave Hill to eight of the world's contested rivers—the Euphrates, Ganges, Hudson, Karun, Mississippi, Nile, Rio Grande and Wouri. It reminds us that the flow of water, the flow of people, and the migration of seeds and plants take their own course. A reference to the Mississippi River, *All water has a perfect memory* comes from a phrase in Toni Morrison's essay *The Site of Memory*: "All water has a perfect memory and it is forever trying to get back to where it was."

Behbahani exploring drainage system with Art, Community and Environmental Stewards



The focal point of the installation is an octagonal pool mounted on plastic barrels, suggesting a floating raft to be used in the event of an emergency move to the river. Located on Wave Hill's Conifer Slope adjacent the Kerlin Learning Center, it leads to the northern entry point to the Woodland and sits above an underground drainage system that carries storm water from 252nd Street into the Woodland. The pool's interior is surfaced with tiles sourced from construction projects. The raft's eight side panels are carved with waves of water, plants, birds and underwater species that are reminiscent of Behbahani's paintings (as seen in *Eram*, 2019 in the exhibition *Figuring the Floral* on view in Glyndor Gallery). While the pool's structure projects symmetry and balance in a multicultural and spiritual habitat, the barrels on which the raft is mounted introduce an element of uncertainty.

Follow the Woodland path to encounter the second component of the installation within the rustic gazebo. Experience the sounds of each river by using your camera to activate the QR code. This meditative sound piece weaves active river sounds with rhythms and lullabies, and was developed in collaboration with composer Maciek Schejbal. A portable, eight-panel partition will be introduced at the Family Art Project on September 21 and 22. It will be used for storytelling, either in the intimate space of an octagon or opened wide as a backdrop.

Beginning with the performance during the opening, the project will continue to be activated throughout the fall through organized programs and the participation of Family Art Project participants and Wave Hill visitors.

About the Artist

Through her research-based practice Bahar Behbahani approaches landscape as a metaphor for politics and poetics. She works in a range of media—such as painting, video, installation and performative talks—to layer Western archival matters, cartography, horticultural history and our contemporary position into a new, hybrid narrative. Her solo exhibitions include *Let the Garden Eram Flourish*, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; *Garden Coup*, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, NY; and *The Short Films of Bahar Behbahani*, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, MI. She was an Open Sessions artist at The Drawing Center and will be part *What's Love Got to Do with It?* on view August 16–September 15, 2019. Her work has been presented in numerous group exhibitions, including EMPAC, Troy, NY; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE; 7th Moscow International Biennale of Contemporary Art; 11th Shanghai Biennale. Behbahani is a recipient of a 2019

Creative Capital award for *Ispahan Flowers Only Once* and participated in The Brown Foundation Fellows Program at the Dora Maar House in Ménerbes, France; MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, NH; Time Equities' Art-in-Buildings Residency in New York, NY, among others. She earned her BFA in Painting from Alzahara University and her MFA in Painting from Azad University of Art, both in Tehran, Iran. www.baharbehbahani.com



Behbahani working with Wave Hill WERM interns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All water has a perfect memory came to harbor with the unlimited amount of trust from the Wave Hill community and the generous vision of curators Jennifer McGregor and Eileen Jeng Lynch.

My heartfelt gratitude to the staff of many other departments at Wave Hill: Barry Kogan, Senior Manager of Youth Programs, and students of the Forest Project and Woodland Ecology Research Mentorship nourished the project with their knowledge of water management and the native plants in the woodlands.

Senior Horticultural Interpreter Charles Day and Assistant Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway armed me with the botanical language and the insights into the issues around native and non-native plants in our present time.

Frank Perrone, Director of Facilities and Capital Projects, and his team offered logistical guidance and support.

I am grateful for the generosity, wisdom, and passion that Mallory Muya, Arts Education Coordinator, and her team at Wave Hill, which includes the Art, Community and Environmental Stewards (ACES), CUNY Corps and Bloomberg interns showed through this project. For the last three months, they were deeply engaged in research and conversations around the subjects of river, memory, immigration, among many other fostering discussions.

My special thanks for the level of skill and artisanship that Greg Henderson, Cesar Ramirez, and Andrzej Walczak put into this project.

I feel humbled to my fellow artists Roberto Visani, Todd Chandler, and Terry Berkowitz who empowered me from the moment of conceiving *All water has a perfect memory*, with their continuous encouragement and expertise.

— Bahar Behbahani, NY, 2019



Through the process of building a raft, I realized how difficult it would be to construct one that was safe; one with exactly the right buoyancy to transport bodies, food, culture, memories, and belongings. I asked myself, how can I calculate the weight of dignity so that my raft will arrive safely on the shore?

— Bahar Behbahani

Related Public Programs

Free with admission to the grounds.

SUN, SEPT 15, 2–4:30PM
FALL EXHIBITIONS
OPENING

A musical piece by Afro-Polka Ensemble will be performed by weaving and improvising with voice, percussion and bass guitar. Beginning at different points in the Woodland, they will respond to each other's calls, eventually congregating around the octagonal pool to perform the final arrangement, a collective tribute to the rivers. The performers are: Maciek Schejbal from Poland – musical direction and percussion; Kaïssa Doumbè from Cameroon – voice; Samuel Torres from Colombia – percussion; and Jerome Harris from the US – bass guitar.

SAT & SUN, SEPT 21& 22,
10AM–1PM
FAMILY ART PROJECT:
TO BE A RIVER

Have you ever tried to think like a river? Perhaps you identify as the romantic Danube, the wild Mississippi or the scenic Hudson? Join the stream for an experiential workshop with exhibiting *generated@wavehill* artist Bahar Behbahani as we create a series of water monoprints, reflect on memories and write a flow of poetries to celebrate the rivers we are.

SAT, NOV 2, 3PM
WOODLAND WALK
Sharpen your senses and trace the water-flow in the woodland with *generated@wavehill* artist Behar Behbahani.

Like a River Flows

Bahar Behbahani was born in Iran and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York: a very concise label. But what is packed within that barebones tagline is a complex life, one that has been uprooted and transplanted into an entirely different environment, with its consequent advantages and disadvantages, its disruptions and resettlements, its triumphs and sorrows, its shocks to the system. It is not surprising, then, that Behbahani's projects resound with themes of memory, loss and adaptation, with reality and dreams. And it seems equally inevitable that her central, multi-tiered motif for the past several years has been the Persian garden, one that she has re-tooled to suit her own syncretic imagination. In Behbahani's envisioning, it is a brilliantly protean habitat, encompassing the aesthetic, the poetic, the philosophical and psychological, the political, social and the ecological, furling together past, present and future.

She has long been interested in Persian gardens as an emblematic structure that is integral to Iran's storied history. The first garden may have existed as early as 4000 B.C., while the remains of Cyrus the Great's gardens at Pasargadae from c. 500 B.C. are still extant. The creation of this earthly paradise—the word “paradise” derives from Old Persian and refers to a walled enclosure, a corruption of the word used by Xenophon to describe Cyrus's gardens and later associated with the Garden of Eden—provided a walled oasis of symmetrically arranged rectangular pools, interconnected waterways above and below ground, exquisite pavilions and luxuriant plantings in a land otherwise bereft of water.

Much of her formal knowledge of these gardens, Behbahani has said, has come from European and American writers. Donald Wilber (1907–1997), an American who was an authority on Persian architecture and who wrote so eloquently about gardens, has deeply affected her. (She felt a profound sense of betrayal when Wilber was eventually revealed to be the intelligence officer who masterminded the CIA coup, supported by the British and American governments, that deposed Iran's prime minister in 1953.)

Behbahani is primarily a painter who also makes videos and installations. Commissioned by Wave Hill to create an outdoor work for its grounds, she titled it *All water has a perfect memory*. The quote is a partial sentence from an essay by Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” which was a primary source of inspiration for this project.

Based on the politics and poetics of water and gardens, the installation Behbahani conceived might be

All water has a perfect memory. (Octagon), 2019
Hand-carved pinewood panels, Lapis Lazuli pigment, mosaic, tile, plastic barrel, lashing strap, sandbag, 2019,
12 x 12 x 3 feet

Photos: Stefan Hagen



considered a deconstruction of a Persian garden. It has three components. First, there is the water element, represented by a lustrous, octagonal pool, the exterior made of pinewood, located on a conifer-covered slope that leads to the section of Wave Hill known as the Woodlands. Behbahani chose the octagon as a stable geometric form, one that the ancient Persians believed kept water pure. Each side of the pool represents a river that is a locus of conflict: the Hudson, the Rio Grande, the Karun, the Euphrates, the Ganges, Mississippi, Nile and the Wouri. The pool's exterior blooms with lightly carved—Behbahani calls them “scratched”—representations of Wave Hill's native and non-native plants. The diversity of the botanicals—it includes “immigrant species” and “ballast flora”—is one way that Behbahani shows us the nuances between native and non-native, and how such definitions are often slippery.

In a shift that was critical to the artist, Behbahani wanted to make the creation of this artwork much more collaborative than her usual practice. With that in mind, she invited Wave Hill's interns and students from high schools and universities in the area to work with her on it. She convened workshops where she asked them to contribute ideas, research, art and writing. One of the subjects they discussed during these workshops was

native versus non-native plants—with its far-ranging implications—and the transition of non-native to native. All were asked to add their own stories to the project.

The interior of the pool is inlaid with tiles that are mostly retrieved from other construction projects in New York City. Behbahani, in collaboration with Cesar Ramirez, a master tiler, improvised the design, which suggests a pool within a pool—or the plan of a Persian garden. In addition to aesthetics, the means of production is of great significance to the artist in projects like this one, underscoring the time-consuming and intensive labor required to construct works in tile. That this labor has not always been voluntary reflects a history of privilege and exploitation.

The pool connects us to the Hudson River seen coursing below to its multiple destinations. Behbahani, however, also asks us to consider the invisible but essential underground structures that convey water to the ecosystem of Wave Hill's gardens located beneath the structure.

Rather than sink the pool into the ground, Behbahani raised it on blue and white barrels, transforming it into a pool *cum* raft. These barrels are associated with both succor and danger, often used to float the makeshift vessels that carry refugees away from zones of turmoil, the ways of escape, ironically and tragically, no less perilous than the hazards being escaped. Behbahani said that the project made her think about the “complexity” of building a “worthy raft,” one that would be able to “move people, food, belongings as well as culture and memories to safety,” especially in desperate situations when there is no time.

The second component of Behbahani's installation is the incorporation of an existing Woodland gazebo as a place of meditation, and a place for reflection about the eight, contested rivers. It offers to anyone with a smart phone the ability to download the sound of the selected river by means of a QR code.

In workshops with the students, she prompted her collaborators to think about the Hudson River and its cycles of pollution and reclamation as part of a global network connected to other rivers that have had an impact on their lives. She then asked them, as immigrants, to share their memories and those of their families for inclusion in the project.

The final component consists of portable panels that can be configured to form intimate, fluid shelters that

nonetheless offer a private space for social gatherings. Suggesting screens and other types of partitions, as well as a nod to the collapsible tents of nomads, they reiterate, when assembled, the octagonal shape of the pool. Made of fabric covered with images drawn by Wave Hill's art workshop participants, they are a further instance of Behbahani's emphasis on community and inclusion.

All water has a perfect memory. is Behbahani's associative, allusion-rich, multi-faceted saga about rivers and water, and how rivers circulate throughout the globe, connecting us, separating us, sustaining us, destroying us. It is also a saga about people whose lives depend upon rivers, upon water, which is all of us, as Behbahani reminds us.

—Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic, independent curator and journalist.



All water has a perfect memory. (Gazebo), 2019
Sound, PVC panels
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Photos: Stefan Hagen



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#wavehill

Wave Hill is a public garden and cultural center in the Bronx overlooking the Hudson River and Palisades. Its mission is to celebrate the artistry and legacy of its gardens and landscapes, to preserve its magnificent views and to explore human connections to the natural world through programs in horticulture, education and the arts.

Senior Director: Jennifer McGregor
Curator of Visual Arts: Eileen Jeng Lynch
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