

Persian Gardens

Mixed media on canvas

The Persian garden connotes romance. Vaguely to most, to some picturesquely imagined, redolent with roses of Shiraz, singing nightingales and tapering cypresses. And all this it actually has—cypresses, nightingales, roses, romance—yet it is more significant than that, too: for it, represents one of the world's great garden styles. The epitome and perhaps the origin of the formal garden.

—Donald Wilber, *The Persian Garden*, 1940

For more than a decade, Iranian-born artist Bahar Behbahani has explored the complexities of memory and loss through cultural symbols closely tied to her origins. Her work in a range of media reveals a sense of place both volatile and ambivalent; the artist expresses her state of mind in a visual language that blurs the line between personal and shared history.

Persian Gardens, a new series of paintings, is a revealing meditation on colonialism. The compositions—ornamented with collective memories—re-enact the essence of Eastern philosophy from an Orientalist perspective. The cultural architecture of Persian gardens is shown through the eyes of Western travelers at the turn of the 19th century.

Over the past year, Behbahani has begun extracting descriptions of the archetypal gardens that were written, drawn, and sometimes even converted into engravings by Henry Corbin, Arthur Pope, Eugène Flandin, and Pascal Coste, among other European and American philosophers, architectural historians, and travel writers of the time. On one level, their flowery observations are expressed in the abstract romanticism of the artist's mixed media paintings. On another level, the series is marked by the betrayal of Donald Wilber, a highly respected Middle Eastern architectural scholar whose research the artist had studied as a college student. Surfacing years later, Wilber's secret history as the American spy behind the 1953 military coup in Iran was felt as an unforgivable violation of intimacy.

Behbahani's creative process reflects her discovery of beauty in these hidden truths and biased perceptions. First, she translates key passages from Western writing on the subject of Persian gardens into flowing lines with which she completely covers each blank canvas. Then, the artist conceals her intricate drawings with paint before adding the outline of a classical Persian garden that spans the full length of every composition. The linear overlays depict real architectural plans—enclosing walls, rectangular pools, and an internal network of canals, garden pavilions, and lush plantings—while the intuitive drawings and textured hues confined beneath the rational grids evoke the sensual terrain of the garden interiors.

In *Persian Gardens*, Bahar Behbahani goes a step further. Belying her formalist approach, she seems to be illuminating the conflicted and tenuous nature of self realization, painting scenarios where the pursuit of beauty—couched in the aesthetics of seductive exoticism—might compel us to mask our real identity to satisfy what we believe to be our deepest desires.

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