



BAHAR BEHBAHANI
LET THE GARDEN ERAM FLOURISH

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

LET THE GARDEN ERAM FLOURISH: An Introduction

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi

This exhibition presents a suite of new paintings, an installation, and a video from *Persian Gardens*, an ongoing series begun four years ago by Iranian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Bahar Behbahani. The title is taken from an early nineteenth-century poem by Ali Khan, poet laureate of the court of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, who wrote under the pseudonym Saba, in celebration of Eram Garden, a UNESCO World heritage site and one of the oldest gardens in Iran. The rich history of Eram parallels the histories of old Persia and modern Iran. Its many pavilions, built over several dynasties by influential families who successively had the garden under their control, constitute a record of power and prestige over the ages.

An engineering tour de force, Persian or Iranian gardens have gripped human imagination since their emergence in the sixth century BCE. These walled gardens comprise multilateral structures, connecting aqueducts, networks of water qanats, and surrounding trees and vegetation that remain lush all year in the middle of an arid region. As objects of beauty, they have attracted people from diverse walks of life throughout the ages, from the Persian rulers who created them to evoke their own transcendence and political might to the diplomats, common folk, scholars, and soldiers who have sought out their orientalist enchantment. Haunted by the spirits of fierce power play, Persian gardens are marked by tragedy, love, betrayal, death, and redemption, and mirror Iran's fraught histories, past and present.

Behbahani's layered vocabulary draws upon schematic architectural plans, ritual geometry, and the ornate aesthetics of the gardens, as well as the poetry they evoke, to convey rich and complex narratives. Full of

gestures, her work can be placed within the tradition of mark making and abstraction. In the paintings, we encounter both bold and tentative markings, interspersed with broad strokes and swooshes of bright and cool colors, in some cases concealing thick, black lines that populate the picture surface. Behbahani carefully chooses colors and forms to convey specific notions or intentions. For example, she uses blue in the paintings to reflect upon its role as the dominant color from different eras in Iranian history and art, and to represent the ubiquitous tile formations in Persian architecture in an abstract incarnation. The blue also symbolizes the abundance of water in the fountains and pools of Persian gardens, a testament to clever engineering, but which stands in contrast to the scarcity of water in Iran. The red color visible in many of the paintings represents blooming roses, a prominent fixture in the gardens and in Persian poetry. Behbahani employs renderings of the gardens' layouts and plans to carry the weight of her underlying ideas. She transforms these elements, and others inspired by the building construction going on around her studio in Lower Manhattan, close to the World Trade Center, into a lyrical abstract language.

Behbahani approaches Persian gardens as a metaphor for politics and poetics, and also seeks to represent the intersection of the public and private. Abstraction is her way of seeing, of being, and of grappling with existential questions without necessarily seeking to resolve them. It allows her also to reflect on self-doubt and personal struggles, and to make sense of the ambiguous space she occupies as an expatriate, without feeling that she has left herself vulnerable.



Artist Bahar Behbahani in her studio. Photo by Laura Fuchs.

Behbahani obtained her BFA (1995) and MA (1998) from Al-zahra University and Azad University respectively, both in Tehran. She permanently relocated to the United States in 2007. In this brochure, an essay by art historian Shiva Balaghi and an interview with Behbahani

provide a richer understanding of the artist's practice and the *Persian Gardens* series.

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi is curator of African art at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.

SURROUNDED BY QUIET NOTHINGNESS: On Bahar Behbahani's Paintings

Shiva Balaghi

Each morning, Bahar Behbahani walks across the Brooklyn Bridge to her studio in Lower Manhattan. The iconic structure of the bridge and its neighboring cityscapes have become a visual touchstone for the artist. On her mobile phone, Bahar snaps photos that become visual mementos of sites she passes along the way—the shifting colors of the river, an intricate gothic revival church steeple splashed against a modern glass high-rise, a corner of sky through the linear cables of the bridge. All of it becomes absorbed into Bahar's visual language.

"I feel like I am living in history," Bahar tells me. "As I walk through these New York neighborhoods, I see signs of waves of immigration and the effects of gentrification. The horizon shifts as I walk through sections of Brooklyn that have completely abandoned streets [on my way] to the crowded area around Wall Street. There is this juxtaposition of the past and the present. All of it creates a sense of atmosphere that has an influence on my painting. Space is a big influence on an object, and an object influences the space it inhabits." This notion of time and place is very much embedded in Bahar's artistic approach and is reflected throughout her paintings on view at Hood Downtown.

The paintings in her *Persian Gardens* series are, at their core, about a sense of place. Bahar moved from Iran to the United States eight years ago; after traveling around for some time, she settled in New York City in 2007. Her visual sensibility is marked by the experience of immigration, which inevitably entails a process of perpetual cultural translation. Formally, Bahar has created a new kind of landscape painting, a hybrid style that has to do with Bahar's "way of seeing" and conveying that vision through her art. As the critic John Berger

wrote, "When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it."¹ Similarly, the scholar W. J. T. Mitchell urges us to "think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed."² Bahar's landscapes, then, frame the bifurcated sense of place that many immigrants experience—reconciling this place with that, the past with the present. Peering through their layers of paint, the viewer begins to understand the artist's experience and its artistic expression.

For the past year, Bahar has been painting in a studio near the Freedom Tower. The tragic history of 9/11 hangs in the air, even as the noise of construction fills the neighborhood. This simultaneous sense of loss and renewal follows Bahar into her studio where she reads, sketches, and paints. "These images that I see and the tone of the sounds affect the texture of my art," she tells me. "But my studio is high up on the fifteenth floor, and I block out the vibrations of the noise. My studio is a quiet, meditative space—like a desert. As I begin to work, I brew some tea and sip it slowly, I contemplate. I need that for my painting. There is room for silence, room for nothingness."

As an artist, Bahar absorbs the influences of her surroundings but also distances herself from them, painting in her room of nothingness. Hanging on the wall of her studio are eight small canvases, arranged in grid-like fashion, each in a different stage of completion (see *Chronicle of the Garden*). Seeing the work in progress shows the way her art is created through layering—layers of paint, layers of symbolism. Each painting comes together like a collage of form, color, and technique. In parts, acrylic and oil paints flow across the canvas as though they are watercolor; at times

a fine brush creates sharp edges of color and form. Beneath an overlay of pattern, details of finely sketched drawings emerge. There are impressionist swaths of blue and gray pigment crossed with dark architectural grids. With aching recognition, one glimpses in the painting the scarred landscape of Lower Manhattan.

But another panel in the artwork—filled with pastel flows of pink and green—gestures to a different place that animates Bahar’s paintings, the Persian garden. Here, through the textured layers of paint, there are details of flora and fauna reminiscent of classical Persian miniature paintings, inscribed markings that recall pages of medieval calligraphic manuscripts, and jagged lines akin to a cartographer’s map. In the midst of this impressionistic landscape, the paint has been scraped away as if with a sharp tool to reveal gestural signs—etchings that seem to be shadows of the Twin Towers.

As she watched the construction of the Freedom Tower unfolding near her studio, Bahar became more and more curious about the history of the World Trade Center. In her research, she found that the architect of the Twin Towers, Minoru Yamasaki, had also drawn up the original designs for Shiraz University in Iran. The history of that campus itself is layered with symbolism. Conceived during the Pahlavi era, the university was meant to exemplify a commitment to bring state-of-the-art education to Iranians. The sprawling campus includes one of the most significant historic Persian gardens, Bagh-e Eram. In the midst of the garden, a nineteenth-century mansion built in the Qajar era once housed the Asia Institute, a formative center for the study of Iranian art, architecture, and archaeology founded by the scholar Arthur Upham Pope. Bahar’s face lights

up when she speaks about this historical confluence, all of which feeds into her painting. “I look through all the materials for coding and encoding the history,” she explains.

The connection Bahar discovered between the construction of a major university campus in Iran, a historic Persian garden, and the Twin Towers found expression in this series of eight small paintings. Collectively, the canvases form a kind of quilt onto which Bahar stitches together intimate personal memories with larger historical gestures. “Sometimes it’s surprising that you can create a hybrid space within rigid perceptions,” she explains. “I’m also examining my state of mind in a visual language that blurs the line between a personal and a shared history.”

The hybrid space in Bahar’s paintings, this merging of disparate geographies, signals a prevalent instinct among immigrant communities—a fundamental search for a sense of place. They navigate a continuous process of reconciliation, weaving together distinct languages and cultural codes, a fluid dance between movement and the need to feel grounded. In her art, Bahar creates a quiet space in which immigrant communities—often painfully marginalized by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror—can recognize their own sense of loss, find their own place of solace and safety in this scarred landscape. For immigrants, the notion of a home can be fraught, amorphous, and at times seemingly unreachable. The Persian garden becomes a symbolic place in which one is rooted, quietly at home.

Within Iranian cultural history, the garden is redolent with symbolic meaning. Bahar’s intricate green landscapes tap into a rich artistic and literary tradition of the garden as

an emblem of social and political significance. In drawing on natural motifs, Bahar taps into a longstanding propensity in Iranian culture. In 2004, the curator and architect Faryar Javaherian curated an exhibition titled "Gardens of Iran" at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. In the exhibition catalogue, Javaherian explained, "Our art history has been formed by the links of a chain, each generation inheriting from its predecessors, as in all traditional societies. . . . But more important than borrowing from previous generations is the 'borrowing from nature.'"³

A standard trope of classical Persian poetics is the *gol-o-bolbol*, or the flower and nightingale, referring to garden scenes. And in contemporary Persian poetry, the garden has been characterized as a place of feminist renewal, a space in which one can become reborn. In her poem "Another Birth," the iconic Iranian feminist poet Forugh Farrokhzad wrote:

I will plant my hands in the garden
I will grow I know I know I know
and swallows will lay eggs
in the hollow of my ink-stained hands.⁴

The poem is a beautiful articulation of personal growth through creative expression. Bahar paints with a keen awareness of these cultural connotations, but through painting, she makes the Persian garden something entirely her own.

Leaning against the walls of Bahar's studio are several large canvases; they are works in progress. The artist tends to work on several paintings at once, moving from one to another. Her process is at times extemporaneous—reacting to the quality of the paint, light, and color; at other times her work is painstakingly studied and planned. Both of these qualities are apparent in a large painting titled *Char Bagh*. The painting echoes the traditional design elements of Persian gardens, here rendered in sharp, green rectangular forms painted against abstract flows of earthly colored hues. A delicate overlay of Arabesque

patterns hints at the centrality of Islamic geometry in Persian landscape design. In the center of the painting, shadows of mounted princes on horseback recall the pictorial narratives of medieval manuscripts whose miniature paintings teemed with Persian garden scenes. And through the layers of paint, one sees hints of the jagged lines of a map, as if the artist is attempting to locate this particular *bagh*, or garden.

Persian gardens are verdant spots of respite in a landscape marked with arid plateaus and craggy mountains. But the Persian garden also embodies a poetic sensibility, a kind of mysticism, a particular way of living. It is an ethos that connects man to nature, bridges the quotidian with the spiritual. For the philosopher Michel Foucault, the Persian garden represented a quintessential "other space." Foucault discussed the idea of a Persian garden in his elaboration on the constitutive quality of space. "The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world," he wrote. "The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world."⁵

Of course, Bahar's *Char Bagh* is not, in fact, a Persian garden. It is a *painting* of a Persian garden. This brings to mind the way the critic Holland Cotter once described a painting as "an embodiment of order, a universe that you could, just through looking, move into and inhabit, where you could set up a life, live an ideal." Both the Persian garden and a painting, then, frame an ideal, an alternative reality. In Bahar's paintings, the Persian garden is a figment of her imagination. It is a metaphor, a state of mind, a condition of living. It is a liminal space that brings together the past and the present, architecture and nature, art and history.

Traditionally, the Persian garden is walled, demarcating the borders between the private and public spaces. At key historical moments, though, those boundaries have blurred and

the idyllic Persian garden has become a space of political intrigue. For Bahar, the breached garden wall is a trope through which she can explore Iranian history more broadly, and its relations with the United States more specifically. Bahar's evocation of the Persian garden is not just a sentimental formal gesture in painting. For the past several years, it has become an intellectual quest—as she's searched through a historical maze to understand its significance. The Persian garden has become a kind of map on which milestones of Iranian history are plotted.

In the middle of Bahar's studio, there is a table piled with books, stacks of printed papers, pages torn from sketchbooks, and photographs. Bahar is an avid reader, often connecting new intellectual discoveries with memories of what she was taught in school in Iran. She is engaged in an ongoing process of learning and un-learning, of uncovering layers of truth as a way to feed her artistic imagination. She follows trails of inquiry through piles of documents, making connections in her mind.

In this context, years ago, Bahar reached out to me to discuss my scholarly research on the 1953 CIA coup in Iran. She had read my article on the documentation of that coup, which I argued remains an "open secret."⁶ While key figures involved in the coup had published autobiographies, the official documents remained classified or heavily redacted. Bahar was especially interested in the figure of Donald Wilber, a CIA spy who also worked as an architectural historian. Bahar recalled studying Wilber's book *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions* as a student in Iran. Learning that this man had also been the architect of the CIA coup to overthrow a democratically elected government in Iran was bewildering to her. A reckoning of the relationship between knowledge and power in the Middle East, so effectively laid out by the scholar Edward Said in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, spurred Bahar to do more research.

In a series of paintings she first exhibited at New York's Thomas Erben Gallery in the

spring of 2015, Bahar drew on the seemingly paradoxical career of Donald Wilber. Poring through pages of documents about the 1953 coup and through Wilber's scholarly books, Bahar came to see the Persian garden as a space that was politically coded—a garden plot of sorts. In her studio, she sometimes sketches directly on the pages of documents she reads. And in her paintings, she mimics the black markings of the redacted classified documents. This aspect of her paintings of Persian gardens is more fully elaborated in the exhibition at Hood Downtown, where she has created a timeline and an installation using the historical materials that fed her artistic imagination as she painted this body of work. The archival impulse in her art echoes a familiar strain in contemporary art that the critic Hal Foster described as "a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter memory."⁷

Still, it is important to recall that Bahar is an artist, not a historian. Hers is a creative encounter, an artistic expression. "A work of art," wrote the critic Susan Sontag, "encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary on the world."⁸ As an artist, Bahar's occupation with the history of Persian gardens is not so much to do with documentation but with the evocation of something intangible, an attempt to capture something deeply personal, something chimeric. "For me, the Persian garden is a metaphor," she explains. "It's about a loss, a longing; it represents traces of what's lost. The Persian garden is a quiet corner in each of our lives where we can go and sit in peace, surrounded by quiet nothingness."

Shiva Balaghi is an independent scholar and curator who has written widely on contemporary visual culture. She previously taught art history and Middle Eastern history at Brown University and at New York University.

HISTORY AS A CONTEXT OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE: Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi in Conversation with Bahar Behbahani

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi: In 2013, you began the ongoing *Persian Gardens* series. What was the inspiration and motivation for it?

Bahar Behbahani: It started as an inquest of identity. As a person who grew up surrounded by poetry and carpet, one cannot deny that the idea of Persian gardens is indexed in an average Iranian person's consciousness. The Persian garden has been always connected with a romantic idea of paradise on earth. What are Persian gardens? Why are Persian gardens important? Who made them? Who used them? What is special about the flora in Persian gardens? These were the questions that interested me, along with how Persian gardens might articulate Iranian identity in a global context, in the past and present.

My research started three years ago; I began looking at geography, history, art, and literature in relation to Persian gardens. I soon realized that the subject has more to do with geopolitics than anything else and that Persian history reflects a history of colonialism. So I started to investigate the romantic ideals associated with Persian gardens since the seventeenth century, espoused by European travelers, architects, painters, and writers. This led me to European engravings and books by travelers and orientalists including Sir John Chardin, Eugène Flan-din, and Pascal Coste. Afterward, my attention shifted to the work of American scholars such as Arthur Pope and Donald Wilber, which resonates more with the fact that I now live and work in the United States. I soon discovered that Wilber, whom we all knew as a highly respected scholar of Persian architecture in Iran, was the purported mastermind of the country's 1953 coup. This brought an interesting twist to my research as an artist.

U-SN: Persian gardens are very much polit-icized spaces; they are both sacral and secular. One might argue that they carry the collective memory over the ages more than any other aspects or forms of Persian material culture.

BB: The notion of the Persian garden perme-ates Iranian life and its artistic expressions. References are found in literature, poetry, music, calligraphy, and carpet design. My first tangible experience of Persian gardens was as a child crawling on carpets with garden designs. There is an inevitable spiritual weight of the garden that fills the Iranian conscious-ness. It is captured in quotidian objects and in literature and art. Persian gardens also bear the scars of social upheavals and civil conflicts. Iran's historical memory of the garden is filled with brutal experiences such as the murder of Amir Kabir, the first democratic prime minister, in the bath of one of the oldest gardens during the Qajar dynasty (some two hundred years ago); the house arrest of Mohamed Mossadeq in his garden (he was another popular prime minister who was removed during the 1953 coup in Iran); and demonstrations in the public gardens during the Islamic revolution. The key questions that I grapple with in the *Persian Gardens* series are: Can a place remain beau-tiful even though it witnessed murder, sorrow, removal, and turbulence? How do they affect our individual perceptions, emotions, and collective behaviors when we are in them or imagine them conceptually?

U-SN: The historical figure Hafiz occupies a larger-than-life place in Persian literary tradi-tion and in many households where his fasci-nating poetry of love, romance, and cosmic connections is a staple. In certain ways, his poems explore the reaches of the sacred and

the profane that Persian gardens embody. Hafiz employs metaphor, humor, and irony to great effect in his poetry to critique those who occupy the political realm, who create these gardens for personal aggrandizement, to show off their political might, but also to seek transcendental enlightenment. In a sense, Hafiz's poetry is not unlike these rulers who seek both the secular and the divine in the enchanted spaces of Persian gardens.

BB: In Iranian culture, the garden and poetry are woven together to the extent that one does not exist without the other. Hafiz used the concept of paradise to describe Persian gardens. He is the great master of the language of ambiguity and metaphor. He talks of beautifully shaped tall cypress tree as symbolizing the lover. The lover is also a metaphor for the ultimate truth that advances from a metaphysical place. The nightingale sings the sad song of separation in this ideal paradise and introduces the pleasure of sorrow. In Hafiz's poetry, the garden is a beautiful paradise from one metaphor to another. The garden in Hafiz's world is the manifestation of a country, a society, a house, a place for contemplation, a lovers' hidden corner, a maze we navigate to reach truth. The running water in the middle of the garden is eternal and is the oasis that each of us longs for. It is so vivid that it can be the most beautiful mirage, a true yet illusionary world.

U-SN: The coup of 1953, perhaps more than any other event—including the 1979 revolution—has impacted Iran's modern history. Can you describe the significance of the 1953 coup in the Iranian political imagination?

BB: The history of the 1953 coup in Iran has been told many times. Yet aspects of it remain

mysterious and continue to confound historians, while serving as a source of inspiration for artists. History is made of different layers; my paintings consist of layers upon layers, each representing a different perception or narrative. The coup for Iranians is a signifier of colonialism, the magic of oil, and a major disappointment. I look at the coup metaphorically through the Persian garden, following our tradition of storytelling and poetry, but I also refer to some real facts from that unfortunate incident.

When I was in school at the age of 12 or so, I was looking at the black-and-white photo of the house of Prime Minister Mosaddegh when it was surrounded by soldiers during the coup, which was orchestrated by American and British intelligence as result of the international oil politics at that time. Following the siege, the heavenly rose garden of the Mosaddegh house was turned into a ruin, occupied by armed puppets who stood in front of graffiti sprayed on its once-beautiful stone walls. This is an indelible cultural image indexed in the memory of generations of Iranians who have come across that picture in history books. I am very interested in bringing these pictorial histories into a new conversation with the present.

U-SN: Works in the exhibition such as *Preliminary Steps*, *Chronicle of the Garden*, and the eponymous *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* can all be seen as a form of palimpsest. You build upon historical information, erasing, adding, and re-imagining things. In spite of the fraught issues you address, the paintings evoke what might be described as poetic realism if we take into account the ways in which you combine site plans of some of the best-known gardens,

floral patterns drawn from nineteenth-century illuminated books, and a back-bending process of layering intricate forms.

BB: My main approach in this series is investigating documents and archival materials, either text-based or pictorial materials. Accordingly, I extract 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. I look through all the materials for codes and historical references to raise germane questions for the present. It is a challenge trying to resolve a mystery or to rescue a historical event from obscurity given that one is limited by personal memory and given what one views as a collective amnesia in society. My work follows a process of deconstruction, analysis, and contemplation of forms with geopolitical consequences but always with a persistent examination of the subject of beauty and seductiveness. I also work with a combination of elements drawn from Persian architectural traditions and, inevitably, from my immediate surroundings in New York.

U-SN: It is quite instructive how you congregate manifold forms on the picture surface to insinuate different emotions. For example, in *Char Bagh* (which references the quadrilaterals that usually encapsulate the architecture of the gardens) and *The Decisions Are Made: Activity Begins*, organic, abstract, and geometric forms fuse into each other. In the latter, a work that refers mostly to the events of the 1953 coup, the black bars that suggest redacted information work the fine line of concealing and revealing.

BB: The process is very long and meditative as well as gestural and expressive. I translate the substance of Persian gardens into flowing lines with which I completely cover each blank canvas. Some of the intricate drawings are concealed. The drawings are also depictions

of architectural plans, enclosing walls, aerial maps, rectangular pools, internal networks of canals, garden pavilions, and abundant vegetation. I paint and erase continually. To me, the residues of paint or drawing are important for the history of the paintings. Even when they are not easily visible, they are there, stored in the canvas, like invisible or covert history. My work process reveals my state of mind; I aim for a language that blurs the line between personal and shared histories. Sometimes it is surprising how one can create a hybrid space within the rigid boundaries of perception and historical facts.

U-SN: Though the different works in the exhibition can stand independently, I am drawn to how they seem to suggest sub-plots of a grand narrative. For example, the Eram Garden—one of the best-known Persian gardens and a monument to engineering and architecture, from which the exhibition derives its title—is the location of the Shiraz University. In an ironic twist of history, the Shiraz University stands as a symbol of a short-lived cultural exchange between the United States and Iran.

BB: These kinds of stories excite me, inspire me to make a visual vocabulary. During the transition to modern Iran, Eram Garden was neglected for a while—until the forties, when it transformed into the headquarters of the American-Iranian Society under the direction of Arthur Pope. The presence of the Western scholars in the country raised some questions and brought up different dynamics. For me, the garden is a metaphor that I apply to the history of a country. You plant beautiful flora in a garden, and you also see self-grown or imported plants that can grow fast and cover everything. Visually, I'd like to explore the forms that structure a garden like Eram Garden as well as investigate the trend of the transformation of this garden to a new model of a university. Minoru Yamasaki, who also was the architect of the Twin Towers in New York, designed the university. I'm very much interested in the invisible impact of this design in both places.

So the elements and the visual language that I use in this series of paintings are somewhere between documentation and a fairytale world, where these two can both evoke some questions and document a new narrative of the history of the garden.

U-SN: You have been living in the United States for about twelve years. You have spent nine of those years in New York. It is fair to imagine that you are immersed in American society and the New York art world. In what ways does your practice reflect or depart from the Iranian art tradition, given your art training in Iran, and what might be the American influences in your practice, if there are any?

BB: My work emerges from a hybrid space that I inhabit. My beginning the *Persian Gardens* series coincided with the chance to work in a spacious studio in a high-rise at the Lower Manhattan construction site, provided by Time Equities Inc. Art-in-Buildings. It became a routine for me to walk from Brooklyn, where I live, to the studio in Downtown Manhattan. It takes about an hour and half each way if I walk steadily and at a certain pace. This

ritual journey has afforded me the opportunity to observe the construction going on around New York. I see people rush to their many destinations, the mass of tourists in transition, old verses of life and new aesthetics of presence and becoming. I pass through the humdrum of city life to my studio on the fifteenth floor of the abandoned office complex facing the Trinity Church. I find myself alone up there in my silent world surrounded by canvases and paints, where I contemplate our relationship with space and places. I work for hours without speaking to anyone or receiving any visitors. Yet the vibrations from the construction work down the street behind my studio, where the new World Trade Center stands next to two giant holes beautifully designed as the tribute to the national catastrophe, course through my body. In my silence and industry, I am still very much part of the city.

This interview was conducted via email, and at Bahar Behbahani's studio on September 22 and 24, 2016. The extended version of this interview is published on the Hood Museum of Art's website.

PLATES



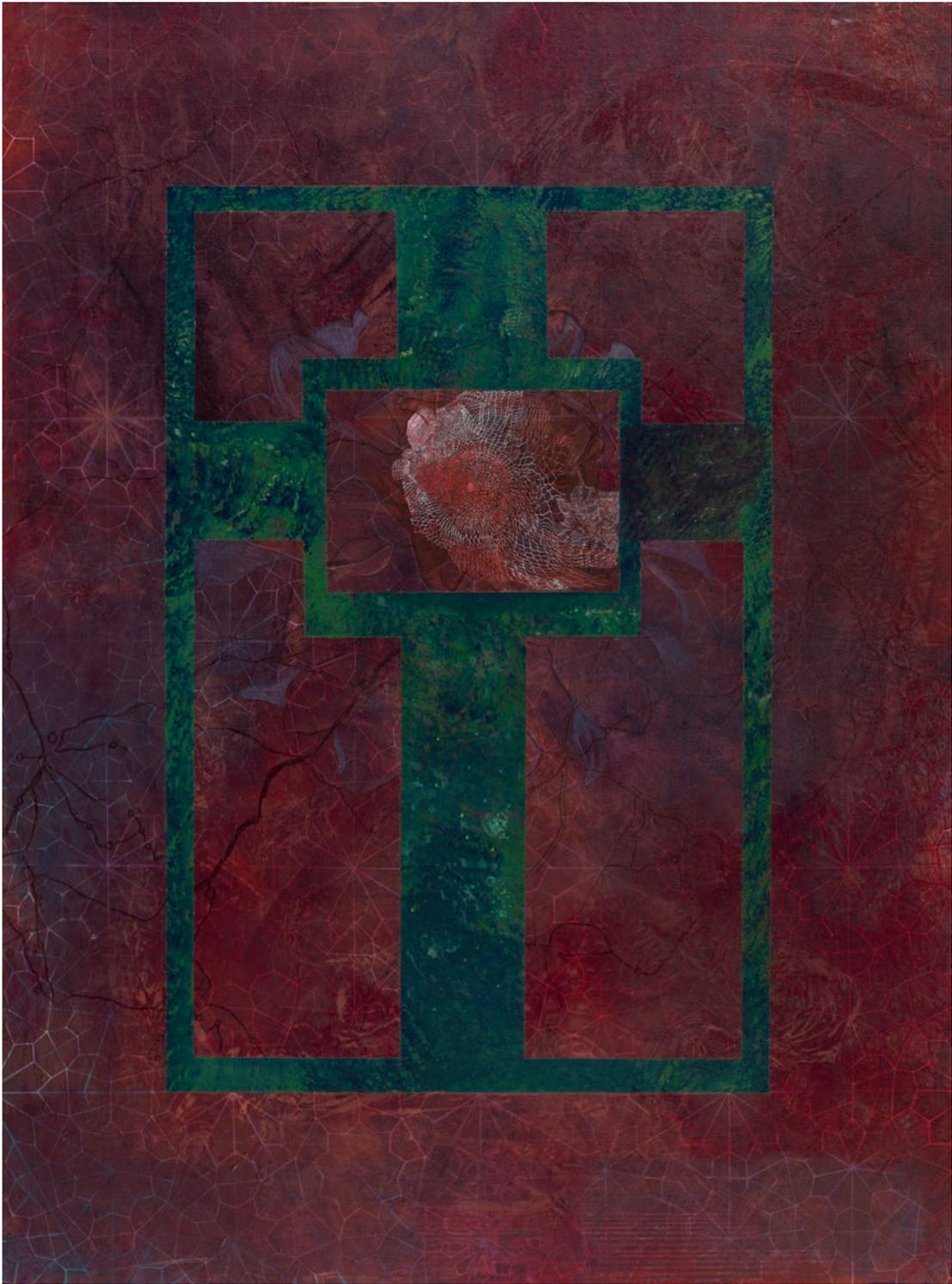
Adorned with Pillars, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas.



Let the Garden Eram Flourish, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas.



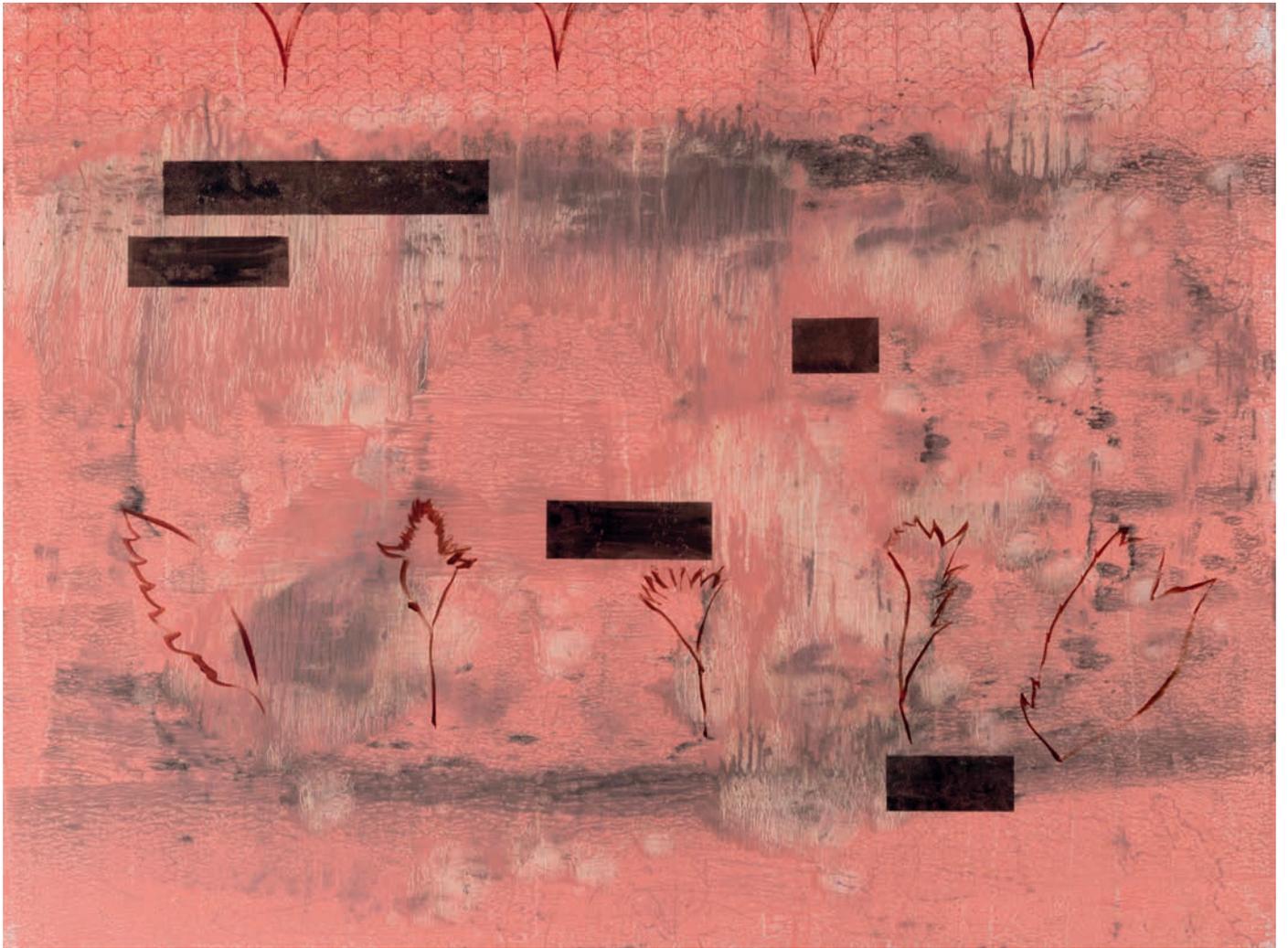
Chronicle of the Garden, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas.



Char Bagh (4 Quadrilaterals), from the *Persian Gardens* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas.



Preliminary Steps, from the *Garden Coup* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas.



The Decisions Are Made: Activity Begins, from the *Garden Coup* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas.



Still from *Visiting You in Summer 2015*, single-channel HD video, 1-minute loop, 2015.



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works by Bahar Behbahani, born 1973 in Tehran, Iran.

Adorned with Pillars, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 57 x 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Let the Garden Eram Flourish, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 70 x 100 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Chronicle of the Garden, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas, each 36 x 28 inches (8 pieces). Courtesy of the artist.

Char Bagh (4 Quadrilaterals), from the *Persian Gardens* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas, 72 x 54 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Preliminary Steps, from the *Garden Coup* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas, 57 x 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.

The Decisions Are Made: Activity Begins, from the *Garden Coup* series, 2015–16, mixed media on canvas, 54 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.

Visiting You in Summer 2015, single-channel HD video, 1-minute loop, 2015.

Uncased, installation: drawing on etching paper, inkjet print on photo paper, book, printed documents found on the Internet, 2016.

The exhibition *Bahar Behbahani: Let the Garden Eram Flourish*, on view at Hood Downtown January 5–March 12, 2017, was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, and generously supported by the Evelyn A. J. Hall Fund and the Cissy Patterson Fund.

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NOTES TO ESSAY ON PAGES 4–7

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1990), 11.
2. W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.
3. Faryar Javaherian, "Paradigms Lost: The Persian Garden Revisited," in *Gardens of Iran* (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 22.
4. Forugh Farrokhzad, "Another Birth," translated by Karim Emami, <http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks1.php>.
5. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 234.
6. Shiva Balaghi, "Silenced Histories and Sanitized Autobiographies: The 1953 CIA Coup in Iran," *Biography* (Winter 2013): 71–96.
7. Hal Foster, "Archival," in *Bad News Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso, 2015), 32.
8. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 2013, Kindle edition), 21.

Photography by Adam Reich, unless otherwise indicated. Artwork © Bahar Behbahani

Cover: Bahar Behbahani, *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* (detail), from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas.

About Hood Downtown

During the interval of our construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Like the Hood Museum of Art, Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

Upcoming Exhibitions

Ingo Günther: World Processor
Hood Downtown
March 24–June 18, 2017

Mining Big Data: Artists' Global Concerns
Strauss Gallery, Hopkins Center
March 24–April 30, 2017

Winter Term 2017 Hours

Wednesday–Saturday, 11:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Sunday, 1:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.
Closed Monday and Tuesday

Directions and Parking

Hood Downtown is located at 53 Main Street, Hanover, NH. Metered public parking is available in front of Hood Downtown on Main Street, and behind the exhibition space in a public lot between Allen and Maple Streets. An all-day public parking garage is located at 7 Lebanon Street.

HOOD DOWNTOWN

EXHIBITION SPACE

