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## Art Notes: Looking Back at the Garden From Afar



Iranian American artist Bahar Behbahani's mixed media works in the exhibition Let the Garden Eram Flourish, explore the history and design of Persian gardens and Iranian architecture. They incorporate design elements of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, drawing connections between the towers and Iran through the buildings' architect, Minoru Yamasaki, who also designed Shiraz University in Iran. At the Hood Downtown in Hanover, N.H., Monday, January 9, 2017. (Valley News - James M. Patterson) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to [permission@vnews.com](mailto:permission@vnews.com). » [Buy this Image](#)



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With the title "Let the Garden Eram Flourish," Iranian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Bahar Behbahani, whose show of paintings, drawings and video is now on view at Hood Downtown in Hanover, gets to one of the central markers of Iranian identity: the return to the garden.

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Eram, in the city of Shiraz, is one of Iran's most venerable and beloved gardens, and is also one of nine UNESCO World Heritage garden sites in the country.

Eram's original structures were built in the 13th century, but both buildings and gardens have been modified over the succeeding centuries. The Persian garden was organized around the notion of a paradise in which sky, light, water and plant life were at play.

Behbahani's canvases draw you into the lush display of Iranian gardens, with their harmonic arrangements of buildings, pools, flowers, trees, sky and bird song.

Some of the gardens seem to be seen from above, or from a distance — a metaphor for the perspective you gain on your own country when you have been away from it for a while.

"These kind of aerial views come from my own constant traveling. I see things from above," Behbahani said in an interview Monday in the Hood Downtown gallery.

But Behbahani's works are more than testaments to the beauty of Iranian gardens, although beauty is certainly part of it.

Her large canvases, with their geometric shapes, intricately drawn markings and blooming, incandescent colors that revitalize the eye, are a way of summoning memories of a country she has physically left behind.

"I think, for me, the most interesting quality is how she bridges time and space," said Smooth Nzewi, curator of African art at the Hood and the organizer of the Behbahani exhibition. The show is second in a series of exhibitions the Hood will exhibit at its downtown Hanover offshoot during the renovation and expansion of the museum.

Nzewi first met Behbahani in 2013 at the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, N.Y., where she had a residency.

Subsequent conversations led to Nzewi including her work in the 11th Shanghai Biennale in China, which he helped to curate last year. After that, Nzewi encouraged Behbahani to continue working on a suite of paintings about the Iranian idea of the garden, which are now on view at the gallery.

With some exceptions, all of the works in the show were painted in a burst of intense activity from May into December 2016. Working 14 to 15 hours a day was more the rule than the exception, Behbahani said.

Behbahani came to the U.S. in 2003, and settled in New York City in 2007. It wasn't the result of a deliberate plan, she said: just something that happened.

Although she lives in Brooklyn, her studio is in lower Manhattan, not far from the site of Freedom Tower, which took the place of the World Trade Center after 9/11. The history of Iran and the U.S. blends in her paintings, as the shadow of what was left of the World Trade center leaves its imprint in the background of what seems to be an otherwise serene scene.

Although Behbahani is not in political or permanent exile from Iran (she goes back to visit her family in Tehran), she has been gone long enough that she uses her art to understand what it means to be an Iranian-American, with the pull of both societies.

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She got both her B.A. and M.F.A., in 1995 and 1998, respectively, at the University of Tehran. At the time, the program was more steeped in the history of Western art, she said, than in the traditions of Persian art, which include the 13th- through 16th-century miniatures that so appealed to the Europeans who visited the region.

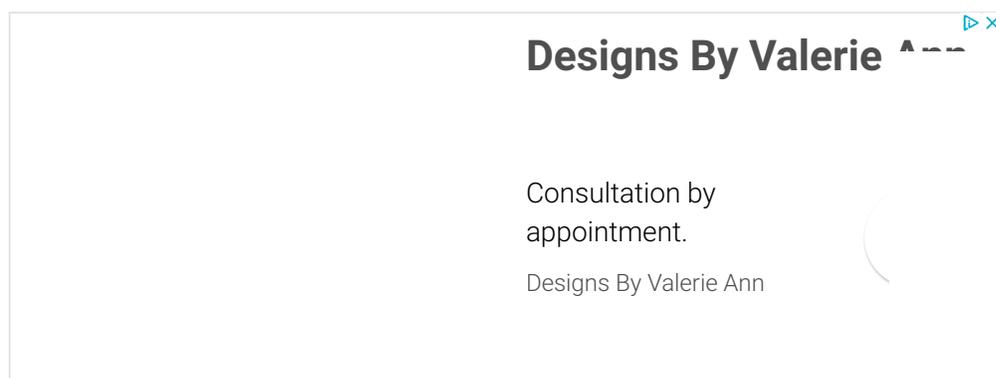
Twentieth-century abstraction permitted her, and other students, to paint what they wanted, and to express political views without fear of censorship.

“Abstract art for me was full of symbolism. It could be read by my circle,” Behbahani said.

Behbahani has used her painting as a way to shape her responses to the often tumultuous changes in the nation’s politics and history since 1953. Then, an American-led coup deposed a democratically-elected government and placed the Shah on the Peacock Throne, ultimately paving the way to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought an Islamic theocracy under the Ayatollah Khomeini to power.

For Iranians, gardens offer respite not only from the tensions of modern life, but also are oases set against some of the country’s arid landscapes.

For Europeans who began traveling to Persia in the 16th century, the garden was one aspect of what’s been called Orientalism, the European fascination with and passion for the East that also became fraught with stereotypes and assumptions about non-European cultures and peoples.



An ancillary exhibition consists of books and artifacts associated with Donald Wilber, a scholar on Persian gardens and architecture, who was also one of the CIA architects of the 1953 coup. Behbahani became fascinated by his double-role as scholar and spy, and her research into his life has yielded insight into the complex nature of the Iranian and American relationship.

One of Behbahani’s other prime influences was literary: Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. She wanted, she said, to do “a painting that is like a chapter of a book, but a book that is a non-linear narrative.”

Proust’s language and structure represented a turning point for Behbahani, she said. “This kind of non-linear narration goes to the past, future and present. You can’t separate one from the other, it’s a placeless, timeless feeling.”

This description applies to Behbahani’s work as well.

There will be a public reception for the show on Friday at 7 p.m. and a public talk at 2 p.m. on Saturday with Behbahani and Nzewi.

The exhibition continues through March 12. Hood Downtown hours are: Wednesday through Saturday: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Closed on Monday and Tuesday.

## Openings and Receptions

AVA Gallery and Art Center in Lebanon kicks off its new year with a reception Friday from 5 to 7 p.m. for four exhibits. Lebanon artist Carrie Fradkin will show “Contemporary Mosaics: Grid Variations”; Burlington artist Clark Derbes exhibits a kind of folk art based on wood in “Post-Vernacular”; James Browning, a Lebanon

photographer, brings the now relatively-rare photo technique of dye transfer prints to the galleries in “Color Brought Forth” and Woodstock artist Margaret Lampe Kannenstine will exhibit “Collages: Reuse, Recycle.”

All four artists will give gallery talks that are free and open to the public. In order, they are:

Browning will speak next Thursday at 5:30 p.m.

Kannenstine will give a talk on Saturday, Jan. 21 at 3 p.m.

Fradkin will speak on Saturday, Jan. 28, at 3 p.m.

Derbes will give a gallery talk on Friday, Feb. 3, at 5:30 p.m.

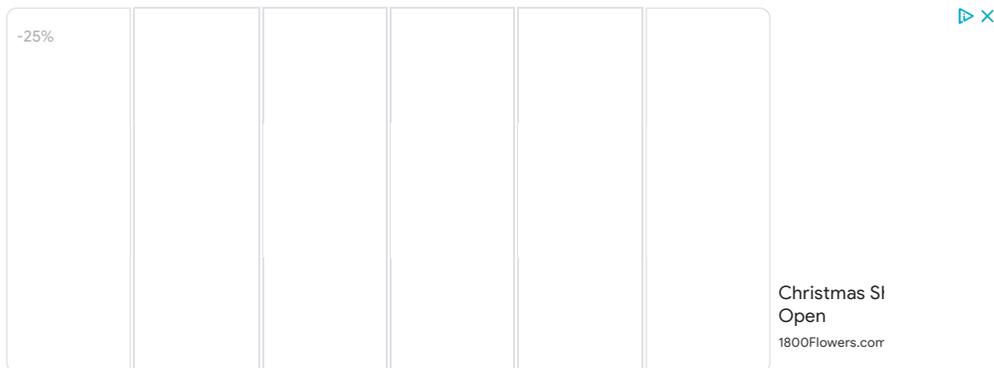
The exhibitions at AVA run through Feb. 3.

There will be a reception today from 3 to 5 p.m. at the **Osher at Dartmouth** art gallery for the exhibition “Reality to Abstraction — A Photographic Journey of Perception.”

The photographer Mary Gerakaris, a Canaan resident, has shown her work previously at the Library Arts Center in Newport and at AVA Gallery. The show runs through Feb. 24 at the Osher office at 7 Lebanon Street in Hanover. Hours are: Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Fridays, 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

“Tibetan and Himalayan Lifeworlds,” an exhibition at **Baker-Berry Library** at Dartmouth College, surveys the history, politics and religion of the “Roof of the World.” It has been curated by Senior Lecturer Kenneth Bauer and Associate Professor Sienna Craig.

As part of the exhibition, Tibetan artist Tenzin Norbu will be on campus on Jan. 19 and Jan. 25 to paint in the Baker-Berry corridor. Norbu’s work was seen at the college previously in 2010, when his painting was part of an exhibition at the Hood Museum called Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond, and he also illustrated a children’s book *Clear Sky, Red Earth: A Himalayan Story*, a project on which he collaborated with Sienna Craig, and which has been published in both English and Tibetan.



Norbu will also be visiting classes and staging a popup exhibit of some of his recent work at the Black Family Arts Center, beginning Tuesday. There will be an artist’s reception on Jan. 25, from 3 to 4:30 p.m. in the Baker-Berry corridor. The show runs through March 31.

“Gillian Tyler: A Golden Anniversary Retrospective” is now on view in the Betty Grant Gallery in Lyme’s **Converse Free Library**. Tyler, a fixture in the Upper Valley arts scene, studied with the noted American printer and sculptor Leonard Baskin and won a Fulbright to Germany where she studied wood engraving. Now with a studio on Lake Fairlee, Tyler concentrates on lake scenes. The show runs through March 31.

## Of Note

The **Chandler Gallery** in Randolph has organized a weekend long “pop-up” environmental art installation, “Winter Wonder Woods,” which runs from Friday through Sunday. The focus will be on making art that depicts, in whatever form, the

Northern Forest.

From 5 to 9 p.m. Friday, artists and art educators will talk about ideas for the exhibition. On Saturday, the public is invited to drop in from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to make art around the theme of the woodland landscape.

The exhibition of the art created for the show will run from 2 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, and again on Sunday, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. There will also be a public reception Saturday at 6 p.m. For further information contact Emily Crosby at outreach@chandler-arts.org, or 802-431-0204.

## Ongoing

**Arabella**, Windsor. The gallery exhibits works by local artists and artisans in a variety of media, including jewelry, oils, acrylics, photography, watercolors, pastels and textiles.

**BigTown Gallery**, Rochester, Vt. "Figuration," which features the works of Lucy Mink Covello, Mark Goodwin and Fulvio Testa, runs through Feb. 25.

**Howe Library**, Hanover. The annual Hanover High School Student Art Show, featuring drawings, photography, printmaking, collage, digital art, sculpture and jewelry, continues through Feb. 1.

**Kilton Public Library**, West Lebanon. An exhibition of work by Enfield painter Penny Koburger continues through January.

**Royalton Memorial Library**, South Royalton. A show of work by 20th century commercial artist Louis Chap is on view through Feb. 18.

**Scavenger Gallery**, White River Junction. The gallery shows handmade wooden objects by Ria Blaas and jewelry by Stacy Hopkins.

**SculptureFest**, Woodstock. The annual celebration of three-dimensional art generally ends when foliage season does, but 80 percent of the show is still on view.

"Grounding," a show of site-specific work curated by sculptors Jay Mead and Edythe Wright, is on view at the King Farm. For more information, go to sculpturefest.org.

**Tunbridge Public Library**. Anne and Mitch Beck, of Royalton, exhibit their mixed-media collages through Friday.

**Two Rivers Printmaking Studio**, White River Junction. The Holiday Print Show runs through Jan. 31.

**Norman Williams Public Library**, Woodstock. "In Living Color," a show of work by painter Patsy Highberg, runs through Feb. 13.

**Zollikofer Gallery**, Hotel Coolidge, White River Junction. A show of paintings by West Lebanon resident Mary Jane Morse has been extended through Feb. 18.

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