

Fig. 1  
 Kamrooz Aram  
*Mystical Visions*  
*Undetected by Night Vision*  
*Strengthen the Faith of the*  
*Believers and Make their*  
*Enemies Scatter* 2007  
 Oil and stickers on canvas  
 213.3 x 304.8 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 Wilkinson Gallery, London



## The Burdens of Imaging: Kamrooz Aram's Painted Elsewhere

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We are living, I reckon, through a terrible moment in the politics of imaging, envisioning, visualizing; and the more a regime of visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisability of the image, endless ostensible transparency and multi-dimensionality and sewing together of everything in nets and webs – the more this pseudo-utopia presents itself as the very form of self-knowledge, self-production, self-control – the more necessary it becomes to capture what imaging can be.

– T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*<sup>1</sup>

The role of the image has continued to plague those engaged in the whole-hearted pursuit of painting as a form of political resistance. How these strange objects come to function in the current image climate, one may never know. But, in spite of this lack of clarity, there are those committed to revealing the potential in the radical act of creating a world onto canvas (or any other given surface). We continue to toil, as T.J. Clark has so aptly pointed out in his recently published diaristic account of two pictures by Poussin exhibited together at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. And, although passages like the epigraph above – that speak to the politics of sustained looking and sustained engagement with image-making – elicit such a negative response (as those from Arthur C. Danto, who contested in his review of the book in *Artforum* in February 2007 that Clark's endeavour did little to further our understanding of the relationship of painting to politics), it seems that few publications in recent years have addressed the problem of painting's persistence of picture-making to such lengths as Clark's *The Sight of Death*.

Despite figures such as Clark and Danto, who commit themselves to the critical cum phenomenological potential of this visual form, there continue to be strains of painting received by critical, academic, and consumer audiences that are both resistant to, and symptoms of, what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has, borrowing from Adorno, referred to as the “dialectic of consumption”, that defined modernist art. Buchloh has argued, for instance, “To be suspended between high art’s haughty isolation (in transcendence, in resistance, in critical negativity) and the universally pervasive mass cultural debris of corporate domination constitutes the founding dialectic within the modernist artist’s role.”<sup>2</sup> In so far as painting has continued to provide a particular space that is contemplative and resistant in its very being in the world – often in spite of itself, and no matter how spectacular or complicit with the market it as a form may become – it seems that painting is far from dead, no matter what its detractors may have claimed long ago. Recent tendencies in painting have thrust us back to this moment of the great divide, to a time in which political resistance and aesthetic transcendence present themselves in tandem as viable options for an otherwise troubled visual landscape. All of this leads us back to a question posed by Yve-Alain Bois so long ago; that is, is *painting* still possible?<sup>3</sup> And if we have in fact been threatened, yet again, with the “end of painting”, in light of the critical arena’s preoccupation at the turn of this century with relational aesthetics and dialogical practices, then what does one make of the form’s resilience and newly articulated politics?

I was reminded of painting’s funereal march while reading a profile on myth-maker artist and provocateur John Currin in a recent issue of the *New Yorker*. Not until the end of what proved to be a self-indulgent exploration of sexism, conservatism and aggression (think Currin’s response to the controversy in 2005 surrounding the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in a series of Danish cartoons: “O.K., they’re terrible-ass cartoons from a quality standpoint, but the idea that those thugs get offended and we just acquiesce, that was the most astonishing display of cowardice,” continuing that “That’s when it occurred to me that we might lose this thing – not the Iraq war but the larger struggle”),<sup>4</sup> were the political stakes of such a practice properly revealed. Despite their lurid appeal and oft critical disapproval, Currin’s images of buxom blondes, contorted and elongated female forms, and scintillating scenes of the heterosexual male’s lesbian ideal have as little to do with their content as such gestures might let on. Currin’s position is that of the trickster, and to fall for such a prank – sheathed in the artist’s claims for the historical and cultural perseverance of pornographic imagery – is to miss the point of what is behind the “veil”. In light of Currin’s a-political practice, one might ask what does a form such as painting have to offer when it is prone to the most egregious of deceptions? Both lauded and loathed by critics, painting of this nature presents the very aesthetic-political conundrum that defines the difficult birth any image has into this world. Why are images given life, and why does one voluntarily choose to make an image at a moment such as this?

Currin’s profile in the *New Yorker* comes to its head at the conclusion, when the reader is left with three proverbial reflections dealt by the artist to the author Calvin Tomkins over the course of their stint: “The meaning of the painting is what you do with your hands”, and “The way things are painted trumps everything else”, and finally, “So much art now doesn’t want to look like art, but painting can’t help it”.<sup>5</sup> It is with the last of these statements in particular that Currin argues for painting’s inability to transgress its status as art, surprisingly bringing the role of the painted image to the fore. Assuming, as he does, that painting inherently provides an aesthetic experience, we are forced to ask ourselves, in light of this, whether we like it or not, does painting potentially lose its power or its bearing in the world when it is no longer considered to be art? For this, I turn again to T.J. Clark, who insists upon a dialectic that separates high art (be it “in transcendence, in resistance, in critical negativity”) from the logic of market capitalism, stating:

I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it. It represents one possibility of resistance in a world saturated by slogans, labels, sales pitches, little marketable meaning-motifs. To see the distance narrowed day by day, and intellectuals applauding the narrowing in the name of some wholly illusory “transition from the world of the word to that of the image” – when what we have is a deadly reconciliation of the two modes, via the utter banalization of both – this is bitter to me.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than clumsily align one particularly decadent and tawdry tendency in painting with Clark’s reactive brand of aesthetics as a vehicle for political resistance, I instead hope to show that the very *bringing into the world* with which painting must contend is reason enough for this visual form to bear the burden of a milieu that has continued to forget to feel and see, and that has opted instead to touch and glance.

Painting in an American context, its history handed down from European modernism, has always had to contend with its social function, or lack thereof. In an arena that has always relied upon high culture’s utilitarian end, both before and after the Second World War, or, before and after *New York stole the idea of modern art*, painted images have always been expected to occupy their given locales, and speak to social and political strife from within their secured, intimate environments. Even at their most provocative and confrontational, paintings here have bore the heavy burden of communicating exterior social phenomena from within an interior space. This has been the shadow under which painting’s life, its death, and the debate surrounding its political function has largely been cast. Present within this discourse, however, are discoverable histories that provide new models for understanding the visualisation of politics in culture, of which have been previously rendered invisible by critical oversight and Procrustean narratives of artistic production since



Fig. 2  
Kamrooz Aram  
*Blazing Glory* 2007  
Oil on canvas  
152.4 x 136.1 cm  
Honart Collection, Tehran  
Courtesy Wilkinson Gallery,  
London

1945. Just as encounters with painting have been corralled by the current image climate – dependent on the clear distinctions between public and private life – the scope in any given approach must expand to include contexts in which painted images play a large part in the formation of their given public sphere, making room for critical models equipped to address the roles these visual phenomena play beyond mere exhibitionary contexts.

When our encounter with painting is limited by the frames imposed by architectural white cubes, the public nature and social function of the form are rarely given adequate room to effectively shine through the very materials that make an image of this world. For as Maurice Merleau-Ponty once remarked in a series of lectures delivered over the airwaves of French national radio in 1948, “painting does not imitate the world, but is a world of its own”.<sup>7</sup> It is only since the history of easel painting (and the slow-moving revolt against it in to the twentieth century), governed by the architectures of experience, that we have truly lost sight of the worlds embedded within images. There remain, however, occasions that paintings resonate the conditions of their making and reveal the processes of their internal world view, despite the places in which they are experienced – the places in which they are presupposed to merely imitate, simulate, and represent far-off places. When these traces do seep through their iconographic and allegorical Trojan horses, and transcend their given context, the encounter is something close to the very experience of warfare, and we are thrust once again to the place of politics.

In early 2007, New York-based artist Kamrooz Aram exhibited a recent body of painting situated as much within the debates surrounding the delicate intersection of aesthetic experience and political commitment as within the fraught history of image-making in post-revolutionary Iran. Aram’s relationship to Iran – where he was born in 1978 amid the political turmoil that ascended to the Islamic Revolution one year later – has been taken up by most writers who have addressed, at no matter what length, his paintings and drawings. When Aram debuted a suite of works in 2004 entitled “Beyond the Borders, Between the



Trees”, Holland Cotter wrote in the *New York Times* of the “Mongol-style clouds” and “military camouflaged patterns”, stating that the latter, in particular, “introduce an obvious hint of realpolitik”; in 2005, Roberta Smith made note in the *New York Times* of Aram’s “sly, lush recyclings of decorative and religious Persian, Chinese, and Christian motifs”; and in November of the following year, Sarah Bayliss addressed at length the mixture of Iranian and American imagery in Aram’s paintings and drawings, pointing to such references as Persian miniatures and rugs, video game imagery, Renaissance painting, military symbols, and Shi’ite religious posters of the variety found in coffee shops throughout Iran.<sup>8</sup> But to revisit paintings such as those exhibited in Aram’s most recent series, of which included *Mystical Visions Undetected by Night Vision Strengthen the Faith of the Believers and Make their Enemies Scatter* (Fig. 1) and *Blazing Glory* (Fig. 2) (both 2007), iconographic descriptions, such as those above, fail to sharpen any understanding of how these images come to emanate their worlds contained within. To interpret these paintings at the level of iconography is to lose site of their public nature, and to thus rob them of their political potential. In an example such as *Mystical Visions Undetected ...*, the mixed symbols of Iranian and American visual cultures, although political in nature, obscure the lost publicness that haunts these paintings in the most material sense.

In one brief mention of Aram’s series from 2007, Negar Azimi remarked that the drawings and paintings “engage with the delicate creation of visual traditions – whether mythical, political, or spiritual – through symbols”.<sup>9</sup> While this held true for many of the works on display, it becomes necessary, in spite of this, to address these images not as confluences of the mythical, political, or spiritual worlds they convey, but rather to address them as painted material substances within a history of world-making from which they, as images, have been displaced. The lost visual traditions to which Azimi refers have as much to do with the materiality of painting as they do with the contradictory visualisations of mysticism and violence in the histories that interest Aram.

To encounter a painting such as *Mystical Visions Undetected ...*, one might make note of a contradictory visual landscape, in which the tensions between illumination and darkness, visibility and invisibility are rendered with reference to tactical night vision technologies and the tropes of mystical imagining in both Christian and Islamic historical contexts. In an image such as this, Aram’s natural progression through earlier painting techniques becomes apparent: the cloud swirls appropriated from miniatures appear in such early works as *The Battle of So and So* (2004, Fig. 3); the floral motifs derived from Persian carpets originate in works like *Longing* (2001, Fig. 4); the astral bursts consume an image such as *The Gleam of the Morning’s First Beam* (2005, Col. pl. 2); and the camouflage-landscape cross-section carry over from works such as *Making the Desert Bloom* (2003, Fig. 5). The paradox of vision and of the rendering of spiritual phenomena through the application of paint is taken up by Aram in this large canvas, spanning 10 feet in length and as intimate as it is monumental.



Fig. 3  
Kamrooz Aram  
*The Battle of So and So*  
2004  
Oil on canvas  
152.4 x 233.6 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Wilkinson Gallery, London



Fig. 4  
Kamrooz Aram  
*Longing* 2001  
Oil on canvas  
137.1 x 284.4 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Wilkinson Gallery, London

Embedded within the looseness and formative drips that make up this image’s painted technique are perceptual shifts in scale that defy not only the logic of iconographic intelligibility, but of spatial orientation. In so far as the study of symbols and of style can grant only a limited access to an image such as *Mystical Visions Undetected ...*, we are forced to ask what do we really learn of our position in the world when such contradictions are introduced to the visual field, and what is lost when a painted image is surrendered to vision and to the tropes of legibility, or, plainly, what goes unnoticed by vision?

Even if it has been the performance of its own demise, the death of painting in this country has had to do with the protected places in which the form was left to reside. Aram’s canvases have as much in common with the domestic interior worlds referenced by carpet patterning and floral decoration as they do with the politics of the public sphere and the natural world. The traces left by these



Fig. 5  
Kamrooz Aram  
*Making the Desert Bloom*  
2003  
Oil on canvas  
167.6 x 134.6 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Wilkinson Gallery, London

realms are revealed by the ways in which Aram's paintings slowly unravel and deteriorate from within, their colours fading, streaking and bleeding into one another as though at the mercy of natural weather conditions. But even beyond these constructed signs of wear, Aram's is a public art that speaks to painting's place as that which is of architecture and a violent birth into the world, articulating this relationship, as it were, from within the very walls that confine it. W.J.T. Mitchell has continued to be particularly influential in the discussion surrounding this violence within public art, whether physical or symbolic, having pointed out three basic forms that are helpful for understanding how publics can be constructed even from within the private spaces of aesthetic experience. He concludes on this point in his seminal essay "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*", that "an image can be a weapon of violence without ever being used as a weapon; it may represent violence without ever exerting or suffering from it".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the violence evoked by Aram's *Blazing Glory* exists not in the cosmic explosion depicted by the radiating light emanating from the painting's central figure, but in the effacement and deterioration that the image has worked into its very being in the world. *Blazing Glory*, like much of Aram's work, is a gesture of political art making through a tension between the isolation of aesthetic experience and the processes of world-formation to which it, as an image, must ascribe. The tension contained within images such as these reside in their ability to signify, through decoration and ornament, the environments of domestic life haunted by the social structures of the public sphere.

It is only since the experience of painting has been confined to interior spaces that perceptions of its radicality as a form have disappeared. *Mystical Visions Undetected ...* and *Blazing Glory* are two examples in which Aram reveals the social and political terrain of the public sphere from within painting's otherwise deadening context – a context in which the ability to perceive an image is given fully over to vision; in which the communicability of an image's properties is constricted; and in which the debates surrounding the form find the most comfort when restricted to notions of imitation and simulation of the outside world.





Figs. 6–8  
View of public murals  
commissioned by the  
Islamic Republic of Iran's  
Ministry of Culture  
(Tehran, 2005).



Throughout Tehran and much of Iran the painted images of fallen martyrs have come to define the experience of public life in the wake of a tumultuous history of Islamic Revolution (1979) and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). Religious and political murals that range in content from scenes of battle to glorified portraits of the afterlife of those who sacrificed themselves for the cause of the Islamic Republic create a landscape in which the public life of the painted image dominates (Figs. 6–8). These images of communal suffering and the loss of life in the name of “Holy Defense”, are bred out of a time described by Michel Foucault, who experienced the atmosphere surrounding Ayatollah Khomeini’s return from exile first hand, as a willingness to “Let Iran bleed, to make the revolution strong”.<sup>11</sup> The visual culture that has continued to emerge around death and political violence speaks to the very public nature lost by painting’s slow retreat towards private life. Although these painted images represent the visual regime of the Iranian state, we are here reminded of what was once painting’s political potential, and its ability to interface with a social body. It is in the internalisation of this logic, if even detached from its principles, that Kamrooz Aram’s painting is truly public in its scope.

However, any comparison of Aram’s work to the murals that occupy much of the Iranian public sphere would be disingenuous and misleading. Furthermore, as compelling as it may be to point out similarities in Aram’s canvases to examples of political mural painting in Tehran, in so far as both share in a logic of the visualisation of the supernatural and of the pairing of natural and ethereal phenomena, to bring forth these associations at the level of iconography would be a further disservice to our understanding of how either set of images operate. As with the existing body of critical literature that has attempted to thus far frame Aram’s practice in the context of more domestic visual traditions along the lines of symbology, a reading that draws forth a veritable empire of signs from a public domain defined by painting runs a similar risk of being bound by the essential logic of descriptive frameworks. Whatever the references or cues that may be wrested from a painted image’s proposed silence, meaning – if it is meaning that we can glean – comes from what has been rendered invisible, from what has gone unnoticed by vision. While iconographic roadmaps can often take one no further than the places of allegory, or places in which narrative templates come fully stocked with one-dimensional themes, it becomes fully necessary to

redefine our encounter with painted images in order to get at the very heart of *what imaging can be*. Attempts made to decode the array of cultural signifiers that largely make up Aram's visual vocabulary rob these painted images of their political nature as aberrations from the existing image flow, because when an image has been contained by the limitations imposed by allegory it is capable of serving only as a displacement of the death, the trauma, and the social politics of far-off places, rather than as a site of these experiences unto itself.

The images that make up Aram's series "Night Visions and Revolutionary Dreams" do more than represent the tropes of revolutionary life and turmoil, they act as political bodies unto themselves, obstructing and deterring the transparent readability sought after by the imaging regimes that control the current battle over images and over our perceptions of the War on Terror, of radical Islam, and of the West's relationship with the Middle East more generally. These are the burdens upon which painting is born into this world, a proposed "image war" that has continued to occupy much critical debate. It is in this light that I am again reminded of John Currin's take on the outcry that followed the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in Danish newspapers in late 2005, of which, as cited above, he relayed to Calvin Tomkins of the *New Yorker*, "That's when it occurred to me that we might lose this thing – not the Iraq war but the larger struggle." While some paintings come to internalise the present conditions imposed upon images and our very relationship to the wars being waged abroad, others conjure delusions of a larger struggle as if the conditions of warfare are natural occurrences. It has historically been painting's duty to reveal these tensions, and some, like Kamrooz Aram, are better equipped than others to bring the political places of painting to the fore.

1. T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 121.
2. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One Dimensional Art: 1956–1966," *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 2.
3. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent American Painting and Sculpture*, ed. Yve-Alain Bois et al. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986).
4. Calvin Tomkins, "Lifting the Veil: Old Masters, Pornography, and the Work of John Currin," *New Yorker*, January 28, 2008, 61.
5. Tomkins, 67.
6. Clark, 122–3.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Art and the World of Perception," in *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.
8. Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: Kamrooz Aram," *New York Times*, March 19, 2004; Roberta Smith, "KA/VH: RA/AG," *New York Times*, March 18, 2005; and Sarah H. Bayliss, "East Meets West Meets East," *ARTnews* 105, no. 10 (November 2006): 162–4.
9. Negar Azimi, "Kamrooz Aram Night Visions and Revolutionary Dreams," *Bidoun: Arts and Culture from the Middle East* 9 (Winter 2007).
10. W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*," in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University Press, 1992), 38.
11. Michel Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?" in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, ed. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (Chicago: University Press, 2005), 263.