

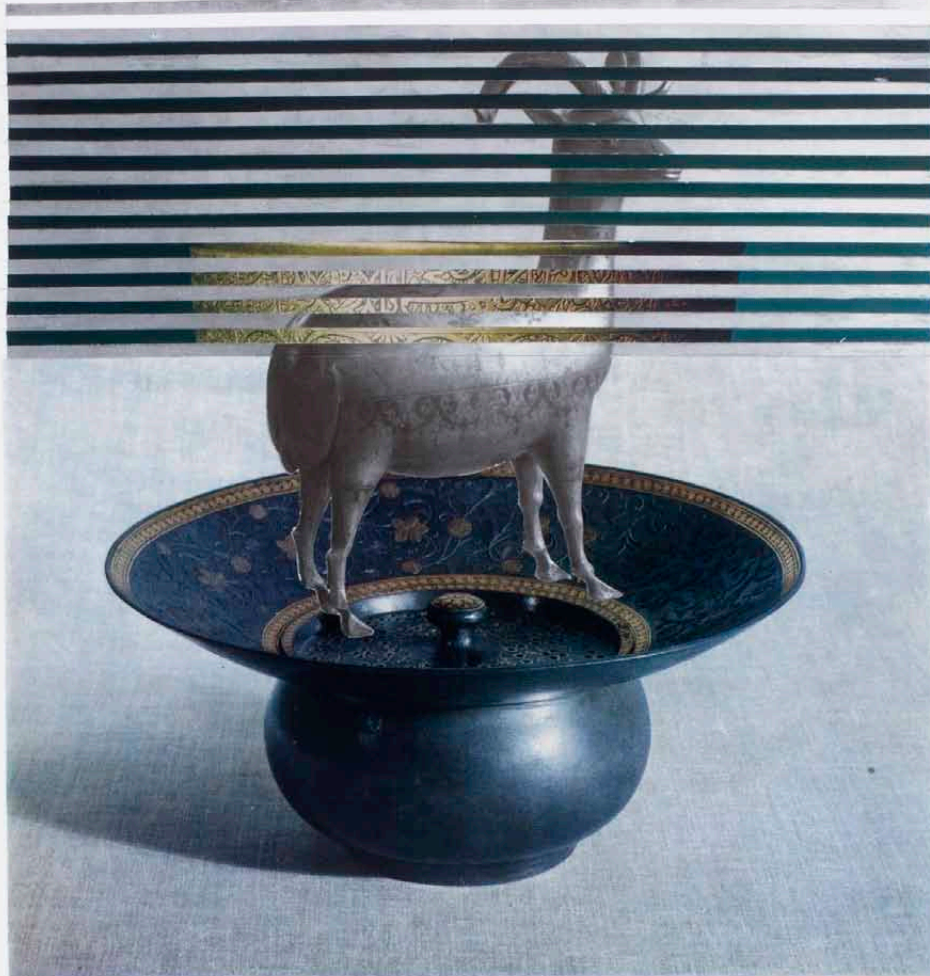
PERRY RUBENSTEIN GALLERY

KAMROOZ ARAM

NEGOTIATIONS

February 18 – March 26, 2011

67. Wash basin. Steel damascened in gold. 19th century
Тазик для умывания. Сталь, насечка золотом. XIX в.



NEGOTIATING HISTORY

Kamrooz Aram in conversation with Arthur Ou

Arthur Ou: This body of work is a departure from your previous work, moving towards something closer to abstraction, although the new paintings are not quite 'abstract' yet, but certainly moving away from pictorialism and narrativity. Can you talk about this new direction?

Kamrooz Aram: In some ways with this new work, I'm actually revisiting ideas and processes that I was interested in early on. All through graduate school I made work that was, as you say, something closer to abstraction. Likewise, although I have been interested in using iconography, I've never considered myself a figurative or narrative painter. But to answer your question, I can certainly say that in the last couple of years, I've been interested in approaching related content through new forms. I'm still interested in how we read symbols and the ways in which what is signified depends so much on context. But with this new work, the process of painting or image-making is central to the content of the work. Rather than investigating certain issues through representing iconography, I am engaging these issues more directly or literally on the canvas.

AO: Can you talk about the notion of the “decorative” or “ornamental” in your new paintings? As well as in the history of painting as such? Are paintings inherently decorative as objects meant to be displayed for a specific kind of viewing? Paintings are fundamentally different from, let’s say, photographs, which contain different levels of content; informational vs. representational, etc. Are you in a deliberate way addressing this aspect of painting?

KA: When I first came to New York, I would go to Persian carpet stores and photograph carpets for source material. I saw these objects as an interesting parallel to painting: While Persian carpets are seen as purely decorative luxury commodities, they originally functioned much in the same way painting has functioned in the West. They were two-dimensional rectangular objects that were lived with in the home and whose language had been developed over years of practice, theory and analysis. Paintings have had a similar history, and many today would argue that painting only serves a decorative purpose in contemporary culture. I may accept the role of Persian carpets as reserved to that of decorative objects today, but I do think that there are still many possibilities for painting to exist as a critical medium in contemporary art.

AO: Following up from the prior question, in the *Fana*’ series, you seem to be bringing in characteristics particular to photography—such as lens flares and overexposure. Can you discuss these new elements?

KA: Many of my paintings have had a dominant central form, from iconography depicting hawks to the most recent use of a central emblematic form. In the *Fana*’ series, the central element framed by the floral pattern is actually a result of disrupting or destroying the image. I have wiped away and sanded down the surface of the painting, resulting in what appears to be a central light-source. *Fana*’ is an Arabic and Persian term meaning “erasure” or “annihilation” and it is used in mystical thought to connote the self-negation one must achieve to reach divine unification. Many Persian carpet designs have been viewed as a diagram of this type of journey.

I like your reference to photography here. I once showed a friend an image of one of these paintings on my phone and he thought that there was a glare from the studio lights. They are at once literal and illusionistic, playing between abstract, process-based painting and something closer to representation.

AO: You seem to be appropriating specific iconic symbols and decorative patterns drawn from historical Persian sources, though using these icons as means to deconstruct their own historicity, so to speak. These paintings are almost the opposite of history paintings, which your previous paintings can be more clearly defined as. I’m curious about your relationship to history, or I should say, histories.

KA: For me, the potential for painting to function critically lies partially in its use as a tool for a certain renegotiation of history, particularly its own, as well as the Orientalist history in which the West has depicted Eastern cultures in whatever way best suits Western hegemony. I want to revisit the Western notion of pattern as necessarily decorative and the view of pattern in non-Western cultures as a lower, less developed form of art.

I have had a complicated relationship to the art and art history in which I was educated. I was always self-conscious of my participation in a history and discourse that I felt was not really mine. There always seemed to be inherent conflicts in this relationship. I felt like I had to somehow negotiate my relationship to this history.

AO: Can you describe the role of geometry in the new paintings?

KA: Geometry first entered the work through the collage series, *7000 Years*. These collages are made from old catalogues of Iranian art, focusing on one book from an exhibition of Iranian art objects covering a span of 7000 years that toured US museums in the mid-1960’s. These objects were loaned to the US from the Iranian government as a gesture of diplomacy. The collages set out to investigate what I’ve been referring to as cultural nostalgia, the romantic and idealistic gaze back at a culture’s glorious past. Similarly, many in the contemporary art discourse tend to look to Modernism as our glorious past, even if they outwardly question or reject its ideals.

The collages are reconstructions of the pages from several of these books. As I made them, I began to think of Adolf Loos’s “Ornament and Crime” (1908), a sort of proto-fascist reaction to the Viennese Secession, in which he identifies Ornament as belonging to “less developed” Eastern cultures. The essay is very interesting and complex in its claims. In fact every time I read the text, I find myself nodding my head at some point before recoiling at its racist implications. Regardless, it begins with the false premise that Ornament serves the same purpose around the world and that it is inherently meaningless and excessive, without acknowledging the significant role that pattern has played in many non-Western cultures. Loos’s assumption that non-Western cultures are less developed than Western culture is used to back up his rejection of Ornament. In the collages, the use of geometric forms is meant to serve as a representation of the type of Modernist ideals for which I believe Loos was setting the stage.

In my paintings, geometry serves more than one purpose. On the one hand, it references flag design, but furthermore, it is a way for me to play out the contradictions I have just described. In many of the paintings there is a struggle for images to exist and at times this struggle is between the geometric forms and the patterns. Which is more significant, which is more central to the content of the work and which is excessive or decorative? In some cases the pattern is central, while the geometry becomes secondary, essentially serving a decorative purpose. Sometimes the geometric shapes are painted with reference to decorative painting techniques.

AO: You have called the body of work “flag paintings”. A flag is almost the ultimate iconic symbol, one that conjures up a wide range of meanings (nationhood, imperialism, branding, corporate/political identity etc.). Can you talk about the significance of this idea?

KA: I began this work after I had made *Generation After Generation, Revolution After Revelation* at LAXART. The paintings in that exhibition were banner-like and set up a ceremonial type of space, leaning against the wall and facing one another in two rows. I thought of that exhibition as propositional, mainly posing questions about the potential for abstraction to engage the social, political and historical issues that I had explored in previous work through the use of iconography. The flag paintings go a step further and engage more directly with the format and proportions of a flag. I see flags as the ultimate representation of a system of belief. I have always been faced with negotiating various systems of belief within my artistic practice as well as my own personal history.

Left:
From the Series “7000 Years”, 2010, Mixed media on paper, 17 x 14 inches (43.2 x 35.6 cm)

Back Cover (Top):
Untitled (Flag #7), 2010, Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches (152.4 x 213.4 cm)

Back Cover (Bottom):
Untitled (Fana’ #7), 2010, Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches (121.9 x 101.6 cm)



Arthur Ou is an artist and writer based in New York. His solo exhibitions include LAXART, Los Angeles (2010), IT Park Gallery, Taipei (2010 and 2005), Hudson Franklin, New York (2007), and the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2000). He has shown in numerous group exhibitions abroad including the *2006 Taipei Biennial*. His work has been featured in publications such as *Blind Spot*, *Art On Paper*, *North Drive Press*, *Art in America* and *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, new edition (Thames and Hudson). His critical texts have been published in *Aperture*, *Afterall.org*, *Bidoun*, *Words Without Pictures*, and *Artforum.com*.

Kamrooz Aram was born in Shiraz, Iran and received his MFA from Columbia University in 2003. Aram has had solo exhibitions at LAXART, Los Angeles, CA (2010); the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASSMoCA), North Adams, Massachusetts (2006) and Wilkinson Gallery, London (2006). His work has been featured in international group exhibitions including *roundabout* (2010), the *Busan Biennale* (2006), P.S.1/MoMA's *Greater New York 2005*, and the *Prague Biennale I* (2003). His work has been published and reviewed in *Art in America*, *Artforum.com*, *The New York Times*, *Asian Art Newspaper*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *The Village Voice*, and the arts and culture segment on *BBC Farsi*, *Tamasha*. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



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