



NAZGOL ANSARINIA

As her new show opens at Dubai's Green Art Gallery, the artist sheds light on the fast-changing nature of Tehran's architecture and cityscape, as well on her own quest to find home in the Iranian capital.

Words by Matthew Wilcox

Nazgol Ansarinia. *Connected Pools*. 2020. Blue plaster. 33.2 x 27.5 x 21.8 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai



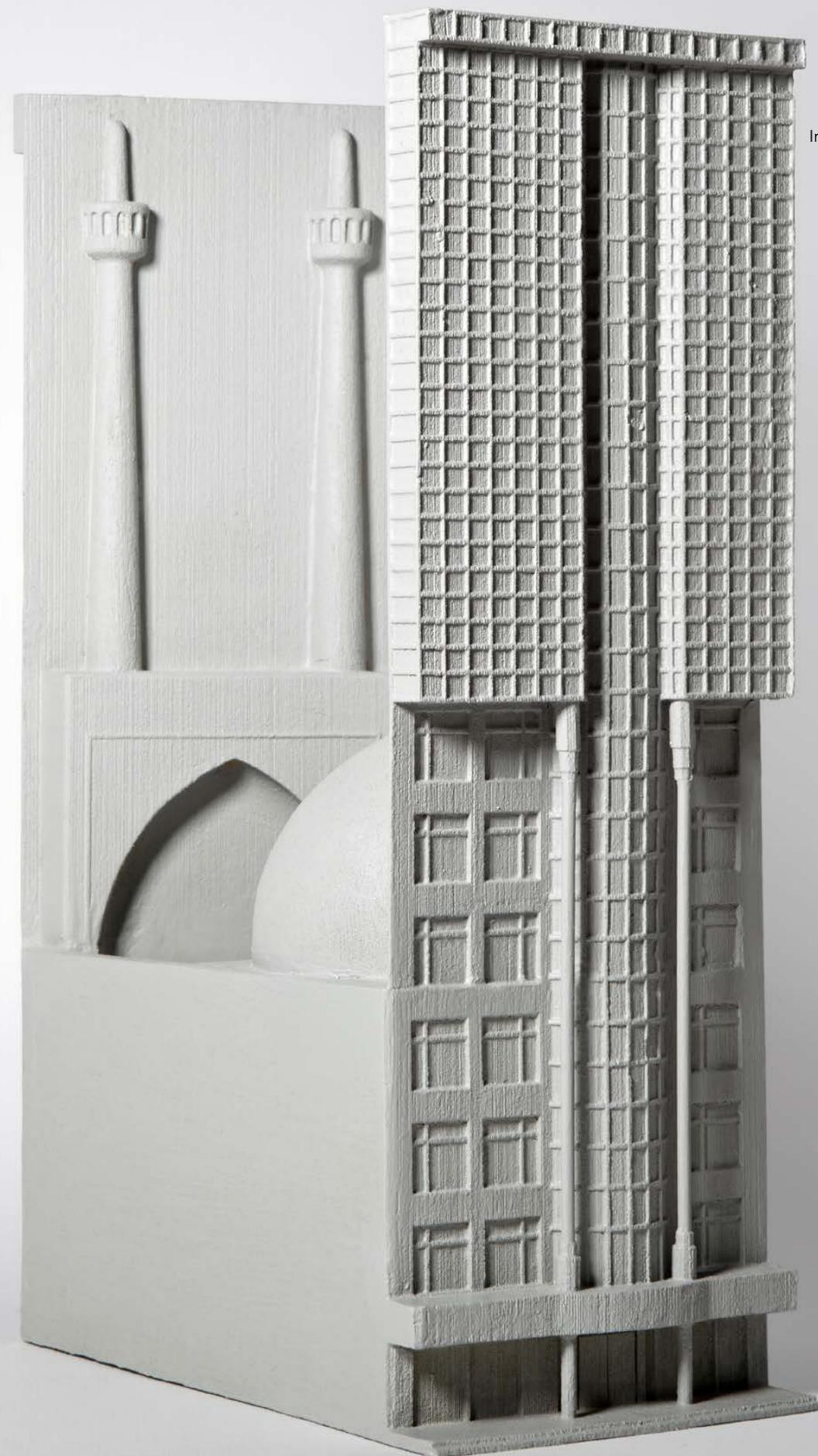
Speaking to Nazgol Ansarinia ahead of the opening of her current show, *Lakes Drying, Tides Rising* at Green Art Gallery in Dubai, we touch upon the relationship between the surface of Tehran and the currents beneath – the uneasy coexistence of old and new, of continuity and change – within her home city, a place that is now home again for her. Ansarinia, whose American-inflected English is by turns articulate, lyrical and precise, describes the difficulty of her decision to return to Iran in 2007, having left to study in London at the age of 17. “When you hold an Iranian passport, getting a visa is always a challenge,” she explains. “So, moving from the States back to Iran meant that I may get stuck or lose the opportunity of being in the States. But I was 23 and I had already lived abroad for seven years – I would say my adulthood had been shaped in the West.”

Ansarinia moved back to Tehran after having trained initially in London and San Francisco and later moving to New York for work. Asked about the decision to return to Iran, she acknowledges that it was a big decision but also a necessary one. “I was very close to my grandparents, but they were getting older and I just couldn’t think of not seeing them for so many years, you never knew what was going to happen,” she says. “So that was a very strong, emotional reason for the move. But it was also a career choice. I

didn’t want to work as a designer anymore. I wanted to do my own projects. And I was hearing quite a lot about the art scene in Iran. It was a time where Iranian artists had started to show abroad, so I thought it was an exciting place to move back to. If I had stayed in New York, I probably would have had to work full time and not been able to do the things that I was interested in.”

Once back in Iran, Ansarinia found life hard at first. “For the first couple of years I struggled to find my place again,” she admits. “But I don’t regret it. I don’t think I would be where I am now if I hadn’t moved back. It has brought me many inspirations and possibilities, as well as the space in which to grow.” Her bravery in returning was vindicated when, in 2009, two years after coming back, she won the prestigious Abraaj Group Art Prize for her work *Rhyme and Reason*, a handwoven carpet that played upon the traditional floral motifs of the Persian carpet as a way of presenting scenes of contemporary life in Iran. In the years since, her work has evolved to incorporate a series of thoughtful reflections upon the tensions between public and private worlds in Tehran, while the city is made and unmade around her.

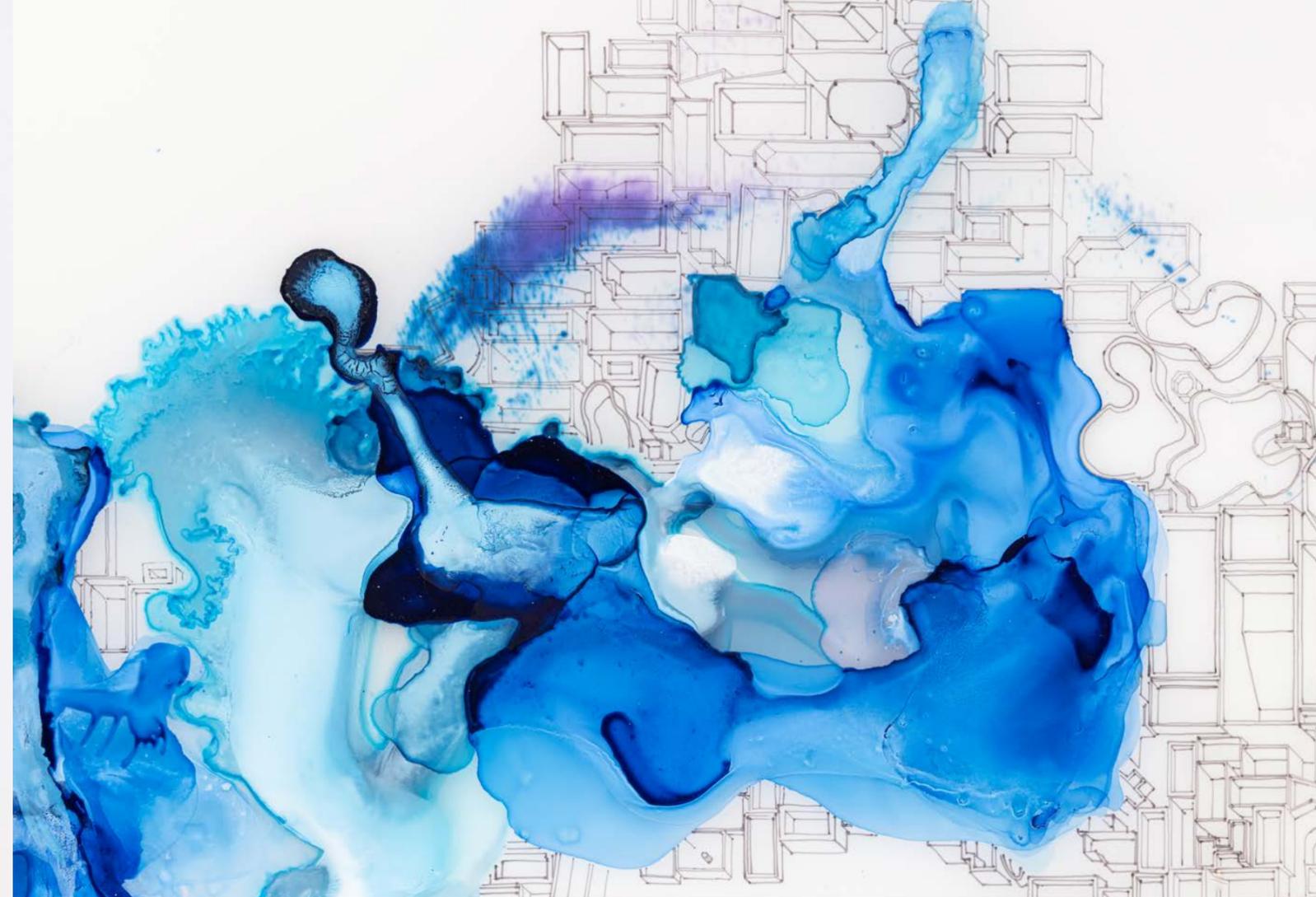
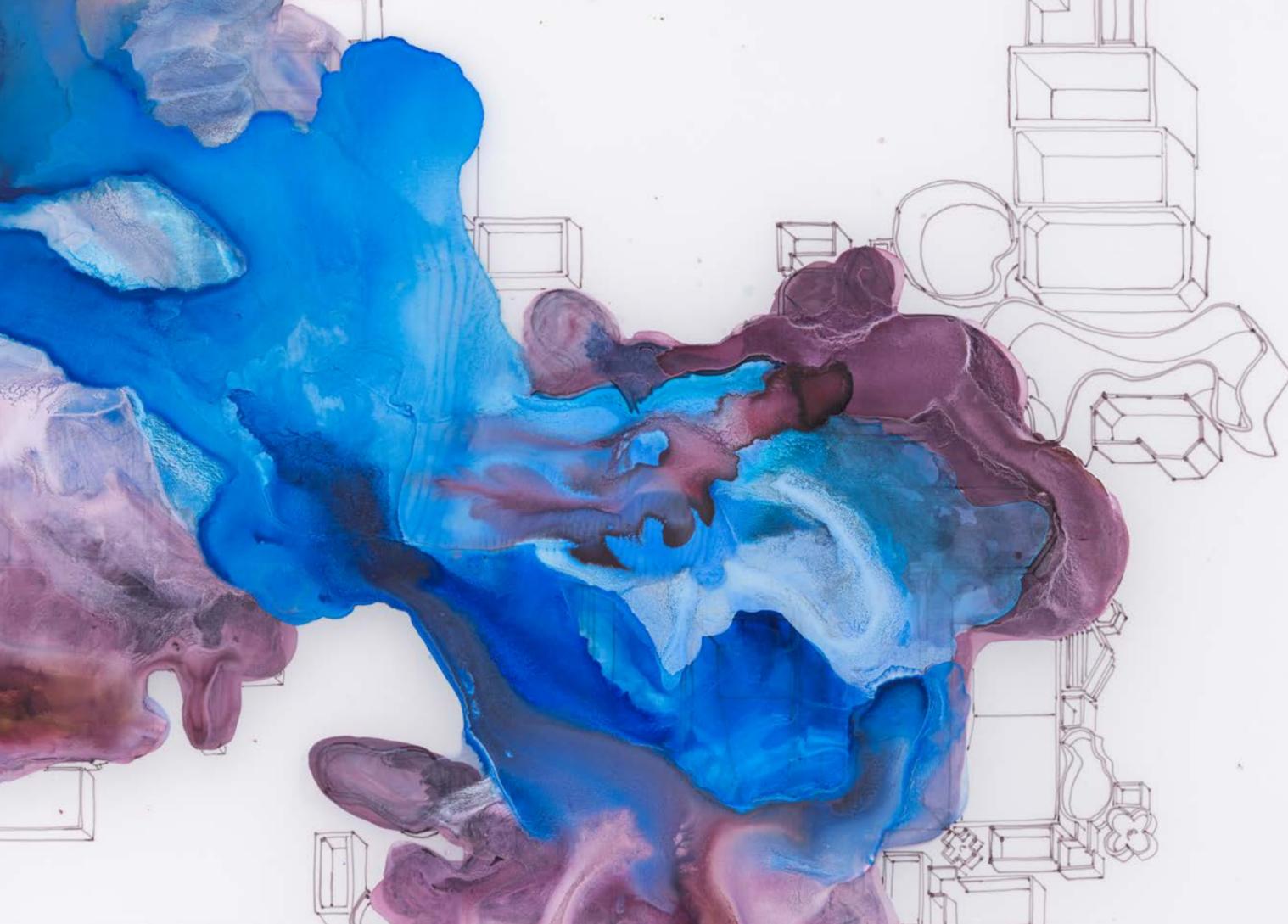
Tehran is certainly fertile terrain for exploration. With a population of 14 million and an average age of around 31 years, preconceptions of Iran as a fundamentally conservative and



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Commercial high rise / mosque with turquoise dome on Molasarda street, Fabrications*. 2013. In collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar. Plaster, resin and paint. 31.50 x 20 x 13 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai

Nazgol Ansarinia. *Dissolving Substances*. 2020. Still. 2 channel video.
3 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai





Nazgol Ansarinia. *Lakes drying tides rising*. 2022. Photography by Anna Shtraus. Images courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai

elderly society need to be kept under review. A recent show by Ansarinia, *Pools and Voids*, dealt directly with the legacy of the Islamic revolution by modelling the abandoned swimming pools of Tehran – the strange deserted legacy of pre-revolutionary plans that predicated the city's development on Los Angeles. The continued existence of these structures is a curious omission in a city that is seeking to build on every available inch of space. Against the unchanging background of the snow-capped Elburz mountain range, frantic construction is levelling whole neighbourhoods, one building at a time. The orchards and winding narrow streets of the city's historic centre have given way to wider, straighter streets and outward-looking buildings.

Ansarinia's sculpture series *Fabrications* (2013) dealt directly with the speed of change in the Iranian capital. Since 2004, Tehran's Bureau of Beautification has commissioned hundreds of murals and Ansarinia has spoken of how she was drawn to the irony inherent in the choice of subject for these. As the city has lost ever more of its open spaces, the authorities have favoured

the painting of images of village scenes or gardens with blue skies onto the existing buildings. "They started with revolutionary slogans written in calligraphic styles, or at least they were when I was growing up during the Iran-Iraq War," recalls Ansarinia. "It was all portraits of the martyrs of the war. These murals would change every couple of years, reflecting the socio-political atmosphere or mood of the city."

The more recent murals, she says, seem to represent a kind of nostalgia for the Iran that the new buildings have been destroying. "*Fabrications* is about memorialising the murals and looking at them as part of what one might say is the architectural history of the city." The architectural element is surprisingly strong in some murals and works to incorporate existing features. "There's a trompe l'oeil thing going on," Ansarinia explains. "They might take already existing architectural elements from the building they were painting the mural on – let's say a tiny bathroom window – then extend it and make it into a window from a traditional house."

This mixing of two "architectures" encouraged Ansarinia to

take things further herself by modelling the real buildings and incorporating the fantasy architecture of the murals within these three-dimensional reconstructions. "I thought, okay, what happens if I take this one step ahead and actually give this two-dimensional painting a three-dimensional style of existence?" The effect, she says, is as "unsettled as the Tehran of today, a city longing for the illusion of its past while restlessly bulldozing over itself to build a fantasy of its future."

The rapid pace of change has made the search for permanence equally challenging. In the spring of 2016, Ansarinia set out to acquire a home of her own in the city. The hunt for somewhere suitable was to consume her life for more than six months and she describes how the process of searching allowed her to pass through the physical surface of the built environment and step inside, revealing another side of her home city, an experience that was particularly unusual for her as a woman.

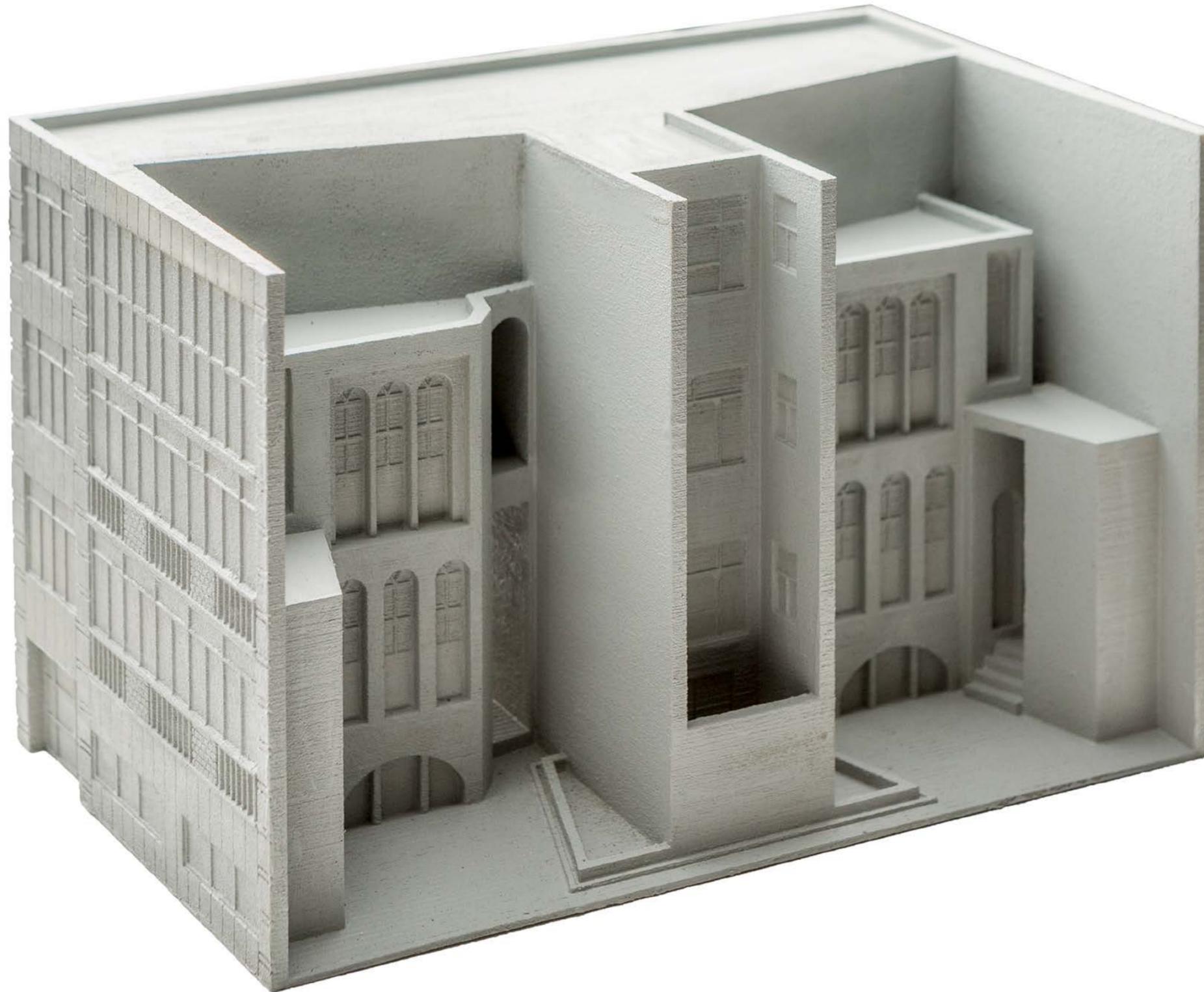
"I got to enter so many houses of different people from various religious, economic and social backgrounds," she recalls. "None

of the houses I visited was empty. They all had people living in them. And I would be shown everything, even inside the closets." She describes it as a very strange and intimate experience, and one that "really stayed with me for a long time."

She had a particular sort of property in mind. "I wanted something that was made before the revolution, because most of those houses have a very different feeling," she explains. "They have big windows and higher ceilings." Ironically, having set her mind on acquiring one of these buildings, the home she eventually settled upon was a small traditional structure from the 1930s, built around an inner courtyard and a more introspective space than she had imagined: "When I saw the house, all of my criteria changed because I fell in love with this tiny sort of fortress ... everything is looking in."

It is paradoxical that this most outward-looking of artists has found a home for herself in one of the few buildings in Tehran without a view of the city that so much of her work has sought to document. She is equally at home, it seems, with irony. ■

Nazgol Ansarinia. *Residential building / Shah-neshin and veranda on Satarkhan highways. Fabrications*, In collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar. 2013. Plaster, resin and paint. 13.50 x 20.50 x 15.50 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai



WHERE IS HOME?

For this issue, we have chosen the complex theme of home. Where is it? What is it? How much does it matter? We explore these and other aspects of a concept which is familiar to us all but can assume so many different forms, from the physical and geographical to the purely metaphorical and emotional.

Through the works and words of artists and other creatives, we learn what home signifies to them, how the power of domestic memories drives their inspiration, why being away from home – either by choice or by force – is so significant, and what role architecture and physical objects play in our own personal construction of the place we call home.

Reviews

Shreyas Karle at Grey Noise	90
Warehouse412	102

Profiles

Nazgol Ansarinia	94
Tasneem Alsultan	106
Noor Abed	140

Interviews

Nelly El Sharkawy	120
Munira Al Sayegh	136

Features

Home in Palestine	114
Artists in the diaspora	126

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WHERE IS HOME?

ART DUBAI. TASNEEM ALSULTAN. ARTISTS IN THE DIASPORA.
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HOME IN PALESTINE. WAREHOUSE421

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