

MOJGAN HABIBI

BEHIND THE WORDS

31 January - 18 February 2018

Mojgan Habibi's PhD research is concerned with the use of text by politically motivated Iranian visual artists. Hidden or secondary meanings contained in prose become more evident in times of political or religious censorship, and the use of text in contemporary art can direct the viewer to content beyond the literal meaning.

Behind the Words is an installation consisting of five individual works, which are connected by an underlying narrative describing political participation in Iran. Habibi elaborates specifically on the Persian variation of the tradition of using writing in political visual art. The topics of censorship, the role of the individual in society, lack of freedom to express political opinion, institutionalised gender inequality, systematic erosion of basic human rights, political participation and non-violent resistance are addressed subtly by Habibi, hidden within poetry and woven into works where political content is masked through aesthetic beauty.

Habibi's works use metaphor, allegory, poetry and references to Persian mythology and history as vehicles to discuss contemporary Iranian politics. Her carefully crafted objects and installations are made from clay, some are fired, and all contain textual references ranging from Persian script to abstract calligraphy.



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THE UNIVERSITY
GALLERY

می بر خورشید و فریاد تو علی زار از روی

چو درخشانند در کاشا برو این بخت باذکار

با شمع بدین محضر اندکوا نه سخن بر ایندهم از پائنا

بسیار که از دنیا که این بر این سخنوا





BEHIND THE WORDS

2016-2018
oxidation fired earthenware, waxed cotton string
470 x 280 x 37 cm

Habibi deals with the issue of peaceful political resistance in her work. In *Behind The Words* individual letters are strung in space to become imprisoned. The letters signify resistance. The white slip on one side refers to censorship, hiding what is behind. Each letter and symbol is a tool of communication, even if imprisoned and subjected to censorship.

The installation incorporates many abstract ceramic components.

These pieces resemble oversized letters and symbols, each carefully tied, suspended and restrained with coloured string. Arranged in seven rows, the letters and symbols are abstract and illegible.

The first impression of the work is of entangled objects or a veil or curtain, but closer observation reveals that each letter is intentionally placed, independently from all others. The letters are made from fired, brown, terracotta clay with white slip on one side.

The letters are cursive, resembling handwriting, and each form is unique. Made from coiled tubes of clay, the simplicity of the Habibi's process is contrast to the scale, which lends authority to each symbol.

KAVEH THE BLACKSMITH

2016-2018
slip Terracotta clay
1.7 x 33.1 m

Iranian artists use references to Persian mythology to discuss contemporary political events. In *Kaveh the Blacksmith*, Mojgan Habibi uses a story from the *Shahname* (Book of Kings) by the Persian poet Ferdowsi (ca. 940 CE – 1020 CE) in which Kaveh, a humble blacksmith, stands up against Zahak, an unjust ruler.

The original literary work can be interpreted to speak of non-violent resistance. Kaveh, who had seen seventeen of his eighteen sons killed by the King Zahak, enters the royal palace to ask that the life of his last sons be spared. The king Zahak agrees, under the condition that Kaveh signs a declaration of support for King Zahak. The blacksmith refuses, destroys the declaration and leaves the palace to mobilise others.

Habibi has reproduced part of the Kaveh story in Persian calligraphy on the gallery walls using unfired clay slip. This work

describes political participation by an individual - the brave decision to speak out against injustice, the ability to say no to unjust contracts, and the possibility to assemble and associate.

Kaveh exclaimed, "Your Majesty, I am Kaveh, I am seeking justice. Grant me Justice! I am a humble blacksmith, yet flames descend on me from his majesty. If you are the King of seven kingdoms, why is all this suffering for us?" The King said to Kaveh "Sign the document." Kaveh responded, "I will not testify to the King's legitimacy, nor will I ever fear the King." As Kaveh left the King's palace, people gathered around him in the market place. With rage, Kaveh roared and urged the world to demand justice.

Out of a piece of leather from his blacksmith's apron, he made a banner. Kaveh fastened the banner onto the tip of a spear. Out of the market place, the dust rose high. His sign was ornamented with silk and jewels and given the title of 'the Kaviani Banner'. In darkness, the banner did shine like a sun, and gave warmth and hope to the hearts of all people.

Translation by Mojgan Habibi



BURNING LIBRARIES

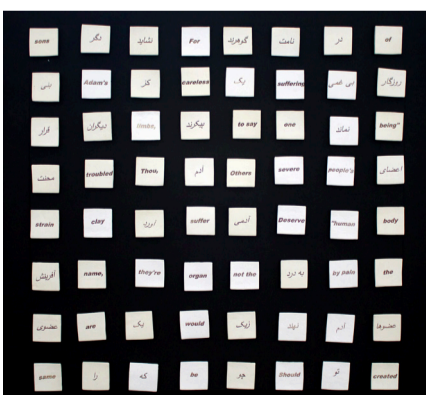
2015-2018
handmade earthenware fired, discarded offcuts of glazed porcelain wall tiles, 60 x 129 x 129 cm

Burning Libraries is concerned with oppression through political censorship. While the burning of contemporary books is largely symbolic, the burning of libraries containing original manuscripts is often an act of senseless, irreversible destruction. This work consists of hand built, oxidation fired, earthenware pieces resembling letters, shards and offcuts of ceramic tablets with or without text.

Oppressive rulers and iconoclasts have ritualistically carried out the burning of books and of libraries containing works by those with a different political opinion. There is evidence of violence in this installation, but also a poetic sense of hope. The burnt remnants are not ash from burnt books but ceramic, which needs fire.

THE WORD IN ACTION

2015-2018
Handmade ceramic fired and glazed tiles
124 x 122 cm



The *Word in Action*, 2015-18 consists of a number of handmade ceramic tiles containing the words of a Persian poem *Bani Adam*, by Saadi (ca. 1200 CE - 1291 CE) and its English translation. The poem describes how humans are connected to each other, like the limbs of a single body, outlining the importance of sharing, empathy and love. The tiles

are attached with magnets and the viewer is invited to rearrange them in order to create new interpretations of the original poem. This could alter the meaning of the poem, but its message could also be reinforced.

There is also the possibility of a spiritual reading, acknowledging that we ought to have empathy with and love for others.

By rearranging tiles, the viewer becomes a metaphor for political change through individual action. The viewer is transformed into a participant and contributor by creating a new poem with new meaning, or by remaking the original poem. The possibility of the viewer's physical engagement with the work allows for other interpretations, even if the physical engagement is only imagined.

*Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;
For they're created of the same clay.
Should one organ be troubled by pain,
Others would suffer severe strain.
Thou, careless of people's suffering,
Deserve not the name, "human being".*

Turquoise Paradox speaks about the oppression of women. The work is critical of the ongoing use of traditional symbols and behaviours, which are demeaning or reinforce ideas of inequality. The ceramic vessels are arranged to spell a Farsi word with three letters. If read from right to left, روز (Roz) translates as Day and if read from left to right زور (Zor) translates as Constrict.

The installation consists of a number of thrown, oxidation-glazed, earthenware vessels, in a teacup shape with a constricted centre, placed on a wooden box. This shape reinforces a stereotypical view of an idealised female form and can be interpreted as a metaphor for

oppression. Each vessel has a hole in the base, which prevents it from holding liquid. The vessels are lit from below, to become containers for light. Instead of liquid, there is a directional light in each vessel shining out. Light coming out of an oriental vessel could, in a cursory reading, be interpreted as a reference to a genie in a bottle. An initial superficial and orientalist reading is welcome with this work because, paradoxically, it sets in place a critical position from which a non-oriental viewer can observe the work with a degree of objectivity: to be able to see that the oppression of women and the denial of gender equality are wilful political injustices.



TURQUOISE PARADOX

2015-2018
thrown oxidation glazed earthenware vessels, lights, wooden box
120 x 80 x 30 cm