



## Power Play: Shahpour Pouyan at Lawrie Shabibi

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Shahpour Pouyan's show at Lawrie Shabibi, 'Full Metal Jacket' is full of elegantly balanced oppositions, interweaving objects of brutality and ugliness with ornamentation and beauty. At its core the work tells a story of the universal human struggle for power, and for the chance to leave our mark on history and be remembered, drawing upon a breadth of cultural references, from Persian motifs to biblical stories.

Upon entering Lawrie Shabibi's space, you are confronted with five dangling rockets. These gently swaying forms are unnerving given their anthropomorphism, arising from the fact that these rockets are constructed from helmets and chain mail. They have the appearance of streamlined warriors flanked by fins decorated with engravings of flowers and birds. The intricate engravings lend these objects of war a delicate feminine quality that juxtaposes the more overt masculinity of their phallic shape.

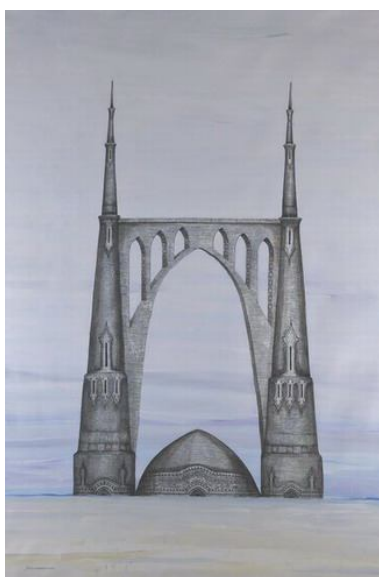
The rockets are a blend of traditional and modern warfare; to create them Pouyan worked closely with traditional armourers and metal smiths, morphing the armour and antique-style military helmets into warheads, inlaying the engraved calligraphy and ornamentation with silver and gold. This degree of authenticity and use of precious metals adds a further dimension to the sculptures – rather than simply appropriating the language of wealth and power, Pouyan has actually instilled these objects with a material value (beyond their value as an object of art).



From the rockets, spectacular in their luxurious surfaces and the associations they call to mind of the glory of war, and things going boom, tinting the skies with fire and billowing smoke – all the grandness of apocalyptic destruction – we find ourselves at another sort of spectacle with Pouyan's hoof works. Disembodied hooves float in vacuums of space, phantom limbs topped with caps decorated with ornamental calligraphic texts. The basis of the work lies in Iranian miniature paintings, particularly those of Siah Qalam, but the use of hooves also refers to the cow as a symbol of power in the ancient cultures of Sumer, Babylon, Iran and Hinduism.

But separated from their body, the hooves are less a symbol of power than that of the aspiration for power. These lonely beings with their vain attempts of grandeur are more than faintly ridiculous, provoking mixed feelings of pity and contempt. In the larger paintings, one executed in a gaudy gold, the other a sickly green, the hooves become grotesque and detestable, but the smaller ink works are more successful in arousing our sympathy for their solitary plight

The relationship between power, solitariness and absurdity is critical to Pouyan's view of the nature of power. He explains 'power in the form of dictatorship has a domineering yet grotesque appearance; in the paintings of hooves, the bottom of the hooves with forms recalling mountains reference the violence and heaviness of power. But power has this issue of loneliness with it...Solitude for me always goes hand in hand with this feeling of the rejection and buffoonery of a powerful person. This is one prevalent element of Iranian culture - the mocking of power and dictatorship. Mockery and ridiculing power is one way for people to tolerate it.'



Also included in the exhibition are two paintings from Pouyan's Tower series, each depicting twin peaked buildings, in silver and gold. These structures point to architecture found in Iranian culture such as minarets and medieval Persian tomb towers, but also to the work of visionary Western architects like Etienne Louis Boullée and Claude Nicolas Ledoux (the former having designed plenty of tombs in his time, including the design for a monumental Cenotaph for *Isaac Newton*).

When exploring issues of power, architecture is an inescapable field, being one of the most obvious tools that civilizations have used as an expression of dominance and wealth, from the Pyramids in Egypt to the imposing silhouette of Dubai's own Burj Khalifa. As Pouyan notes, 'Architecture is the best interpretation of human ambitions'. Architects themselves have assumed roles of supreme power – one is reminded of the plans by one of Modernism's seminal architects, Le Corbusier, for entire cities designed to better not just peoples' lives, but peoples' natures.



Pieter Bruegel's 'Tower of Babel'

Pouyan points to the biblical account of The Tower of Babel as one of his favourite stories from childhood. The myth, which tells the story of mankind trying to build a tower up to heaven, and its theme of the human quest for the Ideal looms over the exhibition. Pouyan says 'I don't see any difference between the international space station and Tower of Babel...it is a parallel curiosity and ambition to reach and achieve endless power.' Against this backdrop, the rocket sculptures take on a dual role of vessels of discovery aiming to reach the glory of the heavens, and vessels of destruction to conquer these new heights.

Aside from the aspirations of achieving some sort of Utopia, Pouyan sees a 'hunger for immortality' in the grandiose architectural feats of human civilisation, which act as 'a weapon against time in order to conquer it'. There is no arguing that architecture can provide the longest lasting testament to a human life or civilization – if the human race was to be wiped out tomorrow, the remnant of our existence that would remain the longest is the Hoover Dam. It must be noted that not all the human race has the privilege to engage in this egotism, architectural or otherwise; though we may share the desire to be remembered in some way, few of us are actually able to achieve this in any meaningful way.

It would be intriguing to know Pouyan's thoughts on the flip side of human civilisation, those who do not succeed in memorialising themselves, and those who are willing to bow to the will of others. It is as inherent in some human nature to submit as it is in others to dominate, and people are all too willing to worship powerful figures, be it a religious deity or a celebrity. Is this something to be criticised in the same way human arrogance is? And if a figure of power and domination is knocked down, do the slaves rise to fill the power vacuum, becoming the masters in a self-perpetuating cycle? These are all questions left unanswered by the show, but perhaps to be answered by civilization itself.

*Full Metal Jacket* by Shahpour Pouyan is displayed at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery until 8th June 2011