

# Shahpour Pouyan

# TEHRAN DAYS



By Kevin Jones

## Day One: War

“There is something in Persian culture that loves to mourn.” At the wheel of his ramshackle Peugeot 405 on a sunny June day, Shahpour Pouyan drives down Tehran streets rendered eerily deserted by the 27th death anniversary of the Imam Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I mull over his remark—somewhere between historical observation and societal critique—as gigantic black flags billow above public squares and atop buildings, while smaller varieties, like pert military standards, flap along the contours of roads, bridges and walkways.

Mourning in Iranian culture is emotional and shared, and this particular breed of national mourning is expressed in a proliferation of imagery: Khomeini headshots had conquered posters, televisions, LED displays, even intrusive screens crammed into neighborhood parks. Billboards of single hands holding snapshot-size depictions of the former Supreme Leader, echoing Shi’ite martyrology, function like images-in-images, further insisting on the importance of repeatedly materializing the person who is lost.

Although I was oblivious to the commemoration of Khomeini’s death when I made arrangements to spend a few days in Tehran with Pouyan, my timing could not have been better: this single event, and how it both emptied yet engulfed the city, galvanized many of the strands running through the artist’s practice. Power, for a start. Power and patriarchy. Power and ideology. Power and peril. Pouyan explores expressions of power, as any gallery press release will tell you, but his use of beauty—ornament, detail, seduction—as a strategy in this interrogation is his undeniable hallmark. Obsession. As in the ceaseless return to certain images—of warfare and weaponry, Persian miniatures, vanished architecture—much like the mourning reflex of obsessing on the image of the deceased. Finally, contradiction. Though he has lived in the United States for the past six years, Pouyan is deeply versed in Persian cultural history, with academic bona fides and a university teaching stint to boast of. Yet he is oddly out of sorts with what he calls “today’s Iran.” This tension between the cultural past and present, how they intersect and overlap, punctuates his work as much as it did our itinerary throughout Tehran on this uncannily timely encounter.

Honarmandan Park in Tehran’s downtown is a slight square of grass patches dotted by brick buildings and modern sculptures, including an early Parviz Tanavoli work. The park—a stone’s throw from Pouyan’s childhood home, into which the family moved after leaving Isfahan, where the artist was born in 1979, the year of the Iranian Revolution—was once a military barracks before being leveled by a missile during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). “We were surrounded by military bases and buildings taken over by armed forces after the Revolution,” he recalls as we turn into the park, its entrance newly clogged by several screens across which archival images of the Imam Khomeini tumbled in clumsy PowerPoint-style animations. Whatever cosmopolitan flavor this neighborhood emitted when seven-year-old Pouyan roamed its streets—an Indian restaurant called “Tanduri,” Armenian playmates and a garrulous German neighbor—was secondary to the predominance of well-to-do families living in the shadows of the bases and barracks at the time. It was during this period in 1986 that the Iran-Iraq conflict shifted into strategic urban areas, a phase known as the War of the Cities: the violence of war exploded on the artist’s very doorstep.

Pouyan’s was one of these families living near the targeted military bases. His father, the head of the electronic and navigation section of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force headquarters in Tehran, had been educated in navigational-systems engineering in the United States prior to the Revolution and, like many of his generation, returned with ambitions for his country. As a child, Pouyan loved to draw and paint, and much of his early output adorned the backs of wayward pages excerpted from his father’s binders of military diagrams, instructions, illustrations and schemas



(Previous spread)  
(From left to right) **PROJECTILE 3, 2, 5, 1** and **4**, 2011, iron, brass and gold, dimensions variable. Installed for the exhibition “Full Metal Jacket” at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 2011.

(This page)  
**PROJECTILE 4**, 2011, iron, brass and gold, 180 x 80 x 116 cm.

(Opposite page)  
**PROJECTILE 4** (detail), 2011, iron, brass and gold, 180 x 80 x 116 cm.

Unless stated otherwise, all images courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.



of warplanes such as the F-4, F-14 and F-15. On one side of the paper, the technological minutiae of objects of war; on the other, expressions of a budding artist’s wonderment at the advanced apparatuses of modern weaponry.

His sculptural series “Projectiles” (2011– ) illustrates how this childhood wonderment has ripened into a complex interrogation of power as manifested in objects of destruction. Featured in Dubai gallery Lawrie Shabibi’s 2011 show “Full Metal Jacket,” curated by Tehran-based Ali Bakhtiari, and more recently in 2016 in NYU’s Grey Art Gallery’s group show “Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran,” these slender, suspended missile-like sculptures are immediately arresting, particularly when presented, as was the case in Dubai, in a group of five: they share a solemn collective charisma, yet are each strikingly unique. An ornate helmet crowns a rounded shaft of chain mail, itself punctuated by metallic rings, from which protrude blade-like fins and razor-sharp rudders. The metal work on these iron and brass appendages is wildly intricate, etched with floral and animal motifs, while the rings and solid metal helmet, inlaid with gold, are adorned with dense, spirited calligraphy that spell out poems and verses excavated from medieval Persian and Mongol history books. In *Projectile 4* (2011), the downward-pointing wings just below the helmet seem to propel it upward, while the curved, fin-like rudders at its tail splay out, connoting imminent lift-off. The weighty sumptuousness of the wings is offset by the mesh-like chain mail, the whole apparatus conflating the rarefied sophistication of the armorer’s craft with the brute impact of a warhead.

Monumental though they may appear, “Projectiles” looks vaguely anthropomorphic. The helmet, the chain-mail spine, fins-cum-limbs—there is a sense of costume pageantry when they are viewed in a group, as if standing before a troupe of performers from some Muharram passion play, a Shi’ia commemoration of the martyr of the Imam Hussein during the first month of the Islamic calendar. The multiplicity of readings, though, does not diminish the immediacy of the work. In a single cogent gesture, Pouyan has fused Iranian history to the country’s present militarization.

**Beauty and brutality, once again, are uncomfortable, and uncanny, accomplices as two cultural histories collide in one synchronic gesture.**



(This page, left)  
**HOOF**, 2012, from the series “Hoof” (2010–12), acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 193 x 109.2 cm.

(This page, right)  
**HOOF**, 2010, from the series “Hoof” (2010–12), acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 175 x 112 cm.

(Opposite page)  
**UNTHINKABLE THOUGHT**, 2014, acrylic and glazed ceramic, dimensions variable.

Two series of paintings and drawings—“Hoof” (2010–12), shown as part of “Full Metal Jacket” in Dubai, and “Aggregate” (2013), featured in a 2013 group show at Lawrie Shabibi—further unpack the workings of power. In the former, playful paintings of a single floating bull hoof, crowned with a comical, gilded helmet, parody the clumsy social climber anxious to acquire the trappings of power and wealth, the titular appendage being symbolic of power throughout Asian mythology and religions. “Aggregate” picks up where “Projectiles” left off in its exploration of military-might-meets-aesthetic-endeavor. In the three large-scale drawings, an image of an engine from a V-2 rocket, a German-produced ballistic missile, is rendered in gleaming gold or silver leaf, endowing it with a religious amulet-like quality. The nodule-crowned, chalice-like chunk is superimposed on architectural plans for an Ottoman mosque, a Christian cathedral and a Buddhist stupa, thus concatenating weaponry and ideology, technology and belief systems.

Parody, as these works hint, is never far from the surface in Pouyan’s practice. *Jacob’s Ladder* (2014), the artist’s only purely performative work to date, staged on the grounds of the Untitled art fair in Miami, summons tropes of evacuation operations to upend the idea of salvation. Performed at a time of day known as “nautical twilight”—a moment of heightened military security, as the horizon is visible, but terrestrial objects cannot be clearly discerned—a helicopter circled the fair grounds for a few moments, as an on-board loudspeaker blasted “We won’t leave you behind.” While the hilarity of the choice of site, as collectors milled about nibbling aperitif biscuits and the accompanying critical stings were lost on no one, the gesture is probably more meaningfully linked to Pouyan’s youthful experience of war than any art-world cage-rattling. “I knew we couldn’t be saved,” he reveals from our terrace perch over Honarmandan Park, recalling memories of overheard conversations between his father and his military peers. “I knew that there was no air defense system to stop or shut down the Scud missiles, so salvation was never going to happen.” Indeed, when the missile hit the neighboring barracks in 1986, it ignited the Pouyans’ flight from Tehran to seek refuge “four cities away,” as he remembers. The trauma of this period, it is safe to say, lingers.

A different historical trauma was evoked by a work in Pouyan’s first solo show in the United Kingdom, entitled “History Travels

at Different Speeds,” at London’s Copperfield Gallery in the fall of 2015. On the floor of the gallery, below a wall hung with works from the artist’s “Miniatures” series (2008–), lay a golden crucifix. On closer inspection, the upper part of the cross suggests a police baton, the metal ribbed as if for gripping, its extremities capped. The instrument tapers off to a softly rounded, almost penile tip. *Memorial Cross for Pope Urban VI* (2010), like much of Pouyan’s work, is instantly understood, without falling into the trap of being a one-liner. The work in fact straddles two historical moments occurring in the same year, but on two different calendars. The ferociously suppressed Green Movement of 2010 when protesters took to the streets in the wake of Ahmadinejad’s contested presidential victory, which is the year 1389 on the Iranian calendar, overlaps with the violence surrounding Pope Urban VI’s reform of the clergy in the Gregorian year 1389. Beauty and brutality, once again, are uncomfortable, and uncanny, accomplices as two cultural histories collide in one synchronic gesture.

## Day Two: Disillusionment

Tehran’s Ferdows Gardens, in the affluent northern part of the city, is a former summer residence of the Qajar family, a ruling dynasty (1785–1925) known both for having jump-started Iran’s modernization, and severely decimated its territorial holdings, having lost much of the Caucasus to the Russians throughout the 19th century. One of their palaces survives today, and was transformed in 2002 into the Cinema Museum of Iran. “Look at this hodgepodge of styles,” grumbles Pouyan as we walk past the busy neoclassical facade of the palace museum, its gaudy, Corinthian columns elevated atop a pompous, U-shaped stairway. “All the Persian-ness has been decorated out of it. That’s the Qajar

style.” Settling down in a nearby café with the artist, I’m struck by the equal intensity of his respect for this fundamental “Persian-ness,” and his reproach of the Iranian cultural scene, particularly its art world.

The artist’s path through this particular world started in 2004 with a BFA, then an MFA, both in painting from Art University, Tehran, which is where his dissatisfaction began as he was confronted with a system he continually characterizes as both elitist and parochial. “I took the national exam for the MFA and was ranked 12th in the whole country,” he explains. “But the only good part of the Art University was finding a good friend—Rokni Haerizadeh, who was a young, energetic and supportive artist.” A 2007 residency at the International Cité des Arts in Paris drove home the shortcomings of the Iranian artistic educational system: “I came back with a major question: why don’t I understand a big part of new art practice in the West?”

From 2007 to 2009, he turned to teaching, notably the history of Persian architecture and the history of Persian painting and miniature, both at Tehran University. But political tensions between the peppy newcomer and disgruntled tenured faculty led to a canceled contract. During this time, though, some of his most noteworthy projects started to take shape—“Projectiles,” for example, but also the “Miniatures” and a curious series that clearly manifests his investment in the intensity of Persian-ness—“Towers” (2007–09). These paintings of fictional buildings, rising, phallic-like, above their vague surroundings, the fruit of repeated visits to far-flung Iranian architectural sites, were meant to be shown at Tehran’s Ave Gallery in 2008. Due to a controversial (too obviously phallic) design on a promotional poster, however, a graphic designer was arrested, the show never ran and the gallery ultimately closed. This final nail hammered into his Tehran disillusionment, Pouyan decided to leave the country.



Pouyan's following years at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, specifically in its alternative, multimedia New Forms department under the guidance of American painter Kit White and performance artist Ann Messner, opened his eyes. Idols were challenged: swiftly inveigled into Noah Fischer's direct-action movement Occupy Museums, Pouyan found himself unfurling incendiary banners outside the New York MoMA, an institution he had hitherto venerated. He shifted his base to New York ("The Met was my *Kaaba*: I knew all the objects and I knew when they changed."), returning to Iran every summer, "going on road trips around the country to see the last remains of Persian civilization."

Encouraged to try new media at Pratt, Pouyan began experimenting with ceramics further to having discovered a pamphlet in a campus medical office on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for which clay-working is a prescribed pursuit. After completion of his second MFA, in 2013, he headed to San Jose, California, to study Chinese ceramic techniques with two Chinese instructors, introduced to him by his sister. This new medium was a boon to the artist, who quickly found himself in 2014 with yet another show at Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi, perhaps unsurprisingly entitled "PTSD."

Radically different from "Full Metal Jacket" three years before, "PTSD," curated by Brooklyn-based Murtaza Vali, was mostly muted colors, plinths and tabletop displays, in an atmosphere redolent of an artifact storeroom or a forensic display area. Power and destruction, those reliable bedfellows, hovered—less obvious this time, yet just as potent. The work *Unthinkable Thought* (2014) consists of a group of ceramic domes, some entirely fictional, although many are drawn from the architectural legacy of Iran's successive dynasties, while still others, like Albert Speer's never-built Welthauptstadt Germania, or the Pantheon, are sheer evocations of ideology expressed through monumentality. Similarly, a subtle power runs through *Tzar Trauma* (2014), a line-up of six craggy-surfaced domes progressing in size from under a millimeter in height to more than 30 centimeters, documenting the increasing might of nuclear destruction. Starkly depicting the evolution of atomic bomb explosions—from "conventional" 1940s US-led blasts, to the devastating Tsar Bomba tested by the USSR in 1961—the otherwise innocent, minimalist structures function like an ominous succession of freeze-framed mushroom clouds. For all their neat symmetry and seeming restraint, though, these series are powerful

indictments of the hubris that fuels ideologies, going so far as to suggest potential consequences, as in *Peak Damavand* (2014), a realistic graphite drawing of Iran's tallest mountain, and an active volcano, eerily inverted.

### Day Three: Obsession

"PTSD" heralded a vein in Pouyan's practice in which a two-dimensional work (drawing, illustration, photo inspiration) is in some way hinged to a three-dimensional output, most notably the ceramic sculptures. Another work from "PTSD," *Still Life* (2014) is a tabletop forest of patina-finished objects that are read as both wartime relics and ornamental vases. While the work revives Pouyan's signature strategy of mingling the decorative and the deadly, it actually re-creates a vintage WWI photograph of a French soldier standing alongside a rectangle of perfectly disposed, camera-worthy artillery shells. Discovered during the artist's research around "The Great War," the photo was a mainstay in Pouyan's collection of images—ones he returns to repeatedly, almost obsessively, unwilling to let go.

The most noteworthy of these visual infatuations plays out across the 39 components of *Memory Drawings* (2015–16). An image excerpted from an Islamic architecture book of the tomb of the 11th century Muqarnas dome of Sharaf ad-Dawla, a Shi'ite mausoleum near Mosul, Iraq, was once pinned to his New York studio wall, a constant reminder of his longing to visit the site. Upon learning of the building's destruction by ISIS, he tried to describe it to friends, but words failed. He then tried to record all the details in his mind, failing yet again. "So I decided I was going to sit every week and make an image," he explains. "I looked at the image on the first Sunday of the project and the following days was the drawing, completely from memory. After 39 weeks I realized I was just repeating myself. I failed. That failure is part of the work." This failure to accurately translate both the mental image and the passion for the actual (vanished) object is read less in each drawing than in the entirety of the wall-filling enterprise. Raising slippery questions about the ability not only of the mind but also of the medium (words, drawings) to render, *Memory Drawings* ultimately constitutes an act of mourning.

"The same impulse that took me to the WWI photograph took me to the miniatures," Pouyan explains on the threshold of Tehran's Reza

## "I keep looking at these miniatures. They are like a monster in the corner."

Abbasi Museum, home to a collection of Persian art including scores of miniatures by Abbasi, a leading miniaturist of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. "I keep looking at these miniatures. They are like a monster in the corner." The conflation of beauty and violence that courses through Pouyan's practice finds its origins in this universe of Persian miniatures, where grisly battles and brutal slayings are rendered in stylized delicacy. Through a painstaking process of scanning, hand-painting and removing the emulsion layers off C-prints, Pouyan reappropriates miniatures of the golden era of the *Shahnameh* ("Book of Kings") from various museum collections—by Abbasi and other masters—only to evacuate all human figures from the images. Ostensibly intended to reemphasize the oft-overlooked landscape behind the unfolding narrative, this gesture of elimination encapsulates its own invisible violence. In what could pass as a work of pure abstraction, *After 'Portrait of the Uzbek Emir Shaybani Khan, Kamal Al Din Bihzad, 1507 AD.'* (2010) foregrounds a dark blue slab straddling green and red fields. The void left by the ousting of the mythic, allegedly ferocious king, whose trace is marked only by some remaining accessories—the slab-like cushion, a letter, a teapot—thrusts place into a primary role. Dissonance between the title and the eerie silence of the work pulls the viewer into the vortex of blankness. *After 'Princes Playing Persian Polo, 1524–25 AD.'* (2008–15), for example, depicts an empty turquoise-colored mound, punctuated by a forlorn goal post in the upper left. Battle scenes, the mainstay of this heroic vein of miniature-making, have become disturbingly static, almost post-apocalyptic, as in *After 'Battle of Bahram Chubina with Saveh Shah, Safavid Dynasty 1564 AD.'* (2010) with its deserted blue mound capped by a solitary tree. In a sly commentary on the very nature of representation, Pouyan edits the prophet Mohammed out of an image that is often cited as one of the rare (and reassuring) examples of his depiction: *After 'The Prophet Prostrate and Worship God, Timurid Dynasty 1436 AD.'* (2008–15) presents nothing more than a gaping ink-blue field framed by text. If the strength of Pouyan's other series resided in how power was made explicit, "Miniatures," on the contrary, proposes a stealthy un-doing of power from within the image itself: conquerors and kings have been wrested from the scene, with only lingering texts to attest, almost mockingly, to their supposed might.

Heading back to the car after our final chat, Pouyan remarks how much Iran has changed since he left: women, for example, their headscarves often little more than a waft of fabric clinging tenuously to the back of their heads, smoke and walk alongside male friends, or sit with them on grassy strips in parks. Fundamentally different from his experience in the not-so-distant conservative past, the scene gives a sense of one part of the same generation being alien to the other. Our jaunts through the capital, under the metastasizing gaze of the Imam Khomeini, provided unexpectedly rich context into the life and practice of this artist who, on the eve of his departure for the Jameel Prize ceremony in Istanbul, for which he was shortlisted, is poised for wider exposure and appreciation. Our Tehran days together were a springboard for thinking about the absolute relevance of Pouyan's practice today. Through his twin concerns of representing power and plumbing the intricacies of image-making, he has tapped into a rich vein with which, as viewers, we become strangely complicit. 🗣️

(Opposite page)  
**MEMORY DRAWINGS** (detail), 2015–16, mixed media on paper, set of 39 drawings: 30.4 x 23 cm each.

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**AFTER 'PORTRAIT OF THE UZBEK EMIR SHAYBANI KHAN, KAMAL AL DIN BIHZAD, 1507 AD.'**, 2010, mixed media on paper, 14.3 x 12.1 cm.

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**AFTER 'THE PROPHET PROSTRATE AND WORSHIP GOD, TIMURID DYNASTY, 1436 AD.'**, 2008–15, mixed media on paper, 19.7 x 16 cm.

