

PIERCING
forms

Still Life, 2014. Glazed Ceramic and acrylic. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist. Photography by Kitmin Lee



*A commentary on the forces of domination, possession, and beauty, **Shahpour Pouyan's** oeuvre is a symbolically rich reflection on the notion of power; writes William Lawrie*

When I first met Shahpour in his studio in Tehran in January 2011 he had just completed the first two of his *Projectiles*. I had been visiting

around twenty five artist studios on that trip and here was something utterly different from anything I had seen, works which were somehow raw but extremely mature, which were at once both lucid and symbolically rich. Shahpour has added different forms to this series almost every year since then. As his practice has diversified, the forms have evolved and taken a life of their own. His interest in typology—classification according to general type, including different versions or variations of groups of form and symbols, has become the central idea that runs through his different bodies of work. Back then his obsession was with power, the way it is expressed through a veneer of culture, which although not unique to Persian art of the Islamic period, has a particularly rich genealogy within it. His references to Persian art were then, and still are, palpable. As he says, “I think of arabesques and Islamic patterns as visual analogues to accents in the spoken word: part of my identity and history, which I cannot remove.”

Since then his ideas have developed. About “power”, he says, “it’s an abstract concept—it’s like water, it has no shape. We cannot talk about it as such—it’s more the relics of power—the container or the vessel through which it is expressed, that are left behind, like fossils.” These are the thoughts that underlie many of his series.

For the *Projectiles*, he works with teams of metalworkers, some making chainmail, others the helmets and the etched foliate decoration on the fins. Working with these craftsmen helps to preserve their dwindling practice. Making this kind of weaponry is a survival, not a revival—the component parts of each *Projectile* closely resemble the showy armour worn by actors in the *Taziye* (passion play), which since Safavid times has been performed throughout Iran during the month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

References to history and archaeology often come up in conversation. Preservation of ideas, of images, of techniques is part of Shahpour’s obsession with history. “When you study a book,” he says, “you bring an idea back to life. I like to dig down like an archaeologist bringing the very contemporary



qualities in history back to life.” In a recent work, Shahpour preserves the memory of the 11th century mausoleum of Sharaf ad-Dawla near Mosul with a unique *murqarnas* (stalactite) dome that was recently destroyed by ISIS, each week making a drawing of the tomb from an image he had committed to memory. He did this for 39 weeks. As the series developed, the drawings became a personal record of the human mind’s inability to accurately document.

I have long appreciated how Shahpour is ready to learn techniques that suit his ideas. He actively seeks out the masters of a craft to learn from them. He did this first with the *Projectiles*, when he came upon a theme that could not be expressed in painting. He did this again with ceramics, which since 2014 have constituted a primary part of his practice, creating sculptures that employ techniques that emulate those of medieval Persian pottery. The first of his ceramics were his *Failed Objects*, which originally grew from an unrealised project to produce metal turbine-like objects with Safavid-era designs. By simplifying them and making them instead in unglazed ceramic, Shahpour transformed their meaning and context. The *Failed Objects* reflected his reading of history, highlighting the complexity of mistakes made throughout its time span. Part of the reason why he wanted to focus on ceramics rather than metalwork was that many of the earliest surviving works of art were made in this material. As often stated in classical Greek mythology, there is a virtue in “mimicking one’s fathers” —in this sense, Shahpour’s “artist ancestors.” The other is that these hollow vessels are not just surface. They have holes to the interior but one cannot see what is inside. Thus these

(Detail) / 2 2011. Ir and gold x 88 cm. of Lawrie and the i



Above: *Unthinkable Thought*, 2014. Glazed Ceramic and Acrylic. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist
 Right: *After Portrait of the Uzbek Emir Saybani Khan*, 2010. Mixed media. 14.3 x 12 cm. 5.63 x 4.75 in. Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

“ABOUT ‘POWER’, IT’S AN ABSTRACT SHAPE—IT’S LIKE WATER. IT HAS NO SHAPE. WE CANNOT TALK ABOUT IT AS SUCH—IT’S MORE THE RELICS OF POWER—THE CONTAINER OR THE VESSEL THROUGH WHICH IT IS EXPRESSED, THAT ARE LEFT BEHIND LIKE FOSSILS[...].”

Shahpour Pouyan

objects have more than one face, part of which is invisible, which he links to the abstract idea of a nation, its history both real and perceived. *Failed Objects* led naturally to his ongoing *Domes*, originally inspired by ancient clay architecture models from excavation in Jarmo and Mari in Mesopotamia and Susa in Iran, and executed in wares and glazes that mirror medieval Kashan wares, it is essentially a typology of different dome types, some real, some imagined, all of which are ideologically charged. This series won Shahpour a place on the present Jameel Prize shortlist.

Beauty, power, and the role of the artist in transmitting messages—these are all themes Shahpour keeps returning to. In *Miniatures* (2008-ongoing) he digitally removes the human figures from images of 15th and 16th century manuscript paintings. When the original miniatures were commissioned,



their purpose was to illustrate particular stories relating to mostly mythical figures. The artists were never given the freedom to show pure landscape. By removing the figures, Shahpour frees the images from both time and narrative, and as such he updates the miniatures for today. In an Iranian landscape one will never see these figures. The stories persist but today no one performs heroic acts, and perhaps they never did. Removing the heroes shows reality in all its emptiness. The paradox that pervades Shahpour’s practice in fact parallels the circularity of his subject matter: his sense of history and the artist’s role in producing and documenting it is ambivalent. Shahpour does not seek to explain this. “I’m not a conceptual artist,” he says. “I work on ideas that fascinate me.” ■

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