

AWAITING ARMAGEDDON

**In the shapes of bombs and domes,
Iran-born artist Shahpour Pouyan finds histories
of violence and hope.**

by Amei Wallach

DESPITE A RISING reputation in the Middle East, Shahpour Pouyan had made only sparse appearances in group shows around New York when he announced himself to US art audiences with the unsettling cacophony of an approaching helicopter at the Untitled art fair in Miami Beach. On December 2, 2014, at nautical twilight—when the sun is six to twelve degrees below the horizon, the time most favored for military maneuvers—an AS350 Eurocopter emerged from the glare of dusk with Pouyan on board.

“We will not leave you behind,” the pilot shouted repeatedly through speakers aboard the helicopter as it hovered over the crowd quaffing beers on the beach. Somebody laughed. Cell phones materialized to take pictures. The helicopter turned west and disappeared. In video documentation of the event, all that remains is dark sky, a bright moon, and palm trees rustling beneath the lights of balconies. The buildings are intact, as they might not have been had the helicopter’s appearance heralded an imminent attack, rather than a performance choreographed by an artist.

Born in Isfahan in 1979, the year of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, and raised there and in Tehran during the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–88), Pouyan has a long-standing concern with the aftermath of militant aggression. In his experience, power—whether military, political, or religious—is not a solid or static entity. “It’s like water,” the artist said in an interview. As a sculptor, he focuses on what remains of the vessels that once gave that power form. “What else is there in human history?” he asked.¹

Pouyan studied Neoplatonism at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy, and received an MFA from the Tehran University of Art in 2007. He taught the history of Persian architecture

at the University of Science and Culture in Tehran, and in 2012 he earned a second MFA, this time from the Pratt Institute’s integrated practices program. His work is informed both by his bifurcated experience of life in Iran and the West and by the breadth of his inquiries into technology, science, architecture, history, and the origins of the world’s religions.

The sculptural forms that Pouyan contrives are abundant and various. They are rooted in his personal history and that of his nation, but they encompass the global complexities of clashing interests. Art history is a type of power, too, one that figures in the meanings of the objects that he makes—particularly since he is attracted to aspects of craftsmanship that have often been treated with suspicion since the onset of modernism. At various points in his career he has pursued mastery not only of drawing and painting, but also of ceramics, metal casting, and the ancient art of designing and making chain mail, which was invented in Persia in the fourth century B.C.E.

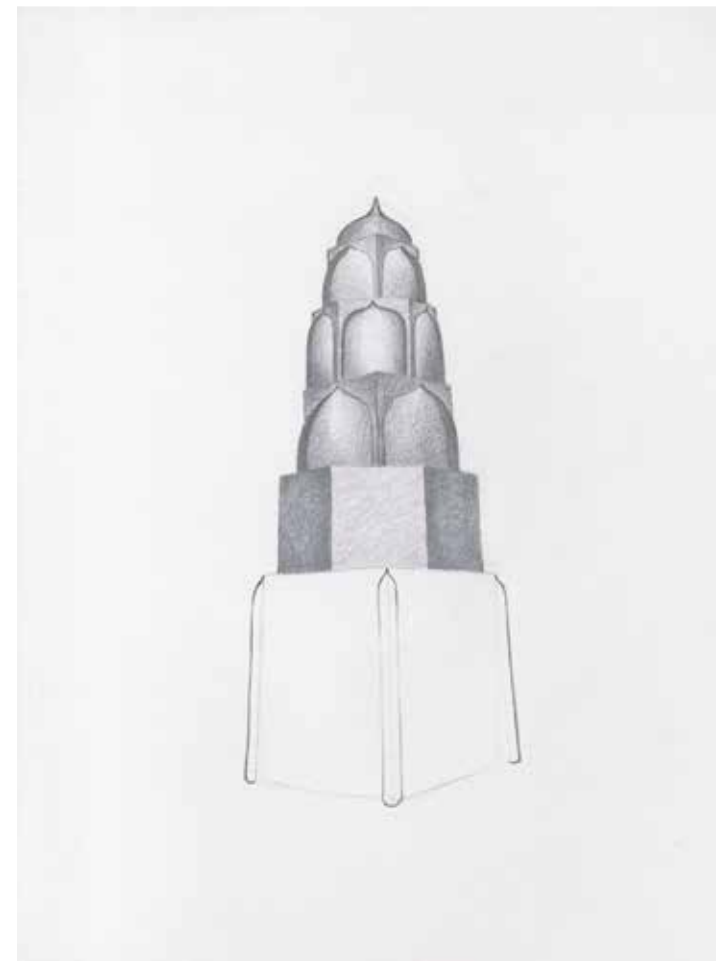
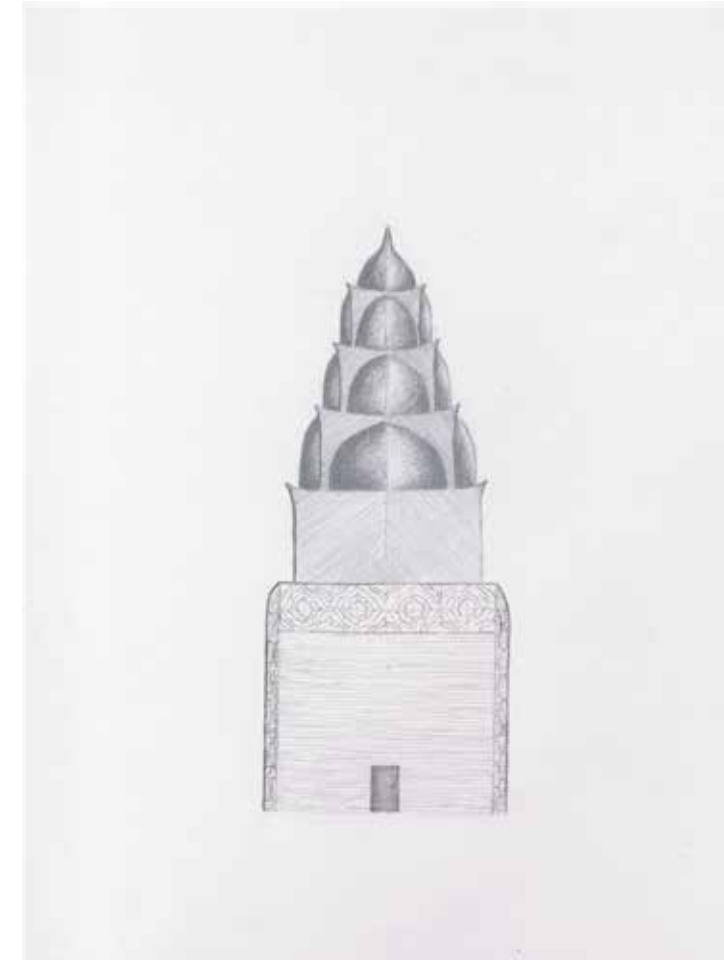
Pouyan usually makes objects. The helicopter flyover in Miami Beach was his first—and thus far only—performance. But in its conflation of historical periods, producing a multifaceted meaning, the performance manifested a number of his ongoing themes. Titled *Jacob’s Ladder*, the piece was inspired by a resemblance between Hubert van Es’s iconic 1975 photograph of a crowd climbing a ladder to a US evacuation helicopter as Saigon fell and *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a twelfth-century icon in which monks are encouraged by angels and tempted by demons as they mount a ladder angled diagonally through a field of gold toward a welcoming Christ. The icon illuminates Jacob’s dream of a

Four drawings from Shahpour Pouyan’s series “Monday Recollection of Muqarnas Dome,” 2015–16. Clockwise from top left, *Apr. 6, 2015*; *July 6, 2015*; *Aug. 17, 2015*; and *Sept. 28, 2015*; all mixed mediums on paper, 12 by 9½ inches each.

All images this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Work by Shahpour Pouyan in “Home Land Security,” at Fort Winfield Scott Chapel, the Presidio, San Francisco, through Dec. 18.

AMEI WALLACH is an art critic and filmmaker living in New York. See Contributors page.



View of Pouyan's exhibition "Full Metal Jacket," 2011, at Lawrie Shabibi.



Untitled 4 (detail), 2014, steel, iron, and ink; in "Home Land Security," at Fort Winfield Scott Chapel, the Presidio, San Francisco. Courtesy For-Site Foundation. Photo Robert Divers Herrick.



ladder connecting earth to heaven, as recounted in the Book of Genesis. But for Pouyan, the more immediate association was the African-American slave spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," as well as other cultural records of aggression and promises of salvation, and related evacuations, including a trauma from his own childhood.

Pouyan was seven when Saddam Hussein launched ballistic missiles against Iran; he remembers that those missiles would hit Tehran several times an hour. His father, General Muhammed Ali Pouyan, was an Air Force electronics engineer, trained during the Shah's reign in aircraft systems at the US facilities of Lockheed and McDonnell Douglas. The new revolutionary regime needed the general in Tehran, but young Shahpour and his mother were evacuated by train to a far-off city. They found themselves stranded there, along with thousands of others who had nowhere else to go.

As a child of the revolution, reared in a familiarity with its promises and failures, Pouyan is critical of the consequences of power. In his proposal to *Untitled*, he noted that the performance would take place at a time when President Barack Obama was calling for a broad coalition against extremism in Iraq, the fourth US president to do so, as part of a so-called war on terrorism "that is full of repeated mistakes and errors of judgment that have cataclysmic effects on individual lives."

Pouyan hoped that the hovering helicopter and the pilot's shout of "We will not leave you behind" would induce the feeling of fear that comes with awaiting deliverance in a dangerous, unstable place. But of course, most of that was

probably lost on the merrymakers on the beach. Art fairs aren't particularly fertile ground for nuance.

Quick readings of Pouyan's work tend to be misleading whatever the context. Such was the case with his second significant US appearance, in "Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran," at New York's Grey Art Gallery in winter 2016. Pouyan was one of three younger artists in the intergenerational exhibition. The two oldest artists, Faramarz Pilaram (1937–1983) and Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), had



Unthinkable Thought, 2014, glazed ceramic and acrylic. Photo Musthafa Aboobacker.

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been honored under the shah for their synthesis of modernist abstraction with traditional art forms, from amulets to calligraphy. As founding members of the Saqqakhaneh movement, Pilaram produced stylized renderings of village mosques and calligraphic script in his paintings and works on paper, while Tanavoli incorporated tomb architecture, grillwork, calligraphy, and indigenous religious iconography into his bronze sculptures and paintings. After the Iranian Revolution, the Saqqakhaneh movement and its practitioners were dismissed from their posts and derided, only to be rediscovered by the international art market in recent years, as Christie's launched successful auctions in Dubai for Middle Eastern collectors. The once-struggling artists of the Saqqakhaneh school began selling works for prices exceeding a million dollars, and now younger artists who look at Persian history through a contemporary lens are habitually accused of pandering to the market.

Pouyan, at first glance, can seem heir to the Saqqakhaneh tradition. At the Grey Art Gallery, he showed "Projectiles" (2013), a series of sculptures finely fashioned in chain mail etched with calligraphy, and *Unthinkable Thoughts* (2014), a tabletop installation of simplified, miniature ceramic domes, towers, and mausoleums, accompanied by drawings.

At the opening of "Global/Local," the word "orientalism" could be heard bandied about among Iranian-American artists attending the show. Nicky Nodjoumi, an Iran-born, Brooklyn-based painter whose artworks serve up a cocktail of politics and the absurd, explained to me later that Iranian artists are concerned about the judgment of Western curators who seem to have a preference for stasis and exoticism in art of the Middle East, rather than art that is critical of present and past.

The concept of orientalism has taken deep root among professors of modern Islamic art and history in American universities since 1978, when Edward Said defined it as the West's relationship of presumed superiority over the East. Most often the term denotes a patronizing preference for what is most erotic, dangerous, and other in "oriental" cultures. But Pouyan's response to the orientalist epithet is fierce. He was raised in a home filled with the traditional arts, in a landscape studded with ancient architecture. These forms are integral to his development as an artist and a person, and he deploys them as instruments of critique.

The hanging chain-mail works in "Projectiles" pay homage to ancient techniques while exploring historical implements of aggression, from javelins to missiles to drones. Characteristically, Pouyan made a point of learning the craft from a master, working in a traditional mail workshop in Iran.

Still Life, 2016,
glazed ceramic
and acrylic.
Photo Kitmin Lee.



Together with new works, several of those “Projectiles” are currently on view in “Home Land Security,” a group show organized by the San Francisco nonprofit For-Site in the deserted military buildings of the Presidio. Pouyan has hung five of the sculptures, one nearly eight feet tall, in the chapel. The religious atmosphere is important to Pouyan; he sees both Islam and Christianity as manifestations of power and its abuses. While he was working with craftsmen to make additional “Projectiles” in Iran last summer, passing through airport security in Tehran, Istanbul, and New York as a possible person of suspicion gave him a visceral experience of the meaning of homeland security.

AS A STUDENT in Iran, Pouyan was a painter. Dissatisfied with the way drawing and painting were taught at the university, he sought out the artist Morteza Katouzian. He had little admiration for Katouzian’s European-influenced academic works, but spent four years learning from him about line, shading, and light.

In New York, Pouyan became a sculptor after he read a brochure on post-traumatic stress disorder that prescribed pottery-making as occupational therapy and discovered that Pratt has a highly regarded ceramics department. *Unthinkable Thoughts*, his installation at the Grey Art Gallery, was one result. Modeled on structures from Zoroastrian fire temples to Hitler’s fantasy of a stadium to anchor Albert Speer’s plans for a rebuilt Berlin, those forms designate a desire for dominance, the traumatic effects of which Pouyan knows too well.

During the final years of the Iran-Iraq War, kids in the suburbs enjoyed the freedom of school cancellations. But back

with his father in Tehran, Pouyan endured the incessant bombings along with adults’ nightly discussions of beheadings and slaughter at the front. He knew Iran’s technology was incapable of repelling the most deadly of the missiles, and felt the fear of helplessness against an abstract enemy. In his sculptures, this son of a general persistently conjugates forms of power and of powerlessness, sometimes conflating them.

Pouyan’s 2014 solo exhibition “PTSD,” at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery in Dubai, brought together disparate works of stunning variety. *Still Life* (2014) re-creates in ceramics a French World War I photograph of German artillery shells arranged on a table. There is both beauty and horror to these shapes, and humanity in their metaphorical references to the body. The shells resemble not only erect phalluses but also breasts. The elegant and abject works in the ceramic series “Failed Objects” (2014), also included in “PTSD,” are glazed like ancient vessels, and are rounded, ridged, or elongated. They are small enough to fit in the hand, and conjure an egg as often as a grenade. In these works, natural creation signifies a brutal cycle of technological destruction.

Tzar Trauma (2014), another installation in the Dubai exhibition, links the destructive power of nuclear bombs to the peaceful energy at issue in negotiations with Iran. Pouyan discovered a chart first published in the October 2002 issue of *Popular Mechanics*, which depicted the relative destructive power of nuclear bombs, from the combined force of those that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the Soviet AN602 hydrogen bomb, better known as the “Tsar Bomba,” which has more than fifteen hundred times the power of the ones that hit Japan.



Tzar Trauma, 2014,
glazed ceramic and
acrylic sculptures
(on table) with
ink-and-graphite-
on-paper drawing.
Photo Musthafa
Aboobacker.

He rendered the mushroom clouds in the chart as six minimal graduated domes, modeled on the containment tower of Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power plant. The first three domes are brass, as they were too small to fire in the kiln—the littlest one was hardly bigger than a splinter. The three bigger ones are glazed ceramic; they culminate with the fourteen-inch-tall Tsar Bomba cloud.

Above the table bearing the brass and ceramic “bombs” was Pouyan’s rendering of Japan’s iconic Mount Fuji, drawn upside-down with Renaissance perspective and the adamant line of an Utamaro woodblock. In the German magazine *Prötocollum 2015/16*, he explained the series of connections behind the work’s conception. Outside Tehran’s Imam Khomeini Airport he once encountered a welcoming billboard featuring the imam against the backdrop of a mountain. Iran’s mythic mountain symbol is Mount Damāvand, the highest volcano in Asia, where, according to Zoroastrian legend, a three-headed chained dragon awaits the end of the world. But the billboard artist had carelessly depicted Mount Fuji instead. The error led Pouyan to an association with the Fukushima Daiichi catastrophe. Nuclear bombs end in disaster. Peacetime nuclear power ends in disaster, too. The world is upside down, and the demon awaits Armageddon.

Pouyan has no illusions that art can save the world. His enterprise is to record and celebrate the human, often through what remains. In the country of his birth, this means the architectural legacy of the last six thousand years. At one point he photographed two thousand minarets and domes in ancient and Islamic Persia. He tacked on his wall an image of one crucial site that he couldn’t reach until a cessation of conflict. The eleventh-century mausoleum of

Sharaf al-Dawla near Mosul, Iraq—once part of the Persian Empire—was until recently one of the few remaining examples of a *muqarnas* dome, with its honeycombed interior and prismatic stalactite forms protruding above.

On Halloween night in 2014, Pouyan learned that ISIS had destroyed the building. He was walking to the Brooklyn Academy of Music from his apartment, and he wept in mourning as he watched the passing costumed revelers. Marooned in a sea of strangers, separated from his heritage, and unable to summon words sufficient to share his memories and his rage, he focused on the image of Sharaf al-Dawla in his studio. For days he studied it, then put it away and never consulted it again. Every Monday, week after week, he drew a picture of the structure from memory. As the building and its ornament morphed and changed on paper, he became interested in how the mind preserves and alters visual memory in the absence of contemporary digital prompts. At the end of thirty-nine weeks he decided that he remembered nothing more. He has set about realizing his “Memory Drawings” as ceramic sculptures, teaching himself to fashion clay models of the sort that builders used to court clients in medieval Persia.

The technology of building may have advanced since then, as have the instruments of aggression and destruction. But the ethics that might control them continue to fail. “We abuse technology,” Pouyan said. “I think that is why Prometheus was punished. We were not ready for fire.” ○

1. All quotes are from the author’s interview with Pouyan on May 3, 2016, in his Manhattan studio, or from an Aug. 10, 2016, telephone conversation.