



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

"My Place is the Placeless": Iranian artist Shahpour Pouyan at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Iranian sculptor Shahpour Pouyan dives deep into "Neo-Baroque" sculpture, genealogy and DNA.

Sculptor Shahpour Pouyan transforms Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi gallery into a museum display of the architecture of his own DNA in "My Place is the Placeless".



Installation view of "My Place is the Placeless" by Shahpour Pouyan. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

A sculpture for every culture in your DNA

In an exhibition entitled "**My Place is Placeless**" at Lawrie Shabibi Dubai, artist **Shahpour Pouyan** creates a miniature cityscape constituted by 33 sculptures that each reference a particular architectural motif. Placed on a large cubic display stand made from industrial steel, the effect is an eerie urbanscape that is both unified and fragmented, organised and chaotic. Domes, towers, mausoleums and monumental buildings appear as singular abstracted elements in Pouyan's concentrated scaled-down, ancient-futuristic city. Where Pouyan's previous exhibition projects have centred on blacks and greys, steel and bronze or terracotta, here turquoise, bronze and gold ceramic glazes set the hushed tone of the show.



Shahpour Pouyan, 'Untitled', 2017, Glazed stoneware ceramic, 21 x 22 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.



Shahpour Pouyan, 'Untitled', 2017, Glazed stoneware ceramic, 34 x 24 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

The sculptures at **Lawrie Shabibi Dubai**, all of which were made in 2017, constitute the artist's creative response to a genetic ancestry test taken in 2013. The text revealed that the artist has ancestral ties to 33 countries, including Norway, Ireland, Bhutan, Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. After receiving the results, Pouyan spent two years researching the architecture from each of the 33 countries that showed up in the test in order to produce a unique sculpture for each of the countries. For the project, the artist focused especially on the "figure" of the dome, performing a material or artistic "genealogy" of the dome structure as it goes through various historical and political modifications in relation to local power or military structures.



Installation view of "My Place is the Placeless" by Shahpour Pouyan. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

The sculptural genealogy of identity

The fact that these sculptures have been displayed on a large cubic structure, which serves to level all of these sculptural gestures across the same plain, forwards Pouyan's call for an analysis of identity that actively disrupts progressive, reductive or unifying readings. For Pouyan, the 33 domes jostle together as a multiplicity, disputing any possibility of fixing one ethnicity as more important than another, or one location over another.

The press release references the artist's engagement with French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose work has provided artists and critical thinkers with experimental methodologies that resist reductive or humanist approaches to history and identity. Referencing Foucault's seminal work *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), Pouyan asserts his current exhibition project as "an experiment in an archeology of the self". For Pouyan, there is a constant negotiation of multiple material cultures, narratives and performances at play in the emergence of individual identity, whereby some are disappeared, some are recovered, some are forgotten, some are celebrated and others are erased entirely.



Shahpour Pouyan, 'Untitled', 2017, glazed stoneware ceramic, 43 x 22 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

The Neo-Baroque as strategy

The sculptural work of Pouyan references multiple archetypal typologies of architecture and art practices as varied as traditional Buddhist, Islamic and Christian architecture, 20th-century military edifices and fascist architecture as well as minimalist sculpture. The artist has used the term "Baroque" in relation to his work to refer to the "patchwork" effect of weaving together multiple aesthetic references.

"The Baroque" is a term traditionally associated with the 17th century, though it was not a label used by individuals of the period itself to describe the art, economics or culture of the period. The Cuban critic Severo Sarduy developed a theory of the Neo-Baroque in his seminal publication *Ensayos generales sobre el barroco* (1987) ("General Essays on the Baroque"), written contemporaneously to the work of European theorists Michel Foucault, Jaques Derrida and Roland Barthes.



Installation view of "My Place is the Placeless" by Shahpour Pouyan. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

In his study of the so-called "Neo-Baroque movement" in literature and art throughout the 20th century, Sarduy praised the radical and experimental possibilities of re-appropriating the Baroque as artistic method, focusing on the will to reveal the constructedness of truth and reality. This is something he suggests is achieved through a particularly performative use of disparate materials and symbols with distinct cultural and political lineages. Pouyan's recuperation of the Neo-Baroque as strategy in the context of his exploration of DNA reading practices can be read as a critique of the tendencies to racialise and sexualise identity for economic and cultural capital.



Shahpour Pouyan, 'Untitled', 2017, glazed stoneware ceramic, 22 x 21 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

"My trace is the Traceless"

In **an artist statement**, Pouyan reflects on his personal and political motivations for approaching the Baroque as an artistic strategy, commenting:

My childhood was flooded with the smell of history and power: the atmosphere of the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic martyrdom cult, the blueprints of American and Soviet fighter planes like the F-4 or the MiGs, the Tv documentaries about the Cold War and the portraits of political leaders next to our bathroom door.

Baroque antiques and outfits, architectural floorplans of monumental buildings, killing machines and scientific geometrical diagrams are part of my vocabulary in recreating a renovated historical landscape. Combining different signifiers of religions, cultures, technologies and empires' rococo helps me portrait the visual Esperanto of wealth and power. I bridge different historical references to celebrate the glorious halo of Empires' metabolic waste.

The title of the current exhibition references a poem by the 13th century Sufi mystic poet Rumi. The following line of the poem, not included in the title, perhaps best summarises Pouyan's investigation into the ethics of origin stories, whereby he traces his own ethnic origins in order to reject the ethics of any investigation into origins rooted in biology. The poem reads:

My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless.

Rebecca Close