

## Shahpour Pouyan: *My Place is the Placeless* at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

By [Rahel Aima](#)



*My Place is the Placeless*, 2017 (installation view). Photo: Musthafa Aboobacker. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Left hook. “Where are you from?” Right cross. “No, where are you really from?” There are many ways to answer this one—two punch of a microaggression, familiar to minorities everywhere. Perhaps you moved there for college; perhaps you were born there, and your parents were too. Shahpour Pouyan chose to respond forensically. Four years ago, the Iranian artist took a DNA ancestry test to reveal a personal genetic makeup that spanned 33 countries, from Norway to Bhutan. The results, which have been parlayed into the ceramics, sculptures and altered images of *My Place is the Placeless*, suggest the perfect clapback. Implicit in this kind of diaspora art is the search for origins, and who can argue with science?

Anchoring the exhibition is an open steel cube upon which are arrayed 33 colourful ceramic sculptures. Each one showcases, in exquisite miniature, a dome characteristic of one of Pouyan’s countries of origin. Some of these sculptures are immediately recognisable, like the sharply pitched roofs of a Viking-era stave church, the distinctive terraced nipple of an Iranian icehouse or *yakhchāl*, or the studded beehives of early Syrian earth architecture. Lacking a robust architectural literacy myself, my reading of the geographical origin of less distinctive forms turns on my assumptions about the genetic makeup of Iranians as much as on any visual cues. Certain architectural elements seem

to point to Byzantine, Ottoman, Mughal or Roman origin, and if DNA is essentially a document of conquests past, shouldn't there be a showing from Central Asia and the Caucasus too? (There is.) Taken as a whole, the installation suggests an architectural chromatogram, separated out from a single drop of blood.

Leaning on shelves on the walls facing this installation is a series of photographs depicting manuscripts, currency, busts of great leaders and other historical artefacts from the same ancient civilisations: instruments of cultural might that are no less potent for their small scale. A snapshot of murdered Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad nods to these artefacts' vulnerability in the present, however. One such photograph in particular casts the show in an even more ominous light. It depicts a man from the front and in profile typifying the 'Classic Mediterranean, convex nose, Dulaimi, Iraq' of the image's caption as well as the scientific racism that underwrote both biological anthropology and genetic research for much of both disciplines' histories. Another kind of dome measuring comes to mind, the kind that uses calipers and emphasises genetic purity.

Framed in muted teal and, in contrast to the beautifully finished sculptures, somewhat haphazardly covered in protective plastic, the photographs resemble the kind of mass-produced patriotic paraphernalia you find gracing many a family home. The kind a father or uncle might look up from the dinner table and nod at in quiet satisfaction. *Look at the grandeur and beauty of our heritage; we were really magnificent once.* Yet a closer look reveals that all the faces in the backgrounds of these images are suspiciously similar: the artist has Photoshopped their features to resemble his own, as if to say, 'I was there, and there, and there, too'. Much as the modern nation-state builds its mythology on a scaffolding of civilisational genealogy, Pouyan has inserted himself into his own heritage.

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