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Routes, Rupture, and Return
Gender, Identity and the Artistic Practices of Diasporic Iranian Women Artists in the US

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the post-revolution generation of Iranian women artists in the US diaspora and examines their engagement with gender and social identities through creative practices against a backdrop of neoliberalism, transnationalism and digitalisation. Employing a framework of performativity, liminality, habitus and capital, and intersectionality, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 15 Iranian women artists and semiotic analysis of their artworks. By analysing participants' narratives and cultural products produced within specific social, cultural, and temporal contexts, the study seeks to understand how their identities are constructed and performed in response to rapidly evolving social conditions and events. It also explores how their artwork challenges or reinforces ethnocentric and gender stereotypes.

The study spans two moments of international significance: it began during the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of Donald Trump's presidency, marked by right-wing extremism and heightened Iran-US tensions, and concluded during the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement, a gendered movement originating in Iran and expanding globally, significantly impacting the perspectives and artistic practices of participants.

The research concludes that these artists navigate a complex constellation of influences, including their Iranian heritage, experiences within global and diasporic contexts, socio-political conditions framing their existence, and the broader global art ecosystem shaped by neoliberal pressures. Interview material indicates that participants produce art as a reactive form of self-expression, resistance, and identity negotiation. Their art serves as a vehicle for personal and collective expression, challenging and reshaping dominant Orientalist, media, and political narratives. Their negotiation of self is influenced by lived experiences framed by intersections of identity, familial legacies and socio-political currents in Iran, the US, and globally.

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"Woman, Life, Freedom"

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* The images and tables in this thesis have been included with the expressed permission of the producers.

INTRODUCTION

In the decades since 9/11, the art of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region gained renewed global significance, yet the framing and reception of women artists within this space remains problematic. This thesis is concerned with the post-1979 Revolution generation[1] of Iranian women artists in the US and asks how they engage with issues around gender and social identities through their creative practices. Conducting research on this group of women at the present time is both sensitive and timely. While much attention has been paid to migration and displacement there is little scholarship that addresses how Iranian women, of this generation, in diaspora, in the US, make sense of their complex identities in rapidly developing circumstances, which include the post-9/11 climate and the related 'war on terror' and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US, heightened Iran-US tensions, sanctions, shifting inter-diaspora dynamics and changing circumstances in the home and host countries (Thomas, 2024).

It is argued here that the event of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a point of rupture, or as Gramsci terms it, a *conjuncture,*[2] significantly impacting the generation of women artists who experienced it—a phenomenon well-documented in existing academic literature. This study, however, shifts the focus to the subsequent generation: those born and socialised amid the post-revolution climate—some under the Islamic Republic and others in the US—who contend with different challenges and realities.

[1] 'Post-revolution generation' in this thesis refers to individuals born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Participant Aida was born in 1978, during the revolution, but would not have been cognisant of events at the time.

[2] "Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci developed his spatio-historical method of conjunctural analysis during the rise of fascism in Italy … Gramsci's conjunctural analysis has become newly relevant to our own moment. Our conjuncture has been marked by multiple colliding crises [i.e.] the rise of the far right across the world, and a crisis of hegemony and for capitalism on a global scale" (UC Berkeley, 2023: para 1).

Drawing from the understanding that 'identities' are both contextual and evolving the research for this thesis has sought to address the following main research question:

How do diaspora Iranian women artists of the post-revolution generation engage with art and for what purposes?

This raises a series of associated questions such as: how do these artists talk about themselves and their identities? What socio-political conditions or events enable them to produce art? How does their artwork challenge/reinforce ethnocentric/gender stereotypes?

In seeking to answer these questions, the research used both interviews and semiotic analysis of the artistic work. It interrogated their work in terms of the reasons why Iranian women artists produce their art, their intentions and how their work represents and re-represents the complexities of the identities of women artists in the Iranian diaspora of a particular generation, who have, in some cases, formed new hybrid identities within a Western, largely secular context.

Arriving at Research Questions

The questions this research addresses have been informed by my professional experiences in art and media in the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region as a director of an art gallery specialising in Arab art and as a culture writer. Through my work, I observed that art, as a process of meaning-making, rooted in a specific context and as a cultural product of particular conditions, has great potential in the formation of complex and counter-knowledge. On an intellectual level, I was particularly interested in the specificity of artists' diasporic experiences. The research was also carried out at a time of global attention to art produced by women from and of the Middle East in the post-9/11 climate, a development that has challenged (and in some cases reinforced) dominant perspectives about what the Middle East *is*.

Indeed, the term 'Middle East' is problematic not only because of its 19th-century Eurocentric origins, which present an essentialist view of a homogenous

geographical space but also because of its ambiguity—there is no agreed-upon definition. The Middle East as a concept and its physical borders are socially constructed and have, therefore, shifted substantially with scholars and political powers making numerous attempts to define them. As such, Davison (1960) proposes that the term Middle East is “elastic” and “more a psychological than a geographical area” (674).

Despite the lack of consensus over the term, the label ‘Middle East’ is useful as a basis for discussing art produced by individuals who may share experiences and commonalities based on proximity and cross-cultural pollination. It has been widely used by academics and as a mode of categorisation within the art market,[3] yet this study refrains from a priori framing individuals based on geographies.

In parallel to international institutional and gallery exhibitions of Middle Eastern art over the last two decades, global interest in art coming from the Middle East has also been stimulated by the framework of international institutions and auction houses established in the Gulf States. In 2006 Christie’s held its first auction in Dubai and by April 2011 it had sold over $215 million worth of Middle Eastern art (Christie’s, 2012). Bonhams followed suit in 2008 and Sotheby’s in 2017 (Kinsella, 2008 and Sotheby’s, 2017). The establishment of the Art Dubai art fair in 2007 and the Sharjah Biennial in 1993 also contributed to global awareness of Middle Eastern art. As Toukan (2013) suggests, the expanding market for Arab art, encapsulated by the United Arab Emirates’ rising position as a major art hub in the Arab world, has seen contemporary artists based in “culturally thriving cities like Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran increasingly rely on Dubai as a commercial window onto the international art scene” (2013: para 11).[4]

[3] Iranian diasporic art, the focus of this research, is often encompassed within the wider category ‘Middle Eastern art’ within the art market. Christie’s auction house, for example, defines their Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern art category as including Arab, Turkish and Iranian art (Christie’s, 2024). Artwork by an Iranian or Iranian diasporic artist can, however, circulate in various national, regional and international markets.

[4] Note on formatting: for in-text citations, ‘para’ denotes ‘paragraph’ for online articles; the format ‘00:00:00’ is used for audio/visual timestamps; […] within participant interviews is emphasis or clarification added.

The decades following 9/11 have also witnessed intensified academic attention towards the cultural production of Iranians in diaspora across cinema, literature and, in particular, art (see Karim, 2013; Naficy, 2018; Motlagh, 2008). Research has primarily focused on the artists that migrated during or following the 1979 Revolution (see Bombardier, 2013; Ebrahimi, 2019; and Navab, 2007); there is, however, a gap in the literature concerning Iranian women artists of the post-revolution generation in diaspora. This study attempts to partially fill the gap in the literature but also stems from my close interactions with women artists displaced from the Middle East, such as hyperrealist Samah Shihadi, a Palestinian from Haifa whose work alerted me to the concept of intersectionality as a lived experience of those residing in in-between conditions. Shihadi is a member of the Palestinian diaspora rooted in the traditions and expectations of the Muslim and Arab worlds while at the same time navigating what may be the contradictory values of contemporary Israeli society. My professional relationship with the artist facilitated an intimate understanding of Shihadi's circumstances, influences and artistic processes. It also alerted me to art's capacity—as a product of a particular social context and conditions—to offer nuanced insights into the complexities of the gendered diasporic experience.

Through my professional experiences, I became aware of the visibility and framing of artists like Shihadi within the international art ecosystem. Observing the selection and presentation of MENA artists by curators, institutions and media I became aware of which *kinds* of artworks were and were not prioritised by the international art market. Shihadi's charcoal-on-paper drawings negotiate a breadth of social and cultural terrain; they are, on the one hand, rooted in Palestinian traditions while on the other reflective of her current existence in contemporary Israeli society and beyond (see Figure 1). *New World*, 2023, is, for example, a self-portrait of Shihadi crossing the bridge which first opened when the Berlin Wall fell, reconnecting East and West. It captures a moment during her artist residency in Berlin, but the work requires a double reading. The scene arguably serves as a metaphor for Shihadi's liminal status lodged between worlds, walking between opposing ideologies in a third space, Berlin. Another of Shihadi's works, *Dough* (2018) (see Figure 2), was acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and displayed as part of the museum's 2023 group exhibition of women from the Middle East and its diaspora: *Women*

Defining Women in Contemporary Art of the Middle East and Beyond. The curation was, however, problematised by media commentators who posited that the show offered a reductive depiction of the SWANA woman. In her review, Haddad (2023) contended that traditional portrayals of SWANA women in the exhibition were devoid of any critical edge, particularly focusing on Shihadi's work. She suggested: "It's hard to glean the intended takeaway for Palestinian (labeled Israel-born) artist Samah Shihadi's charcoal drawing of an elderly woman making rounds of bread ("Dough," 2018) besides craving my Lebanese grandmother's homemade bread" (para 7).

I mention these issues as examples that alerted me to how the selection and framing of artwork plays a significant role in shaping broader conceptions; in this case about how a Palestinian female might 'look' and behave. The Middle Eastern female may, indeed, be more visible in institutional spaces in the wake of 9/11, yet her framing is subject to asymmetric power structures. Under these conditions, certain narratives, more familiar and comforting to the Western eye, might be privileged while others are suppressed. This highlights the role of the visual and visibility in shaping knowledge and discourse and raises the question: Who is speaking for whom?

Figure 1

Samah Shihadi, *New World*, 2023, [charcoal on paper], courtesy of the artist, Stedelijk Museum Vianen

Figure 2

Samah Shihadi, *Dough*, 2018, [charcoal on paper], courtesy of the artist, LACMA, Los Angeles

Figure 3

Hazem Harb, *Untitled, Jerusalem #1,* 2019, [C-print archival photography collage on fine art paper], courtesy of the artist

My work with artists from the SWANA region showed that artists can compile, synthesise, and re-represent information pertinent to their personal experiences and reflective of their social conditions, functioning simultaneously as researchers engaging with contemporary social and political phenomena. Indeed, Rikou and Yalouri (2018) suggest that during the 1990s there was an "ethnographic turn" in art which saw artists adopting aspects of anthropological theory to support their practices in challenging social realities, often as a mode of political engagement or art-based activism (see section below: 'Creative Methods'). One such example is Palestinian visual artist Hazem Harb, who views himself as exiled in the UAE. As part of his art practice, he collects *pre-Nakba* ephemera and employs a research-driven approach. He uses materials such as archival photography and maps to interrogate and reframe his past (see Figure 3). By recirculating these materials in the contemporary art framework, Harb attempts to reach an international audience and counter-represent dominant discourses surrounding the Palestinian people (Williams, 2019).

These two cases illustrate the complex circumstances of displacement, migration, and cultural re-creation that shape contemporary Iranian art. Artists, like the two discussed above, often turn to their art practices as a means of processing complex emotions and experiences that cannot be articulated in the same way through the written or spoken word. Their art, then, as a process and

practice of meaning-making, produced under specific socio-political conditions, offers a nuanced mode of understanding the diasporic experiences. These experiences and understandings of contemporary Middle Eastern artists supported my arrival at my research questions and also contributed to the application of the visual research methods discussed in the methodology section below. The next section offers an overview of contemporary Iranian art with a specific focus on the gendered characteristics of art itself before outlining the context of the research.

Women and Contemporary Iranian Art

Figure 4

Shirin Neshat, *Faceless, (Women of Allah* series*)*, 1994, [B&W RC print and ink], courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Research indicates that media and political discourses in the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran have co-opted, repositioned and reduced the image of the Iranian woman for various purposes. According to Dadi (2008), the Western fixation with the icon of the veiled Muslim woman has been central to Orientalism

from the 19th century onwards; however, this figure was previously characterised by “passive eroticism” (125). More recently, the veiled woman has also been used for avowedly oppositional purposes. Behiery (2012), for example, argues that the stereotype of the veil, rooted in the colonial period, continues to be reproduced in contemporary visual culture, particularly in media. In contemporary Middle Eastern art, however, the varied utilisations of the veil see it engaged in complex ways as a representational strategy and site of counter-knowledge and resistance (ibid.). The question as to how and why the image of the Iranian woman has been harnessed for different agendas will be examined in more detail in Chapter Two. It is important, however, to note that these discourses have become entwined in different articulations of gender in contemporary Iranian art.

Internationally, artists have responded to Western-centric framings by expressing the diversity and contradictoriness of Iranian women’s identities. Shirin Neshat is one of the best-known Iranian women artists in diaspora and describes herself as an ‘artist in exile’ who is ‘caught between two cultures’ (Neshat, 2010). In an interview with *Michigan Quarterly Review* Neshat discussed her return to Iran for the first time following the 1979 Revolution, an experience that stimulated a new body of work:

> I still hadn’t arrived at a subject I felt compelled to explore until I returned to Iran in 1990, which was one of the most shocking experiences I have ever had …The difference between what I had remembered from the Iranian culture and what I was witnessing was enormous … When I returned to the States, I was haunted by the experience and started to travel to Iran regularly … As I pose my questions about the experience of being a woman in Islam and gather information, the work takes new directions … In Islam a woman’s body has been historically a type of battleground for various kinds of rhetoric and political ideology. Much about a culture and its identity can be gleaned from the status and circumstances of its women, such as the roles they play in the society, the rights they enjoy or don’t … a Muslim woman projects more intensely the paradoxical realities that I am trying to identify ... The traditionally feminine traits such as beauty and innocence on one hand and cruelty, violence, and hatred on the other coexist within the complex structure of Islam itself

(Sheybani, 1999: para 8-9).

Academic analysis and criticism of Neshat's output (see Figure 4) also illustrate the potentially divisive nature of art as well as the tensions between the artist's intentions and the reception of their work. To cite one example, Tripp (2013) considers Neshat's "ambiguous portrayals of women" dressed in full *chador*[5] to be powerfully subversive in the reconfiguration of Islamic codes (299):

> Sometimes the subversion of the image of the 'Muslim woman' is achieved through the calligraphic phrases inscribed on their bodies, suggesting that they have become vehicles for text but not necessarily of the kind sanctioned by the ruling religious authorities of Iran – as in the use of a poem by the Iranian feminist Forough Farokhzad on the eyeball of the subject in the work *Offered Eyes*. In doing so, Neshat is defying both the imposed 'type' required by the Islamic Republic and the stereotype of veiled Muslim women so prevalent in the West (Tripp, 2013: 299).

The negative feelings of some critics towards Orientalism and exoticism in contemporary Iranian art are captured by Grigor (2018) who in her reflection on Neshat comments: "A Tehran-based art critic wrote that the market has created a false trend forcing artists to produce works with exotic Middle Eastern feel and another said, in private, all Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Neshat are doing is to sell souvenirs" (Grigor, 2018, 00:26:55). Neshat's art is also criticised by Khosravi (2011), who regards her work as a form of neo-Orientalism, particularly because of the use of signifiers such as the "Muslim veil, illegible Persian calligraphy, and guns" which she argues position the Muslim woman as "a subaltern entity in an archaic society. As a result, the Iranian Muslim woman remains restricted by her social, cultural, and religious praxis, as well as by Neshat's formal and contextual depiction of her" (n.p).

Neshat's art, however, arguably broke new ground, raising important issues and opening discussions about Iranian women, particularly the centrality of the gendered body in Muslim cultures. Her work addresses the complexities of the Iranian female body as a subject of surveillance and the Western gaze and the

[5] A form of veiling prevalent in Iran. This all-enveloping, often black, cloth covers a woman from head to toe (Zahedi, 2007).

site of faith-based, political, and ideological discourses (Babakhani, 2024). These debates are further problematised if we set them in the wider context of the exhibition framework, with the curator tasked to translate such works to a wider, often unfamiliar, audience. Susan Edelstein, curator of Neshat's 1997, *Women of Allah*, exhibition in Vancouver described her initial experience of Neshat's work at the Venice Biennale, offering insight into the confusion aroused in the Western viewer by Neshat's purposeful negation of explanatory text:

> Without textual translation I admit to my uneasiness at providing any type of accurate reading of the work. What was this artist trying to tell the viewer? To what degree does my inability to read this language [covering her face] affect my reading of the work? (Edelstein cited in Parker 2005: 56).

These conflicting analyses shed light upon the complex dynamics surrounding the intention, reception and presentation of contemporary Iranian art as well as pressures on artists emanating from the commercial art market. Neshat was part of the generation of female Iranian artists who migrated from Iran between the 1960s and 80s, often referred to as living in 'exile' (even though this in itself can be seen as a socially constructed if resistant identity). Similar things could be said about other 'diaspora' women artists such as Parastou Forouhar, Mitra Tabrizian, Samira Abbassy, Sonia Balassanianin and Taraneh Hemami. This generation of female artists has received much scholarly attention from a range of academic subject areas; particularly with respect to their work's exploration of identity, gender, and diaspora. To this extent, they also represent what is being referred to here as the first-generation of Iranian diasporic art, as opposed to the indigenous art of Iran.

Research Context

The fieldwork took place in two phases: January 2021–January 2022 and then August–September 2023 within an international context marked by crisis and extraordinary circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic limited the mobility of the participants and impacted their ability to connect with family, community, and in some cases, their studios and artistic practices. The restrictions surrounding the pandemic also limited my ability to conduct in-person interviews and participant observation which had originally been planned for the fieldwork. Consequently,

fieldwork interviews were conducted digitally, via *Zoom* video conference software.

The fieldwork also commenced as the right-wing presidency of Donald Trump concluded in January 2021.[6] Participants based in the US, therefore, entered the interview process from a climate of right-wing, anti-Muslim, and anti-migrant sentiment, heightened tensions between Iran and the US, economic sanctions on Iran, travel restrictions on Iranians, as well as the #BlackLivesMatter[7] and #MeToo[8] social movements emerging in the US. Meanwhile, those inside Iran experienced a period of government crackdowns, increasingly violent responses to protests as well as limited professional and financial opportunities inside the country as a result of international sanctions on Iran.

These are just some of the many complex social and political conditions that contributed to the lived realities and perspectives of the research participants. As such, the data collected during these interviews cannot be generalised to other periods or contexts without substantial modification.

Thesis Organisation

Following the introduction, the methodology outlines how the research questions were approached, evaluating and defining the most appropriate, current research methods, and outlining the strategy employed in the study. Chapter One, *The Iranian Diaspora: Context, Concepts and Markets*, then, introduces and analyses the Iranian diaspora in relation to the participants' hostland, the US, and asks what it means, in terms of identity, to be 'Iranian' or 'Iranian-American' and a woman in the context of the diaspora. The chapter then interrogates contemporary theories of cultural identity and diaspora with a view to establishing a theoretical basis for research and analysis before focusing on contemporary Iranian diasporic art by women artists. This section also examines the interrelationships between global and local factors that have impacted Iranian

[6] Donald Trump's tenure as the 45th president of the US started with his inauguration on 20 January 2017 and ended on 20 January 2021.
[7] The hashtag associated with the Black Lives Matter social movement, which aims to expose racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by Black people.
[8] The hashtag #MeToo popularised in 2017. It relates to the social movement and awareness campaign against sexual harassment and abuse.

diasporic art and the complex way in which gendered identities are articulated or reimagined within it.

Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five draw from the empirical data collected during the two stages of fieldwork. Chapter Two, *The Art Market and Neoliberalism*, situates the participants within the economic and structural ecosystem within which they operate, maintaining that these structures influence their perspectives and art practices. For this chapter, key contributors to the Iranian and Middle Eastern art markets were interviewed, and secondary sources including existing literature and auction sales reports were referred to where required. Chapter Three, *Journey to Diaspora*; Four, *Identity*; and Five, *Art in Disruptive Moments* combine empirical data from the participants' interviews with semiotic analysis to unpack the questions central to this study. *Journey to Diaspora* explores participants' respective migration journeys and motivations to migrate. Acknowledging that subsequent waves of migration to the US are distinct from the mass dispersal of the 1979 Revolution, this chapter examines the nuances of contemporary push-pull factors contributing to Iranian migration patterns.[9] The discussion addresses contemporary experiences—acculturation, hybrid Iranian-American positionality, return migration, and exile—and considers how they might frame the perspectives and realities of the research participants. 'Identity' then applies the concepts of identification, intersectionality, and performativity to female, Iranian diasporic identities. This chapter looks at how and why participants select, perform, and present various identities through their art practices. *Art in Disruptive Moments* then draws on the perspectives of four of the participants interviewed in the months following the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement (interviews were conducted in August and September 2023).[10] This chapter focuses on the impact of a highly significant event that connects Iran and its diaspora, exploring the role of technology in shaping communication, identification and artistic practices among the interviewees and offering a point of comparison to their earlier responses collected during the first phase of the fieldwork. The conclusion, then, draws together the various strands of the thesis.

[9] It also recognises that push-pull factor analysis may not fully capture the increasingly complex and intertwined motivations behind contemporary migration.

[10] "Woman Life Freedom" is a slogan associated with a series of protests and an international movement. The "Woman, Life, Freedom Movement" was stimulated by the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Jîna Amini in September 2022 while under police custody in Iran for not complying with enforced veiling laws (Amnesty International, 2023).

It outlines key points that emerged from the research and offers some indications of directions for further research.

Contributions to Research

This research contributes to the emerging but nascent field of literature on Iranian diasporic art (see Bublatzky, 2020; Ebrahimi, 2019; Grigor, 2014; Lotfalian, 2022). As discussed, literature exists on the generation of Iranian artists to arrive in diaspora during or as a result of the 1979 Revolution, as well as specific literature focusing on Iranian women artists and their articulations of identities. There is, however, limited literature exploring the experiences of the post-revolution generation, who navigate radically distinct and evolving circumstances. This thesis draws attention to the lack of comprehensive literature on Iranian diasporic art and aims to address, in part, earlier inconsistencies and ambiguities in this field. Given its interdisciplinary nature, the research also contributes to several interconnecting fields of study including cultural studies, media and communication studies, Middle Eastern art history, as well as gender, migration, and diaspora studies.

While there has been increased attention towards art produced by women from the Middle East, in parallel with critical examinations of (neo)Orientalism in and post-colonial approaches towards art practices, this thesis addresses the limitations inherent in the existing discourse on Iranian art, specifically the art produced by the post-revolution generation of women in diaspora. This indicates the relevance and significance of this study in addressing these gaps. The research also examines diasporic existence and communities in the digital age. It considers the significance of technology in shaping diasporic realities in ways that are both exceptional and banal, from personal communication to protest, as well as the (at times overlapping) relationship between physical and digital spheres. Connected to this, the research addresses the art and technology axis, a rapidly evolving dynamic that demonstrated alterations and advancements even during the timespan of the fieldwork.

Contemporary diasporic conditions are increasingly hybrid and fragmented while, more broadly, patterns of movement and interaction are increasingly online, cosmopolitan and transnational; as Bauman (2000) has suggested, we are in a

phase of *liquid modernity.*[11] The aim of this study is to shed light on processes of identity construction within this evolving context. By contributing to the understanding of the heterogenic experiences and identities of Iranian diasporic women artists in the US, while critically examining the broader socio-political and neo-liberal conditions that frame their artistic expressions, this study enriches scholarly discourse on diasporic identities, gender, media, culture and politics in the Middle East. Through its interdisciplinary approach, the research contributes to advancing knowledge in these fields at multiple levels.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the various discourses and studies on Iranian diasporas, the research for this thesis employed a multi-method approach that combined semi-structured interviews with semiotic analysis. Fifteen Iranian diasporic women artists were interviewed between January 2021 and September 2023. The research was conducted in two distinct phases. Initially, it was planned for one year (January 2021–January 2022); however, during the writing-up phase, the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement (WLF) commenced. This was a moment of conjuncture that significantly impacted the participants and in some cases their art practices, particularly because of the gendered character of the movement. During follow-up interviews from the first stage of the study, participants were keen to discuss their experiences and express their perspectives on this moment, resulting in an extension of the research into a second phase. The study, therefore, encompasses two significant, liminal periods between 2021 and 2023: the COVID-19 pandemic and the WLF Movement and associated uprisings inside Iran. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants to elaborate on previous responses during the writing-up stage throughout 2023.

The semi-structured interviews sought to address the key question of this research: How do diaspora Iranian women artists of the post-revolution generation engage with art and for what purposes? And the sub-questions this

[11] Bauman (2000) uses the metaphor of liquid to express the way that contemporary society is transitioning from solid, stable structures towards a more fluid, dynamic existence. This shift manifests, he contends, in social structures, economies, identities, relationships, and institutions in modern society.

raises: how do these artists talk about themselves and their identities?; what socio-political conditions or events enable them to produce art?; how does their artwork challenge/reinforce ethnocentric/gender stereotypes? The use of semi-structured interviews presented an opportunity to share individual narratives, countering monolithic stereotypes surrounding Iranian women that have prevailed, and draws on other studies concerning migrants. This is a method that Fedyuk and Zentai (2018) suggest allows them to maintain a focus on the research question and aims while, in parallel, offering space for the interviewee to introduce related topics. Semi-structured interviews empower participants by giving them 'voice' and enabling them, to some extent, to 'set the agenda' rather than conforming to fixed parameters set by the interviewer, as such they can discuss what is important to them. This is particularly important in qualitatively-based and relatively small-scale studies, such as this one, since it enables the researcher to access those empirically and emotionally grey areas that can often remain hidden. The employment of this method aims to address asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and the researched that may be embedded within previous studies. It also takes into account my positionality as a white, female, non-Iranian outsider and the power imbalances[12] that might be associated with this while addressing limitations in existing data. Nevertheless, it has been well-argued that interviews, however structured, cannot be treated naively as objective sources of data; they have to be treated reflexively and critically and examined in the light of other related sources. A 'critical realist' approach has been applied which, whilst not accepting that these sources cannot be treated simply as personal narratives, they cannot also be treated naively as 'true' accounts. It has also been recognised that many of the processes and issues discussed here are socially and culturally constructed, given in particular that artistic practice and imaginative creation create complex fields of signification.

Interviews combined with various media formats, are increasingly used as an advocacy tool, and form a step towards collaborative research and knowledge

[12] My positionality, particularly my gender, may also benefit this study. Participants might, for example, feel more comfortable speaking with me as a woman (rather than a male researcher), mutual gender may also contribute to a level of shared experience. Given the participants' social class, the power dynamics in these interviews may be more balanced compared to interactions with participants from other marginalised communities.

co-production, granting greater empowerment to the participants (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018). In this study, semi-structured interviews were combined with semiotic analysis of the artists' creations. As a study, it considers art as a cultural genre and product produced within a specific socio-political and temporal context. In combining discursive semiotic analysis and interview data there is an opportunity for critical reflection upon the participants' contexts and narratives, taking into account, for example, that they might consider elements of their art practices to be intuitive or unconscious. This additional level of analysis allows for the triangulation of data as well as external reflection on contextual and circumstantial factors that the participants might not be able to objectively reflect upon.

Timeframe and Structure

In terms of the actual research, the fieldwork interviews were conducted across two phases between January 2021 and September 2023 (see Fieldwork Interview Log, Appendix D). Participants were speaking from a particular context that conditioned, to some extent, the perspectives they expressed during the interview process. The findings of this fieldwork, then, cannot be unreflexively used to draw conclusions concerning other groups or moments in time.

The interviews were conducted and recorded digitally via *Zoom* video conference software. In-person interviews had been planned for this fieldwork; however, this was not possible due to restrictions on travel and in-person contact enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second phase of interviews, conducted during August and September 2023 were in response to the WLF Movement. The movement significantly impacted the perspectives and in some cases, the art practices, of the participants in this study, a shift which some of them were keen to discuss within the context of this research. The additional data collected from these interviews contributed to Chapter Five.

Target Population

During the research, I interviewed 15 women artists in the Iranian diaspora in the US who acknowledged that identity is a present theme in their artwork. The sample size accounted for diversity amongst the group and the chance for

different ‘identities’ to surface. The sample revealed diversity along various lines, including age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation/secularism, political beliefs, and marital status. Regarding class, although more challenging to define (as class dynamics may not directly translate between Iranian and American contexts), it was assumed that, given the participants’ educational attainment of at least undergraduate level and their ability to relocate abroad and fund their artistic endeavours, they likely fell within the middle to upper-class spectrum. Similar socio-economic status and mutual status as artists among the sample accounts, then, for specific perspectives and experiences which are not representative of those among Iranian diaspora women nor Iranian women more broadly. The circumstances surrounding their migration may also result in a shift in status and self-perception among participants who experienced being recognised as marginals and migrants in the diasporic context. As such, notions of class and social status are contingent and contextual.

While all participants are considered to be diasporic some experienced migration personally, at various stages in their lives, while for others born and raised in the US, narratives of migration were passed on to them by the prior generation. Each migration journey, then, is personal and particular. A consideration of how and why participants arrived in the diaspora, as well as the migration narratives they share in the interviews, is arguably as significant as examining the various intersections that shape their identities in understanding their diasporic realities.

In terms of how the parameters for the dataset were set, the artists included in the research were selected as belonging to a group of contemporary artists operating within a global framework. Definitions of what constitutes ‘global art’ are hotly debated but Anheier and Juergensmeyer (2012) at least offer a useful working definition which will be applied albeit critically here:

> Global art embraces any type of art, including paintings, sculptures, photography, cinema, video art, digital Internet art, as well as conceptual, installation, and performance arts, that participates in the international art world through cultural exchange or commerce. The exchange is not limited to one-directional transfers from dominant art cultures to indigenous sources. Rather, there exists a pluralism of active sources

> contributing to the reciprocal flow and mutually enhancing stream of art and its support systems, including art institutions, art publications, art criticism, and educational support (84).

It is worth noting, however, that such reciprocal flows do not preclude the existence of hierarchies within the global art market, which will be discussed later.

About the Research Participants

What follows is an introduction to the women of this research with a focus on intersectional lines and distinguishing aspects of their varied lived experiences (for further information on the participants see Appendices A and E).

In terms of commonalities, the women in this study belong to the post-revolution generation of Iranian diaspora in the US, sharing gendered and national intersections. They all identified themselves as artists and were socialised in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. On closer examination, however, the sample did exhibit a high degree of diversity presenting a challenge in neatly defining participants' profiles and experiences. Initial interviews revealed a spectrum of religious and secular beliefs, including Muslim, Jewish (non-practising), non-believer, and Bahá'í. Ethnically, one participant identified as Iranian-Arab, while others identified as Jewish or Persian. Their ages, at the start of the research, ranged from 27–41 and are grouped as follows: 2 participants were 26–30; 5 were 31–35; 6 were 36–40; 2 were 41–45. These groupings might affect, for example, their length of experience as artists and lived experiences. Politically, participants identified as either democratic or did not express a political perspective. Some were single, married, with or without children, and their sexual identities included heterosexual, queer and undisclosed. Educationally, all women held at least an undergraduate degree, with several pursuing or holding Master's (MFA) degrees, and some possessing PhDs and teaching in universities.

Their migration journeys and experiences of acculturation varied greatly. Second-generation Iranian-Americans discussed the traumatic dispersal of their ancestors, with some identifying as the offspring of Iranian communists or

experiencing family persecution due to their Bahá'í faith, resulting in exile across generations. This highlights the importance of intergenerational experiences that are inherited and influence present-day diasporic realities, including those within the sample set. Participants were born and raised in various US States or spent their formative years in various cities inside Iran, migrating to the US between 1994 and 2019. Some had lived in or spent time in other countries including India, the UK, Amsterdam, Germany, and France, expressing transnational ties with varying degrees of connection to Iran.

Regarding their mutual status as artists, motivations and durations of engagement with art varied. Some expressed specific agendas for their art including promoting Iranian art and culture or engaging in activism, others viewed art as a medium for communicating that which they could not 'say' or bridge-building between themselves and the world. In terms of participants' engagement with the art market, some were (un)represented by galleries (nationally and/or internationally). Some were more advanced in their careers, exhibiting regularly internationally and participating in international auctions, biennials and museum exhibitions with an established international collector base.

The diversity within the sample of 15 participants suggested a need to move beyond essentialist approaches to identities. Both shared experiences and subjective perspectives emerged during interviews; these commonalities and differences guided the themes explored in the empirical chapters.

Contacting Subjects

First attempt at contact with potential subjects was made via email. If there were difficulties in reaching informants, key individuals, organisations, and institutions were identified to provide access to suitable research subjects. In addition to the subjects identified through online (web and social media) research, a snowballing approach was applied, whereby certain subjects or stakeholders referred other relevant individuals. Snowballing is often applied to hard-to-reach communities (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018). This approach relates to the art community, which has a reputation for being relatively closed-off. Arguably, the insider knowledge of informants inhabiting both the art and Iranian communities

led to subjects that are not easily visible through other forms of searching. Mouw and Verdery (2012) also suggest that respondents to surveys are more likely to participate and respond truthfully when referred by acquaintances rather than those who are randomly contacted; it was inferred that the same could be plausible for interviewees referred to this study.

Interview Process

Having obtained informed consent from participants, a series of identical, structured questions were shared with each subject at the start of the interview process to establish background variables that were informative to the research and to assess how representative and/or diverse the dataset is. This was to account for different perspectives that might arise from different intersections and experiences such as date of migration to the US. These questions included: age; place of birth; place of residence; date of personal/family migration to the US; gender identity; sexual affiliation; marital status; religious and political affiliations; as well as when, why and where they began producing art.

Additional interviews were conducted with relevant art market contributors who engage specifically with contemporary Iranian art. Interviewees included auction house employees, art advisers, and museum curators amongst others. These perspectives were sought to provide further context and insight into the art market ecosystem within which the subjects operate: the external factors that contribute to their experiences as artists and the relationship between art and the economy.

Some experiences or memories might be sensitive or even traumatic for the subjects. In order to ward against any unpleasant memories, unless interviewees were in agreement with this, they were informed about the character of the questioning in advance of the interviews. Fedyuk and Zentai (2018), focusing on the use of interviews in researching marginalised or vulnerable groups, suggest that on a practical level interviews are flexible, thus offering the respondent the opportunity to enter into the process from a safe space and at a time that is convenient for them. While in-person interviews had originally been planned, the

revised, online character of this fieldwork offered an additional element of flexibility, safety and security to the participants.

Semiotics and Intertextuality

Fundamental to the approach taken here is the notion that artworks, beyond their aesthetic value, are capable of producing meaning and revealing complex information. This concept draws upon *semiotics,* a framework which Saussure laid the foundations for through his structural theory of language, which demonstrated how linguistic signs can produce and communicate meaning. Semiotics has evolved significantly over time, particularly through the contributions of Barthes, who explored the layered meanings of signs, and Hall, who extended semiotic techniques into media analysis and wider forms of representation. Unlike Barthes, however, Hall's work initially focused on the socio-political context and, interactively, the consequences of specific forms of representation. In this work, both of these tendencies have been given weight and have, arguably, led to a more nuanced and fluid interpretation of the artists and their artworks. Beyond Barthes and Hall, others such as Berger (1972) and Sontag (1977), have made very significant contributions to our understanding of images in particular, but there has always been a tension between those who, following Saussure, have adopted a linguistically-centred approach (structuralist and post-structuralist) and those who have also given weight to the structuring and destructuring power of context. The approach taken here builds upon this tension and explores the dynamics and interactions between the different approaches as well as the potential resolutions.

There is no space here to explore all of the twists and turns of this debate, but it is useful for present purposes to note some salient points. Firstly, Barthes usefully understood signs as having a multiplicity of meanings; he suggested that there is a "'floating chain' of signifieds," with the reader able to "choose some and ignore others" (Barthes, 1964, in Evans and Hall, eds., 1999: 37). He also developed Sausurre's notion of signifier and signified into a wider theory of signification which argued that cultural signs, symbols, and images offer up both 'literal' (denotative) and 'symbolic' (connotative) functions (ibid.). Secondly, Kristeva's work on intertextuality echoed Barthes in identifying the interconnectedness of texts and the multiplicity of meanings they generate. Both

these theorists thereby closed off any sense that signs and symbols, of any type, could simply be ‘read off’ in terms of a preferred or standardised meaning.

Thirdly, Hall made a connection, in work such as *The West and the Rest* (1992), between theorists such as Barthes and Kristeva and his own explorations of colonialism within cultural studies. Hall argued that meanings contribute to the “mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall, 1996b: 25-26). These frameworks of meaning, if unchallenged, can become taken-for-granted associations that subsequently constitute ideologies defined by one group and imposed on another that result in cultural oppression (see Hall, 1982; 1996c). Subsequently, however, under the influence of post-structuralism Hall and others moved away from a class-based analysis of domination/subordination to explore how different representational forms were influential in constructing discourses of social and cultural difference; giving much greater weight to gender and ethnicity in particular and, globally, to the construction of regimes of subordination and exclusion that operated to define what Said influentially came to call the ‘Other’. In contradistinction, however, Hall and others made the point that the excluded and marginalised could create counter-hegemonic and oppositional images, signs and symbols, in art as well as everyday life, that challenged the dominant discourses.

Drawing critically on these insights we can see how artists create images for various reasons, one of which is to resist the framings imposed upon them by the dominant group. By subverting hegemonic visual codes, artists can expose the fragility of oppressive imagery harnessing the language of the oppressors themselves. The artists included in this study navigate complex socio-political terrain, which will be explored in the next chapter. Analysing their artworks necessitates, therefore, a dual approach: an understanding of their context and conditions, as well as awareness of the dominant discourses against which they may be consciously or unconsciously operating.

The application of semiotic analysis in this study offers the opportunity to analyse the meanings the artists have encoded in their artworks. These works are

understood as a cultural product, shaped by the artists' context and diasporic realities. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) suggest that the relationship between the context, observer and image is one of negotiation/trade/bargaining, with the process of deciphering an image taking place at conscious and unconscious levels:

> It brings into play our own memories, knowledge, and cultural frameworks as well as the image itself and the dominant meanings that cling to it. Interpretation is thus a mental process of acceptance and rejection of meanings and associations that adhere to a given image through the force of the dominant ideologies. In this process, viewers actively struggle with dominant meanings, allowing culturally and personally specific meanings to transform and even override the meanings imposed by producers and broader social forces (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, cited in Parker, 2005: 133-134).

This process is problematic when the viewer is observing images created from a context that they might not be familiar with; the reading is rendered incomplete when the viewer does not share the author's criteria for selection. Indeed, Barthes argued that signs and their interpretations vary culturally and circumstantially, while the meaning the audience derives is influenced by the dominant structures within which it is produced. There can be, however, no simple reading of a particular sign if we accept the idea of a 'floating chain of signifiers' from which individuals construct their own meanings. Meaning is therefore understood here as multiple, unfixed, socially produced, and at times subject to the influence of competing forces.

As noted above, Kristeva's (1980) notion of intertextuality also has useful applications in the semiotic analysis of cultural artefacts. Her work critiques earlier rigid structuralist approaches in favour of a dialogic understanding illuminating how the viewer, when producing meaning, brings with them their own repertoire of knowledge. Reading, she suggests, should never be merely a "linguistic" process on an isolated 'text'. Consequently, she advocates a reading of what she calls the "translinguistic" - the text's dialogue "along horizontal and

vertical axes with its writer, readers and context" (*Desire,*[13] 69 cited in Richardson, 2002: 218).

Taking these insights further and referring directly to the diasporic context Mirzoeff (2002) suggests that the diasporic image is "necessarily intertextual" in that the viewer must bring with them "extratextual information" in order to attribute meaning to that which they are observing (209):

> … in the visual image, intertextuality is not simply a matter of interlocking texts but of interacting and interdependent modes of visuality that I shall call intervisuality. From a particular starting point, a diasporic image can create multiple visual and intellectual associations both within and beyond the intent of the producer of that image (ibid.).

Semiotic analysis, when combined with participants' personal narratives, has proved highly applicable to this research. The research objects and subjects are socially constructed, dynamic and changing; requiring, therefore, a flexible and reflexive approach. The combination of these methods offers the opportunity to evaluate elements that may be unconscious as participants construct their compositions to express what they often cannot articulate through written or spoken words. Visual analysis and personal narratives converge, therefore, to provide a multi-layered understanding.

The discussion so far has evaluated the value and challenges associated with semiotic and intertextual analysis. The use of these methods, as already noted, reflects the multilayered and iterative nature of cultural reality which cannot, therefore, be analysed using uncritical realist analysis. We cannot, for example, assume that our own interpretation is the only one but equally well, signs and symbols are generally interpreted within a socially negotiated and agreed field of meaning which, following Habermas (1984), is designed to achieve a communicative consensus; this does, however, nevertheless leave space for innovative or off-the-wall interpretations that shift the consensus itself. As already demonstrated, what constitutes Middle Eastern art, for example, changes as the

[13] *Desire* refers to: Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Columbia University Press.

context and driving forces do.

'Creative' Research Methods

The artworks selected for analysis in this research were chosen in relation to the themes raised by participants in their interviews such as trauma, migration, or motherhood. This approach facilitated a secondary analysis of the interview data and triangulated the participants' reflections. It is necessary, however, to acknowledge that there has been a widening and cross-fertilisation of social science and arts-based methodologies. Kara (2024), for instance, notes that creative research methods when applied to academic enquiry can defy "binary or categorical thinking", placing value instead upon "contextual specificity" and reflecting the "multiplicity of meanings that exist in social contexts more accurately" (Kara, 2015: 14); this consequently supports the collection of rich and nuanced data. In addition, creative methods are, arguably, particularly beneficial in gathering data on sensitive topics that might be hard to talk about but easier to express visually or when participants face communication challenges (NCRM, 2017).

One of the main aims of my research was to uncover the complexities of gendered diasporic identities; the application of visual methods was, therefore, both fundamental and complementary to other traditional methods. When applied together, they form a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject at hand. It has been argued, by Leavy (2017) for example, that arts may be able to access that which is otherwise out of the reach of conventional understandings or, as contemporary artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye has stated, in discussing the power of her art to articulate that which written words cannot: "I write about the things I can't paint and paint the things I can't write about" (Tate Britain, 2023).

Creative methods were employed in multiple ways during this study. During one-on-one interviews subjects reflected upon images that they had constructed, the data was collected via audio and video recordings of the interviews, and the participants shared images of their artwork and supplementary visual material during post-interview communication. Mannay (2010) claims that the practice of asking participants to explain the visual images that they create is now a

“common feature” of social science research (18), but this process is problematised by the complex issue of artists’ intentions. Rose suggests that the most “salient aspect in understanding a visual image is what the maker intended to show” (Rose, 2001 cited in Mannay, 2010: 17) but historically this has always been a contested issue in aesthetic theory. It is accepted that the interpretation of the audience is not necessarily the same as the narrative intended by the image-maker; in fact, it can often be notably different. Theoretically, it has been argued above, drawing upon Bourdieu (1993), that images may be read as part of a field of meaning, which *ipso facto* opens up space for divergent readings of the work. We can ask, for example, to what extent does the artist encourage or discourage this? Are they keen to suggest a single overwhelming reading or allow some diversity? And so on. Interviews with the participants were, therefore, employed to better understand this ‘field of meaning’ and to counter the chance of misleading or aberrant interpretations of the works.

Rose (2016) claims that three particular sites contribute to the critical understanding of the image: the site(s) of production, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) of circulation where various audiences see it. These sites are complicated because each of their processes has different elements. Discursive semiotic and intertextual analysis was applied to artworks produced by the participants in this study, as a layer of analysis which interrogates ‘the site of the image itself’. Through this process, particular themes could be identified which helped to establish the types of concerns selected, rejected and performed by the artists through their processes of cultural production. The data also revealed differences and similarities across generations of Iranian women artists in diaspora and within the sample group itself.

While some artists have never wanted to draw attention to themselves or their work, there are others, Andy Warhol for example, for whom the performance of being an artist or of deconstructing it, was an essential part of what they do. Artists may be aware of the extent to which Iranian-American gendered identities are performed in their work or how they, themselves, may be ‘performing’, either in their artwork or in their roles as artists. This raises the question as to what extent and in what ways the identity of a female Iranian diasporic artist in the US in the early 21st century is performed and constructed. The combination of

participant interview data and discursive semiotic and intertextual analysis helps us to understand how *performativity* (discussed in the next chapter in relation to Butler, 1988) manifests in both artwork and artists. By integrating these methods—interviews that centre participants' perspectives and experiences and analysis of the objects they create within their social contexts—the study moves beyond the perspectives of artists, art critics, audiences, and existing scholarship, offering a more dynamic, multi-dimensional exploration of Iranian diasporic gendered experiences.

Secondary Sources and Triangulation

Secondary sources were an essential reference point for the research underpinning this thesis. Sources such as art critiques, academic literature, press articles, online media sources—including art gallery websites, auction and gallery sales reports, and artist biographies—were, therefore, consulted throughout the process. Additionally, prior to and during the research, social media, particularly Instagram, served as a valuable source of data for Iranian artists, including those involved in this study, as well as for evolving art market commentary. These accounts provided real-time insights into artists' engagement with digital media, their creative output and engagement with and response to socio-political issues. Relevant gallery newsletters, visits to institutional and gallery exhibitions have also significantly enriched my understanding and insights into Iranian art.

Research methods and data sources were triangulated, offering a way, for example, of understanding the research questions from both the subject and the researcher's perspectives. Creswell (2009) suggests that triangulation supports validity through an additional layer of cross-checking, establishing "themes based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants" (Creswell, 2009: 191). Themes were drawn together, and differences and unexpected information were identified. The data was first coded based on the variables identified during the initial interview survey, allowing for comparisons between the subjects at different intersections. Artworks were coded and catalogued according to the themes identified during semiotic analysis and fieldwork interviews. During the writing-up stage, an open dialogue was maintained with the participants for fact-checking purposes, follow-up questions and clarification.

Reflexive Methodology

It is essential to reflect upon both the positionality of the researcher and the methodology employed at all stages of any research process since no simple trajectory can expect to capture the depth of experience and action that artistic work implies. At the same time, it has long been recognised that research, to be successful, must be iterative to address issues and problems whilst the research is in process and seek appropriate modifications in the research design and process. Using this iterative and reflexive approach, several potential limitations were identified in the methodology. Firstly, the sampling method had potential flaws; snowball sampling can lead to oversampling within a particular network of peers, resulting in bias but in practice, the artists selected were not involved in a closed or tightly bound network so this issue did not arise. Secondly, the representativeness of the sample was not guaranteed. Given, however, the small size of the 'sample' representativeness was not an option and a more qualitative approach was employed. Thirdly, while the sample size and specific profiles of the subjects were sufficient for qualitative analysis, they prevented the drawing of generalisations from the study; something which is nevertheless inherent in any small-scale qualitative study. Finally, there was no way to assess the extent of potential partiality in selecting participants, as there was no available data on those who chose not to participate to use as a comparator.

In terms of the semiotic analysis, the scope of the research did not allow for an analysis of each participant's entire portfolio. Therefore, the artworks selected for analysis were subject to the predispositions of both the participant and the researcher, offering insight into only a select portion of the artist's output.

While the fieldwork attempted to explore the nuances of Iranian gendered diasporic identities, the attachment to gender and nationality as lenses for exploration was also limiting in the sense that other possible avenues of exploration could be closed off. Conversations were tied to and grounded in the intersection of these identities, which also framed the semiotic analysis. Qualitative interviews had limitations too. While they could offer insight into, for example, an artist's perspective, the subjectivity of the researcher and the

participant must be considered. It is acknowledged that both parties' perspectives are subjective, unfixed, and may evolve over time. The material could not be accepted as fact and was triangulated and verified using other methods and sources to support accuracy. As per critical realism, however, there is no entirely objective reading of 'reality', but it is accepted that there is a reality that is separate from our construction of it. The semi-structured interview technique also made it difficult to draw comparisons between data. The data-gathering process saw large volumes of qualitative data produced through filmed interviews, the sharing of high-resolution images, audio recordings, and fieldwork notes; subsequently, it was difficult to analyse such information evenly, and this data took considerable time to transcribe and catalogue.

Finally, there was an issue concerning the subjectivity and interpretative understanding involved in 'reading' any image; as the interpreter, I possess prior knowledge, experiences, and understandings that can shape my perceptions of the image and the interpretation of it in a way that cannot necessarily be replicated. The research has inevitably been subject to partiality grounded in my positionality as a white, female researcher and non-Iranian outsider. Despite measures taken to counter this partiality at each stage of the research and a reflexive approach, some information might be 'lost in translation'. It is argued here, however, that employing a systematic and transparent methodology, which acknowledges its theoretical and epistemological presuppositions, can counter partiality, enable conclusions to be based on sound reasoning, and make the researcher's preconceptions transparent. In qualitative research, the immersion of the researcher in the context is arguably unavoidable, as the researcher can never be entirely absent from the research process. The systematic checks discussed above, however, attempted to ensure that the analysis for this study remained rigorous.

CHAPTER ONE
THE IRANIAN DIASPORA: CONTEXT, CONCEPTS AND MARKETS

Iranian Migration to the US

Before proceeding to an analysis of Iranian diasporic art, it is necessary to locate it within the wider context of the Iranian diaspora as a whole and how this has

developed historically. As Said argued, the discourses around 'oriental' art are not free-floating; they are politically and culturally constructed and have real effects. They, for example, contribute to the construction of dependent and subordinate subjects (Said, 1979). Contemporary diasporic Iranian art draws upon, reinvents and transmutes this complex history and thereby reimagines inherited Iranian customs and traditions while transforming or rejecting them. What follows, therefore, is a brief overview of the recent history, extent and implications of the global Iranian diaspora, with particular reference to the US.

There have been three major waves of Iranian migration to the US during the modern period. The first wave extends from 1950–1979, the second and largest from 1979–2001 (Hakimzadeh, 2006). The third started in 2001 and intensified in the wake of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections (Hakimzadeh, 2006; Gharibi and Mirvahed, 2021). Harris (UCLA, 2023) notes that while there have been 'spikes' in immigration, particularly during the late 1990s and in early 2010 there was a notable decline during Trump's presidency (2017–2021).

During the first wave, the 1960s saw a significant increase in outward movement from Iran. This can be attributed to shifts in socio-political conditions including increased economic wealth and mobility among the rising middle class (Modarres, 1998). During the 1990s, Modarres conducted an extensive study of settlement patterns of Iranians in the US.[14] He suggests that, historically, the Iranian immigration pattern has included a combination of three groups: students, their families, and exiles. The movement of these groups continues to be affected by inter-group dynamics as well as social and political shifts in the home/host countries and internationally. One such example was the unprecedented number of Iranians travelling to Western societies for education during the 1960s and 70s. The option for education abroad was previously reserved for the upper classes and some military personnel, but this opened up during the Pahlavi period (1925–1975) under Mohammad Reza Shah's vision of modernisation. Bozorgmehr and Sabagh (1988) claim that the oil boom and rising incomes supported parents in defraying the educational costs for their children. Those who left Iran for education abroad during the 1970s were enticed

[14] The research took place in the 1990s, therefore, it only captures the 1990s and cannot be extended to the later period without careful extrapolation.

back by the demand for graduates of foreign universities in Iran against a backdrop of the rapid development and industrialisation in the country paired with a limited capacity for higher education in Iran (Azadi et al., 2020). This contrasts with the dramatic brain drain that the country experienced in the 2000s and the lowest rate of return among migrant groups in the US, suggesting a lack of opportunities and a poor outlook for the educated in Iran. Return to Iran among Iranian students educated in the US, post-graduation, declined from 90% in 1979 to less than 10% in 2020, a figure corresponding to the lowest rate of return among students of all foreign nationalities in the US (Azadi et al., 2020).

The late 1970s saw religious groups that anticipated persecution and royalist sympathisers flee as uncertainty increasingly surrounded the Pahlavi regime (Hakimzadeh, 2006). It is worth noting that continuation of class status was a motivating factor for early migration. Sanadjian (2016), suggests that there was an expectation among Iranian migrants, fearful of losing the status they maintained under the Shah's rule, that transnational migration should offer them continuity in terms of "class mobility" (97). This group exited before the Shah was overthrown and settled in the West (ibid.).

The second wave (1979–2001) that began after the 1979 Islamic Revolution saw over 330,000 Iranians migrate to the US. This figure was composed mainly of political refugees including socialists and liberals, exiles and asylum seekers as well as young men fleeing military service and the Iran-Iraq War. Young women and families were the next to follow. The result was flows of "wealthy and educated classes" from Iran that dominated the first phase of post-revolutionary migration, transcending stereotypes surrounding migrants (McAuliffe, 2015: 37).

The third wave of migration to the US began in 2001 and is ongoing (UCLA, 2023). Social and political conditions in Iran and internationally continue to impact migration in positive and negative terms. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, for example, influenced Iranian immigration to the US on a major scale (Emami, 2014). The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act (2002) was established shortly thereafter (Sensenbrenner, 2001-2). According to Emami (2014), this period saw a significant decrease in the number of immigrant and refugee visas issued to Iranians by the US. In 2002 13,887 Iranian

immigrants and 2,971 refugees were admitted to the US in comparison to 7,251 immigrants and 1,878 refugees in 2003 (ibid.).

Azadi et al. (2020) organised drivers for migration from Iran into four broad categories that may compound and interrelate over time:

1. **Predisposing Factors** (evolving over a very long term):
    - Lower per capita income compared to advanced economies
    - Inferior quality of education relative to developed countries
    - Social and political repression, including human rights violations and religious persecution
    - Increased labour mobility and urbanisation
    - Social shifts such as individualism and secularism
2. **Proximate Factors** (evolving over the long term):
    - Economic stagnation and chronic unemployment
    - Decay of government institutions and loss of social capital
    - Endemic corruption and crime
    - Environmental challenges in large cities, particularly air pollution
3. **Precipitating Events**:
    - The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)
    - The Cultural Revolution (1980–1983)
    - Government crackdowns on dissent during protests (1999, 2009, 2017–2018, and 2019)
    - Significant economic sanctions (2012 and 2018)
    - Poor state response to natural disasters
    - Monetary shocks including currency devaluation and high inflation
4. **Mediating Catalysts**:
    - Increased internet penetration
    - A growing number of friends and family abroad

Inside Iran, shifts in social values (towards individualism and secularism) and factors that affect daily life such as environmental and economic challenges (such as sanctions and a devaluing currency) drive ongoing migration to the US.[15] These factors compound with evolving social and political currents in and outside Iran.

[15] More recent events, for example, the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement (2022–date) are not captured in this 2020 study.

Education continues to be a motivating factor for migration among Iranians: student visas accounted for 20% of the 15,824 nonimmigrant visas issued to Iranian nationals (3,323) between 2000 and 2005 (Hakimzadeh and Dixion, 2006). Azadi et al., (2020) have addressed the issue of brain drain from Iran in their research. The authors claim Iran is undergoing a “brain drain crisis” and identified three distinct phases in the number of Iranian-born students enrolled in foreign universities (4). They noted a sharp increase in the decade preceding the 1979 Revolution followed by a significant decline in the two decades post-revolution and an upward trend thereafter. When their research was published, in 2020, there were 130,000 Iranian-born students enrolled in foreign universities, a record high. Azadi et al., (2020) note that: “As a proxy for the brain drain issue at large, the total number of active scholars among the Iranian diaspora has undergone a ten-fold increase since 2000” (4).

There has also been a small but notable trend of return migration among Iranian immigrants (see Malek, 2016; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013). It is important to note that while there is a lack of quantitative data on return migration (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013), what data is available can be used to develop a more complex analysis. Lotfalian (2022), for example, discusses a situation that might affect some of the participants in this study whereby the economic boom and cultural exchange with the West in Iran, following the election of reformist President Khatami (1997–2005) attracted return migration:

> Iran experienced a bustling cultural exchange with the West: academic conferences, film festivals (which had been underway as early as 1991), music events and tourism. An ethnographically important process was the undercurrent of movement of Iranians from Iran to the West, as well as in the opposite direction, from the Iranian diaspora to Iran (Lotfalian, 2022: 7).

Lotfalian notes that this period halted when nationalist Ahmadinejad became president (2005–2013), suggesting that a change of regime in Iran impacted not only opportunities to engage with culture but also the desirability of return to Iran for those in the diaspora. The perceived openness and economic opportunities

under Khatami, as well as positive external relations that diminished with Ahmadinejad, played significant roles in this shift.

In parallel, push factors for return migration from the US to Iran include, for example, Trump's rhetoric surrounding Iranians and Muslims in the US and heightened visa restrictions. The prospect of living in the Islamic Republic of Iran does, however, remain improbable or unappealing to the many Iranians who originally left in fear of religious or political persecution. It is important to note that, while useful for understanding migration motivations, the push-pull factor analysis can be viewed as overly simplistic. This is particularly the case in the era of transnationalism, where social worlds and ways of living are increasingly fluid, and the circumstances and motivations for human movement have become more complex and intertwined.

Iranian Dispersal and Reconcentration

It is impossible to establish exact motivations, which vary case-by-case, but it is generally accepted that political upheaval in Iran has been a significant factor behind outward migration. In parallel, other significant factors positioned the US as an attractive destination. The concentration of elite members of Iranian society in Los Angeles, for example, increased during the 1960s. The area was afforded prestige not only by its distinguished inhabitants that included international celebrities but also by international media discourses that positioned Hollywood and America as the height of aspirational living, a place of opportunity, social liberation and the 'freedoms' promoted by the Pahlavi regime. The 2000 US Census indicates that all 50 states received Iranian immigrants; the vast majority (55.9%) however, moved to California (Census Bureau 2000, cited in Hakimzadeh and Dixon, 2006). According to Modarres (1998), the initial spatial distribution of Iranians in the US closely aligned with the locations of major educational institutions that attracted students. A shift toward higher concentrations in selected places occurred during the 1980s when the initial wave of students began to pursue careers, and their family members followed them from Iran to the US in addition to the arrival of Iranian 'exiles' during the late 1970s and 1980s:

> By the 1990s, the geography of Iranian settlement patterns portrays a process driven mainly by family reunification and a search for economic

> opportunities. The end result has been a dramatic concentration of one-half of all Iranian immigrants in California. By 1990, Los Angeles County alone housed over a quarter of all Iranians in the US (Modarres, 1998: 49).

Things are, however, changing. Harris (UCLA, 2023) has observed an evolving trend, suggesting that younger, first-generation Iranians (aged 25–34) are more likely than their older counterparts to eschew the West Coast, opting instead for states in the South and Midwest.

While sharing certain similar characteristics, there are pronounced differences in the profiles of the Iranian diaspora in diverse US locations, not only when comparing states but also when considering neighbourhoods, which helps to underline the complexities of such diasporas. Much of the literature has focused on the Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles and, more broadly, California, largely because of the concentration of Iranians in the state. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)[16] data, states that of the 15 ZIP codes that attracted more than 1,000 Iranian immigrants from 1983 until 1993, 14 are in Los Angeles County and only one in New York City. The 14 ZIP codes in the Los Angeles metropolitan area are all areas, according to Modarres (1998), “with high socioeconomic status and high population density” (38). It is clear, then, that diversity within the Iranian diaspora in California occurs according to neighbourhood; as Carrol (2017) puts it, Muslims typically settled in Orange County or the San Fernando Valley while Jews made Westwood and Beverly Hills their homes. This pattern of ethnic groups locating themselves within communities that are separate within the same general areas is familiar throughout the world, particularly in world cities where particular ethnic communities are identifiable within small spaces.

Iranian Diasporic Formation and Identity

The issue of nationality and its relation to national identity has preoccupied diaspora studies for some time, particularly since theories of globalisation

[16] The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was a former agency of the US Department of Labor (1933–1940) and the US Department of Justice (1940–2003). The agency ceased to exist under that name, 1 March, 2003. The majority of its functions were transferred to new entities under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which was established as part of a government reorganisation following 9/11 in 2001.

problematised the presumed significance of the nation-state (see Cohen, 1996; Churchill, 1996). Indeed neat definitions bound by a unified population across national, ethnic and religious lines, are improbable in most settings, and also in the case of Iran.[17] The question of national identity is complicated by the fact that Iran has a wide range of ethnically and religiously defined groups beyond the dominant 'Persian' ethnic grouping which means that the label 'Iranian' is only one layer of identity and one that does not necessarily have strong purchase given, for example, the desire amongst some to leave the 'homeland behind' or the reluctance to answer to an Iranian classification given the hostile environment caused by US-Iranian confrontation. It is important to note that identities and their labellings are unstable and fluid, those that might be applied externally by, for example, academics, media, or government officials, might not necessarily be adopted by the group to whom it is being attributed. Therefore, labels such as hyphenated Iranian-American, as well as unhyphenated Iranian American, are subject to individual preferences which might shift over time. For the purposes of this research, however, Iranian-Americans can be defined in practice as Americans of Iranian ancestry and/or individuals that have dual Iranian and American citizenship; this is, however, a 'working definition', subject to clarification and modification.

Tehranian (2008) found that as a result of the previously discussed tensions first-generation Iranian-Americans often adopted Western names like "Mike or Mo", or denounced Iranian heritage in favour of "ambiguously Mediterranean ones" (Tehranian, 2008, cited in Malek, 2016: 29). The second-generation, however, does not appear to have adopted the same degree of "covering strategies" (ibid.). As such Mahdi (1998) contends that popular approaches to Iranian identities have previously been "essentialist, static, monolithic, and idealistic" (79).

Broadly speaking, the Iranian diaspora is differentiated along several axes including Muslims, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, Jews, Christians and the non-religious as well as those identifying as LGBTQI and those politically opposed to [or in support of] the Islamic Republic (Sreberny and Gholami, 2019). It is also differentiated along class/status, gender, generational, and ethnic lines; and it is,

[17] The Iranian national identity can be claimed by several linguistic and ethnic groups including Arabs, Baluchis, Kurds, Turks and religious groups including Assyrian Christians, Jews, Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians, and Sunni and Shiite Muslims (Karim and Rahimieh, 2008).

of course, important to recognise the extent to which these characteristics *intersect*. These differentiations are apparent ethnographically, for example, in the diverse rituals Iranians in diaspora engage with. During her fieldwork in California, anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi encountered people of Iranian ancestry participating in the pre-Islamic, old-Persian harvest celebrations of *Mehregan*. Twenty years ago, Ghorashi (2004) suggested that the adoption and reinvention of these historic cultural traditions was a mode of preservation for and conscious sense of having an 'Iranian cultural identity' but this is an identity distinct to those in diaspora:

> In Iran's more recent history, *Mehregan* has not been part of national celebrations and thus has little meaning for Iranians in Iran. Iranians living abroad frequently fall back onto pre-Islamic symbolism and the history of the Persian empire of antiquity. This helps them construct and advertise an Iranian diaspora identity intentionally different from that of contemporary Iran, and this is, among other things, a reaction to the negative views of post-revolutionary Iran that dominate public perception and debate in many Western countries (Ghorashi, 2004: 12).

This corresponds with arguments in the more general literature that suggest that so-called 'traditional' customs and practices may be reinvented or reimagined in the context of transnational migration, a process Cohen and Yefet (2019) see as resulting in a 'trans-national diasporic identity' which borrows from pre-Islamic Persian as well as aspects of the new, dominant culture. They argue that this blending of identities and processes diminishes the significance of the national centre. Drawing upon Mahdi's (1998) idea of 'transplanted culture', they suggest that this "selective interpretation of Iranian culture" was established from a re-imagination of the homeland culture, adapted to make it "more appropriate to their lifestyle in the host society" while remaining representative of an imagined Iranian culture (Cohen and Yefet, 2019: 13). It is important to note, however, that this may not apply to all sections of the diaspora community. Not everyone will be, for example, equally nostalgic, and some might view such perspectives as conservatism.

Studies of cultural identity have rejected essentialist notions of identity based on national, ethnic or gendered imaginaries, this is reflected in research which has

clearly demonstrated the complexities of the Iranian diaspora. Relating to adaptation to American society, for example, Bozorgmehr found significant differences in the experiences of Iranian exiles/refugees and immigrants while Naficy (IAAB, 2014) notes that the intersection of faith further complicates this process as it shapes power balances in the new, diasporic context:

> The religious minorities in Iran became the majority in exile. Jews knew how to be a minority here [in California] … and assimilated quickly. The Muslims who were all-powerful and didn't have to justify their existence at home now had to deal with that, and it was very traumatic for them, partly because many of them were secular (IAAB, 2014, 00:06:14).

Generational Identities

Over 45 years have passed since the 1979 Revolution, and the mass-migration of Iranians to the US has resulted in a sizable second-generation population (Bozorgmehr and Douglas, 2011). Bozorgmehr and Douglas (2011) have defined the second-generation Iranian diaspora as persons born in the US to at least one foreign-born parent as well as those who immigrated to the US under the age of 13 (Bozorgmehr and Douglas, 2011: 2). The second-generation is, according to Maghbouleh (2010), one which has come of age "entirely in US institutional spaces such as schools and universities" (1). She notes, however, that "little scholarship" has been produced to address this "new cohort of young adults as they move beyond their diasporic childhood homes and into adulthood" (ibid.). One study by Bozorgmehr and Douglas (2011) identified a continuation of economic and educational success from the first to the second-generation, which has become "more balanced across gender lines" in the second-generation (3). They noted that, at the time of publication, the second-generation was still 'young', and it was, therefore, premature to draw complete conclusions; however, they predicted an upward trajectory given this generation's "initial achievements" (ibid.).

The second-generation has also been discussed in relation to assimilation. Mahdi (1998), for example, found that Iranians in second-generation US diaspora displayed symbolic rather than behavioural representations of Iranian culture because 'Iranian' values, norms, and symbols are not as easily accessible to this group as they had been to their parents. He argues that

second-generation Iranians have shown a strong interest in “maintaining a sense of their ancestral roots and culture, but such a desire is predicated on an Americanized understanding of Iranian culture” (94). This crossing of cultural boundaries is also reflected in Hanassab’s (1998) research which indicated that young Iranians in Los Angeles found it difficult to adopt the same standards and values as their parents as they have been exposed to American understandings of freedom and liberties.

Alinejad and Ghorashi’s (2016) research into the Iranian diaspora in West Coast America significantly highlights how generational imaginations and constructions of what it means to be Iranian are being challenged and contested. In the first-generation, scholars observed a “selective interpretation of Iranian history and culture that might be deemed more favourable than the Islamic one in the hostland and bases Iranian identity exclusively on the pre-Islamic grandeur and power of the Persian Empire” (Mohabbat-Kar, 2016: 18). This discourse was, they claim “invented” by elite Iranian immigrants who settled on the American West Coast and, from there has been exported to other diasporic locations (ibid.):

> For the first generation Iranian Americans, the connection (bridge) to the American context seems to have been the major priority. The stories of success and the celebration of Persian heritage have been used as two sources of connection to the new society. From the turn of the century political awareness of the US context is added to this pattern. Yet, the second generation seeks alliance with the critical voices in the US questioning this rather a-political positioning of the first generation. In their quest for belonging they position themselves in the anti-racist discourses inherited in part also from other minority groups who have had similar (other Muslim and Middle Eastern minorities) or more embedded (African American and Latino) histories in the US (Alinejad and Ghorashi, 2016: 74).

Particular versions of Iranian culture have been maintained for subsequent generations in the diasporic context with the support of “Iranian diaspora money” (Lotfalian, 2022: 32). For example, members of the diaspora funded the revival

of Iranian studies centres that diminished following the breakdown in relations between the US and Iran post-1979 (ibid.). The sustenance of Iranian culture in the diasporic context might, however, be subject to subjective agendas and interpretations as well as perspectives grounded in class (given that those with sizable, disposable capital are funding such ventures) resulting in a distinct diasporic version of Iranian culture upheld in the hostland.

Up to this point, it has been argued that certain attitudes, attributes, and experiences may be characteristic of a specific generation within the Iranian diaspora. It is, however, important to problematise an over-reliance on generational definitions that overlook individual experience and transnational ways of living. In the contemporary period it is increasingly common for individuals to navigate between multiple countries and contexts. An individual might, for example, find themselves born in one country, educated in another, and later migrate or temporarily relocate again for further studies or career opportunities. These experiences do not align neatly with the traditional classifications that place much significance on home and hostland affiliations.

Similarly, the first-generation diaspora categorisation suggests those who are the first to migrate from their family and can, therefore, encompass migration across several decades. Migration from Iran has been driven by various push-pull factors, ranging from the mass expulsions of the 1979 Revolution to more recent migration influenced by economic sanctions and educational opportunities (acknowledging previous concerns about the push-pull model it is important to recognise that causation may be more complex and dialectical than these factors alone suggest). Consequently, generalisations cannot easily be drawn from generational understandings alone.

This study takes the perspective that significant events experienced by a collective during a specific socio-temporal context can shape their outlook and understanding of the world in meaningful ways, a notion which will be explored in further detail in the conceptual framework. As noted in the introduction, this research will subsequently differentiate between those who directly experienced or were cognisant of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and those born afterwards, who inhabit and navigate distinct socio-political contexts.

Gender and Iranian Diasporic Identities

Few studies have explored the implications of gender relations within the Iranian-American diaspora. Bozorgmehr's (1998) research remains one of the most comprehensive relating to the demographics of the Iranian diaspora where he notes the gender composition. His research found that in the 1980s, men constituted over 60% of the migrant population, which might have made heterosexual relations difficult and encouraged men to marry outside of their ethnic group. By the following decade, however, the sexes were more evenly balanced with men now constituting 56.5% of migrants. Women also increased their participation in the wage labour force over the same period.

More recently, qualitative studies have looked beyond the bare statistical picture and provided a richer ethnography of Iranian-American women. Albrecht's (2016) work, for example, attempted to uncover the complexities of the social construction of female identities via individual case studies of Iranian women in Tehran as well as the diasporas in Berlin and Los Angeles. In her discussion of Los Angeles, Albrecht described the community as dominated by "socially conservative, monarchist families" that were "universally apolitical" (2016: 55). This contrasted with the Iranian diaspora in Berlin whose members came from former revolutionaries. Indeed, the problems faced by first-generation Iranian women in Los Angeles seem to be entrenched in the dual experiences of migration and acculturation but underpinned by the patriarchal family.

In a related study, Ghorashi (2003) compared the life stories of Iranian women exiles who were involved in leftist political organisations during the 1979 Revolution, living in the Netherlands and California. Ghorashi reaffirms the notion that the Iranian community in Los Angeles is a special and influential case. Echoing Albrecht's judgement that migrant Iranians were largely apolitical, she contends the "most striking outcome" of her research was that "these leftist political activists, with their relatively common pasts, position themselves completely differently in their new countries" (2). In the case of the diaspora in California, she found their location became a 're-creation' of the years before the Revolution, "an Iran outside Iran" (10). This might explain why, while women in the Netherlands felt excluded and positioned themselves "exclusively as Iranian", women in Los Angeles communicated a greater sense of belonging and

positioned themselves as “hybrid”, referring to themselves as Iranian-Americans (1). In the case of the diaspora in Los Angeles Ghorashi (2003) argues that this new context contributes to the “configuration of multiple – Iranian-American – identities … where the present and the past are mediated by hybrid positioning” (10). Ghorashi observed little pressure to assimilate in this particular circumstance. Instead, she suggests that these women, through their hybridity, were able to “move between two different places and times” (11). For this group at least, the hybrid and in-between condition seemed a positive space that they could utilise to adapt to the various contexts they inhabit.

Ghorashi (2003) draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* which also applies to this study. She describes habitus as a set of “preferred and routine schemata, formed in the past, which obtains new forms through interaction with new settings in the present” (1) or in Bourdieu’s terms:

> The habitus—embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensures the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within the world (Bourdieu 1990: 56, cited in Ghorashi, 2003: 1-2).

Ghorashi (2003) argues that this sense of ‘feeling at home’ described by the women in Los Angeles, was not simply related to the conscious choices they made but also their surroundings that connected them to their embodied past in the form of ‘cultural/social habitus’:[18]

> For many Iranians who were brought up during the time of the Shah, “Irangeles” feels more like Iran than the Islamic Iran after the Revolution. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, or ‘Irangeles’, can serve as a familiar environment, similar to the place where they grew up (Ghorashi,

[18] Referring here to the presence of social and cultural aspects from the past i.e. cultural rituals and social gatherings in the present context.

2003: 10).

This also highlights the role of imagination in the reconstruction of the homeland in a new, diasporic context. Ghorashi (2003) suggests that, for these women, discrimination appeared “minor” and “not taken seriously” (8), something which she attributes to patterns of interaction with American society. American society is, however, also an imaginary, one that is often conceptualised under the term White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP), which denotes the dominant culture but the reality is, however, far more diverse. The women included in Ghorashi’s study might be viewed as white with cultural and economic capital, bearing similarities to, for example, the Jewish diaspora[19], who may experience guarded or partial acceptance in the US. There are different levels and forms of acceptance, potentially influenced by class, age, gender as well as circumstances upon arrival in the host country. Young women might be seen as potential partners and more readily accepted, for example, whereas older individuals might be perceived as less assimilable. Ghorashi (2003) following Naficy (1993) notes that in distinction to other migrant groups such as the Mexicans, for example, Iranians residing in Los Angeles arrived as immigrants that were not viewed as an “ethnic underclass” but rather as “transnational elite” with educational and economic capital and the skills to integrate into the workforce (Naficy 1993: 6 cited in Ghorashi, 2003: 3). It is important to note, then, that her study was only representative of a niche social demographic and her findings, which are a product of place and time, contradict the discrimination and anti-Iranian sentiment reported by academics such as Bozorgmehr and Douglas (2011) and that also came up in my own interviews and are addressed in my own research below. This points to diasporic belonging as being fluid, contingent and altering over time and through new conditions.

The contradictions and specificities highlighted by Albrecht (2016) and Ghorashi (2003) further establish that generalisations previously drawn from studies on Iranian diaspora women can sometimes be limiting and unrepresentative. Their work emphasises the diversities that occur according to intersections of identity and factors including geographical location and generation. The situation of these women is further complicated, they suggest,

[19] There are Iranian Jews.

by external factors such as media and political stereotypes that they may seek to contest as well as inter-diaspora conflicts between those who, for example, may uphold varying perspectives about the Islamic Revolution or monarchy. This suggests the significance of external perceptions in identity construction as well as the way that diasporic identities are formed dialogically.

The substantive issues identified above are now explored in more theoretical terms; identifying some of the conceptual issues which have underpinned the research. The next section examines some of the key theoretical approaches and concepts that have recently emerged concerning diasporic identities—performativity, habitus and capital, intersectionality, as well as Stuart Hall's thinking on identities and identification—as a preliminary to a discussion of the analysis of Iranian diasporic art in the contemporary period.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Diaspora: An Overview

In what can be considered the classical phase of diaspora studies, the concept of diaspora was constructed in relation to ethnicity, for example, Jewishness. Notions of nationality then became more significant as nation-states themselves in the developing world[20] became firmly established, leading to the familiar hyphenated characterisation, for example, Italian-American (which is itself now subject to critique). Until recently the 'nation' was taken as the primary unit of analysis in terms of global relations by international institutions and nations themselves, but this conceptualisation has tended to unravel as the varied impacts of globalisation have been recognised (see Held and McGrew, 2000; Scholte, 2005; Martell, 2010). Indeed the 'nation-state' has been a relatively recent construct rather than a timeless phenomenon (Hobsbawm, 2012); particularly in the 'developing world' where 'nations' have been carved out by colonial powers or formed through anti-colonial struggles or civil wars. Rather than creating a unidimensional global culture, as some theorists of 'cultural imperialism' have feared, globalisation has, in the short-term at least, contributed to the formation of numerous hybrid and cyber-cultures that transcend the limits of the nation-state. There is, however also the argument that Western capitalist

[20] Some African nations, for example, only emerged in the 1960s following decolonisation.

culture has had an enormous impact but (a) this has been hybridised or assimilated locally and (b) 'local' cultures have been reimagined or reinvented sometimes in opposition, sometimes in imitation. Urry (2000) observed that the literature on diasporas has shown that a "single and exhaustive national heritage has become less sustainable" (154):

> Post-colonial writings have more generally demonstrated that all cultures are in a sense inauthentic, contrived and constituted through their complex interchanges with other cultures … Such cultures have thus been made and remade as a consequence of the flows of peoples, objects and images, backwards and forwards across borders. These corporeal and imaginative mobilities resulted from the different patterns of colonial administration, work-induced migrations, exile/asylum patterns, individual travel and mass tourism, popular culture and the mass media, the complex relationships exchange in post-colonialism, 'myths of return' and so on (ibid.).

It is doubtful whether any typology can capture the complexity and diversity of diasporas, even in the restricted terms of the modern era. Rather than offering a strict definition, it is beneficial, then, to establish the boundaries of the subject, mapping out the main arguments and discussions as migration and diaspora are subject to ongoing shifts in relation to global flows, advances in technologies as well as academic understandings. One of the prominent analysts of diaspora is Cohen (1996), who attempted to draw together what he sees as the common features. These are:

> … dispersal from an original homeland; expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; a collective memory and myth about the homeland; an idealisation of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance; the development of a return movement; a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; a troubled relationship with host societies; a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other societies; and the possibility of an enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism (515).

Cohen later revised his definition demonstrating an awareness of the impact of new technologies and increased mobility but also new ways of conceptualising diaspora to reflect the multiple forms that migrants, hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds and contexts, might take. Rather than employing a 'single definition' Cohen suggests a number of variable processes may be combined in different ways to explain what diasporas refer to; this is because a 'single definition' of diaspora may not be sophisticated enough to capture the evolving character of migration, particularly in line with new modes of communication and movement. Cohen (1997), then, suggests a looser definition but his revision also suggests that definition itself can be a critical and ongoing process rather than an attempt to produce an all-encompassing formula:

> … transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination (26).

While providing foundations for explorations of diaspora, other scholars have problematised these categories. More specifically, criticisms have been raised concerning 1. the implications that creating a specific model of diaspora has for those subsumed within it 2. the omission of diaspora that has no geographical/territorial homeland (which is incorporated in Cohen's later thinking) and 3. the difficulty of adequately incorporating the 'new migrant communities' – the 'boat people', displaced, asylum-seekers – who are currently dispersed and, in Fanon's term the 'wretched of the earth'.[21] As such Georgiou (2003) calls for a 'multi-layered analysis' that sheds light on a variety of experiences and practices that might impact group and individual identities.

In a similar vein, Campt and Thomas (2008) have argued that there is a tension between a conception of diaspora that is the "direct result of migration, and a more expansive notion of diaspora as a phenomenon that transcends any causal link to travel, movement, or displacement" (2008: 2). They claim that scholarship

[21] *The Wretched of the Earth* (French: *Les Damnés de la Terre*) is a 1961 book by Frantz Fanon, in which Fanon applies psychoanalysis to explore the effects of colonisation on the individual and the nation.

on the African diaspora in particular often privileges the rubrics of "travel/migration and middle passage/common origin as formative and defining elements of diaspora" (ibid.) in ways that might privilege binary frameworks of analysis such as home/host or displacement/homeland. Such analytic formulations, they suggest, often embrace notions of "origin and authenticity" that limit a more nuanced understanding of the complexities that "undergird diaspora" (ibid.).

As Brah (1996) has argued, the concept of diaspora needs to be explored through the intersection of diaspora, border and "dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (208). Most commonsensical approaches suggest that physical movement is a priori aspect of diaspora since it implies dispersal. While the arguments by Campt and Thomas (2008) and Brah (1996) call for a more nuanced consideration of the confines of the concept there is also a danger that in broadening a specific process of definition the result becomes too vague.

This overview has argued that there is no simple way of looking at diaspora. Initial approaches have proved too limited and dualist; more critical approaches have suggested that a more nuanced and flexible approach is required and in particular there is a tension between materialist interpretations (stressing the importance of location, dislocation, communication flows, etc.) and constructivist approaches that stress the importance of transnational communities; that they are more complex than simple dualisms might suggest; and that transnational identities are formed by intersecting factors that can create multiple and hybrid identities. These discussions, while beneficial in understanding diaspora, also highlight that there is a tension between definitions of diaspora based primarily on migration and broader conceptions that transcend physical displacement in capturing the complex contemporary realities of diasporic communities. With this brief context in mind, the discussion now focuses on Iranian diasporas.

Diasporic Movement: Transnational and Cosmopolitan Living

Social groups globally, including Iranians in diaspora, have exhibited increasingly digitised, cosmopolitan, and transnational lifestyles. Indeed, Cohen (2004) suggests that changes in the character of international migrants have

resulted in what is termed the “transnational turn” in migration studies (138). This urges us to consider international movement and migration not only in terms of start and end points but as an ongoing, dynamic process involving multiple connections and motivations that are increasingly blurred and intertwined.

Broader literature on migration suggests that some migrants may identify more “with one society than the other” (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1992: 11) but it has to be recognised that they exist within a more complex web of relations. Consequently, the majority seem to “maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation” (ibid.). Georgiou (2010) also suggests that increased mobility and mediation result in a type of *place-polygamy;* a sense of belonging to different places and cultures. Such multiple and fluid affiliations are not just experienced by those in diaspora but also by those who exhibit a cosmopolitan way of thinking, which might also account for the perspectives and transnational experiences of the participants in this study. Discussing cosmopolitanism Calhoun (2002) connects class to the way that individuals move through and engage with the world, discussing a ‘class consciousness of frequent travellers’. Moreover, Cohen (2004) contends that common stereotypes relating to cosmopolitan people suggest “privileged, bourgeois, politically uncommitted elites” associated with, among other groups, wealthy jet setters, artists, academics and intellectuals, who maintain their cosmopolitan condition through either their own or inherited wealth and exhibit “snobbish and superior attitudes” (144-145). These traits might not, however, just be stereotypes and may adequately capture the lifestyles of some contemporary cosmopolitans. According to Cohen (2004), boundaries are increasingly blurred as groups outside traditional diasporas are drawn to a “diasporic consciousness and cosmopolitan lifestyle” (138):

> People move to trade, to study, to travel, for family visits, to practice a skill or profession, to earn hard currency, to experience an alternative culture and way of life and for other reasons too … they are transnational by intent, adaptation or compulsion (Cohen, 2004: 138).

It is useful, then, to consider the participants in this research through a

cosmopolitan lens. Aligning with the above discussion, participants' upwardly mobile social status, transnational lifestyles, and existence as artists, allows them to engage with multiple, global contexts. A cosmopolitan consciousness, then, may inform their experiences, movements and interactions as much as the intersections of their identities do. As they participate in the international art market, participants may engage in residencies, exhibitions and further education internationally, resulting in patterns of movement and transnational ties, fuelled more by individual pursuits than their diasporic status. Indeed, Bublatzky (2020: 2), referencing Werbner and Fumanti (2013), questions whether it is possible to discuss "'shared canons of taste among diasporic producers and consumers who collectively define what makes for social distinction [...]'" (Werbner and Fumanti, 2013: 150 in ibid.). Bublatzky (2020) instead calls for a nuanced consideration of the web of affiliations and connections that exilic and migrant artists might harbour—the institutional contexts and transnational audiences they engage with and their transcultural and transnational personal and professional environments—beyond imaginations of a static diasporic community (Axel 2002 in Bublatzky, 2020).

It is also beneficial, here, to consider broader approaches to living and working in the 2020s as demonstrated by more flexible ways of working, concerns about work-life balance, and the shift away from centralised offices. The emergence of the 'digital nomad' (see Bauman, 2000; Makimoto and Manners, 1997) has moreover contributed to increasingly transnational lifestyles across various contexts and demographics, which means that the participants' status, as members of the diaspora and as artists, are not necessarily the only contributing factors to the forms their lifestyles might take.

Evolving technologies also play a role in maintaining and exporting a cosmopolitan consciousness. On the relationship between cosmopolitanism, globalisation and media forms, Cohen (1997), suggested that, in 1997, cosmopolitan and hybridised culture had been created and sustained by "satellite transmissions, videos, tourism, advertisements, and the global media and entertainment industries" (135). Almost thirty years later, this dynamic has arguably been accelerated by increased global access to the internet which facilitates ever-shifting transnational networks, flows of information and ways of meaning-making.

Today, the Iranian diaspora maintains transnational connectivity via evolving modes of digital communication technologies and through enhanced mobility. It is, however, important not to underestimate the communication maintained by those who migrated before common access to the internet and travel who would also have used the means available to them—such as sending messages or goods via returning visitors, the telephone and post and exchanged visits—to maintain cross-border communities. Similarly, this group would have embraced new technologies and advancements as they arrived. It is also worthwhile to note that the sample set included in this study occupy a position, straddling the moments before and after widespread access to the internet and digital technologies. It is possible, then, to overemphasise the impact of technology and its association with a particular generation. It is also not the technology which determines the form of communication because the latter can take any conceivable form; it is the users that determine the form.

Digital Diaspora

Technology underlies most conversations surrounding transnational flows which, today, contribute to a sense of identity, home and community among those in diaspora. This aligns with Anderson's (1991) notion of *imagined communities*, which suggests that communities—such as those formed by diasporas—may not always be directly visible or experienced in full but can exist in the collective imagination. Such communities can be sustained through media and digital scapes, which not only facilitate virtual connections but also influence events and interactions in the physical world. This research, then, examines the dynamics of community and identity through participants' engagement with digital and media environments. Georgiou (2010) claims that ties with family, kin, and communities sustained across distance are increasingly networked and mediated which results in territory holding less significance and "spaces of communication" that mediate identity and belonging (14). The author notes that the mediated and interconnected space is a place of contestation where complex and at times conflicting articulations of identity can unfold:

> In having access to various media and to communication technologies that diasporic people can control and manipulate in order to connect to (or disconnect from) individuals and communities in their neighbourhood or in

distant places, they provide the ultimate example of the cosmopolitan condition (ibid.).

As suggested, there is, however, a danger in overemphasising the role of technology in human connectivity. There are significant differences in digital and physical experiences and they also, to some extent, 'blend' and supplement one another; many in diaspora utilise both real-world and online communications, separately or combined. The interconnectedness between digital and physical spheres and actions is exemplified in Malek's (2021) exploration of the evolution of *Iranian.com.* The website was an early example of an online community established in 1995 to recirculate archival images (particularly from 1960s and 70s Iran). It evolved through diasporic funding and technological advancements, transforming into an interactive space and becoming the "go-to website for all things Iranian-diasporic" (Karami, 2012, cited in Malek 2021: 145).[22] Motivations for engagement with this online archive ranged from nostalgia to the presentation of counter-visuals. The popularity of such a platform suggests the value of online spaces in the recreation and reimagination of Iranian and Iranian diasporic identities, a collective practice which drives visibility and connectedness around a specific vision of Iranian identity. As discussed, diasporic funding revived Iranian studies centres in the US (Lotfalian, 2022). Similarly, platforms like *Iranian.com* would not necessarily be possible without diasporic capital.[23] This raises the question: to what extent do individual and capitalist agendas cultivate and reinforce dominant versions of Iranian identity? Monarchist funders may, for example, privilege visions of cultural identity aligned with Pahlavi ideals while other realities are suppressed.

Diasporans now have access to communication platforms such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram, Zoom* and social media that facilitate interaction with local, national, hybrid and diasporic identities. Reflecting on the internet usage of second-generation Iranian-Americans in LA, more than a decade ago, Alinejad (2013) suggested that the relationship between first and second-generation internet engagement was characterised by "continuity and rupture" (112-3). The

[22] Iranian.com halted production and served as an archive as of September 2021 (Iranian.com).
[23] In 2007 Iranian.com's founder, first-generation Iranian-American, Jahanshah Javid, upgraded Iranian.com into an interactive website, working with private investors (Karami, 2012 cited in Malek, 2021).

second-generation engaged in a process of combining information and experiences mediated through the internet, connecting them to narratives passed on to them by family or community members. This resulted in a bridge between the prior experiences of earlier generations that were verbally transplanted and the physical and digital experiences of the new generation (ibid.). Addressing the specificity of generational experience, Alinejad (2013) discussed how the homeland might come alive for the second-generation through a multilayered process where imagination, narratives of return, online mediation, and transnational networks, together, contributed to a specific understanding of the homeland:

> While ideas of an idealized national homeland are upheld through affective attachments and memories, this seems not to be a homeland handed down to them by virtue of being their parents' place of origin. They have come to locate home in Iran in their own ways; it is a discovered, secondary home, an imaginary of [a] youthful, urban place that speaks to Iran's cultural inclusion in modernity … second-generation Iranian Americans engage in media practices surrounding return stories and experiences that are not limited to a single form of transnational sociality but are at a crossroads of a unique combination of various (mediated) ways to engage with notions of return and homeland (Alinejad, 2013: 112).

It is important to recognise digital technologies as interconnected and overlapping across various contexts and channels. Communication technologies facilitate day-to-day interactions within diasporic communities, enabling cross-border communication with family and friends but they also serve as tools for exceptional activities, such as mobilisation during social movements or evolving art practices. Exchanges in the digital sphere also shape and reconfigure real-world events. Candidatu, Leurs, and Ponzanesi (2019) contend that digital diaspora is "mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms, through material, symbolic, and emotional practices that are all reflective of intersecting power relations" (34). This notion is valuable in understanding the dialogical relationship between on and offline dynamics. Reflecting on the Iranian

context, Yazdiha (2022) examined how events such as the 2009 elections in Iran and hostile socio-political conditions in the US drew the second-generation diaspora into digital diasporas and collective action:

> Against the backdrop of rising, global anti-Muslim hostility and a political context categorising Iran as a member of the 'Axis of Evil', second-generation Iranians came together online, then in the streets, to perform solidarity and collectivism with Iranians across the world (67).

This suggests that current diasporic identities and networks are not only formed through a negotiation between the binaries of home/hostland, they are also configured by significant events and online exchanges. Shifts in global politics can activate digital diasporic networks and stimulate action that reconfigures the contours of national identity resulting in opportunities for reconsideration of notions of belonging that transcend the nation (ibid.). Recent social movements, such as the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement (WLF) (2022–date) demonstrate how physical and digital borders merge as online exchanges among the Iranian diaspora led to protest marches, collaborations, the bypassing of internet blackouts and the exchange of vital information.

Castells (1996) has addressed the importance of the network form, not just as a form of global communication but as an organising principle for the global economy and social interaction; in particular, newly emerging social movements and the 'social morphology' that underpins them. Protesters have, for example, made extensive use of communication technologies not just to facilitate critical responses and direct action but also to coordinate action across the globe. This applies to the movements in the Middle East, realised through engagements with technology that supported real-world actions, mobilisation and opposition through a network structure. Hänska-Ahy (2016), for instance, applies Castells (2009) to his exploration of the interface between social and broadcast media in the context of the Arab Spring and the way that the practices of social actors shaped this interface and, conversely, how the character of the interface can circumscribe the action possibilities afforded to social actors. Hänska-Ahy (2016) quotes Castells to the effect that: "'the three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self-communication) coexist,

interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another'" (Castells, 2009: 55 cited in Hänska-Ahy, 2016: 100).

Addressing the production and circulation of art, technologies have reconfigured processes that affect artists in the Iranian diaspora in various ways. The instant exchange of images and information contributes to a global aesthetic consciousness and distinct aesthetics of the internet. Online auction and sales platforms connect artists to international audiences. In parallel, they contribute to an artist's consciousness of market dynamics, the 'value' of specific artworks, and aesthetic trends. Discussing Iranian and Iranian diasporic cultural production specifically, Lotfalian (2022) suggests that in Iran's climate of control and censorship, where cultural productions do not typically gain the authorisation of the state regulatory board, the internet takes on significance as a site of resistance. He also attributes a certain level of collective responsibility, in the representation of the nation, to artists in the diaspora, which will be discussed further in Chapter Five:

> Each work, whether book, film, music or exhibition piece, has to be submitted to the board of the Ministry of Cultural Guidance, where every sentence or visual frame is evaluated by a committee. At least three spaces - the underground, the diaspora and the internet - are often framed as spaces of resistance to this highly regulated state space (10).

Online, transgressions of boundaries between legal, political, public and private realms can take place, effectively connecting international and local spheres. In the Iranian context, digital technologies facilitate exchanges that enable artists to bypass religious and legal restrictions such as censorship and sanctions; conventional barriers to their artistic expression can, in this way, be challenged. The artist's choice of medium is significant in this respect. Film has, for example, transcended physical and legal barriers, connecting those inside Iran with international audiences. A notable example is *This Is Not a Film*, a 2011 documentary directed by Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, which was smuggled out of Iran to the Cannes Film Festival on a USB stick concealed inside a birthday cake. Technologies allow visuals like photographs, captured in one location, to be transferred digitally, printed and displayed elsewhere without

the need for physical transportation (or state approval): expanding, thereby, the reach of Iranian artists beyond their geographic and political constraints. These issues primarily affect artists inside Iran but they also impact artists in diaspora or those that reside between locations, as these factors influence the Iranian art market and the networks within which diasporic artists may circulate. Technologies also enable cross-border collaboration, establishing new networks between artists inside and outside Iran. An artist inside Iran can, for example, share an audio file captured locally, via *Telegram* (cloud-based messaging app), with a diasporic artist who remediates it and exhibits it in the US. In this way, technology enables a reconfiguration of dynamics between social groups, reshaping inter- and non-diaspora relations and giving rise to new art forms.

Building on the above, the discussion here addresses the dynamics between aesthetics and digital communication technologies, the role that these technologies play in the informants' lives and work and in what Ranciere (2004) calls the *distribution of the sensible*. According to Ranciere, the *distribution of the sensible* refers to the system of implicit laws and frameworks that structure society, determining how roles and functions are assigned across social fields. It regulates what is perceptible and intelligible within a society, drawing partitions between what can be seen, heard, and said, and what remains invisible, inaudible, or unspeakable (Ranciere and Corcoran, 2010: 36). 'Sensible', then, connects to both sensory perception and intelligibility, defining the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. Ranciere perceives this distribution as a partitioning of the world that not only divides people and spaces but also organises the ways in which bodies and voices can participate in the communal realm. The dominant social order—what he terms the 'police order'—operates as an anti-political force, one that seeks to maintain established configurations of power (Sayers, 2005). It is anti-democratic in that it reinforces a static arrangement of roles and forms of visibility, limiting the potential for radical reconfiguration or the emergence of new forms of political subjectivity (ibid.). For Ranciere, 'critical art' can be emancipatory in that it can disrupt and reconfigure social hierarchies. Technologies, by offering individuals agency to capture and disseminate their own images (realities) and overcome physical and legal limitations like those outlined above, help disrupt the hegemonic visual order established by forces in Iran and the US. The digital sphere is not, however, entirely democratic or

emancipatory; it is subject to unequal power dynamics and the control of those who create, distribute, and govern technologies. Algorithms are subject to censorship and biases, which restrict the freedom of individuals to represent themselves and limit the audience that can access their expressions. The digital sphere, then, is a site of struggle where self-representation and connections are mediated by underlying power structures. This will be further explored in the analysis of the fieldwork material. The discussion now moves towards the various approaches to diasporic generations as it is relevant to this discussion.

Generation: Continuity and Divergence

Central to this work is an understanding of the way that a generational consciousness can be shaped by specific experiences and socio-political conditions at certain times. Individuals of a particular generation, from a similar context arguably share similar experiences that imprint upon their perspectives and the way they interact with the world. It is useful then to consider generational perspectives and values through the lens of Mannheim's *theory of generations*. Mannheim situates generation within socio-historical context and suggests that a shared consciousness among a generation might arise due to exposure to the same, significant historical event/s as well as the social conditions experienced during their formative years (Pilcher, 1994). Mannheim identifies generational location as central to the "existential determination of knowledge" (Pilcher, 1994: 483):

> Generational location points to 'certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling and thought' (Mannheim 1952: 291), and the formative experiences during the time of youth are highlighted as the key period in which social generations are formed … contemporaneous individuals are further internally stratified: by their geographical and cultural location; by their actual as opposed to potential participation in the social and intellectual currents of their time and place; and by their differing responses to a particular situation so that there may develop opposing generational 'units'. The likelihood of a generation developing a distinctive consciousness is seen to be dependent on the tempo of social change … (ibid.).

Experiences of significant events like the 1979 Revolution, the ensuing social and political upheavals in Iran, and traumatic dispersal, have, arguably, contributed to the consciousness of the generation that witnessed this moment. While there is less available data on the post-revolution generation of Iranian women, which this research aims to address, it can be assumed that the traumatic dispersal experienced by those who fled the Revolution is not necessarily shared by this group in the same way.[24] Elahi and Karim (2011) contend that "Iranian immigrants and their second-generation and now third-generation children and grandchildren, reflect diverse experiences and cultural contexts depending on when they left Iran and how they have been greeted or represented in their host nations" (8). Some individuals in this sample set are the children of first-generation migrants who arrived in the US following the 1979 Revolution; they were raised within American institutions as Iranian-Americans, others were socialised under the Islamic Republic and migrated later in life, driven by factors less connected to conflict and upheaval and more aligned with individual aspirations, such as education. This group has, however, experienced significant events that have likely shaped their own generational consciousness, such as 9/11 and the rise of right-wing extremism in the diasporic context. The influence of these events on the lived experiences and identity construction of the post-revolution generation will be explored in detail in the subsequent chapters.

The post-revolution generation exists in a hybrid setting that negotiates Iranian, American, and diasporic identities, often digitally mediated or accelerated through globalised mobility. Whether born in the home or hostland, this group did not experience Iran before the Islamic Revolution, and as such, pre-revolutionary memories and experiences will be passed on and diffused to them through secondary sources and intergenerational transference (discussed in Chapter Four in relation to *postmemory*). Neither generation nor identities are static, however, and individuals continue to undergo transformations over time. Indeed, there was a notable shift among the group that experienced the Islamic Revolution from an exilic status to a diasporic one. By the 1990s, Mohabbat-Kar (2016) observed that the exilic state began to wane and transition as Iranians in

[24] There are exceptions. Minority communities in Iran were persecuted throughout and after the 1980s, resulting in ongoing migration, trauma, and a sense of exile among some group members. The Iran-Iraq War also motivated migration but it was not discussed as a push factor by participants in this study.

the diaspora increasingly embraced the immediate realities of their everyday lives and hostland culture. This evolving identity was also informed by connection to diasporic communities and culture (ibid.). With increased mobility and online communication, an ever-growing number of people of Iranian descent connect with one another, thereby encountering different or similar experiences and forms of being Iranian or living an Iranian life outside of Iran (ibid.). These flows, along with the consumption and commercial success of Iranian diasporic cultural products—such as art and cinema—play a significant role in strengthening and disseminating Iranian diasporic culture, which continues to morph over time. This evolving diasporic culture, in turn, influences the experiences and identities of subsequent generations exposed to it. In addition to the consideration of the intersections of race, gender, sex, class and age, Farahani (2017), then, argues for a generational understanding of diaspora which supports not only an intersectional understanding of how diaspora relates to the new context but also as a way to perceive “hierarchies and intersecting forms of power” that are at once “enacted and negotiated between different diasporic communities” (153).

Diasporic Identities

Building upon the work of Hall (1996a) and others which highlighted the idea that identities are produced not given, cultural studies have explored ways of understanding diaspora beyond the binaries of home/host and us/them; focusing, in particular, on the concept of hybrid identities (see Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1993). The concept of hybridity draws attention to the mixing of cultures and the creation of new forms of cultural expression as well as identities characterised not only by ethnicity but also by a wide range of cultural phenomena. Importantly, for the argument here, the term had a particular resonance with respect to those involved in cross-border migration and thereby involved in living between cultures. Warning against overreliance on notions of hybridity, however, Farahani (2017) suggests that not every member within a diasporic community is “‘flexible/hybrid’ in the same way or to the same degree” (52).

The participants in this study experienced migration in various ways - some were born and raised in the US and considered Iranian-American because they

have one American and one Iranian parent, or because they were born and raised in the US to two Iranian parents. Others migrated in their youth with their family and some moved to the US in adulthood alone; the term hybridity, then, does not necessarily capture the complexities of these varied experiences and affiliations. Indeed, Farahani (2017) argues for an evaluation of individual experience underscoring the significance of the "how, when, where and by whom" (38) migration is experienced as each border and border transgression reveals its own narrative.

Recent research has focused on the connections between the individual and the community within a framework which draws more on social constructionism than post-structuralism/modernism. Brubaker (2003) argues that people are situated in particular 'webs' of belonging:

> That ethnic and other forms of solidarity provide 'networks of mutual support, capacities for communication, [and] frameworks of meaning'; that 'culture and social relationships are as real as individuals'; that 'no one lives outside particularistic solidarities'; that 'it is important to think of solidarities in the plural'; and that solidarities are organised in a variety of ways (Brubaker, 2003: 556).

Considering the Iranian context specifically Ghorashi and Boersma (2009) note that the initial exilic identity demonstrated by Iranians in diaspora was later replaced by a more "rhizomatic network-based diasporic approach to Iran" (678) suggesting while the homeland remained an important point of reference, diasporic identities draw from multiple points of reference. The authors follow Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the connection between diaspora and the rhizome:

> Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion . . . The tree is filiation but the rhizome is alliance . . . the fabric of

> the rhizome is the conjunction (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 21-25 cited in Ghorashi and Boersma, 2009: 670).

Specifically interrogating the concept of gendered identities, Butler conceptualised it as *performativity*. Gender, Butler argues, is in no way:

> … a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceeded; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1988: 519).

As such, there is no given or natural gender identity that lies behind "expressions of gender", identity is rather "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990: 25). Drawing from Turner's research into social drama which claims that 'social action' requires a repeated performance, Butler (1988) suggests that the repetition and re-experiencing of an act lead to the legitimation and normalisation of ideas. For Butler, the public nature of the performance of gender is implicit in its institutionalisation. Rather than using agency vs. structure approaches, she describes the construction of gender and, subsequently the subject as not so much a "radical choice" that reflects individual choice, but "neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend" (526). Her theory of gender as performativity, then, can be used to discuss the gendered image of the Iranian woman as constructed, iconised, institutionalised and played out in the public sphere by various actors. This image is perpetuated through media, political, and religious discourses in home and hostland contexts. Such standardised representations interact with various aspects of women's lives, such as the performance of a Middle Eastern gendered identity encountered within the global art market, which artists in this sample group may seek to subvert, challenge, contest (or affirm) through performances of alternative gendered realities.

With particular reference to Iranian women artists, scholars such as Allerstorfer (2012) have analysed their art through the lens of performativity. Specifically, Allerstorfer observed that drag performance, which Butler used to illustrate gender's artificial and constructed properties, can relate to external signifiers of Iranian womanhood such as the *chador*. The author also maintains that her subjects embarked upon "performative strategies" in order to access complex categories through their work, such as 'body/gender/identity'. Performativity then is useful here in that it can offer "fragmentary insights into inter- and transcultural processes" (180) and expand upon the push-pull between visual representation and authorship. In the case of this research, performativity is particularly beneficial in understanding how participants might select, construct and perform particular identities within their art practices. Performativity, then, is employed in this study as a lens through which to explore how identities are constructed and performed in the compositions of the sample set, as part of the discursive semiotic analysis of the artworks.

Gendered and sexual identities are, arguably, intimately bound given that normative standards surrounding gendered identities often confine and enforce standards around sexual identities and how they are expressed in the public sphere. In her research into diasporic sexuality focusing on first-generation Iranian immigrant women in Sweden, Farhani (2017) employed a gendered and interdisciplinary approach to Foucauldian discursive genealogy to understand processes of normalisation in relation to sexuality and the way that Iranian Islamic stereotypes in diasporic space "function as disciplinary power" (4). Farhani draws upon Foucault's exploration of: "how, why, and in what forms was sexuality constituted as a moral domain" (Foucault, 1990b: 95, cited in Farhani, 2017: 3). In relation to this research, the notion of disciplinary power (as proposed by Foucault) can also help understand how participants might mediate and construct their own gender and sexuality in relation to discourse. This is simply because socially constructed discourses relating to gender, femininity, morality and sexuality, that are dominant in Iran, might also impact diasporans. Disciplinary power then provides a useful optic—although not necessarily the only one—through which to consider the types of discourses the participants in this study might be mediating and, as artists, processing through their practices.

Scholarship has also drawn on Bourdieu's *habitus,*[25] *field*[26] and *capital* concepts (see McNay,1999; Ghorashi, 2003; and Bottero, 2010) to address diaspora and gender both broadly and, more narrowly, in the case of Ghorashi, who has applied them specifically to women in the Iranian diaspora. Broadly speaking, Bourdieu viewed society as operating within structures, and that 'capital' is at the foundations of our social lives and secures one's positioning in the social order - the more capital one has, the better placed one is within the social world (Bourdieu, 2002). He identified three fundamental forms of capital:

> … *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 2002: 281).

Moreover, Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic capital* connects to cultural capital and the focus of this research. Cultural capital is, according to Bourdieu (2002) "more disguised" in terms of its transmission and acquisition than economic capital (284). It, therefore, functions as symbolic capital which the author suggests is unrecognised as capital but instead as "legitimate competence" functioning in markets in which economic capital is not fully recognised: "whether in matters of culture, with the great art collections or great cultural foundations …" (ibid.).

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[25] Bourdieu (1977) frames habitus as the collective entity by and through which dominant social and cultural conditions are established and maintained. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, suggests "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (86). These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" give structure to the subject's (shared) world-view and their "apperception" of the spaces in which they inhabit (ibid.).

[26] "Bourdieu argued that in order to understand interactions between people, or to explain an event or social phenomenon, it was insufficient to look at what was said, or what happened. It was necessary to examine the *social space* [or field] in which interactions, transactions and events occurred (Bourdieu 2005b [2000]: 148). According to Bourdieu, an analysis of social space meant not only *locating* the object of investigation in its specific historical and local/national/international and relational context, but also interrogating the ways in which previous knowledge about the object under investigation had been generated, by whom, and whose interests were served by those knowledge-generation practices (e.g. Bourdieu 1993a; 1994d [1987]; 2004 [2001])" (Thomson, 2012: 65).

While notably different, both Butler and Bourdieu's concepts underline the question of agency that can help us understand how Iranian women might seek to transcend misrepresentative framings that they encounter by deploying their cultural/symbolic capital through their art. This can materialise in, for example, the selection and performance of counter-representations of national identity in their creations. It is worth noting that Bourdieu's concept of habitus and theory of capital do not take into account the potential for transformation through performance, but Butler's framework opens up a space in which the individual can, through subversion, for example, disturb the status quo. By applying the two approaches together, we can see how transformation can also take place via performances that subvert and challenge normative gender constraints.

This research draws on these approaches as well as on Hall's concept of *identification*, which helps us to understand that subjects move between different identities as they shift roles and contexts. Identities, it is argued, are not separate but *intersect* (see Woodward, 1997) thus moving beyond essentialist notions and stressing the importance of *difference,* not only in binary distinctions but also in the multiple and shifting forms that identities might take, enabled, for example, by transnational migration and globalisation. In addition, the study has been informed by the concept of *intersectionality* first introduced by Crenshaw (1989), which helps to address the situation of marginalised or oppressed groups such as the LGBTQ community and transnational migrants. Drawing from her own experience, Crenshaw observed what she considered to be a double discrimination with respect to her situation as a black woman. The significance of this conceptualisation is that it breaks away from binary thinking to consider how characteristics such as gender, class, ethnicity, faith, and sexual affiliation might 'intersect':

> … the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must

be rethought and recast (Crenshaw, 1989: 140).

While this research does not assume that diversity is a universal or objective fact, this dynamic approach to identities can expand thinking beyond categories towards a way of understanding through multiple processes that intersect and relate to the dynamics of gender. Indeed, certain aspects of identity might carry more importance during different times and in different contexts; a situation which is evolving rapidly as evidenced by recent shifts in Western attitudes towards fluid and trans identities. This resonates with discussions of gender and Iranian women where the latter have frequently been positioned as static and monolithic but for whom there is no single gendered identity as the review of literature on Iranian diaspora above has suggested. For Iranian women, artists whose practice seeks to reflect upon and explore identities, intersectionality draws in the relationship between their gender (which should not be assumed as a privileged marker of identity) and how this interacts with factors such as faith, ethnicity and class. While Butler has argued that all gender is performance, intersectionality accounts for difference by exploring how that performance might be different for different individuals.

Cultural Production and the Iranian Diaspora

Turner (1967) offers a critical understanding of in-betweenness through his concept, *liminality*, which he argues explains ritual practices that are seen as uncertain and ambiguous (cited in St John, 2008: 1). Naficy (2001) draws on this concept in his consideration of the narratives in Iranian films which he suggests are “physically and mentally located within the host country” (78). These films foreground “the life and clash of cultures” (ibid.) and reveal an integration of the particular (Iranian) and the general (universal)” (80). A liminal status, then, can be one of longing, limbo and isolation; however, Naficy also observed how the post-migration exilic status can transcend into a diasporic one where liminality can be viewed “not only as a sense of longing but also as belonging with an immense productive potential for new and hybrid cultural forms” (ibid.). Naficy’s focus is on cinema, but his analysis applies to other forms of diasporic cultural production. He draws attention to the recurrence of certain themes which come across in diasporic and exilic cinema:

> … open form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, doubled, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicised structures of feeling, interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers (Naficy 2001: 4).

Professor of Iranian studies, Hamid Dabashi, offers an example from Iranian contemporary art, acknowledging the centrality of liminality in Iranian-born visual artist and filmmaker Shoja Azari's work: "He is the artist of our liminality, of the twilight zone of our certitude and doubt. In Persian, we call that moment of the dawn when light is about to overcome darkness … His art thrives on the uncertainty of that border" (Keshmirshekan, ed., 2019: 253). The liminal condition, then, can be generative, inspiring a particular kind of creativity that draws from multiple references and produces its own trends and themes, but Naficy's work has also been critiqued for 'romanticising and homogenising'. Edwards (2017), for example, claims that the category of diasporic cinema can be constricting, flattening the "diversity of identity" and denying the role of intersection between class and gender and "the lived experiences of the actual diaspora population" (Edwards, 2017: 1). The weight of unrepresentative categorisations is illustrated in the experiences of, aforementioned, Azari who has been residing in the US since the 1980s. In discussing his own artwork, Azari expresses frustration at market expectations to perform a restrictive form of identity: "The content of my thinking, imagination, dreams is English, is American. But you are expected to be silent about your American identity" (quoted in Balaghi, 2009: 145). Moreover, Lucie-Smith (2011) questions the validity of such categorisations, asking whether artists in diaspora can even be "counted as Iranian" or if they simply belong to the new Western societies within which they exist (40).

In the context of contemporary Iranian art, the output of women artists does, however, demonstrate how the exilic state associated with the first-generation has become a central theme and space for creativity. In discussing the art of

Parastou Forouhar, Bublatzky (2020) notes that the politically motivated murder of the artist's parents in 1998 forced Forouhar into exile in Germany. Her artistic explorations in this context then became a way to respond to "the politics that have been shaping and defining her life and sense of belonging both in Iran and in Germany ever since that day" (3). Discussing Shirin Neshat, Balaghi (2009) notes that her output is "tinged with an anxiety of separation—from her country and her family—and the task of reclaiming a sense of being at home" (146) despite the fact Balaghi and other commentators problematise the label 'exile'.

Curator Salwa Mikdadi (2004) confirms the dynamic and temporal nature of these labels and the importance of re-evaluating them with regard to new research. While many artists in diaspora reasoned their exile would be temporary and that there would be a return home once conditions improved, Mikdadi claims that since the 1990s artists have become "less troubled by issues of locality and work freely between two and sometimes three cultures" (2004: para 4). 'Exilic' and 'diasporic' are slippery terms which artists may readily adopt or reject according to various agendas. Some artists in exile, like Forouhar and Neshat have also been able to return to Iran at certain times from the 1990s for personal visits, which complicates straightforward notions of exile (Dehghan, 2017). Such terms might also be externally imposed upon artists placing them in a position where they must conform to or reject them. Indeed, Azari suggests that having one's identity "given" to them might be attractive to an artist, as such marketable groupings may align with money, fame, and acceptability (Balaghi, 2009: 145). Conversely, there may be a "struggle" for those who resist a market-imposed identity (ibid.). Azari is Neshat's partner, and they have collaborated on artwork, but their divergent experiences of exile suggest the subjectivity and complexity of the condition. As Balaghi (2009) succinctly asserts, defining and constructing one's own identity "as an artist, an Iranian, an exile" is a site of contestation (145).

Cultures in contemporary society are arguably marked by cultural hybridism. Bhabha's understanding of hybrid cultures and third spaces formed through migrant diasporic communities is relevant, particularly as the *glocal*[27] context

[27] 'Glocal' refers to the merging of the local and global; a connectedness stimulated by transnational flows and an ability to perceive 'globally' and behave 'locally' (Oxford Reference, 2024).

becomes a third space of communication where cultural specificities might be translated and understood in an unprecedented manner (1994). Bhabha theorised the ‘third space’ as a liminal, ‘in-between’ location where hybrid cultural identities can emerge (in this case in the production of art) as a new, third product of a negotiation of elements from different cultures. Indeed, hybridity as a concept remains central to debate surrounding diaspora as, in the context of globalisation, there is no way to return a homogenous and unified culture back into the box of the nation-state.

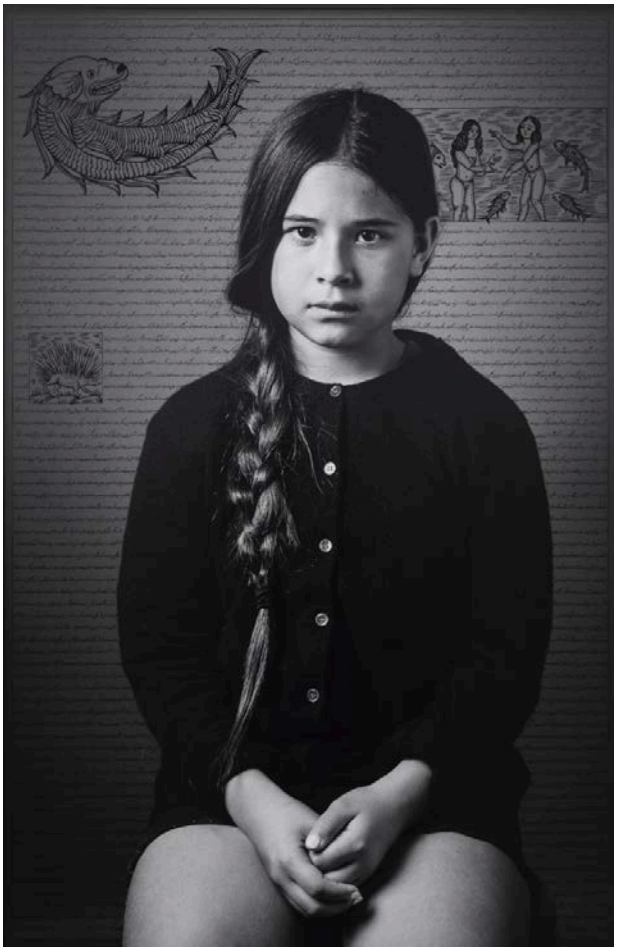

Figure 5

Shirin Neshat, *Katalina Espinoza*, from *Land of Dreams* series, 2019 [Digital c-print with ink and acrylic paint], courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

As discussed, for Neshat, experiences of dislocation and return to Iran contributed to her art practice in significant ways (see Neshat, 2010). This suggests that for those in diaspora, migration (as well as return and exile) is an ongoing process and site of inspiration. Clifford’s (1997) notion of *routes and*

roots is a valuable optic through which to understand the relationship between diasporic movement, identity formation and cultural production. According to Clifford, *roots* suggest a sense of dwelling and attachment to a specific place, he notes that “roots always precede routes” (3). In contrast, *routes* are tied to travel and movement. Experiencing identity through roots requires “figurative or material engagement” (36) with routes, which may occur through intercultural encounters or contact zones. Identity shaped by routes, however, emerges from the experience of leaving one’s roots and moving “beyond the boundaries of home” (ibid.). For many diasporic Iranians, journeys of return—whether real or imagined—are central to how they understand their identity and cultural roots, particularly for those who have never physically been to their homeland. The desire to reconnect with cultural roots may inspire new routes, journeys which, in turn, can stimulate artistic expression as individuals seek to mend cultural dislocation through immersion. This is evident in Neshat’s case; her return to Iran during the 1990s significantly altered her practice but new journeys and contexts have also informed her artistic expressions, connecting her past with her diasporic present and presenting new ways to connect to cultural identity. Travelling across New Mexico in the US contributed to Neshat’s creative output, as seen in her multi-disciplinary project, *Land of Dreams* (2019). Her body of work combines film and portraiture of the communities she encountered in the American West, often overlaid with Farsi script (see Figure 5). Her journey and resulting work constitute Neshat’s attempt to connect her place of origin with her current lived experience. As the artist suggests:

> We drove across the country to search for a landscape that at once looked like Iran and America’s Southwest. We settled on New Mexico not only for its spectacular nature but also for its demographically diverse communities … (Gladstone Gallery, 2021).

The above has drawn attention to the extent to which Iranian-American art can be interrogated and analysed in terms of the diasporic, liminal, hybrid and exilic aspects of Iranian-American identity; allowing, of course, for the fact that these identity(ies) are refracted through the lens of artistic creativity.

CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN ART

Following from the above, discussions of contemporary Iranian art need to consider the social and cultural factors that historically have influenced it. Farahani (2017), notes that while Iran has never been a formal colony, it has been subject to Western interference, geopolitics, and the globalisation of the world economy; in theoretical terms, neo-colonialism. Subsequently, Iran and the identity formations of Iranians both inside and outside the country have never been "detached from colonial and Orientalist discourses" (Farahani, 2017: 7). It is important to also consider the influence of the historical currents that have shaped Iran. Notably, Iran was part of the Silk Road network, facilitating flows of ideas, innovation, craft, and aesthetic codes between East and West. Iran's neighbouring nations, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Iraq, and Pakistan, have all been party to cross-cultural exchanges. Significant events such as the 7th-century conquest by Arab Muslims and the introduction of Twelver Shiʿism in the early 16th century under the Safavids have also contributed to the blending of Persian culture and Shiʿi Islam. These instances are just a few examples among the myriad of cross-cultural flows and influences, characterised by trade, internal and external conquests, and the influence of various faiths, that have contributed to contemporary understandings of Iranian national identity. Such exchanges have also informed contemporary Iranian art practices that draw from a plurality of reference points.

The discussion now focuses on how these factors relate to the Iranian art market, within which the research participants may circulate, addressing issues including Orientalism and the commodification of art. Considering that their artwork is not produced in a vacuum, it will frame some of the external forces that shape the practices of participants in this study.

Codifying Iranian Art

This section situates Iranian cultural production within its historical and social context and traces the emergence of the contemporary Iranian art market to frame the conceptual and pragmatic concerns of artists operating inside Iran and in its diaspora. The scope of this research is not great enough to thoroughly

explore the complexities that contribute to Iranian visual culture; rather this overview outlines the major influences concerning contemporary Iranian artists, both within the country and in its diaspora, in relation to the global art market.

Without trying to impose a fixed definition of (collective) identity Keshmirshekan (2013) contends that there are three major issues which have functioned as "dominant discourses" crossing Iranian sociopolitical and cultural realms including "modern culture (modernity) and its place in Iranian politics and society; nationalism (in general but mainly secular nationalism); and Islamic/Shi'i identity (this includes Islamic nationalism)" (10). The author then follows religious intellectual Abdolkarim Sorush's definition of the structure of Iranian culture as an amalgamation of three elements: "pre-Islamic, Islamic Shi'i and modern Western cultures" (ibid.).

Iran's art scene has experienced several iterations and definitions from the 19th century onwards (Scheiwiller, 2018). Indicative of tendencies towards avantgardism during the late 1800s and early 1900s 'modern art' in Iran was often referred to as *honar-e taraqi* (progressive art) (Khansari, 1990 cited in Scheiwiller, 2018: 201-202). During the 1960s and 70s, scholars, artists and critics such as Abby Weed Grey, Donna Stein, Akbar Tadjvidi, and Ehsan Yarshater (ibid.), engaged in discussions surrounding 'contemporary Iranian' art identified as 'modern Persian art'; revealing a connection to the historic "rubric of 'Persian painting'" (Emami, 1971; Tadjvidi, 1962, 1967; Yarshater, 1979, cited in ibid.). Such evolving terminology suggests the contested nature of the art of Iran and the influences of Western, faith-based and national understandings. This heritage continues to influence, albeit indirectly or negatively, the ideas of Iranian artists operating today who process national identity and culture in various ways.

Arriving at Contemporary Iranian Art

As discussed, the formation and understanding of what is today considered Iranian art has not been a straightforward process which is perhaps why Grigor (2014) claims that contemporary Iranian art is so "young, active, multifaceted and pulverised that it is difficult to produce a history in a coherent manner. A complex and highly sophisticated social network rather than the usual texts and artefacts seem to govern the development of its narratives and aesthetic judgements" (9).

While not attempting to confine it within fixed parameters, the following discussion outlines some of the key contributors to the category.

During the 1950s, 60s and 70s Iranian artists gained international visibility as they were presented at fairs and established foreign collector bases (Ekhtiar and Sardar, 2004). Diba (2016) notes that Iranian participation in global art events had expanded by the 1960s to encompass the *Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh, US and the São Paulo Biennial, in Brazil. In 1976 Iranian artists participated in Art Basel, Switzerland. Iran was not, however, able to participate in contemporary biennials in the Arab World, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, because of its affiliation with the US during the Cold War (Diba, 2016). These limitations may have contributed to the regional approach of the 1966 Tehran Biennial (ibid.): “As modest as the 1966 Biennial was, it anticipated the current emergence of the MENASA region (Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia) as a cultural hub of its own centered in Dubai, Sharjah, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi” (Diba, 2016: para 7). In 1977 the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) opened in Tehran enclosing a significant collection of Western and Iranian art (Ekhtiar and Rooney, 2016) and exposing Iranian society to international approaches and significant artists of the time.

Events that followed including the 1979 Revolution and the shift in emphasis and political control from the Shah’s regime to the new Islamic fundamentalist one, followed by the Iran-Iraq War imprinted on the conceptual concerns of many Iranian artists. In parallel, state-imposed restrictions on the content and exhibition of art also affected what could be displayed. Authors have discussed the 1990s, the post-revolutionary period following the Iran-Iraq War, as a time of intense engagement with and increased visibility of Iranian artists within and outside Iran (see Ekhtiar and Sardar, 2004; Keshmirshekan, 2006; Lotfalian, 2022).

Acknowledging the role of diaspora in cultivating interest in the art of the Middle East, Babaie (2011) contends that it was artists of the Middle Eastern diasporas living in the major art centres of New York, London, and Paris in the late 1990s that stimulated the “energetic promotion of new artists—through exhibitions, glossy magazines, auctions, and art fairs … ” (135). Authors have suggested that

several international exhibitions were central to the advancement of contemporary Iranian art as a category, specifically in the year 2001. Scheiwiller (2018) credits the April–June 2001 exhibition: *Contemporary Iranian Art* at the Curve Gallery at the Barbican in London[28] as a catalyst "for what would be known officially in the art world as 'contemporary Iranian art'" (201-202); while Lotfalian (2022) suggests that Shirin Neshat's, 2001, multimedia art performance, *The Logic of The Birds* in New York in the post-9/11 climate was a significant moment that resulted in a cultural shift.

Inside Iran, from the late 1990s onwards, censorship and policies relating to the production and presentation of art relaxed and intensified at various intervals. Lotfalian (2022) examined the rise of the Iranian art market during the reformist government of President Khatami (1997–2005) noting a wave of curatorial changes and exhibitions that emerged in Iran. These developments persisted despite harsher restrictions under President Ahmadinejad. This resulted in a new market 'looking for talent' paired with artists who exhibited an awareness of the economic rewards of the growing market. This gave rise to a shift in gender dynamics among art students with more men also entering art education "as they saw the possibility for making money" (33).

Socio-political shifts inside Iran in the early 2000s also led to Iranians migrating to the surrounding Gulf States and beyond, thus connecting with the international art market. The introduction of contemporary Iranian art to the international auction houses in the UAE started with Christie's in 2006, followed by Bonham's in 2008. Iran's relationship with and geographic proximity to the UAE played a significant role in the emergence of the Iranian art market and its international engagement. The UAE's international art fairs, auction houses, and art collectors have significantly enhanced accessibility to Iranian art within the global market. Furthermore, the UAE is home to an Iranian diaspora that plays an active role in contributing to the country's cultural ecosystem. They do so through the ownership of galleries, the housing and exhibition of collections, and by establishing studios and artistic presence there. Indeed, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, art dealer, Leila Heller, said: "Collectors seeking Iranian art

[28] The exhibition was organised in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation and TMoCA, indicative of the collaboration between cultural institutions in Iran and the UK at this point.

often gather in nearby art hubs like Dubai" (Heller cited in Crow, 2015) while prominent Iranian art collectors such as Dr. Farhad Farjam, Mohammed Afkhami and Ramin Salsali are just three examples of those who took the UAE as their location from which to source and in the case of Salsali, through his Salsali Private Museum (SPM) (open 2011–2019) and Dr. Farjam through the Farjam Foundation, exhibit an extensive personal collection of Iranian artworks.

Migration from Iran has led to a natural division in the concerns of artists, separating those who stayed from those who left. This division stems from distinct lived experiences, socio-political conditions, and practical factors such as access to information and materials. Both groups are shaped by globalising forces and the issues that preoccupy Iranian artists—whether in the diaspora or within Iran—often appear similar, focusing on questions of individual, national, and cultural identity. These questions are, however, filtered through the artist's subjectivity and shaped by their immediate environment, resulting in both continuity and divergence in thematic concerns and artistic movements. The *New Art Movement* which developed inside Iran (Keshmirshekan, 2023) does, for example, reflect site-specific developments in Iran, while artists in the diaspora may reflect upon their experiences of migration and dislocation, in addition to the realities of life in the hostland. This rupture between remaining and departing raises questions about how art by Iranian-origin artists should be categorised and understood, considering the often disparate experiences of those who stayed versus those who left.

Migration journeys have taken various forms, explored by Issa (2011), who attempted to map out the "geographical and cultural paths" followed by several notable Iranian artists (169). The journeys these artists made and the spaces they inhabit appear to influence their choices of medium and thematic concerns:

> Some have left their homeland (but the grand majority of filmmakers and photographers stayed); some return to their country of origin for inspiration (Bahman Farmanara, Dariush Mehrjui, Ghazel, Farhad Moshiri); some live outside Iran but are inspired by events within it (Shirin Neshat, Shahram Entekhabi, Marjane Satrapi, Farkhondeh Shahroudi, Mitra Tabrizian); others live abroad and challenge western concepts (Siah Armajani, Shahrazad Collective) or navigate between

> Iran and their adopted country (Abbas Attar, Parastou Forouhar, Shirana Shahbazi). These aesthetic choices, whether inspired by one's own story or other people's histories, are made through a dialogue with both past and present (Issa, 2011: 169-170).

There has been considerable scholarly attention towards the women artists who experienced the 1979 Revolution and expressed these events through their artistic output. As an example, experiencing the revolution and subsequent displacement transformed the art of Sonia Balassanian, an Iranian artist of Armenian heritage (see Daftari, 2019; Parker, 2005). Concerned for her safety as an ethnic and religious (Christian) minority in Iran, Balassanian migrated to the US. Following this experience, her practice shifted dramatically in character from a focus on Persian miniatures towards large-scale installations with overt political references, such as Balassanian's *Hostage* series, (1980) (see Figure 6). Fundamental to this work is the notion that revolution is not simply political and legislative; it impacts all who come into contact with it, this is captured in this work as the artist renders herself a hostage, blindfolded and locked into various contexts (Ab-Anbar, 2022).

Figure 6

Sonia Balassanian, *Hostages: A Diary #16*, 1980, [mixed-media], courtesy of the artist and Ab-Anbar Gallery, London

The post-revolution generation, who are the focus of this study, inhabit distinct social and temporal conditions, which have influenced their consciousness and artistic concerns.[29] Writing almost 20 years ago in 2005, Iranian-American artist and scholar, Hengameh Fouladvand, observed evolving identities in Iranian-American artists. She identified distinctions between the approaches of generations in diaspora and claimed that while early Iranian artists in the US exhibited a modernist identity which privileged "singular and unique styles" with a focus on "individual identity" this shifted towards an emerging "self-referential identity or subject position" that contests ideas of "essence and authorship and suggests the dissolution of modernist boundaries" (Keshmirshekan, 2011: XV). According to Fouladvand (2005), the second-generation of Iranian artists are "self-referential", concerned with displays of "personal meaning" and focused upon articulations of the self and "its fulfilment" which is central to the

[29] The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) is a significant event that resonates across different generations, particularly for participants born before or shortly after 1988, who spent their formative years in Iran. Shared experiences of trauma and conflict, which span generations, may, arguably, contribute to common perspectives on the homeland.

construction of postmodern identities that are filled with multiple ‘alternatives’. Their art is an “open commentary of their lives” and as such does not possess a fixed direction (Fouladvand, 2005: pp.150-153).

Artists across generations are also in dialogue. No generation is static; they continue to contribute to each other’s artistic awareness and perceptions of Iran. Artists operating today may also be aware of the commercial success of artwork produced by the Iranian diaspora, which adds gravitas to particular forms of diasporic identities that succeed in the art market. Mohabbat-Kar (2016) describes this as a process of “amalgamating” that occurs through “adopting and continuing pre-existing, acquired discourses, cultural identities, and relationships – as well as rejecting, re-evaluating, and redefining them” (12). This accounts for both continuity and change within the cultural production of the Iranian diaspora (ibid.).

The diversity in the Iranian experience across generations and geographies raises questions as to whether the umbrella ‘contemporary Iranian art’ is precise enough to capture this breadth of experience. As individuals increasingly embrace transitional and fluid lifestyles, many artists who are perceived as working inside Iran may view themselves as transnational, multinational, or hybrid, existing between multiple contexts that inform their creations. Indeed, Dimova and Gillen (2017) note that artists’ biographies typically situate them in at least two cities, often their city of origin and a Western art centre between which they navigate “personal lives and careers” (ibid.: 66).

Terming artists ‘exilic’ or ‘diasporic’ might be constraining or inaccurate as is the case with any label. As the previous discussion on hybridity and liminality suggests, however, such positionalities can be generative, contributing to new identities that draw from a multiplicity of influences, allowing artists to create, as it were, from a third space. Artists in and outside Iran are also in dialogue; they are often exhibited side-by-side, at times placed without distinction within the same broad categories. The art market might also engage with artists in diaspora in different ways due to their distinct conditions. Artists in the Iranian diaspora embody many of the contemporary conceptual concerns that characterise the art world’s recent interests–hybridity, transnationalism, and migration. Charlesworth

(2014) notes that negotiation between local and global publics contributes to specific trends and an artistic vocabulary of,

> globally recognisable references to common experience, wherever you happen to be from, or based … This parallax shift in perspective is perhaps why we see a number of trends in new art that reflect this changing context, particularly when artists make the nature of migration and hybridity the subject of their work … Hybridity, flux, fragmentation – such themes characterise increasingly the output of artists who circulate in an art world defined by the tension between addressing a domestic public and a global one (para 20).

Iranian identities have been addressed here as in continuous process, as invented and reinvented according to circumstance and context, and it is therefore appropriate to ask what signs and codes post-revolution women artists employ in their work, in ways that are distinct from or similar to those before them.

Iranian Women Artists Within the Art Market

More Iranian artists entered the art scene in Iran, during the 1990s than any other period in the past. During this time, new trends, attitudes, and methods emerged, but the most 'striking change', according to Keshmirshekan (2007), was the appearance of "a dynamic group of young artists among whom the presence of women was quite noticeable" (338).[30] Lucie-Smith also comments on the gendered nature of this development when he contrasts the climate in secular China, which is said to practise "the fullest gender equality" but has not contributed significantly to women's art globally, with Iran where "much of the most interesting avant-garde art is now being made by women" (Lucie-Smith, 2011: 38). It is valuable, therefore, to examine the visibility and framing of Iranian women artists within the art market with attention paid to how neo-Orientalism and Western-centric biases may constrain engagement with their works.

The increased participation, visibility and recognition of Iranian women artists in the art market does not necessarily equate to them having 'voice' as gendered

[30] Lotfalian (2022) also discussed the increased visibility of male artists during this period.

and neo-colonial power imbalances dictate who has the ability to speak for whom. Georgiou (2017) draws from Couldry's (2010) conception of voice as a *process* and a *value*[31] which also, arguably, applies to this context. For Couldry, voice as a 'process', constitutes a form of reflexive agency, it refers to "giving an account of one's life and its conditions" (Couldry, 2010: 7 cited in Georgiou, 2017: 5). Voice as a 'value' suggests that it is part of an act of valuing; voice "values all human beings' ability to give an account of themselves; it values my and your status as 'narratable' selves" (Couldry, 2010: 13 cited in ibid.). Couldry gives the example of refugees, arguing that their hyper-visibility does not necessarily support them having 'voice' as representations of their "suffering, passivity and vulnerability" may appear to afford voice and agency, but these voices are "channelled, contextually, in ways that perpetuate their image of dependency and powerlessness" (7). Consequently, Western "experts", considered to be "trustworthy voices", speak *for* them from a position of power and the refugee becomes a site where "Western ways of knowing are reproduced" (6). Given that the participants in this study are migrants from middle to upper social classes, they may not necessarily be perceived in these terms. Instead, they may be viewed as ethnic minorities, often filtered through the lenses of Islamophobia or the Orientalist gaze toward the Middle East.

In the context of art, the exhibition of Iranian women artists offers visibility and exposure to international audiences but the Western expert often retains the power to select, frame and represent, which limits the kinds of voices that surface and how they surface. Discussing visibility alone, then, is inadequate in understanding experiences and identities and calls for a consideration of the control of authorship.

Discussing Iranian diasporic literature, Bahramitash (2005) suggests the success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) in North America relates to the way that the

[31] This concept derives from Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* model, which suggests that, in response to a company's decline, individuals typically react in one of two ways: by "exit," where a member leaves the organisation or chooses a competing product, or by "voice," where members seek to influence change from 'inside'. A similar model can be applied to the artists in this study in relation to the art market: they might exit it if they feel their integrity is compromised, use their voice to speak out or challenge the system, or remain loyal to the market and its demands.

text confirms prevailing stereotypes regarding female oppression in Iran.[32] Bahramitash (2005) contends that while the book is considered to support the "women's cause", it is "infused with feminist Orientalism" (230). In this way, it affirms "what many North Americans want to believe about the 'oppression' of Iranian women" (ibid.). Similarly, there is concern that art can reinforce US-centric understandings of the Middle East, often discussed in threat or Orientalist terms. Elahi (2015), for example, asserts that the markets and discourses of the Global North attempt to "recruit Iranian artists or their work into neoliberal geopolitics or neo-Oriental representation" (178), this does not, however, imply that they are successful in doing so. In terms of the content of their artwork, certain symbols and signifiers are read as shorthand for standardising claims surrounding the East perpetuated by the West, as Babaie (2011) notes, there has been an insatiable market demand for ethnocultural markers of identity, reduced to the standardised icons she describes:

> … calligraphy standing for Islam, motifs from ancient civilizations of the Middle East and figures of modern history for secular nationalism, or the veil for essentialized cultural views toward women, gendered experiences, and the body (136).

This results in double standards whereby the contemporary art of and out of the Middle East remains confined to its regional geopolitics while contemporary art more broadly prides itself on transcending the locale and its politics (Babaie, 2011). In this vein, researcher and artist Afshar (2019) discusses *Under Western Eyes* (2014), her series of manipulated photographs produced in response to what she considered a critical question: "Why many of the most widely circulated and commercially successful works of Iranian visual artists from the preceding decade-or-so tend to share a certain uniformity, both as regards their subject matter and visual style?" (47). On the work, Afshar (2019) comments:

> … examining the works of some of the most well-known visual artists from Iran such as Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadirian, Shirin Ali-Abadi, Shahram Entekhabi and Houra Yaghoubi, as well as Iranian artists based in Australia such as Nasim Nasr, what was striking about them to

[32] This is not to suggest that gendered oppression is absent; women in Iran may face compounded marginalisation due to the intersecting aspects of their identities, including gender, class, ethnicity, and religion.

> me—despite this diagnosis in no way applying to all of their produced works, nor to each of them in the same way—was their often singular focus on just a few overarching themes: female identity; the struggle of Iranian women; their being caught between two opposing currents—tradition and modernity. Not only this, their works all tend(ed) to encode or communicate their subject-matter in a highly similar, and almost formulaic visual language involving visual juxtaposition, or the clash of heterogeneous elements and contexts—an almost postmodern language of "mélange"—and tying together their visuality and subject-matter, a single recurring image: the veil (48).

The author notes that while each artist conveys a particular reality in Iran and the "omnipresence" of the veil in their lives, it is only the "most visible expression of Iranian women's struggles" (ibid.). There is, however, what she describes as a "constant" and "excessive visibility" of the veil which has come to represent the "face of Iranian art" and Iranian women in global art (ibid.). This fails to take into account that such compositions, for example, those of Neshat, were arguably critically engaging and thought-provoking when first produced. The problem is rather one of absorption culturally and economically over time which has resulted in a sense that they have lost their critical edge. Keshmirshekan (2023) also suggests that artists inside Iran actively resist gendered stereotypes. Giving the example of Iranian photo-art-based works, he suggests that artists "deliberately abandon" what they feel are "clichéd subjects" instead focusing on themes of "secular activities (café-culture, private lives)" and female agency (249).

While art has, according to Ranciere, the ability to redistribute the dominant order, challenging that which can be said, seen or heard (see Ranciere, 2004; Downey, 2011) there are limits to its potential. The regional categorisation of art does, for example, limit art's potential to contest the dominant order given that it circulates and is read within fixed parameters that are established by the hegemon. Artists may also be motivated to employ a visual language that is accessible to the Western viewer, i.e. the familiar icon of the veiled Iranian woman which reads as her oppression, to be appreciated within the Western art market.

These reflections suggest that the image of the Iranian woman is constructed and reinforced not only by media and political discourses but also through art market structures and the neoliberal forces that drive it, explored now in further detail.

Categorising and Communicating Contemporary Iranian Art

As noted above, contemporary art is a field where marginalised identities can achieve visibility; however, Western-centric selection and presentation structures can restrict this potential. Power imbalances and hierarchies have been aligned with the very nature of regional art categories (see Grigor, 2014). Indeed, while international contemporary art is positioned as being 'global' and 'universal' in character, its 'subfields' keep regional artists on the periphery of global art, recalling Orientalist divides and establishing a differentiation in the way that regional art is interpreted and experienced. Discussing the implications of such categorisation, Brown (2022) following Carroll (2007) suggests that an illusion of a single integrated market is established to "maintain and reinforce such inequality by excluding a wide range of art production and by convincing audiences that the knowledge produced [by] a small cadre of market makers is an authoritative view of aesthetic value and of the art world itself" (16). Speaking of Iranian art specifically, Grigor (2014) suggests that regional art categories are subordinate to international (Western) ones, discussing tensions between artists in exile and those in Iran she notes:

> … the tension between the studio and the street was exaggerated, because neither had the possibility to gain the hegemonic ground. Both were subordinate to Western popular culture under which exilic art constituted a category of subculture, regardless of its temperament (pastiche or avant-garde). If an Iranian makes it, then it is Iranian: a fallacy perpetuated by the strategies of Orientalism (170).

The categorisation of art plays a fundamental role in establishing visibility for an artist filtering not only who will experience but in which context and within which parameters. Regional categorisations and branding are commonplace in the art market, however, in an ever-globalised society characterised by mass migration

and transnationalism, affiliation with a single nation appears less valuable, as Charlesworth (2014) in the *Art Review* argues:

> Today the 'national' is no longer such an operative concept. There may be thousands of artists from around the world in Berlin or London, for example, but few would argue that there is anything distinctly 'German' or 'British' about the art that is made (para 7).

Addressing contemporary Iranian and Iranian diasporic art specifically, there are further issues with this grouping. Scholars and commentators (see Babaie, 2011; Sagharchi, 2022) have suggested that ambiguous and altering categorisations in the art market have resulted in lack of cohesive scholarship on contemporary Iranian art which limits the potential for understanding it. An ongoing debate is whether it should be discussed as Iranian, Middle Eastern or Islamic. Babaie (2011) suggests there is a historiographic gap between the "Islamic" art history of Iran and the "globalist" art history of contemporary Iran which is perpetuated by the "fixed parameters of calligraphy as the quintessentially Islamic feature of 'Islamic' art" (141). Art institutions have revisited and redefined terminology, indicating a desire for semantics that more accurately capture the contemporary condition. Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)'s permanent collection is titled: *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East*. Discussing the labelling of the collection, the institution's website suggests there has been a revisiting of what Middle Eastern and Islamic art might be as the parameters of Islamic art have expanded more recently to include contemporary works by artists "from or with roots in the Middle East" (LACMA, 2024). The revision of categories at LACMA suggests that terminology and codification are ongoing and dynamic processes, subject to revision. The ongoing negotiation of such categories does, however, render the production of cohesive scholarship problematic, as does the conflict between the fields of art history, Islamic art and contemporary art. These issues will be explored further in the next chapter. Categories such as Islamic art, can be problematic for artists who do not associate with religious labels while Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021) suggests that art market systems reinforce national associations but many of the artists subsumed under a national category might exist within a highly different context:

> Many artists who may well circulate in other contexts and with multiple assignations of nationality, i.e., Iranian-American, are subsumed under the ever-expanding label of Iranian art. This is particularly in contrast to artists from the rest of the region who are all contained under the title Arab even when the auction lots are frequently grouped by nation. The broader category Arab means that national markets are undefined and, like with Iranian artists, other national or ethnic affiliations are left opaque (2021: 10).

Curatorial practices make works of art available to the public "providing explanations and pedagogies of appreciation" (Lotfalian, 2022: 32), but the way Iranian diasporic women artists have been framed in international exhibitions has been problematised. Writing in 2001, Butler warned that, as artwork produced by Iranian women became an increasingly "exotic art commodity" the "who" may supersede "the what", creating a situation where "the novelty" of someone at the intersections of Iranian + woman + migrant producing art may take priority over critical engagement with their work (2001: para 6).

The Art Market: Constructing Meaning and Value

'Art', as it has been considered here, has been approached in the terms outlined by the first wave of critical cultural studies thinkers (such as Barthes, Hall, and Berger) as a discursive and communicative form. Specifically addressing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the social function of artists within these communities, Downey (2014) argues that art is "inseparable from the broader political realm" (2014: 12):

> Contemporary art has long been associated with exploring and retrieving forms of knowledge that, in one way or another, have been obscured from view. As researchers and archivists of information and knowledge, artists often engage in the most political of activities: the exposure and representation of that which was not only hidden away or absorbed into dominant narratives but also prevented from being considered in broader more dominant debates and thereby rendered apolitical (214).

Downey considers the example of the revolutions and uprisings that took place across the MENA in 2011; commonly referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’. During this significant moment, he suggests the public looked to artists to represent and remediate events to those outside, i.e. the international onlookers (Downey, 2014). Like Downey, Tripp (2013) considers artists to be authors of history who ‘reflect and mould the present’, thus shaping the future. The conditions and context within which their works are produced, however, extend beyond the social and political factors in the home/hostlands to the global ecosystems that shape the selection, and dissemination of art. As Tripp (2016) notes: “artists, like other citizens, are not operating in a vacuum, driven simply by an impulse derived from the nature of creative autonomy” (2).

Bourdieu (1993) proposed understanding the generation of ‘aesthetic value’ within a symbolic field of cultural appreciation; a theorisation which can help us understand how the conditions within which the participants in this research exist shape their output and its reception, their connectedness to other figures and forces in the cultural field, and how value and meaning are generated through this interconnectivity. Works of art, according to Bourdieu exist as “symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such” (Bourdieu, 1993: 37). This means that we have to take as our object not only “the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work, or, which amounts to the same thing of belief in the value of the work” (ibid.). In other words, perceptions of the value of the work are not embodied at the point at which the work is produced but are socially and culturally constituted through, in particular, the way in which “the producers of the meaning and value of the work - critics, publishers, gallery directors .... - produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such” (ibid.). This is a much more complex process than generally implied or understood and points towards a wider range of actors and interactions which Bourdieu characterises as a social ‘field’ within which works of art are ‘constructed’.

The production of the work of art is not, therefore, only located within the restricted world of the artist but involves the various and interrelated agents that

help to produce the value of the work in a social sense. It is this which, for Bourdieu, constitutes the 'field' of art as a whole, a field which, in a sense, 'produced' the work of art, and in which understanding of the work of art is a 'manifestation of the field as a whole' and not simply the artist alone. The opportunity for appreciation of their art, then, involves a consideration of the networks of power relations that contribute to the aesthetic and financial value of artists. Contributors include (in Iranian, American and global contexts) art education, cultural institutions, collectors, commissions and patronage, art critique, art advisors and dealers, gallerists, auction houses, and curators, as well as shifts in social relations that impact the flow of art between people and places. Discussing this dynamic Lotfalian (2022) suggests that art galleries connect artists to the market while acquisitions from institutions, auction sales and markets support confidence in the value of art. He notes that artists, aware of the framework within which they circulate, may,

> … entrepreneurially, exchange their work in a politico-economic context so as to participate in the culture-making (*farhang-sazi*) process. They do so by appealing to the institutions, financial interests and political agendas of patrons and markets (Lotfalian, 2022: 32).

Having emphasised the social and cultural construction of art's meaning and value, the diverse factors and forces impacting art's production, circulation, and valuation within the market, and the issues surrounding the positioning of artists, including the commodification of specific forms of identity, the following section offers an overview of the structures of the art market within which the participants operate.

The Global Art Market

The global art market represents opportunities for artists to engage with diverse audiences, but it is also subject to power dynamics that shape the circulation, commodification, and presentation of art. Therefore, it is beneficial to understand the structures of the art market, which the artists included in this study navigate.

Much work has focused on the intersection of the global economy and contemporary art. Downey (2014) has extensively explored this meeting point;

he argues that the evaluation of neoliberalism as a “dominant, global political ideology” is central to any investigation of the relationship between contemporary art practices and globalisation (12). Indeed, the notion of art as a commodity is so deeply entrenched within society that it has achieved its own terminology: the *creative economy* (Howkins, 2002 cited in Zarobell, 2017).[33]

Zarobell (2017) drew upon his personal experiences as an artist and curator to consider the socio-economic transformations in the cultural sphere over two decades. He found that, at various levels, globalisation and neoliberalism are implicated in the production, distribution and commodification of art. He notes that accelerating globalisation processes have seen a reconfiguration of the local and the global as “national and regional economic interpretations around art have been subsumed into a larger pool of global art and capital” and now both consumers and producers exist “around the world” (3). It is important to note, however, that global relationships are enormously unequal so that the power to sell and consume art may be distributed to a greater extent throughout the world, but only specific groups—whether defined by wealth, gender, ethnicity or religion—can fully participate in the market.

Global developments have, nevertheless, brought about significant and ongoing changes in cultural relationships. What was once perceived as the unidirectional flow of culture from Europe to the rest of the world via its institutions and ‘representational innovations’ has been contested by developments, including the rise of regional art fairs. The private museum[34] model also sees the once influential institutions in the global art centres challenged by individuals—the ‘international bourgeois’ and UHNWIs (Ultra-high-net-worth-individuals)—who often come from emerging economies and now take up a prominent place in the art market (195).[35] Indeed, private museums and individuals support art and artists (in some cases, more so than the state) and are, as such, more ‘potent’ in

[33] Creativity and the creative economy are evolving, contextually-specific concepts. Creativity can encompass the dynamic between human creativity, ideas, intellectual property, knowledge, and technology, while the creative economy encompasses industries based on creative activities. Closely linked to the knowledge economy, the creative economy drives endogenous growth through investment in human capital (UNCTAD, 2022).
[34] An art institution that has a permanent collection of modern and/or contemporary art which is accessible to the public. The private museum is owned or governed by one or multiple private individuals without any or limited public funding (Velthuis, et al., 2023: 7).
[35] Private museums have come under scrutiny for reasons including their connections to old and new elite circles. They are often viewed negatively, seen as distractions from an ambivalent public image or as vanity projects (Velthuis et al., 2023).

the neoliberal climate (Zarobell, 2017: pp.15-17); these evolving power dynamics afford more influence to individual agendas in the selection and presentation of art. Commentators have also discussed the rise of globalised art forms (see Charlesworth, 2014), which some have problematised as a homogenised visual language established through a “dissemination of norms” (Zarobell, 2017: 5). This phenomenon is further amplified by the internet, where online communities can generate and propagate their own visual trends and practices to global audiences.

Artists, including those in this study, increasingly operate within a global network. Their works are exhibited and acquired across various markets and they might engage with different art markets at different times or simultaneously. The participants in this study might navigate the regional Middle Eastern art market, national markets (such as American or Iranian), or the broader international art market. An artist from the Iranian diaspora in the US, for example, can have their work exhibited locally and acquired by Iranian diaspora collectors who are specifically interested in Iranian and diasporic art. Their gallery might have presences in both Tehran and New York, and participate in international art fairs. Moreover, their art may appear in auctions categorised under Middle Eastern or international art. This suggests the interconnectedness of art markets, with both collectors and artists frequently crossing borders and engaging in multiple realms of the artworld simultaneously.

The ability of Iranian artists to engage with the international art market is tenuous and continues to transform, which affects the market engagement with artists in the Iranian diaspora. Sanctions and legal restrictions have intensified, relaxed and re-intensified over time in accordance with evolving US-Iran relations. This is explored by Vardanjani (2020), who reflects upon the response by artists inside Iran who adapted by reconfiguring their art practices towards ‘intangible’ art that is transferable through digital networks or work that does not require physical shipping. These political constraints resulted in new art forms from artists, but Iranian art collectors and exhibitors have also had to adapt in the face of shifting legal restrictions and instability in Iran. Artists and gallerists continuously adapt to the market’s demands, often adjusting their strategies to align with its fluctuations. Despite not being based in Iran, artists in diaspora face challenges

stemming from sanctions and restrictions that affect the circulation of their work. Financial transactions bearing the label “Iran” may, for example, be blocked, and shipments of artwork identified as Iranian can encounter bureaucratic hurdles. While these sanctions impose limitations on collectors and gallerists seeking to engage commercially with Iranian art, they can also present opportunities for artists in diaspora. Collectors may turn to acquiring ‘Iranian artwork’ from Iranian-American artists represented by galleries in countries like the US or UAE, which can facilitate international monetary transactions. This reveals how the production, exhibition and acquisition of Iranian art continues to transform and adapt in line with evolving global socio-political dynamics, demonstrating, at the same time, innovative and reflexive aesthetic responses. The dynamics and issues discussed above will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Two.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the Iranian diaspora is a complex phenomenon that defies easy categorisation. This discussion has acknowledged moreover the inherent difficulties in neatly defining the Iranian diaspora, recognising that it cannot be comprehensively captured in any singular manner. Instead, it encompasses a multitude of hybrid and blended forms of identity. Focusing specifically on Iranian women artists, this study, informed by the above, explored the multifaceted character of their identities, understanding that these identities intersect in complex ways. Formed dialogically according to context and interactional factors, these identities are fluid and prone to change over time. The following chapters explore how these complex identities are reflected, performed, and refracted through an analysis of subjects’ art and their own narratives.

This thesis is concerned with diasporic artists of the post-revolution generation, who challenge any simplistic definitions regarding ethnicity, origins, migration, generation, or place. Some recently arrived in the diasporic context having spent their formative years in Iran, others belong to the second-generation of residents in the US, with varied connections to Iran—some may not have been born there or lived there extensively. For some, their Iranian identity is primarily imagined, influenced by secondary sources and their own lived experiences in diaspora. The digital sphere also offers opportunities for distinct online identities, networks, and practices to emerge as individuals can connect with distinct forms of Iranian

diasporic identities, and a transnational community and networks of artists. The participants in this study, then, navigate multiple (at times overlapping) networks within which they actively develop their sense of self and personas dialogically.

The above discussion has indicated, however, that as artists integrate into business networks within the art market their art becomes more than just a pursuit of self-fulfilment and creative expression. This can introduce pressures and contradictions within their artistic practice, including expectations to produce certain types of work and commodify their artistic output. The next chapter now examines these concerns.

CHAPTER TWO
THE ART MARKET AND NEOLIBERALISM

Introduction

Art is a business and an aesthetic practice. The commodification of art is nothing new, historically it has been particularly associated with the rise of mercantile capitalism in Western Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, but in the current phase of global development, neoliberalism has arguably transformed the conditions of contemporary artistic practice (Appadurai et al., 2021). Indeed, Appadurai et al. (2021) argue that beyond the globalisation of capital, neoliberal economic policies promoting free trade, the deregulation of financial markets, and the privatisation of welfare have contributed to the reconfiguration of individuals as “entrepreneurs of themselves” thereby rendering subjectivity as human capital (126). Such reconfigurations, often accelerated in our evolving web-based and networked society, cannot be understood as separate from the revived ‘centrality of identity politics in the public sphere’ (ibid.) which connects to articulations of identities in contemporary art. There are many ways in which neoliberalism might make its presence felt in the art world as Appadurai et al. (2021) claim:

> We are all aware of the rapidity with which trophy artworks are priced into the stratosphere, biennials are turned into reputation-building markets, museums function as playgrounds for the super-wealthy, and art from the

> world's margins is pimped out by first-world curators, critics, and connoisseurs (128).

As this study has been conducted in the neoliberal era, it is pertinent to examine the relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary artistic practices. This focus addresses the limitations of art's capacity to serve as a site of individual expression, where subjective articulations of identities might arise, an idea central to this research.

Bourdieu's thinking on capital and the field underlie the following discussion, positioning the art ecosystem as a social field - a network that operates with its own rules and serves as a site of struggle over various forms of capital: social, cultural, economic, and symbolic (MacKay, 2022). These struggles are subject to various agendas and pressures. As Bourdieu (1984a) contends, an artist's liberty is purely formal:

> … it constitutes no more than the condition of their submission to the laws of the market of symbolic goods, that is, to a form of demand which necessarily lags behind the supply of the commodity (in this case, the work of art). They are reminded of this demand through sales figures and other forms of pressure, explicit or diffuse, exercised by publishers, theatre managers, art dealers (4).

It is assumed that the participants in this study orient themselves towards having visibility (symbolic capital) in the various art markets, which means paying attention to how the art economy may influence the artist's creative practice as they move through its network. This chapter also considers how the market can represent artistic products to serve its own goals; artists may, for example, be categorised and framed as Middle Eastern, Islamic, or Iranian, among other labels, to increase their market value.

The Contemporary Art Ecosystem

Artists themselves are aware of the 'conditions of dissemination' imposed by the art market and what this involves. In the words of Haiven (2018), this constitutes a type of "'financialized imagination'" that affects those that participate in the art

world, within which the logic of the market reshapes "'the fields of daily life and sociality'" and makes cultural objects part of a largely "'speculative order'" (Haiven 2018: 8 cited in Brown, 2023: 628). It is therefore important to situate this analysis within the context of the art market, neoliberalism and globalisation. As one of my informants, curator and art historian, Vali Mahlouji, suggested:

> *Given the conditions in which an artist operates—formal, aesthetic, social, political, and cultural—there is an inescapable entanglement with broader structures, and those can include the art market and systems of patronage such as collectors and institutions. Those dimensions are, then, not external to artistic practice but are part of the very framework within which it unfolds and disseminates. As such, the artist will always find themselves in dialogue - in collusion or in conflict - with those forces. They are not discrete or separate spheres, but interrelated components of a larger cultural and economic realities within which we all operate* (Interview, 18th August 2022, Zoom).

The Contemporary Art Market: Structures, Flows and Dynamics

It is relevant at this point to address what is generally referred to as the 'art market'. In brief, cultural objects including works of art become a commodity when traded in the art market. Art can be exchanged nationally/domestically, regionally or internationally (Robertson, 2015: 16). The following is an overview of the international contemporary art market ecosystem which is, to some extent, translated and replicated in and connected to regional[36] and domestic art markets, although these markets do retain their own specificities. The discussion then focuses on how market forces might affect an artist's 'value' before situating the Middle Eastern and Iranian art markets within the global art ecosystem and historical, socio-political contexts.

[36] ArtNet (2024) defines regional markets as: North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Artists born in these regions contribute to corresponding data.

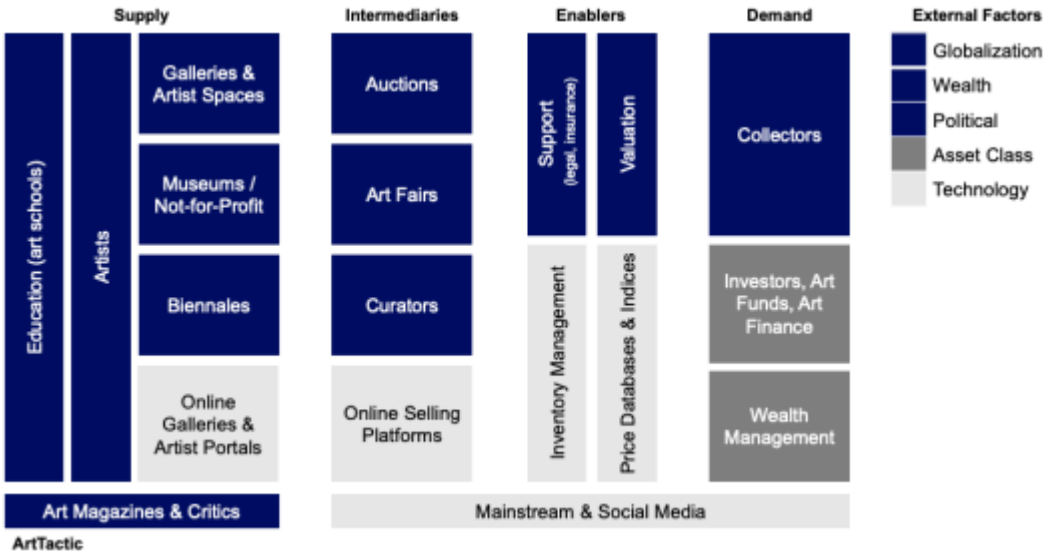

Table 1. *Contemporary Art Market Ecosystem*, ArtTactic (n.d.)

The international art market is the only mechanism for assigning monetary value to art and antiques (Robertson, 2015). Table 1 offers insight into the various contributors to the art market ecosystem in general terms as well as the internal and external factors that drive it. The key factors outlined in this model–supply, intermediaries, enablers and demand–are also influenced by macro-factors that include socio-economic shifts such as the rise of UHNWIs in emerging markets, economic shifts such as globalisation of markets, political currents such as sanctions, advances in technology that facilitate online accessibility to art (and threaten the traditional intermediaries) and legal factors such as taxes.

The internationalisation of a market, understood as a reflection of its maturity, is measured against a country's ability to draw in foreign dealers and auction houses, (either permanently or temporarily) (Robertson, 2015). Indicative of the Western-centric orientation of the art world and the power imbalances entrenched within it, Robertson (2015) suggested that the art world (in 2015) echoed Europe and the US's economic and political dominance while MacKay (2022) suggests that the US and its art market model play a significant role in shaping the wider structures, practices and value systems within the international and national markets:

> If states benefit from the global art world, hegemons benefit from and shape it in specific, historically situated ways. The current global art world field emerged in the postwar period, under American global

> predominance. While the global field is distinct from national ones, the relationship between them is homological … engagement with the hegemon provides incentives and socialization pathways prone to generating similar internal structures. Transnational linkages of art world elites and markets entangle other domestic art worlds with those of the United States. Similarity across national fields results from both the interoperability of like institutions and overlapping expert consensuses about standards of valuation and exchange practices. While the hegemon cannot unilaterally set the field's rules, it can, with care, model global expectations (MacKay, 2022: 3).

Such conditions consequently constrain opportunities for presenting and engaging with art in site and context-specific ways. Gumpert (2020) suggests that there has been a revision of terminologies within the art world, towards a more inclusive approach but the North American–Western European art axis continues to dominate. It has expanded in recent years beyond the art centres of Paris and New York to encompass Los Angeles, Chicago, Berlin, and London (Gumpert, 2020). More recently Dubai has become the first "non-western city to become a major art market destination" (81).

Indeed, in an interview for this study, Anders Petterson, founder and CEO of art market research firm *ArtTactic*, affirms that aspects of the Middle Eastern (referred to here as MENA[37]) market increasingly conform to the international art market model (Table 1):

> *This is a consequence of an expanding and improving cultural and art infrastructure in parts of the* [Gulf] *region. However, like most regions and countries, there will also be a purely domestic art market that caters for a local audience that is likely to follow its own rules and models* (Interview, 25th August 2022, email).

North American–Western European control of the circulation and exhibition of art is reinforced in other regions. This is exemplified in the establishment of global

[37] ArtTactic defines the Middle Eastern art market in terms of artists that originate from (born in) the MENA region (including Iran and North Africa) (Petterson, interview 25th August 2022).

institutions such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in the UAE, as well as the presence of international auction houses in the Gulf. Significant shifts in infrastructure, attitudes, and the flow of art have emerged and these changes have contributed to a climate where regional art is increasingly appreciated and valued. The question of whether these dominant 'international' approaches constrain the means and depth of engagement with art originating from non-Western contexts will be explored later in this chapter. Besides this, it is also important to consider the effect of privatisation and financialisation of interests in the arts (Dimova and Gillen, 2017). The dominant logic behind this social 'field', in Bourdieu's terms, is financial speculation but prices reached at art auctions bear little relation to the "quality and the relevance of the artworks" (Dimova and Gillen, 2017: 64). The field, however, is not unified; it is divided, for example, between 'public' and 'private' (and even more deeply divided in terms of time and space). The former refers to the institutions, museums and biennials that compete with the private sector in the creation of value in the arts but there are no clear boundaries between these different spheres.

Such an argument is clearly illustrated in a research study carried out by *The Art Newspaper* (2015). It suggested almost "one-third of the major solo exhibitions held in US museums between 2007 and 2013 featured artists represented by just five galleries" (Halperin, 2015: para 1). Those five galleries: Gagosian, Pace, Marian Goodman Gallery, David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth were responsible for 11 out of 12 (over 90%) of major solo exhibitions between 2007 and 2013 at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (Halperin, 2015: para 4). This also illustrates the uneven power dynamics that contribute to the art market. A select few (private) entities, such as the aforementioned galleries, have the power to shape judgements around aesthetics and value that filter into public engagement with art. Such dynamics also raise questions about how inclusive and diverse the art market can really be. Outlining the extent of the exchange between public and private spheres and how private and corporate agendas can shape public exhibitions, Dimova and Gillen (2017) suggested that, in 2017, more collectors were "building their own museums" while public museums were ever-dependent on "private funding" (64). In parallel, key art events and awards—art fairs, exhibitions, grants and prizes—are increasingly supported by private corporations, banks and multinationals (ibid.).

The Impact of External Factors on an Artist's Career

It is necessary, then, to contextualise the artist within the broader ecosystem by examining the various forces and dynamics that can influence their artistic careers, artwork, and interactions with the market. A 2018 study by *ArtTactic* addressed the factors influencing an artist's career advancement. The study employed the criteria below to define the 'top 500 artists' aged 40 and under; suggesting that these factors work together to determine an artist's market value (ArtTactic, 2018: 4):

- Important exhibitions in museums, public art institutions, private foundations and commercial galleries (last three years)
- Inclusion in museum collections and major private collections
- Shortlists for artist prizes (last 18 months)
- Biennial participation (last 18 months)
- Gallery representation (gallery reputation)
- Art fair participation
- Auction presence
- Social media presence

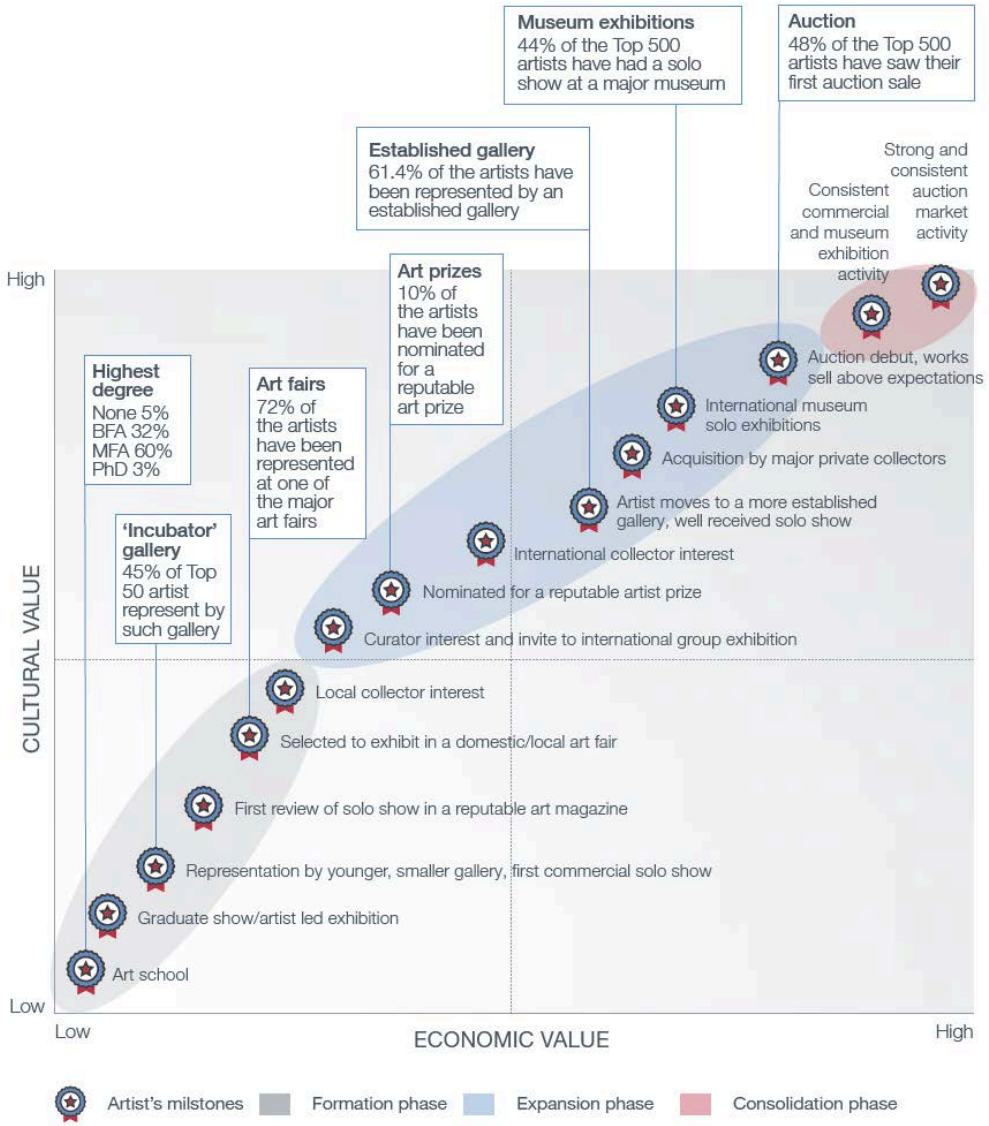

Table 2. *The Endorsement Process*, ArtTactic (2018: 7)

Table 2 further illustrates how certain criteria can propel an artist's economic and symbolic capital over three phases: formation, expansion and consolidation. It suggests that rather than a singular force the market is a space of interlinking hierarchies and flows between realms. This is, however, a traditional model which does not account for online connectivity. This model remains relevant for many artists, but at the time of writing (2024) there was a rising number of artists who found innovative ways to market themselves and establish collector bases through digital media and other novel modes of direct connection with their audience.

As the model suggests, in the early stages of their careers a typical trajectory for artists involves progressing through education (notably 60% of the top 500 artists had an MFA), representation by a younger gallery, media attention and critical feedback. Subsequently, they attract local interest from collectors and then embark on a phase of international expansion. During this phase, they exhibit internationally, initially participating in group shows to gain recognition from institutions and collectors. Eventually, they transition into international gallery representation, leading to acquisitions by international collectors and institutions, followed by works being sold at auction and acquired by museums (ArtTactic, 2018). Artworks gain value (or not) as they circulate within different cycles within the global art market. The setting of prices and how a work of art enters into, for example, an auction is a process based on both “concrete information and deep speculation which requires prior knowledge of an artist’s market to make predictions for the future” (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2021: 12).

As addressed earlier, an artist’s freedom is constrained by their submission to the laws of the market (Bourdieu, 1984a). The participants in this study are engaged in a continuous dialogue with various factors discussed above including educators, media, collectors, gallerists and institutions, as well as within the social fields they inhabit. This dialogue shapes their artistic practices, choices, and interactions within the art ecosystem, blurring the boundaries between artistic expression and market demands.

The conversation now focuses on how the aforementioned components of the contemporary art ecosystem might influence the participants in this study, as women artists in the Iranian diaspora. The discussion draws from fieldwork interviews conducted with various stakeholders in the Middle Eastern art market including auction house representatives, art consultants, curators, as well as the participants themselves.

The Rise of Contemporary Iranian Art

The emergence of the Iranian art market and its international visibility and economic engagement is now examined to provide a framework for understanding the context and structures which the research participants navigate. This discussion acknowledges that Iranian and Iranian diasporic artists

operate in a networked manner, moving between various local and global art scenes. Artists may engage with different markets at different times or concurrently.

Broadly speaking, international interest in regional and national categories can be attributed to global shifts in the presentation of art. Before the 1990s, cultural institutions and official bodies were generally focused on national rather than international audiences and contexts while art schools drew from the “domestic student population” (Charlesworth, 2014). Shifts in the curation and presentation of contemporary art at major events during the 1990s contributed to new value systems and areas of focus that facilitated engagement with art beyond the traditional centres (Dimova and Gillen, 2017). As Dimova and Gillen suggest:

> Documenta X (1997), curated by Catherine David, marked art’s decisive turn towards the political, social, economic and cultural issues of the contemporary globalized world. David also mapped the three most important lines of art’s engagement with globalization: postcolonial discourse, urbanism, and new communicational technologies (2017: 68).

This shift influenced global approaches to understanding and engaging with regional art, while within the MENA region, the contemporary art ecosystem evolved to support international engagement with its cultural output. By the mid-2000s there was a significant rise in the number of public spaces available for engagement with Iranian art, with galleries arriving in Tehran and Dubai specifically (Vardanjani, 2020). By 2020 there were 191 art galleries in Tehran, a significant increase from 20 during the 1990s (ibid.). Grigor (2018) suggests that the economic shift to an open market system under President Rafsanjani (1989–1997) as well as the opportunity for cultural dialogue with the West under reformist President Khatami (1997–2005) cultivated a climate whereby Iranians were prepared for the re-introduction of the Western art market [20:00]. This renewed cultural environment that saw the exposure of Iranian art to the West and Western art to Iran influenced the output of artists in Iran as well as collectors and audiences externally (Keshmirshekan, 2015). According to Keshmirshekan (2015) 1997, the year that saw the election of Iran’s fifth president, Khatami, was pivotal; a shift that shaped Iranian cultural policy and

artistic movements internally and externally. The loosening of control over cultural spaces supported the growth of cultural events and sites for public engagement with art:

> … TMoCA [Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art] began to hold non-political and non-ideological exhibitions. Therefore the museum, and in particular the Centre of Visual Arts, played a key role in promoting various forms of contemporary Iranian art … Galleries during this period were also freed of the requirement that they gain the centre's approval for each show they wanted to mount. This marked a decisive reduction in government control of artistic affairs (Keshmirshekan, 2015: 134-5).

In parallel, institutions like TMoCA established international ties through the lending of works from the museum's Western collection (many of which had been hidden from public view for years) (Keshmirshekan, 2015). This contributed to the Iranian art scene, cultivating opportunities for Iranian artists to be exhibited at an institutional level abroad while internally forging a creative community by opening up to a wider range of "practising artists and in establishing new perspectives for artistic practice" (Keshmirshekan, 2015: 136). During the early 2000s, the participation of Iranian artists in significant international events such as the Venice Biennale can be attributed to this relaxing of cultural constraints (ibid.).

Shifts in power in Iran since 2005 have limited the exhibition of certain types of art inside the country and the exposure of Iranians inside Iran to international art. This resulted in a climate whereby some Iranian artists inside Iran focused their attention externally and towards the private sector.[38] According to Keshmirshekan (2015), post-2005 official attitudes towards art mirrored the first phase after the Islamic Revolution whereby institutional exhibitions focused on topics such as 'resistance' in relation to the Palestine-Israel conflict. This was prevalent during Ahmadinejad's second presidency; following the controversial election in 2009, greater restrictions were imposed on art and cultural activities as Keshmirshekan (2015) describes:

[38] There is, however, a dynamic art scene inside Iran and flows between those inside the country and the Iranian diaspora.

> … officials promoted traditional, Islamic and revolutionary values, while at the same time encouraging extreme xenophobia towards the West … the majority of the community, including the artists' societies, overreacted culturally against this situation by refusing to participate in public shows. Since there was a limited chance for showing their work in official venues such as the TMoCA, they had to focus their attention outside the country through the private sector (138).

The impact of widening the diaspora was that its members were raising the profile of Iranian artists internationally. Throughout the 1990s, artists who left Iran in connection to the 1979 Revolution garnered significant attention from the market, elevating the global visibility of Iranian diaspora art. Notably, Sonia Balassanian had already gained international recognition by exhibiting at the Basel International Art Fair in 1976. It was, however, Balassanian's first solo exhibition in New York in 1980, *Hostages: A Diary*, at Eli Meyer Gallery that revealed a significant shift towards a more politically charged artistic expression in the diasporic context. Similarly, Shirin Neshat's acclaimed *Women of Allah* series (1993–97) followed her first return to Iran after the 1979 Revolution in 1990. Her film, *Turbulent* (1998), further solidified her reputation when it was showcased at the 1999 Venice Biennale, where it received the Golden Lion award. Painter and illustrator Nicky Nodjoumi faced significant controversy when his body of work, *Report of a Revolution*, was exhibited at the TMoCA in 1981. Featuring imagery depicting struggle, bloodshed, violence, and executions, along with critical depictions of Ruhollah Khomeini, the exhibition incited outrage, with local newspapers labelling Nodjoumi a 'traitor' and featuring his art on their front pages (Jennings, 2023). Fearing capture and execution Nodjoumi fled to the US (ibid.). Nodjoumi continues to exhibit actively internationally and was among the many artists in diaspora raising the profile of Iranian art abroad. What connects each of the aforementioned artists, who experienced the Revolution, is their desire to visually narrate their experiences of it in their own ways. During the 2000s the Iranian diaspora also launched its own cultural organisations and lobby groups in the US (for example, The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans and The National Iranian American Council) which resulted in a distinct diasporic voice (Lotfalian, 2022).

As discussed, notable international exhibitions of contemporary Iranian art, taking place from the early 2000s contributed to an awareness of Iranian artists abroad. Scholars have suggested that social and political events contributed to a global interest in MENA art specifically. Hassan (2010), for example, notes that while literature on contemporary Iranian art has been produced since the 1960s it gained prominence in the field of art history and the international art markets in the period following 9/11 and the "later American colonial wars in Afghanistan (2001–present) and Iraq (2003–2011?), as interest in the cultures and lives of the Middle East has also grown exponentially" (Hassan, 2010, cited in Scheiwiller, 2018: 194).

Significant museum exhibitions in the US have foregrounded historic and contemporary Middle Eastern art. For example, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006), at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, was organised by Iranian-born American, Fereshteh Daftari. The exhibition showcased artists from Algeria, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey working across various mediums. Significantly, Gumpert (2020) notes that in the accompanying catalogue, Daftari warns against,

> the rush to categorize well-known artists such as Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Shahzia Sikander as "Islamic." The Islamic world, she notes, covers an enormous expanse, from Indonesia to the Atlantic coast of Africa. In examining the work of seventeen artists living and working outside the Islamic region, who share neither nationality nor religion, she, too, strove to avoid overarching homogenizations or generalizations (84).

In 2015, *Islamic Art Now* at LACMA was the first major exhibition of LACMA's holdings of Middle Eastern contemporary art (the largest institutional collection in the US). This exhibition featured 25 works spanning photography, sculpture, video, and installation by what it describes as 20 artists "from Iran and the Arab world" (LACMA, 2024). Later, in 2021, London's V&A presented *Epic Iran* an exhibition tracing 5000 years of the country's "monumental artistic achievements, which remain unknown to many" (V&A, 2024) from historic artefacts to modern and contemporary artworks by artists including Parvis Tanavoli, Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Neshat. In the same year, the British Museum also presented

Reflections: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa, an exhibition of artists “born in or connected to” the countries from Iran to Morocco. Over the past two decades, such exhibitions have created international opportunities for public engagement with Iranian historical and contemporary art practices, framed through various perspectives. Such framings play an important role in how the wider public understands Iranian art and culture. LACMA presented it as contemporary Islamic art, MoMA from a non-Islamic lens, the V&A traced its historical trajectory, and the British Museum situated it within a broader regional context.

Indeed, Middle Eastern and Iranian art is now exhibited in galleries and institutions globally. Significant collections of contemporary art from the Middle East are housed at the British Museum and LACMA (Campbell, 2017). Other institutional collectors include the Guggenheim and MoMA, New York; Centre Pompidou and Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, and the Tate, London. Islamic art and artefacts are held at the Louvre, Paris and Abu Dhabi; the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), Qatar; the Pergamon Museum, Berlin; and the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, providing avenues for public engagement with Middle Eastern cultural products beyond the region. Galleries in global cities often run by the Iranian diaspora also centre programming around emerging and established Iranian and Iranian diaspora artists. Examples include Advocartsy and Nazarian Gallery in LA, Grey Art Gallery, Leila Heller, and Shirin Gallery in New York, and The Third Line, Carbon 12, Leila Heller, and The Courtyard in the UAE.

Gallery spaces first established in Iran also maintain an international presence. Dastan’s Basement was, for example, established in Tehran in 2012. The gallery actively participates in international art fairs and cultural events such as panel discussions abroad. The gallery’s founder, Hormoz Hematian, established a second space, Zaal Art Gallery in Ontario, Canada in 2023 bridging Iran and its artists with the international art market. Although artwork is not directly sanctioned, US sanctions prohibit financial transactions with Iran; the trade and exhibition of art, therefore, becomes sanctioned in practice (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2023). Hematian, the gallery’s founder, has discussed the impact of US sanctions on Iran on the art market in several interviews (see

Apollo, 2019; Tarmy, 2018). This suggests a readiness to look externally for opportunities and to engage with other markets that are less restrictive.

The Iranian art market, then, operates both locally and internationally, influenced and contributed to by those in the diaspora and inside Iran. As discussed, institutional and gallery exhibitions, art fairs, publications, and cultural events connect Iran with the global art market but Iranian art remains susceptible to shifts in power and politics which can constrain its circulation.

Auction Houses and the Iranian Art Market

The Iranian art market has evolved significantly over the past two decades, experiencing periods of rapid growth, adjustment, and consolidation. Auction houses have played a central role in establishing the economic value of contemporary Iranian art, particularly in the secondary market. It is, therefore, useful to explore the formation and structures of the auction house categories in relation to contemporary Iranian art as they directly impact the economic and symbolic value attributed to such artworks. Understanding these values illuminates the dynamics driving aesthetic appreciation; such value systems may also influence artists' strategic decisions if they aim to succeed within these frameworks.

Dina Nasser-Khadivi, a participant in this research, is an art consultant and former Christie's specialist in 19th Century European Art and Middle Eastern Modern and Contemporary Art. In our interview, she suggested that the main channels for sales of contemporary Iranian art are galleries inside and outside Iran, auction houses, and private dealers. Art galleries have traditionally focused on the primary market (although some do work with the secondary market) while auction houses sell artworks in the secondary market. High billing sales of works by modern and contemporary Iranian artists in auctions in the early 2000s by international houses in Dubai attracted international attention towards the art of Iran connecting the Iranian market to global collectors. The auction houses' entry into the Gulf also helped to establish price points for Iranian artists. This was also supported by the establishment of the Tehran Auction House in Iran in 2017, indicating the flows between domestic and international markets and that the global reach of Iranian art is facilitated by a web of interconnected elements.

According to Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021), 2006 was the year that Middle Eastern art was widely considered to become more comprehensively integrated into the global art market. It was the year of the first auction of Middle Eastern art in the Middle East (Christie's), as well as other key events such as the establishment of the international Gulf Art Fair (later Art Dubai) (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2021). The author suggests that the early days of auctions of Middle Eastern art (2006-9) experienced speculation that resulted in "staggering prices for Iranian art achieved in record time" (2021: 11):

> It was at Bonhams' spectacularly successful March 2008 Dubai sale that the first Iranian artwork, *Eshgh*, by Farhad Moshiri, sold for over one million dollars. At Christie's April sale in 2008, Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture, *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)*, achieved the highest price for any work auctioned in Dubai and was a world record for any Middle Eastern artist at the time. These watershed moments announced the commercial viability of the category of Iranian art in particular. Since then, the sustained inclusion of Iranian art at auctions has implied that it has a consistent market (3).

Dina said that while she was working at Christie's, in the early days of the auction house in Dubai, the majority of sales under the category of Middle Eastern art came from Iran suggesting the sizable market demand:

> *When I used to be involved in the sales at Christie's, one-third of the supply and the demand used to be Iranian. It was the only country that had such a strong presence … The rest of the percentage was all the countries of what's considered the Middle East and North Africa together and Iran was a standalone, a third of the supply and the demand, that was a lot* (Interview, 10th July 2022, telephone).

The formation of the contemporary Iranian art market and its accelerated growth and demand had both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the perceived value, appreciation, and awareness of contemporary Iranian art increased. On the other hand, artists operating outside the typical art market

framework, due to the auction house demand, were missing out on the opportunity for critical reflection on their work (see Table 2). Their absence from this cycle limits the overall discourse surrounding contemporary Iranian art and, therefore, understandings of it in addition to the sustainable growth of the artist as Sreberny-Mohammadi, (2021) discussed:

> Prior to the economic crash of 2009, many Iranian artists sidelined their galleries and consigned their works straight from the studio to the saleroom. When artworks move directly from an artist studio to an auctioneer's block, as is common in new art markets (Horowitz 2011), they are taken out of critical circulation and skip steps of the cycle where they may acquire value beyond the economic. If an artwork goes straight to the auction, it has the potential to create prices that are not repeatable, where an artist may sell for much higher than expected, as opposed to when artworks are sold in galleries for prices agreed upon in advance between the artist and the dealer (Velthuis 2003). Despite the trust and transparency that Christie's hopes to trade on, the proximity of artists to auctions can actually destabilise a system that other participants have invested in (ibid.), although their continued success suggests that fear has not been realized (12).

Commenting on these issues, Dina suggests that rather than a 'drop' in the art market post-2008 there was a "correction" whereby the market became more established, supporting the holistic growth of Iranian artists:

> *I think there was a correction which had to do with several reasons, one of them being that when the auctions began, there wasn't really an established market for a lot of artists. They didn't have galleries at the time, at least for those who were in Iran. It was a market that was completely forgotten. There were a handful of artists who were making it in the diaspora as international artists … What you had over time was a healthy evolution … the prices have definitely become reflective often of what they should be … I think the market has had a healthy run, it is just less localised outside of Iran* (Interview 10th July 2022, telephone).

The UAE: Connecting the Global and the Local

Given the economic situation in Iran, there is no doubt that the UAE's openness to international trade, its favourable tax set-up, new wealth, diversity of faiths, cultures and nationalities within the country, its historic and cultural ties with Iran as well as its geographic proximity to it have helped the interest in Iranian art.[39] As Iranian artists looked internationally post-2005, the Gulf played a prominent role in connecting the artists of Iran to the international scene. Writing on art market structures, Robertson (2015) suggests that there is an imbalance between regional and international artists because "developing economies have lesser art worlds and art markets producing lower levels of added value for their national and regional art" (16) but the existence of "extremely wealthy" states within a region (ibid.) can support regional artists in securing positions within the international art world as in, for example, the GCC states which are in proximity to Iran.

During a panel discussion in 2022, *Curators, Institutions and the Market: Twenty odd years in the making of the contemporary Iranian art scene,* speaker Nima Sagharchi (Director of Middle Eastern, Islamic, and South Asian Art at Bonhams, UK) reflected on his experiences in the Islamic art department at Sotheby's UK. He suggested that, on the formation of the market in the UAE, historic ties and flows between Iran and the Gulf, as well as the UAE's "peaceful" climate that welcomes gallerists and collectors from West and East, played an important role in establishing the contemporary Iranian market. This climate also contributed to the visibility and mobility of the artists themselves as they overcame the limitations of sanctions and strained political ties between the US and Iran:

> The market grew primarily in the Gulf countries … I like the idea of Dubai being the Hong Kong of Iran. Dubai has been culturally colonised by Iranians heavily and I think the locals were very friendly towards our group and there was a spirit of peaceful cooperation there that you couldn't have anywhere else, you couldn't have an art fair with an American gallery, an Iranian gallery and a Lebanese gallery anywhere else at that time … access to the market in Iran was very difficult if you, as a Western collector, wanted to buy art from Iran there were obstacles with visas,

[39] This relationship has altered over time influenced by global political conditions.

> bank transfers, knowing who to see when you get there and the general framework was difficult to navigate … Dubai was really a fresh experience for everyone as Iranians could get there, showcase their talent and do it very directly … (Sagharchi, 2022).

Market freedom in the early 2000s and the idea that investing in Iranian art was free from the "possibility of engaging in an illegitimate business" was central to this progression (Vardanjani, 2020: 3). Vardanjani (2020) following Nephew (2017) notes that the initial boom in the Iranian art market in the Gulf and beyond was free from the limitations of sanctions that targeted Iran's financial system suggesting that at that time the rest of the world (excluding the US) saw Iran as an economically "normal" state (Nephew 2017: 65 cited in Vardanjani, 2020).

In the post-2005 climate, positive Gulf-Iran relations resulted in opportunities for exposure for Iranian artists via auctions and exhibitions in the GCC.[40] Migration to the Gulf was also conceptually generative for artists resulting in new, diasporic art forms. Grigor (2018) notes that displacement led to the formation of artworks that displayed a sense of betweenness and fragmentation, a new *glocal* cultural product:

> … Many Iranian artists have found in Dubai, Doha and Kuwait City a meeting place of dialogue and display. These artworks often reflect the in-between position between geopolitics, market category and fragmented identities [22.53].

Rather than painting a utopian picture, however, it is important to note that there are limitations to the extent to which artists can express themselves freely and critically within the UAE's framework. Local laws prevent, for example, artworks depicting nudity or suggesting blasphemy. Such conditions might, then, result in self-censorship among those who do not wish to face legal implications (see Bharadwaj, 2013; Harb 2021). Conditions are, however, unfixed and have shifted over time. Sanctions against Iran, enforced by the US and other international entities, have also fluctuated in severity over several decades. Sanctions have been implemented for various reasons among them: the hostage crisis

[40] GCC-Iran relations are evolving and specific to each nation.

(1979–1981); Iran's failure to cease uranium production (2006); and later, under the Trump administration in 2018, when the US withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal. Indeed, Vardanjani (2020) observes that the most "systematically intensified sanctions against Iran" applied during the Trump administration might have been the most damaging to the Iranian art market. These sanctions included the majority of Iran's economic and financial activities and blocked the country from legally bypassing them (2). The sanctions do not target the art market, however, the financial blocks render "business with Iranian art entities impossible" (ibid.). Moreover, international art institutions are sensitive to the risk of working with Iranian organisations or individuals as this may impact their relations with the "more lucrative American market" (ibid.). Such conditions have challenged Iranian artists and those handling their works as they faced issues with visas and mobility, fluctuations and restrictions on currency exchange and transactions, as well as shipping and logistics issues. More recently, in September 2023, the UAE eased restrictions on Iran highlighting the volatility of this ever-shifting dynamic, which is subject to the impact of ongoing geopolitical tensions between various players in the MENA region and the US. A 2023 article in the *Financial Times* by Kerr and Bozorgmehr suggested that trade between the countries "surged" as restrictions on business activities were reduced:[41]

> Executives said the UAE has in recent months rolled back limits on corporate registrations and the issuance of visas to companies from Iran, which remains subject to tough US sanctions … Flourishing trade relations between Iran and the UAE, the traditional centre for re-exports into the Islamic republic, forms part of the Gulf state's pivot towards regional de-escalation and a focus on business (Kerr and Bozorgmehr, 2023: para 2-3).

Sanctions on Iran may, as previously addressed, stimulate migration and also benefit those in its diaspora. Vardanjani (2020) claims that economic limitations in Iran have contributed to the formation of a "hidden market" whereby "domestic dealers are unable to ship art objects abroad, and international dealers and collectors are banned from business with Iranian entities and individuals" (10). In

[41] The UAE and Iran both joined the BRICS group of emerging-market nations in January 2024 which could result in further political cooperation and economic opportunities between the countries (Rahman, 2024).

this context doing business with, for example, Iranian migrants in the GCC or the US rather than those inside Iran reduces the risk for international dealers (ibid.):

> Recently, art galleries in Dubai rely on a diaspora, who form the main body of the art community in the emirate …
>
> In this situation, many international galleries invested more in the Iranian diaspora, dual citizens, and well-known artists. For example, among the Top 20 Young Artists from North Africa and the Middle East, as named in ArtTactic 2018, five artists are from Iran (Dewar 2019: pp. 1–20), but only one of them lives in Iran … (2020: 10).

The Iranian art market has experienced palpable growth and international engagement over the last twenty years but it remains entangled with geopolitical dynamics and economic factors necessitating the adaptability of its artists, collectors and exhibitors who navigate its complex and evolving networks.

FRAMING AND CIRCULATING IRANIAN ART

Western Structures

This chapter has addressed the significant influence of the US art market model on international and regional art markets; it is, therefore, necessary to examine American perspectives on the Middle East as these perspectives underride dominant framings and positioning of Middle Eastern art and artists within the art market. Such perspectives are connected to legacies of Orientalism and contribute to the power imbalances which permeate contemporary structures of art exhibition and discourse, which will now be explored in more detail.

Structurally, Western[42] institutions have long perpetuated and institutionalised East-West division. Ward (2021) claims that although contemporary post-colonial movements and discourses have spurred institutions in Europe and North America to reexamine their complicity in upholding imperial hegemonies, little

[42] Here, 'the West' and 'Western nations' are defined as countries within the Western economic and political sphere, including the US, Canada, the countries of the EU, the UK, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, and New Zealand. 'Western arts' and art institutions refer to the countries that share the visual arts, literary, and performing traditions of Europe such as the US and Canada.

scholarly attention has been devoted to the influence of Orientalism on the formative years of the modern, encyclopaedic museum in the West. Such structures underlie not only the presentation of art in this context but also institutionalised ways of exhibiting and communicating what was deemed "Orientalist" art more broadly:

> The East-West division influenced how both museums came to organize their administrations between experts on art history and experts on "the Orient." Furthermore, Orientalized juxtapositions, a feature of Hegelian art historical theory popular at the time, formulated how museums organized their exhibition spaces. By following the museum's gallery program, visitors enacted the evolution of civilization from Orient to Occident and envisioned the differences between Western and Eastern arts as high and low respectively (2).

Discussing the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ward (2021) notes that the 1890s and 1900s saw both museums solidify the "East-West binary as a part of their administrational structure and exhibition layout. Furthermore, museum engagements with East Asia led to the development of another Orientalized binary: East Asian crafts versus Western paintings" (1). Ranciere's (2004; 2010) perspectives on the relationship between aesthetics and politics are relevant here. He proposed that the dominant social order determines the hierarchy of voices, often creating divisions and shaping which voices and perspectives might be encountered, but for Ranciere, art is a medium capable of disrupting and reconfiguring hierarchies. Such a notion is, however, challenged when considering that not all art is positioned and engaged with on equal terms. In the US, strategies of organisation and presentation within major institutions, as exemplified by Ward (2021), not only constrain encounters with Middle Eastern art but also establish hierarchies and value systems around it. There is, for example, a tendency to categorise Middle Eastern art as Asian craft, which is often perceived as less intellectually rigorous as opposed to Western 'high' art. As discussed, Middle Eastern art is visible in American institutions but its positioning can be problematic; it is often systematically codified in a manner that renders it subordinate.

Studies have suggested that exhibitions of Middle Eastern art have often consciously or unconsciously reinforced Western-centric understandings. The positioning of the US as a 'saviour' is, according to Farhat (2009), a regular strategy employed by curators, critics, and scholars in America who "leap" at the chance to contrast the "open," "liberating," and "progressive" West against the "closed" and "repressive" Middle East (1226). Discussing the exhibition of Arab artists in the US, Farhat (2009), reflects upon the 'classic' American approach towards the region:

> Popular exhibition topics include the status of women in Arab societies. There is a prevailing notion that when female artists are given the opportunity to exhibit in the United States and Europe, they are instantly freed of 'inherent' social, psychological, and religious "veils." In fact, Western academia seems to be so obsessed with the concept of 'veiling' with regard to the Middle East that references to it abound in everything from exhibition titles to scholarly writings on Arab art and culture. Violent political conflicts in the Arab world, preferably when they involve civil strife, also seem to be a fixation in the West. In the case of Lebanon, for example, the majority of artists who have shown their work in the United States often explore the contested history and collective trauma of the nation's internal strife (1975-90) (1226).

The author observes that while curators may approach their work with "good intentions," they often appear "incapable of escaping a polarizing post-9/11 environment" (Farhat, 2009: 1229). This suggests that a confluence of factors, including the lingering structural influences of Orientalism in the exhibition framework and the prevailing post-9/11 discourse surrounding the Middle East, together perpetuate reductive framings of Middle Eastern artists within the market. This is reflected in my interview with Venetia Porter, formerly Senior Curator for Islamic and Contemporary Middle East art at the British Museum, who problematises the presentation of Middle Eastern art without context and the lack of 'voice' that regional artists have in the contemporary exhibition space:

> *It's important to be able to read the works, if there is Iranian subtext, then it's really important to know that … if it's in a kind of contemporary context*

> *and people don't really understand what that's about, it might just be a line in a caption, but there's no depth to it. So I think the important thing with all of these artists is that everyone needs to understand what they're about. And the best way to do that is to interview them and to hear the voice of the artist telling you what that work is and why they're doing it* (Interview, 28th July 2022, Zoom).

Western institutional dominance does not, however, go unchallenged. Robertson (2015) discusses a power struggle involving the BRICS nations which experience frustration with US rules governing the internet, bilateral trade agreements, and the reserve status of the dollar. Such nations have begun to push back against the West, which relies on its "moral authority"—the perceived robustness and incorruptibility of its institutions (Robertson, 2015: 17):

> The institutional power of Europe and America is the final instrument on which the West's authority appears to lie, as transitional economies grow ever richer and compete technologically with the developed world (ibid.).

Iran and the US: American Orientalism, Media and Politics

When considering Orientalism we tend to reflect on a 19th-century body of knowledge produced under the forces of British and French imperialism pertaining to the Middle East and India (Ngai, 2000). These days the term Orientalism is regularly applied to almost any "negative Western stereotypes about all Asians, across time and across a capacious area that stretches from Turkey to Hawaii" (Ngai, 2000: 408). According to Ngai (2000) this slippage can be attributed to the "enduring power of Said's analysis", but critics have called for a more historically and geographically accurate vocabulary (ibid.). Said suggested that American Orientalism did not emerge until the immediate post-World War II period, when American social science "reworked European Orientalism into area studies, just as the United States displaced Britain and France as the dominant Western power in the Middle East" (ibid.). Reflecting specifically on China-US dynamics, Tchen identified three overlapping (but approximately successive) cultural formations:

> In early America, “patrician Orientalism” conferred social status upon those who possessed Chinese things and ideas. A “commercial Orientalism” emerged from the early-nineteenth-century “populist marketplace economics” of the urban penny press, theater, and display. Finally, by the 1870s, “political Orientalism” “recast desire-imbued and ambiguous representations into an exclusionary and segregationist discourse.” Each formation, Tchen argues, “began with some admiration or fascination for an actual Chinese thing, idea, or person, then went through a phase of emulation and mimesis, and ended with European American mastery and dominance” (Tchen, 1999: Xx cited in Ngai, 2000: 410).

These reflections relate to China-US relations specifically but suggest the specificity of American Orientalism and its mechanics. In the case of Iran, the 18th and 19th centuries saw American missionaries, pilgrims, merchants and tourists travel to the Middle East (Rosenblatt, 2009); they often bypassed Iran, taking routes through Egypt, the Levant, and what is, today, Turkey (Shannon, 2021). Few Americans, then, had direct experiences of Iran before the twentieth century, subsequently, Persia was intertwined with the broader “American Orientalist imagination about the supposedly exotic and inferior East” (43). This imagination, however, differed from British and European Orientalism connected to the countries’ colonial projects (Nash, 2019). The US maintained a distinct relationship with Iran; following the establishment of diplomatic contact between the countries in the 1850s, the US government kept a friendly but distant relationship with Iran throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Iran remained an ally of the US during the 1950s and 1960s, a relationship that became “much more robust” by the early 1970s (de Groot, 2020: para 7):

> It happened to coincide at a time during which the Shah’s rule became increasingly dictatorial, as well as a time when vast sums of money were flowing into Iranian coffers following the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which Iran did not fully observe and benefitted from enormously financially. You had an economy that was overheating, an increasingly corrupt elite, an increasingly dictatorial ruler, and an increasingly close relationship of

> those elites with the United States, and that was not a good combination. It resulted in an enormous backlash in 1979 (de Groot, 2020: para 8).

Media and political discourse on Iran have shifted according to the relationship between the two countries as Dorman and Farhang (1988) suggest in their analysis of daily American press coverage of Iran (1951–1978). As they note, before the 1979 Revolution media framing was positive, shaped by the association of the US with the Shah: " ... the press tended to serve Washington's shortsighted policy goals" (3) in doing so they framed political opposition to the regime as "nothing more than benighted reactionaries" (ibid.). This was, however, complicated by an international anti-Shah movement led by the left and intelligentsia, notably Foucault. Dominant framings took on a negative hue following the 1979 Revolution, the US hostage crisis and 9/11. Miller and Bunn (2013) outline the shift in post-revolution media portrayals of Iran:

> From the earliest days of the Iranian revolution, the U.S. media has served up a steady diet of frightening images: burning American flags, crowds chanting "Death to America!", the glowering eyes and anti-American rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini, missile launches, and more (20).

Dominant American perspectives on Iran have been informed by legacies of American Orientalism, the visual hierarchies structurally entrenched in US cultural institutions, historical events, political dynamics, and media representations. An awareness of these perspectives contextualises how Iranian art and artists are framed and received in the US and, subsequently, the related international art market, a topic now examined in further detail.

Framing and Naming Contemporary Iranian Art

As already addressed, there has been a significant uptick in attention towards Middle Eastern art during the post-9/11 era and a burgeoning market interest in Iranian art specifically. This enthusiasm is evident across various stakeholders including galleries, institutions, individual collectors and auction houses. It is, however, important to recognise that this interest is not solely organic; rather, it is

socially constructed and globally disseminated through the influential mechanisms of the art industry.

Considering the strategies employed by auction houses in marketing Iranian art, categorisations often inadvertently perpetuate Orientalist narratives. By assigning labels and categories, there is a risk of distorting the intended meanings that artists seek to convey, along with the complexities of their experiences. This is captured by Sagharchi (2022) who discusses the way that Sotheby's auction house (UK) approached the categorisation of contemporary Iranian art in line with the organisation's priorities which he suggests are primarily "commercial" and grounded in a "specific vision" of taste. There was a debate, within Sotheby's, about whether contemporary Iranian art should be viewed as part of a historical continuum within the framework of Islamic art or as an expansion from traditional art centres into new realms of contemporary art as he discusses,

> The idea was to bring all the modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art into the Western art sales and that, for good or for bad, meant that they approached it with a specific mindset regarding taste. Contemporary art going for sale in an auction house has to be focused on things that first of all they consider to be commercial and second of all a specific vision of how they want to cast the art from that region, so they were focusing mainly on mid-career artists, artists whose work was palatable to Western collectors, artists who have worked with Western galleries before and whose medium and mode of execution was something that the Western collectors could figure out and understand. The Islamic art department had a completely different view, their view was that we should be filling in the story chronologically after the 19th century. What happened to calligraphy? What happened to manuscript art? What happened to metal work? It was about taking these crafts of the Middle East and saying—what next? Whereas the contemporary art department was saying—where else? Other than America and Europe, where else? So it was this 'where else' vs. 'what next' fight that I was involved in (Sagharchi, 2022).

In a similar manner, Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021) notes that in auctioning art in 2006 at Christie's in Dubai, auctioneers had a sense that they could set their own framework which would arguably be guided by the organisation's goal of generating sales. Subsequently, artists from a range of countries and contexts were auctioned together, united only by a broad geographical territory:

> The rather expansive title of Christie's first-ever auction of Middle Eastern art, International Modern and Contemporary Art, Including Arab, Iranian, Indian and Western Art, allowed the auctioneers to include artworks from vast geography, stretching from North Africa to India, to Europe and America. This meant 'we could pretty much do what we wanted' [Interview, 10 June 2016] (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2021: 4).

This approach is constraining as selection processes guided by Western tastes define which artists become visible; it also places them into tenuous groupings that gloss over their specificity. This reinforces existing visual hierarchies and Western dominance. The practice of subsuming diasporic artists into already fluid categories further expands and confuses the parameters. In her study[43] on the emergence of the Iranian art auction category at Christie's Dubai, Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021) notes that all Christie's' catalogues published from 2006 to 2016 mentioned the nationality of the artist yet, she suggests that those with Iranian origins existing outside the homeland were "consistently" labelled as Iranian regardless of any other national affiliations they might have (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2021: 7). This suggests that artists in the diaspora, those who are dual national or hybrid—Iranian-American, for example—are marketable and continue to be understood through the lens of nationality, regardless of their affiliation with Iran, the duration of time spent there, or whether they are conceptually engaged with the country or not; they are also actively contributing to the contemporary Middle Eastern art market. This is relevant given that some of the participants in this study have never been to Iran and have existed solely within the American context with varying degrees of attachment to Iranian culture. Indeed, in terms of market performance, several art historians have demonstrated the "'strength' of Iranian diaspora artists, many

[43] Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021) analysed Christie's auction catalogues (2006–2016). Her ethnographic data was drawn from live auctions and interviews with staff members.

of whom make work related to Iran, but who no longer reside there and hold passports of other countries" (Grigor 2014; Daftari 2019 in Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2021: 7). This points to a degree of capitalisation by the art market on loose geographic ties and cultural identities.

The fluidity of auction house frameworks raises questions about who qualifies as a contemporary Iranian artist, presenting a significant challenge for scholarly research into their experiences. This challenge is exacerbated by practices prevalent during the market surge of 2006–2008, discussed previously, which saw Iranian artists diverging from traditional market engagement (see Table 2). This behaviour hindered critical reflection on their work and led to barriers in accessing knowledge and documentation on contemporary Iranian artists and their output.

Although auction houses exhibit flexibility in their categorisations, discrepancies remain across the market. Platforms like *ArtNet* and *ArtTactic* define regional art as work by artists born in a specific location, while auction houses and galleries may include artists from the diaspora or those with hybrid identities, such as Iranian-Americans[44] born outside the specified region. This lack of cohesion suggests an inadequacy of these terminologies in capturing contemporary human experiences and affiliations that are far more complex.

Navigating Market Demands

Iranian artwork not only circulates within the market but also responds to it. As addressed by Sagharchi (2022), the contemporary art department at Sotheby's sought Iranian artists whose approach and content could be easily understood by Western collectors and who had previously been exhibited in Western galleries. This suggests that auctions are catering to Western viewers, whose expectations standardise and filter the kind of Iranian artwork encountered through international auction house frameworks.

Artists, including the participants in this study, are aware of Western-centric market demands. They stay informed about what sells and for how much through offline and online channels, including real-time auction sales results, announcements of institutional acquisitions, and media profiles of prominent

[44] Some would even question this labelling of identity; theoretically if they are citizens of a specific state would they not just be 'American'?

artists. Artists might not necessarily wish to align themselves with market demands but their awareness of them may influence their decisions. Contemporary artists from the MENA region straddle complex terrain; they might feel the need to negate subject matter that reinforces stereotypes about them relating to, for example, gender, oppression and conflict. Another issue that Gumpert (2020) raises is that artists referencing geographic or culturally specific traditions may be accused of capitalising on their exoticism and self-Orientalising (see Grigor, 2018). These concerns are further exacerbated by broader trends in international contemporary art—art that reflects and connects with identities and the global condition, therefore appealing to international, hybrid and transnational audiences (Keshmirshekan, 2015). Indeed, Charlesworth (2014) contends that cultural differences are transposed into internationally recognisable products that self-consciously preserve "identifiable characteristics of cultural difference, for both global and local audiences" so that they might be at once legible and commercially exchangeable (para 15). While Joselit (2013) suggests that successful contemporary global artwork is an "emissary, whose power arises out of cultural translation rather than avant-garde innovation, a form of international currency that can cross borders effortlessly" (Joselit, 2013: 21 cited in Brown, 2022: 15-16). These reflections align with Sagharchi's (2022) suggestion that in order to successfully circulate within the international market an Iranian art must be effortlessly read by the Western viewer. The problem is, then, that artists often face the dilemma of having to simplify or package their cultural specificities to be understood by those unfamiliar with their context, while still retaining local 'authenticity', in a way that aligns with market trends for identity-driven art. Speaking from the Iranian context, artist and researcher Afshar (2019) discusses an awareness that art is a site of cultural translation whereby a non-Western artist produces output that is "destined to be read by a Western audience" (68). To be read they must refine their language to one that is global but speaking of the local (ibid.). This global language is, however, one that continues to be guided by the West, in the sense that Iranian and other artists are faced with the dilemma of having to choose between the type of art that is 'derivative' of the European/Western model or foregrounding their Otherness (Keshmirshekan, 2010: 499 cited in Afshar, 2019: 68). The Iranian artist might, then, find themselves in a situation where the language that they are speaking is not their own but rather an "imperial one" (Afshar, 2019: 68).

This discussion of art market demands raises several questions: How do these conditions constrain artists? How do artists respond to them? During the first phase of fieldwork, participants discussed contradictory pressures, on the one hand, to produce art that is universally accessible but, on the other, infused with national identity to successfully circulate within the international art market. In our interview, one participant, Mobina Nouri, highlighted that there is a set of predefined topics that she felt were deemed 'acceptable' by the art market. This awareness of acceptability was felt at multiple levels from artist residencies to exhibitions. Mobina also suggested that her gender and nationality presented further limitations as to what she could engage with in the American art market:

> *If you do something about the environment it's good because it's a hot topic, immigrants and immigration is a hot topic … I love it when it's genuine, but sometimes they* [artists] *create to be part of that topic … We're just stuck in the hole and the topics that this society just forced us to do, because that's the market. As an Iranian immigrant female, this is what* [art] *is 'acceptable'… Sometimes the art is not political or related to society or anything, it's just art for art's sake … but they* [the market] *reject it … I just don't like the hierarchy of different types of art that have different types of values … you follow those trends, which is not original, it's just because it is fashion. A gallery* ['s motivation] *is based on sales but the museums work on those* [aforementioned] *topics. After BLM* [Black Lives Matter Movement] *there was a huge discussion re. Black and African-American art and then there was a huge opening for this type of art, and awareness around that which was a great idea and brought more African-American artists to the scene. Then later the quality went down and it only mattered if you were African-American. These things shape what artists want to do, also with residencies, they focus on those specific topics* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Who or what, then, constitutes an internationally accessible artist? In discussing the factors that he considers contribute to the international success of an artist, Vali suggests that translatability across cultures and contexts is key:

> *If an artist is able to transcend prevailing tastes and the structures of the market—and by 'market' I refer not only to economic factors such as sales and collectors, but also to broader forms of cultural positioning and relevance—then their work may attain a kind of translatability across contexts. In other words, when an artist moves beyond the immediate frameworks that define their reception, they may more successfully open up the possibility for their practice to resonate across different cultural, geographic, or discursive boundaries* (Interview, 18th August 2022, Zoom).

Another participant, former Sotheby's Deputy Chairman of the Middle East, Roxanne Zand suggests that Tala Madani, one of the participants in this study, is an example of an Iranian artist in diaspora who is global in her approach and market positioning, therefore surpassing regional categorisation. In our interview, Roxanne suggested that in the selection of her subject matter, rather than attempting a process of cultural translation, Tala avoids tropes associated with an Iranian national identity entirely in favour of the immediate concerns relating to her diasporic existence:

> *Tala, she is situated within an environment where she's constantly exposed to the issues of the day within the thematics, she's reflecting the stimulus around her … Artists in Iran are dealing with different things … In the West artists deal with different things* [in comparison to artists inside Iran]*-gender, race. The Venice Biennale* [in 2022] *was all about race and gender, particularly gender; diaspora artists are likely to be influenced by these themes and naturally respond to Western preoccupations* (Interview, 26th April 2022, telephone).

Tala's subject matter which reflects "Western preoccupations" is, therefore, readable and acceptable to the Western viewer. Readability also seems fundamental to the success of Iranian diasporic artist Mehdi Ghadyanloo, who informant Dina offers as an example of an Iranian artist who has achieved international success, transcending regional stereotypes and market categorisations:

> *… Mehdi Ghadyanloo, who just had an exhibition with Gagosian actually, grew up in Karaj, which is a province in Iran, and ended up doing these*

> *really wonderfully childlike, very realistic paintings and landed a show at Gagosian, New York … and is collected by all the mega collectors in the world … He actually breaks the stereotype and he's equally very talented … Today there is this very Orientalist look on the artists that come from Iran and therefore there is always this expectation of it being dark* (Interview, 10th July 2022).

Both artists, Tala and Mehdi, avoided tropes relating to an Iranian cultural identity, their art is universal in character and can arguably be subsumed into 'Western art' discourses. The description of Mehdi's art on his gallery, Gagosian's, website is devoid of references to a place of origin. The Western viewer is not required to enter into a process of cultural translation nor require insider's knowledge of a historical or cultural context to appreciate such work:

> Ghadyanloo's works envision a fictive architecture of playground slides, tubes, and ladders situated in shallow, walled spaces and lit from above by ocular skylights. Meticulously painted in acrylic and oil, their rounded forms are defined by dramatic chiaroscuro that represents the reflectivity, translucency, and opacity of polished steel, plastic, and other materials. The enigmatic paintings convey Ghadyanloo's fascination with perspectival construction and illumination and prompt metaphysical interpretations (Gagosian, 2022).

The pressures artists face throughout their careers can vary for each individual, depending on their context and artistic approach. As discussed, they may experience pressure to create work that is universally comprehensible. For non-Western and diasporic artists this can result in a process of cultural translation and an adaptation of their artistic vocabulary to resonate with Western eyes. But what is universal? It appears to be a visual language grounded in Western norms and values, posing a challenge for artists that attempt to maintain authenticity and achieve market recognition.

Problematising Market Positionings

The participants in this research, in fact, problematised regional categorisations and positionings by suggesting that the exhibition of artists based on geographic ties is a limiting lens for understanding and engagement. Curator and art

historian, Vali suggests that regional groupings, through their broadness, limit exposure to subjective ideas as 'where the artist is from' will always underlie a reading of the artwork:

> *I find regional categories in art history to be ultimately limiting. While they may serve a functional purpose as survey frameworks—providing initial exposure to artists and practices—they often fall short in articulating deeper conceptual, experiential, or epistemological insights. In my view, these categories operate as preliminary classifications rather than as structures that foster critical understanding. For instance, the label 'Iranian artists' does not, for me, suggest any inherent aesthetic coherence, meaningful relationality, or productive tension. As such, whether one is curating, historicising, or practicing within such a category, it tends to function as a broad, benign umbrella—capable of encompassing a vast range of work without necessarily clarifying the relationships between disparate practices, positions, or expressions.*
>
> *As a survey that illustrates the broad spectrum of artistic interests and expressions, the use of regional categories is not without merit. It is undeniable that geography plays a formative role in shaping cultural production. One might describe this poetically: mountains, rivers, and deserts delineate boundaries—separating societies, histories, languages, and modes of life. These natural and historical separations contribute to the formation of distinct cultural and communal frameworks, within which artists often share certain affinities or commonalities. However, in the contemporary context, there is a pronounced emphasis on individual expression rather than collective identity. This shift compels us to reconsider how we frame and interpret artistic practices, suggesting the need for alternative modes of analysis that prioritise personal experience, conceptual autonomy, and transregional dialogue over predefined cultural or geographic categories* (Interview, 18th August 2022, Zoom).

This implies that when exhibitions are curated based on collective definitions, tied to an artist's country of origin, they often emphasise superficial characteristics rather than uncovering the artist's conceptual concerns or technical ability. Such groupings, aimed at surveying a particular cultural context,

can, however, provide some valuable insights. Illustrating the broad and tenuous nature of the category 'contemporary Iranian art' Babaie (2011) suggests that a meaningful interrogation of "individual biographies and art histories" has been forfeited in "favour of collapsing the artists' varied cultural and geographic experiences into a superficially unified category of the contemporary Middle East" (136). Informant Venetia questioned categories based on ethnicity, such as Arab art, and faith, such as contemporary Islamic art, that might appear under the Middle Eastern art umbrella and bear little semblance to the artists that might be subsumed under such terms. In her approach, as a previous curator at the British Museum, Venetia focused on the artist's country of origin and the rubric of the Middle East/East but she acknowledged that a more expansive, international grouping for these artists would be ideal; this suggests an awareness of the limitations of current terminology and groupings. In our interview, Venetia said:

> *I'd like to think that in 10-20 years they won't get centralised as Iranian or Middle Eastern generally. Iranian, I think, is probably fine, but Arab is a kind of nonsense … I tend to go by where an artist comes from. So whether they're an Iraqi or a Palestinian or something like that, under the rubric, under the umbrella of Middle East and East, I don't use the term contemporary Islamic, which makes me allergic really. But I think in the future, certainly in the British Museum, in an ideal world, all these artists should be together, they are international artists* (Interview, 28th July 2022, Zoom).

Frustrations were expressed by the artist participants in this research who may find themselves exhibited in art fairs, group exhibitions, and auctions under categories that do not feel representative to them, for example, contemporary 'Middle Eastern art', 'Arab' or 'Iranian art' and so on. Categories come with expectations associated with geographies, religion or ethnicity that then underlie any reading of an artist's output. Some of the participants in this study identified as Jewish, Bahá'í or secular while only one identified as Muslim, suggesting the fragility of the Islamic art category as a defining force. American-born participant Kimia Ferdowsi Kline suggests that the content of her art focuses on lived experiences that are less attached to nationality and more focused upon other intersections of her identity such as her gender and personal relationships yet

she expressed a sense that artists are “lumped together” based on nationality, as she discusses:

> *People are just lumped together* [in terms of exhibition] *and really the work that I’m making, I think has so much more to do with my experience as a woman and my experience within a family system* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

Participant Nebras Hoveizavi expresses confusion over her place within the Iranian regional category as an Arab-Iranian whose social and cultural experiences might differ from those broadly considered to be “Iranian”:

> *Sometimes I find myself with the same category of Iranian artist. Yes, I speak Farsi, I’m raised in Iran, I have a really strong relationship to it. But as an Arab-Iranian … I want to think about my geography as my memories and memories don’t have those borders, and they just link together as one piece. And for me, often putting all the Iranian artists together limits me … I’m gathering stories like everyday life here in Qatar* (Interview, 9th December 2021, Zoom).

For Nebras, her ethnic background as an Arab-Iranian and her lived experiences took precedence over her national identity and contributed to a sense that she didn't necessarily fit into the parameters that she understood the category ‘contemporary Iranian art’ to have. This category has associations with a range of histories, narratives, and visions rooted in the Persian experience that Arab-Iranians such as Nebras may feel are distant from their own cultural experiences. Despite her affiliations, her art circulates under the umbrella of Iranian art, subsequently limiting the field of engagement with it.

Regional categorisations also have financial implications for artists. Dina points out that an artist’s classification as regional versus international can lead to them being undervalued within the market:

> *… When there is an exceptional* [Iranian] *artist I find it amazing when people tell me they find it* [the artwork] *very expensive when actually you have really crappy Western artists who sell for the same amount of money or millennials who sell for that amount of money without having proven*

> *anything in their career. Right? So that's where I would see the discrepancy …* (Interview 10th July 2022, telephone).

Benefits and Endurance of Regional Groupings

Regional categorisations also have benefits for the artists subsumed under them. Participants in this study and external sources have discussed the benefits of the existing regional art market categories including financial rewards, profile-building, emotional attachments, and opportunities for exposure. Sreberny-Mohammadi (2021) suggests that such market categories are "good business sense" for the auction houses who engage collectors keen to acquire works based on region while affording prominent collectors of regional art with symbolic capital:

> High-profile Iranian collectors such as Mohammad Afkhami have articulated their positions as that of "cultural ambassadors" (2017) collecting and promoting Iran through art. In that way, it makes good business sense for the auction houses to continue to promote national links, despite a desire for buyers' interests to diversify (13).

In her book *Reflections: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa* (2020) Venetia claims that geography is just one way that artworks might be grouped, but it is "a convenient one, and obviates the need for labels that can sit uncomfortably with the work – one such being the term 'contemporary Islamic'" (Porter, Tripp and Morris, 2020: 16).

Artists might also benefit from this situation. In our interview, Venetia suggested that some artists may be financially better off when included in regional rather than international art market categories but they are stuck between financial gain and opportunities for international exposure, as she recounted:

> [ideally] *work doesn't appear in a Sotheby's sale of Middle Eastern art, that it actually appears in an international sale. But as Farhad Moshiri once said to me, he makes more money out of something being in an Iranian art sale than if it's an international sale. So they're caught between*

> *the two. In an international sale, nobody would know who Farhad Moshiri was whereas in a Middle Eastern art sale, they would.*
>
> *The trick is for artists, if they can be in galleries which are representing artists from everywhere, that's the only way in which all of that is going to break down* [regional groupings] *… people still try to pigeonhole them and put them into these kinds of contexts* (Interview, Zoom, 28th July 2022).

Support for emerging artists in the form of grants, funding and residencies might also be allocated to artists based on particular aspects of their identities i.e. nationality, religion, ethnicity or gender. Artists identifying as Iranian, then, might be eligible for benefits that support them in the early stages of their careers based on their nationality. One of the many examples was a "career-defining" residency in London offered to emerging to mid-career artists who were Iranian and aged 25 or over by the Delfina Foundation, Magic of Persia and the V&A Museum. Such an opportunity is undoubtedly appealing to aspiring artists who wish to expose themselves to new communities and build their profile and would, therefore, result in them positioning themselves as Iranian for eligibility.

Informant Parisa Ghaderi suggested that affiliation with regional categories might change over time and according to circumstance and context. The category 'Iranian artist' was useful to her early in her career as a point of definition and identification but over time she felt that she transcended this status and hoped to be considered an artist in her own right, dealing with subjective concerns rather than a representative of a certain place or culture. In our interview, she expressed concern, shared by other participants, over capitalising upon her national identity using the metaphor of strategic game playing to capture this sentiment:

> *In the beginning, because maybe it was a cultural thing or I was just trying to express and define myself as I'm from Iran and I'm an Iranian. I think that, for some reason, we all need that association because that's how we define ourselves and as part of our identity. But later on, I just wanted to be known as an artist. Even if I'm from Iran or the US or China, it doesn't matter to me, even if I'm male or female. I think those are just limiting*

> *categories. I think it suits when everything is supported, you know? In the beginning, I always had this dilemma of when and how someone should play their exotic card. You know that I'm from Iran and you have these associations and how can I contribute to that? ... If I should play with that exotic* [identification] *or just liberate myself from all of those associations and talk about the very personal concerns* (Interview, 13th September 2021, Zoom).

Despite the problematisation of geographic-based categories, they have endured. Participant Vali suggests that "the origins of funding" guides the market as well as an emotional attachment to "collective stories" which motivates certain groups to acquire art that connects them to a familiar identity. This cycle might then continue to reinforce the Iranian art market category as Vali discussed:

> *I think patronage, collecting practices, sponsorship, the origins of funding, market demand, and the circulation of material objects all contribute in various ways to the regionalisation of collective approaches in exhibitions, art fairs, and related platforms. These economic and institutional forces inevitably shape how art is presented and consumed. For instance, it's telling that in the UK, non-Anglo-American artists tend to attract significantly smaller audiences—some figures suggest by as much as 60 percent. Similarly, in the auction world, Russian art sales are often oriented strongly toward Russian buyers. This reflects a broader reality: we remain deeply attached to our collective narratives, and these attachments aren't easily undone. But in my own practice, that's not where my interests lie. I'm more concerned with uncovering historical blind spots, challenging dominant frameworks, and, in a sense, disrupting the status quo. From that perspective, regional categories aren't especially productive or generative—they're simply not the framework I find useful to work within* (Interview, 18th August 2022, Zoom).

Participant Dina notes that the collector-base of Iranian art largely comprises Iranians in the homeland and those in diaspora. She suggested that they build their collections, in some cases, with the specific intention of tracing the Iranian historical canon and, as such, preserving significant moments in Iranian cultural

history through the acquisition of art. Such an ambition affords the individual with high status and symbolic capital. In resonance with Vali's observations, Dina suggests that individuals in the diaspora, much like herself, view Iranian art as a conduit to their cultural heritage, compressing the geographical and temporal gap between themselves and their ancestral roots. This symbolic engagement with Iranian culture provides a sense of closeness to the homeland, allowing individuals to construct and uphold their chosen versions of Iranian identity through their patronage of art:

> *The main collectors used to be people from the diaspora who started reconnecting with the country in the same way that I did, through specialising, at one point in my career, in artists who had a connection to Iran. But over time there has been a true generation of collectors that developed, not just in diaspora, but in the country. And the main collectors are Mohamed Afkhami, a very established collector who has been collecting for over 15 years, Dr. Farjam who has an impressive collection of contemporary artists and was one of the pioneers behind the Iranian art movement. Those are the key ones outside Iran. And those who collect inside, there's both young and older people that collect contemporary. They are the key forces behind what's happening in the market, other individuals are between Canada, Switzerland and London and Iran as well as those in diaspora. Their approach is one that traces the evolution of the Iranian art historical canon and spans from modern to contemporary* (Interview, 26th April 2022, telephone).

These reflections prompt the question: does the prevalent collector base, largely composed of Iranians and Iranian diaspora, render regional categorisation a restrictive element, limiting visibility within a demographic already well-acquainted with it? Alternatively, could such categorisations prove advantageous by cultivating unity among artists and collectors? The answer probably lies somewhere between the two perspectives.

EDUCATION AND ART

The Allure of the MFA (Master of Fine Arts)

Participants in this study expressed mixed sentiments about their MFA education

in the US. The interview material does, however, suggest that education plays a significant role in moulding an artist's approach, perspectives, and interaction with both the American and international art markets. Table 2 suggested that art school is a key contributor to an artist's career; it also pointed to the relationship between education, media and economic value in the art market. Miller (2022) expands upon the close relationship between the (literary) MFA programme and neoliberalism in the US. The author notes:

> The emphasis of the individual over the social, the subject over the object, and personal experience over all else resolved in a type of literary aesthetics, while at first being distinctly American, that would eventually be recast under the neoliberal formulations of human capital and sovereign consumerism that fueled the expansion of programs as emerging writers were increasingly encouraged to think of themselves as centers of profit and the MFA as an investment (1).

On the idea of an MFA as an 'investment,' a 2016 article by *ArtNet* suggested that in the 2000s the MFA was a "Golden Ticket" in an increasingly youth-oriented art market, emboldened by rumours of dealers "snapping up" newly graduating artists (Davis, 2016). A study by Elbaor and Davis (2016) for the same publication analysed a list of the 500 most successful American artists at auction from ArtNet's price database over a 50-year time span (artists born in 1966 or later–2016) to identify how educational choices correlated with measure of early-career success (ibid.). In the top 500, 53% achieved an MFA, 35% had no MFA and 12% were self-taught. Such statistics and press coverage are good PR for US institutions that are, largely operating like businesses and profiting from the number of students that engage with their programmes. This, in turn, creates an urgency for tutors to cultivate the type of art students that are 'market ready' and will establish a 'career' as an artist, rather than producing art for art's sake. During an interview in 2007 the art dealer and gallerist known as 'Hudson' problematised the attitudes of art school graduates who perceive their practices in career terms:

> These years, it's probably better to develop out of art school. It's quite odd now that art school graduates expect immediate affiliation with a gallery, believing they are already artists of some development. Generally, it requires five or so post-graduation years to disengage from the

> teacher/school influences and create one's own effort. At this point, I've stopped attending graduate and undergraduate art school exhibitions as a way to remain in touch with younger artists and art. I'm looking outside the box (Blair, 2007: para 3).

Despite the high financial costs associated with such programmes the allure of the MFA programme, particularly in the US, to artists that aim to obtain market success is understandable. Indeed, several of the artists included in this study suggested that they left Iran to enrol on MFA programmes in the US.[45] Each experience of education is personal and affected by a range of factors such as the period of study, the context and the location of study, the ethos of the specific institution and its faculty members as well as the cohort, among the many variables that contribute to specific experiences. There are, however, certain shared perspectives that arose from my discussions with the research participants.

Participants expressed an awareness of how the US educational system is influential in establishing artistic careers as well as concern over formulaic approaches to art production. Drawing upon her interactions with other Iranian women artists in the US, Mobina (who had already obtained a PhD in the UK before migrating to the US) suggested that the MFA system in the US is considered to be influential in establishing art market connections but she decided to opt out of it. She suggested that without even participating in the US academy, she became aware of its standards of 'acceptable' art. Mobina also raised concern over the associated cost of the American MFA programmes, paired with a desire to retain authenticity in her output:

> *They* [in America] *are very diverse. But … I feel different and I think differently. It changed what I'm doing, what I focus on, because of the academy system of here.*
>
> *The category: 'academic American acceptable art', if you go to that category you can jump up … to me is like everything is the system. You should be in that system so that you can go to a museum* [exhibit in a museum]. *I did some sort of consultancy with some professors from art*

[45] An MFA qualification might offer opportunities; a study visa might also have been an accessible option that supports migration to the US.

> *school … They said: 'The level of your art, it's very high but the reason you have to study here, even though you have a PhD, is because everything here is connections. And then when you do it, the MFA, it's a very big chance for you because it connects you with that kind of area, of the system'. They call it a 'system'. I never accepted it. I think I did enough study.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Plus, it's very expensive to do it* [an MFA] *in America … I see so many people repeating that system. You know, the artists in this city* [San Francisco]*, for example, one university, they all do the same thing that the professor was doing … there's no creativity in that to me* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Commodification of Marginal Identities

In the US, MFA programmes reinforce the commodification of identity-driven cultural production among marginals under the neoliberal economy which establishes limitations on their spectrum of expression (Miller, 2022). Discussing writers of marginalised identities, Miller (2022) suggests that they are externally defined and constrained by criteria proposed "primarily by white, straight, males" (66). Furthermore, despite the perceived equality of the MFA programme, the literary aesthetics of the marginalised remain dependent or subordinate to what is considered to be the "default" identity (the cis-white-male) (ibid.). Miller (2022) is reflecting upon literature studies specifically, but his observations can translate to visual arts MFA programmes in the US. He observes the way that education systems might have a vested interest in the way that creators, such as the ones included in this study, express their identities through their art in a way that not only upholds the hegemonic order but also packages and commodifies their articulations of the self.

Reflecting upon their experiences participating in their respective MFA programmes in the US, participants in this study expressed discomfort and frustration at educational institutions and their professors for encouraging them to produce art that embodied the characteristics of what they perceived to be Iranian national or gendered identities.

Participant Kimia discussed feeling pressure to create work that felt inauthentic to her and experiencing repercussions for not conforming to her instructors' vision of Iranian cultural identity. This is problematic because it highlights how an artist's vision or worldview that they wish to communicate may be co-opted by the structures encountered during the formative stages of their artistic career.

Educational institutions might prioritise their students' success in the art market or their conceptual engagement with global trends, such as 'identity politics', to remain relevant and maintain their position within the art ecosystem. As Crane (2023) suggests, the expected pathway for an artist involves curators scouting "artists at degree shows, 'incubator' galleries, or art fairs and setting them on the path to a strong secondary market at auction and a permanent place in national collections" (para 2). Achieving recognition through this cycle enables institutions to attract more (fee-paying) students, thus reinforcing their market relevance and financial stability.

This is exacerbated by the notion that faculty members are unlikely to be Iranian themselves and might simply lack the cultural awareness of the Iranian diasporic context necessary to guide a nuanced interpretation of it. Such direction may, however, contribute to the perpetuation of Orientalist visual tropes and depictions of Iranians—like the veiled woman—that continue to be recirculated. This is problematic for those expected to reflect upon an Iranian national experience they have not had as Kimia discussed. For many students keen to excel within the MFA programme the threat of failure could motivate them to produce artwork that caters to the expectations of their instructors rather than producing that which feels representative to them. Kimia discussed her experience of being told what kind of work to produce in order to be 'marketable' and her subsequent feelings of dissonance:

> *I was trying really hard to make work about being Persian, being Iranian. It felt a little inauthentic to me, even though it was what everyone was telling me to do: 'Iran is such a hot topic right now. If you make work and say that you're Iranian, people will buy it'… I was really trying, I was authentically*

> *trying to make this work. And it did sell and people really did like it, but I didn't like making it so much. So I stopped.*
>
> *My professors were* [telling me to make this kind of work] *I got in a lot of trouble, actually, because they were like, 'Kimia, you're not making work about identity politics, what are you doing'? But I was making work about my experience about being a woman. I've always been a figurative painter, so I was painting a lot about the body. I went to an all-girls high school and middle school where the rates of anorexia were really high and I actually had classmates die from it … from the beginning, making work that felt personal to me. At the time I was making work about the female body and the way that the media portrays it and imposes these ideas of Western beauty onto the female body. 'You have to be taller, more light-skinned', all of the things. My paintings were largely about that and none of my teachers were into that. They wanted me to make paintings about Iran. So I got bad grades and they would yell at me.*
>
> *… I really did try to make work about Iran and Persian culture and stuff. But I've never experienced it firsthand, it felt like I was making a poster rather than making a piece of art that felt really authentic and personal to me* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Both Kimia and Mobina described the pressure to be aware of 'hot topics' like identity politics and migration suggesting that while such topics might not necessarily be of concern to them as individuals, producing art that contributes to these movements would boost their market relevance.

The interviews suggested that artists in this study shared concern over 'taking advantage' of their status as an Iranian woman to elevate their career as an artist. Parisa, for example, spoke of being faced with a choice—declaring 'who she was' in terms of national identity in her art and pleasing the faculty or being 'herself'—implying that the two could not co-exist. In our interview, she described confusion and a sense of limitation during her education in the US, which was led by 'white Americans' who may not relate to her cultural experiences:

> *Should I take advantage of being from Iran or break away from that shell and say 'This is who I am'? Most of the mismatch feelings came from critiques in my grad school, all the faculty were white American. The idea*

> *of boxing, defining and labelling, some of the resistance to 'graphic designer'* [which is her professional background] *'You have to be more conceptual and think more conceptually', I was wondering whether to make work to please them or to be myself* (Interview, 13th December 2021, Zoom).

For Parisa, an engagement with global dialogues surrounding gender as an artist felt more meaningful than 'site-specific' ones. In our interview, she problematised the portrayal of Iranian women as 'submissive' and 'oppressed', depictions that reinforce dominant portrayals of the Middle Eastern woman. She suggests that the way diasporic artist Shirin Neshat has been assimilated and absorbed into dominant mores has established limiting market expectations for women artists from Iran, reinforced in American academic institutions. The market success of the revolution generation of artists and the Western-centric interpretations of their work produced after leaving Iran seem to haunt the subsequent generation, limiting their ability to engage with their own subjective concerns as Parisa discussed:

> *When I was putting up work for critique, my professor asked 'Why they are not wearing hijab, they don't look Iranian'. I said 'They shouldn't be, I'm representing women in general, women all over the world'. I don't want to talk about oppression and being submissive and all of these misconceptions about Iranian women, it's not true.*
>
> *Second, it's all over the world, right? We have the #MeToo movement and we have all these other things going on; it's not site-specific. This was the first time it hit me. This is the expectation that I'm from Iran. They want to know if they can associate my work with something that Shirin Neshat did, putting these two opposing concerns together, black and white, you know, showing one side and the other side. A professor from Pakistan said: 'The world is filled with all this news about the Middle East, how they are just savage people and they're uneducated and women are just so oppressed'. He said that as an artist, 'You don't have to add to that. This is your tool to say: No, it's not, and this is my interpretation'. I can be that correcting lens. I don't want to add to that misconception any more if they*

can find this from other sources. Why should my art contribute to that? (Interview, 13th December 2021, Zoom).

Enriching Experiences

Mehregan Pezeshki and Ghazal Rahimi have had a common experience as artists. They both left Iran during adulthood and pursued MFA programmes in California. In contrast to some of the experiences described above, they both expressed positive experiences of American education, specifically the opportunity to engage with feminist theory which, they suggest, was transformational and enriching. For both artists migration to and education in the US offered an opportunity for critical reflection upon their gendered experiences in Iran, suggesting that notions of freedom/restriction are subjective, constantly evaluated, contextual and dialogical. Mehregan suggested that the liberal framework of *CalArts* was an institutional environment where she could push the boundaries of her practice in ways that were not possible in Iran. This highlights a diversity of experiences and encounters with MFA programmes in the US shaped by prior experience and the differences between different institutional and aesthetic cultures. Our interview was conducted in 2021, a time when restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic were still in place and when Mehregan was studying for her MFA. In the interview she discussed opportunities to connect with critical theory and having a safe space for experimentation in positive terms:

> *I just finished my first year* [MFA]. *It was interesting because the way that I was approaching my art was thinking about my issues, the things that I'm concerned about and focusing on how I can visualise these things …* [the COVID-19] *pandemic really helped me … I sat in my house and I started reading philosophy theory ... I'm trying to educate myself about feminism, just generally and reading a lot about nudity and sex, pornography.*

> *Being in the California Institute of Arts* [CalArts]*, it has a great history of liberty and that opens a space for expression. And that really pushed me to that directIon too, because it was the first time I had nudity in my work … it was like a fear, the scariest place to get into. But they* [the faculty] *were really encouraging and they kind of looked at it in a different way in*

all the readings that I have, I started seeing it in a different way too … (Interview, 19th May 2021, Zoom).

Ghazal also discussed an emancipatory experience during her MFA studies. She suggested that the opportunity to engage with feminist theory reframed her ideas about the treatment of women, as well as affirming that she has a 'voice' which she then juxtaposed with her experiences in Iran. This suggests that for those in diaspora, experiences in new social fields support reflection upon and renegotiation of prior experiences; and that experiences and notions of the self are constantly being negotiated, are understood dialogically, and are subject to revision. In our interview, Ghazal said:

> *It definitely took years for me to find myself on so many issues that I had in Iran and I actually didn't know what was wrong and what was right. So, years after, reading theory and researching I realised, 'Oh, that wasn't right'. That whole being treated that way as a woman is not right. Whereas first, when I came to the US, I had no idea that this is not a way that women should be treated. I thought that was OK because that was the only reality I knew and I experienced, even though I came from a family that we travelled a lot or came from a family that are considered more open-minded or more modern there were so many issues. And it wasn't until I came to the US and maybe even in grad school that we were reading a lot of theory. Then I realised, 'Wow, this is not OK'.*
>
> *It was a liminal space in a way that, yes, it definitely took some years for me just to begin to realise and analyse my past life in Iran and what I went through and why I feel the certain way I feel today. I remember going into grad school and that's where you have a seminar class where you read theory and you sit together with your classmates to discuss the work. And when I first was asked: 'OK, what do you think' or 'What is your opinion on this?' I was completely surprised that my opinion even matters … you don't know how you internalise those oppressions yourself, you internalise those issues of censorship yourself … you censor yourself … I felt like I didn't have anything important to write or my opinion didn't matter. Like, 'Who am I to write', you know, or 'Who am I to have an opinion or to*

express myself'.

> *I came to do research to find out why I felt the way that I felt. Why am I experiencing those issues still in the US? And where does that issue come from … you know, gender identity, Orientalism, feminist research, women's studies. That whole body of research that was also related to the work that I was creating … that helped to know myself better … Writing maybe is even more important because that's where you actually sit down with yourself and when you write you suddenly feel very important that you have the right to express yourself, have the right to have an opinion and talk about your personal life* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

For Ghazal, postgraduate studies offered the opportunity for self-expression, providing her with a chance to reflect on gendered issues she had experienced in Iran. It also supplied her with analytical tools, such as academic explorations of gender, feminism and Orientalism, that contributed to her practice. It is important to note, however, that both Mehregan and Ghazal are producing critical artwork that embodies visible elements of national identity and reflections on the subordination of women in Iran. These themes align with dominant Western portrayals of Iran and are familiar to Western audiences, which might account for their support and acceptability within the US art education system. Both artists studied at California art schools—UC Berkeley and CalArts—where the social and political climate tends to be more progressive and open compared to more conservative regions. This context may have contributed to their more positive and liberal experiences within the MFA framework.

CONCLUSION

The discussion so far has situated contemporary Iranian art within the broader art ecosystem and the context of neoliberalism. Artists included in this study operate within this framework, navigating diverse forms of capital within the art ecosystem, all subject to the demands and pressures of the market. It is necessary, then, to situate the participants within this context, as the forces and flows of the market frame and constrain the possibilities of their art.

Following an overview of contemporary art market structures, the focus fell on the Iranian art market, within which the participants in this study may circulate

and respond to. Having contextualised the emergence of the market within broader socio-cultural and political currents inside Iran and internationally, a discussion of historic exchanges between the US and Iran highlighted that such flows influence how Iranian culture is perceived in the US. This American consciousness impacts the reception and portrayal of Iranian artists in the global art market. The chapter established that legacies of Orientalism and dominant Western-centric approaches in the art market limit understanding and engagement with Middle Eastern art, including Iranian art. These conditions perpetuate hierarchical structures within the art world, where Middle Eastern art is often positioned as subordinate to or derivative of Western art, impacting the self-perception and market positioning of Iranian artists. This legacy can also influence artistic decisions as creators, aware of market demands, conform to or rebel against standards and expectations.

The limitations of dominant perspectives, fluid terminology, and constricting categorisations impact the expression, visibility, and reception of artists' work. The tendency to group artists based on regional or ethnic distinctions has been problematised by participants. Such structures oversimplify complex realities, such as those of the participants in this study who, as members of the diaspora in the transnational and digital era, negotiate a range of affiliations and experiences to be discussed in the following chapters. The participants contributing to this chapter spoke from various positions within the art market. They emphasised what is lost by engaging with artists through the lenses of nationality or ethnicity—an understanding of subjective concerns, technical abilities, and dynamic, global experiences.

The exchanges between artists, markets, institutions, and social contexts suggest the evolving nature of artistic practices within a neoliberal framework and the global art ecosystem. The discussion of the influence of American education systems on Iranian artists indicates the neoliberal underpinnings of MFA programs in the US, where the emphasis on preparing artists for the art market may overshadow artistic authenticity and cultural diversity. Pressure to produce marketable art is particularly challenging and felt by artists from ethnically and culturally marginalised backgrounds, as expressed by the participants in this study.

This overview of the ecosystem in which the participants in this study operate, shaped by the pressures of neoliberalism, forms the basis for the discussion in the following chapters, acknowledging that these forces may influence artistic expression beyond the artists' intentions. These chapters combine participants' personal narratives and discursive semiotic analysis of their artwork, offering a comprehensive exploration of the motivations driving contemporary Iranian diasporic artistic production.

CHAPTER THREE
JOURNEY TO DIASPORA

Introduction

The discussion now focuses on contemporary understandings of migration and diaspora. This chapter explores, therefore, how and why the participants arrived in the diaspora, emphasising that lived experience is as significant as *who* they are (their intersectionality) in understanding how they make sense of their respective worlds.

The relationship to Iran among this sample set, it is argued here, differs from that of the generation before them who experienced the 1979 Revolution. Unlike their predecessors who existed at a time of significant outward migration due to the Revolution and its associated issues, this group's motivations include new (but also similar) push-pull factors, including sanctions and, economic instability and lack of opportunities grounded in gender restrictions. Existing during a moment of transnationalism and digitalisation, the post-revolution generation form communities in ways that are similar to and distinct from those that came before them, including in online spaces. Consequently, this chapter examines the interlocking factors contributing to contemporary migration and return migration, acculturation, hybrid Iranian-American negotiations, transnational experiences and interactions between diasporic members in on/offline realms.

Offering a snapshot into the complexities of contemporary human movement, the journeys of the 15 participants[46] included in the sample set vary significantly (see Appendix E, Participant Demographic). Participants include individuals who

[46] Participants are named in full here and referred to by first names hereafter.

migrated from Iran to the US and second-generation diaspora born and raised in the US. Some participants, like Kimia Ferdowsi Kline, Rex Delafkaran, and Sheida Soleimani, were born and raised in the US, with either both or one parent being Iranian. For these individuals, the concept of Iran has largely been an imagined homeland. Others including Aida Izadpanah, Bahar Sabzevari, Ghazal Rahimi, Parisa Ghaderi, Mahsa R. Fard, Maryam Safajoo, Mehregan Pezeshki, Mobina Nouri, Nebras Hoveizavi, and Shilla Shakoori, migrated from Iran to the US later in life and are considered first-generation diaspora, as they represent the first generation in their families to migrate.[47] Tala Madani, another participant, moved to the US with her family during her youth, representing those who migrated at a young age, while Leila Nazarian was born in the US but moved between Iran and the US at regular intervals, experiencing both her Iranian heritage and an American upbringing. As well as outward journeys, return to Iran was a significant theme raised during interviews. The following discussion, then, contributes to evolving literature on return migration within migration studies.

Participants' experiences and movements are influenced not only by individual desires but also by the choices, affiliations, and intersections of identity—particularly class and faith—of those who came before them. For example, second-generation participants include the offspring of political refugees (communists) and religious minorities (Bahá'ís), circumstances that significantly influence participants' relationship to home and hostlands. These varied experiences and circumstances indicate the complexities of migration, return, and diaspora. Indeed, the motivations and conditions that stimulate diasporic movement, even within this sample set of 15, are multifaceted and cannot be neatly captured within straightforward discussions of generational shifts or waves of migration.

The material in this chapter draws from interview data and provides further insight through the semiotic analysis of artworks produced in connection to the themes raised by participants. It commences with an exploration of the motivations for migration to the US before addressing contemporary phenomena

[47] Participants might have joined or been joined by other family members during the same wave of migration to the US suggesting that migration is an ongoing process across generations.

such as transnationalism, digital diasporas, and current experiences of return and exile as reflected in the participants' narratives.

Migration Narratives

As discussed, participants arrived in the US at various stages in their lives for various reasons. Given the focus of the research, it is important to consider factors such as the amount of time they have spent in the US, the type of attachment they have to the country (e.g., born and raised there versus primarily there to study), and the reasons they arrived (e.g., personal choice rather than traumatic expulsion during conflict). These factors influence how participants engage with their various contexts and frame their understandings of 'home' and 'belonging'.

Participants Leila, Rex, Kimia, and Sheida were born and raised in the US and are considered second-generation Iranian diaspora. Sheida's family fled Iran overland due to their communist affiliations and subsequent persecution, with her father leaving in 1985 and her mother following in 1988. Rex has an American mother and an Iranian father who left Iran around 1981, although the specifics of their migration narrative have not been shared with her in detail. Leila was born in the US to Iranian parents and considers herself to reside between the US and Iran. Kimia did not disclose the circumstances of her family's migration, but she did reveal that her family are Bahá'í and had experienced persecution in Iran. All second-generation participants who had never been to Iran expressed a desire to visit the country and engage with their cultural roots on their own terms. This indicates the significance of first-hand experiences in processing and connecting to cultural identity and the continued significance of national identity even among a generation raised in an entirely different context.

The other participants experienced migration themselves. Tala migrated in her youth in 1994 because her mother wanted to pursue a PhD in the US and joined family members already living and working there. Other participants arrived between 2005 and 2019 in adulthood. Mobina lived in the UK, Bahar in France, and Maryam in India before migrating to the US. Some participants described a transnational existence, while others considered themselves exiled from Iran. Notions of exile and the ability to return to Iran were, however, discussed as fluid,

contingent, and ambiguous, adjusting according to shifting socio-political conditions in both countries and their own actions as agents in Iran and the US.

Participants discussed various motivations for their migration to the US, including pursuit of higher education, migration with family members or a romantic partner, desire for US citizenship/US Green Card,[48] and lack of professional opportunities in Iran in relation to gendered limitations there. Seven participants migrated from Iran to the US between 2009 and 2019, a significant period marked by the 12th June 2009 disputed presidential elections and the subsequent Green Movement,[49] a likely push factor for this group. Participants did not specifically cite the shift in power from reformist President Khatami to his successor as a primary motivation for migration, however, the changing social and political conditions in Iran and new restrictions imposed by Ahmadinejad's administration likely contributed to a restrictive environment that spurred their relocation. This aligns with the findings in Chapter One, which acknowledged the ongoing brain drain from Iran.

Here, a consideration of the intersection of social class and the specific experiences of migration it affords is relevant. The interview material suggests that the participants come from a middle-upper socio-economic class, as they indicated having the financial means to embark on further education and set up a new life in the US. They also placed significant value on "being educated". The material also implies that the informants, all women, have the freedom to live and travel alone—opportunities not available to all Iranian women or women in broader Islamic, patriarchal societies. Thus, the intersection of class contributes to a distinct migration experience.

The discussion now moves towards contemporary migration and movement, acculturation, and the construction of diasporic communities both in physical and digital spaces, as narrated by the participants.

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[48] Permanent resident card.

[49] The protests, commonly described as the Green Movement, commenced 12 June 2009, in response to the repressive political climate, continuing until early 2010. Initially, the slogans and sentiments of the protesters focused on contesting a stolen presidential election, with phrases like "Where is my vote?" Over time the focus realigned. Messages were directed towards the supreme leader indicating a shift from calls for reform to advocacy for revolution (Ghasseminejad et al., 2020).

MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION

Education

As discussed, Iranians have a long history of migrating to the US for educational purposes, a motivation shared by the informants in this study. Participants discussed their parents and even grandparents as being highly educated and studying abroad. For example, Tala's mother migrated for a PhD, Leila's mother taught at a university in the US, Sheida's father is a doctor and teacher and Kimia's grandfather was a physician. Several participants suggested that their motivation for migrating to the US from Iran was also for education, but this motivation was complicated by other interlocking push-pull factors, including societal expectations of women in Iran and lack of professional opportunities and 'quality' education there. Educational attainment translates across generations. All of the participants in the study are educated to or working towards at least Master's (MFA) level. Two participants hold a PhD (Mobina and Aida), several are teaching in universities in the US (Parisa, Sheida and Kimia), and one (Nebras) teaches in Qatar.

Educational attainment in Iranian society holds much symbolic capital and is closely bound to evaluations of individual and familial social status. It is useful at this point, then, to outline notions of shame (*khejālat*), honour and dignity in the Iranian context. Shame and honour were terms that arose in several interviews, suggesting that these imagined ideals guide the way participants reflect upon themselves as well as shape their behaviour and decision-making processes. These terms are entrenched within Iranian society and have been transplanted and reinforced in the diasporic context. As the interview material suggested, an awareness of shame, honour and dignity and their social implications guide a range of factors such as gendered and sexual practices, public behaviours, and educational choices. Such notions do not neatly translate from the English definition; they cross moral, individual and collective terrain, and are not only aligned with individual actions but also with family and communal reputation (Zare, 2023). Zare offers a useful definition of shame and how it operates in the Iranian context:

> Persian culture may fall into the shame-based category as individuals are afraid of exposure of any behaviour and the accompanying shame that may taint the individuals' self and other family members. In some cases, the shame is even deliberately exposed as a means of social control in order to let other people evaluate the individual and ultimately amend the behaviour (2023:1).

Khejālat [shame] is labelled both a social and a moral emotion due to the type of feeling it connotes in the Persian language; it can have both social and moral action tendencies (ibid.: 5). Shame, honour and dignity are socially constructed norms that, due to their communal significance, police individual bodies and behaviours. Indeed, Evason (2016) suggests that perceptions of pride and dignity in Iranian society constrain behaviours through a consciousness that the individual must protect their personal and familial honour by upholding a public image that meets socially agreed-upon standards:

> As people don't want to risk doing something shameful, they generally adhere to social expectations. If faced with criticism, Iranians are likely to deny any fault in order to avoid dishonour … While prestige can be gained through achievement, boasting of it is seen as pretentious and can draw quick dislike and denigration (Evason, 2016: para: 11-12).

In relation to the symbolic capital Iranians afford education, participants expressed an awareness of the 'prestige' that obtaining higher education might afford them in this social field. Parisa, for example, discussed education abroad as both a practical and prestigious response to limited opportunities for higher education for women in Iran:

> *Many Iranian students go to the US because higher education is the only prestigious and affordable way to immigrate. There is no ease of getting a visa for Iranians because of political tensions and sanctions; many students face rejection and deportation due to unfounded reasons. Iran's current socio-political and dire economic situation will force many more to consider immigration* (Interview, 8 July 2022).

Aida discussed the pressure of external judgement from the Iranian community. For her, pursuing higher education was perceived as an alternative to marriage that her family would view as equally valuable. This reveals how normative standards women face, such as getting married by a certain age, may influence decision-making, commitment to education and also complicate processes like migration, which must be tied to an honourable pursuit (such as education):

> *Usually, a girl like me back home would be thinking about marriage … I knew that I wasn't going to stay here* [Iran]*. And there was a conversation in my family that if you want to go abroad to continue your education, you have to go for a PhD. That gave me enough motivation to come to the United States, which itself takes about three years* (Interview, 7 April 2021, Zoom).

Tala reinforced these sentiments. She suggested that, at least in her social world, college education is not 'enough':

> *There is something in Iranian culture. I bet you probably noticed that they are very much highly emphasised upon continuing education to higher education. College education is not enough. You have to always go to the Master's and then your PhD* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

These reflections betray an acute awareness of community judgement and standards relating to cultural capital upheld in Iranian society. While the focus on postgraduate education might seem normal for the participants and within their social class, this would not necessarily be mirrored in the experiences of Iranian women from different contexts.[50]

Mehregan suggested that not only the level of education but also the specific area of study holds significance for Iranians. While this is not unusual among diasporic and migrant cultures, Mehregan also suggested that higher education would bring her family 'honour'. Even among the women of the sample set who appear to have considerable social freedom and the freedom to practise their, at

[50] Although women's literacy levels and their participation in education in Iran is generally high (see Jacobs, 2016) lower-class, rural or religious communities inside the country might place more value on compliance with patriarchal family standards bolstered by discourses of faith and morality rather than women's educational attainment.

times, contentious art, pressure from societal judgement and assessment of their merit shapes the dynamics between them and their families. In our interview, Mehregan said:

> *All of my aunts and uncles had to become doctors. So when I told my dad that, 'Hey, I want to study art', I wanted to do acting (he was never any part of that world). He and his brother were in a communist group … and he studied in France. The background that I'm telling you is not Islamic or religious. But he was like, 'You are not Michelangelo or Da Vinci'. So it was a whole battle, not even with them, but for me realising that this can be a career … When I was going to go to school, my dad was like, 'Oh, conservation and preservation, historical places—that seems like an architect'... I honored him a lot and he was really a role model for me and I was like, 'Oh, maybe he's right'… So I studied conservation and preservation of historical places* (Interview, 19th May 2021, Zoom).

Motivations for migration, then, can be shaped by a desire to leave behind the restrictions and pressures of family and community in Iran. This is combined with individual dreams and desires for independence that cannot necessarily be realised by women under the communal gaze in the homeland. Broadly speaking, the gendered aspect of this is even more significant to women than men in the Iranian context. In the case of Mehregan, the opportunity to study art was possible defiance:

> *The idea that art is not a career was so strong in my head … I was like, 'I want to go to acting school' and he was like, 'Never, ever in any part of the world. You cannot do that. You know this is a toxic environment'. And he said the same thing to my sister who wanted to become a nurse. So that idea of judgment of this career, this is specific, a position brings you into like sex work or whatever was in his mind …* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Given Mehregan's father's communist background, her reflections suggest that notions of honour, for Iranians, are not necessarily tied to religion. She does, however, infer that her father associates being an actor or nurse with sexwork

and being disreputable, indicating that he links one's choice of profession to their social standing and morality.

Aligning with the earlier discussion on the ongoing brain drain in Iran, Ghazal discussed attempting to gain her art education in Iran itself. This pursuit ended in frustration, however, as she was faced with gendered limitations and the diminishing quality of the faculty in the country:

> *I came to this country with an F1 student visa.*[51] *At the time I went to the University of Tehran in Iran, which is considered one of the best public universities. But for art, most of the well-known faculty left Iran and migrated to other places. My experience with academia in Iran was similar to that of many others. We were really disappointed. I studied photography in Iran for three semesters and then I decided to apply to come to the US since my sister was already there, studying engineering … As a woman, you have to work hard to step beyond certain limitations that are assigned for women … I found that pressure on me because there were limitations and issues of censorship … The whole cultural pressure, I went to university, but then it wasn't really easy for me as a woman* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

Push Factors: Migration from Iran

Ghazal, Mobina, Mehregan and Aida claimed that gendered restrictions in Iran stunted their career possibilities and individual freedoms, contributing to their desire to migrate. In Iran, enrollment in tertiary education among women was at 56.6 percent in 2020 (World Bank, 2022) but discriminatory policies, informed by religion and patriarchy, enforce gender segregation and limit women's participation in the labour force. Despite high levels of education and literacy, just 14.4 percent of the labour force were women (aged 15 and over) in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Mobina suggested that she would not be able to pursue the career in teaching that she wanted had she stayed in Iran:

[51] An F1 visa allows academic students to enter the US as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in a language training program or course of study that culminates in a degree, diploma, or certificate. The institution must be authorised to accept international students by the US government (USCIS, 2024).

> *I wanted to teach but as a female following the rules of the university, I wasn't allowed to teach even though I was first in the class. The role went to a guy. I was super disappointed. That was the point I decided to leave. I wanted to find my freedom—I didn't qualify because of my sexuality* [sic]. *Criteria are not based on knowledge but on religion* [in Iran] (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Aida, too, suggested that her personal and educational achievements were not adequately recognised in Iran:

> *I felt I had all the checkmarks: I graduated from a very good school* [in Iran], *I had very good work, I have my published books, and I'm taking my art classes. What was inside of me, however, felt like this is not enough. This is not a place to grow. I felt like I'm not 100 percent myself … I'm not really feeling 'home'* [in Iran], *not in terms of the family members or the family structure, I have a very good family, very close, but in terms of being in a larger society. I was feeling that I am not comfortable like I need a place to kind of fly in a way, the kind of freedom to go beyond the stereotypes that would be your destiny* [in Iran] (Interview, 7th April 2021, Zoom).

A sense of limitation concerning career opportunities in Iran was not, however, shared by all participants, illustrating clear subjective and contextual differences that contribute to participants' experiences. Due to age differences among other factors, participants have, for example, worked and studied under different economic and political circumstances. They have also existed within different communities inside Iran which might account for varying ambitions and perspectives among the sample set. Some were based in Tehran and others in other cities including Ahvaz, Shahrood, and Isfahan. Perceptions may also differ due to the participants' positionality, i.e., the stage in one's career and the intersections of their identities.

Unmotivated to Migrate

Several participants in this study suggested that they did not want or intend to move to the US, refuting dominant assumptions that the US is an appealing hub for migrants socially and economically. Some participants migrated to be with a

romantic partner or due to difficulties with their residency/visa in other locations, but a life in the US was not their first choice.

Stereotypes of Iranians are commonly discussed in relation to dominant American perspectives, but stereotypes surrounding the US and American culture are also discussed by Iranians and contribute to their perceptions. Maryam expressed reservations about moving to the US because of assumptions she had about American culture being 'materialistic'; she was concerned that she might also become materialistic by being there. Tala on the other hand, refers to Hollywood shaping Iranian imaginations of the US, which supports the idea that media, pop culture or commonly held stereotypes were, at least at the time of her migration in the 1990s, significant in contributing to assumptions about what life in America might be like, although there may have been significant exceptions to this on a religious or moral basis.

Today, however, digital technologies make the sharing of real-time imagery and information possible for Iranians which means that friends and family can instantly relay their realities across borders. Media stereotypes, then, might not hold so much weight or may be viewed differently in the digital era. Maryam's concern about migrating to the US was shaped by her morality, feelings of guilt at leaving her family in Iran and a sense of not being 'steadfast':[52]

> *My husband is from Nebraska, in the US, he's not Iranian, he doesn't have any Persian background. We met each other in India in 2012 and got married in India… We wanted to stay in India … Then we could not extend our visa. We tried to apply for him to come to Iran. He couldn't, because of the religious issue and the countries* [Iran and the US] *are not friendly with each other. So then we moved here* [US] *we applied for a Green Card and I came here … I didn't want to come to the US first of all, when we are in Iran and you are Bahá'í you live in persecution. All your family members and yourself and the community, everybody's in persecution … When I moved to India I felt a little guilty that I left my country and my people are in persecution.*

[52] In the Bahá'í faith the term 'steadfast' is regularly referred to in teachings and prayers.

> *I find that very personal feeling like I was not loyal or I was not steadfast to not stay, but it was not any of these … I really didn't want to be far away from Iran … I felt if I came to the US, maybe I would be very 'materialistic' but it is not like that. Now I don't have any issue staying all my life* (Interview, 18th February 2021, Zoom).

Maryam demonstrates concern with how her community perceives her for leaving Iran and a sense of guilt for abandoning her 'people'. This sentiment is undoubtedly influenced by her Bahá'í faith and the associated responsibility of being 'steadfast'. The intersection of faith and the moral virtues it promotes, combined with the communal gaze, appears to shape Maryam's self-perception similarly to how notions of honour/shame function as a disciplinary apparatus, as discussed earlier. Since only two of the participants are Bahá'í it is not possible to generalise very far from this observation.

Maryam's experience also suggests that travel and visa restrictions, resulting from hostile relations between Iran and the US, impede movement and complicate romantic relationships. Her American husband cannot live in Iran with her and her family, demonstrating the impact such tensions have on migration journeys.

Mobina had settled in the UK where she suggests that she was content, but political shifts in the UK and the US forced her migration to the US:

> *I didn't have any choice, my choice for immigration wasn't my own. It started with disappointment with my own country but then when I moved to London … I was forced to decide again and it was easier with a Green Card for the US* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Participants' experiences and perceptions of migration, then, vary based on their personal circumstances including their family background and religious affiliations. Some embraced the opportunities afforded by migration while others expressed reluctance rooted in concerns about cultural identity, moral values, and social belonging.

Their migration patterns suggest continuation and divergence across generations. Some followed established networks and familial connections, relocating to areas where family members or acquaintances were already settled, while others were the first in their families to migrate, establishing their own pathways. Participants discussed their ancestors migrating for education, a motivation they shared. They also expressed an awareness of the symbolic capital associated with higher education and its relationship to social judgement and value in the Iranian context. Indeed, at least among this sample set, education remains a key driver for migration, but this is not a straightforward process; it is complicated by overlapping push-pull factors. These include societal expectations, limited professional opportunities and perceptions of quality education in Iran, as well as concerns about gender-based limitations, political instability, and economic prospects.

Arriving in Diaspora

How participants perceived and engaged with place and culture was often influenced by their positionality and how they arrived in diaspora. The timing and location of their arrival and prior experiences significantly impacted how participants processed their arrival in the US, often challenging their preconceptions.

Participants contested dominant notions of Iran as an entirely restrictive space for women by contrasting their experiences in Iran with those in conservative settings in the US. This comparison challenged the idea of a homogenous experience in both Iran and the US and questioned the dominant discourse that frames the West as inherently free and Iran as inherently oppressed. This perspective came up during Mehregan's interviews. She discussed contradictory feelings of freedom and restriction in different social contexts in the US and in public and private spaces in Iran. Such reflections suggest that concepts of freedom vary and are contextually re-evaluated. The question of how "free" participants felt as they moved through social contexts emerged prominently across the interview material, highlighting a shared concern with personal freedoms and liberties among participants. This concern suggests participants' awareness of and appreciation for the freedoms they experience. Social freedoms are highly valued and not taken for granted by them; they are

constantly assessed in dialogue with the spaces participants inhabit. In our interview, Mehregan suggested that different environments in the US presented varying degrees of freedom and restriction, prompting her to reconsider and redefine her understanding of freedom in relation to her homeland. She contrasted her experiences of restriction in Texas with the sense of freedom she found in San Francisco:[53]

> *When I grew up in Iran … there was no Koran or religious environment, and we all know that we can party, we can drink, we can do anything, but we cannot talk about it at school. So that duality, that paradox is always there. And then, you think about the US as this open country … And then I moved to Texas and I was like, 'Wow, people are so conservative and religious here and you don't see that from outside'. And when I moved to San Francisco, that was kind of like another explosion for me, because even though I was really open-minded, I had a lot of structure* [to my perspectives] *like 'This is good or bad'* (Interview, 19th May 2021, Zoom).

Despite access to the internet and the instantaneous information it provides, migration to the US can still result in culture shock, as presuppositions about the country often do not align with reality, as we have seen. Bahar discussed struggles and adjustment to a new culture. She reflected on her experiences, suggesting that she 'missed' the pure cultural forms of Europe which she contrasts with the diversity of New York. This desire may relate to her longing for her own national culture from a distance and suggests the dialogical character of cultural understanding:

> *The first thing that you can feel when you come to the US as an immigrant here is the land of cultural diversity. It's like a melting pot in which different cultures add new flavours to it. I like this diversity, you're free to express yourself in so many ways and learn from many different cultures (mostly in New York). However, I missed the European countries which have their own language, food and cultural ceremonies. It's hard to say and compare. I've never doubted my own identity but I can imagine for the*

[53] Mehregan's experiences of gendered freedom in Iran might have been shaped by the intersection of class as well as her father's communist affiliations, resulting in a specific type of experience that does not reflect broader experiences of females in Iran.

> *second-generation kids who were born here it's not the same experience* (Interview, 1st June 2021).

Although comfortable in the US, Aida discussed post-migration struggles that were rooted in language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. To succeed in her new environment, she discussed constructing a "new self" and "finding" oneself in a new environment designed for international students, highlighting a process of adaptation and transformation within the new context over time. Her experiences reflect Hall's concept of identification which suggests that as individuals move through contexts they construct new identities, dialogically, with and through their new surroundings. As such identities are always in the process of forming, under process and might need to be revisited and reimagined in a new social context where old codes and ways of being do not translate:

> *The first couple of years were a real struggle for me, both in terms of language and in terms of, for someone who is a valedictorian, and now all of a sudden coming to a completely new society … I had to reestablish myself and I had to develop another self next to my previous self …* (Interview, 7th April 2021, Zoom).

The interviews suggest that migration often necessitates a process of adaptation, transformation and reflection as individuals navigate new social fields. Through this process, they reconfigure themselves in dialogue with their surroundings and recontextualise past experiences.

Diasporic Judgement

As part of their adaptation to the US context, participants discussed navigating the standards and expectations of the Iranian diasporic community there. Dominant Western discourses have framed Iranian women's personal freedoms and bodies as restricted in Iran, but interviews with Mehregan, Ghazal, and Mobina suggested that the policing of women's bodies manifested in new ways post-migration.

According to Farahani (2017), the 'desirable' female subject in the Iranian context is constructed in contrast to "undesirable, abnormal, and

unacknowledged femininities" (1). Normative visions of femininity upheld and reinforced by Iranians in diaspora can thus limit articulations of gender for artists concerned about being misread or deemed 'deviant' by cultural standards. For example, Mobina noted that despite the broad discourse surrounding social freedoms in San Francisco, she felt her expression was limited by the conservative art community there compared to London. Notions such as 'freedom' are, then, contextual, subject to revision, subjective, and contingent on prior experiences:

> *The biggest identity shift for me was when I moved from Iran to the UK … That was a huge shift for me and a different culture. I found my freedom in art … But in America, I'm not sure. It's like I actually felt the US, with all their slang for freedom and blah, blah, blah. I didn't feel the way I was free in London to express my art in America. Even though I was in San Francisco, the most liberal city of America, I felt it changed my identity again. And I felt I should be more conservative because the galleries, some of them didn't show my works because of the nudity. So it just feels like I kind of have to channel, again, a new identity for myself and my work* (Interview, 6th July 2022, Zoom).

Mobina clearly identified a process of self-censorship motivated by an awareness of the domestic art market demands. During our interviews, she talked about a collector-base of the Iranian diaspora in San Francisco, prompting the questions: To what extent does the diasporic community continue to reinforce limitations on Iranian women's bodies in the diasporic context? And how does an artist's awareness of market demands affect the articulation of gendered realities in diasporic art? The policing of women's bodies can be overt, yet it also manifests in more subliminal ways like dominant aesthetic preferences for art that conceal the female form. Mobina's artistic expressions seem to be formed dialogically, shifting as she engaged with different art markets over time. This evolution is reflected in her artworks (see Figures 7 and 8), which exhibit a transition in thematic concerns post-migration.

Figure 7

Mobina Nouri, *Freedom (Free Them)*, 2019, [gold ink on premium canvas, handwritten calligraphed poems], Advocartsy Gallery, LA

Figure 8

Mobina Nouri, *8th Night*, 2020, [gold leaf paint on canvas] Advocartsy Gallery, LA

In Figure 7, a work produced in 2019, the year that she migrated from London to San Francisco, a female nude takes the centre of the composition. She appears liberated as she flies through golden calligraphy, which alludes to historic Persian culture. The text clings to and illuminates her monochrome figure and is refracted

behind her, suggesting the dominance of her form over the lettering. The work's title suggests a bid for gendered freedom. Conversely, a work produced in 2020, one year post-migration (see Figure 8) focuses on what could be considered less contentious and more universal subject matter—tales from Middle Eastern folklore (*One Thousand and One Nights*). Her scene from the epic, while still containing the nude form, does so in a less overt manner, the female body is more difficult to locate here, intertwined with fantastical elements, plant life and animals, that evoke Persian miniature traditions. Here, the nude body is rendered in a poetic and romanticised manner rather than a politicised one. Mobina's interview suggests an awareness of her audience and their judgement (in this case the audience is American and the Iranian diasporic communities in the US) that contribute to a process of self-censorship and the silencing of deviant identities in her art:

> *Those* [nudes] *were more acceptable in London, they were covered in words but to Iranians, they were 'nude' and borderline acceptable … When I moved to the US I did more of that style of work but I felt the level of criticism was higher … people are not that open to nudity and the nude in general. Maybe that was one reason I shifted to surrealism* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

While living in Iran, Mehregan suggested that her family members, despite being 'open-minded,' instilled in her an awareness that certain behaviours were acceptable and aligned with being ladylike and sophisticated. She frames this positively, contrasting her experience with her perception of other women in her society who may be controlled differently, through, for example, the mechanics of faith. Mehregan suggested that some women within Iranian society are raised to believe that their treatment by others is directly connected to the way they present themselves and their bodies in society. This can result in experiences like sexual abuse without repercussion for the perpetrator which then normalises such actions. Through her art, Mehregan defies these mechanisms of control by creating work that presents her body naked, publicly contesting dominant portrayals of Iranian women and their bodies perpetuated in Iran and the US. She challenges the shared belief that a woman's choice of clothing or presentation of her body invites judgement and policing from outsiders:

> *My dad's family, they were all communists, and my mom's family, they were a little bit traditional, but, you know, they were very open-minded. You know, I was never told to dress up. I mean, the idea of being ladylike was always there. Like, 'A lady doesn't sit that way. They didn't do this or that'. But it was more like a proper, sophisticated way rather than like 'This is so people don't look at you'* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Indeed, a shared concern among several participants was to clarify, during the interviews, that they came from secular, open-minded, and well-travelled families and contexts, suggesting a need to distance themselves from a conservative and religious imagination of Iran and Iranians. Post-migration, Mehregan expressed frustration at encountering limiting perspectives on women's behaviour among Iranian women in the diaspora. This indicates that collective notions about how women should behave persist even in a new social context. In our interview, she described frustration at an exchange with another Iranian woman whom she perceived as narrow-minded. This highlights how both Iranian diasporic women and men may contribute to surveying and shaming women's bodies, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating the patriarchal limitations they experienced in Iran within their new context:

> *She said … 'You put a candy or sweets in front of one person and tell them you can't eat it. One person would insist to eat it and the other one say: 'Oh, okay, if you say, I'm not going to touch it'. And I was so furious. I was like, 'What the fuck? … Your mind is this big that you're comparing a woman with a candy?' … It's mind-blowing to compare a person with a candy and a woman does that … they were telling me, 'Yeah, if a person dressed up like this and like that, you know, it means that I want to get fucked'* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Such perspectives subordinate women to the interpretation of the male gaze and objectify them. The fact that women themselves uphold and reinforce these narratives demonstrates how deeply entrenched patriarchal views have become within certain segments of Iranian society, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others.

Bahar also shared experiences of encountering ‘traditional beliefs’ among Iranians outside Iran. She perceived a generational distinction between pre- and post-revolution mentalities. This may relate to recency of migration; for example, those who migrated more recently might demonstrate more tolerant or progressive perspectives than those who came before. In our interview, Bahar said:

> *Sometimes, I encounter Iranians abroad who seem anchored in traditional beliefs, or their perspectives seem cemented in the time before the Revolution. Contrastingly, the younger Iranian generation tends to lean more modern, mirroring the evolving socio-cultural shifts happening within Iran. Yet, some who left Iran years ago seem untouched by these changes … I recognise that a number of emigrant Iranians might still operate within their old mental paradigms. This isn’t surprising; truly embracing and internalising democratic values is a gradual process* (Interview, 24th September 2023).

This open-mindedness among the youth may arise from their exposure to global perspectives, such as individualism, or social movements advocating for marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ rights, facilitated by evolving technologies, which they connect to their everyday realities in Iran. This contrasts with the generation that arrived in the US following the Revolution, who were eager to assimilate and were described as largely apolitical (Albrecht, 2016). Those of this earlier generation often sought to preserve a more ‘pure’ form of Iranian culture following their traumatic displacement from their homeland, which might account for their preoccupation with this incident and the upholding of patriarchal standards, made familiar to them in Iran, in the diasporic context.

While some artists entered into a process of self-censorship upon encountering limiting beliefs about how women should be presented in the diasporic community, others tackled these stereotypes directly and produced new art to construct a counter-vision. The framing of women in Iranian society seems problematic to them and suggests that the process of migration does not necessarily free them from the limited expectations of the community or a sense that they are expected to remain within the bounds of gendered and ethnically specific norms.

Second-Generation Experiences

While they had not experienced migration themselves, those born and raised in the US as part of the second-generation diaspora expressed an awareness of their positionality as Iranian-Americans. Some discussed the need to adapt to various social contexts due to their dual affiliations. Others expressed a desire to repair the space they perceived between their cultural identities through practices such as their art-making, learning the Farsi language, cultural immersion and travel. Their realities were also shaped in significant ways by the movements and affiliations of the generation before them.

Iranian-American Rex has never visited Iran, so her connection to Iranian culture and her construction of an Iranian identity are derived through imagination and shaped through interactions with family members, the Iranian diasporic community, and secondary sources. As such she has the capacity to create and perform a version of national identity in her art that draws on elements she deems favourable or relevant from these interactions. Her perception of an Iranian identity is always filtered through her hybrid experiences in the American and alternative contexts she inhabits.

During the interviews, Rex indicated that language once played a fundamental role in defining her cultural authenticity and enabling access and closeness to the Iranian community. She devoted time to learning Farsi in her adult life. Her lack of fluency in Farsi, however, led to a crisis of identity, making her feel neither fully Iranian nor fully American. This also indicates the significance of the perceptions and standards of others from the Iranian community in her negotiations of self and sense of belonging:

> *Over the years I've realised how significant that barrier is. A language barrier is the basis of all communication. At a certain point I had a complex about it. The reason I'm not quite Persian enough or authentic enough in my own family is because I missed out on this key piece in the puzzle - language … My decision to start learning* [Farsi] *was originally connected to being able to speak with my family openly and in their native language and be able to go to Iran and not have that burden of separation or that degree of separation. Once I started learning it, I started realising*

> *language is really not the whole picture at all* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

What Naficy has termed a "liminal space" has been particularly generative for Rex, who explores the intersection between American and Iranian cultures in her artwork. She has, for example, created pieces that reflect her struggle with mastering the Persian language and meeting cultural expectations within the Iranian diaspora. By deconstructing and then embodying the languages—both English and Persian—that constitute her hybrid identity, Rex attempts to close the gap she perceives between herself and Iranian authenticity. Her artistic process reveals an attempt to reconcile and repair the cultural and linguistic disjunctions in her hybrid experience:

> *I started becoming more curious about the failure in my learning, and that's when it entered my practice. A lot of my use of Farsi in my practice is highlighting the successes and failures in use. And that's in both English and in Farsi and also what does this language become beyond its text? … It's in the learning of writing Farsi, that I've been trying to break apart the characters and embody them and see if I can get inside the language* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

Rex also spoke of how her hybrid family structure framed her engagement with and experience of Iranian culture. She discussed gendered stereotypes that Iranians in the diaspora hold regarding hybrid families, indicating that one's understanding of cultural identity is shaped dialogically, through feedback from others. She is conscious of and affords authority to diasporic communal judgements of Iranian national identities, as she discussed:

> *It really highlighted my difference between having only one parent and the friends that I came upon who either grew up in Iran and emigrated, who are my age. There's a lot of stereotypes around which parent is Iranian and the relationship that engenders … My sister and I both have had this experience. It seems wildly inappropriate, but you'll meet a middle-aged Iranian person and you're connecting and* [they ask] *'Which parent is from Iran?' 'Oh, my dad's from Iran, my mom's from the States'. And there's*

like this, 'Yeah. So your dad probably didn't raise you with any of the culture'. Whereas I have a dear friend who has a very similar experience to myself, but her mom came here from Iran and she did grow up with a different stereotype, it has something to it. There is a different emphasis in upbringing, I think (Interview, 26th April 2022, Zoom).

Figure 9

Rex Delafkaran, *Home Goods,* 2022, [mixed-media sculptural installation] New Image Gallery, Virginia

Rex discussed her home as being composed of items from American and Iranian cultures. Together, these elements established a new, hybrid visual language that informed her worldview. This perspective materialises in her artwork which recontextualizes familiar objects from her upbringing, blending American and Iranian influences to create hybrid assemblages. Her reimagining of cultural artefacts reflects a process of negotiation and adaptation, from a liminal context as well as the generative potential of her hybrid identities. For her solo exhibition, *Home Goods* (2022), Rex presented a mixed-media sculpture (see Figure 9) that mined her lived environment of her childhood, as she discussed:

> *The impetus for this work came from aesthetic references from my home growing up in Southern California, a home that was half-American and half-Iranian. I selected them based on interior design tropes that were staples of the 1990s when I was a child and my geographic and economic conditions - gold door knobs, lighting from the garage, but also the Persian carpets in the home, Farsi dictionaries. All these things became hybrid assemblages and metaphors for this split I'm playing with in most of my work* (Interview, 26th April 2022).

The artist's home, which she discusses as, "half American and half Iranian", formed a site where dual identities could be processed in a singular space. Suggesting the influence of her hybrid environment on her negotiation of the self, Rex then, materialised this visual negotiation in her art. The show's title *Home Goods* denotes the utilitarian character of a homeware store and American consumerist culture but glimpses of Farsi text that appear through plaster in the work suggest that the Persian culture continues to seep through, even in a foreign, context.

Figure 10

Leila Nazarian, *Shahnameh,* 2023, [screenprint on skate deck]

Iranian-American Leila, also approached her art from a standpoint of hybridity, but for her, art is a medium that can repair space; space in the sense of displacement but also political space. Through her art (see Figure 10), skateboards, an emblem of her community in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, are reimagined, intervened with traditional Iranian designs and handwork by artisans in Iran. Through her collaborative process, she attempts to promote understanding and establish new networks that reconnect the US and Iran, as she recounts:

> *It was at USC and just being surrounded by skateboards in the classrooms … I thought that once I got an apartment here it would be cool to hang a skateboard on the wall, but I couldn't find any with the design I liked, and I thought I should get a few custom-made. It would be cool to merge traditional Persian art with this signature object from LA.*
>
> *I was taking classes on diplomacy. Traditional diplomacy is government-to-government relations, but public diplomacy, I kind of see it as government-to-people, like a government reaching out to foreign publics … I feel like what I'm doing with this, I'm bringing attention to Iranians. I'm supporting artisans in Iran. It's very fulfilling for me …* (Interview, 9th December 2021, Zoom).

Her art, then, is a medium capable of bridging divides not only within her identity but also socially and politically. Leila entered the creative process with a specific, socially-minded goal of generating conversation between the countries she inhabits: Iran and the US. The outcome is a hybrid assemblage of elements that she deems favourable from both cultures; a synthesis where both facets of her cultural heritage converse within a singular space:

> *The Ayne-kar* [skateboard] *deck was made in Shiraz. I was inspired by the colourful mirror work in Shah Cheragh which was very popular during the late Qajar era and wanted to use similar traditional patterns for the skateboard decks. For this series, I worked with artisans who worked on the restoration of the shrine. The Khatam* [series] *features Persian*

> *marquetry known as 'khatamkari' which dates back to the Safavid period … I am really interested in the traditional crafts of Iran and the long histories that are associated with these crafts* (Interview, 9th December 2021, Zoom).

Leila's integration of historic, Persian cultural elements into an object typically perceived as 'American' elevates Iranian design from the realm of the foreign and Other, positioning it as equally valuable. Through her process of sampling and remediation, she seeks to embody aspects of national culture that cultivate pride while deliberately distancing herself from Iran's current Islamic identity. This approach can be seen as both a form of aesthetic resistance and a politicised act given her purposeful negation of Iran's present. By forging new connections between communities in Iran and the US, Leila's work transcends the perceived borders between the two nations, while also creatively tethering herself to her homeland, revealing a desire to remain connected to it. Her creations collapse lines of division, embodying the dualities of the local and the global, the historic and the contemporary, and the street and the elite.

While Rex and Leila express a negotiation of Iranian and American binaries, Kimia discusses more complex, global, social networks rooted in her familial migration patterns and personal journeys, underpinned by the intersection of faith, that contributes to her sense of self:

> *I was born in the US. I lived in the US and then after I graduated high school I moved to Ecuador for a year of service. A lot of Bahá'ís go somewhere in the world and do a year of service. I did six months in Ecuador and six months in Costa Rica. Then, after college, I did another year of service in Haifa, Israel, and I've also lived in India and growing up … I was in Nashville and then I lived all over and I did study abroad, in Japan, as well.*
>
> *…*
>
> *My mom's family is a little different* [to her father's Iranian diasporic family that resides in Nashville]. *They left Iran when she was two and moved to Zaire … Then, they moved to the US for my grandfather to get his medical doctorate, then, they moved back. So she was actually mainly in Africa. And*

> *she came to the US for college, so my mom's family, although they're Persian, they've been outside of Iran longer and many of them are still in Africa. I have family in Botswana and Tanzania and Cameroon. I've been to Africa many times. It's a huge part of my identity as well … My grandparents lived in the Congo in Zaire for 40 years. My grandfather was Mobutu's physician. He was working as a physician. And the actress Glenn Close, her father, was Mobutu's physician and hired my grandfather because he was so impressed with him … my grandfather was then asked to be his personal physician. So he worked in public hospitals and he worked for the dictator as well. So, yeah, that's how my mom moved to Africa to be pioneers for the Bahá'í faith, to be missionaries* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

Kimia's familial experiences, across three generations, exemplify the strength of transnational ties and movement in the Bahá'í community before the advent of the internet. This contradicts notions that digitalisation has been fundamental to transnational connectivity among those in diaspora. McAuliffe (2015) suggests that the Bahá'í practice of 'year of service'[54] plays a prominent role in shaping transnational connections among Iranian Bahá'ís facilitating "a cosmopolitan network of connections" that fuses with faith-based aspirations for "global unity" (2015: 41-42).

As well as the intersection of faith, political affiliations framed how the revolution generation arrived in diaspora. Sheida discussed the traumatic migration journey of her parents that stemmed from their political views. For Sheida's parents, their education and existing connections in the US offered them passage to residency in the US:

> *My parents are both political refugees from Iran. My father was opposed to the Ayatollah's totalitarian regime and was a protester and was pro-democratic, and was suppressed for his political views and beliefs by the Ayatollah's government. He was a doctor and working in the hospital but then they were out to kill him. There was a bounty on his head. And so*

[54] "A religious right of passage that often saw young Bahá'ís travelling to take part in development projects, or, for some, working as a volunteer at the Bahá'í World Centre on Mt Carmel in Haifa" (McAuliffe, 2015: 41-42).

he was in hiding for three years and then eventually was able to escape the border from over the mountains into Turkey. So that was like a two-week journey with a horse. And in the meantime, my mom and my sister were also trying to find a way to escape. And they also tried to separately escape through the mountains, but they were caught at the border. And because my mom wasn't political herself, but she was married to my father, who they were trying to kill, because she was affiliated with him, they arrested her. And so she was imprisoned for a year and separated from my sister and my father, who had already gotten to Turkey and applied for asylum in the States. And, yeah, she was imprisoned, tortured, many other horrible things and then finally released and then attempted at escaping again and made it a second time with my sister to Turkey. By then my father had gone from Turkey to Italy and then Italy to the United States, where he found an Iranian doctor at Yale that would take him on as a fellow and that gave him a reason to get asylum … And then my mom, because of their marriage, was able to get her asylum papers and come over as well (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Racism, Misunderstanding and Right-Wing Politics in the US

The post-revolution generation has lived through major events that significantly altered the dynamics between the US and Iran, shaping their social environments. Mannheim's *theory of generations* is relevant here as it considers how significant events like 9/11 shape not only how the participants are perceived and received in the US but also their consciousness. The discussion now focuses on the socio-political climate in the US in the decades following 9/11, addressing the social conditions within which the participants exist and suggesting how these conditions might inform their lived experiences and perspectives.

Interviews for this fieldwork began in January 2021, coinciding with Joe Biden's inauguration following the presidency of right-wing candidate Donald Trump. Participants naturally reflected on their recent experiences under Trump's leadership. Anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian rhetoric has, however, long been prevalent in the US, especially in the years following 9/11, with media and political discourses often conflating Islam with terrorism. These social conditions

significantly influence how Iranians, including the participants in this study, are perceived and received in their social worlds.

Participants expressed an awareness of American stereotypes and profiles of Iranians, often grounded in terror and threat narratives. These perceptions affected their interactions across various social contexts, from education to spaces of transit and their surrounding communities. Some experienced biases first-hand, while others observed them being directed towards family members. The participants' responses to these stereotypes varied: some expressed frustration, while others sought to challenge and address them through their artwork.

Struggles with cultural misunderstanding and the feeling that they needed to explain their culture to those in the US were emphasised by participants whether they were born and raised in the US or migrated there. Sheida was, for example, born and raised in the US yet she described Ohio as a "horrible" place to grow up in relation to American perceptions of her Iranian origins:

> *I grew up in what's referred to as the Bible Belt, which is a horrible place to grow up as the only Middle Eastern kid. But I grew up in the south of Ohio, on the border of Kentucky in a small town called Loveland, where they grow corn and soybeans. And I went to college in Cincinnati, which is a city right on the border of Ohio and Kentucky as well. But it's a little bit more metropolitan. My dad taught at the college there, so I got to go to school there and finally left Ohio when I was twenty-three. I moved to Detroit, which is still in the Midwest* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Despite being born and raised in the US, Sheida only spoke Farsi during her early years, something that contrasts with the dominant perception that Iranian migrants to the US were keen to acculturate post-revolution. This reluctance to adapt to the new context might have been shaped by her parents' communist background. The resistance of Sheida's parents to impose the local language on their daughter and the preservation of Farsi in their household again suggests that motivations for migration among this group were not always fuelled by a desire to exist within the American context. It also highlights the ways that the

political leanings of one generation can shape the experiences of the next in significant ways. Sheida discussed negotiation between public and private domains as she navigated her experiences with her Iranian family and the expectations of her peers in the American educational context. She described a process of cultural translation, driven by an awareness that her family's experiences in Iran—such as her mother being a political prisoner—would likely be misunderstood and viewed negatively in the American context. An awareness of American perspectives towards the Middle East led to Sheida filtering her realities to avoid stigma and misunderstanding, this indicates the pressure to conform to different cultural expectations in a diasporic setting. In our interview, she said:

> *… I remember when I would say that my mom was in prison, the kids would be like, 'Oh, my God, she's a terrorist'. Or like, 'She's a criminal', because the vernacular is so different here. So I learned really early on the kind of binaries and thinking between East and West* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Collectively, presentations of Iranian culture in the US have also been refined and redefined in dialogue with evolving socio-political currents. Alinejad and Ghorashi (2016) suggest that there was a shift in the presentation of Iranian culture which was, prior to 9/11, actively promoted to highlight the value of American Iranians and their own specific identity or what the authors term a "politics through difference" (65-66). Post-9/11 there was, however, a notable shift in expressions of Iranian culture focusing instead on the similarities that Americans and Iranians share. This re-articulation can be seen as a strategic act of preservation as Iranians attempt to blend in amid a new, hostile social climate where they might be unjustly associated with terrorism due to pervasive threat narratives in the US (Alinejad and Ghorashi, 2016). In our interview, Sheida reflected upon her experiences of stereotyping after 9/11:

> *When 9/11 happened, people would assume that because I was Middle Eastern that I was a terrorist without understanding the complexities of the whole SWANA* [South West Asia and North Africa] *region* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Despite having never lived in or visited Iran, its politics imprinted on Sheida's realities in the US. Experiences of being misunderstood and having to translate her culture of origin to Americans directly influenced the character of Sheida's art practice, which reveals suppressed histories and power dynamics relating to the SWANA region. Her art appears to be directed towards the Western viewer, suggesting a consciousness of dominant perceptions that she contests through her compositions. For example, in her exhibition, *Hotbed* (2020) presented at Denny Gallery, New York, Sheida disentangled a complex network of relations between Iran and the US. Her work raised questions about structures of power, flows of resources, historical ties, and the dynamics between the two countries, considering how the lesser-known American interventions of the past might influence contemporary realities in both countries. Sheida approaches her art much like a historian, looking back through the past to better understand the present. She compressed incidents across time and space in a singular space to form a (visual) document that acts as testimony. Her contrived scenes also provoke broader, social questions. They put into question the very nature of evidence, testimony and truth in a digital era of deep fakes and manipulated imagery (Cirla, 2021). Sheida, then, urges her audience to consider the foundations of what they 'know' at multiple levels.

Each work in the exhibition approached a specific event from Iranian-American histories. Sheida offered a critique on "hot-button issues" including sanctions, international relations, trade, and the history of the petroleum industry. For instance, *PS752* (2020) (see Figure 11) takes its title from the Ukraine International Airlines flight 752, which was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on 8th January 2020. At the centre is a pointing finger on top of lilac rubble. Generic in appearance, the arm could extend from the grey, suited sleeve of any politician. It is, then, hard to distinguish to which 'side' the hand belongs, symbolising the prevalent blame-shifting and ambiguity in contemporary geopolitics (Denny Gallery, 2020).

Figure 11

Sheida Soleimani, *PS752*, 2020, [archival pigment print] Denny Gallery, New York

For the exhibition, Sheida supported her present-day compositions with material that served as evidence of major moments in international relations between Iran and the US, starting from the 1953 Iranian coup. Such material not only provides historical context for her contemporary art but also educates the local American audience on the dynamics and interventions led by America in the Middle East that might not be commonly discussed, such as the US-backed overthrow of Iran's democratic government. By presenting this visual evidence, Sheida challenges reductive stereotypes perpetuated in US politics and media that depict the Middle East as a site of conflict and terror while framing the US as its saviour.

Rex also grew up in the US and recalls experiencing prejudice directed towards her father and being labelled a "terrorist" at school after 9/11. This highlights the prevalence of the threat/terror narrative in the US and how it might be used to Other those from Iranian backgrounds, as recounted by Sheida, and Rex in our interview:

> *I remember traveling in 2004 or maybe 2003 to England to visit my uncle. My dad was pulled off to the side* [during transit]. *And then, when I was in school, I was so young at that time like 2001, 2002, around the time my generation of children was hearing the word terrorist and not understanding fully what that really represented or where it was coming from and so in school. There were jokes about me being a terrorist …* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

Rex suggested that the ability to pass as American or as white resulted in divergent experiences for both her and her sister:

> *I grew up in a very predominantly white area and school, even though Orange County and Southern California as a whole is a very diverse area. I was going to a private school and that particular one just happened to be a little bit lighter overall … There was an understanding around my dad being this ethnic one … a lot of 'exotic', and 'You're this interesting man from this foreign place'. There was different treatment that I was aware of as a kid … My sister and I were both at the same school, but because I presented more like him I think there's just that clear reading of me differently. There were some key moments during the years post 9/11 where my dad was actively being harassed and treated differently, not by members of the school community, but in airports and, you know, out in the world. My mother remembers this really vividly. People wouldn't want to sit near him in restaurants on a couple of occasions. I remember experiencing it. He wasn't even necessarily presenting in any particular way. He's not Muslim …* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

Despite coming from the same family Rex and her sister had distinct social experiences and treatment that hinged on an imagined closeness/distance from 'whiteness'. This suggests that racial hierarchies and beliefs surrounding white superiority remain an issue in the US, reinforced by the rhetoric surrounding Islam and terrorism in the post-9/11 context. Maghbouleh (2017) notes:

> Iranian American youth are perceptive to the everyday reminders— via micro-interactions, state surveillance, and media representation— that

> their off-white racial status is not just subordinate and conditional to normative whiteness but only partially legitimate and mostly in name … As populations in the United States can either be folded into or cast out of whiteness, the experiences of Iranian American youth expose the constantly shifting ground on which it sits (172-3).

More recently, the shift towards right-wing politics in the US has significantly affected the participants' lives, a common thread within the interviews. The political climate under Trump impacted them in multiple ways, from sanctions impeding transactions to physical restrictions on themselves and their family members, and an increased awareness of racial prejudice.

Figure 12

Parisa Ghaderi, *Go Home! series,* 2018-2019, [digital photography]

Marginalisation and the migrant experience in right-wing America were captured in Parisa's *Go Home!* (2018-19) photography series. Using staged photographs captured in an Ikea store, Parisa produced a furniture store catalogue entitled *Ikaeru*.[55] The catalogue twists the idea of searching for a home, central to the migrant experience. Parisa frames migration from a universal rather than subjective standpoint. Her compositions are devoid of personal identifiers and the artist's point of origin cannot be easily ascertained. The series title, *Go Home!*, raises the question of where home might be and the viability of this request. It can also be understood in relation to anti-refugee and migrant

[55] *Kaeru* translates from Japanese to English as: "to go home".

sentiment. Referring to the context of the UK Jones et. al (2017) suggest that the phrase “go home” is historically associated with racist abuse and far-right political groups (12).

Parisa’s catalogue employs dark humour to contest the dehumanisation of deterritorialisation, inviting a double reading. Content commonly associated with advertising and consumerism in the West has been manipulated and replaced with unexpected references to the discourse of displacement. Icons of immigration—hyperthermia blankets and worn-out shoes—collide with mundane markers of the everyday experience—the items sold in furniture catalogues. One photograph of a pair of “like-new” shoes priced at $2.99 has the slogan: “Our collection of like-new shoes is very unique since you can walk with them nearly 6000 miles. Available in black, dark black and light black. No returns”. Another page reveals the ‘RestInPeace sofa’ with a supporting text that states: “An Iranian-American sofa. Imported. Exported. Portable. Not Durable”. Parisa’s use of commercial language evokes the cheapness and commonplaceness of migrant lives, reduced to a page in a catalogue, while also pointing to the commodification and value of everything (even human lives) in contemporary life. It also captures Western dehumanisation of the migrant, whereby the figure of the migrant is rendered homogenous and faceless.

Discussing experiences of marginalisation among Iranians and Iranian-Americans in the US after Trump’s inauguration Maghbouleh (2017) asserts that this group were stigmatised and sanctioned from the outset. Trump’s Executive Order “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” (January 27 2017) banned the legal entry and reentry of Green Card holders, visa holders, and dual nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries (38). Maghbouleh (2017) suggests that the “formal and informal racialization of Iranian Americans has also resulted in street violence against other non-whites who are, based on visual cues, racially mistaken for being Iranian” (ibid.).

Nebras explained that Trump’s election played a role in her decision to return to Iran despite having spent a decade in the US and having family members there. Negative and reductive framing of Iranians in US media, as well as the sanctions

and restrictions placed on Iran, have also directly informed her artwork. This suggests that notions of belonging and home are constructed and reconstructed in the face of shifts in political power which also generate renewed forms of hegemonic masculinity and racism:

> *I felt I didn't belong any more in LA after I graduated. I wanted to return to Iran when Trump was elected … I took the New York Times with me as I wanted to understand how we are represented as Iranians. In that time it was tricky, if someone makes art about Afghanistan now it's like taking advantage, it needs distance and to be observed to understand* (Interview,10th September 2021, Zoom).

Figure 13

Nebras Hoveizavi, *Ungrounded Series*, 2014, [digital collage]

A sense of dislocation, liminality, and destabilisation unfolds in Nebras' *Ungrounded* (2017) series, a body of work in which she merges two landscapes together: one revealing unfinished buildings in Tehran, rendered incomplete as the physical trace of sanctions, the other depicting a roller coaster at the Six Flags Magic Mountain theme park which Nebras passed daily in Los Angeles (see Figure 13). This juxtaposition suggests familiarity in the foreign and tension between the pleasure associated with the amusement park and the sense of loss and liminality loaded in the unfinished infrastructure in Tehran. The work's title suggests that Nebras felt destabilised by Iran-US dynamics, unrooted and

without an anchor. A desaturated palette and the visual haze, caused by her layering of forms, heighten a sense of uncertainty and speak of Nebras' precarious situation under the impact of sanctions. In our interview, she said:

> *This is the mix of Magic Mountain with unfinished houses* [in Iran] *because part of the sanctions was those buildings and those bridges in Iran, they were in the stop mode. They didn't have money to make it. So that's for me, that Magic Mountain, which is the roller coaster, it has a really unfinished look as a structure … So I combine the unfinished building, which is caused by the sanctions, with Magic Mountain and combined the landscapes together… I had both of them as a passport* [Iranian and American passports] *but both of them, they are home somehow, but they have really complex issues and they have really harsh issues for me …* (Interview, 9th December 2021, Zoom).

Mobina also shared a sense of destabilisation. For her, the shifts towards right-wing politics in the UK forced her to migrate once more to the US. She described the contingency and fragility of belonging and the ability to exist within a certain society for Iranian migrants:

> *Brexit happened in London. At the time, I was working in a design company based on research in the UK … and then Trump* [got elected]*. As an immigrant from Iran, I didn't have a British passport and so at that time, everything was so uncertain about my job … I actually loved London, I wanted to stay in London, but because I had a Green Card, it was kind of easier to go to the US, then Trump's travel ban and all the other things around it* [happened]. *At the beginning, he didn't even allow the people with Green Cards to go back to the country … If these things didn't happen, maybe my life would be different* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

The post-9/11 climate and the presidency of Donald Trump exacerbated prejudice in the US, with Iranians and Iranian diasporans facing discrimination and racial profiling. Participants recounted experiences of marginalisation and misunderstanding, feeling compelled to explain their culture to others in the US, often through their art. Others expressed sentiments of alienation and frustration.

Their narratives suggest the contingency and fragility of belonging for Iranian migrants in the US (and the UK), subject to evolving global political dynamics. Experiences of prejudice and belonging varied among participants based on factors such as geographic location and perceived racial identity, suggesting the intersectionality of identity, politics, and lived experience among the sample set.

The conversation now examines how experiences, such as border crossing in right-wing America, have influenced the participants' self-perceptions.

Border Crossing

The border is understood here as a liminal space with its own rules regulating human movement and freedoms. It is a site where power dynamics are skewed; one person (the border control officer) holds the authority to approve or deny another person's (the migrant's) access to a territory. Border crossing, both as a physical experience and a metaphor, was discussed by participants in this study as a significant life event. Their subjective experiences of migration and passing through US border controls shaped their self-perceptions and contributed to their sense of belonging within US society. Negative experiences at the US border were often interwoven with parallel experiences of marginalisation and racial profiling, exacerbated by the conditions discussed in the previous section. Such experiences contributed to feelings of dislocation and liminality, as reflected in the interview material and participants' artwork.

Participants discussed the experience of border crossing into the US as contributing to a new awareness of themselves as 'immigrants'. The physical experience of migration, along with a re-evaluation of the self, following resettlement in a new country, led to a shift from affiliation with a national identity towards a displaced one. It is worth noting that while the participants in this study may have held high social status in Iran, the experience of border crossing in the US and an awareness of migrant status seems to have prompted a sense of social anxiety and negative or insecure self-perception among this group as their social capital diminished.

The experience of migration and its associated issues were explored by several participants in their artistic output. Unlike the collective experience of traumatic displacement captured by prominent artists of the revolution generation, these

artists connected personal experiences of migration to global discussions surrounding migration, prevalent at the time as demonstrated in, for example, Parisa's work (see Figure 12). This represents a shift from narrating an exclusively Iranian experience to engaging in global discussions surrounding migration, pronounced against the backdrop of Trump's tightened border controls in the US. Parisa's reflections on her migration experience suggest that her journey is not merely a personal narrative but a shared experience influenced by Trump's policies:

> *My experience of border and visa complications is very specific to my nationality because of all this animosity between Iran and the US over the past 40 years which was worsened by the last administration … Not only we as students couldn't go back, but also our families couldn't get a tourist visa to come and see us. So there are so many missed opportunities for either side. We couldn't go attend some of their weddings and funerals or tend to some of the sick people in our family … they couldn't come to be with us for our graduation or our thesis defence or all other, you know, success moments …*
>
> *I think not only me but all the Iranians and others, all of the seven countries that were mentioned in the travel ban … I did a lot of research and I realised that the same thing is happening in the southern part of the US, you know, with Mexico. And I watched a lot of documentaries and I read a lot about the border situation in the south as well. I think that it's not only me, it's just the neighboring countries with the US, they are also affected and how many lives are taken because they just want to get to the other side. Luckily for those seven* [countries in Trump's] *travel ban you don't lose your life to get to the other side, you know? But the emotional suffering and the emotional burden, I think that also has a lasting effect* (Interview, 20th September 2021, Zoom).

Figure 14

Parisa Ghaderi, *The Impossible Room I*, 2021, [still from single channel video performance]

Participants articulated their experiences of border crossing through their art, producing compositions that captured feelings of anxiety, experiences of injustice and marginalisation. For example, in her performance video *The Impossible Room I* and *II* (2021), Parisa connected her personal experience of 'random selection' by US border security to the broader experiences of individuals globally affected by American travel restrictions (see Figure 14). Her process demonstrates how digital media platforms can facilitate the exchange of information and empathy across borders and how art can respond to digitally mediated content that reflects experiences from distant places. The project was inspired by a post on her friend's Instagram feed showing her friend on one side of a black line looking back towards their parents on the other side. This image was taken at the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Stanstead, Quebec, and Derby Line, Vermont. Built across the US-Canada border by the Haskell family in 1901 the Haskell Free Library and Opera House has its address in two countries. It was designed to stimulate cultural and human exchange yet in recent years it took on renewed significance as a site where the family reunions of those separated by the US travel ban could take place (Torbati, 2018). In our interview, Parisa said:

> *It was about the border and the idea of citizenship because I had this experience when I entered one of the ports here* [in the US] *out of the blue, someone says, 'Oh, you've been selected randomly to go through there'. Further investigation is serious … 'Who are you kidding?' That's*

> *something that's just crossed my mind. How could it be random, you know? … It started from this photo of my friend that I saw on his Instagram that he and his wife was standing on one side and his parents were standing on the other side and there was just this black flag line between them. I asked him, 'Where is this? Why are you not together'? He said, that is The Haskell Library, which sits at the border of Canada and the US … The border runs through the library and the Opera House … I spent a good amount of time researching the concept, contacting the library, and reading about all these other similar places that kind of facilitate this process ... this library has become a meeting place for these people, they gather, they just hold hands and hug each other … I was taping my dancer and restricting her movements and kind of saying that you cannot move over that, and one might say that is to give power to these borders and lines* (Interview, 13th September 2021, Zoom).

Parisa's response to this scenario was a filmed performance. In the work, contemporary dancers, sometimes in an embrace, twisting and turning, moved around a floor that gradually became sectioned-off by tape to represent the restrictive presence of borders. The work captures the longing for connection and physical freedom experienced by migrants while materialising the restrictions they face under shifting socio-political conditions.

Figure 15

Ghazal Rahimi, *American on the Inside, Oriental on the Outside and/or Vice Versa*, 2020–21, [oil on linen]

Border crossing was also depicted by Ghazal. In her *American on the Inside, Oriental on the Outside and/or Vice Versa*, (2020–21) mixed-media painting, Ghazal layered an American visa stamp upon her self-portrait (see Figure 15). The LAX airport entry stamp, branded on her forehead as though she is a commodity, evokes dehumanisation. The stamp symbolises approval for entry into the US, but also the contingency of her freedom. It forms a reminder of the power dynamics at play, where border control officers wield authority over her movement. As her face dissolves into a backdrop of traditional Iranian geometric motifs, shattered ceramics, and barbed wire, she is reduced to a mere representation of her Iranian racial identity. The barbed wire, entwined in her hair, summons pain and separation as well as the aesthetics of the Mexico-US border. Produced amidst a backdrop of heightened right-wingism in the US, Ghazal's artwork reflects broader political currents, such as Trump's call to build a wall between America and Mexico. She draws parallels between this geopolitical climate and the imagined barriers between Iran and the US, suggesting that issues of separation and belonging are global and prolific. The work is further complicated by Ghazal's reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic; the global upheaval caused by this event prompted introspection on her own restrictions and she connected the personal and political dimensions to this in a singular space, as Ghazal recounted:

> *You see the barbed wires in the woman's hair and, you know, barbed wire is a tool for building walls, building limitations, categorising people in one place geographically and culturally, when you categorise a group of people because they are different or because they are all culturally different, you expect them to act in the stereotypes that are determined in society. This then becomes an oppression for that group of people. So the barbed wire is communicating that. I, like many others, came to this country with a visa and experienced issues not being able to go back and not being able to travel or my parents weren't able to get a visa for a long time when Trump became the president.*
>
> *I experienced these issues of these borders and limitations that we have in the world and when the pandemic happened suddenly it was a global*

> *issue—everyone was experiencing this level of helplessness … it was on a collective level and a global level, that everybody experiences those issues of helplessness and like an unknown future that you constantly experience in your everyday life as an immigrant …* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

The border, with its skewed power dynamics and implications for freedom, inclusion, and access, were central themes in participants' discussions. Their experiences of border crossing were shaped by the political conditions at the time. Participants responded to these experiences through their artwork, capturing their anxiety, marginalisation, and isolation. They did not view their experiences as isolated incidents, however, but rather as part of a broader global conversation on migration policies and border controls.

In this context, they turned to their art to express their own experiences and empathy for other communities facing similar frustrations and to critique the socio-political conditions they endure. Through their art, Parisa and Ghazal reclaimed agency and revealed their experiences at the border—an inherently closed-off and restricted zone where photography and documentation are prohibited. Their artworks expose hidden experiences of migration and critique the border and the mechanics behind it as a site that limits human interaction and perpetuates dehumanisation, separating families and reinforcing racial stereotypes.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Points of Connection with the Homeland

Given the above discussion, establishing a sense of community and belonging felt pressing to the interviewees. Participants lamented the physical distance from their homeland and encountered Othering and misinterpretation in the diasporic context. This dual challenge heightened the significance of finding and maintaining connections that affirmed their sense of belonging and provided a supportive network.

Participants discussed searching for points of connection to their cultural roots to feel closer to their national culture. Sensory experiences—taste, smell, sight and

spoken language—summoned Iran and a sense of home for them in multifaceted ways. Participants engaged in practices including poetry readings, singing, the preparation of food and consuming Iranian or Iranian diasporic media. These interactions recalled a sense of home but are a reimagining or recreation of Iran in the diasporic context, as such these representations take on new forms and meanings distinct from evolving practices in Iran. Hall (1996b) notes that there can be no straightforward 'return' or 'recovery' of "the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present …" (448).

For those who migrated to the US alone, such interactions were beneficial in the early days, post-migration, offering a sense of familiarity and community in a new context. For the second-generation, born and raised in the US, cultural experiences helped them better understand an aspect of their national identity that they could not experience first-hand due to geographical distance or perceived exile.

For Mobina, the Persian community in San Francisco offered a network of support, community and acceptance:

> *I'm very lucky because I'm in a very creative community of Iranians, a very supportive Persian community, especially for artists. Most of them are people working in tech companies like Google, and Apple, but with the artists, too … And those people, mostly very wealthy people, are really interested to support Iranian artists in their community, their own community, and so they go to their shows.*[56] *I found it very supportive … I can say, 99 percent of my friends are Persian* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

Rather than prioritising external connections, Tala placed significance on her own articulations of identity. She suggested that distance from her homeland stimulated a transformation in how she reflected on and performed her national identity. Migration caused her to become even more "Iranian". This demonstrates the role of agency in the construction and presentation of identities yet her performance of Iranian identity in the diasporic context is also limited and

[56] Mobina's positive experiences contrast other participants' more negative perceptions of the diasporic community.

subsequently distinct from the version of herself that previously existed in Iran, which she considers to be more complex. Presenting a nuanced Iranian identity in the US might be challenging due to the lack of cultural and social resources necessary to construct such a complex version. The reception of such an identity is also limited in that complexities, commonly understood in the Iranian social context, may not translate into the American one. Tala's performance of 'Iranianness' then is constructed in dialogue with those who might not have the framework to fully understand her multifaceted identity. As she explained:

> *When I was in Iran I wasn't 'Iranian' because everyone is much more nuanced with subcategories. When I left Iran I became a fervent Iranian and missed home, so I became very 'Iranian'* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

Tala's reflections also suggest that embodying one's national identity and practising it in a new context might go some way to repairing the sense of loss and distance experienced by those in diaspora. Other participants like Bahar suggested that their feelings of longing and nostalgia for Iran could be countered by engagement with the internet and digital communication technologies as well as watching Iranian television:

> *I didn't get the chance to visit Iran for 10 years, my memory of what this early 'home' feels like, sometimes tends to be tied to nostalgia, and I feel stuck in time, but these kind of feelings for me doesn't last long because of the internet and the new social communication and new technology, you have access to everything. I sometimes watch Iranian TV online to feel like I'm in Iran. And I try to stay up to date about the news and Iranian society. Iranian society is very dynamic, they never stay the same. I need to update myself* (Interview, 1st June 2021).

Expressing the power of media to cultivate a sense of closeness to one's culture, participants suggested that watching Iranian television in the US fulfilled their desire to remain up to date with current affairs and engage with the Farsi language in a setting where their mother tongue might not be heard. Parisa expressed dismay at Iranians in diaspora who 'diluted' their language with

English over time. This suggests a concern with the preservation of the pure language which endures across generations and locations. The emphasis on safeguarding 'pure language' might relay nationalistic tendencies or a desire to uphold a version of Persian identity—free of religion and external influence—that Parisa holds in high regard. A concern with 'pure' language and Persian culture came up in several interviews. Participants discussed texts like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) (1010). Widely regarded as the Persian national epic, the poem intertwines myth and history, chronicling the ancient kings of Iran from the mythical era to the Arab conquest (651 AD) (Leoni, 2008). The narrative traces kings and heroes as they engage in battles against 'foreign' foes, evoking the struggle for the survival of Persian civilization (ibid.). *Shahnameh* also embodies broader themes of struggles between 'good' and 'evil' which could be understood as an allegory for resistance against cultural and linguistic erosion. This engagement suggests shared anxiety over the potential loss of cultural identity. In our interview, Parisa said:

> *I watch almost every TV series … I watch it because I want to be updated with whatever is happening and also in terms of language. Some people come here and after a long time, they're having a hard time speaking Farsi, that's one of my pet peeves. You have to just make sure that you could say everything correctly. And you don't want to mix English with Farsi. That's something, especially when I talk to my family. I try to just stay away from using those English words. I watch a lot of TV series, I watch Iranian cinema closely, I also read in Farsi*[57] (Interview, 13th September 2021).

Aida discussed the intergenerational transmission of the Persian language and cultural traditions. Despite having lived in the US for 15 years and consciously avoiding cliches associated with Iranian cultural identities in her art, Aida expressed a desire to raise her son with the Iranian language and cultural traditions. This suggests that, for Aida, a particular version of Iranian identity may play a significant role in shaping her son's sense of self, even as he grows up in an American context:

[57] Farsi, the modern Persian language, belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family and is written in the Arabic script.

> *I personally practise a lot of my cultural heritage, like celebrating Nowruz, Persian New Year and even try to teach my son about that and teach the language, everything …* (Interview, 7th April 2021, Zoom).

Participants emphasised the connection between practising culture and engaging with the Iranian diasporic community. Ghazal discussed connecting to her culture and a community of Iranian artists by visiting Iranian art galleries and attending Persian poetry readings. Poetry has played a significant role in communal traditions and contributed to Iranians' collective consciousness of cultural identity for thousands of years. As such, poetry might form a powerful source of connection to 'home' for those in diaspora at multiple levels. In our interview, Ghazal said:

> *The first cycle of friends was through college which was super international. I had Mexican friends, friends from all parts of the world. I also eventually became familiar with Iranian artists and galleries … Roshi* [Roshi Rahnama, founder of Advocartsy Gallery in LA]*, she also has this gallery and that's also like a gift to know this group of people or artists that are creating work, talking about the same issues, struggling … it was helpful to have that community …*
>
> *Poetry reading has been a major part of my personal and artistic life because like there's a big culture of poetry reading in Iran and Iranians are extremely poetic about experiencing themselves and others usually* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

Elements from Persian literature are recurring motifs in the art practices of several participants, particularly Mobina, Ghazal, Parisa, Leila, and Bahar. Their revival of a privileged vision of Iran's past, which they connect to in the diasporic setting, might appear nostalgic. It is, however, arguably also a political and subversive act. The foregrounding of these signs and symbols in their art speaks about 'who they are'; it negates Iran's present, aligns them with its high culture and literature, and removes the current Islamic version from any sense of intimacy and entanglement with their identities.

While Mobina and Ghazal expressed a desire to connect with the Iranian diasporic community (who may be potential supporters and clients) Mehregan felt marginalised by the tight-knit Persian community in California. She perceived judgement from this group which acted as a barrier to entry and made her seek friendship outside the diasporic circle. This connects back to earlier discussions on how an awareness of the collective gaze and judgement can shape individual behaviours and consciousness, as Mehregan discussed:

> *In my experience in California, which has the most Iranian population in the US, they are finding their own people and sticking to them even if they are not sharing the same values. They prefer to speak their own language and hang out with Iranians. From the early years, I moved to the States I learned to not sacrifice the quality of my friendships because of the language barrier. I had to stop hanging out with my Iranian friends because they were being too judgmental. There was a lot of pretending and talking behind your back. I couldn't bear to be friends with someone who talks behind my back and smiles in my face. I preferred to be alone but not to be friends with someone who was not telling me the truth* (Interview, 7th July 2021).

All participants expressed a shared desire to maintain a connection to their Iranian cultural roots. Some expressed a sense of solace and support within Iranian diasporic communities, where they could connect with fellow Iranians and engage in cultural activities together. However, experiences within these communities varied, with some participants feeling marginalised or judged by their peers, leading to a reevaluation of their social circles. Through their artistic practices, participants sought to preserve and recontextualise Iranian culture within a diasporic setting. Their art challenges dominant narratives about what it means to be Iranian and reclaims agency over their cultural heritage against the backdrop of both the current realities under the Islamic Republic and prevailing Western media and political portrayals.

Discovering Culture and Community: The Second-Generation

Participants, born and raised in the US, shared a common desire to seek out and

experience their cultural roots in various ways. Rex distinguished between the types of Iranian diaspora communities that one might encounter in California drawing distinctions between Orange County and Los Angeles. Even within a single state, then, there are palpable nuances between communities and opportunities for interactions with culture suggesting the heterogeneous character of the Californian diaspora. Rex expressed a desire to experience Iranian culture and community first-hand, beyond the oral narratives she had received from family members. This suggests the significance of self-discovery and personal embodiment in understanding one's cultural roots:

> *I was growing up in Orange County, which did have a large Iranian population, but it was quite different from that of LA. I took any opportunities that I had as a young adult to go to LA and feel part of this. There were more shops and music and art and people in general that were speaking the language, and a lot of food that felt like a connection. When I was in high school, I was probably not as connected to any real community because I didn't have that element of family around me. My parents split and so a lot of that family was not immediately present. I found myself until now, finding it in other ways. Food and language—these surface connections that I have some control over—I found actually it became like an exercise in taking on my relationship to this identity, not through my family … There was a desire to separate it* [my identity] *from my dad for a while, for me to find my own relationship …* [to culture] (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

For others born in the US like Kimia, the family offered a meaningful source of connection to Iran:

> *My dad is one of five and all of his family members live in Nashville and all of their kids and all of our kids', kids. So I find myself stuck, rooted in this massive family that I grew up in. It's like this little mini Iran outside of Iran. So I don't have to try too hard. I'm surrounded by it with my family* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

In Kimia's case, her satisfaction with experiencing culture through others may also be tied to a sense of solidarity and communal network reinforced by her Bahá'í faith. This suggests the significance of human connections in relating to one's culture, whether through personal experiences or through relationships with others who share similar histories and narratives. Kimia also discussed the positive impact of travelling to India, a country that she considered to be culturally close to Iran, as a substitute for immersion in the homeland, given her perceived exile. Secondary experiences of culture, then, while valuable to participants like Kimia, cannot entirely replace experiencing cultural roots through their own routes.

Participants discussed other types of community that were significant in shaping their social worlds and sense of self in the US. Art and student communities, LGBTQIA+ communities and other networks based on shared hobbies or commonalities like motherhood and faith were discussed by participants. Sheida prioritised intellectual connection, shared experiences and social values in her relationships, factors that surpassed superficial connections like a shared national identity:

> *The people in my community are all looking at critical issues … My best friend is the founder of a space called 'Queer. Archive. Work'. That's an art space for Providence, queer artists and high school students that don't have support from a community to be able to go and have a residency and to make artwork in a place where a community of other LGBTQ individuals are there to support them. I'm also a wildlife rehabilitator, my basement is actually filled with hundreds of birds right now … So part of my community is the animal rehabilitation community, people that care about helping and saving wildlife as well* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Figure 16

Sheida Soleimani, *Coping Mechanisms 3*, 2021, [archival pigment print], Denny Gallery

Sheida's communal interests, such as bird rehabilitation, have informed her art practice, indicating that lived experiences shape her consciousness, even in her typically highly politicised work. In her *Coping Mechanisms* (2021) series, Sheida reflected on the strategies she employed to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. In *Coping Mechanisms 3* (2021) (see Figure 16), she layered a snapshot of a Zoom call with her parents and a chicken (one of the birds she nurtures) atop images of mosques being fumigated for the virus. The work straddles multiple concerns. It exhibits the familiarity and artificiality of internet aesthetics[58] which can be globally read, but for a deeper understanding the composition requires specific knowledge relating to events in Iran and the artist's intimate environment; it is, then, both personal and ambiguous. The series, stimulated by Sheida's experiences of the pandemic, introduced a new intimate

[58] Internet aesthetics are "collectively shared and recognizable entities … they can inspire design trends, books, personal journeys of self-discovery and transformation … Internet aesthetics appear similar to famous art styles or music genres, yet without presenting fundamental characteristics which are understood to be essential for aesthetic categorization" (Giolo and Berghman, 2023: para 8).

dimension to her work, making it personal for the first time (Denny Gallery, 2021). The work connects her daily interactions, facilitated by digital technologies such as *Zoom* and her mobile phone, with broader global events, suggesting that an event of such magnitude can reconfigure an artist's approach to their art and the way they process personal relationships and socio-political events. During our interviews, Sheida discussed significant events she experienced either personally or through digital media platforms like the Green Movement in Iran, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement, emphasising how these moments of conjuncture, which were digitally mediated to her, have reconfigured her artistic perspectives and practice.

Digital Collectives and Culture

In addition to real-world interactions, virtual exchanges enabled participants to stay connected and engaged with their cultural roots and artistic communities, despite geographical and political barriers. Digital communication technologies sustain contact with family, friends, and national culture, closing the gap of physical distance and bypassing legal restrictions on movement.

Bahar suggested that cultural traditions and festivals significant to her were kept alive and celebrated with loved ones in Iran via social media. She discussed changes and external influences on the Iranian community that she witnessed digitally, suggesting the importance of shifts back home to those watching from afar. Thus, digital technologies play a central role in mediating community, tradition, and national identity from a distance:

> *My contact with Iran is mostly through my family, friends, social media and lately through my arts …*
>
> *I have some Iranian friends and family and we celebrate Nowruz or other cultural events together. Our days were connected because of the power of social media and the internet … As I know and I see through social media, they* [in Iran] *still celebrate all Persian ceremonies but I can see the Western, American mostly, culture influences on the Iranian young people more than ever* (Interview, 1st June 2021).

Mobina suggested that, despite the power of digital media to connect, she remained mentally distant and homesick for Iran. Engagement with digital technologies can produce conflicting and simultaneous feelings of closeness and distance for those in diaspora; they do not entirely substitute physical connection with people and place, as Mobina testified:

> *My grandparents moved from a village that was a winery village … They moved to a city. It was different but in the same area … I think the experience of immigration was so different for them. At the same time, the technology was not there. So now I can FaceTime with my parents every day, it's much easier. But at the same time, the location and distance changed and I'm much further away. So psychologically I become more homesick, more, you know, depressed sometimes. And I feel like they were in the same context of the same culture, the same country* (Interview, 6th July 2022, Zoom).

In discussing her parents' use of these technologies Mobina highlights that the adoption of new technologies is not specific to a particular generation. Generational experiences are not static and her parents' generation continues to evolve in parallel with younger groups; how they engage with new technologies may, however, be distinct.

The internet, with its capacity to establish new networks and modes of creation, has contributed to participants' artistic practices. Most maintain social media accounts and use digital communication platforms to share their artwork with a global audience, effectively bypassing physical borders and sanctions. They stay informed about local (within Iran) and global aesthetic trends through platforms like Instagram, while digital media also enhances their awareness of global events, trends, and art market data.

Internet technologies facilitate the exchange of digital materials and open-up avenues for collaboration with artists across borders. Digital elements often serve as primary or secondary media in their work. For example, several artists, especially those producing performance art, use video to transcend the ephemeral character of the medium by documenting and sharing their work with a broader audience. Nebras has produced video art, Tala has created animations, and Rex, Parisa, Mobina, and Mehregan have recorded their

performances. Mobina has also explored AI-generated art. Maryam and Sheida consider themselves in exile due to their art's critical and political direction. The material that informs their art is often shared with them from inside Iran through communication platforms or sourced from the *dark web* in Sheida's case. Several participants have produced multi-media artwork, incorporating audio and visual files or drawn inspiration from news and imagery mediated to them digitally.

It is worth noting that Iranian artists' engagement with evolving media forms is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1990s, Iranian filmmakers have been highly visible and celebrated internationally. Videography and photography are mediums characterised by their proximity to reality and ability to reveal the subjective gaze. As such, they can powerfully document and represent Iranian experiences to a wider audience. The positive global reception of Iranian cinema influenced artists in and outside Iran. During the Green Movement, the rise of citizen-led journalism—images capturing the protests and their aftermath captured and circulated via mobile technologies—allowed artists to remediate and process such media forms. Taking these images as source material, artists reworked them, affording them new meaning and new audiences. Digital technologies have, then, facilitated new forms of documentation and collaboration among Iranian artists and those from other fields i.e. journalists and citizens, both inside and outside Iran.

Figure 17

Maryam Safajoo, *Bashir, Herald of Lov*e, 2024, [oil on linen]

Maryam contended that social media is fundamental to her art, providing her with content and a layer of security. Individuals inside Iran share personal photographs and accounts of persecution pertaining to the Bahá'í community with her, which she then uses as the basis for her narrative paintings (see Figure 17). Material is shared with her digitally, via platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, which helps her to bypass geographic and legal limitations. There are, however, risks surrounding these practices. Maryam considers herself to be in exile, so Iranians inside Iran face risk when sharing information with her. Surveillance is prevalent in Iran, including in the digital sphere, and Iranian authorities have been known to target and detain individuals based on their social media activities. During moments of protest and social tension in Iran, the internet becomes a site of contestation; it is shut down by the authorities as a mechanism of social control. Maryam's artistic process does, however, suggest that the isolation associated with the condition of exile might be alleviated through online processes that allow the exiled individual to engage digitally and artistically with the homeland despite enforced separation.

When interviewed in 2022, Mobina was producing a new work entitled *Chador,* informed by news that she digitally received relating to events in Iran. Mobina previously discussed retreating into themes of folklore and fantasy in her art to 'escape' reality. The impact of events encountered through online media was, however, powerful enough to compel her to engage critically and intimately with real-world issues through her work. This suggests that she is liminal, pulled between worlds, where the traumatic images and information circulating digitally can be disruptive enough to provoke a creative response, as she recounted:

> [This series] *was based on news I discovered of a girl forced to marry a guy in south Iran …* [she] *escaped to Turkey … When she came back the father gave her to the husband and then he and the brother cut off her head and walked with it in the street, and I saw the photos. It's very disturbing. Whenever these things happen, I moved from my surreal world of Scheherazade* [earlier works focused on Scheherazade, a female character in One Thousand and One Nights]*, which was an escape for me, it's so unbelievable and disturbing* (Interview, 29th March 2022, Zoom).

Technologies and digital communication platforms are fundamental to Sheida's practice. She works with, at times, sensitive material. In her *To Oblivion* series, 2016, for example, she used a dark web server to access information relating to women who have been executed inside Iran, often following unfair trials and human rights abuses (McLaughlin, 2017). Such exchanges would have been almost impossible without the layer of anonymity that the dark web provides. This indicates the ways that technologies can reverse flows of power.

Sheida discussed how digital technologies reconfigured her artistic production during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when in-person interaction was severely limited. Subsequently, online activity and interaction accelerated, and new applications unfolded. This shift led her to develop a new process that integrated historic (Iranian archives) and contemporary (global digital) media formats, effectively compressing place and time. Her family's narratives were exchanged and recorded digitally and combined with their digitally remediated archives. This served dual functions; Sheida preserved oral testimonies and imagery

documenting her family's exodus from Iran while also allowing these elements to take on new forms and be encountered by new audiences as they came to circulate within the contemporary art framework. Her work stimulated collaboration within her family unit and afforded her parents, who endured these experiences first-hand, 'voice' as they relayed their stories on their own terms. Sheida, through her process, preserved memory but also inserted her familial experiences into the broader discourse her art negotiates—networks of power and control, as she discussed:

> *It's definitely very collaborative. My parents have told me these stories my whole life … When the pandemic happened … my dad's a doctor so I was like, 'Oh my God, what if he gets Covid and gives it to my mom and they die and they never get to tell their stories' … I thought maybe this is time for me to start recording these stories … Instead of doing it through ghostwriting in a written way like a book I'm going to do it as a photographer. That's really when it started. Thinking about how to ghostwrite these stories, calling them, talking to them, telling them my ideas, my mom and my dad sending me ideas back and forth. And it really became a collaborative practice of creating these scenes, these sets, these stories, and then working with them to tell them … I'm thinking a lot about the stories that she* [my mom] *has collected from the women that she was imprisoned with and a lot of the women that didn't make it. Thinking about how these stories are communicated … how can I transcribe those and photographs …*
>
> *The source images definitely were traded digitally before* [in her earlier work] *but now the source images are part of my parents' archive, a lot of the images that they escaped with. So I'm using actual physical photographs and scanning them, I'm using drawings that my mother has made and I'm using all of their stories and transcribing them into symbols directly instead of having a little bit of distance from the stories* (Interview, 15th September 2023, Zoom).

As discussed, digital communication technologies powerfully capture Iran's site-specific realities but also facilitate global art movements and consciousness. Tala, for example, suggested that communication technologies enable the

development of a global visual language. Chapter Two posited that a global visual language can be a homogenous one, devoid of connection to a particular space or time; in the digital age it can also be shaped by internet aesthetics that are accessible to anyone, anywhere, as Tala indicated:

> *In the younger generation of early 30s or late 20s, there's a whole slew of good painters … they almost look global in their language and they might not be so good when you get up close to them because they're informed by Photoshop aesthetics and the digital thing. But that's also a global phenomenon, it's not necessarily an Iranian diaspora thing. It's also because people are seeing so many paintings online and maybe it's also in the way that materials of paintings have developed. But all of a sudden painting has exploded and people seem to be really good at it across cultures … It's not my generation, it's younger than me, kids that I see even in Iran. There's this Instagram you can follow it's called Tehran Art Scene or something and it highlights Iranian artists every day. And the studios they show from Iranian artists don't look anything different than those of the Berlin or New York artists. Everyone's studios look the same* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

This awareness of a globalised, digital, visual language was also expressed by Parisa but in more positive terms as she associated it with connectivity and knowledge exchange rather than the flattening of cultural specificity:

> [Regarding] *the new generation of artists … I think that's mainly because of the internet and also Instagram. You can easily follow all the artists around the world, you can connect with them and just broaden your horizons and perspectives with what is simply a click. I think that's amazing, and I kind of see that reflection in the work …* (Interview, 20th September 2021, Zoom).

Digital technologies presented a range of opportunities for participants, connecting them to community and culture and supporting innovation and collaboration in their art practices. Technologies may facilitate the bypassing of legal and geographic restrictions for them but are not, as discussed in Chapter One, a utopian solution, entirely democratic or emancipatory. Technologies,

software and algorithms are subject to unequal power dynamics and the control of those that create, disseminate and govern them. Many issues feed into the politics of *The Internet.* Inside Iran, citizens face online and offline censorship and surveillance, internet blackouts, and sanctions that impede the free flow of communication and exchanges. These issues also affect those in diaspora. Algorithm bias on platforms such as Instagram constrains and privileges the information viewers engage with, resulting in echo chambers and silencing marginalised perspectives online.

RETURN AND EXILE

The discussion now moves from a focus on community towards diasporic movements and the motivations for them, exploring how participants navigate between Iran, the US and other locations. This discussion stems from the recognition that, despite being globally mobile, the homeland and physical experiences of it significantly influence how participants define themselves as artists and individuals. In some cases, an individual's relationship with Iran also prompted movement to alternative contexts and communities.

Return

Cohen and Yefet (2021) contend that post-revolution migration flows are often voluntary, lacking the 'exilic identity' characteristic of those forcibly displaced. This observation is supported by the accounts of participants in this study. The voluntary nature of their migration from Iran may explain why several participants felt they could move between Iran and the US with relative ease. In contrast, participants who had never been to Iran have not faced the pressures and adjustments of migration or directly encountered the issues in the homeland themselves; this might account for their expressed desire to experience it, based on a romanticised imagination of Iran.

Western discourse suggests that Iranians in diaspora are often traumatised, displaced, in exile and in fear of returning to the homeland due to oppression and gendered limitations there. These assumptions may correspond with the lack of literature on return migration among Iranians (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013). Sreberny-Mohammadi (2013) found a lack of quantitative data on reverse migration flows of the Iranian diaspora specifically. This can be attributed to the

limited number of returning diaspora Iranians and the focus, within the field of migration studies, on South-North migration routes (Fittante and Barry, 2022) and outward movement from a homeland to a hostland. In recent years, however, there has been notable return migration among young, second-generation Iranians (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013), something that the testimonies of the participants in my research also reflected. Such findings complicate straightforward notions of migration and the relationship between diaspora and their homeland.

The participants in this study discussed return to Iran in various ways. Interestingly, almost all interviewees, except Nebras, were drawn to Iran as a site of inspiration or familial and cultural connection rather than for pragmatic reasons. Motives grounded in individual fulfilment, rather than practical concerns like economic opportunities, can be attributed to participants' social class and status as artists. These factors presumably afford them greater geographic and financial flexibility compared to migrants of a lower socio-economic class.

For the participants born and raised in the US, yet to experience the country, a desire to visit Iran was expressed as a complex urge characterised by an interest in discovering 'their' culture on their own terms, retracing familial routes and immersion that would invest their art practices with authenticity. Indeed, the idea that lived experiences inside Iran, would align participants with cultural and creative authenticity was pronounced during the interviews. Clifford's (1997) understanding of "roots" and "routes" is useful here, in understanding why Iranians in diaspora might associate travel to Iran with the ability to connect with an aspect of their identity. For the participants who have never been to Iran, the homeland exists as an imagined place that they expressed a strong desire to rediscover. They spoke of connecting to their "roots" by undertaking a journey to Iran, effectively creating their own "route" to the homeland. Rex and Sheida, both born in the US, exemplify this sentiment but despite their efforts they were unable to travel to Iran due to safety concerns.

Rex expressed frustration at the way in which her family restricted information on Iran and her family's past from her. This lack of information might have contributed to an air of mystery surrounding Iran that sparked curiosity:

> *They didn't speak a lot about it* [Iran]. *My grandfather is, at this time, estranged from the family, however, he was in the navy during that time so I imagine his experience was quite specific and different. But they're very very shut down and my grandmother passed when I was younger and also the language barrier was a big part of my feelings about my identity comes from that, because I wasn't really able to learn that much about them. They did stay with us for a time when I was a child. It was always very smoothed over, you know, like, 'It was so beautiful someday you'll come'. But always a reference to 'It will never be like it was but don't pay any attention to all that trouble'* [in the media] … (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

Despite limited opportunities to discuss her family's connections to Iran, Rex's narrative suggests an awareness of how US media frames Iran, which her relatives were keen to counter in their reflections of the homeland. Curiosity, a romanticised perception of Iran, and a desire to retrace and relive her family's past were key motivations behind her desire to 'return'. This longing for a nostalgic and romanticised 'home' to be discovered through physical immersion is a sentiment commonly shared among those in the diaspora. In our interview, Rex spoke of familial resistance to her return and fear of persecution but she also understood Iran as a site that could offer her creative inspiration. This indicates the significance of personal immersion and experiencing cultural roots through personal journeys:

> *I would like to go and stay for a longer period of time with family … I would be with some extended family in Tehran, but then my dad's wife's family is in Mashhad. I would be able to split my time between those two cities. As a ceramic artist, I really would love to go to Yazd because there is a really rich artistic history of that region. My grandmother was from Azerbaijan and so I'd love to go north … It would be a lot of retracing family migratory patterns and trying to get as deep into the art subculture, dominant culture and subculture as possible. Because of the art that's happening by Iranian artists right now, I'm just really curious about what's able to be made there and what is just being shown there and being made elsewhere. I have a lot of Iranian friends who are making work here and*

> *showing it in certain galleries in Iran and some of the work is pretty critical, I'm curious what the threshold is. I would love to film and produce some work there* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

The desire for physical return to the homeland is a common dream among those in the diaspora and in exile, though it often remains unfulfilled. To date, the participants who wished to visit Iran for the first time have not yet achieved this goal. Artists in this study, particularly Leila, Parisa, Mobina, Rex and Tala expressed an awareness of and curiosity towards artists practising in Iran. This suggests that despite being in the diaspora, they feel a connection to artists operating within Iran, they are monitoring them, keen to connect with their output and afford these practitioners a certain level of symbolic capital.

In Rex's case, lack of information regarding her family's experience in Iran contributed to mystery and intrigue. Conversely, for Shedia, the inter-generational transference of her family's experiences motivated her to travel to Iran, suggesting the power of one generation's narratives in shaping the realities of the next, as she recounted:

> *As a nurse in Iran, my mother worked for quite some time in the delivery ward in a village hospital. Many women would have stillbirths, or give birth to babies that had a variety of complications. Feeling ashamed, they would often leave the bodies of the children behind to be thrown away. My mother decided to preserve the babies in jars, and would paint and draw them from memory for me as a child … I didn't understand that it was strange as a concept until I got a bit older. When she had to escape the country, her mother asked her to finally bury the jars in their backyard under her favourite tree, narenj- a sour,* [bitter] *orange tree. When I was a teenager, she drew me a map of where they were located in the yard, indicating the specific tree's location. My initial motivations for wanting to travel to Iran were to visit the site of my mother's home, use her map, and find the buried jars. Being able to actually associate the stories told to me with real-life experience has been a major motivator for my desire to travel to Iran. Another motivation would obviously be to be somewhere where my native tongue is spoken, as there are not many Farsi speakers in the*

area where I live. Unfortunately, I am exiled and cannot visit (Interview, 16th July 2022).

Both participants' status as dual nationals contributed to a distinct experience; it impacted their ability to travel to Iran and their sense of safety there. In Sheida's case, this was amplified by her family's political affiliations and traumatic departure from Iran as well as the critical and politically-motivated content of her art. These factors contributed to her sense of exile suggesting interaction between familial legacies and individual agency.

The experiences and concerns of dual nationals, that they might be, for example, government targets in Iran, may be distinct from the concerns of Iranian nationals who migrated in later life or the revolution generation who moved to the US before them. In our interview, Rex said:

> *I would be probably travelling as a dual citizen. There's a lot of resistance in my family for me to travel that way because citizens have been and continue to be targets in travel … I think I would be safe … but there's a reasonable fear I think* (Interview, 2nd March 2021, Zoom).

Sheida succeeded in obtaining an Iranian passport but was also dissuaded from visiting Iran by family members due to political unrest during the Green Movement. Reflecting the contingent and fluctuating nature of exile, Sheida's new politically motivated artwork, which responded to the Green Movement, contributed to a sense that she was in exile and could no longer travel to Iran:

> *I tried so hard when I was in college, the political situation, the Green Revolution had just happened and I had started making political artwork. I was applying to get my passport because technically, because of my parents, I'm a dual citizen, even though they don't recognise American citizenship and vice versa … I was going through the motions to get my passport. I got it. And then as soon as I was getting ready to travel, all of our family in Iran was like, 'Don't come right now. It's a really bad time, especially if you're making* [art] *work' … I've always been politically minded because of my parents and what happened to them. I had been*

> *somewhat outspoken, but I'd never done it blatantly in my work. And then seeing what was happening there and here in America, I was like, 'OK, I want to talk about this or I want to make something about it'* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Sheida used her art to critique the Iranian Islamic Regime, contributing to a sense of separation through exile. Other participants used their art to cultivate a sense of cultural and physical proximity to Iran. Indeed, the majority of artists in this study remained conceptually engaged with Iran albeit in distinct ways. This comes across in the interview with Bahar who said:

> *… The source of my inspiration for my works, my memories, and my identity all come from Iran. I've been changing throughout these 20 years of living outside Iran. I'm not the same person, but I can't stop thinking about Iran* (Interview, 1st June 2021).

Participants were motivated to produce art within Iran and collaborate with Iranians for various reasons. These included a longing for cultural authenticity, a wish to repair the perceived distance associated with migration, aspirations to embed themselves within or support the Iranian community, and the aim of establishing new networks between diaspora and non-diaspora practitioners.

Leila described a transnational existence but an enduring personal and artistic connection to Iran. She was born in the US and moved to Iran during her youth for education, she later moved to Paris and then back to the US for further education. She described herself as currently existing between Iran and the US and, for her, regular return trips to Iran seemed positive and unproblematic:

> *I go back and forth as I go to Iran three times a year and I just love going to the bazaar and looking at this traditional craftsmanship like Persian marquetry … It takes a month for them to create these geometric patterns, it's just so beautiful. I feel like, in Iran, people, especially my generation, don't appreciate this art as much as I do. I just wanted to merge it with something like skateboards and bring attention to it again …* (Interview, 9th December 2021, Zoom).

Mobina also expressed that returning to Iran would enrich her art. Similarly to Leila, she has ambitions to co-produce artworks with Iranians, suggesting that collaboration with artisans can infuse artwork with cultural authenticity and preserve 'pure' culture and traditions, as Mobina discussed:

> *If I could go back to Iran then I think things would be much easier for me to create a much more authentic project, because my goal and one of the things in my art practice is connecting these dots. I love methodology, the history, craftsmanship, whatever is very traditional. I love, but I want to bring to the contemporary format. So I think if I had those opportunities that are inside Iran; those craftsmen are amazing … I could create so many more projects that are so super valuable* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Parisa too shared aspirations of an existence, as an artist, operating between the US and Iran. This suggests that the question of 'belonging' continues to preoccupy these artists post-migration yet, they imagine reconciling this through a lifestyle that allows them to navigate both locations physically and professionally, suggesting a liquid conceptualisation of life and work. Parisa also expressed a sense of duty towards the Iranian community suggesting that, despite time spent in the US, she still felt strong ties to Iranians in Iran:

> *It's my dream to be able to work in both countries. I feel that I have to give back to my home country, where I have spent the majority of my life there. I know that being an artist facilitates it as I can connect the two nations through art and creative collaboration* (Interview, 8th July 2022, Zoom).

Mehregan, Mobina, and Tala discussed transnational movements, shaped by their positionality as artists, moving between countries for residencies and opportunities connected to their artistic careers. They discussed their perception of opportunities in Iran in relation to their gender which they framed as a limitation. Tala, for example, suggested that class and gender contribute to opportunities and positive experiences for males within Iran's patriarchal society that might not be experienced by females:

> *Certainly, nobody lives the way they do if Iran wasn't Iran. I mean, if your mom was, let's say, Greek or Turkish, the ebb and flow of back and forth, would be much more normal. My mom might have just gotten her degree and come back to Iran as opposed to staying in the US. Anyone who leaves generally doesn't come back except for I would say if you come from a very affluent family in Iran and if you're a man or a boy or a young boy, you might have more opportunities in Iran than you would outside of Iran …* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

Tala's comments align with the findings of other researchers who suggested return migration patterns among the Iranian diaspora vary generationally and according to intersectional factors including gender (see Rostamalizadeh and Ardahaee, 2016; Fittante and Barry, 2022).

Despite barriers to return, the longing for Iran persisted among participants. Their desire revealed a stronger relationship between the Iranian diaspora and Iran than suggested by Western media representations. From an artistic perspective, Iran represented an opportunity for professional development and inspiration. Those born outside Iran were motivated to visit the country out of curiosity and a longing to experience their cultural roots on their own terms. This suggests that first-hand experiences, or even imagining such experiences in the national context, play a prominent role in the construction of the self and underline the enduring relevance of the nation in shaping personal identity.

New Routes

Although most participants had opportunities in the US, they were thinking of new journeys. This suggests that Iranian migratory experiences are in flux and that the US is not always perceived as a final destination. Travel was generally discussed by participants as something regular, easy and accessible. Their reasons for travelling were largely grounded in individual fulfilment and connection—meeting family members or for the purposes of their art and inspiration—suggesting a cosmopolitan consciousness amongst this group. On the transformative potential of travel and exposure to new contexts Longinović and Buden (2008) suggest that subjects are caught amid the "global flow of identifications" and that new subjects are produced through experiences of travel

and translation that results in a process of “becoming across cultures” (2008: para 2-3):

> The question of translators’ identity remains at all times within the horizon of crossing boundaries between communities and their particular idioms, in displacements informing their particular routes of cultural exchange (ibid.).

Mehregan felt her artwork acquired new depth after travel. Travelling within the US and Europe provided her with reflective space to contemplate themes such as the acceptance and rejection of the nude body in various social settings, filtered through her prior experiences in Iran. These interactions contributed to a realisation that the acceptance/rejection of nudity is socially constructed, contingent, and varies according to context, which led to the creation of new work. The interviews suggested that reflections on aspects of identity like gender are fluid and ongoing processes, subject to revision in dialogue with new interactions:

> *That phobia of nudity … that fear of, ‘Oh, if I’m nude, if anybody sees me what do people think?’ … the film that I made, I made it in the Netherlands. I spent about three months being in different parts, from Amsterdam to little small towns close to South of France and observing the cultures of nudity in different places, from Texas to San Francisco to LA to Iran … Comparing all these things and getting over my own fears. Because at the same time, I had this thought that if I’m confronting somebody as an audience that is standing on this spectrum of covering and nudity, these two paradoxes or different points, if I’m trying to break down the fear for someone who really believes in this covering, I can bring that question. I can have them come one step closer to me. I don’t want them to accept who I am, but, you know, kind of like breaking those structures* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Mehregan articulated a sense of being between two worlds: one characterised by stability and static tradition, represented by her family and home, and the other by the ever-shifting, international dynamics of the diaspora she inhabits. This juxtaposition suggests that individuals in the diaspora may view their culture

of origin as immutable and unwavering, contrasting with the fluidity of their diasporic existence:

> *I think a lot about that, how my family, they never change. And my society has been changing a lot from being here in Texas, San Francisco, Los Angeles, visiting Europe, you know, all those things … It's important for me to constantly monitor all these two aspects and then see who I am. Who the new person is, you know … I'm changing, the society is changing, but my core, which is my family and my understanding to the world is the same and that is the thing that needs to be deconstructed … 'Who am I?' My tradition is a part of who am I.* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

While Mehregan acknowledged the influence of her new journeys, there is a conflicting sense that she constructs her understanding through critical comparison between the binaries of here/there and past/present. This suggests both a sense of cultural confusion and a negotiation of the self wherein time, distance, and new experiences have not interrupted the dominant role of her cultural heritage and traditions in shaping her identity.

Tala, discussed her international and varied interests as formative in her self-perception, contributing to a 'scattered' and at times conflicting identity. She described a cosmopolitan and transnational existence: she was an intern at the German Council on Foreign Affairs researching immigration and integration in Berlin, a student of political science, a resident artist at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam for two years, a migrant who moved from Tehran to Oregon, an internationally exhibited artist, a wife and a mother who later settled in California. Beyond her geographic shifts, Tala has inhabited various social fields as a migrant, student, mother, and artist, as such she draws from multiple reference points when negotiating her 'self' in relation to her social environments:

> *It's difficult when your own identity is scattered, Oregon, and the art world for example, you can't share with rural friends. When identity becomes very scattered, to find a soul connection that meets you on all those levels is difficult* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

These divergent experiences and bonds made it difficult for her to establish meaningful ‘soul connections’, as she termed it, that fulfil her on all levels as she mediates between diverse affiliations. This tension between identities also manifests in her art that negotiates multiple spaces. Her experiences of gendered division, reinforced by the Turkish community in Berlin, for example, offered an opportunity for Tala to reflect upon the patriarchal divisions she knew from Iran, yet she approached this subject matter as if addressing a Western audience. This is just one example of how Tala’s multiple affiliations and experiences have contributed to art that cannot be easily codified or confined to a single geography or context.

Tala contrasted her urban art community with her rural friends, suggesting that the imagined space between a rural existence and her cosmopolitan lifestyle is so vast that finding common ground for fulfilling connections is problematic. For migrants, communities often form rapidly based on easily identifiable bonds such as nationality. Therefore, early connections, made following migration to Oregon, might lack the intellectual stimulation that Tala seeks. The more varied experiences and affiliations one has the more challenging it might be to find common ground with others, as Tala recounted:

> *There are not that many Iranians in Oregon, but you do create a de facto community based on the fact we are from there* [Iran] *even though we might have very different perspectives or values, not a soul connection. It fulfils something but not necessarily the other things, perhaps not intellectually* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

Nebras’ international movements were spurred by a combination of professional frustrations, due to lack of opportunities in the US, and the hostile political climate there under Trump. She had previously lived in Iran but found that her bid to return following more than a decade in the US was problematic. There, Nebras faced poor economic conditions, structures that limited the advancement of women and a lack of engagement with her artistic medium within the art market. She attempted to pursue a career as an academic but despite ‘participating in the system’ and complying with the faith and gender-based restrictions Nebras felt unable to succeed under these conditions (a frustration also expressed by Mobina and Aida). This suggests that even when one follows

the local rules one cannot necessarily advance:

> *I wanted to live in Iran, and I really tried for two years. I had been trying a lot to adjust myself. I had struggled with finding a job. I found a university job that pays me less than my taxi fare. And I was going to it and I thought, 'What is this thing?' I'm coming from America just to deal with this and everyone said, 'Are you insane? Like you're going to survive in Iran and work?' And I didn't believe anyone, you know, I ended up wearing a hijab with the longest socks because I thought, 'I want to be in the system' - anything that they ask for.*
>
> *I wanted to work and live in Iran, and I really tried and I realised they just don't want me there. And I couldn't survive in the system of education* (Interview, 10th September 2021, Zoom).

In less than five years, Nebras experienced a series of significant relocations: she left the US, attempted to return to Iran, spent time on artistic projects in Poland and Berlin, and sought to move to the UAE, though visa issues due to her Iranian citizenship proved problematic there at the time. Eventually, she settled in Qatar, where she found work teaching photography. While the opportunity for international mobility is common among artists, Nebras' experience reflects a particular openness and adaptability in response to unmet personal needs. Her transnational movements were influenced by interlocking factors, including economic, social, and political conditions, career opportunities, and the question of "Where do I belong?".

Exile

As well as discussing return to Iran, participants expressed an awareness of their potential status as exiles. Perceptions of exile were informed by their own activities and intersectionality as well as those of their ancestors. One might assume, for example, without attempting to travel to Iran, that they too would be exiled if their family members were.

As argued above, the dominant labelling of Iranians as exiles is misrepresentative. Bozorgmehr (1998), for example, notes that among Iranians

who left for the US following the 1979 Revolution the differences in characteristics between Iranian exiles/refugees and immigrants, were "significant"; these differences affected their acculturation in the US (16). The primary motivations for leaving Iran among this group are as follows: 43 percent of the Iranians (surveyed in Los Angeles) were classified as exiles or political refugees and 57 percent as immigrants (Bozorgmehr, 1998). Exiles and refugees were more likely to have migrated with family members, with the intention that they would return to Iran. This group includes more members of Iranian faith-based minorities like the Bahá'ís and Jews (Bozorgmehr, 1998: 16). Indeed, the intersection of faith contributes to a specific experience. McAuliffe (2007) found that faith contributed to the maintenance of transnational social fields and a specific relationship to Iran among Iranian migrants. Whether someone was of a Muslim or Bahá'í background, for example, impacted the type of interactions they had with Iran and the transnational social fields that connected the "nation of residence" with Iran (38).

Within this sample set, two participants identified as Bahá'í. They indicated that their faith significantly affected their families' treatment in Iran and their opportunities to enter the country. Their experiences are, however, distinct and cannot be used to make generalisations due to the small sample size. Kimia, who was born and raised in the US, considers herself in exile from Iran due to the narratives passed down from her family members about the persecution they faced there. Conversely, Maryam, who lived in Iran with her extended family, also acknowledges her status as an exile. For her, exile is primarily due to the type of art she produces and her engagement with international media, but these actions are motivated by her faith. She still has family members living in Iran, suggesting that her faith is not the sole reason for her exile. This indicates that the notion of exile is temporal, subjective and constantly negotiated in line with personal actions and intersections of identity, as Maryam discussed:

> *I am exiled from Iran because a few times they have arrested my family members and friends they asked about my paintings during their interrogation. Also when my 19-year-old sister was arrested in 2016 during the time she was in solitary confinement, I was interviewing with Voice of America and BBC etc. … about her situation. Because of my activity, she*

> *was asked by her interrogator why her family was making so much noise about her arrest. Because of all this, I am sure that as soon as I arrive at Tehran Airport I would be arrested because of being in touch with foreign media, as well as my paintings which are talking about the reality of the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran that was kept hidden, silent and covered* (Interview, 25th June 2022, Zoom).

Maryam's experience indicates that the Iranian state's surveillance extends to Iranians abroad and that the persecution of family members might be used as leverage to pressure individuals into censoring their critical voices. The actions of those outside the country, then, can directly impact the lives of those inside Iran, indicating the far-reaching influence of external dissent on domestic realities.

Discussing exile, Naficy (1991), suggested that such notions are subject to revision. As with all official histories and narratives, exilic ones are not fixed nor homogeneous as "exile itself is processual in that it flows in history and changes with time" (Naficy, 1991: 299). During the period of fieldwork, between 2021 and 2023, I observed changes in participants' perceptions of exile even within this short timeframe. Mobina, for example, expressed differing attitudes towards her status of exile due to shifts in socio-political climates and her own public expressions as an artist. When first interviewed in 2022 she expressed a sense of concern and confusion as to whether she could safely visit Iran, contrasting her experience as an emerging artist with that of established artist Shirin Neshat.[59]

Experiences of exile, for those who experienced the traumatic expulsion of the 1979 Revolution, may have felt more pronounced than for the post-revolution generation, who became aware of exile in different ways. This later generation benefits from greater access to travel and digital technologies, enabling more frequent and intimate connections with their community. These shifts suggest that the experience of exile is not static but evolves over time, transformed by how individuals maintain ties to their homeland. Mobina, for example, discussed how her family would meet in a third, 'safe' country when travel to Iran was

[59] While Shirin Neshat describes herself as an artist in exile, her return to Iran in 1990 underlines the ambiguity and fluidity of the term.

deemed problematic. Such solutions do, however, have limitations, as her father's limited mobility restricted their opportunities to reunite:

> *In the covid time everything changed. When I moved to America going to Iran became much harder. It's so far away. In London, I went every year to Iran. My parents are there and need our help but now we cannot visit them. You never know. It's very sensitive. When I go I'm not that famous, we know Shirin Neshat is not allowed to enter. Emerging artists we work on our own topic, for me it's 50/50* [safety] *because there are spies everywhere. I love to visit my parents but there are always these things in my head. If I go, instead of seeing my parents I go to jail. Often we meet in Turkey or Dubai instead. But at the same time, it's very difficult because my dad is not well* (Interview, 24th August 2021, Zoom).

When interviewed later, in 2023, Mobina suggested that she was more certain of her status in exile because of her public, politically-motivated art that reflected the treatment and status of Iranian women produced in response to the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement:

> *Oh, wow. Yeah.* [in response to the question: do you consider yourself to be in exile?]. *Now, because of the performance I had and everything. Because before my message for women was indirect, but still I was on the target, on the radar. But now that I create this, you know, all of these Instagram, social media and everything and the performances, it's very direct for the government* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

While not generalisable, her comments reflected the contingent character of exile that may alter as socio-political conditions do and as a result of individual agency. Mobina aligned her perceptions of safety with her actions in online spaces. This suggests that while offering her a global audience for her art, platforms like Instagram also expose her to risk and the surveillance of the Iranian State.

The idea of dual citizenship (discussed earlier) both facilitates and prohibits one's ability to move freely between countries and belong. In our interview, Mobina expressed that the treatment of dual nationals in Iran has changed. Her

status as a dual national, particularly in a climate of heightened tensions between the US and Iran, where news of arbitrary arrests and prisoner swaps is common, contributed to her anxiety about travelling to Iran:

> *The fear of so many people going back to Iran, even the ones that had no problem, but now like it's kind of making them … a* [prisoner] *trade with America so they get their money. The government get the money too, because we are now double nationality* [suggesting prisoner swaps are financially motivated by the Iranian State/US leadership]*. So from anywhere in the world, we go there, we become targets.* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Among this sample set, the exilic condition brought about travel patterns ('routes') that seemed to be shaped by a desire for cultural and geographic proximity to the country. Naficy (1991) claims that when return is "not possible in actuality, and when its metaphorical and narratological staging is found to be insufficient, other substitutes may be sought" (290). This corresponds with the actions of Kimia, who sought a substitute for Iran in the form of a third country. Kimia described her year in India as "transformational"; although she could not travel to Iran due to her exilic status, she found similarities between Indian and Iranian visual cultures as she discussed:

> *I've never been able to go back to Iran because of being a Bahá'í … It's a deep longing and sadness of mine not being able to go, it feels like a cultural amputation. Being in India, even though India and Iran are very different (Persians would kill me if they ever heard me comparing the two); they are very different. The cultures are not so comparable, but the architecture is comparable and art is comparable. Indian miniatures and Hindi and Persian have a lot of overlap. I could actually understand a bit of Hindi. So being in India for a year was transformational because it was the first time that I was seeing Persian and Indian miniatures up close in real life* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

Her imagining of the homeland in a comparable setting highlights the role of imagination in establishing a sense of home and cultural connection for those in exile. This experience sparked a period of experimentation in her artistic practice

as well as reflection on her national identity. Indeed, interview data suggested that journeys and opportunities to connect with cultural roots have been generative for participants. Migration, then, might be an initial diasporic journey but it is not the end or the only journey of significance in the contemporary diasporic and exilic existence.

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this chapter has sought to unpack some of the complexities of the movements and migration journeys of post-revolution Iranian migrants to the US. It has suggested that a combination of push-pull factors and socio-political currents in both Iran and the US stimulated their movements. For this generation, migration has largely been driven by individualistic motivations rather than collective and traumatic ones, marking a significant departure from the experiences of the previous generation. The experiences and international movements of this sample set do, however, continue to be shaped by the migration patterns and affiliations of the earlier generation. This legacy frames their relationship with Iran, suggesting continuity, divergence and exchange across generations.

The research interviews revealed that migration for education remains prevalent across generations. Participants sought out opportunities for higher education and professional advancement not readily available to them in Iran. Their pursuit of education is, however, complicated by other factors, including societal expectations, limited professional opportunities, and the quest for personal freedom against a backdrop of gendered limitations in Iran. Education abroad, at Master's and PhD levels, offered a gateway to social mobility and prestige, often perceived as outweighing or equal to traditional markers of success like marriage in the eyes of Iranian families. Education also provides an accessible and straightforward route to migration. For some participants, education abroad represented an opportunity for personal growth and self-realisation, particularly for those aspiring to break-free from gendered confines in Iran and pursue artistic careers. Perceptions of limitations and opportunities in Iran varied among individuals. Some perceived success, authenticity, and fulfilment within the Iranian art scene and attempted to connect to it from afar, while others felt barriers to their aspirations and focused on opportunities abroad.

Migration and exposure to new cultural contexts provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their identities. Migration also triggered a transformation in the way some participants reflected on and performed their national identity. Distance from the homeland can, for example, intensify one's sense of Iranian identity, leading to a reevaluation of cultural nuances and a heightened connection to Iranian heritage. Alternatively, it may offer space and time to reflect upon negative experiences and aspects of homeland culture, such as gender imbalances.

The political conditions in Iran and the US played a significant role in shaping the participants' realities. The event of 9/11 imprinted on their social worlds, their reception in the US and dominant framings under the threat/terror narrative. Participants expressed concerns about right-wing politics, racial stereotyping, and the impact of policies such as travel bans and sanctions on their lives under the presidency of Trump. The rise of conservative ideologies in both countries further complicated their sense of belonging and created an awareness of their contingent status in diaspora. These events have also been generative for artists seeking to contest dominant narratives and stereotypes attributed to them in the US context through their art.

Participants deployed coping strategies to achieve a sense of home in the diasporic context. They actively sought out cultural touchpoints and community among the Iranian diaspora, and through their art practices, they engaged in cultural preservation and recreation. Such practices support them in achieving a sense of belonging in the diasporic context while also helping them negotiate their sense of self. Participants of the second-generation diaspora and those navigating hybrid family dynamics engaged with Iranian culture in particular ways. Their positionality and exposure to American and Iranian influences resulted in a negotiation of identity amid two distinct cultural spaces.

Digital communication technologies have reshaped real-world dynamics, forging bonds and a shared consciousness among the Iranian diaspora. Technologies have sustained participants' connections to Iran, Iranian culture, and global Iranian communities. Interestingly, however, traditional offline practices like

poetry readings continue to hold significance for this group, suggesting that online interactions have not completely supplanted collective, in-person activities.

Reflecting on their roles as artists, participants expressed conflicting perspectives towards digital spaces, which offer them both security and risk and opportunities for innovation. This suggests a sense of ambiguity exacerbated by the Iranian State's evolving use of technologies to monitor and control its population, extending even to Iranians abroad. Despite these challenges, internet technologies offer benefits, supporting the formation of artistic communities and collaborative opportunities, reshaping the relationships between diaspora and non-diaspora individuals. This evolving dynamic can give rise to new art forms, networks, and creative processes. In parallel, the internet contributes to a global consciousness and its own aesthetic trends that transcend a fixed location.

The participants' responses did not align with dominant narratives surrounding exile and return migration. They expressed their desire to return to Iran, a phenomenon shaped by individualistic motivations, familial narratives, artistic aspirations, and a longing to reconnect with cultural roots. Unlike previous generations who may have considered themselves in exile post-migration, some participants harboured a voluntary desire to visit or return to Iran, driven by curiosity, a romanticised perception of their homeland and a desire to discover it on their own terms. International movement, for this group, seemed frequent and accessible, often motivated by artistic endeavours as well as for connection to community and culture. Migration, then, is not the end of the participants' journey; they continue to move, explore, and seek something new; they are still searching, unsettled and looking for a centre.

CHAPTER FOUR
IDENTITY

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the catalysts and conditions that propelled participants into diaspora, their acculturation experiences, and the events and

social conditions that shape their existence. Now, the discussion moves towards an examination of identities. As previously discussed, the social conditions, frameworks, and lived realities of the post-revolution generation diverge from those that experienced the 1979 Revolution, a group that has been extensively discussed in existing literature. Navigating their own socio-political terrain, the post-revolution generation are distinguished by their engagement with digital technologies and transnational lifestyles, factors that influence their self-conception, perspectives, social interactions and artistic production. As in the previous chapter, through a combination of fieldwork interviews with diasporic Iranian women artists and semiotic analysis of their artwork this chapter offers insight into the complex articulations of identities within this underexplored demographic.

The discussion initially examines how the confluence of participants' various intersections of identities moulds their experiences and perspectives, it then looks at how their diasporic lived experiences and awareness of external framings might further shape their identity articulations. Based on the interviews and analysis of the artworks, several themes emerged, which this chapter will now explore.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Why Gender?

Up to this point, it has been emphasised that the framing and appropriation of the image of the Middle Eastern, particularly the Iranian woman is prevalent in various contexts, encountered in Western media and political discourse and at different levels in the art market. Participants expressed a particular awareness of their gender and the attendant constraints and opportunities it entails, thereby signifying the role of gender intersectionality in shaping their experiences. They discussed their active engagement in processes of self-representation, driven by a recognition of being misunderstood and misrepresented. It is valuable, then, to explore the complexities of the gendered experiences of Iranian diasporic women in a manner that centres their agency and captures the specificities of their realities. These perspectives can, arguably, only be authentically expressed by the women themselves.

Policing and Releasing Iranian Women's Bodies

Participants approached their gendered identities as a social category; they discussed how they constructed these identities in their art to transcend gendered limitations imposed upon them and negotiate the complex and various facets of how they see themselves in diaspora. Self-representation in their art seemed central to these negotiations and connected participants to broader transnational feminist social movements.

During the 1960s and 70s, feminist artists engaged in processes of self-representation in their art, motivated by the lack of visibility and acknowledgement of women in the traditional art canon and a desire to control their representation. This movement, supported by the belief that "the personal is political" saw women artists produce work that "expressed their feelings as women artists in a man's world, as women in a man's world, and just as women" (Borzello, 1998: 159 cited in Vasko, 2007: para 6). To counter dominant portrayals of the female body as a "voiceless object to be judged by male spectators" women artists engaged their own bodies under the premise that they could control the narrative and direct the audience's response (Borzello, 1998: 167 cited in Vasko, 2007: para 7). The emphasis on the 'self', taking ownership over the gendered body and authoring subjective realities in the practice of Iranian women artists can, therefore, be viewed as a political act, a bid for agency and voice.

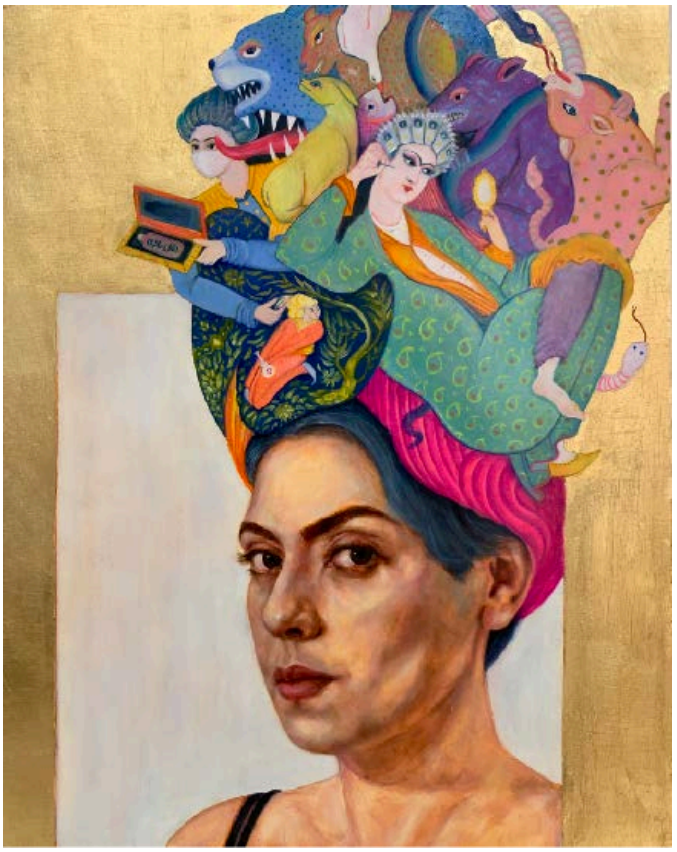

Figure 18

Bahar Sabzevari, *Pandemic, Crown* series, 2020, [oil and gold leaf on wood panel], Leila Heller, New York

Bahar's self-portrait is a site where personal anxieties can be expressed and where the personal transformation she underwent after migrating can be processed. She views self-portraiture as a means to imagine an expanded and flexible version of the self, indicating that identification is a continual process of negotiation and revision, which she attempts to narrate and negotiate upon her self-image. Through self-portraiture Bahar connects the diverse aspects of the self in a singular space where they might converse. The complexities and richness of Iranian women's identities are reinforced through bold colour that characterises Bahar's work in contrast to the stark, binary, black-and-white visions of Iranian womanhood depicted in Western media and by some artists of the revolution generation like Shirin Neshat. In our interview, she said:

> *At the beginning of my art practice, I chose to reflect upon and share my personal stories through the process of making self-portraits. Because immigration, in general, can evoke many emotional subjects such as*

> *personal anxiety, history and identity it was very challenging and somehow, it was rewarding.*
>
> *And that transformative process of immigration and adjusting myself to a different culture … has been linked to my creativity and to my art, which allows me to have an expanded, and flexible perception of myself and of others. I feel my work, even more than me, could find its way to connect with people even in the absence of a shared language because art is the universal language, specifically visual arts that can speak for themselves* (Interview, 17th May 2021).

The act of layering or inscribing elements onto the body renders them intimate. This is evident in Bahar's work *Pandemic* (2020), where signifiers of different aspects of her identity—her interest in nature and longing for an Iran of the past—are intertwined as a crown upon her forehead, suggesting the high status she places upon these aspects of the self. The work's title captures an incident of pressing concern to the artist, the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the deployment of her self-portrait, Bahar challenges traditional power dynamics. She stares directly back at the viewer, reclaiming the gaze and raising questions about who is looking at whom and who holds the power in the interaction. This suggests an awareness of the audience and who might be observing her as an Iranian woman and forming judgements. By composing works that reveal her subjective interests—other works feature icons as varied as dinosaurs, lobster claws, and CNN microphones—Bahar, as an Iranian woman, contests monolithic portrayals through a performance of her multifaceted interests. Her bricolage of references that span cultures, contexts, and genres in a singular space refutes neat definitions.

As well as foregrounding the complexities of their identities, other participants reflected on the physical limitations experienced by women in Iran from their new diasporic perspective. The female body is a site of control where religious, legal, social, and political discourses intersect. Participants, however, transcended these constraints, taking control of and inserting their gendered bodies into places and spaces that women are typically prohibited from. In Ranciere's (2004)

terms, they visually disrupt the dominant order, imagining one more favourable to Iranian women.

The artists of this study often layered their self-portraits with signifiers of Iranian national and cultural identities evoking a sense of in-betweenness and preoccupation with the past. By controlling and appropriating the codes of the nation-state and merging them with their own, gendered bodies, participants attempted to reconcile the gendered and national fragments of the self while raising questions of legitimacy. They confronted the spaces that women can and cannot inhabit in Iran. Their amalgamations collapse structures of division and governance over women's bodies, transcending social and legal restrictions on women and releasing their bodies from the confines of the private space into the public, elevating them into sacred and male-dominated realms.

This process of collapsing social divisions appears in Ghazal's art. In her *Ornamental Oppression* (2018) series she takes and then 'breaks' the eight-pointed geometric star pattern associated with Islamic geometry, absorbed from the Golestan Palace in Tehran. In one work, she inserts her self-portrait into spaces that the unveiled female body might typically be prohibited from but she is blindfolded (see Figure 19). Self-portraiture, in Ghazal's art, politicises her body but also universalises it, she connects her experiences to those of other women who may share similar issues. Her image enters into the wider discourse surrounding the gendered oppression, as she discusses:

> *The personal is political. In feminist history as well as in feminist theory they talk about women's personal experiences as a political experience because it matters. I use myself and my self-portrait appears in so many pieces of mine because I'm talking about experiences that I went through. I am one of the many women living in the US experiencing these issues … I just talk about personal experiences, but you know that could also be a collective experience* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

The disruption of repetitive, culturally specific patterns in Ghazal's compositions reflects her desire to dismantle the status quo, but the work also conveys a sense of struggle. It illustrates that patriarchal boundaries can be broken and that

the status of women is unfixed. It also materialises the oppression she has experienced on multiple levels, from Iran's gendered restrictions to Western hierarchies. The imposition of the blindfold signifies her disadvantage, but the inclusion of verses from *Shahnameh*—a symbol of the battle between light and shadow—leaves a trace of hope that remains indecipherable to outsiders, suggesting that emancipation is still possible:

> *My use of patterns references the patterns we have in society, patterns have been repeated so many times we feel the need to follow them, and there are so many of these patterns that become oppression upon women.*
>
> *Because of Islamic art and patterns, all figurative forms were banned* [in Iran]*, and that's where I began to create these patterns to show the notion of division without any representational form … I was trying to show the oppression of women by covering their eyes and their head and with the screaming figure, but then the text* [on the scarf] *from the Book of Kings, Shahnameh … There's a battle between light/dark in the book. With the central character, I'm highlighting how the role of women in Iran was under the influence of the Islamic Regime. By covering the face and identity of the women I emphasise the invisibility of women, and also the gaze into them, they don't want your gaze* (Interview, 24th January 2022).

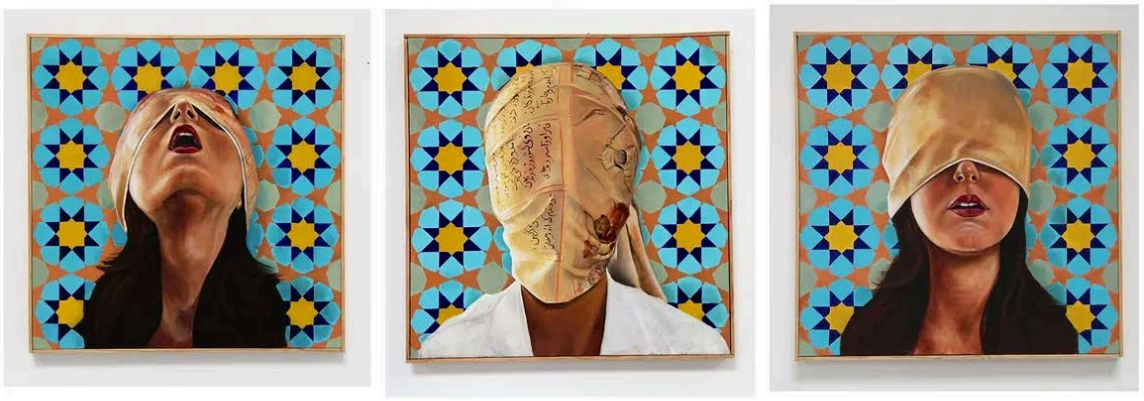

Figure 19

Ghazal Rahimi, *Ornamental Oppression* series, 2018, [oil on canvas]

Other artists, including Mehregan and Mobina, depicted the female form—both naked and clothed—layered upon icons of Iranian nationhood, suggesting a desire to reconcile various aspects of their identities—gender, nationality, and, in some cases, sexuality—in the same space. This common desire for these identities to coexist and investigating what this might look like through their art suggests the fragmentation of the self that participants aim to reconcile through their art.

Through the use of her body in her work, Mehregan contests the idea that the Iranian gendered body is a monolithic entity, but rather a complex amalgamation of meanings and experiences. For *Catch Me*, *I'm Falling Asleep* (2014) the artist photographed herself and her partner in various states of undress, staging the moment when human bodies are in their most peaceful and disarming state, asleep (Pezeshki, 2023a). As a counterpoint, this suggests that the artist views conscious human behaviour as synonymous with conflict.

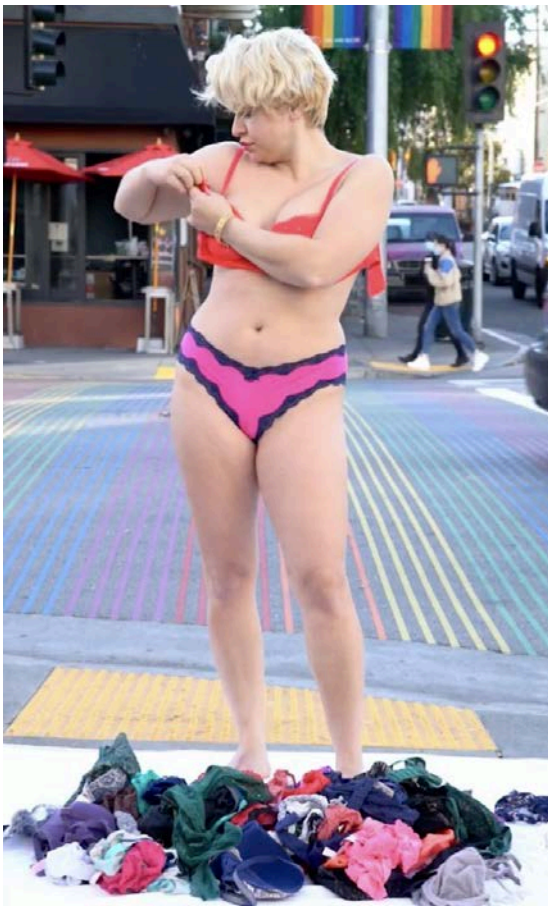

Figure 20

Mehregan Pezeshki, *Imagine If It Was Tehran*, 2020, [still from video of live performance]

Here, the female body reveals various aspects of the gendered experience related to Mehregan's private world—romance, intimacy, rest, and vulnerability. Conversely, her video performance *Imagine if It Was Tehran* (2020) politicised the female nude, engaging it with discourse on the role and rights of women in both Iranian and American societies (see Figure 20). The artist performed in underwear on the streets of San Francisco. Underwear, she contends, is the most private item of clothing; thus, she exposed something intimate in the public space. Her partially nude body transgressed the boundaries of the public/private realms. It materialised something that she suggests might be impossible in Iran—the female nude body in the public domain. Mehregan invited her audience to reflect upon where her gendered body is and is not allowed to exist. She could have filmed this performance in the privacy of her home, but she chose to stage it on the streets of San Francisco, rendering herself vulnerable. The public and dialogical character of the work engages the audience. It immerses them in her narrative suggesting that the reaction of the American public is fundamental to her performance of the self. Her perceived safety in this context contrasts with the violence and legal consequences she would likely face for revealing her body in Iran.[60] Mehregan navigated the meaning of her gendered body in dual contexts, filtering her current experiences in the US through her past life in Iran. Reflecting on this process, she discussed an awareness of objectification, judgement and the external gaze. Interestingly, for Mehregan, the reaction of other Iranian women to her undressed body was of keen concern suggesting that Iranian women as well as men police and constrain female bodies:

> *I started working with underwear which for me is the most private clothing that we use every day. And it's kind of about the judgment and the bad—consumerism, capitalism—all these things, kind of like involved in the objectification of my own self … When I started working with underwear and then mostly performance pieces, I went to Castro in San Francisco … I just got naked and it's funny because the piece called 'Imagine if it was Tehran', I mean, I wouldn't have said but, you know, I was thinking, 'If I did this piece in Tehran, probably women would be the first people to come and try to cover me or stop me'. But in San Francisco,*

[60] Although Mehregan considers the Castro, a queer community in San Francisco, a safe space, she may still encounter stigma, violence and negative public reactions there.

nobody really sees any interaction like people even looking … The idea of safe space was very present for me … (Interview, 19th May 2021, Zoom).

Figure 21

Mobina Nouri, *Hair in Wind*, 2018, limited edition of 7, [black ink on premium canvas and artist's handwritten calligraphy], Advocartsy Gallery, LA

The nude body in Mobina's *Hair in Wind* (2018) composition is invested with an emancipatory quality but also a sense of vulnerability suggesting the multiplicity of this sign. She unifies the nude female body with emblems of Persian high culture—Farsi script and the Persian carpet—suggesting a desire for intimate engagement with specific visions of nationhood. The text Mobina uses is often derived from her favourite historic Iranian poets, Rumi and Hafez (see glossary), yet their words are distorted into abstraction, rendering them barely legible. The figure's body, curled to conceal its identity, appears fragile; through its anonymity, the scene feels both personal and universal. In a similar way to Ghazal, who rendered her subject blindfolded, the idea of knowing or not knowing, being included or excluded, and a subject of the gaze is central to Mobina's

construction. The illegibility of the Farsi text contributes to ambiguity and confusion, a strategy used by several artists to engage the viewer in a process of cultural translation. This approach renders the unfamiliar Western viewer inferior, as meaning is lost when they lack insider knowledge to decode the work. The artist, then, subverts the power dynamic, reversing the power of the gaze and compelling the audience to confront their own preconceptions and ignorance. In this work, Mobina has not only challenged the Western gaze but also inserted her body into spaces which it might normally be forbidden from, thereby transgressing multiple boundaries for Iranian women.

Ghazal, Mobina and Mehregan demonstrated mutual concern with the framing and visibility of the Iranian gendered body often drawing from personal experiences. In response, they produced art that imagined a transgressing of dominant social orders, they harnessed the gendered body as an empowered site of convergence where various discourses and ideas might be negotiated and contested. Mobina and Mehregan have engaged artistic mediums such as video performance and photography, distinguished by their proximity to ‘reality’. Unlike painting, for example, these mediums evoke a sense of authenticity, capturing specific experiences just as the eye may. The documentary quality of their work intensifies the artists’ efforts to convey their realities as a counter to the dominant depictions of them.

Figure 22

Mahsa R. Fard, *Hallucination*, 2020, [acrylic on canvas]

The artists discussed above used their art to insert the female form into spaces where it might not conventionally appear in Iran, conversely, other artists have reflected upon the absence of the female form in certain environments. What unites their practices is their active engagement with women's access and visibility. This comes across clearly in the work of Mahsa who was one of the few artists to depict the veiled female in her art[61] in works such as *Hallucination* (2020) where veiled figures move into the distance (see Figure 22). The work likens the Iranian woman to a mirage in the desert. Female bodies are rendered homogenous, devoid of individuality; a wash of blue over their covered forms denotes male dominance over female bodies in Iran. In other works such as *Stadium I, II,* and *III* (2019) Mahsa depicts sports stadiums in Tehran that women are forbidden from entering. She intervenes by adding a wash of pink over the setting, denoting the trace of the women prohibited from these spaces. The artist suggested that she can only enter such domains online or through her imagination. By depicting and disrupting sites of gender segregation in Iran she transgresses the legal limitations placed upon women, exposing inequality but also an alternative reality:

[61] During the first phase of the study.

> [The] *Stadium series, that's going back to my experience back in Iran in 2018 … Until now women, they cannot go to the stadiums so I've never been in any stadiums. I don't have experience and all of my experience is secondhand from TV, from my phone, from the internet, finding images. I started that search based on that … all of the photos that I used were from one stadium that said it was the biggest stadium in Iran, which is in Tehran, in my hometown and I've never been there* (Interview, 24th November 2021, Zoom).

A concern with the spaces that one can or cannot inhabit also materialises in Tala's art, but she does not overtly approach this from her standpoint as an Iranian. Recently, she has been painting babies crawling over settings conventionally reserved for adults, such as the British parliament depicted in *Babyocracy I* (2021) (see Figure 23). Here, Tala reflects on social structures that subliminally reinforce gender segregation and restrict mothers from engaging in activities such as political participation.

Figure 23

Tala Madani, *Babyocracy I*, 2021, [oil on linen], Pilar Corrias, London

Before giving birth and producing her *Shit Mom* series (2019 -), Tala's commitment to painting male (rather than female) figures persisted for eight years (*Border Crossings*, 2023). This suggests that lived experiences can

significantly disrupt an artist's practice and shift their conceptual concerns. After becoming a mother Tala demonstrated a new perspective; she came to reflect upon the places where mothers and children might or might not be able to exist and the reasons for this.

Tala's interest in painting men stemmed from another experience in Berlin, where she lived among the Turkish community, which reminded her of the male-dominated culture in Iran. This suggests that understandings of the homeland continue to be negotiated and understood from new and sometimes unexpected contexts where parallels might be drawn. An awareness that she was prohibited from male-dominated spaces and the conversations that were held in such settings spurred paintings in response that contested social divisions. In depicting the places and spaces where some are not allowed to enter, Tala exposes asymmetric power relations and uses humour to probe systems of social exclusion and control, as she declared in our interview:

> *I was so fascinated because the Turkish community very much resembles Iranian community culturally and the machismo, the sort of machoness there. And in Berlin, they have all these like what you call tea houses … the windows are glass. You can't see inside. You know, 'What's going on for that kind of privacy? It's just all men there. Women don't go there. It's just men hanging out. And the Iraq war, Bush had just invaded Iraq. So that was happening and the Kurds were fighting. And a lot of the Turkish people are Kurdish. I was just dying to go in and have a conversation and that kind of distancing of because I'm a girl, that was also very informative of what my practice became like, basically I put all these frustrations in my paintings, all of this angst politically, the displeasure with like Iran's poison globally, that imbalance, that frustration, the death of the culture. I mean, Iran is dying, basically has been on its slow death culturally for a long time …* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

A concern with the control and regulation of gendered bodies and standardised expectations relating to appearance and behaviour was evident in the interviews, not only in relation to Iran but also in the American and diasporic contexts. Because of their status as women, the participants are preoccupied with

questions about where they can and cannot exist, what society expects from them, and their gendered limitations—boundaries that they seek to collapse through art that imagines alternative realities.

The participants asserted their agency to regain autonomy, deploying various strategies to overcome social and structural limitations. A commonality among those interviewed was the desire to either insert their bodies into settings where they might be prohibited from or expose the invisibility of women in such spaces through the negation of their presence. A pronounced desire to reconcile various aspects of the self within a singular space also suggests a fragmentation of identities and an underlying anxiety among this group concerning deviant and divergent identities that they sought to ease through their art. This suggests that personal liberties and gender segregation for Iranian women in and outside Iran remain of significant concern to the post-revolution generation yet they connect this experience to the diasporic context and global encounters that offer new opportunities for reflection.

Engaging Feminist Literature

Exposure to feminist literature offered participants a lens through which to reflect upon and reframe their experiences as women. Mehregan suggests that exposure to Western feminist frameworks during her education at liberal arts institution, CalArts, allowed her to critically reflect on her culture of origin and its gender-based hierarchies, stimulating a process of self-reflection and re-evaluation that was reflected in the artwork she produced post-migration. This suggests that time, distance, and exposure to alternate models of thinking offer opportunities to process and understand cultural experiences anew and that self-understanding is an ongoing and reflexive process:

> *Learning about feminism taught me how my culture under-represented women and what were the effects of sexism on my personality. I became more determined in being liberated and broke those rules in my art practice … I was always aware of gender discrimination but it was in my 30s that I truly started to learn how these discriminations affected my life. After I learned and read so much about sexism and women's subordination in a Middle Eastern country I was determined to never go*

back there again. It's not even about gender equality, it's much deeper than that. I felt behind the back of every man is a strong belief that men are superior to women. And this is a cultural issue, men learn from early ages that women are created to give service to men. And this is normal. I shall say that not all men are this way but this is the common belief (Interview, 19th May 2021, Zoom).

As discussed, the character of Mehregan's art changed drastically from earlier works such as *Catch Me, I'm Falling Asleep* (2014) to more politicised and critical works that she felt empowered to produce during her MFA programme. However, the question arises: does she feel empowered to produce such works while studying in the US, given that they possibly align with dominant Western narratives that portray Iran as a repressive society for women?

Figure 24
Parisa Ghaderi, *Visual Poetry* series, 2018, [digital photography]

Other artists have absorbed the sentiments of empowered Iranian women into their compositions to expose alternative models of Iranian womanhood and embody their essence into their art. Parisa, for example, engages with the words of Iranian feminist thinker Forugh Farrokhzad (1934–67) in her artwork.

Farrokhzad is known for her poems that tackle gender, female subjectivities, and desire; she, posthumously, became a symbol of liberation for the following generations of Iranians.[62] In her *Visual Poetry* series (2018), Parisa inserts her self-portrait into scenes inspired by Farrokhzad's poems. Her portraits, imbued with a desaturated palette, suggest that a woman's life is devoid of vibrancy. Parisa's use of self-portraiture in this work is notable. The scene is characterised by a Western aesthetic, with the artist wearing a checked shirt, standing in a stark, utilitarian room devoid of any cultural specificity; the setting suggests that she deliberately avoids a stereotypically Iranian representation. By confronting the viewer head-on with her gaze, she raises the question: who is observing whom? Much like Bahar's work, this can be seen as an attempt to readdress the power dynamics between the Western viewer and herself as the gendered and racialised subject. In this series, Parisa performs mundane domestic activities like ironing, traditionally associated with women. Her materials have, however, been imposed upon. Farsi text is cut from objects like grocery bags and washing gloves. Parisa uses Farrokhzad's words to elevate the gendered experience, asserting the contradictions and complexities of womanhood. Given Farrokhzad's status as a feminist thinker who operated before the Islamic Revolution, the inclusion of her text is emancipatory. Parisa transcends domestic stereotypes often ascribed to women and literally spells out a new narrative. The synthesis of text and image collapses space and time, connecting Farrokhzad's reality to that of present-day Iranian women, suggesting that gendered issues and the need for their representation are ongoing and unresolved. Parisa captures the contradictoriness of the gendered experience, indicating that one can experience contradictory and multilayered emotions that defy straightforward explanations. This indicates the power of art as a medium that can synthesise and process that which cannot be easily verbally expressed, as Parisa commented:

> *Those are self-portraits that I'm representing the poems of Forugh Farrokhzad … It's just a big deal in Iran, and I love her poetry and her poetry is just so contradictory. She talks about all those different feelings and emotions that women experience during their lifetime, and they're all*

[62] Following the 1979 Revolution, Farrokhzad's poetry was banned for nearly a decade. Censorship inadvertently increased her appeal to new generations of Iranians, who framed Farrokhzad as an icon of creative, individual, and sexual freedoms (Radjy, 2019).

> *very, very contradictory. They're feeling trapped, but at the same time, they love their prison guard* (Interview, 13th September 2021, Zoom).

An additional layer of complexity is applied by Parisa through the physical act of cutting out text, which questions its ability to exist in the present. The illegibility of the text to Western viewers denies them access, raising the questions: must they know Farrokhzad's history or read Farsi to fully engage with the work? This tactic, employed by several participants in this study, suggests an awareness of their audience, that they might be speaking to the Western viewer and attempting to regain control over asymmetric power dynamics.

The interviewees suggest that engaging with Western feminist literature offers a critical lens through which they can reflect on their gendered experiences. This engagement stimulates new artistic expressions and innovative ways of framing and presenting the Iranian gendered body, exemplified in Mehregan's work. For Parisa, integrating the perspectives of an Iranian feminist figure into her art challenges reductive portrayals and unveils a multifaceted vision of Iranian womanhood. For both artists, feminist perspectives combined with their own embodied experiences possess a liberatory and emancipatory quality, allowing them to transgress the various issues they perceive in the social fields they inhabit, including stereotypes surrounding the position of women in society and expectations regarding how a woman should dress and behave in public.

Gender as Contingent

As highlighted in the last section, through Mehregan's narratives, another key theme that came across in the interviews was the notion that gendered identities were contingent. This means they are always under a process of becoming and constantly subject to reflection and reconstitution. Mobina captured this well when she discussed how she draws inspiration from Persian literature and explores the role of women in folklore or the female body in dialogue with its status and symbolism in Iran. Conversely, she has also produced art in response to gendered violence in Iran, including the news she received of honour killings. These events, widely mediated in the Western press and circulated using digital technologies, seemed to pull Mobina towards the homeland, opening an ongoing dialogue and oscillation between both worlds despite physical distance. As she

explained, her artwork altered due to an incident in Iran, shifting in content from a general concern for gender balance in Iran towards a direct engagement with a specific event. In our interview, she said:

> *I have a new collection called 'Chador'. It sees women using fabric* [symbolising the chador] *and then throwing it away … Inspired by compulsory hijab. I was thinking about any force is not acceptable, I use dancers as they are free, I want it to be emotional, some characters are covered completely, and they start to get free and we see beauty and expression and freedom. In the context of the country, all the force is against women and they are limited, I use two girls … the two are lesbian …*
>
> *Whenever something happened in the news, like murders because of men's power it makes me very sad, I feel like, 'Oh we are in the 21st century and we still have barbaric behaviour', the news coming from Iran makes me think of a way of expression that we are free, the inspiration is coming from that. I don't want it to be raw and violent but rather sensual. Some critics are against my work because I show lots of sensuality, it's part of being a woman, I don't care if people want to see violence in art, I can only create beautiful pieces, if you want to try for peace it's better to show peace and beauty. My art moves towards peace and freedom for women all around the world, it creates that conversation. Even if it changes one person's mindset* (Interview, 29th March 2022, Zoom).

While Mobina discussed women and gendered freedoms in general terms during our discussion, her work focuses narrowly on the specific Iranian experience and does not bring into conversation the gendered violence or oppression that is also prevalent in the US.[63] This suggests strong national ties and the impact of the gendered experience in Iran on the individual given that, despite having spent more than a decade outside Iran, Mobina remains conceptually preoccupied with the gendered experience in her homeland. She also suggests that 'being

[63] In terms of domestic violence 29% have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner in the US (The Hotline, 2024); systematically, women are disadvantaged by gender-specific policies such as anti-abortion laws in 14 US states that put millions of women and girls at risk (ONCHR, 2023).

sensual' is part of being a woman but this generalist and gendered statement does not reveal a multifaceted or critical understanding of gender.

Gender, Sexual Expression, and Sexual Orientation

Expressions of sexual orientation and sexual selves were closely bound to the way that some informants reflected upon their gendered identities. Foucault (1990) analysed sexuality in terms of power relations and the forms in which it was constructed—the idea of 'perversity' for example—through discourses that defined how sexuality could be discussed, practised and regulated. Farahani, following Foucault, suggests that sexuality is one of the:

> central organising principles of identity and identity formation. It covers a wide spectrum of elements and includes questions regarding gender and identity, femininity (and masculinity), embodied practices, emotion, desire, fantasy, body language, clothing norms and gendered sexual practices (2017: 2).

Different social contexts provide different possibilities and opportunities for sexual identities to be renegotiated and defined. As subjects shift context, through a process such as migration, or reflect on their sexual selves in dialogue with the multiple spaces which they inhabit, the constraints and possibilities of varying social worlds are refracted in their self-understanding (Brickell, 2006). For instance, Mobina discussed the way that leaving Iran for the UK allowed her the freedom to incorporate the female body into her art and explore topics such as homosexuality that were forbidden to her in Iran:

> *When I left Iran I was finding a new identity in a new context and country. I became more expressive and free and used my own body to connect to my roots but then after a while, I found topics like 'forbidden love', being homosexual in Iran, and used two girls or two boys and the message behind that is 'love is love' and no matter where it is or between who …* (Interview, 29th March 2022, Zoom).

Her journey allowed her to reflect on and perform topics like love, freedom and restriction, sexuality and the gendered self in new ways. By representing the Iranian female body nude or queer from a safe space, Mobina could transcend

social restrictions and perform her own vision of reality. Her work also illustrates that no singular meaning can be ascribed to the gendered body. Mobina's body in her art is a vessel that allows her to connect to her cultural roots, a politicised icon, a symbol of advocacy and sensuality at once. Mobina does not identify as gay, but her desire to support this cause might come from her own experiences of marginalisation as a woman which cultivates empathy for other oppressed groups.

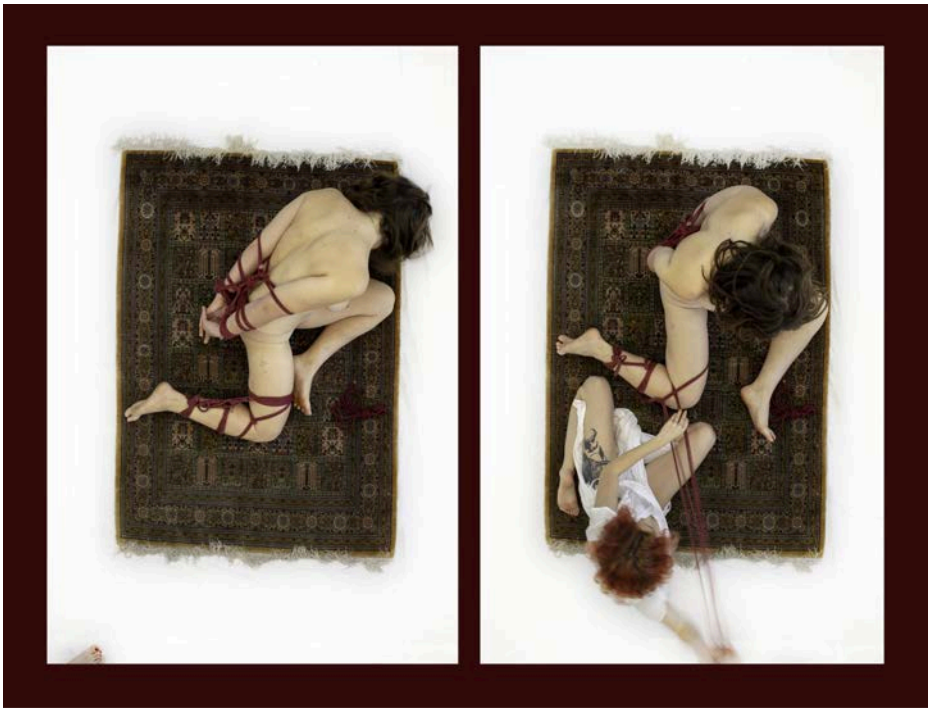

Figure 25

Mehregan Pezeshki, 2018, *Untie The Knot*, [photography series]

Mehregan also uses her art to explore the boundaries of sexual freedoms. Her photography series *Untie the Knot* (2018), interrogates the sexual freedoms and taboos she experiences, negotiating between diasporic and Iranian contexts. This work reflects a common theme among the artists: the boundaries of what they can and cannot do as women, but here the conversation zones-in on the sexual self. The series depicts the artist being tied by another woman in a manner that evokes the erotic rope-tying practice of *shibari*. The idea of physical limitation and disadvantage expressed in Ghazal's work (see Figure 19), is visible here, as ties constrict Mehregan's body but there is also a sense of liberation as she boldly performs what might be considered, deviant sexuality. Both Mehregan and Mobina (see Figure 21) present their own gendered bodies,

nude, on a Persian rug. Their figures are rendered anonymous, avoiding the gaze of the viewer, in a position of submission and observed from above. This staging places the viewer in a position of power as they can look down on the subject and pass judgement, but the subject, the Iranian woman, cannot look back.

In her artist statement, Mehregan explains: “The silk rug has personal symbolism since it was a gift from my father and evokes strong memories of our relationship” (Pezeshki, 2023b). For Mehregan, the Persian rug connects multiple worlds in a single site, fusing national identity and tradition with intimate memories. The layering of her sexualised body upon it, then, charts complex terrain. It creates tension between sexual and national identities, public and private realms, it evokes sexual freedom but also constraint and addresses her family’s and community’s relationship to her sexuality. Rather than making a straightforward assertion that Iran is a place of limitation and the US is one of freedom, the artist contends that experiences of conservatism and restriction in both contexts have informed her work:

> Where I grew up, in the closed culture of Iran, one naturally expects sexual taboos. But I was surprised by the amount of sexual prejudice in the West, even in those attending these events [sex workshops], and wondered about the source. San Francisco and being exposed to an open sexual culture gave me an opportunity to further explore this subject (Pezeshki, 2023b).

Some informants chose to explicitly define themselves as ‘queer’ in contrast to others who identified as ‘straight’ or ‘heterosexual’ or to those that did not disclose their status and did not discuss sexuality in their interviews or as a component or concern within their artwork. Discussing oneself as a ‘queer Iranian’ comes with risk given that sexual minorities experience discriminatory policies, marginalisation and violence in Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The diasporic context can, however, offer a safer space for the performance of queer Iranian identities to arise.[64] In our interview, Rex discussed the way that

[64] Discrimination and violence against minorities including the queer community is also present in the US.

intersections of her identity—the gendered, the sexual and the national—come together with her positionality as an Iranian-American to account for the specific experiences and perspectives that inform her artwork. She discussed these aspects of the self and her lived experiences as being central to her questions about who she is:

> *Gender, sexuality and nationality all work together to create the context for my work … Lately, I'm seeing things that inform the more central idea—failure. They are tools. It's who I am. The most intrinsic tools, where I come from and my life experience* (Interview, 18th March 2021, Zoom).

In an attempt to address the question of 'who she is', Rex connected the idea of failure, filtered through her hybrid Iranian-American positionality, to queer theory. A preoccupation with failure in Rex's practice, suggests social standards contribute to how she perceives herself. In our interview, she discussed the centrality of gender, sexuality and nationality to her visual explorations:

> *I think in terms of orientation, the fact that I'm choosing objects like dildo-inspired forms, failure has a long history in queer theory … being generative, embedded into heteronormative structures and a failure is actually more real or more true to an experience …* [now] *the gender stuff is less at the centre of everything* [her work] *… In a lot of ways gender, sexuality and nationality, they all kind of work together to create the context for my work and for how I'm making things and why I'm choosing my content* (Interview, 18th March 2021, Zoom).

Figure 26

Rex Delafkaran, *Shelf of Seven*, *DILS* series, 2020, [ceramic, cinder blocks]

For her series, *DILS* (2020), Rex fused Iranian ceramic traditions and Farsi text with the form of a dildo—a symbol of female sexuality, autonomy and empowerment. She disrupted ideas about public and private spaces, applying dinnerware glaze to a sexualised object associated with the private domain. In rendering the intimate visible, Rex made herself vulnerable while creating a context where seemingly disparate aspects of the self—the sexual, the gendered and the national—can co-exist and converse. Parallels can be drawn here with Mehregan's artistic output. On the surface, both artists engage icons of sexual practices: the rope in Mehregan's work evokes *shibari,* associated with BDSM, control, and submission, while dildos in Rex's work indicate female pleasure and desire but they also reflect gendered power dynamics and suggest the privileged status of men in Iranian society.[65] These icons carry secondary associations with pain, pleasure, submission, freedom and autonomy. This suggests that, like gender, sexuality for Rex and Mehregan is multi-layered, contradictory, and contextually negotiated.

Both artists exhibit a fragmentation of the self and a liminal condition resulting from their negotiation between cultural contexts and intersecting identities. Rather than simply narrating their realities, they used their art to construct new

[65] In Iranian society, mothers often refer to their sons as "Doodool Tala", which translates to "golden penis", a phrase evoking male privilege and dominance in this cultural context.

ones that challenge the hegemonic order. Through their work, they materialise the sexualised (and queer) Iranian diasporic woman—an identity that rarely surfaces in dominant portrayals. In Iran, discussions and displays of sexuality are confined to the private sphere and are punishable if performed in public. Thus, the diasporic and hybrid spaces these artists occupy in the US provide a safe context for imagining and presenting these fragments of their identities together—an opportunity not possible in Iran. The overtly sexual content of their work indicates that their art is a site where suppressed or dissident aspects of their identities can be expressed and negotiated. As participants like Mehregan have suggested, however, scrutiny and judgement (as well as persecution) are still felt in the diasporic context and may be exacerbated by expressions of sexuality that do not comply with social norms. These artists risk endangering themselves and their communities in Iran by publishing sexualised work, thus jeopardising their safety. Furthermore, the question of whether such sexualised artwork would be accepted and commercially successful within the art market remains uncertain. Mobina, for instance, entered into a process of self-censorship as the market rejected the nudity in her artwork.

Faith, Exile and Identity: The Bahá'í Experience

Faith is another intersection of identity that contributes to specific experiences and perspectives. Participants indicated affiliations with a range of faiths, including Islam, Judaism (non-practising), Bahá'í, and non-religious stances. Despite this diversity, faith only emerged as a significant topic in discussions with the two participants who identified with the Bahá'í faith, Kimia and Maryam.[66] While this sample size is too small to draw definitive conclusions about the Bahá'í experience, the commonalities in worldview and experiences shared by these participants suggest that their faith significantly shapes their identities and their relationships with their surroundings.

The Bahá'í participants highlighted how their faith influenced their sense of community, ethical perspectives, and artistic expressions. The Bahá'í emphasis on unity, equality, and social justice, for example, resonated in their artworks, reflecting a desire to promote understanding. Their faith provided a framework

[66] Faith was discussed by participants but in terms of their opposition to the Islamic Regime in Iran.

for navigating their identities, offering a sense of belonging and purpose amidst diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, while faith, as an intersection of identity, was not a prominent theme for the majority of participants, its impact on the two affiliated individuals highlights the potential for religious beliefs to shape artistic perspectives and identity formation in significant ways. According to McAuliffe (2015), shared experiences of exile combined with 'global thinking' (and the use of metaphors such as the 'United Nations' that 'animate' Bahá'í theology) might account for a distinct relationship with the nation-state among Iranian Bahá'ís. He notes that the "eschatological globalism that animates their theology" and practices renders the nation subordinate and the basis of "socio-cultural and geopolitical attachment that must be overcome" to reach a new world order (2015: 43-44). Such a worldview dismantles the "normative power" of national identities (ibid.). Their exile is, however, a "national experience", significant in that it is a "tangible diasporic communal experience" particular to Iranian Bahá'ís (ibid.).

This vocabulary and way of interpreting the world was expressed by Kimia. In our interview she distinguished her own definition of identity from the commonly held ones that she observed, instead referring back to the Bahá'í faith for her understanding of humanity. This suggests that her faith plays a fundamental role in self-reflection and definition, one that overrides versions that arise in popular culture or the art world. In our interview, she said:

> *For me as a Bahá'í, identity is about the human soul and it's about our inherent oneness. And it's about the fact that my reality, the reality that is Kimia Ferdowsi Klein, is not the colour of my skin. It's not my gender. It's not my culture. My language. It's my soul. It is the human soul. What is identity to me is the fact that we are all essentially spiritual beings currently having a physical experience in this body … I do mark off a lot of those boxes. I'm a woman. I'm a minority. My family has gone through a lot of trauma. I've gone through a lot of trauma. But I don't feel that any of those things are my identity. I feel that my identity is as a human soul, which is the same as everybody … I think that our identity as human beings should be defined in such a way that it brings us closer to one another rather than divides us. Now, all of these life experiences I've had.*

> *I would say they are part of my human experience and naturally come into my work, but I wouldn't say that I would use them as sort of markers of victimisation. That's the definition of what I think people currently use as identity that I reject* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

When reflecting upon her identity and self-perception Maryam also seemed to understand this through the lens of her faith, suggesting the importance of her religion and its teachings in shaping her ideas about herself and the world,

> *I'm a painter, I believe Baha'u'llah's teaching is the healing medicine for today, I'm a human being. But whenever I think about the self I remember this beautiful mystical quotation from Baha'u'llah: 'Be as nought, if thou wouldst kindle the fire of being and be fit for the pathway of love'. This says nonexistence is a must to be existent. So, whenever the concept of identity comes to my mind, this quotation comes at the same time. When we try to find ourselves and focus on ourselves so much, we become more lost. When we focus on others and helping them and being of service to them, that is when we find ourselves* (Interview, 25th February 2021).

Figure 27

Maryam Safajoo, *Repetitious Insecurity*, 2022 [oil on linen]

Maryam suggested that the content of her realistic paintings is motivated directly by her faith. She expressed a desire to register and relay the persecution of the Bahá'ís and viewed her art as a visual record of events that could counter the

systematic violence and silencing of her community in Iran. For Maryam, her art is a vehicle to share such experiences with a wider community and a form of resistance against the threat of erasure under the Islamic regime that is “more valuable” to her than the oral transference of stories. In our interview, she said:

> *Since my graduation, I have totally focused on the persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran, not crisis and victory, just persecution. I think ‘til the end of my life I can paint this … Registering history through art is very important … especially when your art becomes accepted by the people who you are painting … When they accept it it makes the art more valuable than just hearing their story* (Interview, 18th February 2021, Zoom).

The acceptance of her art by the Bahá’í community is a motivating factor for Maryam, suggesting that she approaches her art dialogically, with the perceptions and approval of her religious community in mind. Her commitment to reframing and narrating their experiences through her art, and speaking for those who cannot critically speak out in Iran, suggests that, even in a new context and with the passing of time, her connection to the Bahá’í community remains a driving force that takes precedence over the narration of her personal, evolving experiences.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

The discussion has, so far, focused on how intersections of participants’ identities contribute to their perspectives and realities. Now the focus moves towards lived experiences, framed by the structures within which participants exist and their intersectionality, exploring how overlapping identities affect individuals’ realities. Informants indicated that their lived experiences significantly shaped their sense of self and influenced their art. Experiences of motherhood and trauma, for instance, shaped by the intersections of gender and nationality, were discussed as reconfiguring not only their artistic approaches but also their perceptions and relationships to the various social contexts they inhabit.

Motherhood

The experience of motherhood was transformative for some participants. After giving birth, they not only perceived themselves differently but also found that

this experience framed their understanding of the world in unexpected ways. It spurred reflection on their art practices, sense of national identity, interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, and the shifting status of their body and mind. Motherhood, therefore, was a catalyst for reevaluating artistic expression and identity. Tala, for example, found pregnancy and motherhood to be influential to her practice. Before motherhood, Tala's output focused on broader social topics, including power dynamics, representations in the Western art history canon, political authority, gender and toxic masculinity. Her paintings primarily depicted men. The experience of becoming a mother led her to think about practices of motherhood being influenced by social structures and as such, culturally and generationally specific. In our interview, Tala said:

> *I had my first child and I was shocked … I wasn't around kids at all* [before] *I didn't have any siblings. I was shell-shocked, like, 'Oh, my God, this child can die if I'm not careful'. It's so interesting. And this is something I think is a phenomenon … My work is actually dealing with this phenomenon out of the bizarreness of our generation's anxiousness in parenting. Parenting is so ordinary because it's the thing that humans have been doing since humans are humans … yet our generation is so uncertain and is so uncomfortable with this experience … I think I am channelling that on some level into my work. I'm not really sure how much of that is experienced amongst Iranians, because I didn't ever observe when I was in Iran, I never observed mothering in the same way that I'm thinking about it now* [in the US] … (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

Figure 28

Tala Madani, 2019, *Shit Mom (Remodel)*, [oil on linen], Pilar Corrias, London

Goodwin and Huppatz (eds.) (2010) suggest that motherhood is an "'institution' that has been reproduced through ideologies" that establish standards relating to how a 'good' or 'bad' mother might appear. These ideologies, which are 'raced' and classed, function in a manner that regulates women and motherhood and fixes their identities (Goodwin and Huppatz, eds., 2010). For Tala, the process of becoming a mother prompted her to look externally and reflect on the social anxieties surrounding motherhood in the Western context. She critiques contemporary Western standards and hysteria surrounding parenting through her *Shit Mom* (2019–date) series. The work marked a shift towards the female form in Tala's practice as she summoned the subject of social and personal anxieties: the "shit mother". Here, the mother figure is depicted in situations that oppose social ideals of motherhood: on all fours surrounded by babies in a nightclub, smeared across the dinner table, reclining in a hammock, or curled up and unaware of her two children on the floor. In other pieces, newborns are depicted alone, evoking the absence of the mother. Her paintings exhibit a childlike, primal form; Tala's mother figure is depicted as a brown (shit) stain, devoid of defining features. Removing the mother from the status of the sacred, she literally wipes her away and presents her own degraded version. By

pictorially adapting the iconised image of the mother from pristine to profane Tala's art subverts socially constructed standards pertaining to motherhood and lays bare her own anxieties and realities. In our interview, Tala discussed her motivations:

> *After my second child was like, 'I know I'm not going to have any more children. I'm going to take eight months off. I'm just going to really enjoy it' … When I came back to the studio I had just been staring at children for eight months, so I was just in my head, I thought I would get it out of my system, get it out of my mind's eyes. I painted it and I thought it was so disgusting. It was so kitsch. It was like a mother holding two children like you've seen it a thousand times … It was so cute, it didn't feel real. So I started just wiping out the painting. The mother became shit and became muddy ... I was like, 'Oh, my God, that's so good, the muddy, shitty mom' … Luckily I had unblurred the kids. There were these pristine children being held by this muddy, shitty mother and I thought, 'Why haven't I seen this before?' That immediately became very shocking that in all the years of people painting there hasn't been shit mom yet? Everyone complains about their mom to the therapist … We all blame our moms and our death for everything. Why haven't we pictured this yet? Why is the mom such a holy figure? Literally, the Virgin Mother that we haven't dared to change pictorially … It is sacrilege to paint shit, right? So I just went at it. I painted tons of shitty moms …* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

The interviews revealed a conflict in Tala's self-perception. The process of becoming a mother forced her to reconcile her identities as a mother and an artist, which initially felt disparate. This sense of fragmentation caused Tala to revise her output, resulting in a type of critical art more aligned with the version of herself she knew before motherhood. This suggests the fragility of identities and how they can be reconfigured following significant events like motherhood when an individual's anchor points—such as critical art in Tala's case—are disrupted. Tala's experience highlights the way that artists can absorb and process their surroundings and experiences through their creations. It also suggests that art is a practice that individuals turn to, to resolve inner conflicts and (re)define themselves.

Kimia also negotiated experiences of motherhood through her art. She suggests that her art refracts a multitude of perspectives. It embodies her gendered positionality as a woman, daughter, mother, sister, and wife and also personal experiences, including familial trauma, which she connects to universal human experiences. Rather than reinforcing dominant portrayals of motherhood, Kimia associated her pregnancy and the experience of giving birth with trauma. In our interview, she said:

> *That experience* [of birth and pregnancy] *is so traumatic … it really forces you to be honest with yourself on levels that you never experienced before. And it also really empowered me because it's so terrifying and you come so close to death that there is like a fearlessness that I embodied after I became a mother. And I think that followed me into my studio. And that journey is really what led me to making the current work that I'm making now* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

Earlier, the discussion highlighted that participants actively contest misrepresentative portrayals of their gendered identities, this also extends towards standardised depictions of motherhood. After the transformative experience of becoming mothers, Tala and Kimia turned to their art to express versions of this identity that felt more authentic to them. Tala deconstructed the sanctified image of motherhood prevalent in Western discourse through raw depictions that captured both social and personal anxieties. Her work exposed the pressures placed on mothers, as well as her own discomfort with and adaptation to this new, supposedly natural identity. Similarly, Kimia's art challenged the perceived naturalness of motherhood, instead linking it to trauma. Both artists demonstrate an awareness of how they, as women and mothers, are framed in broader discourse—framings that feel disconnected from their realities. Their art, then, is a site that addresses the gap between representation and lived experience.

Art and Trauma

Trauma was another significant lived experience discussed by participants as impacting their outlook and being processed through their art. For some, trauma

was a direct experience, while for others, it was transmitted orally across generations or through a combination of lived experience and transference. The post-revolution generation did not experience the 1979 Revolution first-hand, but many of the participants in this study were alive and in Iran when the Iran-Iraq War concluded. Aida, Bahar, Mahsa, Maryam, Mehregan, Mobina, Parisa, Nebras, Shilla and Tala were all born in Iran before the war ended in 1988.[67] Interestingly, however, they did not discuss the impact of the war on their lives. This could be because they were very young at the time or because they wished to avoid reinforcing war and conflict narratives associated with Iran, which some participants actively problematised. Tala, for instance, suggests that while the revolution generation needed to expel their experiences through their art, the tendency of artists from subsequent generations to reflect on such topics is problematic. Discussing the art of Shirin Neshat specifically, Tala said:

> *Because she did what she did* [Shirin Neshat]*, then I won't have to anymore. There is no space there anymore … This work is in every single artist coming out of that culture because we're all so bombarded with the 80s images of the Iraq war, the gun, the war, the martyrs, the death, the soldiers. Of course, she also has experienced the actual Revolution that she brings with her and the female participation … Those images become burned in your mind's eye unless you exercise them …* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

The concept of exorcising significant events or experiences through art emerged in several interviews. Participants described using their practices to work through and expel unwanted emotions and thoughts, or as a way to advance their thinking. This is, however, complicated by an awareness of the art market. Tala expressed an awareness of what had 'already been done' by Iranian artists and claimed that her role as an artist is not to repeat what is already out there but to advance new narratives.

During the interviews, there was a sense that respondents were reflecting on what Hirsch has termed "the generational structure of memory" (Hirsch, 2016: 00:04:05) and how the, often traumatic, experiences of one generation, in being

[67] Participants were aged 2–10 when the war ended so would have varying memories and experiences of this event.

transposed to another, can shape the lived realities of a new generation. Rather than viewing *postmemory* as a specific structure of identity formation, it serves as a way to understand how memory is "transmitted across time and space for experiences that we might not ourselves have had but that shape us and inflect who we are" (Hirsch, 2016: 00:04:17). Hirsch contends that individuals who receive 'inherited memories' may find themselves dominated by 'the narratives that preceded their birth or consciousness':

> It [consciousness] is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present (Hirsch and Columbia University Press, n.d.).

Hirsch's (1997) concept of postmemory offers a framework for understanding how narratives of the 1979 Revolution, passed on by those who lived through it to those who did not, transmit traumatic memories and emotions across generations. Such narratives, often mediated by family, community, or secondary sources, facilitate the transference of both intimate (familial) and collective traumas. These inherited memories shape identity formation, interacting with individuals' own lived experiences in new contexts and are, therefore, processed and represented in new ways.

Figure 29

Kimia Ferdowsi Kline, *Flight, Fight, Freeze, Fawn*, 2020, [ink, oil pastel, and thread on papyrus]

Contrasting with Tala's perspectives, the trauma experienced by the revolution generation was discussed by some participants as something they needed to articulate through their art. Kimia discussed the violent treatment of her ancestors in Iran and how the transference of their memories contributed to her sense of exile and art practice:

> *The way that my family left Iran was incredibly traumatic. My grandfather was executed in 1982 after the Iranian Revolution because he was a member of the Bahá'í faith. We're all members of the Bahá'í faith, which is a religious minority there that's still, to this day, heavily persecuted* (Interview,16th April 2021, Zoom).

Figure 30

Kimia Ferdowsi Kline, *Mother Tongue*, 2021, [ink, acrylic, freshwater pearls, glass beads, lava fire glass, glitter, abalone and thread on papyrus], Marrow Gallery, San Francisco

Kimia's work evokes the universality of trauma. Her work *Flight, Fight, Freeze, Fawn* (2020), for instance, takes its title from the four common trauma responses to perceived threat or harm. In her composition, four figures are depicted crying, stitched together as a manifestation of the familial bond yet they are facing away from one another, evoking emotional distance (see Figure 29). On the surface, her compositions appear joyful. Her use of bright colour is a tactic that draws in the audience, enabling them to engage with sensitive topics like trauma in a manner that is not immediately triggering. Her characters are typically genderless and anonymous. By presenting universal figures that resonate across cultures and contexts Kimia cultivates a sense of empathy and unity through her art rather than addressing the specificity of her familial trauma.

Kimia's figures and titles are connected to systems of meaning that capture the psychological questions she explores, again, suggesting the prevalence of trauma in society. In works like *Mother Tongue* (2021) (see Figure 30), she incorporates four-point configurations reminiscent of charts used in modern

trauma theory in psychology (Marrow Gallery, 2024). The work renders the mother the central figure with the faces of other family members, expressing sentiments of shock and pain, orbiting around her form. The title *Mother Tongue* draws parallels between the roles of the mother and the nation in imparting emotional distress and evokes the idea of language as a weapon.

Kimia's art is also influenced by her own lived experiences, such as the traumatic and bodily experience of childbirth previously discussed. She negotiates a complex constellation of lived experience and *postmemory* in her artwork, filtered through Western psychological frameworks. Her selection of materials captures this complexity, for instance, her use of papyrus carries multiple meanings: it has socio-cultural roots in the Middle East, it symbolises the physical experience of tearing skin during childbirth and draws parallels with the fragility and durability of the human condition as well as the tenuous nature of human relationships. In our interview, Kimia said:

> *The themes that I'm talking about in my work in terms of generational trauma, family relationships, family systems and psychology, intimacy, all of these things are very archetypal themes. Families have existed since the beginning of time, and that's reflected in the ancient material that I have very luckily discovered. It's also frayed at the edges, I think it's a lot like skin because I do stitch it. It also reminds me of the process of, if you have a wound and you need to be stitched up after childbirth, often there are tears that need to be stitched up. And the paper is really inherently imperfect. There's a really wabi-sabi quality to it. I think that that's reflected in our bodies. Our body and our relationships are imperfect. They're frayed at the edges. They are fragile, but they're also pretty durable. The paper is actually pretty durable, even though it is fragile at the same time. All of these paradoxes that exist in our bodies and in our relationships I find to be true in the material* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

Sheida also explored inherited trauma, particularly through her parents' escape from Iran. This theme was central to her exhibition *Ghostwriter* (2023),[68] which

[68] Exhibited at Edel Assanti Gallery, London, 2023.

was presented against a backdrop of a hand-drawn map that her father created to chart their escape from the country during the 1979 Revolution (Edel Assanti, 2023). In our interview, Sheida reflected on how her family's stories affected her, making her feel their trauma firsthand. She emphasised that this trauma was amplified by her parents' culturally specific resistance to Western methods of dealing with emotional stress, such as therapy:

> *My mom never went to a therapist because of what happened to her. She told me all of her trauma stories, I aged very quickly, learning those things very early on. And my father would do the same thing, you know like Middle Eastern families don't really like admitting they have problems, and so they would often confide in me as the child that had not been traumatised the way that they had been. I didn't find it traumatising, but I found it jarring when I got to school and I realised that a lot of the other kids around me had nothing similar to my experience.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Because of what happened to her in prison, she has a lot of PTSD. And so her avenues of therapy were caretaking but not, you know, the regular ways. She would rehabilitate injured animals when I was a kid. And then I really got into it because I'm sure, you know, both academia and the art world are really fucked up places. And so it's nice to have an escape* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Figure 31

Sheida Soleimani, *Noon-o-namak (bread and salt)*, 2021, [archival pigment print], Edel Assanti, London

Sheida's earlier work focused on wider political dynamics rather than intimate experiences but this later work (see Figure 31) drew directly from the artist's experiences of 'absorbing' these narratives from her family members. In our interview, she discussed a sense of responsibility and pressure imparted onto her as the custodian of these stories, which stimulated a desire to record and communicate the traumatic experiences of her family to a wider audience. This suggests that the passing on of such stories intergenerationally might result in a personal attachment to them that transcends personal experience, context, and generation, as Sheida observed:

> *I've absorbed their trauma, but I have coping mechanisms of, you know, it not being traumatic for me in the same way that it was for them. It's like I'm a carrier of these stories. While those stories are traumatic, it's also, I feel, my job to alleviate them of that pain as much as I can and kind of be*

> *an outlet to put the stories out there* (Interview, 15th September 2023, Zoom).

By collaborating with her parents to record their narratives, Sheida embodies them as she becomes their 'ghostwriter' through her own visual medium. However, she expressed mixed feelings relating to her exploration and expression of her parents' trauma in her art in relation to trends within the art market. Her desire to relay her parents' experiences and sense of responsibility towards them was complicated by concern about the fetishisation and commodification of SWANA artists dealing with topics like trauma in their work. This reflects her awareness of her positionality, coupled with a sense of collective responsibility in having the power to represent, given the risk that artists from the SWANA region may be misrepresented within the Western art market. Such concern might contribute to self-censorship as artists critically reflect upon whether they will be capitalising on traumatic experiences through their work:

> *I've been wanting to make this work my whole life, but I also didn't feel like I was ready. The art world, and especially journalists in the art world, have this tendency to kind of exoticize pain and trauma, like very interested in the pornography of pain. As a younger artist, I didn't have the language to be able to talk about that in the right way. And so if I'm telling the stories of my parents, I wanted to make sure I was doing it in a way that was responsible, in a way that was ethical and didn't make them these kind of traumatic pornographic subjects for the gaze of the West. I think I've just been wanting to make it, but I waited a really long time to do so* (Interview, 15th September 2023, Zoom).

Mehregan turned to her art to process personal trauma. This came across in her discussion of how processes of creation helped her to navigate and process the sexual abuse she had personally experienced in Iran. She reflected on the normalisation of abuse in Iran and the way that social structures protect and enable such incidences. According to Mehregan, systems of communication in Iran contribute to a climate where women are sublimated and voiceless, facilitated by, for example, the socially accepted notion that silence is equal to sexual consent.[69] In our conversation, Mehregan discussed using her voice in a

[69] Such attitudes are also present in Western societies.

film that she co-directed, *The Shadow on the Wall* (2022), engaging it as a corrective force to transcend systems that facilitate sexual violence against women:

> [Her collaborator] *was like, 'Let's do this. We're going to make a film'. So we started writing this together. I went to all of my memories and all these things. I decided that I'm going to act as two persons. One is going to be me and one is my dream-like or my unconscious … I think about that a lot, because as a woman, as a person if I don't use my voice, if I don't give consent, and in Farsi, there is this idiom … These idioms in our mind, they say: 'Silence is the symbol of acceptance'. So when you keep saying this, of course men think that, you know, you didn't say anything, 'I thought you like it. You want it' …* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Figure 32

Mehregan Pezeshki and Arash Kamali Sarvestani (directors), *The Shadow on the Wall*, 2022 [film still]

The participants often favoured artistic mediums and strategies that offer proximity to reality, however, Mehregan engaged the subconscious and surrealism to negotiate her experiences of trauma in her film (see Figure 32). This approach allows her to remain a step removed from reality and bypass the need to capture events intimately, which may be triggering for her and her audience. Her film captures the culturally and generationally specific experiences of a particular group, one that knew both an intellectual community and a

religious regime inside Iran. The film allows Mehregan to confront feelings of self-guilt in relation to sexuality and abuse shaped by this environment. By employing surrealism she can unite a range of interconnecting elements—psychological and external interactions, social and political forces, discourses of morality and judgement, abuse and sexual experiences—in a way that documentary filmmaking could not.

The fieldwork suggested that experiences of trauma endured by previous generations transcend space and time. They do not stay with them, rather they are passed down and imprint on the subsequent generations contributing to the way they reflect upon themselves and their realities. Participants responded to intergenerational trauma in various ways, taking on caretaking roles or through artistic expression. This transference then can, at least for some of the artists in this study, be generative as they explore and process post-trauma narratives through their practices. This suggests that the events of the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath continue to be processed and presented by the post-revolution generation, albeit in new ways.

The fact that participants turn their art to express and work through traumatic experiences and transferred memories suggests the therapeutic potential of creative expression. Mehregan used filmmaking to work through her own trauma. In doing so she actively challenged the social norms and structures she encountered, which she contends facilitate gendered abuse. Both Mehregan and Sheida's interviews indicated the significance of narrative control, whether in terms of having voice or countering stereotypes ascribed to Middle Eastern artists in connection to trauma.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Countering the Western Gaze

The artists of this study were aware of how they were framed and perceived by others. They were conscious of racialised discourse and marginalisation in the post-9/11 climate and, under the Trump presidency, of art market identity stereotypes and media narratives. This influenced their behaviour and self-perception, often prompting them to distance themselves from these external

views or articulate alternative models through their art. This suggests the dialogical character of their identity construction as participants constantly negotiated and (re)defined themselves in response to external framings.

As discussed, Sheida's art responded to misrepresentative framings of the SWANA region encountered in America. By critically reflecting on narrative-building in the Western media and political scapes her art questions Western societies' relationship to truth and challenges their framings of the SWANA region, as she discussed:

> *It's a two-pronged approach, lots of SWANA individuals know about what's happening in the Middle East because of their background but it's this idea of being seen … My work is also very much for creating awareness for the West. Individuals from there don't need to hear about what's going on but the West often tramples and overshadows the narratives of what's happening. They pay attention to specific issues, specifically in Iran, it's uranium and oil, but when it comes to human rights issues the West turns a blind eye … I think about my work as unfolding those narratives for individuals who are not accustomed to them or don't have information about them to get them to think about their own conditioning and question what they know about a specific thing. Maybe the pieces can leave a breadcrumb to find out more information* (Interview, 25th May 2021, Zoom).

Sheida's scenes are vibrant and seductive, summoning the codes of advertising and the aesthetics of the internet, which she combines with irony, humour, and artificial elements to lure viewers and confront them with her reality. She adopts various strategies to articulate the 'truth' in her art. She works with source imagery, archives and citizen-led documentary—mediums, afforded with a sense of authority and legitimacy given their proximity to testimony and reality. They also offer subjective, rather than homogenised and externally defined, accounts. The combining of artificial and constructed elements with these aspects that document 'reality' probe at the nature of knowledge particularly in relation to media and political discourses that frame the SWANA region. Each scene is layered with a complex network of symbols that the viewer is invited to decode to

establish meaning, suggesting that Sheida is keen to engage the Western viewer as an active participant in her process. Her practice of codifying political information into her art links back to the practices of artists and intellectuals inside Iran who have historically done so under the forces of censorship and suppression (Cirla, 2021). This indicates the need for such practices to continue under contemporary conditions, that the issues of the past remain unresolved.

Figure 33

Sheida Solemani, *Minister of Mineral Resources and Petroleum, Angola & Former Secretary of State, United States*, 2017, [archival pigment print], Harlan Levey Projects, Belgium

In *Minister of Mineral Resources and Petroleum, Angola and Former Secretary of State, United States* (2017) Sheida scrutinised relations between the OPEC nations and Western political powers in the post-1960s climate. Here, the Former Secretary of State of the US is bent on one knee with oil stains on his hand, proposing to the Angolan Minister of Mineral Resources and Petroleum. The proposal between the two leaders of state suggests that the marriage of the nations, the US and Angola, is founded upon oil. The pair are surrounded by artificial matter—plastic diamonds and graffiti-spray-painted palm trees—that

allude to the falseness and cheapness of this relationship. The subversion of their masculinity, through reference to homosexuality, evokes the performative masculinity associated with politics and conflict. Sheida's work, produced in direct dialogue with, and as a counter to, Western perspectives, suggests that dominant framings of the Middle East in the US motivate her artistic practice. The weight of misrepresentation, then, might be eased through artistic expression that attempts to reclaim cultural narratives.

Ghazal also discussed an awareness of the Western gaze which influenced her perspectives, post-migration. Our conversation underlined that conflicting experiences of limitation and liberation in the US significantly altered not only her artistic direction but also how she perceives herself:

> *… about how my work has changed, yes I think intensely … One major thing that I can think about is the Western gaze. Since leaving Iran and moving to the US I experienced myself in this liminal space and in-between space, I experienced a sense of not belonging. And the Western gaze and American/Western European gaze on my culture or me became an issue.*
>
> *Before in Iran I never really questioned issues of this, but after moving here and reading so much about it, I realised issues of being Othered. But in a way, I think of my whole practice as a space that reflects these issues and reflects this liminal space in between two cultures, two lands … in Iran I was more concerned about the craft itself … After moving here I finally found myself having so much to communicate and gave myself the permission to communicate, the concept and conceptual art became more interesting to me* (Interview, 6th April 2022).

Ghazal also reflected on social pressure, felt in the US, to package and perform Iranian culture in an easily digestible manner for the host community. She struggled with pressure to conform to American social norms while maintaining the authenticity of her cultural expression, suggesting the impact external perspectives have on individual behaviour:

> *When you categorise a group of people because they're culturally different, you're oppressing that group of people … They* [in the US] *actually don't want you to be that different for the purpose of fitting in in the society. But at times, they want you to be authentic and represent your culture in many ways. I had experiences of being categorised geographically and in a way that's 'OK' in the world* (Interview, 4th August 2021, Zoom).

Navigating Stereotypes

As addressed in Chapter Two, participants felt pressure from the art market to produce work that aligned with stereotypes of Iranian women. Central to these discussions was the issue of mandatory veiling in Iran and its portrayal in Iranian art. The generation of women artists who lived through the revolution garnered international attention and market appreciation for their work that explored gendered restrictions in Iran. The issues identified in Chapter Two—contemporary art's focus on identity-driven work, the lack of nuanced discourse on Iranian art and the limitations of its presentation and circulation within the art ecosystem—and the image of the veiled Iranian woman which has been iconized and widely mediated, contribute to expectations that participants encounter in various contexts. Notably, none of the women included in this study are veiled and only one participant identified as Muslim in the scoping survey but the issue of mandatory veiling in Iran and the question of whether to include or exclude the veil in their artwork was raised by several participants indicating the enduring significance of this issue.

In the Iranian context, the veil is loaded with complex and contradictory meanings that have shifted over time according to alterations in power. Under the Pahlavi Monarchy (1925–1979) the veil was banned and so wearing it could be read as a symbol of resistance while under the Islamic Republic particular types of veiling such as the *chador* might be considered a sign of affiliation with the current regime. More recently the veil has gained new significance in Iran during the "#WhiteWednesday" and "WLF" movements as women publicly burned hijabs as a form of protest. Indeed, the WLF Movement has been characterised by images of unveiled Iranian women (Motlagh, 2022).

Artists, such as Mobina and Mehregan, were concerned with news of the (mis)treatment of women in Iran. Mobina discussed her artwork, *Chador* (2022) directly tackling this issue, depicting a woman discarding her hijab as an act of liberation and defiance. Conversely, Parisa and Tala, explicitly chose to negate the veil in their output, rejecting it as a marker of their identity. Their engagement with the veil is however significant, suggesting that the topic of veiling continues to be of concern to Iranian women artists across generations. Articulations of gendered identity are, for these participants, produced dialogically with the symbol of the veil and can never be detached from it whether they are depicting it, contesting it or negating it.

Tala discussed reaching her choice of subject matter through a process of negation, first understanding and avoiding that which she did not wish to depict in her art. For Tala, paintings of women and veiled women, in particular, were prolific and overdone as were artworks by Iranian artists that incorporated Farsi or calligraphy. By assessing what had already been captured by existing artists and making a conscious decision to avoid repeating their subject matter Tala avoids further reinforcing stereotypes surrounding Iranians and Iranian women:

> *As an Iranian, I'm not going to do anybody with a veil, so many Iranians are doing veiled paintings of women. As a woman in general, I'm not going to paint a woman because there are just so many paintings of women, women everywhere in paintings. I've seen so many women on canvases. I'm not going to paint them. I'm not going to do anything with calligraphy, with Farsi, because that's been done so much, I can't as an Iranian. So I kind of went with the negative. I know what I won't do and then came to well, I want to do figures, I'm going to do some paintings of some men and then we'll see where that goes* (Interview, 13th April 2021, Zoom).

Participants also expressed concern relating to the monolithic framing of Iranian women that they encountered in the US, something that they sought to contest with counter-imagery. Parisa curated *Inner Fragments* (2018),[70] an exhibition of

[70] Inner Fragments was co-curated with Mahsa Soroudi. It opened at Norwest Gallery, Detroit, US.

Iranian women artists living and working inside Iran. Parisa's statement suggested that the show represented a "new wave" in contemporary Iranian art. It was motivated by a desire to overcome hostile relationships between countries and dominant discourse relating to war and revolution by foregrounding new gendered realities:

> For these emerging artists, Iran's political and social turbulence has not been an obstacle in the development of their artistic voice, in fact, it has helped fuel and shape it. Their art has been overshadowed by revolution, war, and sanctions. These industrious artists await an opportunity to showcase their artwork.
>
> This exhibition will create a space for dialogue and constructive discussion between the artists and the American audience thus engaging in an artistic discourse regardless of political and geographical boundaries (Ghaderi, 2018).

Parisa suggested that the stimulus for this project was the limited framing of Iranian women that she witnessed in the US, which prompted her to exhibit artwork produced inside Iran to counter reductive perceptions, as she said:

> *It all started from a main concern about how women artists and women, in general, are represented in the media here* [in America]*. All of this negativity and the dark side of Iran and Iranian women, and how all of them are submissive, oppressed people and individuals … I don't even see a hint of those* [war and revolution] *in today's generation of artists, even those who were born in the 1980s.*
>
> *…*
>
> *My first thought is not about all those dark events and experiences, but also about ageing and depression and feeling lonely and their phobias and fears and the other bigger ideas that they're not very mainly political … I think that was a driving force behind a curatorial project to show the world and especially people in the US that women in Iran are living different lives and they are not suffering. Not all of them are suffering from*

> *all those cliches, we have the creative tools to live beyond those cliches, beyond those restrictions …* [the show was] *nicely received by the American audience here because they were amazed by all the different subject matters and the colours and the body in the pictures. Because that was totally contradicting their already existing perspective about Iran and Iranian women and their art … I think that it was successful in that people would understand that there's another part of the world, that despite all those negativity and bad news, it's coming from, they also have this.* (Interview, 20th September 2021, Zoom).

Despite her intention to counter dominant depictions of Iranian women through her curation, Parisa inadvertently limits the selected artists to a dialogue centred on US perspectives on Iran. This confines them again to the task of countering the discourse of conflict and oppression through their art, rather than allowing for the exploration of individual expression. Critically speaking, this approach may inadvertently reinforce neo-Orientalist understandings of Iran, which Parisa aims to counteract.

Commodifying Iranian Identities

The exploration of the art market and interview material suggests that identities expressed in art can be co-opted and commodified for various capitalist and neo-colonial agendas. During our discussions, participants expressed concerns about reinforcing misconceptions and stereotypes related to Iranians and Iranian women. Aida, for instance, articulated frustration with art from the Iranian diaspora that perpetuates stereotypes about Iranian women. In our interview, she advocated for authenticity and urged artists to go "beyond" what has commonly been depicted:

> *Let's just go beyond that kind of a stereotype, like … Iranian women artists the first image that comes is just all these stereotypes of the women with a veil … let's give a break to this concept. We overuse that, let's be honest and open to ourselves. And let's not think about just about market … let's really take it seriously in a sense. Let's go 'beyond' that for a while. If there is a work that you certainly want to express yourself in that manner or there is a necessity of using that specific concept to express yourself I understand. But constantly beating that drum. I don't*

> *really like that. I feel it's not honest and it's not a type of artwork that would stay in the history of artwork …* (Interview, 7th April 2021, Zoom).

Shilla discussed a "game" of identity and a negative perception of art that foregrounds markers of identity which she aligns with a culture of victimhood. In our interview, she said:

> *I'm trying not to play this game of identity. I kind of think if I get stuck into it … it affects my life in a way that I don't want to, I feel that I'm a victim instead of being somebody who is in charge of their own life. So I'm trying to put aside all these identities like race, religion, all that … And you can just kind of go in there trying to get started with your life and it becomes your life. It defines your life if you get stuck in that type of thing. So I'm trying not to think about this. Obviously, I'm considered Iranian-American. But I'm trying not to put my energy into that …* (Interview, 12th September 2021, Zoom).

Kimia shared a similar perspective and also raised the culture of victimhood in the art world as an issue. She considered popular, contemporary engagements with identity to be divisive, formulaic, and a weak mode of differentiation and further problematised educational institutions in the US and the art market as sites that reinforce these values. In our interview, she said:

> *I think that the way that we talk about identity politics right now is really divisive. It is in the sense of, 'This is me and this is you, and our differences are what define us rather than our similarities' ... It's also this obsession I find with victimisation and everyone tries to out victim each other, 'Oh, I'm LGBTQ, I'm a minority, I'm also handicapped, I was abused as a child'. It's the way that identity to me, that I've seen not only in educational institutions but also in the contemporary art world. It's a systematised way to talk about your personal trauma and to gain stature based on the number of things you can add up that separate you away from a white-male-cis identity* (Interview, 16th April 2021, Zoom).

These narratives capture the impact of external influences including societal

expectations, market demands, and precedents set by other artists, in shaping participants' artistic expressions. Participants demonstrated a concerted effort to transcend stereotypes associated with Iranian women and limiting portrayals of identities more broadly, striving to portray multifaceted, authentic experiences. Identity, for these artists, is not a static subject matter but rather a dynamic conversation. They engage in a dialogical process of art production in relation to popular perceptions of identities, exploring what it means to challenge those perceptions.

This process is, however, not without its limitations. As discussed, a backdrop of dominant framings of Iranian women complicates the artists' approach to their own identity. They may find themselves in a position of either countering prevailing narratives or defending their choice to diverge from them. Moreover, the acceptance and visibility of alternative depictions of gender identities remain questionable. This is evidenced in Kimia and Parisa's experiences with educators during their MFA studies, as their portrayals of gendered identities clashed with expectations of Iranian womanhood. Mobina also felt pressured to conform her portrayal of Iranian women to the expectations of the American art market, even having to censor her depiction of the nude female form.

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this chapter has highlighted the fact that the participants deploy various strategies to navigate and challenge their social worlds. Such strategies are dynamic, adapting and evolving in response to socio-political shifts and new, personal experiences. Despite commonalities and shared intersections of identity among this group (primarily class, ethnicity, nationality, and gender), the breadth and diversity in their artistic expression is striking, suggesting that a consideration of lived experience is vital in understanding the complexities of diasporic experiences. During the interviews, common themes emerged alongside notable differences.

Participants produced art for various, often interlocking reasons. As a context for their production, they expressed an awareness of dominant portrayals of them understood through social interactions in the US, the demands of the art market and media and political narratives. This awareness influenced their artistic decisions, some contested Western stereotypes and misrepresentations of the

Middle East while others refused to depict that which might feed into these narratives. Concern over capitalising on one's identity whether through the depiction of trauma of the gendered experience was raised by participants. This may lead to them avoiding subject matter entirely to avoid this.

They discussed constructing art in response to the constraints they experienced both in Iran and within the diasporic context, whether those limitations arose from their daily realities, restrictive policies, structural barriers, or external framings and misrepresentations. Engagement with national and gendered identities was prevalent among this group. The question of gender and its representation by Iranian women in the diaspora continues to be pressing across generations and so is the question of how to relate to external representations. The fieldwork and the analysis of their artwork showed that these artists employ various tactics to challenge societal norms, including the politicisation of the female body, exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity, and engagement with feminist literature and theory. Their artwork is a site of agency, allowing them to put forward alternative representations that transgress the limitations they feel, suggesting the politicised nature of self-expression and identity articulation for Iranian diasporic women. The desire to reframe and represent their realities extended beyond challenging dominant depictions of Iranian women; it also addressed the misrepresentation of intimate lived experiences, such as childbirth. This suggests that the artists are driven by a need to correct misrepresentation and misunderstanding relating to gender at multiple levels in their work.

Despite physical, cultural and temporal distance, artistic engagement with Iran was prevalent among this group, even for those who had never been there. This challenges discussions in diaspora studies that suggest the waning significance of the homeland as an anchor of identification. While problematising structural imbalances and restrictions in the homeland, all participants expressed a sense of national pride or attachment, but this was often in connection to an imagination of pre-1979 Revolution Iran. Some drew Iran into their art by establishing collaborative networks with creators inside the country, others escaped to a preferable past, foregrounding historic Persian identities. Their art moved between both spaces, suggesting a liminal condition. This was amplified through their engagement with digital media forms that pulled participants

between an imagined vision of the homeland and the current issues in the country.

Participants revealed a diverse range of affiliations and points of identification. For some, this was a hybrid Iranian-American identity, while for others, motherhood or activism became defining aspects of the self. Artists like Tala discussed their status as an artist as a significant facet of their identity.

Comparisons between this generation of artists and the first generation to arrive in the US following the revolution reveal both change and continuity. While engagement with Iranian national identity is palpable among many in this group, it is approached in distinct ways, often interconnected with their own biographies or global discourse on topics such as migration and feminism rather than an attempt to capture a collective national experience. Characteristic of the diasporic experience is the ability to connect with a range of cultures and communities. This broader perspective, intensified by access to global discourses through digital media and frequent travel contributing to a globalised mindset, may cause participants to translate their intimate experiences to a universal audience rather than addressing a specific group. Exchange between generations is also evident in their art and influential in shaping their realities. The intergenerational transference of trauma, for example, has significantly impacted participants, contributing to their relationship with Iran and the experiences they want to address in their art. The production of art supports participants in processing traumatic experiences and making sense of their realities in ways that other modes of expression might not.

CHAPTER FIVE
ART IN DISRUPTIVE MOMENTS

The fieldwork for this research concluded in January 2022, but in September of the same year the death of Mahsa (Jîna) Amini[71] while in custody in Tehran following her arrest by the *morality police*[72] for not wearing her hijab correctly stimulated protests across Iran and internationally. This contributed to a revolutionary movement characterised by the slogan: “Woman, Life, Freedom”

[71] Referred to here as Jîna.
[72] Islamic religious police.

(Parsa, 2023).[73] To suppress the country-wide protests in Iran the government responded violently, arresting over 20,000 people and killing over 500 protesters (Parsa, 2023: para 1).

As with the earlier Green Movement, inside Iran technology and the politics of the internet shaped the movement in significant ways. In Iran, the internet was shut down (and continued to be over the subsequent year whenever the government anticipated protest), access to VPNs were limited by the government to prevent mobilisation (see Freedom House, 2023; Shams, 2023) and facial recognition technology was employed to enforce compliance with hijab laws (Parsa, 2023). Iranian authorities actively engaged technologies to survey and control the population acquiring technologies from other authoritarian governments such as China and Russia (Freedom House, 2023). Software such as *SIAM* can, for example, intercept, store, and analyse mobile user data; it has been engaged by the Iranian State for censorship and surveillance (see Freedom House, 2023; Glover, 2022).

Indeed, a power struggle plays out between the State and its public (Iranians at home and abroad) through and with technology. Beyond Iran's borders, digital technologies serve as vital conduits—linking those inside the country with the diaspora, facilitating transnational diasporic networks, enabling the flow of information, and supporting networks of mobilisation and protest. For the artist community, the digital sphere became a site for protest. Technologies enabled them to quickly produce and disseminate art responding to the movement, collaborate with artists inside Iran, and amplify their voices when they were restricted by censorship and State control.

Holliday (2023) contends that Iran's political networks are structured in ways that subjugate women much like gender apartheid, but the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement (WLF) has been described as Iran's first feminist uprising (Holliday, 2023). This movement is, notably, characterised by its generational dynamics. Primarily led by Generation Z[74] but with the support of the generations before,

[73] The slogan originated in the Kurdish women's freedom movement and has permeated protests across Iran, appearing in Kurdish, Persian, Balochi, and Azeri languages (Holliday, 2023).
[74] Generation Z were born between 1997–2012.

their parents and grandparents, the protests in Iran quickly came to express widespread discontent and desire for freedom and revolution (ibid):

> This generation, like their peers around the globe, wants to hang out freely; they want LGBQT rights; and are concerned about the environment. The protests also highlight the very different economic situations and discrimination faced by the Kurdish, Baloch, Bahai and Azeri communities, among others. Jîna's death is therefore symptomatic of a political system without regard for basic human rights (Holliday, 2023: para 3).

The movement extended to those in diaspora with large-scale marches held in global cities. It has been sustained at varying levels over more than a year and has made a tangible impact on an international scale. A particularly significant intervention was the UN's decision in December 2022 to remove Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women[75] in response to Iran's violent treatment of the protestors (Parsa, 2023). New grassroots organisations have also emerged, advocating for women's rights and proposing comprehensive charters like the "Bill of Women's Rights" (Parsa, 2023). However, the movement has also led to negative experiences within the diaspora, including harassment and self-censorship, as discussed by *The Vashti Collective* (2023):[76]

> Throughout the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, we have witnessed the reproduction of Iranian state violence as members of the diaspora (self-) silence as a consequence of adopting the logics of the state. Our constant worry about the safety of our loved ones in Iran – while also guarding against targeted harassment in the US - perpetuates these fears. Our fury at repression in Iran coexists alongside anger and indignation at our diasporic community eating our own (para 10).

This reflects a broader pattern of fear and repression that extends beyond Iran's borders, resonating with discussions in the previous chapters on diasporic

[75] A global intergovernmental body dedicated to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment (Parsa, 2023).
[76] The Vashti Collective comprises Iranian-American women whose scholarship and activism focus on human rights, social justice, and feminist imagination (The Vashti Collective, 2023).

judgement and shaming. These dynamics significantly shape the realities of those in the diaspora, influencing their interactions and self-perceptions.

As the interview material has, so far, revealed, the Iranian gendered experience is a pressing concern for the participants in this research. The gendered character of this significant event, then, likely impacted the participants in this study, influencing their artistic expressions and reinforcing their engagement with gender issues in their work. Indeed, the WLF Movement has had specific implications along gendered lines and for Iranian artists. The *Woman Life Freedom* website, in a section entitled "#EyesonIran", discusses how artists and activists in the diaspora (and their allies) have responded to events in Iran. The site emphasises that their response is characterised by a shared vision and "solidarity with the courageous Iranians who are risking their lives to demand human rights and a free Iran" (Woman Life Freedom, 2024).

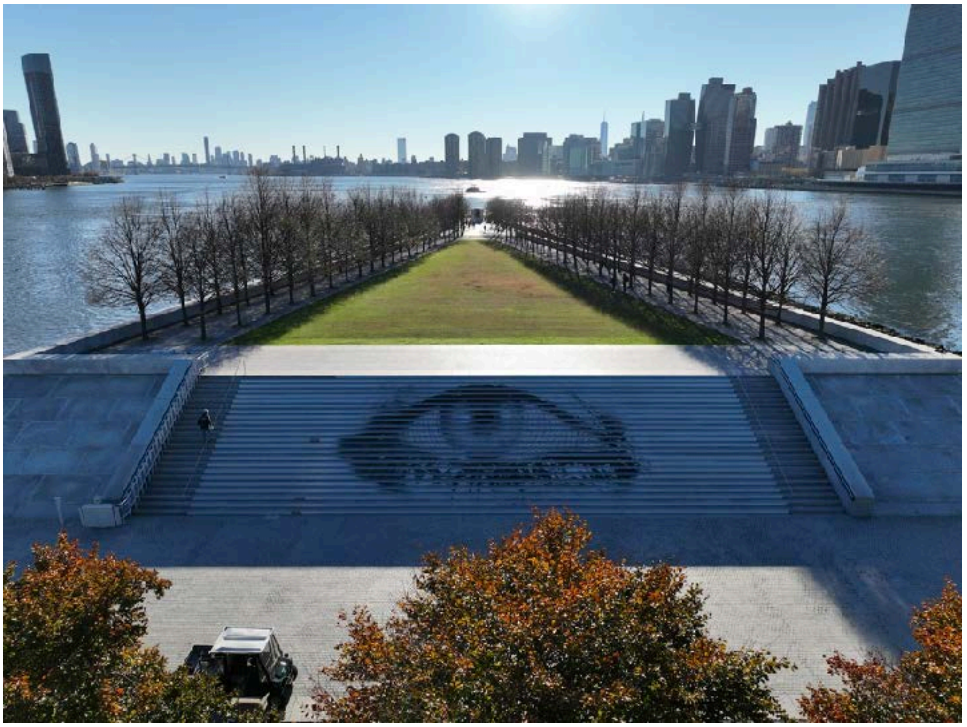

Figure 34

Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes (from Women of Allah series)*, 1993, [originally Silver gelatin print with calligraphic annotations in ink reprinted on the stairs at New York's FDR Four Freedoms State Park, photograph of artwork by Austin Paz], courtesy of For Freedoms

In November 2022, two months after the death of Jîna, a group of artists, including Sheida Soleimani [a participant in this research], exhibited a multimedia

installation entitled, *Eyes on Iran* (see Figure 34) in New York's FDR Four Freedoms State Park. Timed for the UN Women's initiative, *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence,*[77] the installation focused on the power of collective sight, materialising eyes facing the United Nations headquarters, suggesting that the world's eyes are on Iran (For Freedoms, 2022). This example is one of many ongoing artistic responses that parallel the WLF Movement led by Iranians in diaspora. In a statement on the project, Shirin Neshat, another participating artist, suggested:

> When we say that we must keep our 'Eyes on Iran,' we mean that what is happening deserves not only our attention but our vision. In solidarity with the courageous Iranians who are risking their lives to express their human rights, many artists throughout the diaspora and beyond are bringing our vision to bear to ensure international audiences and institutions remain aware of what is happening in Iran … (For Freedoms, 2022).

The participants in this research began their reflections at a critical juncture and liminal moment, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of Donald Trump's presidency, which had contributed to a rise in right-wing sentiment within the diasporic context. Following the commencement of the WLF movement, some participants in this study contacted me to provide additional reflections, indicating the movement's impact on their lives and art practices. These new perspectives enriched the study, offering valuable insights into the ongoing reconfiguration of diaspora-homeland relations, identification, and art production in response to moments of conjuncture. The emergence of this movement prompted me to carry out new fieldwork, which included interviews with four participants willing to discuss it. These interviews were conducted in August and September 2023.

During the second phase of interviews, several key themes emerged, connecting to those explored in the previous chapters. Interviews revealed shared concern with gendered and collective emancipation, the significance of technology in personal and collective connections, and its role in participants' art practices. We

[77] A yearly global campaign commencing on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and concluding on 10 December, Human Rights Day.

discussed the participants' evolving relationship with the homeland and the Iranian community, as well as new motivations for producing their art. Other topics included shifting perceptions of exile and reflections on how various generations engage with Iranian politics and protest. These themes and responses are now explored.

WLF AND DIASPORIC REALITIES

Events in Iran Shape Diasporic Realities

A constant influx of information and news mediated through social media and mobile devices, while facilitating knowledge sharing and solidarity building, also contributed significantly to anxiety among the participants. They described a liminal and dislocated condition, fuelled by the overwhelming exposure to information from online media platforms. Sheida articulated this, expressing feelings of uncertainty and dislocation related to the events unfolding in Iran. This uncertainty led to a near-constant attachment to her phone as her primary source of updates and information:

> *I wasn't surprised, unfortunately, but I was devastated. It was weeks of just being glued to your phone, looking at the screen, seeing what's coming out, how much information can I find?* (Interview, 23rd September 2023, Zoom).

Mobina also described a sense of liminality, her fragile emotional state and declining health in the weeks following the onset of the movement, leading her to delete social media platforms like Instagram and cut off the flow of information. While Iranians in Iran face significant daily risks and cannot easily escape the physical reality of the movement, those in the diaspora have the power to limit and control the type, frequency, and format of the information they receive. The online character of their interaction allows them to experience the movement at a remove with a level of control over engagement and exposure. As Mobina explained, they could choose to be more or less present and informed at various intervals:

> *I couldn't focus on anything and not just me, all of my friends are affected so much because whoever is inside Iran, yes, it's very difficult but they are*

> *inside the movement with all the news and everything. We are outside so we are in limbo space. 'What's happening?' … My niece can't go to school because later they started to poison girls in this school. And I was worried about my niece. All of us have some families and friends there. It was just devastating … our daily routine got cancelled. None of us could work normally, couldn't focus, always on this Instagram. And for me, as I'm a very hypersensitive person, the effect become higher and I got sick. I got sick from the stress. And for one month I shut off my Instagram. I deleted the Instagram because I got sick. I had so much pain in my bones. I went to a doctor. They said, you should cut off the source of your stress. And I couldn't continue after my second performance that happened … The first time in my life that I could feel the physical reaction in my body from what I see in the news … My health got affected so much and then I had to stop Instagram and the pain goes away after. It was really too much* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Mobina commented on how the realities of diasporic lives limit and impact engagement with movements like WLF and might impede their longevity (a concern shared by Sheida). The ability of those in the diaspora to control the flow of online information and physical distance from events in Iran makes it possible to "get on with one's life". This may also contribute to the dilution of the movement and accentuates the differences between the lives of those in the homeland and the diaspora, despite their shared goals and concerns:

> *As Iranians outside of Iran, we have our own life too. It was so impacted emotionally, mentally, physically and then it just started to become less and less. So the protest now is happening in 25 days. That is one year after the death of Mahsa. So it starts again. It's a big protest that it will happen in LA too. So I will join* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Sustaining WLF in Cyberspace

Evolving technologies and digital modes of communication—Twitter, Telegram, VPNs and Instagram, for example—facilitated the global proliferation of the WLF Movement. They also enabled the exchange of information and media between those in Iran and those in the diaspora, resulting in the possibility of close engagement with events. Those in the diaspora were informed of events on the ground, while those in Iran were informed of the marches, protests, and solidarity

among Iranians abroad. As a result, exchanges in the digital sphere influenced actions and events in the physical world. These exchanges were, however, limited by factors including state surveillance and control over the internet (Freedom House, 2023) combined with the limitations that members of the diaspora might impose upon their engagement with the movement due to factors such as emotional overload as discussed above. In our interview, Mobina discussed the role that social media played in maintaining and sustaining the WLF Movement which, at the time of writing, had been active for over one year:

> *Social media had a huge impact. The fact that the Revolution is still alive, one part of it is the social media, because we started to connect with people inside Iran, even though the internet was shut off and so many times we have problems talking with our parents or our families inside Iran. But still people got some VPN to go through that and then share whatever has happened. It was very scary when it was shut off for a long time. But still the social media helped* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Mobina discussed the fear and uncertainty that communication blockages incur and the tactics employed by Iranians in Iran—such as the use of VPN technology to circumvent State-imposed limitations—to share information with those outside. She reflected on how social media helped strengthen the connection between Iranian artists in Iran and those in the diaspora, resulting in solidarity, new networks, collaboration, and exchanges sped up and facilitated by digital technologies. Reflecting on the intersection of art, technology, and human connection, she suggests that artists, in particular, played a role in establishing external 'empathy' for the Iranian people. A sense of duty, and an awareness of her positionality based on her identity as an Iranian woman and an artist, then, contributed to Mobina's desire to produce artwork directly engaged with events in Iran:

> [Social media can] *create that empathy, a universal empathy between Iranian people and our artists … I connected with so many artists through this movement inside Iran that they told us, 'When you do something for us, we got the hope'. And when they do something inside Iran, we got the hope … Social media creates that connection that nothing become back*

> *to normal. Everything is still alive and we should work together towards that* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Technologies might possess emancipatory qualities, but they also have limitations. Reflecting on the state-imposed internet restrictions during the movement, Mobina discussed the strategies employed to maintain contact within her family. They relied, as noted above, on VPNs to bypass internet blocks and exhibited openness to trying out new platforms to maintain contact. Dynamics in Iran, then, directly impact those in diaspora and shape their engagement with digital technologies and one another. Mobina's reflections suggest a power struggle between the Iranian State, which ultimately controls the apparatus, and the public who adapt to these circumstances and circumvent them through engagement with new software:

> *For a long time I couldn't connect with my family inside Iran because everything was blocked, like WhatsApp and Telegram … I couldn't talk with them. But then the VPN helped and then the only things that working now are like Google Meet … So now I use Google Meet, that is better than WhatsApp and Telegram* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Shedia discussed her responsibility to the movement grounded in her positionality as an artist; for these participants, their platforms took on new significance and their practices were discussed as influential sites where they can 'make a difference'. In our interview, she reflected on the value of social media as a vehicle that might alleviate some of the 'exhausting' physical work of protesting in Iran. She suggests amplifying protestors' voices online might continue the protests' momentum. Social media in her eyes is, however, a double-edged sword in that an over-saturation and exposure to information results in fleeting engagement with causes:

> *It's hard, right? … Yes, people are emboldened now in Iran to be able to resist. But, you know, people are also exhausted and they are tired protesting. It's not easy work … We're in a media-saturated economy, right? When something happens, we pay attention to it. Like the flooding or the earthquake in Morocco, the flooding in Libya, we're hearing about these stories now. But a few weeks from now, where are we going to keep*

> *up with the aftermath of what happened in those spaces? … How much are we going to be circulating these stories? I find that because there's so many things happening that we have access to on our screens or our phones and we have the ability to escape those things by looking at pretty pictures or pacifying imagery that we, you know, tend to forget that those things are happening unless they directly relate to us. I feel like it's the job of artists and the people that are on the ground here not experiencing those things to keep this as a constant reminder* (Interview, 23rd September 2023, Zoom).

Bahar suggests that for her, social media offers an 'unfiltered perspective' that traditional media may not provide, indicating a value and trust attributed to citizen-led journalism rather than traditional media sources. She believes that social media might bypass restrictions on freedom of speech in Iran and media shaped by agendas outside the Iranian context. Social media then becomes a space where 'real' and subjective realities might arise:

> *Digital technology, especially social media, has been crucial in keeping me informed. While this mode offers immediate updates and a more unfiltered perspective, the power of the digital world in echoing the voices of the Iranian revolution cannot be understated. In a country like Iran, where freedom of speech does not truly exist, I've found hardly any disadvantages to using social media for news. It seems that only those at the heart of the movement can provide the most accurate information from within, revealing the regime's brutality towards its own citizens* (Interview, 25th September 2023).

Generational Differences: Power and Representation

Participants were aware of generational differences and commonalities in engagement with the movement. They noted that the younger generation in Iran, perhaps due to their exposure to external influence from technologies, media, and globalised value systems, exhibited a distinct mentality and approach to revolutionary activities. The participants discussed this positively, indicating an appreciation for the specific contributions of the generation below them inside Iran. It also suggests self-awareness among the participants regarding their own

generational positionality and status in diaspora, contributing to distinct perspectives, understandings and involvement in the movement. Mobina, for example, expressed a sense of pain and inner conflict at not being physically there during the women's protests in Iran. This sentiment suggests that, despite the availability of online engagement, there remains a strong desire for direct, physical immersion in events in their homeland:

> *In the time, when Ahmadinejad happened and the Green Movement, I was there and I was the one that was in the street and they started to kill people and everything goes like really down* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

While Mobina focused on her physical presence at solidarity events in her homeland, she did so from the relative safety of her position in the diaspora. She contrasted her own experiences of the Green Movement with those of the new generation, suggesting that digital technologies support this generation's engagement with revolution and conflict in new ways. Mobina contends that the online world offers them more power through their ability to share experiences, explore alternative realities, discover new notions of freedom, articulate their needs, and mobilise. She also noted, characteristically, that this group are 'braver', critiquing her own generation for being silent:

> *I kind of remember myself when I was in Iran and we were in the streets the same way. But I feel now they are much braver than us* …
>
> *These movements just bring up so much memory and so much of the trauma that we went through, but we were silent at the time or we didn't have that much power that this new generation has … But this new generation, there are two reasons. One is they are so much connected to everywhere in the world. They are connected through Instagram with everyone and are more aware of how the other people lives. But we didn't have access to internet that much at that time or social media. So now social media, huge impact. And they know what is freedom. They are very bright and their needs are different. Yeah, the new generation, not just in Iran but around the world, their needs are different* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Bahar reflected on the movement with more optimism discussing a sense of unity among Iranians across generations and gender lines 'under one flag' suggesting a strong sense of nationalism and national pride:

> *I first learned about the women-led movement in Iran following the unfortunate death of Mahsa Amini. For the first time, men were supporting the cause too, showing the deep connection between gender equality and other human rights under the oppressive Islamic regime. I felt a mix of sadness, hope, and inspiration … The younger Iranian generation, which constitutes a majority, is clear in their demand for massive change beyond mere improvements. They envision a secular, democratic Iran that's open to the world …*
>
> *For the first time since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranians both outside and inside the country have united under a single flag and cause: Woman, Life, Freedom. Every week, Iranians abroad come together to plan protests, amplifying the voices of those inside Iran. The Iranian diaspora community worldwide joins these efforts, sharing stories and coordinating events in support of the movement. This global unity transcends boundaries, amplifying the movement's reach and impact* (Interview, 25th September 2023).

While the other participants sketch a picture of unity among Iranians, Sheida suggests that some simply do not want to be involved distancing themselves physically and emotionally from Iran:

> *I think there are a lot of people that are in the diaspora that really do want to call attention and bring attention to what's happening there. But people don't know how, they don't have the tools. And so protesting, physically protesting is one way to at least make people aware of the presence. But there is the diaspora that's here that's also indifferent. You know, they've gotten here, they've gone through the struggle and they're away from it now and they don't want to engage with it anymore. And so I feel like it's kind of both sides, unfortunately* (Interview, 25th September 2023, Zoom).

Historic Disputes Replayed in the Present

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, inter-diaspora conflicts have, in

some cases, negatively impacted the WLF movement. Mobina discussed the initial optimism at the unity of the Iranian diaspora at the start of the movement, which she contrasted with the failure of Iranians to mobilise against the Islamic regime during the 1979 Revolution. Her perspective places a sense of social responsibility on diasporic Iranians to engage with conditions in their homeland. It also highlights how younger generations may critique their predecessors for not confronting past injustices, indicating intergenerational and inter-diaspora tensions that influence how current realities are perceived and addressed within the diaspora:

> *We were so happy that, for the first time, all Iranians, any kind of ideology or background, had come together with one voice. Some people that supporting the kings, some people with the communist background. But whatever background they have from the generation that they did the Revolution, you know, they came together to create a syndicate to be the voice of those people. But it didn't last long because they couldn't tolerate each other's ideology again. And then it just goes away. It just fades away after a while; we were so happy and hopeful because they came together* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

WLF AND ART

Stimulating New Art Practices

The question of how such events and the participants' relationship to them have influenced their artistic practice is central to this study. The interview material, reflecting the WLF context, suggests a shared sense of responsibility towards fellow Iranians among participants, shaped by their positionality as Iranian artists. In some cases, this responsibility has led them to use their art as a platform for advocacy during the WLF protests. For others, their art practice became a way to process the trauma of the events. These insights are similar to those found in the first phase of the fieldwork, but in the second phase, participants spoke of the WLF Movement as a conjuncture that reconfigured their relationship to their art. Their art became a valuable political tool, often as a substitute for physical protest in Iran. There was a sense of helplessness given the participants' physical distance from Iran that could be repaired by producing

art critically engaged with these events. Through their art, they could educate, articulate, raise awareness, display solidarity, and sustain the movement.

Participants discussed their roles as artists within this movement, expressing a sense of responsibility as image-makers to shed light on Iran's realities, amplifying the voices of Iranian women and those who cannot represent themselves. Sheida suggested that she was aware of her positionality as an artist in diaspora and the 'privilege' that this might afford. She noted that being outside Iran allows some to escape physically and mentally from the events unfolding there. In our interview, she emphasised the importance of using her art to bridge the gap between her relatively safe position and the struggles of those still in Iran:

> *I think that it's the job of artists to respond to what's happening socially and politically in the world. I don't think that art should be a place for escape. There are enough beautiful images in the world, but we live in a time and a place in which I think it's a social responsibility to discuss what's happening instead of, you know, having the privilege of escaping* (Interview, 25th September 2023, Zoom).

Bahar suggested that her art is a site where she can speak for those, in Iran, who cannot; in doing so she raises international awareness of their realities. Both artists view their work as a form of advocacy and documentation. Bahar also supplements her work with media engagement and dialogue with the art community suggesting that the production of the work is not enough as it does not entirely speak for itself:

> *I've communicated with the art community and magazines through interviews, aiming to share my perspective on the movement. Through these discussions, I strive to convey not only my opinions but also the broader messages and demands of the Iranian people, particularly the compelling message behind the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement, and share it with a global audience. Art is my chosen tool to shed light on these socio-political issues and to amplify the cries of those putting everything on the line in Iran* (Interview, 25th September 2023).

In some cases, the character of their art shifted from time-intensive processes towards more instantaneous and accessible modes; participants engaged in public performances and explored new digital forms. The urgency of such an event, then, might prompt an artist to reflect upon how they communicate through their art and how it might be reconfigured in content and form to meet their goals. Mobina, for example, discussed a process of reflection on the form her art takes and its wider social implications. In the early days of the movement she focused on public performances, prioritising public exposure over aesthetic and art market concerns:

> *For a few months, it was completely changed. I was so much affected by that that nothing mattered to me even the meaning of art faded away for me. I felt on that time, I just need to use the art as a tool. So whatever it is, however it looks, it doesn't matter … I felt I need to do these performance in different museums around the world, because my most highest purpose was creating impact. I thought that performance creates the highest impact for people, especially internationally, not just Iranian, because Iranian knows* [about what is happening in Iran] (Interview, 23rd August, 2023, Zoom).

Figure 35

Mobina Nouri, *Wind in My Hair,* 2022, [still from performance] *de Young and Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*, San Francisco

Chapter Three explored how and why participants engage their bodies as performative sites of resistance. In the context of the WLF Movement, participants' gendered bodies gained new significance in relation to the pervasive violence against women in Iran. In one of her performances, *Wind in My Hair* (see Figure 35) Mobina harnessed women's hair as a multi-layered symbol. She discussed female hair within the Iranian gendered context as a complex site of control, resistance, dominance, and rebellion. She suggested that hair is a "weapon" deployed in her art and by Iranian women more broadly against the Islamic Regime, which polices and restricts women's agency over their bodies, particularly their hair. The symbolic value of hair as a destabilising weapon against the dominant social order is constructed through Mobina's perception that women's hair poses a threat to the patriarchal and moral order in Iran. Set against a backdrop of a street art mural in San Francisco, that features Jîna's face, emblazoned with the slogans "#Free_Iran", and "Woman, Life, Freedom", Mobina's performance invited her audience into a dialogue, encouraging personal reflection on their connection to the Iranian experience and its intersection with global discussions on gendered violence against women, as she recounted:

> *That's very symbolic, hair. They're scared of women's hair* [the Islamic regime] *… They think if it's open, it just creates some sort of danger for men and that's the idea that you should cover, then everything is safe. So that becomes a symbol of this Revolution* [Woman, Life, Freedom] *that I have the right to wear whatever I want and then my hair, it's not something that scares men. It's something that I was born with and I don't want to hide it. So that's a very basic right of humans … it becomes the weapon of women in Iran … You can see every day in the social media, videos coming from Iran that women go to the street without hijab even. They face penalty or going to prison or whatever. But they still work on that because that's the highest fear that the government has from her* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

By actively involving the viewer in her work and assigning them the responsibility of cutting her free, Mobina places the freedom of Iranian women rests in the hands of the wider public—responsibility is, therefore, collective. The use of

scissors in the performance also signifies the Iranian State's weaponisation of Iranian women's bodies and gendered violence. Through her art, Mobina brings distant issues closer to her audience in the US, making them intimate and demanding accountability:

> *I started this idea with the hair, and then in Clarion Alley there was a mural that was painted of the women's prisoners inside Iran … I put the scissors all over the red dress … then I started to cut my hair … And then everyone, comes and cuts. And then I get free. So I wanted to have this freedom kind of message, symbolically … The first one was mostly diverse people from all over, but mostly Iranian … it was only the people that didn't know what's going on, so we created some posters, explained what happened. And then I collaborated with musicians … and the sounds from inside Iran, playing the audio recordings from Iran* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Mobina's performance integrated audio recordings of the voices of Iranians inside Iran. Technology was utilised to file share and therefore compress space and time, linking those on the ground in Iran to an international audience. Through her art, Mobina enabled Iranians to circumvent the censorship and risk they face in their country and share their realities anonymously. Her work humanises their experiences to her audience, a process which might cultivate empathy and support.

Since 2020, Sheida has been producing artworks in immediate response to significant political moments and Jîna's death was one such incident that she felt compelled to represent:

> *I made a piece about Mahsa* [Jîna] *Amini's death … I have made these kind of immediate responses to political kind of moments that have happened since the assassination of Soleimani in 2020. And so I thought the death of Masa Amini as being another moment that needed to crystallise in that timeline of what's happening in Iran … I'm telling the stories of women that can't get out or escape the country* (Interview, 23rd September 2023, Zoom).

Figure 36

Sheida Soleimani, *Mahsa,* 2022, [installation] photograph of artwork by Austin Paz, courtesy of *For Freedoms*

Similarly to Mobina, Sheida perceives her role as an artist in the Iranian diaspora as that of an intermediary. Leveraging her positionality as an artist, she conveys the stories of women who cannot leave Iran to a broader audience, thus advocating for them and chronicling their realities. This is further amplified by the public character that Sheida's work, in response to the WLF Movement, took on (see Figure 36). She views her art as a medium for giving voice to those who might face censorship thereby playing a significant role in documenting and narrating suppressed experiences:

> [The] *first piece that I made actually was really just a few days after Mahsa* [Jîna] *Amini was murdered. So the piece is called 'Mahsa', and it's her hand and this kind of flaming, white hijab, a reference to White Wednesdays, a time where women would take their hijabs off and set them on fire. And so there's this hand holding, this kind of flaming hijab as like a reference to her life and kind of memorialising her.*
>
> *Then the second piece that I made recently, just a few weeks ago is called 'La La'. It's this boundary-blurring piece between my parents' story as well as the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement. I cast 100 aluminum tulips, red tulips, which are a sign of revolutionaries … an old Iranian symbol. In a lot*

> *of the protest songs, they refer to these fields of red tulips in the mountains as being the revolutionaries and the laborers and it's really about resistance because the tulips in the winter, they die, but they come back every year … Those tulips are actually in a still life of the mountains that my father crossed over to escape. It's blurring those two boundaries and mashing up the stories.* (Interview, 23rd September 2023, Zoom).

Sheida's artistic response to the events inside Iran (see Figure 36) suggests a sense of responsibility towards Iranians and an attachment to their cause, despite never having spent time in the country. Rather than framing the events that contributed to the WLF Movement or her family's traumatic escape from Iran as isolated incidents, Sheida connects them, suggesting that such experiences are ongoing and part of a complex web of histories and political dynamics that impact individuals and the collective across generations. Signifiers of social movements across time—the burning hijab as an icon of White Wednesdays and the revolutionary tulip as a perennial emblem of Iranian resistance—fused with the authenticity of her family's lived experiences evoke the suppression of dissident voices in Iran over decades but also the ongoing resistance of Iranians. Rather than merely chronicling the current WLF Movement, Sheida situates it within a broader historical context. She critically reflects on the role of Western powers in shaping present realities and invites her audience to do the same:

> *I think something that a lot of people, especially in the West, don't realize, is that this is nothing new … it's really important to remember that history repeats itself and that this has been an ongoing issue. And this suppression has also been something that has not gone away. Obviously, the West starts paying attention every once in a while, maybe every like 10-20 years, there'll be a movement. They will be like, 'Oh, like that's happening in Iran'. And then, of course, the attention fades away. I think it's really important in my work to remind people that the tension does not fade away and this is not over* (Interview, 25th September 2023, Zoom).

In response to the WLF Movement, Bahar's practice also underwent a notable transformation, evolving from introspective themes to art with an overtly political character. Her work began to navigate complex emotional terrain; her simultaneous hopes and fears; her anxieties about Iranian society manifest

through the metaphor of an endangered species. The icon of the cheetah cub suggests that Iranians, much like this species, are born and die in captivity. Bahar's art simultaneously imagines victory and evokes sentiments of hope while critically examining the treatment and status of women in Iran. She pays homage to the role that women, particularly schoolgirls, have played in sustaining the movement:

> *As the recent events unfolded in Iran, my art has also evolved to encompass the broader socio-political issues, particularly women's rights and environmental challenges in Iran. Since our last conversation, my artwork has evolved profoundly, reflecting the pulsating energy of the woman-led movement happening in Iran. I've embarked on a new series titled, 'We are Victorious' (ما،پیروزیم†), where I employ the cheetah as a metaphor for hope and the brighter future Iranian people aspire to. The birth of Victor (Pirouz), a cheetah cub born and died in captivity, symbolizes our victory against oppressive forces despite all the obstacles and restrictions.*
>
> *… In my series titled, 'We are Victorious', I've underscored themes of hope and tenacity, adopting the cheetah as a poignant metaphor. The Asiatic cheetah holds a distinctive place in Iranian culture, not just as an endangered species that has its last few members in Iran, but also as the symbol of the National football team. This brings forth an ironic contradiction in Iranian society: while the cheetah is revered and showcased as a national emblem, women are prohibited from entering stadiums to watch matches alongside men. My artwork, featuring a fusion of a woman and a cheetah, serves as a bold statement addressing this disparity.*
>
> *Additionally, my depictions of Pirouz alongside young Iranian schoolgirls illuminate another profound aspect. These girls, who played a pivotal role in the movement, protested against the mandatory hijab by burning their scarves, voicing their dissent against the sexual apartheid that has persisted in Iran, especially in the four decades following the revolution.*

By melding these elements, I seek to offer a visual commentary on the prevailing socio-political issues in Iran (Interview, 25th September 2023).

Technology and Art

The ability to respond artistically to the WLF Movement was a major concern for the participants I spoke with. Some artists suggested that the labour and time-intensive nature of their traditional artwork posed a barrier to quickly sharing their messages internationally. This challenge prompted a process of revision, allowing new art forms to emerge through digital technologies that could accelerate, expand, and reconfigure their processes. This shift indicated a change in their motivations and an openness to embracing new approaches to their art if it helped them achieve their aims, leading some to engage in novel and evolving technologies.

Figure 37

Mobina Nouri, (2022) *My Body is Wounded but my Voice is High! I Sing! I Dance! I Whirl! I Live! I Free! Nothing Can Stop Me* [Instagram post].

Mobina, for instance, found that the intensive handwork in her drawings limited her ability to produce and disseminate the art she wanted to create in support of the movement. Her work, produced in response to and in dialogue with the movement, exhibits an evolution of forms and an openness to experimentation suggesting a desire to overcome these constraints. Her early digital pieces (see Figure 37) echo the aesthetics of Hollywood cinema and graphic revolutionary posters connecting past to present. Her self-portrait, shared on her Instagram page shortly after the incident on 3 October 2022, is a digital remediation of a black and white photograph of the artist's nude body, her breasts are layered with graphic icons of guns and daggers and the hashtag #MahsaAmini; a bullet appears to move towards her blurred face. The lack of colour serves multiple functions here, it evokes the constructed character of cinema and suggests that life might also be devoid of colour. It also ensures that the viewer is not distracted from the central content of the composition—the artist's nude body and the tools of violence imposed upon it which connect to Mahsa's [Jîna's] experience. Earlier discussions emphasised that the foregrounding of the female nude body in art can be interpreted as a highly politicised act. This is exemplified in the context of Iran and the gendered violence that Jîna's body was subjected to. Mobina depicts extensive assault on the gendered body and uses her digital art and Instagram account to call for the support of the global online community. Graphics and text come together, here, leaving no room for ambiguity, Mobina's Instagram post was accompanied by the caption:

> My body is wounded but my voice is high! I sing! I dance! I whirl! I live! I free! Nothing can stop me….
>
> "Woman Life Freedom"
>
> We are all Mahsa Amini 💔 ما همه مهسا هستیم
>
> Don't be silent …
>
> Justice for Iranian women 💔🖤
> Be the voice…

> All forces and laws for women in Iran is a type of slavery, being born and raised on that environment I experienced the high level of violence and abuse and stress all my life. women inside Iran are tired to be slave. They want to be free from any kind of oppression. Leave them to be.
>
> I understand this is too much for my non-Iranian friends but this is the reality we live inside Iran at the moment. My goal is international awareness not spreading violence (Nouri, 2022).

Later, Mobina adopted AI in her art practice, creating works that could be swiftly produced and circulated. Her digital art complemented her public performances enabling her to engage audiences beyond the Iranian diaspora in real time. By also sharing her filmed performances on digital communication platforms, Mobina transcended the ephemeral and site-specific nature of performance, allowing her work to be circulated and afforded new meaning in the online sphere.

Mobina was motivated by urgency, reach, and impact rather than art market success or aesthetic standards. In this phase of the fieldwork, participants discussed their art as their most powerful mode of expression and a site where they could influence a wider audience compared to other channels. This realisation led to a critical reflection on the form and function of their art, its content, and the audience they were addressing. It also suggested an openness among participants to embrace new modes of creation in response to pressing circumstances. A sense of urgency accelerated and changed their engagement with technologies such as AI. In our interview, Mobina said:

> *Besides my performances, I started to* [make digital art] *because I wanted to be fast. The news is coming every day someone is killed …* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Digital technologies allow multiple media forms to be absorbed from diverse contexts, blended and reconfigured into new, evolving art forms that lend new meaning to existing narratives, this is clearly evident in Sheida's art. Lotfalian (2022) suggests such modes of creative expression have become increasingly

visible in recent years, made possible as various disciplines and technologies intersect, for example, the internet, video, and performance arts:

> Together the forms of media and their cross-over connections, create new spaces of production, circulation and practice that are neither purely national nor transnational, but always already both. People work on images to do things with them, making second-order artworks that address other images (Mitchell 2005) and create new recursive publics (Kelly 2008) instead of directly representing reality (20).

During the first phase of the fieldwork, participants discussed their desire to produce art inside Iran or collaborate with Iranians there, suggesting the significance of maintaining ties with national culture and community to them. In the second phase, collaborative practices took on new significance in response to the WLF Movement. Those in the diaspora who felt helpless or frustrated by their inability to physically engage with the movement inside Iran looked to digital technologies to transcend limitations. Technologies enabled artists to establish new networks and create and disseminate artwork using material that they otherwise would not have had easy access to, such as audio recordings or citizen-captured images of protests shared from inside Iran. Such material could be remediated and amplified by diasporic artists, operating from a relatively safe space, allowing it to circulate in new spaces and represent suppressed realities. Mobina explained how digital technologies have helped her overcome the barriers of distance, enabling her to maintain a creative dialogue with those on the ground in Iran. Her process facilitated the global reach of visual messages from inside Iran, cultivated a sense of solidarity and resulted in innovative, multidisciplinary art forms:

> *I was collaborating with one of the artists* [in Iran] *that creates those small images that I create and put it in the hair* [during her performance]*. It comes from one graphic artist inside Iran that I didn't know before. I saw his* [Instagram] *page and I contacted him and I said, 'Can I use them'? Those are the people that are lost* [missing persons in Iran]*. But they're not lost because the government took them … When people cut the hair*

> [during her performance] *the name of that* [missing] *person and the image was there* (Interview, 23rd August 2023, Zoom).

Mobina's remediation of images of missing people from Iran serves several functions. She illuminates the Iranian state's campaign of control and fear for an international audience, while also memorialising, humanising, and individualising the experiences of the missing. Interestingly, despite the digital elements involved in her collaborative process and other works, this piece is performed in-person and captured and circulated online. Mobina's approach suggests value placed on physical and digital spaces and their interconnectivity. There is also an awareness of the types of audiences that might be encountered in on and offline spaces and their distinct engagement patterns. By incorporating these photographs into the broader discourse of the WLF Movement and performing at institutions in the US, Mobina compels the viewer to bear witness to human rights abuses, confronting them with her subject matter in a setting where they cannot easily glance away, in contrast to the fleeting engagement typical of the online world.

Conflict Over Authenticity

During both phases of the fieldwork, participants expressed concern over capitalising on their identities and maintaining artistic integrity. Mehregan expressed concern over the intentions and authenticity of art produced in response to the WLF Movement. She acknowledged that the movement aligns with her values as an artist and individual but scrutinised the motivations of some artists participating in it, questioning the 'authenticity' of their work. Her critical reflections suggest an awareness that 'genuine' art does not emerge solely when such incidents gain global attention; it also indicates tensions and divisions among the diasporic art community. Mehregan pointed out that performances at well-known institutions like LACMA might be self-serving for some artists, implying that artistic commitment should be evident regardless of global attention, as she recounted:

> *I started seeing a lot of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement coming. A lot of people started talking about it and my work is all about that, it's all about 'Woman, Life, Freedom'. But when that came, I started finding myself having a hard time using that hashtag, using those words … they*

> [artists] *are going to LACMA and a lot of different places, having performances and I'm like, 'Where the fuck were you?'* [before]. *Now you're going on the stage doing performances. I felt like it was not authentic, not genuine ... I'm glad anybody who does anything, I'm so grateful because I think we need as much as help we can get authentically* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

Initially, Mehregan expressed reluctance to engage with the WLF Movement, but she later acknowledged that she was not 'blind' to it and had been inspired by the artistic output of its participants. This shift suggests that artists monitor and evaluate each other's work, experiencing internal conflicts and contradictions as they choose the causes and subject matter they affiliate with. Throughout both stages of the fieldwork, participants emphasised their desire to be authentic as artists and individuals, a sentiment echoed by Mehregan. Her critical stance toward other artists and her eventual inspiration from the WLF Movement suggests a pull between a desire for artistic solidarity and the pressures of maintaining credibility within the community. In our interview, she described a revision of perspectives over time, suggesting the ongoing and dialogical character of self-definition:

> *I just had an interview and it was the exhibition called 'Irrational Exhibit and Edition 12' … I was invited to make a piece and I started thinking, 'You know, I was in the Woman, Life, Freedom I hear it, you know, I'm not blind to it. I'm not ignorant'.*
>
> *I started thinking a lot about women taking off their clothes and a lot of videos, you see, they wear shorts you know, they show their belly. I was very inspired and impressed and so I made this piece. It is called the 'Somatic Flashbacks'. Somatic flashback is kind of like PTSD, a trauma that you physically feel, which I feel a lot … The piece is a combination of photography, video, drawing and performance* (Interview, 5th September 2023, Zoom).

The performance Mehregan discussed was part of a group exhibition of 22 performance artists, *Irrational Exhibits 12: Body, Materiality, and Systems* that explored the duality of balance and crisis in an ever-chaotic world. Mehregan connected this theme to her own lived trauma, suggesting the intersection of

personal and collective experiences. Mehregan's submission, *The Imprint of Somatic Flashback*, (120 min), combined audio recordings of Qamar-ol-Moluk Vaziri (the first Iranian woman to perform on the stage without a Hijab in 1924) and visuals of the artist's nude body. On the surface, the work explores the individual, physicality of trauma. The layering of Qamar-ol-Moluk Vaziri's voice upon the artist's gendered nude form, however, suggests that trauma is a collective Iranian concern, one that connects to the imposition of veiling and the issues faced by Iranian women over a century later.

CONCLUSION

The WLF Movement has influenced the realities and artistic practices of Iranian diaspora artists this research engaged with, prompting a re-evaluation of their roles, responsibilities, and methodologies as artists. In some cases, this event redefined their artistic identities. Central to this transformation is the participants' sense of responsibility towards their fellow Iranians, which manifests through their art as a form of advocacy and a means to process the trauma of ongoing events in Iran. Despite the distance associated with their diasporic existence, participants articulated a sense of duty to represent and advocate for those in Iran, often viewing their art as a substitute for physical presence in the country. A shift in perspective stimulated by the magnitude of events surrounding the WLF uprising in Iran, relayed to them often through digital technologies, has led to a re-evaluation of their art's purpose and an increased focus on using art as a political tool. For many, the WLF Movement marked a point of conjuncture, transforming their art into a medium for educating, displaying solidarity, and sustaining the movement. It also stimulated a shift in how their art was presented, as artists looked to public, institutional and online spaces rather than commercial avenues to display their art. Artists expressed a heightened awareness of their positionality in the diaspora and the privileges it affords them, emphasising the need to mend the gap between their relatively safe positions and the struggles of those in Iran. The urgency of responding to these circumstances led artists to embrace new and evolving technologies. Digital tools enabled them to overcome limitations whether physical, legal or from time-intensive art practices, facilitating rapid and broader dissemination of their messages. This shift indicates a willingness to adopt new approaches and

produce more experimental, potentially less commercially viable art, to meet the urgency of their advocacy work.

This second phase of fieldwork further reinforced key insights from the study's first phase, but it also indicated that diasporic experiences and relationships are evolving, fluid, and dialogical. In light of the WLF Movement, for example, participants directly confronted themes of veiling in Iran, a topic they had largely, previously sought to distance themselves from and connected to restrictive art market demands. The issue of the veil in Iran has not, then, disappeared for this generation, it comes back and takes on new forms. Events such as the death of Jîna, a consequence of a woman defying mandatory veiling, evoke strong emotional and political responses, pulling participants mentally back into the Iranian context. This suggests that despite time, space and new experiences, they maintain a liminal condition, and the homeland remains a central point of reference and definition for the artists within this group.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the conditions, motivations, and artistic concerns of a sample set of the post-revolution generation of Iranian women in the US diaspora, taking into account the experiences and circumstances that framed the negotiation of their environments. The interview material suggests that these artists navigate a complex constellation of influences including their Iranian heritage, experiences and connections within global and diasporic contexts, the socio-political conditions that frame their existence, as well as the broader global art ecosystem which is shaped by the pressures of neoliberalism. The research sought to answer the key question: How do diaspora Iranian women artists of the post-revolution generation engage with art and for what purposes?

The data collected through semi-structured interviews suggests that participants produce their art as a reactive form of self-expression, resistance, and identity negotiation. Their art is a vehicle for personal and collective expression, challenging and reshaping the dominant narratives that attempt to define their identities. This negotiation is influenced by lived experiences, framed by the

intersections of their identities, familial legacies, and the broader, evolving socio-political conditions in Iran, the US, and globally.

How, when, where, and why participants arrived in the US affected their experiences, perspectives, and existences i.e. those who were born and raised in the US demonstrated a distinct relationship with Iran compared to those who migrated alone later in life. These factors contributed to the way participants negotiated notions of home, belonging, freedom and regulation, and self-identity. While their arrival in diaspora prompted reflection on their position as women in the home and hostland, understandings remained fluid and subject to revision as the participants moved through various social fields and took new journeys that expanded their framework for reflection and understanding.

The interviews indicated that the artistic practices of diasporic Iranian women are embedded in and responsive to the dynamics of globalisation and transnationalism filtered through their subjectivities. They inhabit and negotiate multiple, interconnected fields; their work, therefore, engages issues pertinent not only to the Iranian diaspora but also to marginalised and transnational communities worldwide. By situating their personal and cultural narratives within a global context, participants contribute to broader understandings of issues including migration, identity, gender, and political oppression.

Their engagement with global audiences is mediated through digital platforms, which provide vital spaces for maintaining cultural ties with Iran and participating in international artistic dialogues. Digital networks enable the creation of new art forms and collaborative practices that transcend geographic boundaries, reshaping interactions between the physical and digital worlds and diaspora and non-diaspora dynamics. Indeed, some of their art practices would not exist in the same way without access to technology. Their narratives also indicated that significant events spurred new engagement with technologies and adaptations in their art.

Participants were conscious of the discourses surrounding them, whether as women, migrants, or Middle Eastern individuals and artists. These narratives, present in media and political discourse, were also embedded within the art market. Beyond their awareness of the Western gaze, participants discussed evolving forms of Othering, reinforced through, for example, the trend for identity

politics in art. This reflects the shifting dynamics that diasporic artists must navigate as Orientalism and exoticisation manifest in new, subtler forms. These shifting forces present distinct challenges for the artists of the post-revolution generation. An awareness of how they are externally framed influenced their artistic output and how they discussed and presented themselves, suggesting that identities are produced and performed dialogically.

Participants' engagement with national and gendered identities manifested in diverse ways, but the artists who approach these themes are united by a desire to achieve gender balance, representation, and visibility. Participants were acutely aware of how free/restricted they were in various social contexts. Challenging dominant narratives that frame the West as inherently free in contrast to the oppressed Middle East, participants highlighted experiences of conservatism and restriction in both contexts. These limitations were felt on multiple levels and enforced by various mechanisms, including normative expectations around gendered behaviour in Iran and the US, the influence of right-wing politics in America, the gaze of the diasporic community, and constraints imposed by the art market. Their reflections suggest that control and restriction operate across cultural and geopolitical boundaries, complicating straightforward binaries of freedom/oppression. For these artists, freedom as women was not a given; it was a hard-fought, highly valued ideal continually assessed and negotiated within their art. Their strategies to address these issues encompass politicising their self-image and the gendered Iranian body, envisioning alternative realities, representing dissident and marginalised identities, and pursuing emancipation through engagement with feminist literature. Misrepresentation, for them, extended beyond their status as Iranian women, encompassing broader gendered experiences such as childbirth. Their artistic practices were motivated by a need to rectify gender misrepresentations at multiple levels.

Theories of globalisation have problematised the presumed significance of the nation-state, yet the fieldwork interviews suggested that the nation-state was highly significant to this sample set. Despite geographic, temporal, and cultural distance from Iran, they maintained a strong—if critical—connection to their Iranian heritage, which was often reflected in their work. Their connection manifests in various ways, from engaging with historical Persian identities and

pre-revolutionary Iran to critically confronting the country's contemporary issues. Their engagement with historic Persian identities can be read as a politicised act as well as a display of cultural capital, reflecting a purposeful choice to negate the current Islamic regime through their art. Indeed, during the interviews participants were keen to assert their 'open-mindedness' and that they were not from a socially conservative or religious background. By selecting and performing Persian histories and traditions—*Shahnameh*, Persian marquetry, or Rumi—in their art, participants forge connections to a favourable cultural legacy, one of their choice that resists dominant depictions of Iranians.

The generational experience was also a significant theme in this study. Artists who witnessed the 1979 Revolution turned to their art to critique it, reflecting on struggles for freedom and human rights in Iran from their new diasporic positionalities. The artists discussed here exhibit continuity and evolution compared to this earlier generation. Findings from the first phase of fieldwork indicate that experiences of displacement have also significantly informed the post-revolution generation's art, but their work reflects an understanding of migration and cultural hybridity that transcends geographical limits. As Naficy (2001) discussed, diasporic cultural production is characterised by its plurality. Since his study, however, increasingly digital and transnational lifestyles have arguably heightened this multiplicity, giving rise to a form of global consciousness. Such consciousness is demonstrated in the participants' artwork, which connects global issues such as migration—the challenges faced by Mexicans crossing the US border for example—to their own issues crossing borders as travellers with Iranian origins. Indeed, the material suggests that Iranian diasporic artists have moved beyond narrating a distinctly Iranian experience; they foreground global concerns filtered through their subjectivity. The intergenerational transmission of trauma, memory, and cultural heritage connects generations, resulting in an evolving process of continuity and exchange. The impact of events such as the 1979 Revolution extends to those one step removed, still imprinting on their identities and artistic expressions.

Digital technologies sustain connections across time and space. They allow artists to stay informed about and engage with cultural and political developments in Iran, remediate images and archival materials, and facilitate

collaborative networks with artists inside the country. Despite discussing global affiliations and concerns, the pursuit of an authentic portrayal of the Iranian diasporic experience is evident among these artists, raising the question: what exactly is 'authentic'? The fieldwork showed that despite physical distance, a sense of authenticity stemmed from physical and emotional attachment to Iran. For these artists, producing work engaged with the homeland might, at least temporarily, collapse the distance of separation, which may account for the prevalence of 'Iran' as a thematic concern among the sample set.

It was paradoxical that participants expressed a desire to be considered beyond regional groupings within the art market yet the majority of the participants were conceptually concerned with Iran in some way, raising the question: can these women, even those in the second-generation or with only one Iranian parent who have lived primarily in the US, be considered outside the Iranian national grouping? Even for artists whose work may not overtly reference Iran in their output, interviews reveal that their global experiences are filtered through their encounters in/of Iran, suggesting the influence of nationality and ethnicity on lived experiences. Interviews with art market professionals indicated that transcending regional categories requires art to be accessible and resonate across cultural boundaries. This is demonstrated by the international recognition of Tala Madani and Sheida Solemani, though their approaches differ significantly. Madani achieves cross-cultural engagement by creating work that deliberately avoids cultural clichés and explores universal themes such as motherhood, appealing to broader Western sensibilities.

In contrast, Solemani's work is critically concerned with SWANA-US political dynamics. Rather than conforming to dominant US perceptions of the MENA region, her art dismantles them; she is, however, addressing ongoing conflicts through a universal visual language. By drawing on the aesthetics of advertising and the internet, Solemani's work retains global relevance, transcending regional codes. Both artists demonstrate that transcultural engagement, whether through thematic universality or a universal visual language, can support recognition beyond regional classifications.

Timing of the Research

The research commenced and concluded during significant moments of

conjuncture. Participants discussed their experiences citing events such as the legacy of the war on terror and 9/11, the rise of right-wing politics, mass migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Green Movement, and the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement as transformative, influencing their perspectives, lives and artistic expressions. Their reflections on incidents such as 9/11 and responses to shifts in right-wing politics suggest that their sense of belonging and settlement is always contingent. The impact of stereotyping, marginalisation and an awareness of how they are framed and discussed—as outsiders—motivated them to challenge dominant narratives in their art. It was evident that several of the artists were directly confronting a Western audience, suggesting that they viewed their art as a tool to educate and address asymmetric power relations.

Access to evolving technologies allows these artists to experience significant moments differently. While the racial profiling they experienced following 9/11 or during border crossings impacted their minds and art, these experiences, intimately felt, differed from how they engaged with the Woman, Life, Freedom and Green Movements, which were largely lived through digital platforms. The online world offers closer monitoring but also the optionality of ongoing or fleeting engagement with events that can overlap with physical experiences and influence their state of mind and behaviour. This raises the question: how might digitally experienced moments of conjuncture affect trauma, memory, identity, and lived experience in the future?

Limitations on Expression

The interview material suggests that the participants, through their artistic practices, attempt to challenge dominant narratives, assert agency, and present alternative visions of their identities. However, these efforts are not without limitations. Ranciere contended that art can challenge and disrupt social hierarchies, but the participants acknowledged constraints that have influenced their expressive practices in various contexts. In Iran, lack of professional opportunities in academia and the art world were motivating factors for migration, as expressed by several participants. This drive to leave was, however, complicated by a parallel yearning to be inside Iran for artistic purposes: for inspiration, collaboration and creative production. This suggests a push-pull between pragmatic needs and an artistic desire for authenticity, as mentioned above. In the US, participants were conscious of the demands of domestic and

international art markets which did not always align with their artistic intentions. They felt judgement from the Iranian diasporic community regarding their art, some struggled with portrayals of Middle Eastern art in Western media or the expectations of their MFA educators who encouraged art that reflected identity-driven, market trends. This raised concerns about capitalising on or exoticising their identities, a sentiment captured by one participant's metaphor of playing a strategic game and deploying their "exotic card" to succeed in the market. In some cases, this unease prompted a shift in the direction of their work. Such external factors constrain their artistic expressions, creating boundaries that the artists may either push against or pragmatically accept.

The participants appeared highly independent, with most not discussing significant others as sources of support, except in cases where relocation occurred with or for others. They were keen to assert their openmindedness and avoid feeding into what they described as the culture of victimhood they encountered in the art market. Notably, the judgement and awareness of the Iranian community, both within and outside Iran, emerged as a significant external influence. This suggests that the performance of their identities is, to some extent, shaped and regulated by the opinions of others, policed by socially constructed norms such as shame and honour, rooted in the Iranian context. This awareness extends to the art market and the types of art that might be deemed acceptable or unacceptable, which varies contextually.

Such factors arguably constrict individual expression or in extraordinary circumstances provoke resistant responses. These boundaries and expectations are not, therefore, entirely accepted by participants and can be challenged by them, demonstrating their agency and resistance within the constraints they face.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO RESEARCH

In the introduction, it was argued that the images people create, and the reasons for their creation within specific socio-temporal and cultural currents, carry complex information pertaining to individual and collective identities as well as culture. By combining semiotic analysis with semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to discuss themselves, their artwork, and their journeys in their own terms, this research offers insights into the Iranian gendered, diasporic

experience at multiple levels beyond a singular method of analysis. The study, therefore, contributes to the fields of diaspora, gender, media and cultural studies, and art.

As discussed, their artworks are a synthesis of signs and symbols that transcend geographic, historical, cultural, and personal terrains, embodying diverse experiences and narratives within a singular space. These visual products, then, form a rich site for understanding the complexities of identity. This study attempted to understand what these artists are compelled to create in response to their environment and conditions. While art-making primarily served as a means of self-representation for the participants, for some, it also functioned as a therapeutic process to navigate trauma. Art was also framed as a platform for activism or a medium to document and preserve ancestral or cultural memories, thereby resisting erasure. Participants constructed and performed new visions of the self through their work, challenging social restrictions and correcting misrepresentations. They also sought to reconcile fragmented identities that might otherwise seem untenable through artworks that, for example, performed queer-gendered-Iranian national identities together within a unified space.

Identities: Fluid, Fragmented, Dialogical and Under Process

Existing scholarship has primarily focused on the generation of Iranian women artists who experienced the 1979 Revolution. This thesis contributes to the literature on Iranian diasporic art and Middle Eastern art by examining the concerns of the post-revolution generation. Previous research has emphasised themes of exile, dislocation, and the representation of Iranian women in the West. As discussed, Naficy, in 2001, contended that identities and thematic concerns in diasporic cultural production could manifest in various forms, such as fragmented, dislocated, liminal, and self-reflexive identities, engagement with histories and politicised expressions. These themes remain evident in the works of the artists studied here; more than two decades after Naficy's publication, however, this study suggests that Iranian diasporic art also exhibits a pronounced engagement with global movements and a focus on personal biographies. This appears to be influenced by global flows such as transnational migration, media, technology, societal shifts towards individualism, and preferences for globalised and identity-focused art within the market.

By foregrounding participants' own narratives, the research exposes the heterogeneity of this group and their multiple affiliations. In doing so, it contributes to understandings of diaspora, identities, and contemporary art in an era where the human condition is increasingly fragmented. Participants discussed diverse affiliations and identity markers, presenting their identities as rhizomatic networks that interconnected multiple facets. These included, for example, a hybrid Iranian-American positionality, motherhood, activism, and their roles as artists or even as bird rehabilitators. Such expressions challenge notions of dual or static identities. The findings indicate that prevailing categorisations within the art market—based on geographic, ethnic, or faith-based ties—are insufficient in capturing the complexities of contemporary human experiences. Traditional categories often felt restrictive to the participants, failing to encompass the experiences of individuals such as secular, Iranian-Jewish, Iranian-Arab, or second-generation artists. These categories can offer some advantages in terms of career establishment or provide a point of definition, but the participants were aware of the limitations they imposed. The varied intersections of their identities and transnational experiences challenge the adequacy of conventional modes of categorising and exhibiting art. This suggests a need for more inclusive and dynamic approaches to art presentation—ones that reflect the evolving realities of a globally connected world and its increasingly hybrid and fragmented inhabitants.

The fluidity and fragility of identity and its connection to the homeland emerged as key findings, suggesting how diasporic identities are contextually, socially, and historically controlled and ever-evolving. This was evident in participants' evolving notions of exile and belonging, which shifted in accordance with Iranian and US political currents. The discussion of return migration also contributes to ongoing research into diasporic return in migration studies. During the first phase of the research, several participants suggested that returning to Iran was not only appealing but also feasible, while for others, their status as exiles was ambiguous. Despite the challenges expressed by participants—US travel restrictions, negative experiences during border crossings, and difficulties in obtaining visit visas for family members—international travel was discussed as

regular, accessible, and straightforward. This suggests the group experienced high levels of mobility and shared a cosmopolitan consciousness.

Return to Iran was framed as a multilayered pursuit. Participants discussed their return as a source of artistic inspiration, a means of reconnecting with cultural roots and, therefore, their identity, an opportunity for collaboration, and tied to a sense of social responsibility, e.g. supporting local artisans through collaborative practices. The idea of return also encompassed reconnecting with family members or pursuing professional aspirations. While some participants suggested that limited professional opportunities drove their migration from Iran, this view was not universally shared, indicating the subjectivity of notions of opportunity.

Participants' cosmopolitan lifestyles are influenced by their social class and status as artists, but their movements put into question the limitations of 'diaspora' and 'return migration' as frames of understanding. The artists in this study might, for example, return to create work and establish ties in the homeland before moving onward for other opportunities and inspiration in new locations. Moreover, several participants discussed the possibility of a dual lifestyle, working and living between the US and Iran, suggesting a fluid approach to living that might not have been so readily available to the generation before. The outward journey, then, is not the final goal among this group, nor is the notion of return.

The research has shown that political upheavals and social changes in the homeland shape diasporic identities and conceptually bring diasporic individuals back to their homeland, evoking their liminality. Indeed, connection to the Iranian collective felt more pronounced during the second phase of the research, suggesting that significant events such as social movements in Iran might reconfigure diasporic engagement with home and community. Participants' art, in some cases, shifted from individualistic concerns—such as art for personal development or reflecting on their own biographies—towards communal identity. The intention behind their art evolved significantly during the second phase, reflecting a heightened focus on issues directly related to gendered and human rights in Iran. Some participants had consistently discussed their output as a vehicle for activism in relation to Iran yet their engagement with the collective

cause was more pronounced during this period. They assumed roles as intermediaries and translators, using their art to amplify the voices of those inside Iran who lacked access to a global audience, or by reframing their work to express solidarity. This shift signals the fluidity of diasporic identities over the two distinct periods during which the interviews were conducted.

At the same time, this study has shown the commodification of art and its implications cannot be ignored. The demands of the market are, however, reevaluated in line with evolving circumstances. In the first phase, participants demonstrated an awareness of the art market, external expectations, and the types of art deemed acceptable in various markets. During the second phase of the fieldwork, however, the significance of art as a marketable product diminished as participants prioritised rapid and accessible creation for the collective cause.

Media, Technology and Identity

Technology and its relationship to identities is an evolving area of study to which this research contributes. During the interviews, media, technology, and participants' relationships with them emerged as significant themes, influencing various aspects of their lives including relationships with community and culture, art production, and social movements. The fieldwork commenced during a period of dramatic global shifts in technology and media usage accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global embrace of technologies for remote working and interaction, when in-person travel and engagement were limited, likely influenced the opinions and experiences expressed during the fieldwork timeframe. Even during the period of data collection between 2021 and 2023, there were marked differences in how participants reflected upon themselves, their status as artists, and their connection to national identity. Arguably, such opinions and understandings were formed in part through connection to technologies that mediated significant events like the WLF Movement to them.

Participants discussed engagement with media and technology throughout both phases of the fieldwork, though their engagement was notably more intense during the second phase. During the first phase, they suggested technology sustained connections to community and culture. Participants stayed informed of the Iranian and global art scenes, understood art market trends, discovered

internet aesthetics and aesthetic movements, and collaborated with other artists among other interactions.

Chapter One acknowledged that significant events such as the 2009 elections in Iran could draw the diaspora into digital diasporas and collective action (Yazdiha, 2022) this was also reflected in my findings, particularly during the second phase of the fieldwork. During this phase, participants seemed more open to adopting new technologies to engage with the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement from afar. This resulted in a reconfiguration of diaspora and non-diaspora relations as new, virtual, networks were established, in this case for collaborative art production. Such practices reflected an intense desire among those in diaspora to remain tethered to Iran and to amplify the voices of those inside the country from their diasporic positionalities. The flow of information about Iran, mediated by social media and communication platforms, was both facilitated and constrained by technologies. Participants relied on citizen-led documentation of events within Iran as a trusted source of information. This intensified engagement with media had a significant impact on their state of mind, self-perception, and sense of connection to community and culture. Discussions about artwork produced in response to the WLF Movement revealed a constellation of legality, technology, revolution, community, politics, and identity that the participants, as artists, mediated. They described bypassing State censorship through VPNs, collaborating with Iranian artists who shared digital content, and utilising new technologies like AI to expedite the production and dissemination of their work, motivated by a desire to amplify the movement. This interdisciplinary research, then, supports understandings of the evolving role of art and how contemporary diasporic art exists at the axis of multiple spheres. For the artists in this study, beyond self-expression, their art served as a political tool; it was enhanced and evolved through their engagements with technology, informed by global media narratives and evolved as they moved through various transnational social fields.

Limitations in the Research

The research offers new and valuable insights yet it is not without limitations. Conducted during two significant periods—COVID-19 and the later WLF Movement—the unique contexts limit the generalisability of the findings to other

times, events and places. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person interviews, participant observation and studio visits. This lack of direct engagement limited the visual data collected and the ability to explore the artists' environment, potentially missing subsequent lines of questioning that might arise from such interactions. There were, arguably, benefits to this context, too, as the availability of potential interviewees was greater.

Categorising the sample set presented challenges due to various factors that highlight the diversity of the diaspora. While all participants were socialised following the 1979 Revolution, their backgrounds varied significantly. Some were first-generation diaspora, being the first in their families to migrate, while others were second-generation Iranian-Americans born and raised in the US. In addition, several participants discussed transnational existences, living across multiple locations. This complexity challenges neat definitions of diaspora, generational identity, dual affiliation, and hybridity calling for an expanded understanding of diaspora, reflective of these nuances.

The sample size, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, may not capture the full diversity of Iranian diasporic experiences across different intersectional lines. Participants shared the same gender, a similar social class, and ethnic background, except for one participant who identified as Arab-Iranian and another as Iranian-Jewish; the rest were from the dominant Persian ethnic group. The same applies to faith as groups such as Zoroastrians were not represented within the sample set. Consequently, the sample does not adequately represent all faith-based and ethnic minorities within the Iranian diaspora.

The subjectivity of the artists also introduces variability; as discussed in the introduction, their responses cannot be taken as absolute. They might also reflect on the same question or topic in different ways at different times. The perspectives of the researcher and the researched are evolving and subject to change but it is important to work with and through these limitations rather than to assume access to an immutable and unbiased reality.

Future Research

This research presents several questions that offer fruitful ground for future study which could not be explored within the scope of the thesis. A comparison with male or alternative gender identities could have enriched the study, providing a

broader perspective on the dynamics of Iranian diasporic gendered identities. Similarly, the perspectives of artists of the revolution generation or those residing inside Iran could have offered valuable counterpoints, contributing to a more comprehensive exploration of identities among the post-revolution generation of Iranian women.

Questions relating to the relationship between diaspora and non-diaspora artists also emerged. With those in the diaspora keen to establish new networks and forms of artistic collaboration with those in the homeland, how might diasporic artists affect homeland dynamics? Based on interview data collected at a specific time, an attachment to a national bond seemed significant to those in the diaspora, but how will this attachment evolve in the future? Will, for example, in-person rituals such as poetry readings discussed by some of the participants retain their significance as a medium through which culture and traditions are transferred or will the internet give rise to new opportunities?

The participants have experienced periods before and after the proliferation of the internet; access to technology has impacted their existences and their art. How will the next generation, raised entirely with the internet, construct and present their identities as the boundaries between physical and digital existence increasingly blur? Finally, how will evolving, liquid social structures and lifestyles shape how individuals move around, influencing notions of home, outward and return migration, and how they construct their sense of self and maintain connections to people, place and space? These are questions which can profitably be raised and explored in further research building upon what has been found here using an in-depth case study of Iranian women artists in diaspora.

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FIELDWORK INTERVIEWS

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GLOSSARY

AI

Artificial intelligence.

ArtNet

An online platform oriented towards the international art market where end-users can buy, sell, and research art.

ArtTactic

An art market research firm that employs techniques similar to those applied in the financial markets to analyse the art market and its trends.

Ayatollah

A religious leader of Shiite Muslims.

Azeri

A member of a Turkic community that forms the majority population in Azerbaijan. Azeris have also settled in Armenia and northern Iran.

***Bahá'í* Faith**

A religion that began as an Islamic movement in Iran and was established in Iraq in the mid-19th century. The central Bahá'í tenets are the essential unity of all faiths and humanity.

***Bahá'í* Year of Service**

Members of the *Bahá'í* community can embark on an optional one- or two-year period of voluntary service. The focus of this work is aimed at youth, teaching the Bahá'í Faith, or contributing to community development.

Bahāʾullāh

Glory of God (Arabic). This term refers to the founder of the Bahá'í Faith Mīrzā Ḥosayn ʿAlī Nūrī, also known as Bahāʾ Allāh (Bahāʾullāh).

Baloch

A nomadic, pastoral, ethnic group native to the Balochistan region of South and Western Asia, encompassing the countries of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan (also known as Baluch). Their spoken language is Western Iranic Baloch.

BDSM

An abbreviation referring to erotic or role-playing practices that involve bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism.

BRICS

An intergovernmental organisation comprised of emerging-market nations including Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Chador

A large cloth that forms a combination of head covering, veil, and shawl worn by Muslim women, particularly in Iran.

Cultural Revolution (1980–87)

Following the 1979 Revolution, universities in Iran were closed for three years (1980–83). During this period, secular and non-Islamic influences, as well as students and faculty deemed non-compliant with the Islamic regime, were purged from Iran's academic institutions. The aim was to redefine and restructure the educational system in alignment with the values of the Islamic Republic.

Delfina Foundation

A London-based non-profit foundation that aims to facilitate artistic exchange and develop creative practice via artist residencies, partnerships and public programming.

Documenta

A contemporary art exhibition which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany.

F1 student visa

A visa that allows academic students to enter the US for full-time education at an accredited institution.

Farhang-sazi

Culture-making (Farsi).

Farsi

The modern Persian language.

GCC

Gulf Cooperation Council. A regional, intergovernmental, political, and economic union that includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Gagosian

A contemporary art gallery with multiple locations across the world, owned and directed by American art dealer, Larry Gagosian.

Green Card

US permanent resident card.

Hafez

Persian lyric poet, Khājeh Shams-od-Dīn Moḥammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī, commonly known by his pen name Hafez (also Hafiz) (1325–1390). His collected works are widely regarded as one of the greatest achievements of Persian literature, popular in Persian-speaking countries and the West.

Honar-e taraqi

Progressive art (Farsi).

IRGC

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Kaeru

Translates from Japanese to English as: to return; to come home; to go home; to go back.

Khatamkari

An ancient Persian technique of inlaying, this version of marquetry creates art forms by decorating the surfaces of wooden articles with pieces of wood, bone, and metal cut into intricate geometric patterns.

Khejālat

A Persian compound verb. A multilayered Persian cultural emotion schema that overlaps with three different English cultural emotion schemas: embarrassment, shyness, and shame.

LACMA

Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

LGBTQ

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. The language associated with LGBTQ is evolving and means different things to different people. As of 2024, some prefer to use the more comprehensive LGBTQIA+, which stands for Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual. The “+” represents all other identities not encompassed in the shorter acronym.

Mahsa Jîna Amini

The death of Mahsa Jîna Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, on 16 September 2022, in Tehran while under police custody, following her arrest by Iran's "morality police" for not complying with mandatory hijab laws, stimulated the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement.

Mehregan

An autumnal Zoroastrian and Iranian festival celebrating the commencement of harvest. In Zoroastrianism, the festival formed a celebration of the deity Mehr (or Mithra) the god of friendship, love and affection.

Morality Police/Islamic Religious Police

A law enforcement body that operates in Iran, established in 2005, to enforce the modest dress code and chaste behaviour. The enforcement of a public moral code in Iran started following the 1979 Revolution under the new Islamic Republic.

MFA

Master of Fine Arts.

MENA

The region that comprises the Middle East and North Africa.

MoMA

Museum of Modern Art.

Nakba

"Catastrophe" in Arabic. The mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the State of Israel's formation (1947–49).

Nowruz

The Iranian/Persian New Year festival celebrated during the spring equinox.

OPEC

Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. OPEC members include Algeria, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela.

Persian

The predominant ethnic group in Iran. The term is also used to refer to the Farsi language and the culture of ancient Iran.

***Pirouz* (cheetah cub)**

Pirouz means 'victorious' in Persian and is the name of an Asiatic cheetah born in Iran (1 May 2022–28 February 2023). The birth of this litter of cubs marked the

first time the subspecies had reproduced in captivity; as such Pirouz garnered much attention during his lifetime. He was one of the last remaining Asiatic cheetahs in the world.

PS752

The number of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (PS752/AUI752). The passenger flight scheduled to fly from Tehran to Kyiv on 8 January 2020 was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) following its takeoff. The IRGC fired missiles at the aircraft during a moment of heightened tension between Iran and the US. The incident resulted in the deaths of all 176 passengers and staff on board.

PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder.

Rumi

Sufi mystic and poet, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (commonly known as Rumi) (1207–1273) is considered to be one of the greatest contributors to Persian literature and continues to be one of the most popular poets globally.

Safavid period

The era under the rule of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736) is considered one of Iran's most significant historical periods. This dynasty is associated with the beginning of modern Iranian history.

Shah Cheragh

A mosque complex and funerary monument in Shiraz, Iran, known for its interior mirror mosaics.

Shahnameh

The national epic of Greater Iran. The epic poem by Persian poet, Ferdowsi, was written between c. 977 and 1010 CE and is also known as 'The Book of Kings'.

Shibari

A Japanese term that broadly refers to the practice of "binding" or "tying". In BDSM, specifically, it refers to a type of 'decorative bondage'.

SWANA

The region that comprises Southwest Asia and North Africa.

PAAIA

The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans.

NIAC

The National Iranian American Council.

Shah

A royal title that has, historically, been engaged by the leading figures of Indian and Iranian monarchies.

SIAM

A computer system that enables government authorities to access users' locations, decrypt phone calls, and reduce internet connection speeds thereby making smartphones more vulnerable to data interception.

Telegram app

A cloud-based messaging app known for its emphasis on privacy. The app supports end-to-end encryption for voice and video calls, and in optional secret chats. It allows users to send messages, share media and files, and make voice or video calls, including private and group chats.

The dark web

A segment of the internet comprised of hidden sites that are not indexed by search engines, making it inaccessible through standard web browsers. Specific software, configurations, or authorisation is required to access the dark web. An anonymising browser, such as Tor, hides the user's web traffic by routing it through a series of decentralised nodes and special search engines that can access these hidden sites. The dark web's sites use encryption software so their visitors and owners can remain anonymous. The dark web hosts a variety of content and services, ranging from legitimate activities, such as privacy-focused communication and whistleblowing, to illegal activities, such as black markets and hacking services.

The Vashti Collective

A collective of Iranian-American women from interdisciplinary backgrounds whose scholarship and activism focus on social justice, human rights and feminism.

TMoCA

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

UHNWI

Ultra-high-net-worth-individual.

V&A

Victoria and Albert Museum.

VPN

Virtual private network. A service that allows users to connect to the internet through a secure, encrypted tunnel. This tunnel masks the user's IP address and encrypts the data sent and received, offering privacy and security.

WLF (Woman, Life, Freedom Movement)

This slogan was originally associated with women-led Kurdish movements. It later transcended its initial context, gaining international usage and momentum after the 2022 protests in Iran, which were stimulated by the death of Mahsa Jîna Amini. The phrase became a global rallying cry for the movement of the same name, symbolising resistance and a call for freedom and gender equality for Iranian women.

Zoom

A videotelephony software program.

Zoroastrianism

An ancient Persian religion which contains both monotheistic and dualistic features, based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. One of the world's oldest organised faiths.

#BLM (Black Lives Matter)

A decentralised political and social movement that aims to promote anti-racism and expose racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by black people. The movement's central concerns are police brutality and racially motivated violence against the black community.

#EyesonIran

A hashtag expressing solidarity with Iranian demands for human rights and freedom. Artists and activists in the Iranian diaspora, as well as their allies, use this hashtag to share a common vision and to keep global attention focused on Iran. Their aim is to raise awareness of ongoing issues such as gender-based violence within the country.

#MeToo

The hashtag #MeToo popularised in 2017. It represents a global social movement and awareness campaign against sexual harassment and violence.

#WhiteWednesdays

A social media movement that originated in Iran as a protest against the

country’s mandatory hijab law for women. The campaign encourages women to wear white headscarves or clothing on Wednesdays and post photos and videos online using the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays. The campaign was started by Masih Alinejad, founder of *My Stealthy Freedom*.

APPENDIX A
ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The following briefly introduces the practices of the 15 artists who participated in this study. For a more detailed understanding of the artists and their work, the provided links connect to their personal or representative gallery websites.

1. **Maryam Safajoo**

   Maryam Safajoo's narrative paintings depict the violent treatment and persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran. Safajoo often works directly from photographs and first-hand accounts shared by members of the community. Through her art, she seeks to preserve and humanise these experiences, presenting them to an international audience.

   Further reading: https://maryamsafajoo.art/about

2. **Rex Delafkaran**

   Rex Delafkaran is an interdisciplinary artist and dancer whose practice often combines movement with mixed-media objects she has crafted or remediated. Her work explores concepts of failure, cultural belonging, hybridity, and language.

   Further reading: https://rexdelafkaran.com/About-Rex

3. **Tala Madani**

   Tala Madani's transgressive, cartoonish paintings and animations capture and critique social constructs. Madani approaches themes ranging from toxic masculinity to parenthood, politics, and the art historical canon. She regularly engages dark humour to dismantle taken-for-granted norms and power structures.

   Further reading: https://www.pilarcorrias.com/artists/47-tala-madani/

4. **Bahar Sabzevari**

   Bahar Sabzevari's self-portrait often forms the centrepiece of her compositions, creating a site where multiple narratives and ideas from diverse cultural and historical contexts can co-exist and converse. Her drawings and paintings navigate the complexities of identity, blending internal concerns with external influences as varied as Western media discourse, science, Persian histories, and elements from nature.

   Further reading: https://www.baharsabzevari.com/about

5. **Kimia Ferdowsi Kline**

   Kimia Ferdowsi Kline's mixed-media compositions negotiate themes of intergenerational and personal trauma as well as human relationships. Her characters are typically rendered anonymous, suggesting the universality of her thematic concerns. Ferdowsi Kline uses a bold and joyful palette to disarm her subject matter and engage audiences in topics that might otherwise be troubling to them.

   Further reading: https://www.kimiakline.com/about

6. **Mehregan Pezeshki**

   Mehregan Pezeshki is a multi-disciplinary artist, working primarily across photography, film, and performance. Her work addresses themes that are both intimate and collectively relevant, including trauma, interpersonal relationships and social norms/taboos relating to gender and sexuality in Iran and the US. Her performances often directly engage the audience, inviting them to reflect upon their preconceptions.

   Further reading: https://www.mehreganpezeshki.com/about

7. **Sheida Soleimani**

   Sheida Soleimani's work lies at the intersection of art and activism. While she works across sculpture, performance, and film, photography is the central focus of her practice. Soleimani constructs and captures tableaux that blend documentary and source material with artificial elements, urging her audience to question the nature of knowledge in the contemporary digital era and socio-political climate. Her work critically explores power dynamics between the SWANA region and the West.

   Further reading: http://sheidasoleimani.com/info/

8. **Leila Nazarian**

   Leila Nazarian's hybrid Iranian-American positionality informs her artwork which seeks to reconcile and stimulate positive dialogue between both aspects of her cultural background. Nazarian's collaborative process is informed by the practice of cultural diplomacy. Through her artistic process, she establishes new networks between two seemingly disparate nations. Her skateboards are sourced in Santa Monica, California, and are then transported to Iran and adorned with historic designs and handcrafted elements by local artisans.

   Further reading: https://www.eclecticdecks.com/read-me

9. **Ghazal Rahimi**

   Ghazal Rahimi works across painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation. Through her multi-media practice, she explores themes of migration and belonging, gendered and cultural identities, the Western gaze, and Othering.

   Further reading: https://ghazalrahimi.com/bio

10. **Mahsa R. Fard**

Through her paintings, Mahsa R. Fard navigates the complexities of womanhood, cultural norms, and gendered limitations. By depicting imagined scenes, she asserts her agency and challenges gender imbalances, engaging her art as a site of resistance.

Further reading: https://www.mahsarfard.com/about-avenue

11. **Mobina Nouri**

Mobina Nouri is a multi-disciplinary artist producing works on paper and canvas, and digital media. She also engages in performance art and photography. She regularly collaborates with practitioners from other fields and disciplines. Her practice negotiates personal and collective narratives, often drawing on Persian literature, philosophies, and mysticism to address contemporary issues related to gender, humanity, and equality.

Further reading: https://mobinanouri.com/about

12. **Parisa Ghaderi**

Parisa Ghaderi is an interdisciplinary artist who works across mediums including performance, photography, moving image, mixed-media, and installation. Ghaderi explores themes of emotional and physical distance, migration and border crossing, loss and restriction, as well as gender, identity, and the ambiguity of language.

Further reading: https://www.pghaderi.com/

13. **Aida Izadpanah**

Aida Izadpanah's background in environmental psychology influences her mixed-media practice, which examines human interactions with space and the environment. Among the themes she explores are hope, rebirth, social

boundaries, and liberation. Izadpanah's work investigates the potential of materiality through diverse techniques and processes, including porcelain and ceramic work, as well as painting.

Further reading: https://aidaizadpanah.com/about/

14. Nebras Hoveizavi

Nebras Hoveizavi works across photography, moving image, performance, and installation. Her practice addresses themes of dislocation and belonging, the impact of political tensions between the US and Iran, as well as issues of truth, media representation, and identity.

Further reading: http://www.nebrashoveizavi.com/biography.html

15. Shilla Shakoori

Shilla Shakoori's drawings and paintings blend abstraction and figuration to explore the intersection of her Iranian and American cultural identities. Her compositions navigate emotional landscapes and connections to cultural heritage and traditions. Shakoori draws inspiration from prominent figures in Iran's cultural legacy and contemporary artists and musicians from various contexts and eras including Rumi, Forough Farrokhzad, Chopin, Mahalia Jackson, James Baldwin, and Mahmoud Darwish.

Further reading: https://www.shillashakoori.com/cv

APPENDIX B
RESEARCH ETHICS AND DATA COLLECTION, STORAGE AND ANALYSIS

Research Ethics

Before the academic exploration of my research questions and fieldwork, I obtained relevant training and a comprehensive understanding of research ethics and their practical applications. I reviewed SOAS's Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degrees, the SOAS Research Ethics Policy, and PhD Handbook to ensure that I was well-versed in internal procedures and expectations. I referred back to these guidelines on an ongoing basis to ensure that my research met the given standards. Transparency, rigour, honesty, and care, concerning all involved parties, were at the core of this work and were considered at each step from data collection to dissemination.

I did not identify any major potential complications, hazards, or ethical conflicts associated with my project, however, I continued to assess my research through a reflexive approach and discussed any potential concerns that arose with my supervisors. To minimise an accidental breach of the ethical code, I continued to monitor and update my methodology and approaches to interaction with research subjects accordingly, reflective of new information and circumstances.

Collecting, Storing and Analysing Data

Primary qualitative data was collected and stored using three secure modes of storage throughout the study. This data included digital field notes, audio and video recordings of fieldwork interviews, images of artworks, participant consent forms, and scoping interviews.

1. **Physical storage**: An encrypted external hard drive.
2. **Cloud-based storage**: A password-protected Google Drive.
3. **Offline back-up**: An encrypted and password-protected computer.

Additionally, audio and video data were recorded using Zoom cloud-based conference software and a mobile phone audio recorder, both of which feature password protection.

As the research involved the personal data of those residing in the US, it adhered to UK and EU Data Protection Legislation as well as relevant US policies, which vary from state to state. Data management offered 'privacy by design and default' and fell under the SOAS and GDPR guidelines as well as the requirements specific to where the data was collected and the residence of the participant. Until publication, the dataset was anonymised with pseudonyms to prevent identification in case of theft or hacking. This anonymisation process also applied to digital data, and an anonymisation log was maintained to record which details had been anonymised. Personal data in hard copy format, such as paper consent forms, were kept in a locked filing cabinet when not in use.

Data Collection and Storage

Audio and visual (mp3. and mp4.) data were collected and stored via the Zoom application's cloud and backed-up onto an external hard drive. Fieldwork notes from the interviews were typed using Google Docs and transcriptions were recorded using Amberscript software and saved in text format (doc.x) via Google Docs. This data was saved onto the Google Cloud and a second copy was saved onto a physical hard drive.

APPENDIX C
BLANK RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Participant Consent Form

1. Consent Form for:

Beyond Exile: Gender, Identity and Artistic Practices in Second Generation Women Belonging to the Iranian Diaspora in the US (working title).

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an equivalent explanation about the research.

2. Project Title:

Beyond Exile: Gender, Identity and Artistic Practices in Second Generation Women Belonging to the Iranian Diaspora in the US (working title).

3. Researcher Name: Laura Beaney

4. Please mark the appropriate responses below:

Yes
No

1. I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 26/01/2021, or it has been read to me.

2. I have been able to ask questions about the project.

3. I understand that potential risks of participating in this research include a possibility that if I (the participant) discuss the Iranian Regime or its interests in a negative/derogatory manner and this information is published and associated with the subject there could be implications if I (the participant) 1) wished to return to Iran 2) there could also be potential for harm or political pressure placed upon family members residing in Iran.

4. I agree to take part in the project and understand that taking part involves online individual and group interviews with the potential for physical face-to-face interviews at a later stage (if COVID-19 travel restrictions permit). Interviews will take place over 12-15 months commencing January 2021 with follow-up correspondence potentially required to confirm information during the following year 2022. Data is captured using the following methods of recording:

- Field notes (handwritten in notebooks and later transcribed in digital format)
- Audio and video (recorded via Zoom/mobile phone in the first instance)
- For the semiotic analysis of artworks, images of the artworks will be shared by the artist/or representative, digitally stored and coded with typed analysis.

  Data will be stored Google Drive and password protected as well as on an external hard drive with encryption.

5. I agree that my interview is recorded using written text, audio and/or video.
6. I understand that I can refuse to answer questions.
7. I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher/s involved and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.
8. I understand that my withdrawal or refusal to take part will not affect my relationship with SOAS University of London.
9. I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the research team.
10. I understand information I provide will be stored securely by password protected cloud as well as on an external hard drive with encryption.
11. I understand that the information I provided will be used for a PhD thesis to be open source on the Internet as well as the potential for further publications and other research outputs and made available on SOAS Research Online as well as online through publisher websites and in printed physical formats.
12. I would like to be named in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.
13. I would NOT like to be named in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.
14. I agree to waive copyright and other intellectual property rights in the material I contribute to the project.

Research Participant Contact Information

Telephone No:
Email Address:
Postal Address:
Alternative contact:

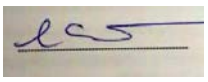
Research Participant Declaration

Name of Participant [printed]
Signature
Date

I have accurately, digitally shared the information sheet with the potential participant and to the best of my ability, ensured that that participant understands what they are freely consenting.

Name of Researcher [printed] LAURA BEANEY

Signature



Date 26/1/2021

SOAS Consent Form Adapted From UK Data Archives Model Consent Form and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike 4.0 International Licence
Please ensure a copy of this document is retained safely for future reference.

APPENDIX D
FIELDWORK INTERVIEW LOG

	Name of participant	Date of Interview	Notes	Informed consent received	Permission to use artwork
1	Maryam Safajoo	18/2/2021	Supplemented with 2 x typed interview responses shared via email 25/6/22	y	y
	Maryam Safajoo	24/2/2021	Supplemented with typed interview response shared via email 25/2/21		
2	Rex Delafkaran	2/3/2021		y	y
	Rex Delafkaran	18/3/2021	Additional comments via telephone audio note 26/4/22		
3	Aida Izadpanah	7/4/2021		y	
4	Tala Madani	13/4/2021		y	y
5	Kimia Ferdowsi Klein	16/4/2021		y	y
6	Bahar Sabzevari	17/5/2021	Supplemented with typed response and additional answers 1/6/21	y	y
	Bahar Sabzevari	25/9/2023	Second phase interview		

7	Mehregan Pezeshki	19/5/2021	Supplemented with typed response and additional answers 7/7/21	y	y
	Mehregan Pezeshki	5/9/23	Second phase interview		
8	Shedia Soleimani	25/5/2021	Supplemented with typed responses 16/7/22	y	y
	Shedia Soleimani	25/9/2023	Second phase interview		
9	Ghazal Rahimi	4/8/2021	Additional answers via audio note 24/1/2022	y	y
10	Mobina Nouri	24/8/2021		y	y
	Mobina Nouri	29/3/2022	Follow-up interview		
	Mobina Nouri	23/8/2023	Second phase interview		
11	Nebras Hoveizavi	10/9/2021		y	y
12	Parisa Ghaderi	13/9/2021	*Share for final review before publishing externally - approved	y	y
	Parisa Ghaderi	20/9/2021	Follow up interview		

13	Shilla Shakoori	12/9/2021	Supplemented with typed response	y	
		22/9/2021	Follow up interview		
14	Mahsa R. Fard	24/11/2021		y	y
15	Leila Nazarian	9/12/21		y	y
	Art Market Interviews				
1	Vali Mahlouji, curator and art historian	18/8/2022		y	N/A
2	Dina Nasser, art consultant and former Christie's Middle East	10/7/22		y	N/A
3	Roxane Zand, former deputy chair person, Sotheby's Middle East	26/4/22		y	N/A
4	Venetia Porter, former senior curator for Islamic and contemporary Middle East art,	28/7/2022		y	N/A

	British Museum				
5	Anders Petterson, ArtTactic, founder	28/8/2022		y	N/A

APPENDIX E
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC

Having obtained informed consent from participants, at the start of the interview process, a series of identical, structured questions were shared with each subject to establish background variables that were informative to the research and to assess how representative and/or diverse the dataset is. The responses are included in the table below.

Name	Age starting interview process	Place of birth	Place of residence	Date of personal/ family migration to the US (if applicable)	Gender identity	Sexual affiliation	Marital status	Religious/ political affiliations (if applicable)	When did you begin producing art?	Why did you begin producing art?	Where did you begin producing art?	Year of birth
Maryam Safajoo	33	Tehran, Iran	USA	Dec 2013	Female	Did not disclose	Married	Bahá'í Faith	Since I could hold pencil	The reason is only love to paint	From Iran and now in USA	1986
Alexandra/Rex Delafkaran	27	California, USA	Washington,DC	Approximately 1981 (family)	Woman	Queer	Not married	none	My whole childhood, particularly during my time in school.	It feels like a calling, part of who I am, and the way I communicate to others and reflect on the world around me.	In my childhood at the Waldorf School I attended, the arts high school I attended I majored in Contemporary Dance, and my official study of fine art began in my BFA program at the San Francisco Art Institute.	1993
Aida Izadpanah	Did not disclose	Tehran, Iran	New York City	Sept. 2005	Female	Did not disclose	Married	Did not disclose	At age of 18	It was a natural way to express myself and over the time the medium of the work changes	Tehran (more representational type of works) and New York City more abstract	1978
Tala Madani	40	Tehran, Iran	Oregon	1994	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	1981
Kimia Ferdowsi	Did not disclose	Nashville, TN	Nashville, TN and New York, New York	Did not disclose	Female	Did not disclose	Married	Bahá'í Faith	When I was a child	I always had an affinity and love for it even from my earliest memory	At home in Nashville	1984
Bahar Sabzevari	41	Shahrood, Iran	New York, USA	I moved to France in 2003 and then to the US in 2010	Female	Straight	Single	Non-believer/ democrat	From childhood, studying art at the age of 23	The short answer is: for saying things that I can't express in any other way and building bridges between myself and the rest of the world.	In Iran first, then in France and now in the US.	1980

Mehregan Pezeshki	34	Tehran, Iran	Los Angeles	June 23, 2009	Female	Queer	Single	N/A	I started getting involved in art around 2004 at high school. I continued my education after I moved to the States from 2009 til 2016. I paused my art practice and got involved into administration and human resources til 2019 then I decided to become an artist full time.	I was always interested in making art since I was a kid, but the reason/intention has been changed through the time.	Austin, Texas	1986
Sheida Soleimani	31	Indianapolis, IN USA	Providence, RI USA	Father: 1985, mother 1988	Female	Queer	Married	Democrat	Age 16	As a means of visually expressing my opinions	In my home in Ohio when I was a teenager	1990
Ghazal Rahimi	27	Tehran, Iran	Los Angeles, CA	16 Aug 2014	Female	Straight	Single		I started painting/drawing when I was 12, but maybe I thought about making art more seriously about the time I decided to build a portfolio and apply to art schools.	I never thought about the why, when I feel like I have something important to say through a work, I'll just make it. There's no reason behind why doing it.	At first, in Iran, during art classes I felt I want to explore with the paint further, I always continued painting. I moved to LA to go to arts school and pursue art as my professional career, then I moved to Berkeley for my MFA, and now I'm making art in LA again.	1994
Mobina Nouri	40	Esfahan, Iran	San Francisco, USA	(lived in London prior to migration to the US from 2010); 2019 migration to the US	Female	Straight	Single	Did not disclose	Childhood	Passion of art	Iran, UK, USA	1981
Nebras Hoveizavi	36	Ahvaz/ Khuzestan Province, Iran	Qatar	March 25, 2007	Female	Straight	Single	Did not disclose	In 2004, I started practicing art, but when I started going to university in 2010 I started making my works.	I think studying art is more a necessity of life. I usually think producing art should be a daily practice. A daily practice that can bring expression to what we are witnessing.	I started my work when I was in the US.	1985
Parisa Ghaderi	38	Tehran, Iran	Michigan, USA	August 2009 to the US	Female	Hetero	Single	Muslim	Childhood	Because I can be myself	At home, I was drawing all the time.	1983

Shilla Shakoori	40	Tehran, Iran	Los Angeles	September 2007	Female	Heterosexual	Married	Born Jewish but not practicing, believing in love and unity. Not specific political affiliation but I can say mostly liberal	Always as a kid but as a professional, since college back in Iran around 2000	Always had an urge as a kid and then chose art at college	Tehran, Iran	1981
Mahsa R. Fard	34	Tehran/Iran	Baltimore /MD	2017	Female	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	From an early age	I started when I was young and I never stop	Back in Iran	1987
Leila Nazarian	35	Los Angeles, CA	Live between Los Angeles and Iran	N/A	Female	Heterosexual	Not married	Did not disclose	Launched Eclectic Decks in 2016 and the handmade decks in 2018	To promote Iranian art and culture	Los Angeles, California	1986