A Strange World – On the Art and Imagery of Mona Hakimi-Schüler

In the studio

Mona Hakimi-Schüler's studio in Berlin is located in a remote industrial area in a building where several artists joined forces to turn the top floor into art studios. Upon entering her studio, I find myself before an enormous lion, roaring in my direction. Turning around, I see a similarly massive horse lying on the floor. To my left are huge, colourful canvases where, aside from a single female figure wearing a headscarf and a coat, animals populate the pictures: a raven, a phoenix, horses, and, again, the lion. These are not only animals in their natural form and expression. Also included are animals and figures taken from Persian miniature, such as the Elysian cavalier, angelic figures, horses, monkeys, and birds as they appear in the traditional Persian ornament *gol-o-morgh* or *gol-o-bolbol* (birds and flowers). Another thread running through Mona's work that is catching my eye are stylized trees, plants, flowers and clouds, also adapted from Persian miniature painting. In addition to this diversity leaps another series of motifs: Soldiers and military equipment such as guns, tanks, and helicopters; contemporary representations of holy Shiite figures; religious flags with bright, colourful writing; architectural structures, ranging from contemporary urban forms to seemingly ancient, Islamic architectures covered in Persian ornament, writing and calligraphy. These figures, motifs, and structures all gather against a background of cityscapes and vast, empty landscapes.

Huge canvases are leaning against the walls of her studio, big sculptures, parts of cloths, a considerable collection of drawings, small objects. The diversity that characterizes the use of motifs in Mona's work is also present in the various formal approaches in her art. There are canvases that combine painting, drawing, and collage. Smaller drawings on the one hand prepare the installations and on the other represent a part of the larger work. Sculptures made of foam are integrated in expansive installations, set in front of wall-drawings and compilations of small drawings. And a format that the artist calls "Raumbild". The literal translation of this German word is stereogram. However, I would describe it as an image or picture that develops a presence beyond its two-dimensional surface and exceeds the boundaries of the canvas. It is in fact a sort of relief that looses contact with its background and thus becomes independent. These "spatial images", as one might call them, represent the evident direction or can be considered a synergy of Mona's oeuvre up to this point of her artistic evolution, as it brings together the variety of her formal approaches as well as yet another combination of motifs that have appeared in her former works.

In this essay and analysis of Mona's art, I will focus on the development and constitution of her work while studying the trajectory of her artistic approach to date. I will examine the broad range of motifs and objects as they appear and explore how they merge and link with one another to constitute new meanings. I will dissect the significance of the artist's "alter ego" and her use of animal imagery and interrogate her employment of collage and Persian writing as well as ornament. Through these explorations, I will arrive at an interpretation of beauty in her work. Finally, Mona's identity as an artist of Iranian descent will be contextualized while taking into account the reception of her work and the cultural realm in which she exhibits her art.

I will start with an examination of *Stories I live by*, a series of canvases and drawings that Mona produced between 2010 and 2012. There is a reason why I start with this series: I will argue that it forms the core

of Mona's oeuvre up to date in the sense that the earlier works somehow lead up to it and that it serves as a starting point for most of the variations of motifs and forms that are following, to the point of her most recent works.

Of the larger canvases, Farewell is an earlier composition that depicts scenery in front of a cityscape, one that appears to be realistic and surreal at once. A female figure, wearing a brown coat and blue headscarf with a white, traditional Persian pattern (typical of female attire in Iran) walks towards the viewer, pulling a trolley suitcase. She turns her head to the right, seemingly looking back, thus facing an oversized raven that lingers in the air as if about to land. Near the raven towards the left side of the picture is a stump that elegantly extends towards the raven – this stump appears in other pictures too. Its stylized and elegant form indicates that the stump's image is an adaption of Persian miniature painting in which it appears repeatedly as one of the stylized elements of a landscape. There is a sort of spatial uncertainty present in the composition, combining the woman, the raven and the stump, brought on by the unfitting size of the figures and objects in relation to each other. This ambivalence is enhanced by their precarious position in the image-space, the halting movements of the walking woman and that of the flying raven. In addition, the image-components in the intermediate ground of the picture emphasize this spatial ambiguity: Here, we see planes, or barriers, pushed into the picture between the foreground and the background. They are not objects, nor are they architectural structures, even if they fulfil a similar function in the picture. They are not painted like the rest, but included as collage. Originally, the two planes are flags with religious motifs and writings as used in Iran during the many holidays that mourn the death of Shiite saints. The black background, the white and red writing, and a black and yellow image on one of the flags form a contrast against the rest of the picture in which colours are attenuated with white in order to reduce their shining brightness. In the background of the painting, the upper portion of a row of apartment houses is visible, upon which Persian writing is recognizably inscribed on one wall. The sky above the cityscape is sombre and corresponds to the tonality of the whole picture that varies between muted shades of blue, brown, yellow, and grey, interrupted only by the brighter colours and contrast of the religious flags.

Several important elements appear in *Farewell*, which we will see repeated in other pictures of the series as well as in other works and which will give us some understanding of Mona's artistic approach.

The "alter ego"

First I will address the treatment of the female figure as we see it not only in Stories I live by, but also in the previous series Helden-taten (2009-2010). Going back to her earlier works Self-portraits (2007), A big family (2007-2008), and Memory trace (2008), one can detect the constant employment of her own background, family and origins, and images of her childhood and youth in Iran. In Self-portraits, Mona directly addresses questions of her own Iranian identity as a woman by confronting the viewer with different appearances of herself in various partly Islamic clothing. On the other hand, she focuses in A big family and Memory trace on images of her family as well as those of her childhood – family members, vignettes of family life and street-life in Tehran, TV and other media-images, and images used in religious contexts. Mona entwines this rather personal approach with questions of image-representation in private and public (media-) contexts, image and memory in the context of not only personal but also cultural representation, as well as modes of narration that are playfully varied in the display and arrangements of the pictures that she calls "wall installations".

We can see this personal approach mixed with other, more external, not so personal images continued in *Helden-taten*, where the figure in the brown coat and the blue and white headscarf already appears. Here, the artist's "alter ego", as I would call it, is moved from the very personal space of the artist's memories to the reflective space of the city (Tehran) in which fantasies, politics and culture reside, are depicted and narrated. Even though the personal aspect of experience and memory remains, other aspects such as cultural memory, media-representations of manifestations and oppression, as well as the imaginary figure of the lion join the image and narrative space of these "ensembles".

Furthermore, back in *Stories I live by*, the "alter ego" dominates most of the compositions, but is at the same time slowly withdrawn from the pictures until she totally disappears. Together with the lion, the horse, the raven or other animal figures, the "alter ego" walks, sits, and kneels within the image space that has become more uncertain, more surreal, and more imaginary, watching and waiting, strangely displaced, but at the same time showing us her inner world. It is this inner world, experience and memory, imagination and dream, anxieties and hopes, miniature-images and media-images, that expands throughout the pictures of the series with regard to both content and form.

A world of animals

Secondly, animals are populating Mona's work: The raven, lingering prominently in the middle of the picture *Farewell* is just one of the various animal-companions of the female figure that appear throughout the series: horses, monkeys, mystical birds, and, most prominently, the lion. Animals have been included in visual arts since antiquity, serving as the "other" of human self-perception, the non-human, as well as a projection screen for emotions, as symbols of virtues and vices, etc.¹ It has only been in the second half the 20th century, however, that the animal-human relationship moved to another level of engagement and emotional bonding, leaving behind the rather one-sided relation of animal-figuration as projection screen for the human part in the human realm.² In miniature painting, animals appear most prominently in an ancient collection of animal tales. Originally coming from India, the *Kalilah va Dimnah* had been translated into an early Persian dialect in the 6th century. The tales, still popular today, in which animals serve as protagonists that perform political pieces of wisdom, have been illustrated in many different illuminated editions.³ Could these be a source for Mona's animal-depictions? They certainly are an inspiration for the prominent role animals play in her artistic world.

The animals fulfil diverse functions in Mona's work, play different roles, and come from various sources. They seem to function as figurative depictions of the "alter ego's" emotional state, while setting the atmosphere of the picture, its content and expression. They stand independent, at the same time integrated and disintegrated in the image-narration – a "state of being in the picture" that is not only to be ascribed to the animals, but also to the female figure, and to all other components of the pictures. On the one hand the animals are closely linked to each other through the composition. On the other hand

See Olbrich, Erhard, "Menschen und Tiere: unauflösbare Verbundenheit", in: Tori [et al] (eds.), pp. 21-29; Bergmann, Jörg, "Haustiere als kommunikative Ressourcen", in: *Kultur und Alltag*, ed. by Hans-Georg Soeffner, Sonderheft 6 der Zeitschrift Soziale Welt, Göttingen 1988, p. 312 (quoted in: Fuhlbrügge, 2008).

See Tori, Luca / Sanders, Rebecca / Steinbrecher, Aline (eds.), Animali: Tiere und Fabelwesen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit (exhibition catalogue), Zürich 2012; Aloi, Giovanni, Art & Animals, London / New York 2012; and Fuhlbrügge, Heike, "Liebe und andere Beziehungen: Grenzverwischung zwischen Mensch und Tier", in: Textem, 2008/05/23 [http://www.textem.de/1487.0.html, last accessed 2014/11/07].

For an early English translation see Keith-Falconer, I. G. N., *Kalilah and Dimnah or the fables of Bidpai*, Cambridge 1885; for a detailed examination of the origins of the text, its various versions and its translations into Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew, see De Blois, François, *Burzoy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah*, London 1990.

they stand alone and isolated. In *Farewell*, the raven hovering in the air at the same time imitates and contradicts the female figure's movement of departure. In *Expectation*, the lion quietly sleeps beside the seated figure and enhances the halted moment of expectation, hinted at in the title. In *Triumph III*, the horse lies on the ground, mirroring the death and mourning that is illustrated in the female figure kneeling beside the horse. And finally, when the artist's "alter ego" is withdrawn from the picture as in *Gate of Heaven II*, the animals seem to take her position as the source and centre of the narrative as well as of the composition: The roaring lion stands alone in front of a crowded scenery of soldiers, Elysian cavaliers, big structures with calligraphy and ornament, and a huge rising sun.

Let's have a closer look at the animal's role in Mona's previous work *Helden-taten*, an ensemble of paintings and drawings of various dimensions arranged on the wall, and one life-sized foam sculpture. The above described personification and transformation of the animal into a key figure of the work has already taken place here. In the drawings and paintings that cover the walls of a corner in this ensemble, the lion accompanies the artist's "alter ego" in scenes that recall manifestations. He roars at soldiers, is thrown into a cage, and his massive figure lies on the ground in front of the pictures, pierced by arrows, dead. Hopelessness seems to be the key notion of the work, embodied in the dead lion. The embodiment of this key moment through the lion's figure corresponds to its appearance in sculpture, as if it has left the image-space in order to substantiate its presence and role. This presence is further enhanced in the work *Dreaming the past* (2012-2013) as well as in the newest work, the aforementioned "Raumbild" *Head in clouds* (2014-2015), in which the artist's "alter ego" rarely appears. The animals – painted on canvas, emerging as a relief, or in the form of a sculpture – take over to orchestrate the imaginary world of the works.

In Dreaming the past a horse takes on the main role in Mona's imagery, presenting itself outside of the painted, or better drawn, image space. Here, a compilation of smaller drawings with colour is arranged before the background of a big wall-drawing in grey shades behind the sculpture. The role the horse embodies in this work appears to be less explicit than the lion in Helden-taten. The quite big figure seems to be resting peacefully, even dreaming. Whereas the peaceful image is also taken up in one of the central drawings on the wall behind (where actually also the artist's "alter ego" appears once more), the other drawings depict a less peaceful scenery: horses standing or running in between military or police men who drag people around, a flock of horses running wild, a lying horse pierced by metal stakes. The figure of the horse as sculpture as well as in the drawings is, scene by scene, directly taken from miniature illuminations of the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi's famous Book of Kings. The horse Rakhsh is a courageous and truthful companion to the hero Rostam until it dies tragically in a pit, pierced by metal stakes. The context of the ancient tales - broadened by yet another figure originating from mythological miniature painting, demons – is at the same time contrasted and complemented by images of statesmen and generals, images apparently from the past from the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which mingle with the familiar representations of contemporary cityscapes. Also the scene in the background in the wall-drawing is both corresponding and contradicting the image of the peaceful, dreamy horse as sculpture, but does not help to clear the situation: What could be a contemporary scene in the city centre of Tehran shows people sitting on sand bags, perhaps barricades. But instead of carrying weapons, the young people are sitting, resting, even dreaming? The horse seems to wait with them, in the middle of a crossroad, surrounded by cars. It takes us as the viewers with it into a setting where we immerse in scenes that combine ancient tales and mythology, a historical Iranian past and the present time of the spectator, us. The seemingly relaxed and dreamy entrance soon turns into an atmosphere of disturbing ambivalence, threat, and violence.

The rather unclear, somehow detached role of the horse is taken up by the lion in *Head in clouds*. This "spatial image" consists of a big canvas in three parts on which sculptural elements are mounted. They grow into a sort of high relief, with the figure of the soldier who turns his back on us and who is half immersed into the surface of the canvas. Finally, with the figure of the lion outside of the picture, the sculptural element turns into full sculpture. However, other than in the previous installations, the figure remains aesthetically and formally directly connected to the image space of the work through the element of patterned fabric the lion is standing on and which reappears in the canvas. When I speak of the lion's "detached role" within the images-space, I speak of it with regard to content as well as on the structural level. Its detachment enhances the ambiguous atmosphere in Mona's works between narration and abstraction and stands for the lion's personification of the ongoing actions in the scene behind him as well as for the animal figure taking over the orchestration of the image space, as I already mentioned before. In this, we can compare *Head in clouds* with *Gate of heaven II* from the *Stories I live by* series. The artist takes up a similar structure of the image space and composition, enhancing it beyond the surface of the canvas. Yet another example for the close interconnectedness and continuity in regard to method, narration and imagery in her oeuvre.

However, the animal's own agency stays in the service of human concerns, of social, political, cultural or personal matters, and of the artist's narration. The sources of the animal imagery also point in this direction: the horses, birds, monkeys and mythical creatures originate in most cases from Persian miniatures, identifiable through their stylized form and execution. The lion, while it appears in miniature painting, it has also embodied the Iranian sovereign state and nation on the Iranian flag for centuries, where it first appeared during Safavid rule in the 16th century. Initially appearing as an image of the artist's cultural and personal memory, the lion leaves its own image and memory to become the "alter ego's" companion, and ultimately replaces her. In one of the drawings of the series *Stories I live by, Preparation*, we can see the lion in a picture within the picture, while the female figure stands alone in the middle of a city-space. The artist herself describes it as "having taken the lion out of the image on the wall", setting it beside her "alter ego".

In *Lion on news garden* (2014) the artist adopts the lion as embodiment of the Iranian nation in an ironic gesture: The figure of the lion stands alone. The usual image-space in the background is reduced to the sculptural element of a sun on the wall (also stemming from the former Iranian flag, but we've already seen it in other pictures and installations), or rather transferred to the ground on which the lion is standing. Here, the artist painted a "garden" in the traditional pattern *gol-o-bolbol* on Iranian newspapers. A literary and decorative theme, *gol-o-bolbol* became most popular during the Safavid period, beautifying text illuminations, ceramic objects, furniture, etc. In this regard, it beautifies the newspapers here, or rather its news. Together with the sword fallen to the ground beside the lion – the original figure of the lion on the flag is proudly holding the sword – the work reveals itself as a critical comment to the historical and present state and development of the artist's home country, to the multiple cultural and national narratives, and to the ongoings within the country as well as its perception elsewhere in the world.

See Diba, Layla S., Gol O Bolbol, in: Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2001/12/15 [http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gol-o-bolbol, last accessed 2015/05/24].

About beauty

Thirdly, the specific structure of the picture and the image-space should be outlined. Stories I live by are not merely paintings, but they are also collages. This is particularly true of the large canvases in which collage elements dominate the compositions. As in Farewell, they consist of Iranian religious flags containing Persian writing and calligraphy in bright colours, Persian ornament, and images of saints and mosques. These structures - the religious flags, or what is left of them - are often sited in the middle ground and serve as architectures, barriers, pictures within the picture, and walls. In Encounter II a black flag with Persian writing in blue, green, red, and orange enters the middle ground like a barrier, an element foreign to the city-scene around the female figure, arranged in a similar way as we have seen in Farewell. In Expectation, the collage-elements form an architectural structure, an arcade of blue, white, yellow and red floral ornament. This arcade seems to linger in the air, opening the view to a geometrically ornamental painted structure that often serves as decoration in mosques, as well as to a calligraphy in red. Here, the geometrical pattern is disproportionately enlarged though, as is the calligraphy. Another collage element is to be found in the lower part of the composition, arranged as if it were a carpet on the floor where the lion rests. While the collages correspond to architectural forms and structures, the spatial setting remains ambiguous and surreal. In Gate of heaven II, the collage elements consist of huge white calligraphy framed by floral ornament and an image of a mosque as well as framed with flowers that serve as buildings, walls, and urban structures in the setting of the picture. Soldiers and an Elysian rider populate the canvas and move through this structure as if it were a citylike formation, a space that continues to be uncertain, working against perspective and spatial logic.

Another prominent collage element that Mona uses are Persian shrouds: In *Triumph III*, the background, earth, and sky consist of pieces of white material, completely covered with small, pale red writing. The earth where a female figure kneels beside a dead horse is made of a russet fabric with small floral patterns. Even the pennants above, linking the scene in the front with the group of soldiers in the back, are made of religious flags. Here, the collage elements do not constitute semi-architectural structures, but they nevertheless dominate the picture and help foster the spatial uncertainty and ambivalence seen in other works.

When looking at *Head in clouds*, as well as at some yet unfinished collage paintings in Mona's studio during my visit, both her mode of operation and artistic approach becomes apparent: Parts of cloth applied to the canvas are to become structural and architectural elements of the picture, together with planes of colour that are to become background, horizon, and sky. The artist composes the picture out of planes made of cloth, religious flags, and of colour, which set the ground for the colour scheme and thus the atmosphere of the scene to follow. The same method and approach applies to the installations and overall to the "spatial images" as in *Head in clouds*, where the cloth, together with the sculptural figure, is taken outside of the canvas and thus expands the composition beyond the canvas. It becomes obvious that Mona's approach is not so much led by the content and meaning, which the many cultural, political, and social visual references would suggest, but by form. The composition should be balanced, the colours harmonized, the works have a "beautiful" expression.

We have beauty and compositional harmony on the one side, and a restrained, unsettling notion of violence and death, religious domination, uncertainty, and halted movement on the other. The notion of beauty refers to an idealistic understanding of art as an image of nature that exceeds natural perfection. Not only are the beauty of line, figural balance, and composition essential, but also emotions, thoughts,

and the allusions created in the observer by the beauty of the artwork, that is, the notion of an ideal world.⁵ While speaking of "beauty", this notion of representing an ideal world is included and does not contradict the rather unsettling content of Mona's pictures. Paradoxically, the beautiful composition accounts for the spatial uncertainty: The carefully composed planes and patterns mislead the figures, prohibit perspective, impede movement, and ultimately, frustrate narration. There remain notions and allusions of content, and the pictures are heavily loaded with meaning that we cannot fully grasp. There is no end to the story; the visual narration deceives us and turns us back to ourselves, to our emotions and understandings as viewers in front of the pictures. We stay there, left alone with an imaginary world that is everything but idealistic.

Another notion of beauty is present in the calligraphic, ornamental and miniature elements. When we speak of a "beautiful line", it is meant literally – one needs years of training to be able to execute these techniques properly. Here, the notion of "beauty" is that of a perfect line and proportion, of ideal colour, all in praise of God and the representation of His creation. However, the perfection of representation transported in these elements does not help put in order the imaginary world in Mona's pictures: By placing bits of miniature here and pieces of calligraphy there, the artist tears apart the compositional wholeness of the miniature and replaces divine order and beauty with chaos and anarchy. Further, the bits and pieces play their role in the prevention of a complete narrative and its understanding.

On cultural representation

This brings us to the last topic that I would like to discuss: the meaning of the pictures in relation to the cultural contexts in which they are perceived. We – the viewers here in Germany, the "Western" viewers, so to say – get the feeling that we don't fully grasp the story narrated in the pictures because of our lack of knowledge about Iranian culture. The fact that we cannot read and understand Persian writing contributes to this feeling. However, it is crucial to Mona's work that the writing does not carry any meaning, for Iranians either. She carefully changes, smears and covers the letters so that the words and sentences become meaningless and the Persian writing pure ornament (despite being very small, almost unreadable, and thus intended to represent a pattern, rather than a text; the Arabic writing on the shrouds that she uses in some of her pictures can be technically deciphered).

Within critical research and writing on contemporary visual arts from the so-called Middle East, including art from Iran, the topic of using Arabic and Persian writing has been discussed controversially. These writings are not accessible to a Western audience. They are obscured to the viewer and thus become "pure ornament". Islamic ornament and everything associated with it, the *Arabesque* in Western art history and art, is closely linked with Orientalism and the Orientalist reception and framing of art – a context and mode of reception that has been and continues to be criticized today. The "inaccessible" writing becomes ornament, *Arabesque*, and is hence linked to a diffuse notion of an Oriental "other". This problematic aspect of the Western reception of contemporary Middle Eastern and Iranian art

For a detailed examination of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's ideal of beauty see Franke, Thomas, *Ideale Natur aus kontingenter Erfahrung*, Würzburg 2005, especially pp. 87 ff.

See Grabar, Oleg, The Formation of Islamic Art, New Haven / London, 1973, p. 78; and Koloska, Hannelies, "Bildmagie zwischen Religion und Kunst. Eine Antwort auf Heike Behrend", in: Brombach, Ilka / Setton, Dirk / Temesvári, Cornelia (eds.), Ästhetisierung. Der Streit um das Ästhetische in Politik, Religion und Erkenntnis, Zürich, 2010, pp. 177-181, p. 180.

See Kittner, Alma-Elisa, "Nahe Ferne' – 'ferne Nähe'. Anmerkungen zu einem orientalischen Topos in der zeitgenössischen Kunst", in: Göckede, Regina / Karentzos, Alexandra (eds.), Der Orient, die Fremde. Positionen zeitgenössischer Kunst und Literatur, Bielefeld 2006, pp. 139-163, pp. 148 ff.

presupposes that the writing is accessible for a Middle Eastern and Iranian audience, which means that it can be read and be understood in local contexts and by local viewers – the guarantee of an "authentic" and "Oriental" work of art. But what happens when the writing intentionally becomes ornament, inaccessible even for an Iranian viewer?

In order to come to a conclusion here, I will briefly refer to Mona's journey to becoming an artist as well as to the context in which she typically exhibits her work. Mona studied art when she came to Germany in 2000, and thus started her career as an artist in Germany. To date she has not exhibited her work in Iran. The usual context in which she shows her works are galleries and museums in Europe, mainly in Germany, where the audience typically fires questions at her regarding the cultural and political meaning. In contrast, when she once in a while meets an audience that is actually from the region of her home country, the artist can't help but noticing the viewer's familiarity with her imagery. She ascribes this familiarity to a shared experience in which memory and images come from a similar source. Is it her own fault then, when she loads her work with these notions and allusions that do not belong to the German, European or North-American aesthetic and cultural context? It is and yet it isn't.

While an Iranian viewer might with greater ease be able to contextualize and understand the single elements that her work brings together (the miniature-elements, the ornamental patterns, the religious flags, the shrouds), more easily grasp the moments to which she refers (the manifestations, the historical images), and be able to allocate the urban contexts (e.g., the city of Tehran), he or she is as excluded from the narration as is the Western viewer and is left alone to deal with the imagery in the same way. Her art raises the same questions and transmits the same notion of spatial and psychological uncertainty, the same dream and reality, and the same beauty of composition and lines interlaced with the notion of danger and violence. Full insight is not granted, and perhaps this becomes even more obvious – and more disturbing – for an observer who understands the Persian writing and the cultural context.

From the early paintings to the "spatial images" and installations, Mona's manner of alluding to without revealing, of painting true to life while stirring a sense of the surreal, of meticulously composing a harmonious and even beautiful expression while infusing it with uncertainty and danger, runs like a golden thread through her work. Earlier in this essay I mention the importance of continuity in her oeuvre, visible in the way she intertwines old and new work. She works and reworks her formal approach and the world of her imagery.

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