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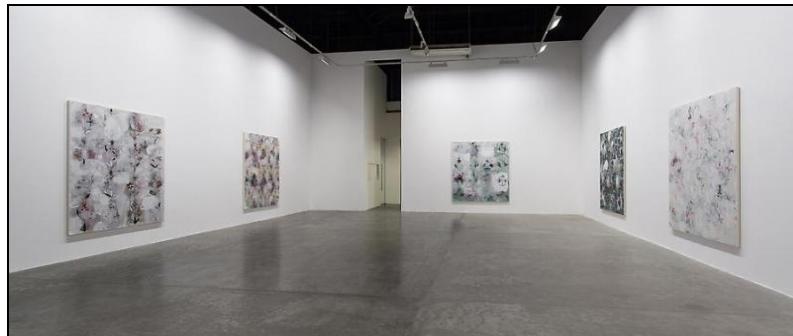
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## Mapping Unstable Objects

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TUESDAY, MAY 13, 2014

By [Ari Akkermans](#)



[Kamrooz Aram at Green Art]

How do objects appear in **painting**? Traditionally speaking, objects do not appear but simply are revealed. In classical painting, covering the canvas with a thick dark color was the means to extract light from the sides or the back, in such a way that things never come into existence, but rather dissolve out of layers of pure color. Dissolution is the basic unit of painting, but what dissolution means in the history of painting, must be understood in terms of the physical properties of the painted material. While classical and early modern painting was characterized by either the panoramic view or the dark interior, the view was total in a manner such that the pictorial relationship was established not between the painting and the viewer, but between the painting and reality.

The **contemporary** situation, on the other hand, presents us with cartographies of risk and instability. At the moment of its withdrawal from the panoramic view, painting unfolds in almost cinematic sequences as a still or a snapshot, the interest of which lies mainly not in the possibilities of representation but in the faculty of judgment. As a tabula rasa, the new canvas, no longer a frame, is both a mere material surface and an absolute space. Paintings are often inscribed, engraved, sculpted, and dissolved rather than painted; for the scientific fallacy of the perfect coincidence between known objects and the mind has been revealed, and the sources of consciousness are found sited beyond memory, located in temporal sequence, subject to transience of life.

In his most recent exhibition, "[Palimpsest: Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors](#)," New York-based Iranian painter **Kamrooz Aram** has performed an investigation on the nature of painting that oscillates between the canvas, the room and the container of space in general. However, investigation is not the right word: The investigation is both the precondition and the final result. In that sense, Aram is a "chercheur", in the French meaning of the word, both a researcher and a searcher. The meaning of **historical painting** is being here re-defined as a laboratory rather than as a stage for a theatrical performance. Grounded on a grid-like structure across the canvas, based on a Persian carpet photographed once at a store in **New York City**.



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[Resistant Forms in Uncertain Space (Palimpsest #27), 2013, oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas, 213x183cm]

Yet, the mathematical process reveals in its precision the difficulties and inconsistencies: The world is practically irrational but mathematically conceivable. "I then destroy it with solvent, wipe it away with rags and rebuild it again. Sometimes what I am covering up has already been erased. And sometimes the cover up itself is erased to reveal what was hidden beneath." The ornamental motif might well be a metaphor for the inaccessibility of the sign and the rupture of the symbolic order, which is necessary for representation: A painting surface based on a snapshot can be but blurry and out of focus. The contemporary image is always out of focus; elements appear at different scales of distance. Focus is the realistic illusion, the artist in seeking lust or illusion.

The **palimpsest** as a torn off folio from a book or a scroll, is in Aram's painting, the site of urban transformation and the archaeological site of a future impossibility, such as the erased De Kooning by Robert Rauschenberg. The basic operation in his work is not filling the canvas but rather emptying it: Aram conceives of the white canvas as the most constricted claustrophobic space that needs to be cleaned up in order to enter the order of meaning and symbols. As if using ultraviolet light to reveal a pagan text scribbled over by a religious hymn or a scientific treatise erased in order to make space for a manuscript of the Old Testament, the painter is making the past present in the moment of its passing.

His method might be less sophisticated and more material: Kamrooz Aram's brush resembles more the ammonium bisulfate that was used to read palimpsests in the 19th century, than a merely photographic gaze. Just like the Novgorod Codex, unearthed in 2000, and apparently written over dozens or hundreds of times during several decades (it's thought to be the only surviving hyper-palimpsest), the architectural instinct of the painter, lead him to think about the intersection between memory, urban conflict, social struggles and aesthetics: Covering the graffiti walls in conflict cities such as **Beirut** and **Istanbul** can only shed light on the restlessness of the contemporary situation, turning entire sections of cities into color fields that screamed out broken parables.



[Revisions for a New Garden (Palimpsest #15), 2013, oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas, 213x183cm]

Placing himself beyond the grammar of **Abstract Expressionism**, while still fluent in it, Aram is seeking a warm place for scholarship and life in painting, without abandoning altogether the concept and aspiration of the image. The engagement of the painter is two-fold, or rather, operates in two parallel dimensions: On the one hand, Aram asks the question whether it is possible for abstract painting to engage with the world, and on the other, proposes a simultaneous expansion of the visual and human fields, in which paintings do not only occupy a room, a "surface," but transform the entire space they occupy in an installative manner, or are transformed by it. But paintings are not revolutions; they can simply ask questions, pose doubts, and then go on living very private lives.

**Marking** or painting? The markings on the painting function more as checkpoints than signs; they remind the viewer about the nature of the material so that they are not dazzled by the illusion of landscape or even of abstraction! Abstract (in painting as much as in music) was born as the moment – rather than form – of absolute freedom, which in turn became the most academic and rigid school in the history of modern art. The total color field erected itself as a blind spot and final destination after which no more could be painted. The following thirty years of painting make the unsuspecting viewer question whether if it is not time to un-see painting in general. Yet Aram's palimpsests are an acute reminder: No image is ever final.

The interiors of the painting are not reachable with the naked eye. They resemble frescos on the wall being painted over, and not simply layers of the paint. These walls are solid, concrete and overarching: The signpost of an impossibility, whether social, aesthetic or critical. Solids however have not fared well in late Modernity: The mega structures of the once booming American car industry in Detroit are now derelict and abetted ruins. They have begun to melt with global capital, migrations and the new financial anti-structures of South Asia and the Middle East. Liquid is the new solid, a state of transition and uncertainty, which is now institutional and permanent. The new metaphor of the modern world is not the skyscraper, but the skyscraper under constructions, the crane, and the debris.

Walking in the streets of contested cities reveals the architectures of insecurity in which we live: The concrete and steel have been replaced by the ruin. However it is difficult to know if the ruin, the debris and waste material, reveal whether something is being built or has been just demolished and destroyed. There's no way we could know. Kamrooz Aram's palimpsests locate unstable objects as they are being filtered out of the image repertoire, and covered up. He is not rearranging the debris into a coherent collection of forgotten objects but letting them speak for themselves. With the aim in mind, of making their dislocation from the order of reality truly manifest, sometimes he needs to cover them up again, in

order to release their potential allegory.



[Maspeth Rituals (Palimpsest #14), 2013, oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas, 213x183cm]

"[Palimpsest: Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors](#)" by [Kamrooz Aram](#) was on show at [Green Art Gallery](#), Dubai, March 17th - May 3rd. A book of the same title was launched with the exhibition. Aram was one of the winners of the [Abraaj Prize](#), 2014.

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