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"Recollections for a Room": Iranian-American artist Kamrooz Aram at Green Art Gallery, Dubai – in conversation

Posted on 18/12/2016



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Kamrooz Aram explores the complexities and contradictions of painting in "Recollections For a Room" at Green Art Gallery Dubai.

Iranian-born American artist Kamrooz Aram talks to *Art Radar* about the relationship between architecture and the ornament in his new body of work produced for the exhibition "Recollections for a Room" at Green Art Gallery.



Kamrooz Aram, 'A Monument For Living in Defeat', 2016, canvas: oil, wax and pencil. 152 x 274.3 cm; tile platform: terrazzo and brass on panel, 137.1 x 121 x 5 cm; pedestals: solid walnut and brass pedestals, 121.9 x 20.3 cm; sculptures: soapstone and alabaster, 18 x 16 x 15 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

Since completing his MFA at Columbia University in 2003, Kamrooz Aram has developed a painting and sculpture practice that consistently probes the historically unresolved relationship between the political and the ornament in modern art history and contemporary art practice. His first exhibition in Dubai, entitled "Palimpsest: Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors" also at **Green Art Gallery**, coincided with the unveiling of another project, "Ancient Through Modern: A Collection of Uncertain Objects" at Art Dubai commissioned by the **Abraaj Group Art Prize** in 2014.

While very different, both exhibitions set out to raise critical questions about the possibilities of contemporary abstract painting and sculpture to engage in historical and political discussions that surpass the self-referential or autonomous grammar imposed on painting and sculpture by the dominant discourses of modern art.



Kamrooz Aram, 'Revisions for a Nostalgic Garden (Palimpsest #12)', 2013, oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas, 213 x 183 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

In the "Palimpsest" series Aram took floral motifs from Persian carpets and repeatedly reconfigured them, building the patterns, destroying them and rebuilding again, resulting in explosive images that perform a state of flux. Through the arrangement of fragments into chaotic compositions and the disruption of the order of the repetitive patterns, Aram sought to complicate the idea of the decorative as something dormant. Aram's works revealed, on the contrary, that painting and even the Persian carpets that they reference are a kind of historical blind spot in the development of modernity's more functional art forms: architecture, design or engineering.



Kamrooz Aram, 'Maspeth Rituals (Palimpsest #14)', 2013, oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas, 213 x 183 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.



Kamrooz Aram, 'Ornamental Composition for Social Space, 1, 2 & 3', 2016, oil, wax and pencil on canvas, 213 x 182 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

Aram thus seeks to include coordinates of space and time in the construction of his painting, either through a titular reference ("Anxious Interiors") or visual codes that gesture towards the design objects or interiors his images quote. It is clear, for example, from the title of his first exhibition at Green Art Gallery "Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors" that for Aram, the discursive and material space between architecture and decoration, interior and structure, is ground for artistic investigation. In the current exhibition "**Recollections for a Room**" Aram further explores this terrain, choosing titles such as *Ornamental Composition for Social Spaces* and *Ornament for a Quiet Room* to propose painting or the decorative as an agent in the production of social relations and architectural space.

Art Radar talks to Kamrooz Aram about the processes and ideas behind this new body of work.



Kamrooz Aram, installation view of "Recollections For a Room" at Green Art Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

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although "traditional" in medium, has been described as "digital" in the sense that distinct information is "flattened" or translated and presented in the same code. You also use digital media as a tool in the preparation of your paintings. Could you tell us about the relationship your work establishes between painting, sculpture and the digital?

My use of digital media has been very basic and practical. My paintings typically begin with a detail of a carpet pattern that I have photographed in a New York City carpet store. When I first started working with carpet patterns in 2001, I was actually using an SLR to take slides, which I would project onto the canvas with a slide projector. Moving to digital was a purely practical move and not a conceptual one as far as I was concerned.

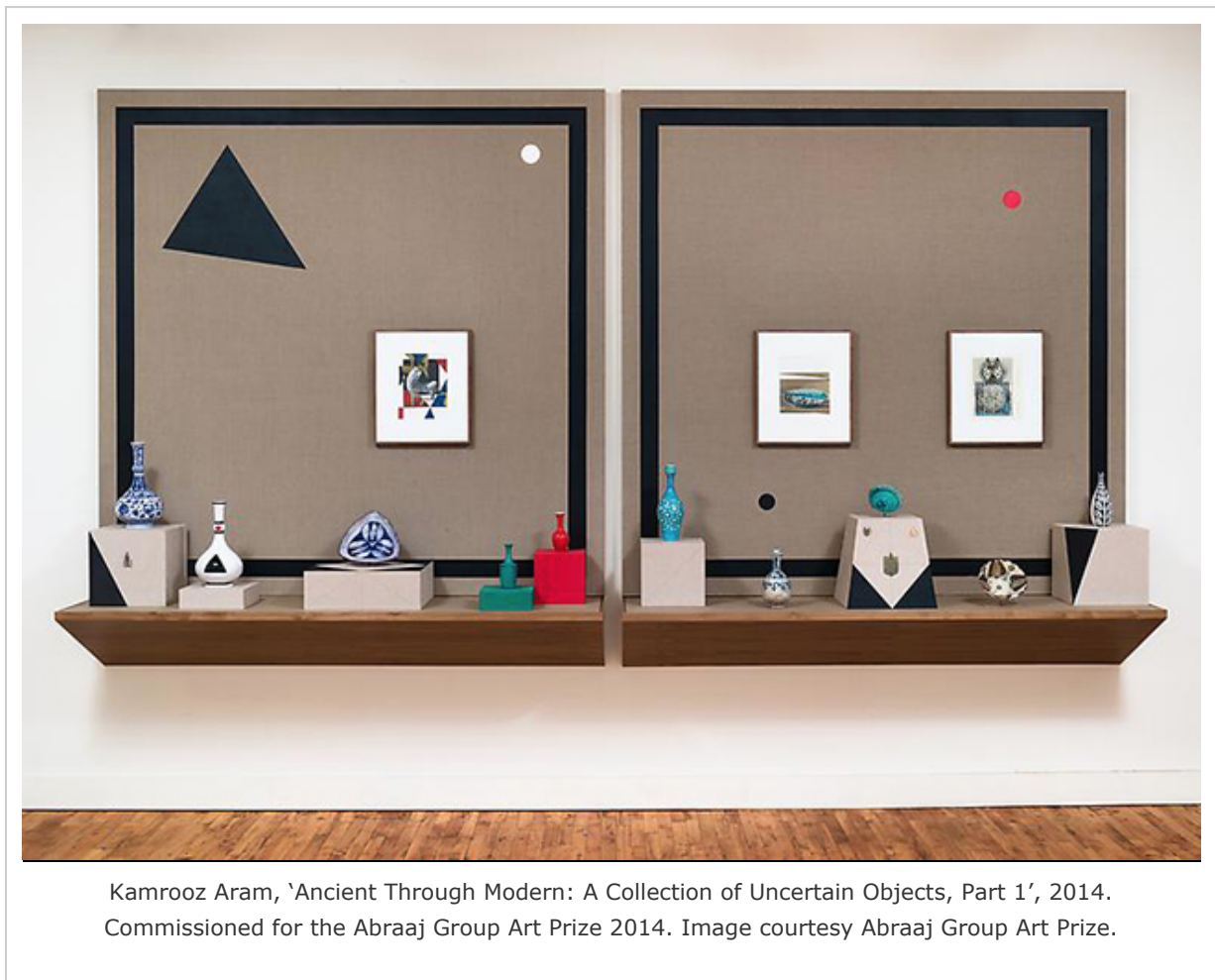


Kamrooz Aram, 'Ornament for a Quiet Room', 2016 oil wax and pencil on canvas, 213 x 182 cm.
Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

As for the validity of the medium of painting, it is a longer conversation. When I was a student I saw a lot of painters who were interested in radicalizing the medium, questioning its relevance and pushing against its susceptibility to the so called decorative. I went the other direction, more interested in embracing painting's potential toward the decorative. Once we embrace the idea of the painting as something that ultimately hangs on a wall and is often functioning as part of the architecture, even a backdrop at times; only then can we compel the painting to be anything more. Otherwise we are back to the modernist agenda of trying to "solve the problems of painting," which is less interesting to me.

Through painting, collage, drawing and installation, your work explores alternative histories of painting in which figuration and abstraction, ornament and action are not necessarily opposed. Which works in the exhibition have been particularly important or surprising for you?

The sculptural works are new to me, although I have been building toward them for many years now. *A Monument for Living in Defeat* (2016) was in progress for well over a year and was much more complex to make than it may appear. I managed to create some complicated technical problems for myself and there was a lot of material research involved. How does one make a portable terrazzo floor, for example? I like to get physically involved with the fabrication as much as I can without getting in the way of the people who really know what they are doing. It was fantastic working with my friends at December Box to fabricate architectural stands and pedestals. It was a long process full of interesting problems that demanded inventive solutions. But even on a very basic level, the project kept shifting. The painting behind the sculptures, for example, changed 4 or 5 times before I settled on the one that is part of the work now.



Kamrooz Aram, 'Ancient Through Modern: A Collection of Uncertain Objects, Part 1', 2014. Commissioned for the Abraaj Group Art Prize 2014. Image courtesy Abraaj Group Art Prize.

You are also known for taking visual codes or cultural objects out of context and placing them in alternative settings (I'm thinking specifically of your 2014 project *Ancient Through Modern: A Collection of Uncertain Objects*), which serves to interrupt the viewers mechanisms of recognition of the narratives and material cultures of "the East" and "the West", thus revealing the farce of approaching them as zones that can be reliably separated culturally or materially. How do you think your current body of paintings is performing this disruption?

I was a student in the late nineties when identity politics dominated the conversation around and among artists who were identified as Other. The conversation around identity politics was necessary and relevant, but it also set off a zeitgeist of artists working with convenient binaries such as East and West that I found to be trivial or and oversimplified. So from early on it has been my intention to complicate the way that we in the so called West identify "East".



Kamrooz Aram, 'Ancient Through Modern: An Uncertain Record for Future Nostalgia', 2016, archival inkjet print, 52.07 x 78.74 cm (Ed. of 3). Image courtesy Green Art Gallery.

This was all sparked after I read Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) when I was a student. And years later, when I began to make the collages that led to the "Ancient Through Modern" series, the books from which I made the collages were all published before 1979, the year *Orientalism* was published. I was interested in a particularly Modernist way of looking at objects from the East, but more generally, the importance of context in our reading of objects in museums.

Broadly speaking, the museum itself is already a context critical to the meaning of the objects it houses. But more specifically, the visual methods used by the museum: the exhibition design, the lighting, the backdrops, the pedestals, are critical in shaping the viewers' understanding of the displayed objects. I suppose there is a parallel in the paintings; my interest in the Modernist fear of ornament and the hierarchy that this set forth. But for me painting tends to be a freer practice and while my paintings are rooted in ideas, I also embrace the taboos academia has assigned to painting; all of those "bad" words like intuitive, emotional, visceral, transcendent, and so on (interestingly, words that one might associate with Western perceptions of Eastern cultures).

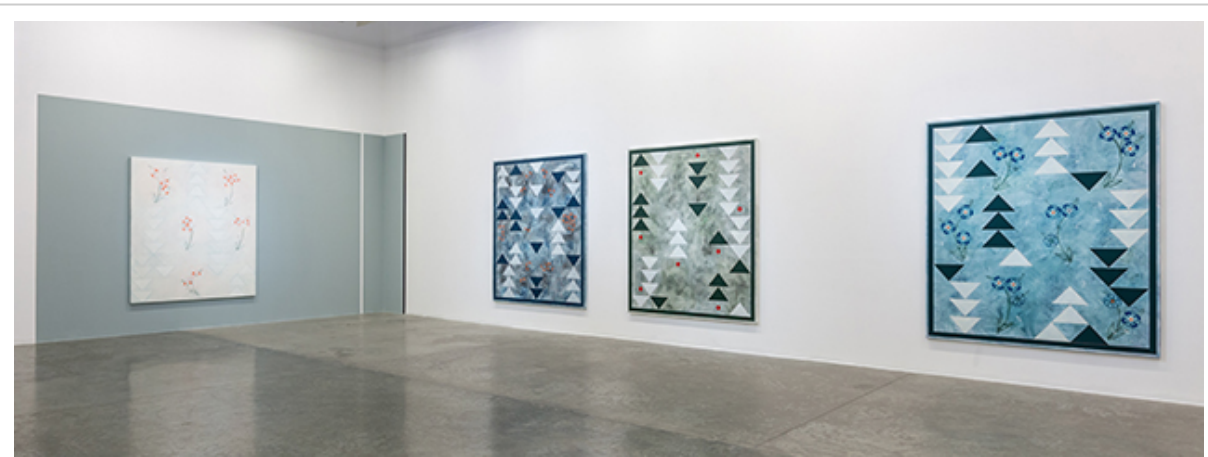


Kamrooz Aram, installation view of (Left) 'Ephasian Fog', 2016, oil and pencil on linen, wood and brass pedestal, oil on ceramic. (Right) 'Reluctant Descent', 2016, oil and pencil on linen, wood and brass pedestal, bronze and iron objects. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

Could you tell us a bit about the genesis of this body of work, and the specific art historical or historical references you are activating or are in dialogue with through your work? What is behind the exhibition's title?

Over the last few years I have become more and more interested in architecture. I suppose you can trace this back to the collages, which I started to make around 2009 or 2010. The bright red or blue backdrops in which the objects in the catalogues were photographed was an invented environment for those objects to exist through photography. In the museum, it is the vitrines and exhibition design that create such an environment. So over the years, as I became more interested in exhibition design, I started to look at Carlo Scarpa's work, most of which consists of museum renovations and permanent exhibition design.

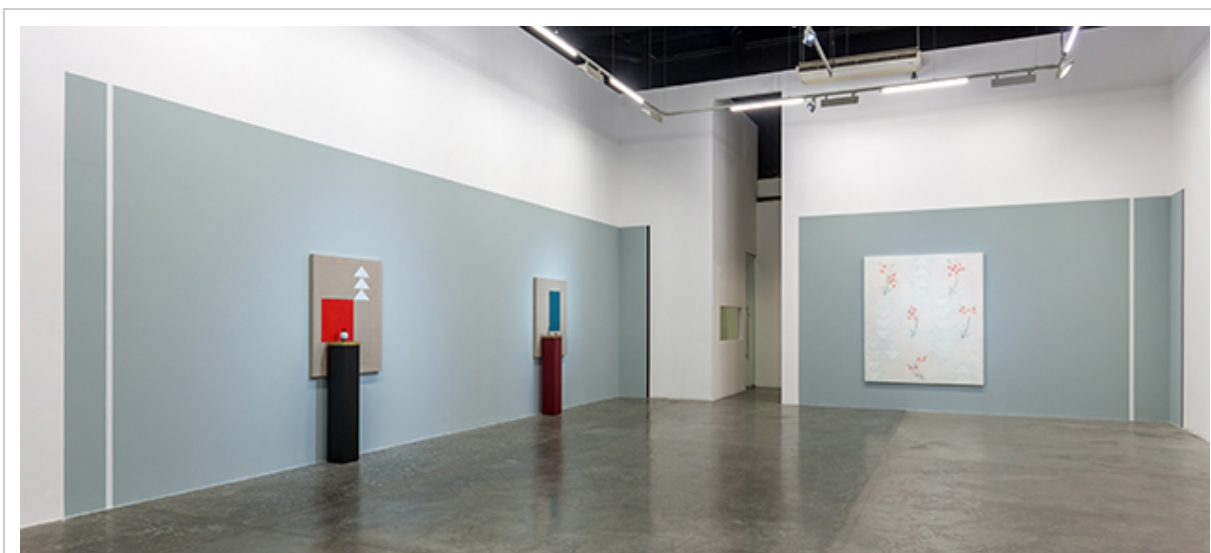
Two or three years ago I took a self guided tour of all of his major works in Northern Italy, which has become a major influence on me and the way I think about space and exhibition design. I have also been looking a bit at Luis Barragan, who has been having a bit of a moment among visual art crowds. Barragan said that all architecture should be emotional, but this is often not the case. I think visual art has the potential to make ordinary or indifferent architecture emotional. The title of my next show, which is at Museum Dhondt Dhaenens in Belgium, is "Ornament for Indifferent Architecture". The title of the show in Dubai, "Recollections for a Room", is also emphasizing the context in which the work is displayed.



Kamrooz Aram, installation view of "Recollections For a Room" at Green Art Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

I am also interested in our reliance on looking to the past in effort to identify ourselves in the present. I think that we are often guilty of a cultural nostalgia that is characterised by a longing for a glorious past: the past we view in museums. Iranians go to the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York or the **Victoria and Albert Museum** in London and look at the art of an ancient civilization that we can claim as our own. But when we look at these objects in the museum we are not really seeing the past, we are seeing a fragmented representation of the past in the present. Let's say you see a stone head of a lion that was at the top of a column in Persepolis; there are so many variables that inform your perception of this object in the museum. It was likely once painted in bright colours, but you are seeing the natural colour of the stone. You are looking at an isolated fragment, which was possibly part of a repeated pattern.

The light and shadow cast by the museum lighting system, the steel mount that holds the object on the wall, the height at which the object is installed, these all inform the way that you view this object. So in my own work, I use a variety of objects in the sculptural works including genuine antiquities, counterfeit antiquities, replicas sold in museum stores, objects that I have made myself, or even banal found objects, in order to challenge the viewer to put aside some of the typical ways we are trained to look at an object in a museum. I engage the display of the object as part of the whole. The pedestals are no less important than the object they display, and the painting behind them is as critical as the pedestal and the object. This interdependence is something I want to highlight.



Kamrooz Aram, installation view of "Recollections For a Room" at Green Art Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery.

What artists and other artworks by colleagues or mentors are you particularly excited about at the moment?

I am interested in Tauba Aurbach's research in ornament. Her last show in New York was really special. **Iman Issa's** *Heritage Studies* series (2015) is also something I have been looking at... she manages to be incredibly thoughtful without relinquishing poetry and beauty. Two painters a generation or so ahead of me who I often think about are Amy Sillman and **Charline von Heyl**. For both of them, each painting is a new search and no two paintings have the same solution. They both had a commitment to abstract painting in a time when it was unpopular, but also have a complex relationship to abstraction in that the work is always challenges us to reconsider the distinction between abstraction and figuration. I really appreciate the way both artists talk about their work and about painting in general. There is a certain embrace of the unknowables in painting that I think is important. Charline, who I studied with in grad school, often talks about the blurry line between painting and design, something that I always saw as a parallel to my interest in painting and ornament. And Amy's writing on painting is incredibly compelling. Both of these artists manage to approach painting with a deep understanding that engages its complexities and contradictions.

Rebecca Close

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