

## **Excess of Subjectivity**

### **A Conversation with Kamrooz Aram and Lauri Firstenberg**

**Lauri Firstenberg:** When we met, you were in graduate school at Columbia and working on a series of diptych paintings that were very much bound to the logic of the grid. The paintings were based on a dialectical relationship between modernist tropes and Sufi principles. You spoke of this early work in terms of "contradiction." Could you speak to the evolution of your work from this point to the utter transformation of your paintings? Each series relates to the larger practice yet undergoes a series of major reinventions and experiments. Can you help us trace a trajectory from a work like *Coming and Returning* in 2002 to your recent *Transformation/Desert Station* in 2005? Your work seems to be increasingly iconographic and narrative.....

**Kamrooz Aram:** It's interesting that you chose *Transformation/Desert* (2005) as a recent example. Many of the earlier works dealt with this idea of transformation. At the time I was interested in making work that dealt with issues in traditional Islamic art. Islamic geometric patterns and Persian carpets are the closest thing the Islamic world has to Western painting. Throughout my education, I had come across artists from the Islamic world living in the West who dealt with social and cultural issues including a kind of self-Orientalizing exoticism model of entrée to approach identity politics.

I wanted to make work that was not illustrative of questions of identity, and it was not meant to be apologetic or self-critical. My approach rested in a reading of Islamic culture in the West as territory that was ridden with a great deal of interest and criticism. I was not positioning the work as directly participating in that discourse. I wanted to deal with these issues in a more complex way than merely adhere to the customary dichotomization of East meets West. Contradiction was a means to interrupt this binary position. *Coming and Returning* (2002) was the last of this grid-based geometric work.

I began to make paintings using Persian carpet patterns found in local carpet stores in New York. The relationship between Persian carpets in New York and painting in New York is quite interesting. They are both ridden with signification, but people just want the ones that look good. They intersect at the point of the decorative. These paintings started as an attempt to bring some content back into these decorative forms. Slowly, I began adding to this vocabulary and they became less abstract. Clouds taken from miniatures indicated a sky, the carpet pattern became a tree, camouflage patterns became a stand-in for the ground, and the paintings shifted more and more towards referencing landscape directly.

My first solo exhibition in New York consisted of what I called "tree

paintings." The carpet patterns were sort of destroyed and rebuilt over and over again - the paintings were very layered. It was also the first time light started to take on an important role in the work. Romantic bursts of light were literally destroying the carpet pattern in a cheeky actionist manner. I became increasingly interested in an ideology of romanticism. The visual vocabulary keeps growing, and new characters are introduced. Narratives began to form, but vaguely. *Transformation/Desert Station* (2005) is as direct as it gets. I'm not interested in telling one story. The iconography is never something that you can quite put your finger on. For me, it's more about this carnivalesque, absurd, magical and scary present day.

**LF:** At our last meeting we spoke about the potential of painting and the charged negotiation of politics and aesthetics for a young generation of contemporary artists working in the medium of painting, particularly in the context of America. How do you address this negotiation and are you looking for a nonbinaristic language to reconcile a kind of polarization of priorities or tendencies?

**KA:** Exactly. An artist I know recently asked me if I was still making political work. I didn't know what to say; I was kind of appalled that he thought of it this way. At the same time, I wouldn't want to deny that there are political implications in the work. I just don't like oversimplifying and talking about the work as if it is directly about a stated political situation. I hope that any political references in the work are not so definable. As you have probably seen, many artists, curators and writers have the same tendency as politicians to create a binary situation, to talk about things in polar terms. In my case, people can't let go of the East-West thing. This is just an easy and dramatic way to mythologize cultural endeavors.

My first interest in the questions of aesthetics and politics was when I was in college and read Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). It sort of set the pace for me. This was a large part of the early work at Columbia. In the recent work, one might be tempted to conveniently reference the Iraq invasion and war, but this is too simplistic. There is nothing in the work that directly references this war. Yet there are direct references to images of destruction and warfare; even some of the titles include language that references military jargon, but in a dislocated fashion. I am not interested in locating these terms specifically. I have even used titles like *The Battle of So and So*. The approach is towards the amalgamation of references and the posing of questions. People get hung up on symbols and signifiers and, for me, the challenge is to provide material for a multitude of readings.

**LF:** Is your position regarding the political anchoring of your work guided at all by the climate of the market - the fear of politics - its encroachment upon the realm of aesthetics? Does the art world, particularly in New York, allow for a practice such as yours to work

in the genre of painting, politically, without a posturing or tendency towards abstraction in order to "pass" in a current climate that promotes, as you say, beauty, the decorative? Who are contemporary models engaged with the traditional terms of sublimity and violence at the site of painting? Who are mentors or colleagues you see as models able to reconcile the aesthetic and the social?

**KA:** I think we can say that the market is generally interested in aesthetics first and content second, especially when it comes to painting. I think this is okay, to an extent. Painting depends on a certain level of spectacle. If a painting consists only of spectacle, the painting becomes decorative. If the spectacle is weak and content dominates, then the painting risks being didactic. The market, specifically in New York, is obsessed with spectacle and virtuosity. It is like '80s rock; if you can play fast guitar you make it big.

However, many painters are making work that is at once spectacular and socially engaging. Among my colleagues, Marc Handelman is probably the best example of a painter who really engages the aesthetic and the social in an integrated way. Marc and I were in graduate school together, and he was one of the few artists who really understood what I was trying to do. He would write me pages of notes and diagrams to try to explain what it was he thought I was doing.

At Columbia I studied with people like Kara Walker, Coco Fusco, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Jon Kessler. But I also studied with Terry Winters, Ross Bleckner, and Gregory Amenoff. And there I was, somewhere in between positions. I had an ongoing conversation with Kara about the historical role of painting as a colonialist language, a Eurocentric masculinist medium. I am self-conscious of my participation in this discourse, and it is revealed by the contradictions of content in the work. I came to the conclusion that I was speaking Patois. I think that Kara is a model for young artists who are engaged with social and political questions. Like Kara, Marc and I also talked about the historical role of painting. But he understood why I was painting. There was a period of time when Kara was challenging the fact that I was painting at all.

**LF:** What is your process in terms of your drawing? Are your drawings studies for paintings or autonomous works?

**KA:** The drawings are autonomous, though they have recently begun to influence the paintings. The drawings that I am making now began as an exercise in which I would make one drawing in the morning right when I woke up and one at night right before I went to sleep. It was a ritualistic form of visual thinking. The more I made, the more involved the drawings became, and they became a significant part of my work.

It was always important that I made the drawings at home and not in

the studio. I thought of them as more casual than the paintings. I also like the idea of drawing as ritual. In my first solo show, I had a room in the back of the gallery painted dark gray with a spotlight on one large drawing. The people working in the gallery had to pick one of five drawings every morning to show for that day. I wanted to bring this element of ritual into the gallery.

The drawings vaguely reference miniature painting, but go against the traditional meaning of miniatures. They are never planned, always intuitive, and any attempt at perfection is futile. In fact, I think they acknowledge the impossibility of perfection, or perhaps they reject the very ideal. The drawings include found forms, certificate papers, and stickers that are collaged into the drawing.

**LF:** What do these collaged elements represent? What is your relationship to kitsch?

**KA:** I'm interested in the subjectivity of kitsch. I grew up with a lot of what would be considered kitsch, and I never thought of it as such. It is common for Third World immigrants to the West to find that what they thought of as beautiful and meaningful in the context of their mother culture is now tacky and kitsch. Interestingly, much of this is a result of an attempt at bringing elements of Western aesthetics into traditional Eastern art forms. I've been looking a lot at Shiite religious posters and calendars that draw from Renaissance art but also seem to reference glam-rock posters with the airbrushed, made-up ideal of masculinity. The compositions are super-balanced and the colors, though meant to be heavenly, are quite apocalyptic.

In the drawings, the collage elements are what I think of as a sort of commercial mysticism. The stickers of flowers are the ideal image of a flower. The certificate paper mimics the decorated borders of Persian miniatures. The shiny star stickers in the paintings long to be the gold-leaf stars in a Giotto painting. It's actually kind of sad.

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Lauri Firstenberg is the Director/Curator of LA><ART, a nonprofit contemporary arts organization in Los Angeles. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in the History of Art and Architecture Department.

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