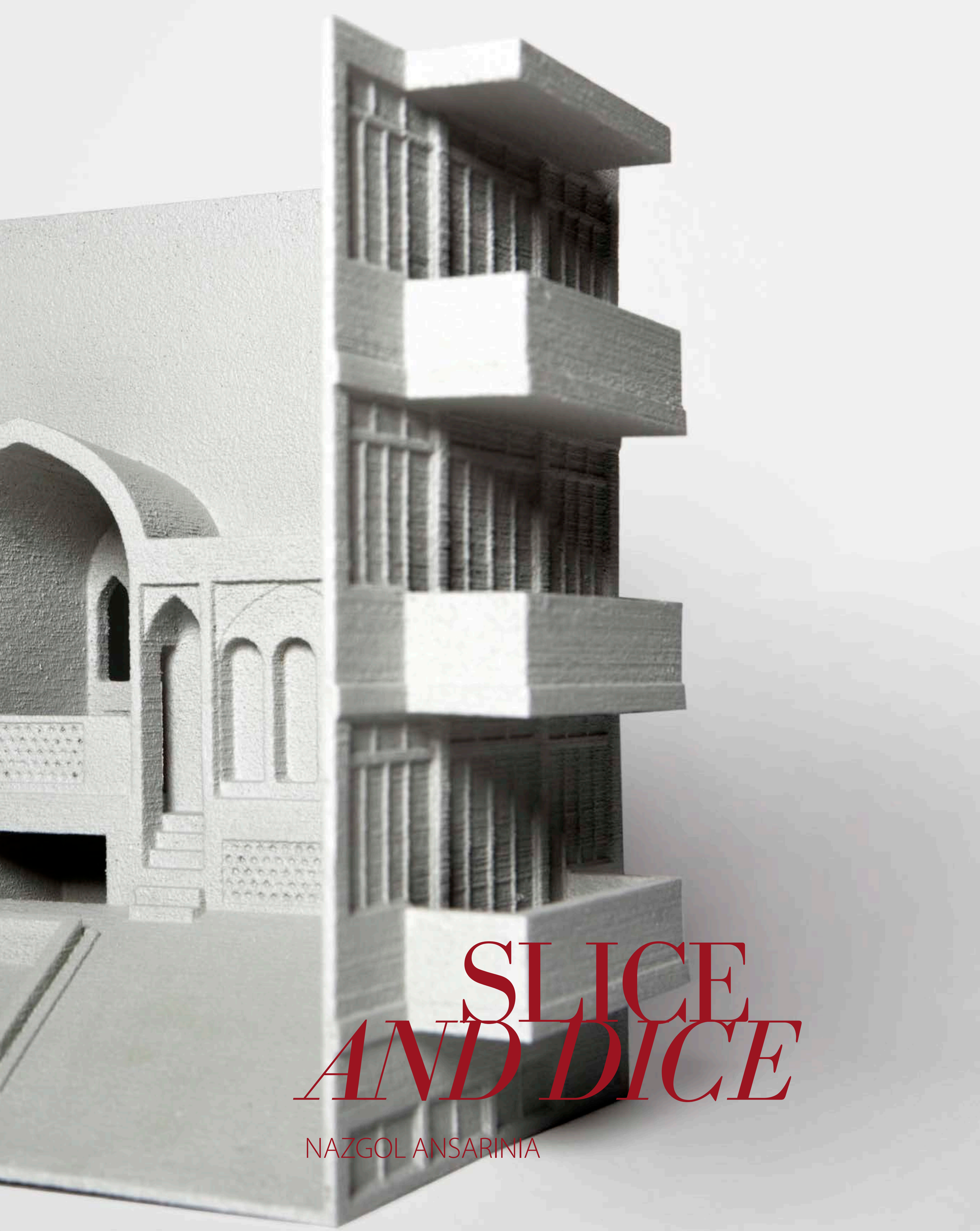
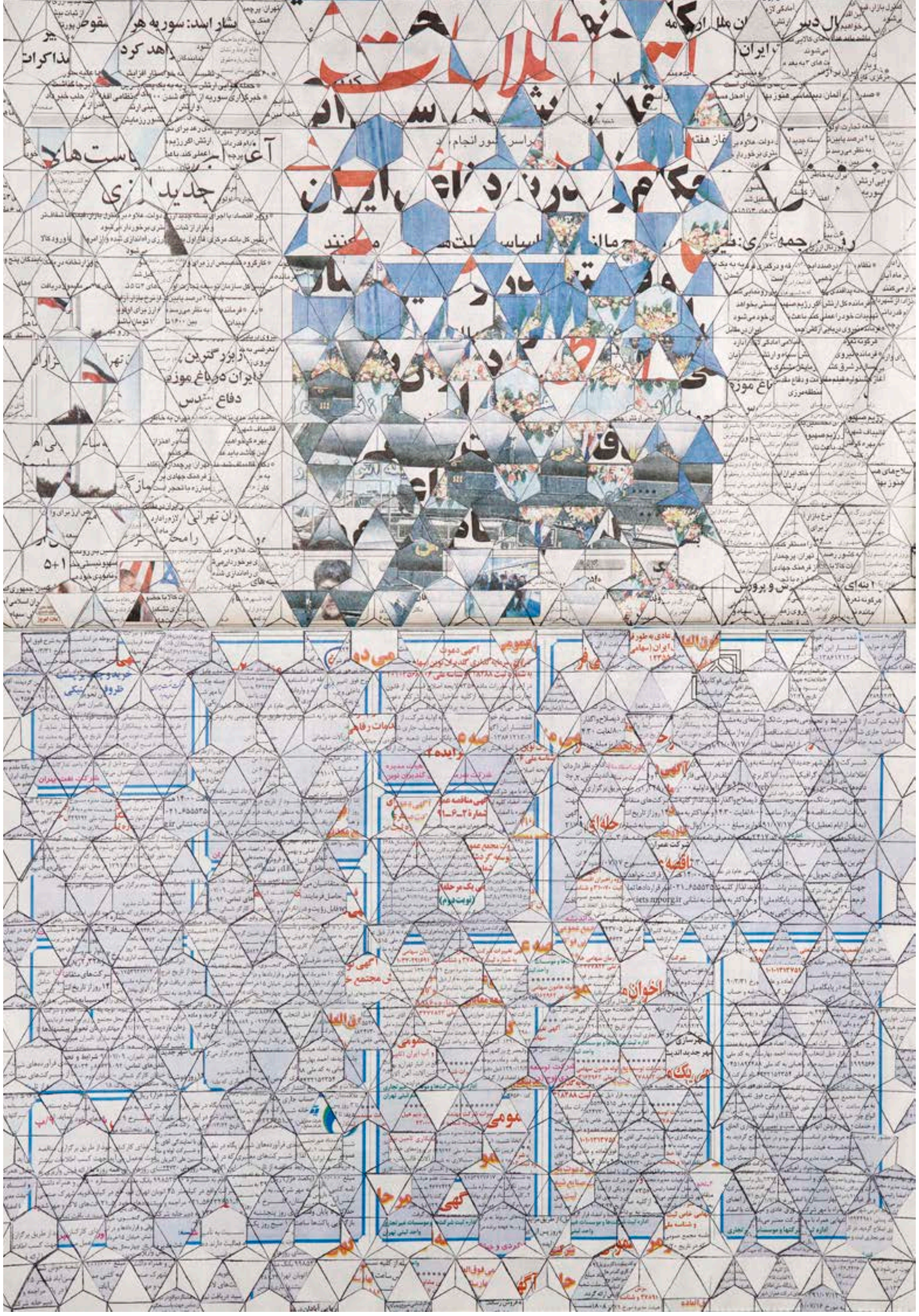


SLICE *AND DICE*

NAZGOL ANSARINIA

The Tehran-based artist rethinks, reworks and recasts everyday objects and juxtaposes them against daily life. **Lemma Shehadi** speaks with Nazgol Ansarinia, who takes things apart before drawing conclusions.

Nazgol Ansarinia's words are simple and to the point and though she is one of Iran's most talked about artists, her manner is reserved. Since returning to Tehran in 2005 after studying in London and San Francisco, she has made the Iranian capital the subject of her work. "My perfect Tehran would have clean air, more trees, more sidewalks and less aggressive drivers," says Ansarinia. She reflects on daily life through household items like newspapers, plates, chairs and carpets. "I want to take these banal objects apart and reveal something hidden in the layers," she explains. In her series *Mendings* (2011–12), she slices through furniture and ceramic plates and sticks each side together again, often combining these objects with traditional designs and ornamentation. The result is an everyday object that looks familiar, but not quite. Her piece, *Patterns*, awarded the Abraaj Group Art Prize in 2009, weaves scenes from contemporary daily life in Iran into traditional Persian rugs. These tableaux tell the story of Ansarinia's first year back in Tehran, seeing the city as an adult. "It was hard," she recalls of her first job at the state-run Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. "Though it is a museum, it was like working in any bureaucratic government office."



The immersion of light and reflection, symmetry and abstraction, communicates the power of God, that sublime, unknowable, invisible force of the Abrahamic traditions.

Struggling to adapt, Ansarinia built an archive of notes, drawings, recordings and photographs about her daily experiences. "I wanted to find a way to combine these," she says. "In Persian carpets, all the small elements are joined to create one big image." In the corner of one rug, eight men are arranged symmetrically behind a floral pattern, their heads tilted back to finish the contents of a bottle. Below them, two women in sleeveless, knee-length dresses and high heels face the viewer. Alcohol is forbidden in Iran, but consumption is rife and secret parties pepper its cities. In another carpet, a family of four drives by on a scooter, a vehicle made for two people. One child sits on the driver's lap, while the mother, in a light grey chador, is sandwiched between him and an older son, the engine exhaust fumes transformed into flowers. "[Though] carpets are everywhere in Iran, I had never taken an interest in them before," notes Ansarinia. Upon her return to her homeland, she saw them in a new light and became interested in their use of symbols and geometry.

LOGIC IN PATTERNS

Mirror mosaics, or *Ayeneh Kari,* are often found in shrines or covering entire walls and ceilings of mosques, as with the Shah Cheragh in Shiraz. The immersion of light and reflection, symmetry and abstraction, communicates the power of God, that sublime, unknowable, invisible force of the Abrahamic traditions.

Opening spread:
Fabrications, Residential Building/Belvedere And Garden On Resalat Highway. 2013.
Plaster, resin and paint.
11 x 20 x 13 cm.

This page:
Reflections/Refractions. 2012.
Newspaper collage of 22 September 2012 front pages.
71 x 53 cm.

Facing page:
Mendings (Grey Chair). 2012.
Wooden chair and glue.
44 x 41 x 95 cm.

In the 1960s, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was the first Contemporary Iranian artist to use this traditional craft within the context of Abstract Expressionism. But in Ansarinia's collages, the texture of newspaper is not glossy like mirrors, but dull – a gesture from the sacred to the mundane. It is not light that is reflected, but the grey, jumbled fragments of information, the very fabric of urban life. *Ettelaat* (The Informer), Iran's oldest newspaper and unwitting catalyst for the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has its own political connotations. Once a propaganda vehicle for the Shah, the paper provoked a popular uprising when it published a defamatory article on the ruler's fiercest and most outspoken critic, Ayatolla Ruholla Khomeini. The people of Qom took to the streets, sparking a wave of regular and violent protests that eventually toppled the Shah and brought in the Revolutionary Guard. In the series *Reflections/Refractions*, recently exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, the artist reconstructs two copies of *Ettelaat* using the mirror mosaic or reverse glass technique. The text and the images are visible, but illegible, and one page interrupts the other, revealing Tehran's polyphony and chaos.

Ansarinia's use of crisp lines, pattern and symmetry echo her background as a graphic designer. But there are clear critical and conceptual elements which she picked up from her time at university. She had just moved to the UK capital to study at the London College of Communication in 1997 when the Royal Academy of Art opened *Sensations*, the controversial exhibition of artworks from Charles Saatchi's collection. Works by Young British Artists such as Tracey Emin and the Chapman Brothers were included in the show, which sparked protests outside the museum. Ansarinia had never seen such pieces before. "I was mesmerised by a strange ephemeral

This spread:
Rhyme And Reason. 2009.
Handwoven wool, silk and cotton. 360 x 252 cm.
Inset: Detail of *Rhyme And Reason*.

> **The murals that Ansarinia is interested in are new, appearing "six of seven years ago [and] are a reflection of what is going on in the country."**

orange object, it was Rachel Whiteread's rubber *Bathtub*," she recalls. Dissatisfied with design, which she found "limiting", she enrolled in an MFA at the California College of Arts in San Francisco in 2001. "The course didn't teach design as a product, but as a way of thinking," explains Ansarinia. "The focus was theory and linguistics. I developed a method that I'm still using." There, she began her first major work, the *National Security Books* series (2001–08), in which she alphabetised the words of the US National Security books, chapter by chapter. "I arrived in America and two weeks later, 9/11 happened," she recalls. "I experienced all sorts of problems with my visa and was affected by the new immigration laws and perspectives on the Middle East." The words appear isolated, one by one, line by line, in a vertical column on each page. "I was drawn to the simplified, repetitive language, and the fact that it was produced to deal with 9/11," she says. In this work, Ansarinia shows that meaning is never fixed, but relative to its context. Words like 'terrorists' or 'conflict' are repeated many times in one chapter. Others appear only once or twice. She insists that her work is not political: "I don't have any slogans. I try to keep ideas open for interpretation."

INNER-CITY WORK

Her two most recent projects *Fabrications* (2013) and *Pillars* (2014–15) explore urban developments in the city. "We have lost our open spaces in Tehran," Ansarinia explains. The city, like many others in Iran, has become increasingly dense and cheap concrete buildings replace traditional townhouses; *Fabrications* comments on this. She points to the murals along the walls of Tehran where idyllic village scenes and Persian architecture are painted. "These are done in a kind of trompe-l'oeil style, so they look like real buildings from a distance," she says. "I don't understand why they knock down these buildings and then paint bad copies of them."

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This page:
NSS Book series. 2008.
Printed paper bound together in book format with a foil embossed cover.
Four books, 30 x 21 x 2.5 cm each.

Facing page:
Article 51, Pillars. 2014.
Cast resin and paint. 33 x 33 x 62 cm.

All images courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

Collaborating with the architect Roozbeh Elias-Azar, Ansarinia drew and designed models for new, hybrid houses based on those she found in the murals. Two different houses were drawn and fused together, "so you don't know where the first one ends and the other one starts". Their absurd, Escher-esque use of illusion echo the kitchy trompe-l'oeil motifs.

Murals are a common sight in Tehran and often depict religious scenes and imagery, like the three-storey-high painting along the Mudarris Highway. In the 1990s, the heroes and martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war were often portrayed. The murals that Ansarinia is interested in are new, appearing "six or seven years ago [and] are a reflection of what is going on in the country." Caecilia Pieri, who has written about murals on blast walls in Baghdad, describes these as "permanent urban furniture". They are there to beautify the city, but also to cover up existing social and political tension. Often, the artist has been commissioned by the local authorities to paint symbols of peace and unity, to "legitimise the official narrative". Ansarinia's latest work in progress, *Pillars*, shown for the first time through Green Art Gallery, casts a satirical eye on the rise of Tehran's emerging middle class. New houses built across the city with neo-classical columns are the latest display of wealth. "I find them ugly and ostentatious. They have nothing to do with us," she says. "Today in Tehran, you have a lot of expensive cars, luxury brands and large shopping malls. I grew up during the Iran-Iraq war; consumerism was scarce back then." At the time, "anything that came from abroad, anything that was colourful

“Tehran was so grey at the time, maybe that’s why I don’t use much colour in my work.”

or nice, like stickers or Swiss chocolate was so rare.” As a child, her aunt brought her a souvenir from London – a pink pencil case with printed hearts, which Ansarinia never took to school for fear of losing it. “In fact, I still have it at home, unused,” she says.

Though disappointed with modern developments in Tehran, she has no nostalgia for the city of her youth. “Tehran was grey and ready for war. They built bunkers made of fabric bags full of sand for us to shelter in,” she explains, “there’s not much that I miss about it.” Did it have an impact on her work? She doesn’t think so. “Tehran was so grey at the time, maybe that’s why I don’t use much colour in my work,” jokes Ansarinia. She is more interested in the modern city she lives in, responding to it through everyday domestic objects, rather than visions of the past. The pencil case, the chocolates and the stickers which she so coveted as a child, today form part of mundane household items, which she studies so closely and reconstructs. C

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