

MAPPING CITIES, MAPPING CULTURES

The thread weaving the bulk of this issue together is **CITIES**. Moving from Tehran to Jeddah, Palestine, Beirut and Syria, *Canvas* looks at how artists are engaging with the urban fabric in their practices. Some comment on the impact of rapid urban transformation, while others lament the destruction of heritage and the erosion of human dignities. Meanwhile placing human beings centre stage in massive metropolises is the focus of street artist-provocateur JR, who gives *Canvas* an exclusive from NYC.

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Nazgol Ansarinia. *Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. Installation view at Green Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery. Photography by Mustafa, Seeing Things



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Fragment 1 and Fragment 2. Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. 2018. Installation view at Green Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery. Photography by Mustafa, Seeing Things



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Fragment 2. Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. 2018. Video still, 6min 15 sec (Edition of 5). Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Fragment 2. Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. 2018. Video still, 6min 15 sec (Edition of 5). Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery

FROM THE GROUND UP

Iranian artist Nazgol Ansarinia was helping her parents move house in Tehran when she first became aware of the physical materiality of traces, those ghostly imprints of where furniture once stood and outlines where pictures once hung. Realising that even an empty space carries the marks of history, she embarked on a journey for which her video installation *Living Room* (2005) was the starting point. What has followed is a sustained engagement not just with buildings, but with an entire set of social and economic phenomena. For Ansarinia, these exist in a systematic relationship with architecture, as **Arie Amaya-Akkermans** learns.

The physical fabric of cities is composed of more than construction and waste; they are ecosystems that encompass all our functional social relations. The dramatic urban developments in Tehran over the past decade have profoundly informed Nazgol Ansarinia's work to the point that it has become her main focus. She has worked with architectural models, municipal murals and miniature monuments that capture the intersection between the sacrosanct domestic sphere and the broader built environment. Her architectural process is one that is fundamentally based on deconstruction. In her own words, "I take elements of these subjects apart and then put them back together in a way that reveals something unnoticed about them." Back in 2012, her series *Mendings* was emblematic of this; she halved household items – china plates, mattresses, a mirror – and then joined

them together again, but as deconstructed half-bodies. With a substantial part of their surface removed, they were rendered useless as objects.

More recently, in her current exhibition, *Demolishing buildings, buying waste*, on view at Green Art Gallery in Dubai, Ansarinia has expanded the metaphor of deconstruction to encompass an entire building in Tehran that she witnessed being destroyed. Over the course of 16 days, she recorded how a familiar low-rise residential building was reduced to a carcass. The videos *Fragment 1* and *Fragment 2*, presented as a two-screen video installation, document this process with such uncanny accuracy that the viewer might be led into thinking they are watching a meticulously staged performance. The collapsing walls and ceiling give way to a pristine daylight that invades the entire space, cleansing it from its specific memory-content.



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Mechanisms of Growth* (detail). *Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. 2017. Plaster, glue, pigment. Variable dimensions. Photography by Hanna Orłowski

Paradoxically, the new buildings in Tehran nowhere resemble the futuristic architecture of Dubai and Doha, but form instead a kind of neoclassicist pastiche, rich in ornamentation and a flush with Doric and Corinthian columns. These strange vertical constructions, replete with historical references, do not mirror traditional Persian architecture either; instead, they invoke a mythical past. In her previous exhibition at Green Art Gallery, Ansarinia presented the *Pillars* (2016) series, in which collaged columns (which are used in construction by mere aesthetic convention) are cross-sectioned to reveal inscribed articles from the Iranian constitution dealing with the economy, wealth and land ownership. During a visit to the artist's studio in Tehran in 2016, she mentioned a project to me, *Royal Address*, that was under construction at the time but summed up succinctly the process at work. The reference is neither to the extinct monarchy nor to the Persian past, but to a generic neoliberal desire to build a hyper-capitalist distant future, one without the troubles of history or the mounting anxieties

of the present. The future is preemptively seen as an archaeological layer.

With her current show, it is in the large-scale installation, *Mechanisms of Growth* (2017), that the artist fully deploys the parasitic relationship between construction and destruction, via the building's demolition. Piles of construction debris (shattered tiles, bricks and cement blocks) resurface, arranged almost at random, recast as archaeological artefacts waiting to be examined and verified by experts. But construction debris isn't archaeological material, or is it? What you are seeing in the installation however, is also not actual debris but 3D-printed models of the remnants, after they were documented by the artist, modelled and simulated on a computer.

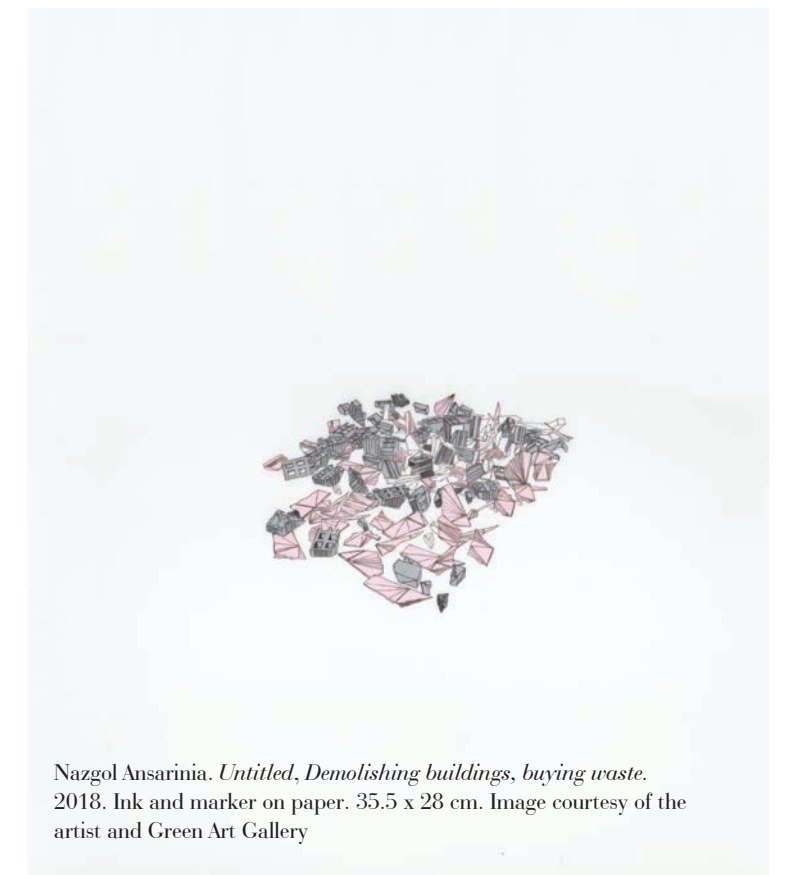
"I redrew the building in a 3D programme and then simulated the demolition, so that the rubble also comes from the simulation of breaking material," Ansarinia says. There are accompanying drawings too, titled after the gallery exhibition, which the artist explains are also based on the destroyed building. The building is therefore temporarily and

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– Nazgol Ansarinia



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Untitled, Demolishing buildings, buying waste*. 2018. Ink and marker on paper. 35.5 x 28 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery



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partially reconstructed, only in order to be demolished again as the artist turns rubble into regenerated construction material. Though this idea isn't new to archaeologists and has also been used in forensic research, it places Tehran's new architecture within modernity's technological imagination, as a repetitive cycle of production.

Nazgol Ansarinia's home and studio is in Dar-Abad, a former village on the northeastern edge of Tehran and on the slopes of Alborz, where part of the big picture of rapid urban change sweeping through many cities in the world is evident. A gigantic cloud of pollution on the horizon and the traffic deadlock of a poorly planned city signal to more affluent citizens fleeing the historical downtown (Ansarinia's family moved out of the very central Behjat-Abad) in search of better living standards in former rural hinterland or, as in the case of Ansarinia's video, on the remains of former single-family houses. Meanwhile, poorer residents are trapped in the economic and environmental inferno of a rather derelict downtown.

"You feel lost when you can't relate to a space," Ansarinia says during our discussion on how the architectural fictions of the city semantically take over the incredible hardships of everyday life within it. In her work, she is constantly articulating the disappearance of physical (and public) spaces, not only as a question of functional urbanism but also as a phenomenon of internal displacement. The fast-paced transformation is driven exclusively by the pretence of economic reform, without taking into account the obvious imbalance between construction and destruction, and forcing long-time residents to live in a city whose slow spontaneity is no longer the very fabric of its social life. As she very aptly said in *The Artist and their City*, the Guardian-produced video series in collaboration with the Tate, "Tehran is a city longing for the illusion of its past while restlessly bulldozing over itself to build the fantasy of its future".

Demolishing buildings, buying waste runs at Green Art Gallery in Dubai until 12 May.