

New York Exhibition

GROUP SHOW

CONJURING FLAMES

Curated by Lila Nazemian

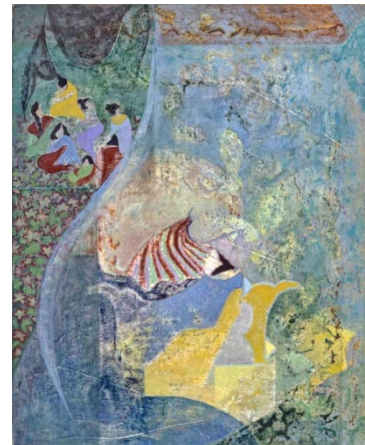
June 23 – August 19, 2023

Arsenal Contemporary Art New York is pleased to present *Conjuring Flames*, an exhibition curated by Lila Nazemian featuring artists Morehshin Allahyari, Pardiss Amerian, Anahita Bagheri, Ala Dehghan, Leila Seyedzadeh and Hadieh Shafie.

Conjuring Flames is inspired by the writings of the twelfth century Iranian philosopher and mystic Sohrevardi as described in his book, *Aql-e Sorkh (The Red Intellect)*. The founder of the school of Illuminationism, Sohrevardi's complex and extensive teachings combined Islamic, Platonic, Hermetic and Zoroastrian philosophies. In his story, a falcon (humanity) escapes captivity and encounters a wiseman (The Red Intellect, Sohrevardi himself) who recounts seven wonders he has seen of the world. Rooted in his approach to consciousness as both discursive and intuitive, Sohrevardi's *The Red Intellect* proposes a philosophy of life that seeks a balance between the spiritual (light) and material (dark) worlds. When light breaks through darkness, it turns red, as seen in the sky during sunrise, or in the flames of a fire.

Within the exhibition, nature is approached as a representation of this balance between the material and spiritual worlds; a symbiosis of concurrent light and dark in Sohrevardi's philosophy. The title of the show, *Conjuring Flames*, alludes to the continuous struggle for humanity to achieve this sacred balance. These dualities and the presence of nature as well as spiritual beings appear in the artists' works, installed across intertwined areas of light and dark throughout the space. The range of mediums includes works on paper, painting, sculpture, installation and video, thereby reflecting the breadth of traditions, both traditional and contemporary, with which the artists engage and transform.

Pardiss Amerian's oil paintings emerge from the tradition of illuminated manuscripts, hand-made books from the 12th -17th centuries containing epic poems and tales from Persianate and Islamic worlds, alongside illustrations in the miniature painting tradition. Her experiments with forms, adding



Pardiss Amerian, *Tale of Bright Water* (2021),
Oil on Linen, 25 x 20 in.

and removing layers by sanding the canvas, result in delicate abstractions with stone-like textures and gestures towards figurative shapes.

Hadieh Shafie's practice similarly engages with traditions pertaining to Islamic art, such as illuminated manuscripts, calligraphy, and miniature, in addition to Western art such as the Abstract Expressionist and the Color field movements. Constructed of thousands of hand-painted strips of paper and deeply engaged in the investigation of color, the *ketabs* (books) contain the repetitive word, *eshgh*, (love/passion). This containment of text within the work reverses the traditional relationship between text and image established by illuminated manuscripts.

Mountain representations are a recurring topography within **Leila Seyedzadeh's** practice which includes installations, drawings, sculptures and textile paintings. She often references mountains from Iranian myth and literature, such as the *Qaf* mountain which also plays a seminal role in *The Red Intellect* as the first wonder described by the wiseman. The amalgamation of various patterned textiles reflects compositions and motifs present in the Shiraz school of miniature painting (mid-14th to early-16th centuries). A new landscape painting on view features depictions of New York's East River as it flows through vivid terrains of the Alborz mountain range.

The Alborz mountains and the mesmerizing flora that grow in its ecosystem are also a source of inspiration for **Anahita Bagheri**. Consisting of abstracted vines, flowers and buds, her sculptures are enlarged iterations of tiny wildflowers that she encounters when mountaineering in northern Tehran. Made from papier-mâché, a medium which has been practiced in Iran since the 16th century Safavid era, for painted and lacquered boxes, trays and cases upon which were depictions of kings, battles, decorative flowers or scenes from Persian literature. While maintaining the primary elements of this craft, Bagheri reverses its scale, transforming contained painted portrayals into large three-dimensional forms.

Ala Dehghan's work reflects echoes of surrealism, manifesting subconscious sceneries of mythical beings and creatures, such as the *jinn* and multi-headed snake in her colored-pencil works on paper. Deeply sensorial, her mixed-media textile installations are designed to reorient the viewer's perception and sense of self. In a work, Dehghan illustrates a luminous tree upon a black fabric, reminiscent of the sacred Tuba tree in *The Red Intellect*, whose roots are said to descend down to the earth's surface and to be used by humans engulfed in the carnal world as a recourse for pulling themselves out of the darkness and into the light of the divine.

Morehshin Allahyari's 3-D printed sculpture and video on view are drawn from her archival project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2016–2021), an annotated and illustrated archive that focuses on female and non-binary *jinn* figures from manuscripts and other sources from Islamic mythologies and the occult sciences. According to pre-Islamic and Islamic theology, *jinn* are sentient beings made of smokeless fire that can influence humans in their plane of existence. Allahyari's video features Huma, a *jinn* attributed to causing fever. In the work, Huma is established as a force able to respond to the current climate change crisis.

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