Sound of Line

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List Gallery, Swarthmore College
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Introduction

As a young girl – even in the midst of war – Nazanin Moghbeli had a heightened awareness of color. Growing up in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war, she recalls the nights when her darkened bedroom flickered with colored light – oranges, reds, and yellows – an eerie spectacle punctuated by the distant thuds of explosions. Other nights, she hid in the basement and there was only blackness, deep, consuming and eternal. Her days, by contrast, were often strangely normal: school, music lessons, playing outside with her cousins. In the afternoons, she practiced calligraphy. She was left-handed, but was forced to use her right, because the bamboo ghalams were beveled only in one direction. She adapted. The whole family did. Her parents – both musically inclined – practiced, with her mother, Manzar Moghbeli, singing and her father playing the santour. And still the bombs fell. It all mingled: the music and the dissonance, the creation and the destruction, the small moments of bliss and the terror. This was the fabric of her childhood and it can be seen in the gorgeous and varied artwork in this book.

Nazanin was instilled, from an early age, with a reverence for Iran’s past – the democracy of Mosadegh, the poetry of Rumi, and Persian classical and folk music. This, however, was challenged by what she saw during Islamic Revolution. She resented how zealots used Islam as an excuse to amass and abuse power. As an adult, her artwork reflects that dichotomy. Her drawings utilize Iranian calligraphy, but by necessity, break from the traditional form and content.
She presents a vision of Persian culture—not as an orthodoxy or a sentimental tribute to the past—but as the inspiration for something new and reimagined—steeped in the past, but liberated by a freedom which eludes those who remain in her homeland. Her work is minimalist and powerful. She makes use of ancient lines—lines which connect, but do not tether her to the past.

Nazanin left Iran in 1983, at the age of nine, and moved to the United States. Her father’s medical practice and her mother’s work as an artist and calligrapher inspired her to pursue dual careers in medicine and art. Indeed, she came to see the blood that flowed through the body as the symbolic equivalent of the ink that flowed through the nib of her pen and gave life to the paper she filled. As a cardiologist, she studied lines—the readings of the EKGs—the very measure of vitality—and as an artist she drew them. Today, her practice as a doctor informs her art, and her art provides a unique perspective which she brings to the bedside.

As a writer, I have tried my best to capture the life of the Muslim diaspora in my Pulitzer Prize-winning series, Welcome to the New World. But I am an outsider; a mere interpreter. Nazanin has lived the experience and her voice and vision are exquisite, refreshing, modern, and authentic. Her lines bisect and encircle the worlds she has seen, tying them together with a simplicity that belies their elegance.

—Jake Halpern
New York Times Journalist, winner of Pulitzer Prize for journalism
These drawings are made with traditional Iranian bamboo “ghalams” and ink. I borrow techniques from Iranian calligraphy to create abstract work. Rather than using these techniques as they were originally used, to create religious objects, I explore the secular meaning of line in and of itself. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, I seek the complete dissolution of words and instead prefer to create abstract images, my proposed alternative to religious object making.

These abstract drawings are in dialogue with traditional Iranian calligraphy, with some pieces incorporating, in the form of collage, writings from my mother, a professional Iranian calligrapher. This series is a dialogue between the traditional and the modern, the religious and the secular, the past and the present.
Dream, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 22 x 28 inches

M, 2019, ink on paper, 20 x 38 inches
Étude 3, 2020, encre et graphite sur papier, 28 x 22 po

Étude 3, 2020, encre et graphite sur papier, 22 x 28 po
Étude 6, 2019, ink and graphite on paper, 7 x 8 inches

Étude 7, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 7 x 8 inches

M5, 2019, ink on paper, 9 x 11 inches

M6, 2019, ink on paper, 7.75 inches
Étude Étic, 2021, spit bite and sugar lift etching, 5 x 7 inches

Étude Étic, 2021, aquatint print, 6 x 6 inches

Meditation on b, 2021, ink and graphite on paper, 14 x 14 inches
Dream, 2021, ink, graphite and charcoal on paper; 36 x 64 inches
Untitled, 2020, ink, graphite, and charcoal on paper, 8 x 11 inches
Étude 4, 2019, ink and charcoal on paper, 7 x 7 inches

Dream 5, 2020, ink and graphite on clayboard, 5 x 5 inches
Void 2, 2020, ink on clayboard, 5 x 5 inches

Operation Ajax, 2021, ink and collage on paper, 22 x 28 inches
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Department of Art and Art History
Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA 19081

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Inside cover:
Red Dream (detail), 2021, ink and charcoal on paper, 46 x 36 inches

opposite: photograph by John Carlino
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