The background is an abstract composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes. It features a palette of deep red, dark grey, and off-white. The strokes are layered and curved, creating a sense of movement and depth. Interspersed within these strokes are elements of Persian calligraphy, including cursive script and stylized characters, which are rendered in a dark, ink-like tone. The overall effect is a complex, textured visual field that suggests a connection between visual art and language.

Sound of Line

Nazanin
Moghbeli



Sound of Line
Nazanin Moghbeli

List Gallery, Swarthmore College
2021

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 Mosaddegh, 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.

opposite: photograph by John Carlano





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

opposite: *Tuning 2*, 2020, ink and charcoal on paper, 22 x 28 inches



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.

opposite: *Foundation, Étude on grey* [detail], 2020, ink on paper, 5 x 6.5 inches



M, 2019, ink on paper, 20 x 28 inches



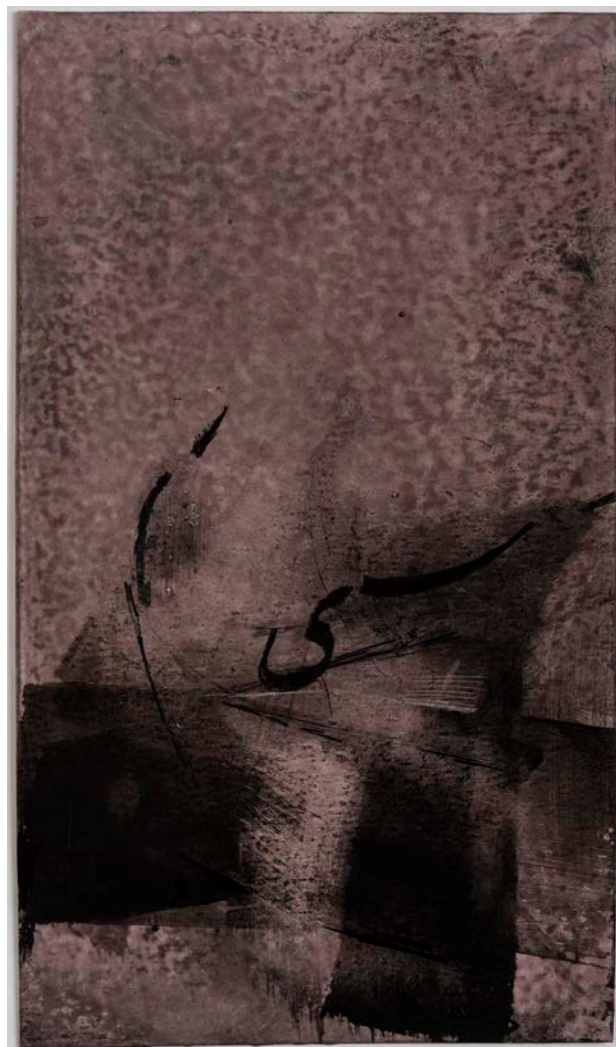
Dream, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 22 x 28 inches



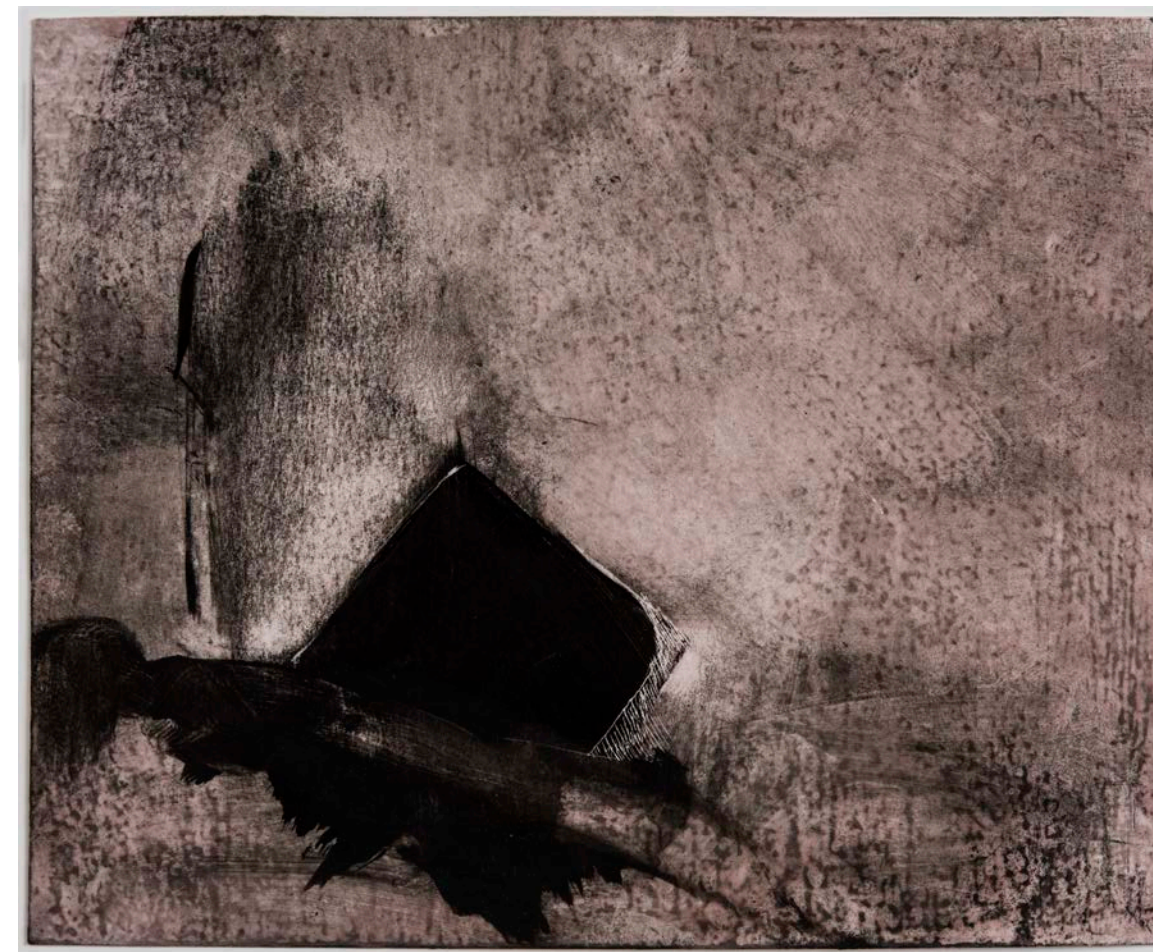
Étude 5, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 28 x 22 inches



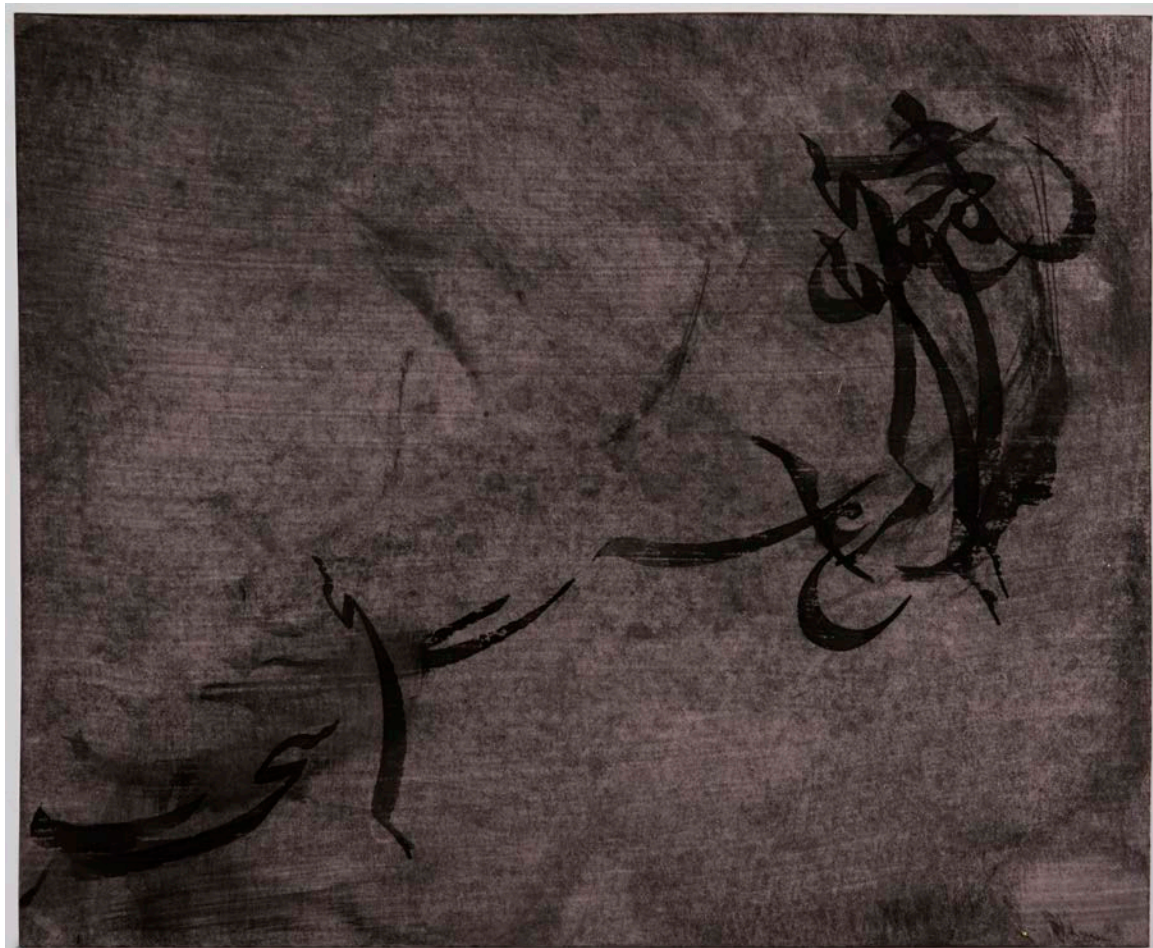
Étude 3, 2020, ink, graphite and pencil on paper, 22 x 28 inches



Étude on grey 1, 2020, ink on paper, 7 x 4 inches



Foundation, Étude on grey, 2020, ink on paper, 5 x 6.5 inches



Étude on grey 3, 2021, ink on paper, 5 x 6 inches



Étude on grey 2, 2020, ink, graphite and charcoal on paper, 6 x 6 inches



Étude on blue 2, 2021, ink on paper, 7 x 9 inches



Étude on blue, 2021, ink on paper, 7 x 7.5 inches



Étude on grey 3, 2021, ink on paper, 7 x 7.5 inches



Étude on grey 3, 2021, ink on paper, 5.5 x 7 inches



Étude 6, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 22 x 28 inches



Étude 7, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 22 x 28 inches



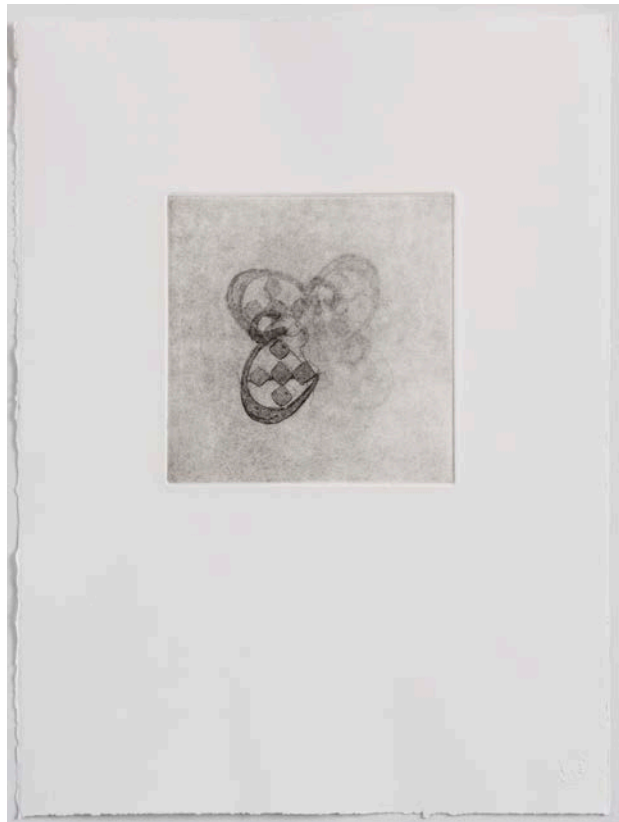
M5, 2019, ink on paper, 9 x 12 inches



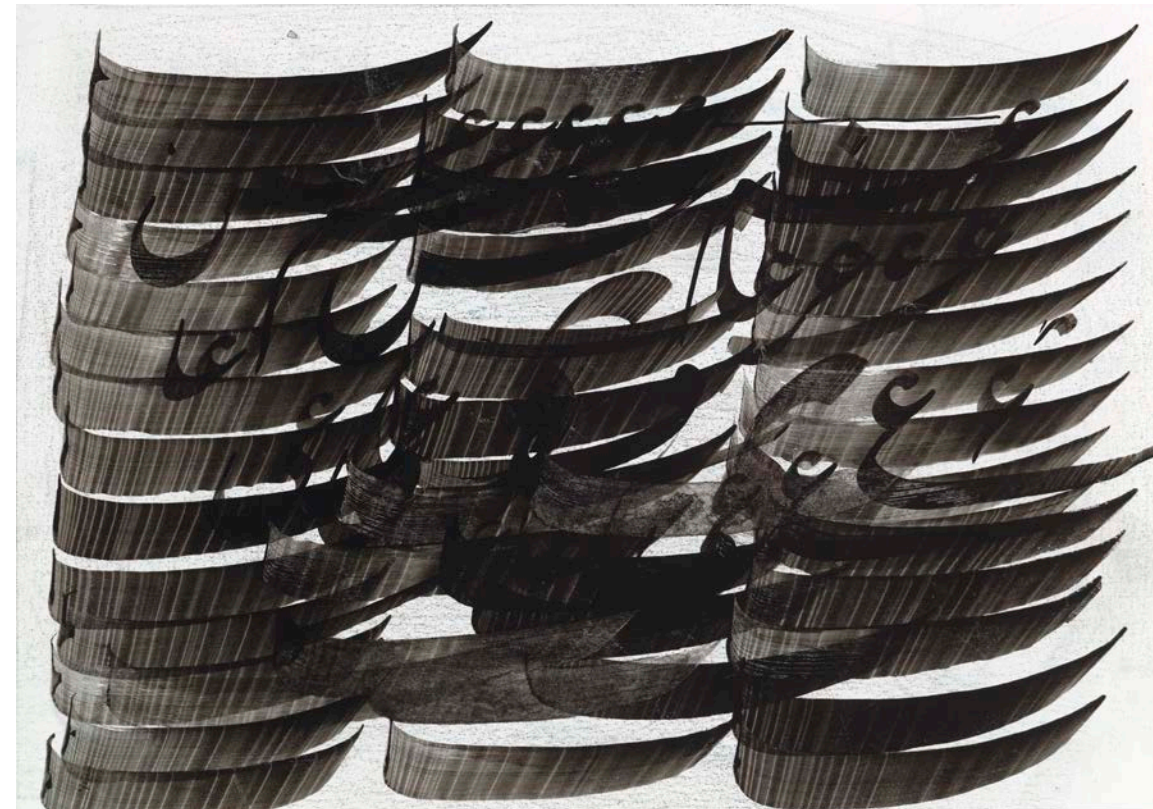
N4, 2019, ink on paper, 7 x 7 inches



Étude Ein 2, 2021, spit bite and sugar lift etching, 5 x 7 inches



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



Meditation on b, 2021, ink and graphite on paper, 12 x 14 inches



Morghe Sahar 2, 2021, ink and collage on paper, 22 x 28 inches



Morghe Sahar 3, 2021, ink and graphite on paper, 28 x 22 inches

Dream, 2021, ink, graphite and charcoal on paper, 36 x 64 inches





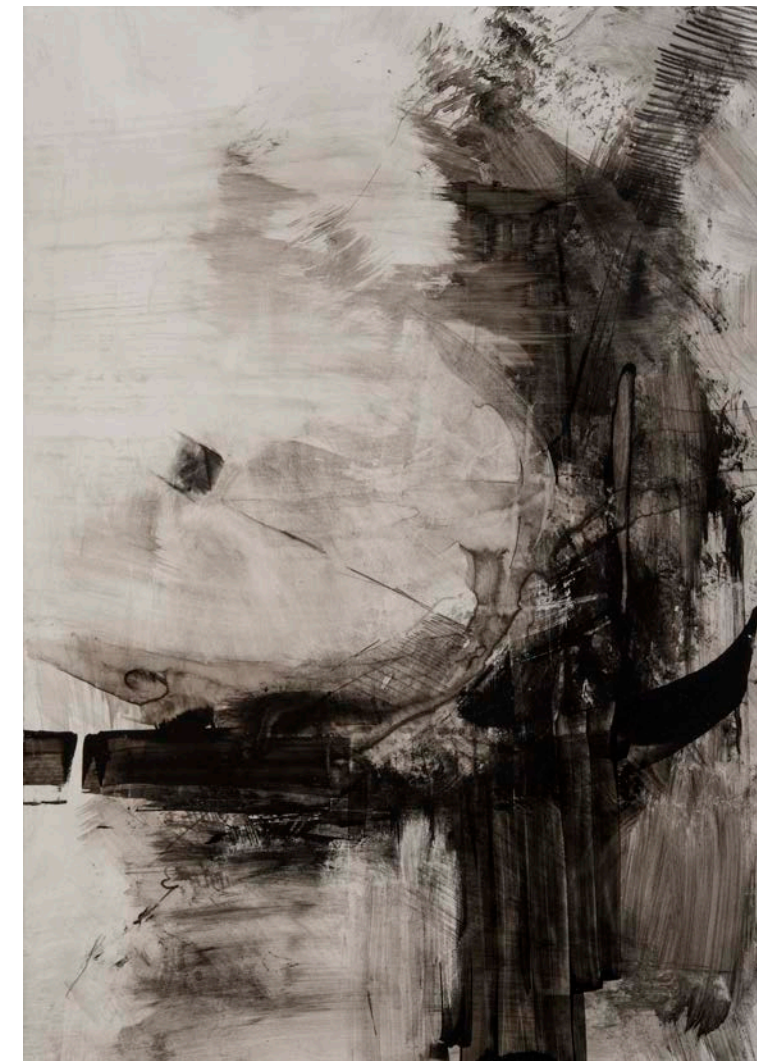
Void 4, 2021, ink on clayboard, 5 x 5 inches



Void, 2020, ink on clayboard, 5 x 5 inches



Untitled, 2020, ink and graphite on paper, 8 x 11 inches



Untitled, 2020, ink, graphite, and charcoal on paper, 8 x 11 inches



Release, 2021, ink on paper, 20 x 9 inches



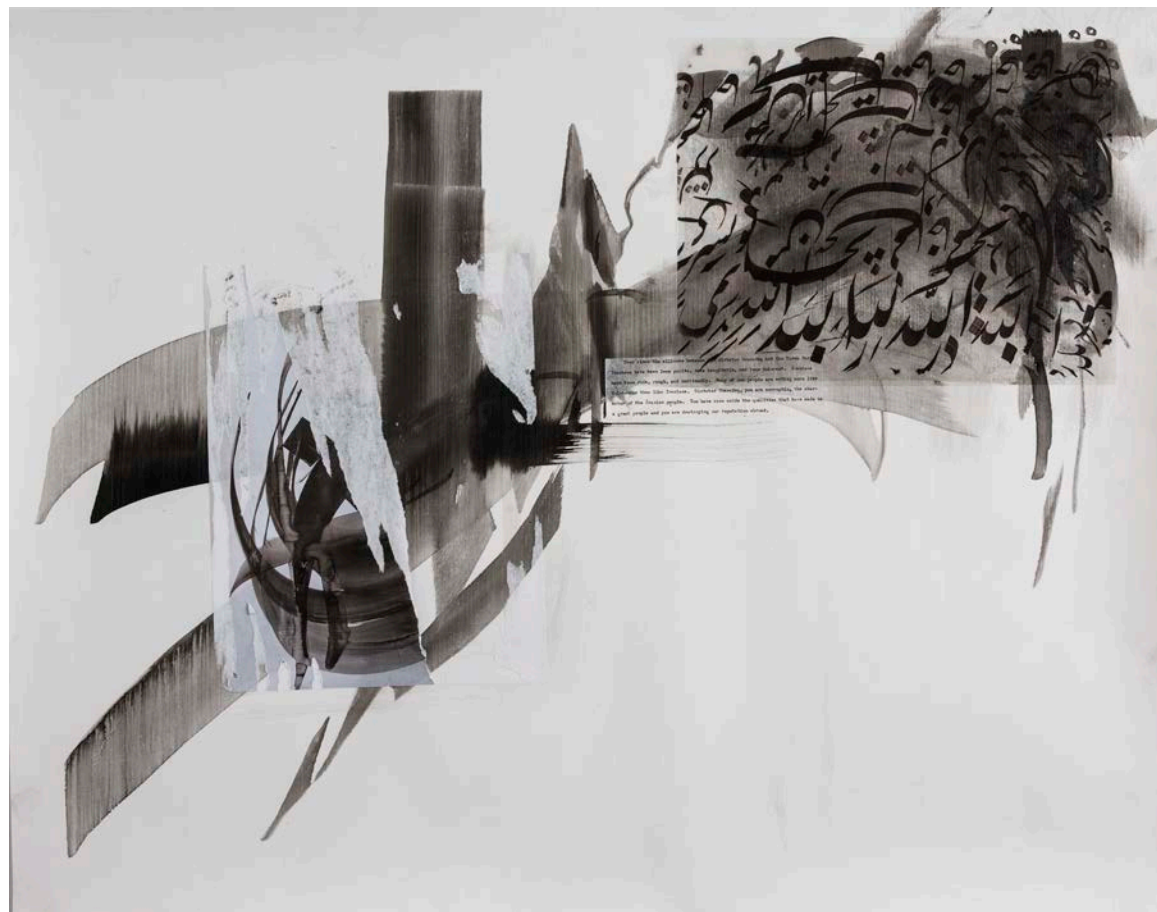
Étude Y, 2021, ink and graphite on paper, 7 x 6 inches



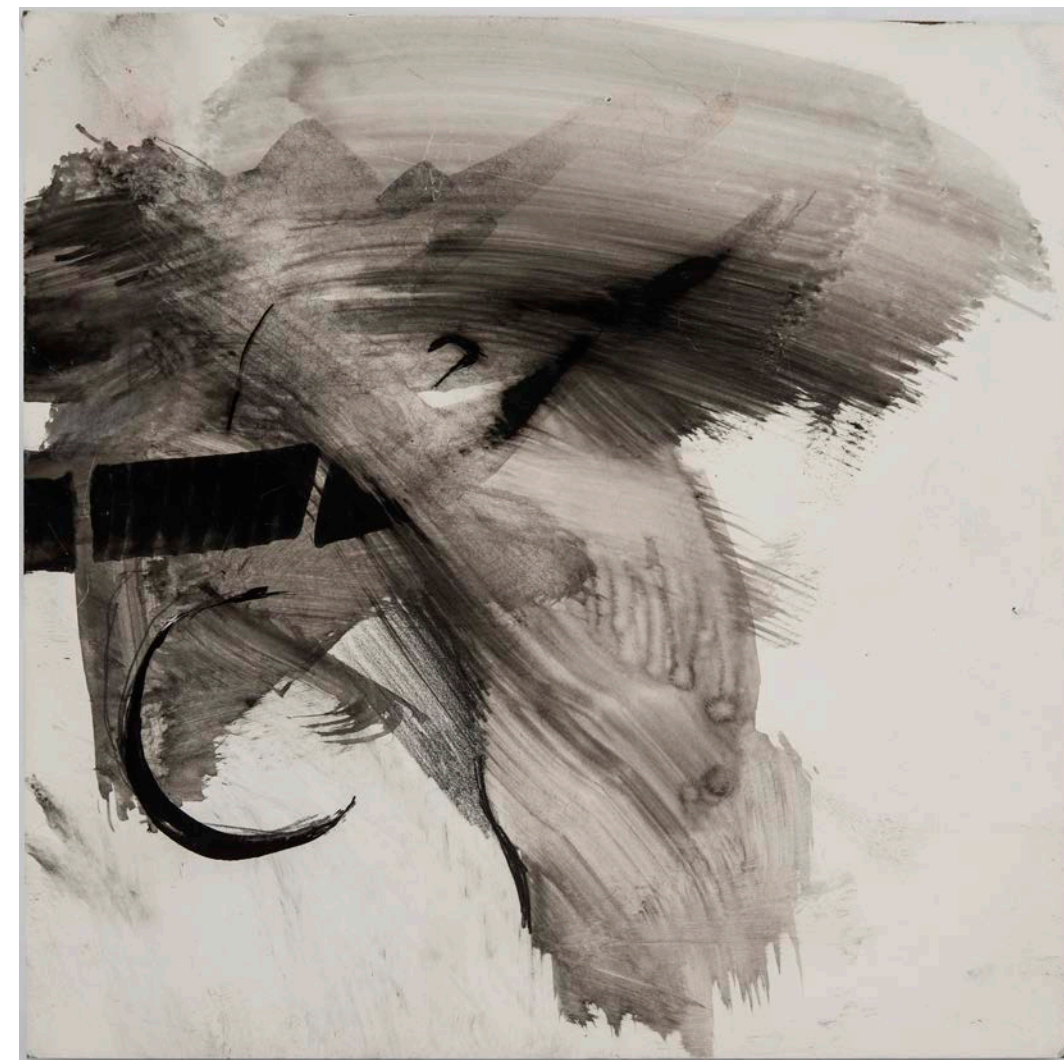
Étude B, 2019, ink and charcoal on paper, 7 x 7 inches



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



Operation Ajax, 2021, ink and collage on paper, 22 x 28 inches



Void 2, 2020, ink on clayboard, 5 x 5 inches

Sound of Line / Nazanin Moghbeli was published in June 2021 as part of a month-long series of events highlighting the accomplishments of outstanding Swarthmore College alumni.

© 2021 List Gallery, Swarthmore College
Department of Art and Art History
500 College Avenue, Swarthmore, PA 19081

All rights reserved.

All images appear courtesy of the artist.

Design: Tess Wei

Inside cover:
Red Dream [detail], 2021,
ink and charcoal on paper, 16 x 12 inches

opposite: photograph by John Carlano



An abstract artwork featuring thick, wavy, horizontal bands of red and grey. The red bands are layered over the grey ones, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is dynamic and textured, with the bands appearing to flow and curve across the frame.

List Gallery,
Swarthmore College