

Zahra Nazari: Exploring Identity in Abstractions Inspired by Architecture

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by Celeste Kaufman

[Zahra Nazari](#) is an Iranian artist who grew up in Hamedan, Iran, and now lives and works in New York City. Through painting and installation, she explores such issues as the built environment, immigration, and the liminal identity of being pulled between two cultures.

Inspired by the juxtaposition of ancient ruins alongside ultramodern infrastructure in her native city, Nazari's abstraction is influenced by architecture. Hints of familiar imagery like arches, columns and building facades are distorted into surreal forms roiling across the picture plane. Typically muted palettes are sometimes interrupted by a burst of bold color, and a subtle luminosity keeps her work just shy of Brutalist.



“Points of Departure” Installation by Zahra Nazari, 2014. 29 architonic kite forms and 2 shaped freestanding canvas structures, Acrylic and ink on canvas and asian paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Thickly layered underpainting and the complexity of Nazari's forms create an immense depth to her paintings, which is at times also enhanced by using Mylar or other transparent surfaces. This experimentation with creating a sense of multidimensionality with her paintings leads to a natural translation of her work to large-scale site-specific installation. The artist creates more sculptural work by painting her imagined architecture on aluminum panels, wood, or unstretched canvas that she manipulates into forms that relate to the structure of the building around it.

Affecting the physical space of the room enables viewers to further engage with Nazari's ideas about the relationship between people and their environment. Architecture can serve as a means both to connect and to separate the inhabitants of a place, and by abstracting these conflicting qualities, the artist investigates the emotional weight of its power.

This summer, Nazari's work was featured in the inaugural exhibition of the new Long Island City arts space, [Cigar Factory](#), and can be seen at the [Carrie Able Gallery](#) in Brooklyn through July 28, 2018. A recent discussion touched on her art practice and what viewers can look for from this promising emerging artist going forward.



"Transpose" by Zahra Nazari, 2018. Acrylic, link on mylar, 42 x 56 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Celeste Kauman: What has your path been like as an artist? When were you introduced

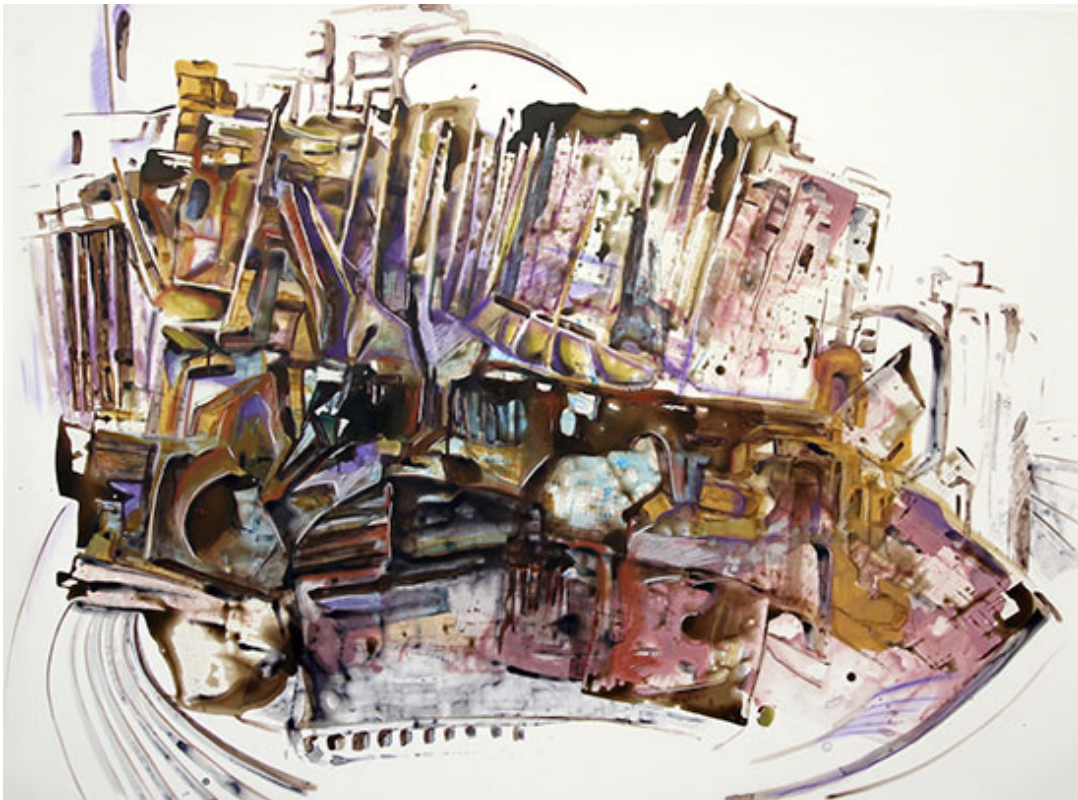
to art, and how did you develop your visual vocabulary?

Zahra Nazari: Growing up, my family surrounded me with art. My older brother acted in theater and directed documentaries. My father was a collector of ancient artifacts. So, I came quite naturally to the arts, and realized early on that I wanted to be a painter. In my teens, I was formally trained in photorealistic painting and began exhibiting. During high school, I started all the academic training of painting from life with different mediums. This then helped inform the style I further developed during college. My work started off as surrealism and later on it evolved to abstraction and to the three-dimensional.

CK: What inspires you, and what do you explore in your work?

ZN: My environment has always been the major inspiration for me. Hamedan, the city where I grew up in Iran, has especially been an influence on my work. Hamedan contains an architectural dichotomy that impacted my imagination. It is a city that has existed for a millennium, and there I saw this modern city flourishing beside archeological sites of historical significance. In my youth, I became fascinated by the way that cities' urban structures affect, connect, and separate its inhabitants.

Later, upon immigrating to the United States, I developed an evolving identity as an immigrant, which also informed my work beyond physical space. I explore human relation, emotion, and connection with the built environment. Architecture, aerial views, and cities, in general, are the most dominant elements in my work.



“Remaining Castle” by Zahra Nazari, 2018. Acrylic, ink on mylar, 42 x 56 inches.

Courtesy of the artist.

CK: Do you have any kind of background in architecture? Are you primarily drawn to the aesthetics of architecture, or the stories it tells about the people that build and interact with it?

ZN: The aesthetics of buildings stir me like a melody of a song or brushstrokes in a painting. Sometimes there is a great harmony and sometimes there is sharp contrast. Architecture has the ability to make us feel comfortable, excited, or bored. It has developed as a form of civilization; it reflects and tells us a lot about the culture, climate, wealth, power, technology, and modernity of any given place.

CK: What connections do you see between the ruins of historical sites in Iran with American postmodern architecture, as it informs your work?

ZN: Deconstructivist architecture in the U.S draws my attention because of its fluidity in form and departure from rigidness and limitation. It shares active and sculpture spaces with the ancient ruins of my youth.

CK: Are there investigations about culture and identity in your work as well? If so, what questions are you trying to answer, or what answers are you hoping to provide?

ZN: Immigration and its psychological impact are what I am currently exploring in my work. People shape new identities as immigrants by leaving the comfort zones of their home countries and by the way they are perceived, as well as how they perceive others. Memories of home start to fade and after a while you lose your sense of belonging to *any* place. The immigrant, then, forms an identity as an outsider at all times, in all places. I explore portraying this fragmented psyche in my work's brushstrokes and forms.

CK: What is your process like, for your paintings and for your installations?

ZN: Unlike my installations, each painting starts with intuition. I often work on the ground on an unstretched canvas or paper and use a variety of tools like large squeegees, painting knives, and big brushes to move the paint. I use many layers of paint before starting to add the abstracted imagery on each piece. For those images, I use my photographic research from specific sites as a reference. I often work on two or three pieces at the same time. Working on multiple pieces in various stages, there is a lot of back and forth from the floor to the wall until the very last step where I add the final marks.

For my installations, I draw or make a maquette of the structure. The design, then, informs the materials for the construction. The shape of the piece dictates the imagery on the surface of the piece. For instance, if there is a sharp angle the image painted on that surface is similar in form. This way I create an illusion of space where the painted area and the physical structure are blurred.



“Transformations” by Zahra Nazari, 2016. Acrylic on shaped industrial grade aluminum sheets and canvas, 96 x 228 x 120 inches, site-specific installation, Main Line Art Center, PA. Courtesy of the artist.

CK: What issues of aesthetics are you most interested in with your work?

ZN: Being naturally rebellious, it is interesting for me to question and challenge the norm, to reshape an expected format of painting. I create large freestanding painted installations that offer a very different experience for the viewer, blurring the lines between paintings and installations.

My audience is able to walk around, enter, look up into or see the work from above. As the sculptures have imagery depicted on their surfaces, the audience becomes a part of this created world rather than merely observing it.

CK: Could you talk a little about your pieces in the exhibitions at the Cigar Factory and Carrie Able specifically?

ZN: The Cigar Factory exhibition, “Let Me Reintroduce Myself,” is a show of works on paper exceptionally curated by independent curators Krista Scenna, of Ground Floor Gallery, and Carolina Peñafiel, of Local Project in Queens. It is always important for me to have work that responds to the scale and structure of the building. The Cigar Factory’s old, industrial, high-ceiling space with great light was perfect for my large-scale diptych, “Dream Palace.” The pieces are on Mylar, and hung from the ceiling in the center of the space. The translucency of the Mylar, being backlit with natural light, illuminated the vivid colors and created a stained glass effect. As its title suggests, this piece depicts an imaginary palace with fluid forms and colors.

The exhibition, “CMYK,” at the Carrie Able Gallery in Brooklyn has the theme of color. Curated by

Damien Anger, my piece, "Skylight" was selected for its playfulness of color. There is an abstraction of an oculus delivering colors that transition from top to bottom. The layers go from pink to ochre, green, blue and dark blue.



"Dream Palace" by Zahra Nazari, 2018. Acrylic on mylar, 120 x 84 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

CK: How is life as an artist for you in NYC? What are its rewards and its challenges?

ZN: NYC definitely makes life hectic, competitive, and more challenging for artists. At the same time, though, I can't see myself living anywhere else.

Having one of the largest art communities in the world, I have access to draw from a high concentration of artists, curators, galleries, and museums. This proximity allows me to regularly

receive studio visits from gallery directors, curators, artists, and collectors. So I am lucky in that I am able to maximize my inspiration, exposure, and opportunities.

This same high concentration of colleagues also allows for commiseration on all the ways NYC is challenging: its high costs and the competition that both drives down the value of work and forces me to be extroverted to the point of exhaustion.

CK: What's next for you? Are there any forthcoming exhibitions to look out for, or any new directions you're exploring with your work?

ZN: Currently, I'm working on a project focused on Eastern architecture. It is based on my most recent visit to Iran after living abroad for seven years. I started it early this year on Mylar, and have since re-envisioned it as a suspended installation on Plexiglas and acrylic sheets. This installation is formed in three dimensions and has cutouts shaped by elements taken from architectural arches, geometric design, and patterns in Eastern architecture.

The Manhattan Graphics Center awarded me a scholarship for their printmaking program for this fall, which I am very much looking forward to. I have worked with a variety of printmaking techniques in the past, such as stone lithograph, etching, and silkscreen, but for this program I will be focusing on Japanese woodblock printing and monoprints.

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