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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Soheila Azadi Interview

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**Interviewer: Jillian Bridgeman**

**Artist: Soheila Azadi**

**Location: via telephone – Crown Point, IN / Chicago, IL**

**Date: April 19, 2018**



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist.

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2018 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

Soheila Azadi is an interdisciplinary visual artist and lecturer based in Chicago and Iran. Born in the capital of Islamic cities, Esfahan, Azadi absorbed story-telling skills through Persian miniature drawings since she was nine. Azadi's inspirations come from her experiences of being a woman while living under Theocracy. Now residing in the U.S. Azadi is dedicated to transnational feminism with a passionate devotion to the ways in which race, religion, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity intersect. Azadi uses performance art and performative installations as methods to both materialize and narrate stories about women's everyday struggle in the world. Her use of fabric in her works is deployed critically and sensually to amplify customs that serve to classify, separate, oppress, and potentially / unknowingly liberates those obfuscated by such a tradition. Azadi currently teaches at School of the Art Institute of Chicago while she is an artist in resident at Hatch Projects.

Bio from: <https://www.soheilaazadi.com/biography.html>

**Interview Transcript:**

**Jillian Bridgeman:** Can you tell us who you are and share a little bit about yourself – to whatever extent feels comfortable.

**Soheila Azadi:** My name is Soheila Azadi. I'm from Iran. I was born and raised there. I moved to the U.S. about fifteen years ago. I studied Early Childhood Education back home, and then once I came here, after six years, I had the opportunity to start my education again. So, I did traditional animation for undergrad and then went to UIC [University of Illinois at Chicago] for graduate school.

**JB:** Thinking about how your own background and story resonates in your work, how would you categorize your art and/or yourself?

**SA:** My work is very much inspired by my identity of being a Muslim-born woman living under theocracy in Iran and now living under democracy in the U.S., and sort of going back and forth between challenges that I've been facing in both systems as a Muslim woman. But also, I'm thinking about what happens when we separate people based on their sex, and that's something I grew up facing constantly living in Iran. It was challenging to some extent; and then there was a point that I got used to these heavily gendered spaces. Obviously because I was born with a female body, I didn't really have a choice. So, I belonged to the female side. In my work, I think about what happens when we spatially separate people, and then I specifically focus on female-only spaces, and then think about what kind of activity happens within those spaces.

**JB:** You talk about these themes that come up in your artwork. Did you want to intentionally make work that represented these themes, or do you think you started creating and then suddenly these themes started defining themselves in your work?

**SA:** Whenever I was making work in undergrad, I wasn't really thinking about my identity of being a Muslim-born woman. And then, every work I was making, because I was from Iran, automatically people wanted to bring that up and attach it to my work. So, at one point I realized the identity of the artist cannot be separated from the work of the artist. I had a revelation of, "why not just directly deal with that issue?" I began thinking, "they see me this way in the West, so I'm going to make work for the audience that wants me to make work about my Iranian identity."

**JB:** That's a really great way of putting it. You don't get the choice to separate the two, so you inevitably make the two work together. Thinking about art in general and tracing back to the beginning of your career, can you talk about when you first became an artist?

**SA:** I started painting when I was nine, and art always was a part of my life. My mom is an artist; she's a craftswoman. I grew up in the second largest city in Iran which is known for art and culture, so you get confronted by it. My great-grandfather was a metalworker. So, I always had that interest in my life. But then, because of the educational system back home I really didn't have a choice but pursuing early childhood education. Once I came to the US I started continuing that and also understanding my artistic practice. But at one point I realized, no, I really need to

pursue art in a very serious and academic way. So, basically, not long ago I went to get another degree, and it was in the arts.

**JB:** So, obviously it's been a really big impact on your life.

**SA:** Yes.

**JB:** I would like to discuss a couple of your works next. Can you tell me about the meaning of your work *Garden of Evil* (see image 1)? Such as the timeframe, when you made it, the process of making it.

**SA:** The *Garden of Evil*, that work was...I am still trying to find the right wordings for that work because of its newness. It was for a solo show I had in January 2018. It is a textile-felt piece that I did in collaboration with my mom. I think it's really sort of another chapter of my previous works that are felt pieces, too. What was the other works you wanted to talk about?

**JB:** The other work I selected was *Baba* (see image 2). What I found interesting about both of these pieces is you put them under the section titled "Paintings", yet neither of them seem to prioritize the medium of paint. Was this an intentional decision on your part, and if it was, can you share that intention?

**SA:** Yes, that was intentional. When you go back through the history of painting, you realize that it was and still is very male dominant. In the past women didn't really have the platform to show work. Many female artists were producing work under male names. And so, that was a reflection on that and bringing that history in, and sort of owning it as a female artist and giving it a different dimension. It is still a canvas, especially the other work, *Garden of Evil*. It is attached to a canvas fabric, but it's three-dimensional and it encodes women's work, so thinking about framing that as painting and sort of getting back at the history of painting and how messed up it was and has been. I always think about how these pieces were made very freely, sort of like expressionist paintings, but they were made by yarn, so thinking about using a different medium but with the same intention to create work yet it's very feminine in nature. In *Garden of Evil*, I used balloons inside these knitted pieces while thinking about masculinity and giving masculinity a moment to shine, but then giving it enough time to deflate. So, all of the balloons over time deflated. It's an angry work I think, but it's very soft-looking. Same goes for *Baba*. Again, this other piece *Baba* is also a piece I did for my solo show. "Baba" means "father" or "dad" in Farsi and many other languages. I was thinking about my father and the saying he says that, "If women had brains, their testicles would grow in their chest." So, the entire series of this [*Baba*] and the other piece [*Garden of Evil*] are inspired by this saying. So, in a way I'm collaborating with my mom to get back at my dad. I tried to get away from the shape of a brain but resemble the shape of a brain. There are balls inside them, small ping-pong balls. I was thinking about what kind of brain would be shaped like that and how it would be a very messed up brain that's made of testicles.

**JB:** It's fun hearing you discuss these two pieces because obviously you get to hear the "behind-the-scenes" of what goes into it. Just thinking about those two pieces, was there a certain reaction you were hoping to prompt in the people viewing these pieces?

**SA:** I'm not sure any reaction would be my hope here, but sort of highlighting those issues we are still facing as women. Why do I need, for example, to make a point by framing my pieces as painting? There is that need to this day. I'm just going to talk about the art world in general. It is still male-dominant, and it's again about my father and thinking about the millions like him. I wanted to highlight these issues and struggles we are having and the struggles of carving our way into any society I think, but in a humorous way.

**JB:** You make it a point to comment on the fact that you're identifying your father as the person who funds your work, so can you explain the significance of that factor?

**SA:** Sure. I'm thinking about men still having power, thinking about how they get paid more than women. For example, where I'm from the majority of students in colleges are female, but in the workforce, the majority are male...and what does that say? When you are not financially stable it impacts your life greatly. And so, I'm thinking about my father as somebody who has the power because he has money. He actually did fund the entire project, but at the time I really didn't think about it that much. I was like, "oh, thank you Dad, that's very generous." He knew the intention of the work; he knew that me, my mom, and his sister were all collaborating to sort of get back at him, but he was like, "Oh, this is very radical. I love this, I'm going to fund this." At that time I was like, "Yes!", but then I thought, "Oh, there's more to it." And, the "more to it" is that he has the ability to fund this. It wasn't my mom who could say that and my dad would be the one to knit these. So again, going back to gender roles and pressures that society assigns to us.

**JB:** It's great to hear you describe it as, "Oh, this is awesome" initially, and then you're like, "wait a minute" as you are going back to those same issues. So, this is something we have already been talking about, but there's a statement on your page that says, "Thinking about the history of painting and its male-dominant nature, Azadi introduces a feminine form (craft) that could potentially replace the masculine form (oil painting)." Can you expand on what you mean by the contrast between craft and oil painting?

**SA:** I always go back to this. I don't know if it's me or the way my brain was trained, but again, painting is very male-dominant. To reclaim that realm [painting] as a female artist and also a woman of color on top of that was something that was very important to me, especially because I've done lots of paintings and you really don't see any of them on my website. I always had restrictions when I used oil paint and it was mainly back home. For example, I wanted to paint this painting with a dog in it, and my teacher said I am not allowed to do that. The way she said it was, "If there's a painting of a dog in your house, your prayers won't go up", so dogs are seen as dirty creatures. At one point, I gave up the idea of painting because of so many restrictions that I had. Also, in the West, I had one teacher – I studied in Pennsylvania – and he told me that if I claimed to be a feminist then I should bring in a nude picture of myself into the painting class. And so, all of these pressures made me think, you know what? I'm going to give up that medium, but not entirely. I'm going to claim this as painting because that would be most comfortable, not that it is most comfortable because pushing craft as an art form in the art world is not easy, but still, that was a safer place for me. But, the work itself isn't safe work.

**JB:** It's really redefining the word "painting" for yourself and taking your experiences with that word – both good and bad – and transforming it. So, the next thing I want to discuss is in relation to Asian American identity/art. Considering your own background and identity, do you personally ever address yourself/your work as "Asian American"?

**SA:** In a way I am because when we use the term "Asian American" in the West, it's defined differently than it is in the East. So, in the West, we are mainly thinking about far East, but back home we think about the continent and not the country. And so, if I think about it that way, I would say that could include many other countries that are "Muslim" countries. So thinking about it that way, yes, I am directly dealing with my Asian American identity. That term is very interesting because do I think about myself as an American even? I don't know. But, I've shown work years ago at an exhibition for Asian American artists, so I do consider myself an Asian American...maybe.

**JB:** Can you state what that exhibition was?

**SA:** Sure. My friend was curating it. That exhibition was during the Asian American Film Festival in the Gene Siskel Film Center at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago]. It was an exhibition in the main lobby, and so I was a part of that with an initial 16mm film that was experimental; it was a scratch on film.

**JB:** It seems "Asian American" isn't the best way for you to identify, or you just don't feel like that really defines you. Do you feel there's a better label for yourself that's been given to you as an artist, or that you've given yourself?

**SA:** Maybe Asian/Middle Eastern would be better because I really don't think "American" is something...I mean, wouldn't you use "American" when somebody is born here?

**JB:** That's a really interesting topic that keeps coming up in our class about how you earn the title of an "American". It's this tricky thing where "American" could mean somebody that's a native-born, or someone who is just living in the country of America and if they are/are not considered an American. It's a lot of back and forth, and that's why this question is loaded in that way.

**SA:** I still don't consider myself American, although I'm a citizen now. It's funny because when I did the test and did the oath, the officer there asked me where I'm from. It was a funny question because I'm supposed to be American, and on the day that I promise to be American and to be loyal to this country, you're asking me where I'm from.

---side discussion---

**JB:** Thinking back over your whole artistic career, what types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you? Where were you exhibiting your work at the start of your career, and has that stayed the same, or have you found new venues, maybe "bigger name" places?

**SA:** When you start, you really cannot show everywhere. So, you start from alternative spaces. You sort of make a name for yourself and get into the well-known exhibitions. When you say “well-known” exhibitions it’s also something funny because there are exhibitions I know many people go to and get loads of foot traffic, but then there are places well-known within a specific group of people. I’ve shown in almost all of those places. I have shown in Heaven Gallery, ARC Gallery, CAC (Chicago Artist Coalition), not many alternative spaces though. But, at the beginning I showed at some of them, and there was a point where I went to one of them and was like, maybe that’s not a place I want to show my work. Then, I sort of stuck between more of like white cube sort of spaces. I’ve shown performances in one of the best platforms in Chicago, Defibrillator [Gallery]. The most recent one was at Robert F. DeCaprio Art Gallery in Palos Hills, IL. This was a juried solo show that was inside Moraine Valley College.

**JB:** Is Chicago the main place where you are exhibiting your work?

**SA:** I’ve shown my video work in many countries and states in the US. I have performed in Nashville too, but majority of my works were shown mostly in Chicago.

**JB:** Thinking about where you are at now as an artist, could you discuss things you are currently working on, or projects you are planning to start soon?

**SA:** There is a music video, titled *Hijabi Mermaids* that I have been working on for sometimes now. I think I am at a point in my practice that I want to directly address my Muslim-born identity. In the past, it was something that sort of informed my work, but it was not ever something that I directly dealt with in my work. So that’s something I want to directly focus on. And then, there are some textile pieces that I’m trying to make which are sort of abstract pieces that I might be framing as painting. They are a “hashtag” series. I already have another *Hashtag* series, but this will be different; there will be mixed-media pieces with different slogans like “#hijabihavingabadhairday”. All of them are supposed to be humorous, using real hair, just other things I am thinking about. I will be traveling to Iran this coming summer and my hope is to collaborate with many women there to realize this project.

**JB:** Thinking about these projects that are coming up, are you going to expand on those other messages you’ve already talked about, like gender disparities and your cultural ties?

**SA:** Yes. I will be directly focusing my Muslim identity; my female/Muslim identity. But also, I want to focus on Muslim pop culture and specially showcasing female Muslims. That’s something not everybody has access to, and I would love to provide that, hoping that it would eliminate that alienation of a specifically female Muslim.

**JB:** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me and walk me through your personal journey as an artist. I am looking forward to the pieces coming out soon.

**SA:** Thank you for talking with me.

**End.**



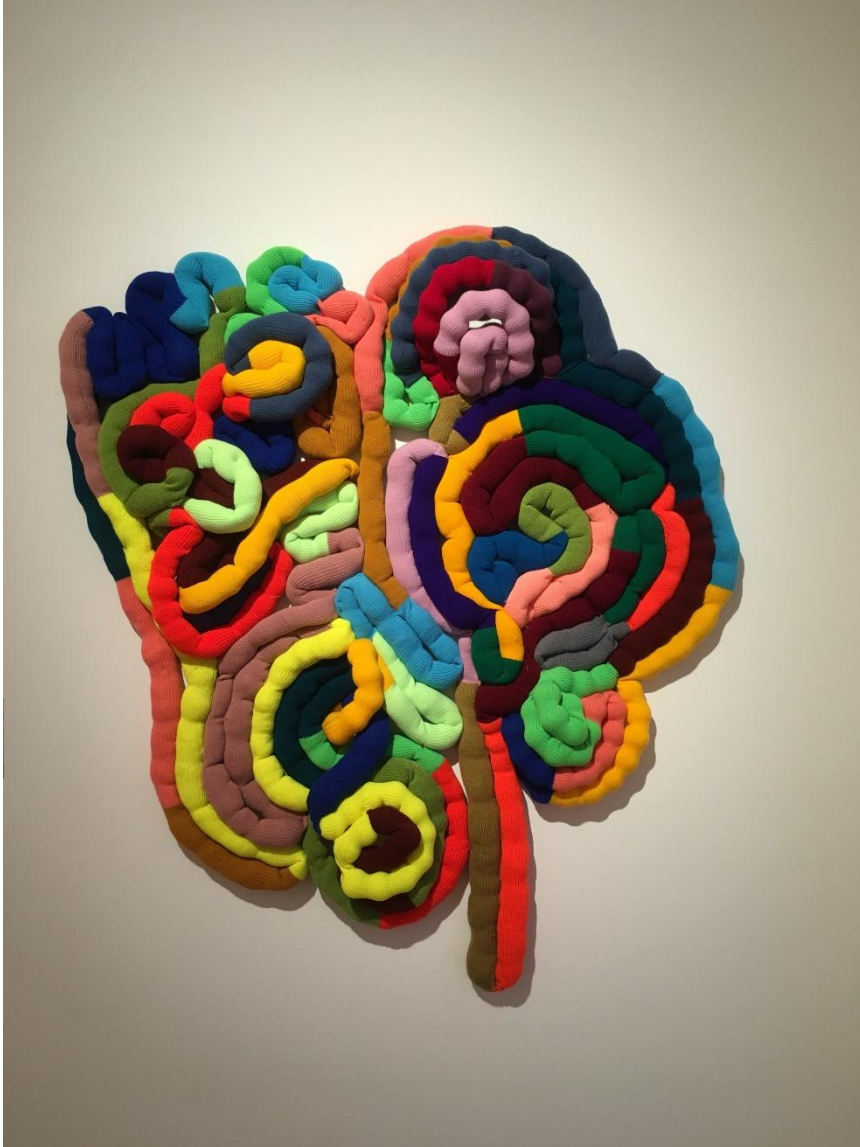
*Image 1: Garden of Evil. Year: 2018*

Medium: Painting

Material: Canvas, Yarn, Balloon, Wire, Thread

Dimensions: 62 inches by 70 inches





*Image 2: Baba.* Year: 2018

Medium: Painting

Material: Yarn, Thread, Bing pong Balls

Dimensions: 50 inches by 65 inches