

# The Birth



THE BIRTH

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## ABSTRACT

My paintings move through the shadow of my past life. I was born and grew up in post-revolutionary Iran, in a culture dominated by patriarchal governments and households. As a young woman in Iran, I saw wars, protest, and revolution. My early experiences in Iran changed my perception of the role of women in society; they influenced my way of talking about women. I began using my art as a voice for women and the harsh experiences and constraints many experience. My work encompasses psychological aspects of these suffering women's lives. My new series of paintings, *The Birth*, is divided into two groups: figures and still life compositions. The figurative works are inspired by narratives derived from Islamic culture and adapted to modern customs. They are usually centered on a single woman surrounded by objects of symbolic meaning. My still life works are surrealist stories with a collection of objects selected for their symbolic value. Papers, a typewriter, water, cups, flowers, and light stand in for voiceless women in my paintings. The cups symbolize women as beautiful, strong vessels, and the flowers represent a new beginning in all my paintings, reaching from the darkness of the vessel toward the light of the sky. The typewriter is a symbol of voice, and water represents the purity of life in my paintings. Painting is my way of showing love, passion, and hope to other women who have suffered as I have.

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I would like to thank my husband, Sam Shafigh, for his support, patience, and continuous love through my artistic journey. I would like to thank my son, Aiden Ryan Shafigh, for his understanding when I snuck to my room to work on my projects. You both encourage me to grow. I am so proud of you. I love you with all my heart. I am especially thankful to my mentors and advisors, Peter Zokosky, F. Scott Hess, Darlene Campbell, and Serena Potter, for assisting, guiding, and shaping me along my artistic path. I would like to thank my parents, Mahdi Samaie and Ozra Farokhtala, for opening my young eyes to the beauty of art, and for all their love, caring, and sacrifice. I would like to thank my siblings, Sadi Samaie and Sara Samaie, for all their support and kindness. I am especially thankful to Peter Zokosky, for being my second father during this time, for his caring and kindness, inspiration, motivation, knowledge, and support. Thank you to all of my friends for being here always.

**DEDICATION**  
To my family.

**EPIGRAPH**

*I am my own muse, I am the subject I know best. The subject I want to know better.*

*-Frida Kahl*

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## DESCRIPTION

I am beginning a new chapter in my art, one that empowers me as a woman to speak my

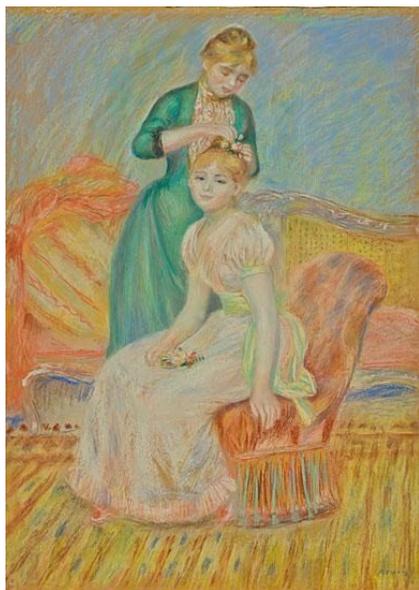


truth and illuminate that truth for others. The path I am on is a one-way road to freedom. It began with my heart. It is a path with questions about my beliefs and ideologies. With those doubts and questions, I have looked deeply into women's rights and political issues in my new series of symbolic paintings entitled *The Birth*. I seek to express things that cannot be said with words. *The Birth* explores the beauty, pain, and growth in my life and signifies my own rebirth. In this way, I use my art as a voice for women and the harsh experiences and constraints many

Figure 1. Pegah Samaie, *The Heart of Gravity*, 2018, 20" x 30", Oil on aluminum, Permanent collection festival of art Laguna Beach.

face. My early life in Iran changed my perception of the role of women in society. Those experiences also influenced my way of talking about women.

My paintings represent two main chapters in my life as they relate to women: one of



oppression and one of opportunity. The first part covers my childhood in Iran, and the second covers my life after I immigrated to the USA and since I became a mother. Both phases provided impetus for my own introspection and discovery around what it means to be a woman. So, what is life for me as a woman? The meaning of life and my purpose for living used to be a mystery to me. They often still are, but now I use my past experiences consciously and subconsciously to express the reconciliation I am navigating with all the storms of my life and

Figure 2, Pierre-Auguste, *La Toilette*, c. 1889, Pastel on paper, 32" x 23 5/8", Haggis Museum.

Figure 3, Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1519, Oil on poplar, 30" x 21", Musée du Louvre.

identity. I am recovering, reclaiming, and redesigning what it means—to me—to be a woman.

My recent painting, *The Heart of Gravity*, deals with this topic (Fig.1). In this painting, I derived inspiration from two older works, *Mona Lisa* and *La Toilette* (Figs. 2 and 3). I borrowed

the idea of a woman who appears to be simultaneously serious and smiling from *Mona Lisa*. *La Toilette* is a pastel painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, completed around 1889. This painting portrays a woman decorating the hair of a young lady who is holding a flower and looking at us. *The Heart of Gravity* displays a woman sitting, though her hair decorations are composed of cups. *The Heart of Gravity* not only symbolizes the eight planets of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune reimagined as cups, but it has deeper personal content at its heart. The cups represent not only planets, but also women as beautiful, strong vessels. All are orbiting in the same pattern, no cup is closer or farther, no cup is shinier or dimmer than another. They don't touch, hit, or break each other. They maintain order to respect each other. They represent life and love each other and their nature. All are united, regardless of nationality, sex, ethnicity, race, religion, or language, without discrimination. They give each other power to stand upright their companionship helps them to grow and shows us the beauty of life.

Looking deep into my childhood, I see a completely different world than the one depicted in *The Heart of Gravity*. My childhood was spent next to the window in my bedroom, watching the movement of people below. I imagined how wonderful it would be to walk on the sidewalk and smile at people, talk with them, or play with the children. I would imagine I could fly, that I would be released from my confines, that I could be free. But, when I opened my eyes, I was still there, next to the window, only watching people move below. I sometimes waved at imaginary friends far away, secretly wishing someone would wave back at me. I knew many friends and girls that were similar to me. I frequently heard of girls committing suicide as they jumped from their own windows. I would think, *oh, another is free*.

*Life Vest* is one of my paintings that displays my feeling in that bedroom (Fig. 4). A



woman is surrounded by water. Her hair floats around her, and the water pulls her deeply into

Figure 4. Pegah Samaie. *Life Vest*, 2014, mixed media on wood, 24" x 48".

herself, into its depths. She holds paper in one hand and a typewriter in the other—a way of having a voice, a story. These stories cover and hide her body. The reflection of light from the sky hides her body. Her emotionless eyes look towards the sky—a new window, a new life.



My family banned my sister and me from talking to boys, and if we did, we were punished. Secretly though, I had a boyfriend. He was my neighbor, and I met him from my window as he sat in his own. We only had a short conversation by phone, but looking at each other from our windows and waving our hands was enough to make a melody in my heart. Shortly after, other neighbors reported this to my parents, and I was banned from seeing him and forced to close my curtains. I only had the window and sky to fill my soul. Now, they were taken from me. The windows were shut, and I moved into the furthest corner of my room. I no longer felt nourished, lacking sun, water, and air. I would no longer be able to stand or grow. *Veiled Resistance* shows a woman behind a screen (Fig. 5). Her covered sense organs (eyes, ears, and mouth) are concealed behind the lace. This symbolizes the fading role of women in society, where men hold the majority of the power. Lace is a symbolic element in my paintings which refers to the wall separating women from the outside world. The wall is made from traditions that push women into the darkness, to their second-class status. The red lace refers to the color of the bridal dress in some cities of Iran.

*Veiled Attempt* deals with similar content, though with some differences (Fig. 6). Her eyes show through the floral lace. She is looking at us, but her other sense organs are covered behind the lace. Some of the lace's floral patterns, similar to a mask, are hiding her mouth and ears, which refers to my observations of women's experiences while seeking gender equality in a culture that has pushed them into silence.

Figure 5. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Resistance*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".

There were activities I dreamed of participating in: music, dancing, parties, watching television, even reading novels. I loved to read novels. I loved losing myself in the depths of stories, but I had to read in secret. Underneath my pillow, I always kept a novel and after everyone was asleep, I could escape into its pages. Stories colored my life. With them I found myself in love, in a dance, in danger, in anger, and in death. I have never been afraid of death. To me, it is freedom. It is flying. It is, when living in black and

white, the ability to reach a blue sky. Death was running in the grasses and feeling the cold, wet, freshness of them. Death was a vibrant dream. If

anyone loses all her dreams and hope, she is like death. *Veiled Threat* displays a face of young

Figure 6. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Attempt*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 10" x 15".

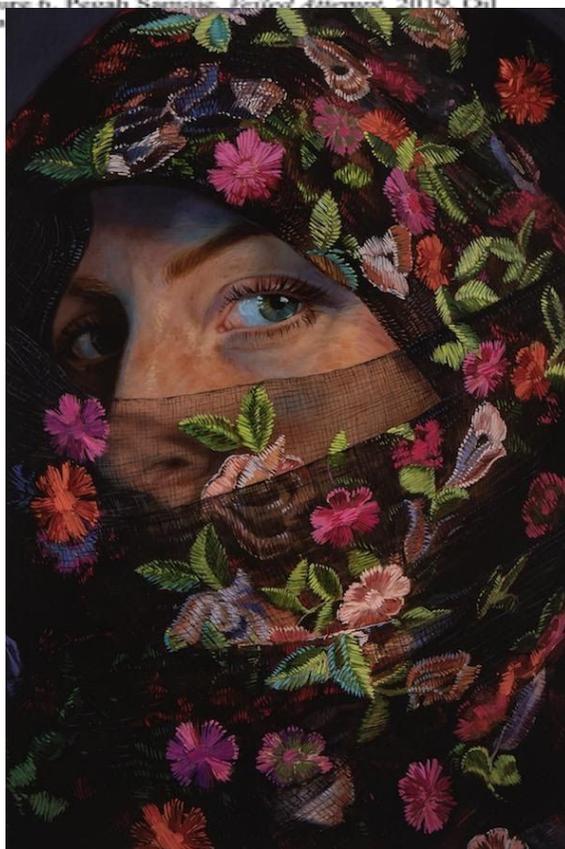


Figure 7. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Threat*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 10" x 15".

woman whose head is wrapped with highly detailed black lace and a colored floral pattern design (Fig. 7). The painting is larger than life, and the subject makes direct eye contact. Apart from her eyes, her other sense organs are behind the lace. *Veiled Threat* portrays a distrustful woman mired in the depths of society. Only her eyes show through; they are looking for a miracle to bring her back to life.

I found my life one step away from ending. I imagined how easy it would be to end it in a



single moment, to be free of my cage and jump

Figure 9. Pegah Samaie, *The Shawl*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".

my bedroom window as I had heard of others doing.

Freedom appeared to be an unreachable dream for me: it was a mirage of happiness in my life. I secretly clung to the hope of being reborn. I imagined living in a fantastic and visionary place where I would be free of pain and suffering, a place where I would be looked at without any sexual discrimination. My mind was overwhelmed. I felt like I couldn't breathe. The room became denser, thicker, fuller. I needed fresh air, freedom. *The Shawl* is one of my new paintings



Figure 8. Pegah Samaie, *Through the Shadow*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 8" x 10".

from

which targets this specific era (Fig. 8). This painting illustrates a torso of a woman who is opening her shawl to be unveiled and then to be free. The shawl has the traditional Persian pattern and it is a symbol of the Islamic culture.

My Parents eventually allowed me to open the window again when they thought I had learned my lesson and the threat of romance had been eliminated. I relished this moment, breathing in and welcoming the sounds of the traffic, the wind, people, and birds. *Through the Shadow* (Fig. 9) represents this experience. This painting depicts the rising of flowers from darkness; it represents the sunrise. I intend for *Through the Shadow* to be the light for anyone who has lost her path and who needs a hand to touch her, to give her power to breathe, to show her the way to fly.

The door of the cage may open one

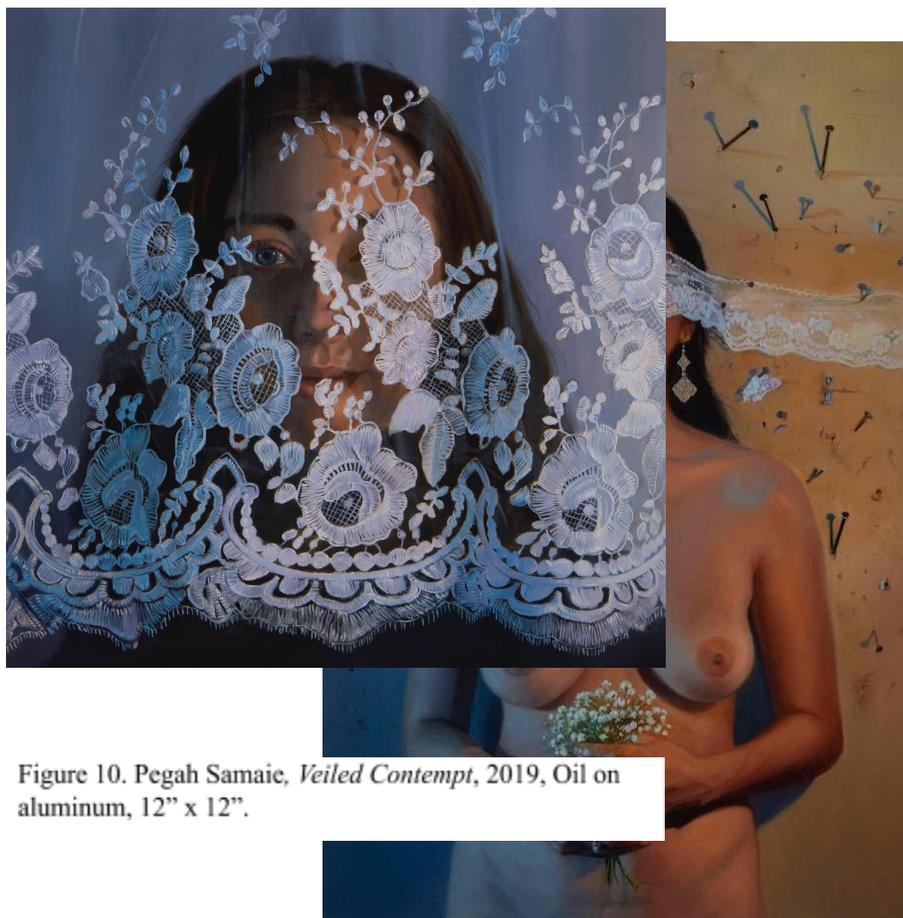


Figure 10. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Contempt*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".

day, but still the caged bird must decide to fly away. The door opened for me, but I didn't fly.

Figure 11. Pegah Samaie, *To Love and Obey*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 20" x 30".

Instead, I wanted to fight. I wanted to change my family's view. So, I stayed. But I was young, and I didn't yet understand how hard it is to change people. I chose to get married. My marriage was a turning point for me. I was only twenty years old and had just completed my first year of college. I found myself in turmoil between wanting freedom and feeling afraid to grasp it. My marriage was an arranged marriage, organized by my parents. I didn't accept it at first, but I found myself inside an arranged engagement, nevertheless. My young mind believed there was a way to be free, but my heart was afraid to step in the same direction. Now, I am here, in that

young woman's future. I know my marriage was not the moment of release, but it was a step towards freedom, towards today. In my recent painting, *Veiled Contempt*, I speak to the same content, hidden woman (Fig. 10). The painting addresses the point in my life when I learned to hide my feelings and accept my destiny. *To Love and Obey* is also indicative of my pain and the pain of other girls similar to me (Fig. 11). A nude woman is surrounded by nails. Her eyes are covered with the white lace which is nailed on the wall. She is in a frontal pose with some baby's breath flowers in her hands which refer to the wedding ceremony. Her body is the subject of marriage and the wall is its history. It is the history of so many women's lives from all around the world who have been touched by or are familiar with this pain. Her beautiful virgin body is glowing with warm and cool colors and the white fabric refers to the bridal dress.



Figure 12. Pegah Samaie, *Vacancy*, 2018, Oil on aluminum, 12' x 16".

My husband and I immigrated ten years ago to the U.S from Iran. My first step into this country felt dark: I left behind my dearest family and friends. For many years, I thought, *what am I doing here?* and I continually asked my husband to return to Iran. My recent painting, *Vacancy*, deals with this longing (Fig. 12). This painting



depicts a nest inside a glass dome with some broken eggs around it. It represents the immigration. *Vacancy* is a symbol of land, without any body, or a mother without any children. The nest is the symbol of a mother who is forgotten, but still hopes to see her children one day. Hope gives her power to stay strong and bloom again even if there is no way to breathe. This painting is gray with a variety of colors for the eggs to depict a diversity of genders and nationalities. My husband was the only person who pushed me to immigrate and then stay here. The reason was a dark moment we experienced in Iran: I lost my first child, Farnam, in surgery because of a serious heart disease. That little boy felt like my only reason for surviving. I loved him unconditionally, only for him and for my feeling of being a mother. *Departed* represents son with the heartless, opened body after his surgery (Fig. 13). He is my little angel in white with a loose gold bandage around his bodiless soul. He is lifeless. The background is in black to show the deep sorrow I still have for my loss. During the last several months in Iran, I spent my time by his grave with too many tears and memories. I became deeply depressed and it made my husband worry. He asked me to move to another country. Good or bad, from childhood I have learned to obey. I left my country and all my belongings and memories.

Figure 13. Pegah Samsaie, *Departed*, 2018, Oil on aluminum, 14" x 18".

Still, sometimes life smiles on us and we have the chance to open a window to the blue



sky. On a dark night in February 2016, I stared at a little mobile hospital bed. Aiden, my newborn son, was sleeping while he was wrapped in a blanket, tight and calm. I could not sleep and could only think of who must take care of this little baby if he wakes up and cries. Today, he is almost three years and eight months. He is a very curious and active boy. Each morning when he wakes up, he seems to enter into a new stage of life. He is growing and learning fast. He is copying all our daily activities, including reading, painting, singing, playing guitar, brushing, and even flossing his teeth. Now that he knows I paint, he has started to compete with me in painting. He painted all of our walls and cabinets. He is my inspiration and one of the reasons to pursue

Figure 14. Pegah Samaie, *Expectant*, 2016, Oil on ABS, 12" x 16". Figure 15. Pegah Samaie, *Aiden's Birthday*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 8" x 10".

art. His smile is the true meaning of life. I

have learned the purity of love through him.

In *Expectant*, I carefully selected the items to depict in order to convey the feeling of my pregnancy (Fig. 14). The green vase and the baby's breath flowers are symbols of birth. The

glass dome refers to the fragility of the womb. Outside of the glass dome is my history. There is a light green baby who is crawling outside of the dome to show my dream of having him one day and watching him grow. *Aiden's Birthday* is about his birth (Fig. 15). I carefully selected all Aiden's favorite toys— his ball, car, rubber ducky, and mini piano. He has his hospital identification tag on his foot. He is my gift package, surrounded by all his favorite things. I love him and his interesting personality. *The Birth* series is a new direction which began with Aiden. I am finally free to grow, and to explore the process of my release and freedom. Aiden is my power to stand and be a voice for all women who are experiencing the darkness. My life is full of his green steps and my air is full of his breath. With this power, from painting to painting, I create stories about myself, my family, and all women around the world.

## **RESEARCH**

I enjoy looking at subjective art pieces that represent an artists' feeling of life experience. They are rich with historical, realistic, or surrealistic meaning. I am attracted to stories and the opportunity art offers to silently express emotion to the outside world. My art is the story of my own life experience. When I began painting, I looked for allies to support my art. When I did not find them, I realized that what I was truly seeking were allies to support my independence as a woman.

My childhood bedroom was the first place I started to know myself as an artist. I shared my bedroom with my sister. She was one year younger than me and was the favored child at home. Unlike me, she loved math. My parents were always disappointed in me for spending time on drawings while she was winning awards for her excellence in school. This created a huge gap between us. I distanced myself from my parents and her more and more until I found myself cornered in the room my sister and I shared. I closed my eyes, my heart, and my soul, rejecting the limitations they set for me, and continued painting. I was liberating myself. My painting *Ready to Bloom* (2017) refers to this period of my life (Plate. 4). I felt as though I was in a cage that suppressed my growth. The clear plastic with the gold ribbon in this painting represents our shared bedroom and the limitations that women have. In my mind, I have an image of a flower that is coming out of darkness; the lily represents a new beginning.

My father was the one who introduced me to art. He would frequently teach us about the alphabet, animals, or shapes by creating simple lines and colors. He would draw them and then make a story with them. As a little kid, I would think about his hands and how beautiful it was when they made these creatures. When I was in school, I was painting for all my friends and classmates. On my twelfth birthday, he gave me permission to sign up for semi-private art classes with an abstract artist, Hojat Shakiba. Shakiba was a master of color. The foundation of my knowledge of color comes from his class and his expertise. His theory was the first lesson to



help me understand the colors and the relationship between them, how to mix and perceive them.

When I became more familiar with the professional side of art, I was enchanted by artists who could paint drama. I began to learn more about old master artists and their

Figure 16, Leonardo da Vinci, *The Battle of Four Horsemen*, 1657, Print, 21 1/8 x 27 5/8 in. Museum of Fine arts, Houston.



Figure 17, John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, (1851-52), Oil on Canvas, 30 in X 40 in. Tate Britain, London.

artworks. A book of Leonardo da Vinci's renaissance drawings was my introduction to this type of work. I was amazed to find it in my father's library, and I started copying the drawings. My first complete, large drawing was a copy of *The Battle of Four Horsemen* by Leonardo, which depicts a battle between wild, angry soldiers on horseback (Fig.16). I admire the way Leonardo displays emotion, movement, and the passage of time in this drawing. It captures the drama of a situation, which is what I strive for with my own art. Engaging movements and emotions are two elements I seek to represent in all my paintings.

The iconic painting of *Ophelia*, painted by John Everett Millais, is haunting to me. This English pre-Raphaelite painting is inspired by a scene in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, in which

one of the main characters, Ophelia, kills herself after her father murders her lover (Fig.17). Millais depicts her body floating lifeless in the water, a symbol of tragic romance. This painting reminds me of my son, soulless in his grave. In my painting, *Departed*, I translated my own Ophelia moment. *Departed* depicts my first son with a heartless, opened soul after his surgery. Although I didn't depict my son's body, I represent his body in the tragic and dramatic moment of his death.

Sources of inspiration for my thesis came from some surrealist women artists too. I have a strong response to the artist Frida Kahlo whose role as a surrealist woman painter is significant. I am especially drawn to her strong artworks about her life experience. She beautifully portrayed herself in all her happiness, sadness, and suffering. She is inspiring and encourages me to keep speaking of my experiences as a woman from an eastern culture. Author Carlos Fuentes, in his book, *The Dairy of Frida Kahlo*, wrote about this talented woman artist in order to understand her powerful vision and her art. She beautifully and emotionally

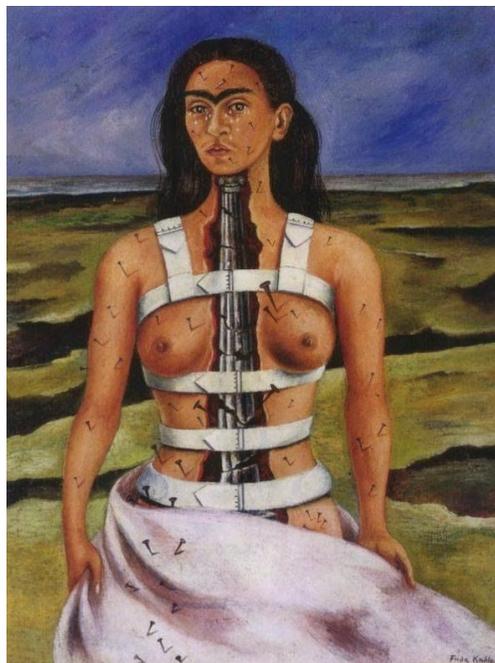


Figure 18, Frida Kahlo, *Broken Column*, 1944, Oil on canvas, 40 cm x 31 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City.

poured all her feelings in her paintings. She explored the fear and loss that she experienced throughout her life.

*The Broken Column* is an image of Kahlo's pain and suffering (Fig. 18). Nails represent the constant and intense pain in her body after a near fatal accident. She completed this painting following an operation on her back. Though her eyes are full of tears, she appears strong and beautiful. *The Broken Column* inspired my depiction of pain and suffering in *To Love and Obey*. I borrowed the nails and eye contact from this painting as a symbolic display of the power of women when they are facing a time of pain.

Kahlo paints her own body to have a better understanding of herself. She explains the culture and her own life experiences through her paintings. Kahlo, as a woman artist, is exploring the complex and ambiguous relationship between the female body and female identity. Diaries, fragments, experiences, suffering, pain, happiness, and observations enable all artists to explore themselves. To understand better how surrealist artists approached the meaning of self, Chadwick provides this interesting explanation of self in *Mirror Images:*

*Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation:*

We are born with a nuclear core of personality, which is the seed from which a cohesive structure called self begins to form during the second year of life. This process unfolds gradually through the interaction between biology and environment. The self under normal circumstances grows, matures, and remains flexible all of our lives. But first, all of its parts need to work in unison, as a well-integrated mechanism; only then can we sense our self as whole and not have to think about it. Otherwise we experience the self

as unintegrated, fragmented, unbalanced, incomplete, even empty, and we go about our lives self-absorbed, attempting to sustain a sense of cohesiveness in artificial ways by attaching ourselves to someone or something we believe will provide the means to keep us whole. Without a sense of self, we attempt to establish self-objects, relationships that mimic the ones we had or wish we had in infancy, when we were as one with the people around us. (Chadwick 88-91)

When I stepped onto my artistic path, like many surrealist artists, I began to know myself and my paintings as mirrors of self, or as the reflections of my feelings in the response of the society. I started to paint my history and started to imagine myself in the free world. And then, I started to reflect myself in all my paintings.

I also have a strong response to the French romantic artist Eugene Delacroix's painting of *Liberty Leading the People*. Delacroix painted this at the end of 1830 during a revolutionary period for the heroes of the Barricades in Paris. For me, *Liberty Leading the People* is an example of a very successful painting with a strong group composition, a story, and the visible emotion and tragedy of war (Fig. 19). The painting depicts Lady Liberty leading a group of French civilians and soldiers to fight on against monarchy (Kleiner 623). This is one of the most remarkable paintings of people in pursuit of freedom in response to the French July Revolution. In the artist's conception, a partially naked woman holding a French flag is a symbol of freedom. Lady Liberty is in the middle of the composition, depicted with lighter colors than the rest of the figures, and the contrast of the dark crowd brings her forward as a focal point with the fallen figure to the left, giving her a sense of powerful importance in the French movement to show



that revolution crosses class boundaries. I find this thoughtful re-imagining of a historical event inspiring, and I have used a number of these ideas in my own painting. *The Shawl* (2019) is my expression of freedom, displaying a woman opening her shawl as an act of personal and political freedom, which is inspired by Lady Liberty.

Likewise, feminist poetry inspires me. In Persian literature, poetry is deeply rooted in culture, nation, and personal diaries. Poetry helps me to think about the core of my persona and my humanity. My father assigned poems for me and my sister to memorize, and he often read us speeches from the lives of popular poets. I often found Persian female writers', poets', and thinkers' emotions resonated with my artistic path. As Persian women, we had similar

Figure 19, Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, Oil on Canvas, 102.4 in x 128.0 in, Louvre Museum.

experiences of life and prejudice in a patriarchal society. Among these poets, I had a particular affinity for Forough Farrokhzad and Shirin Neshat.

Most of my paintings are inspired by Farrokhzad's poems. She is a symbol of power for me because of how she expresses feminine emotion and romantic feelings, living in a society dominated by Islamic patriarchal power. Farrokhzad wrote a poem about women who were abandoned by society. In her poem, *To Sister*, she writes, "Sister, rise up after your freedom, why are you quiet? Rise up because henceforth you have to imbibe the blood of tyrannical men ... (Vakil XV). Repeatedly, Farrokhzad questions the action of women in this way and exhorts them to rise up and fight for their freedom. Her words are so powerful to me that I added lines from some of her poems to the papers in *Life Vest*. Her poems mirror her position as a feminist seeking freedom for all women in Iran. In another poem, she writes, "I'm a woman and I must address feminine issues rather than human issue(s)" ("Iranian Woman" p?). I am inspired by her

efforts to discuss the oppression of women and to be a voice for them. With all of my work, I also seek liberation and independence for women.

Shirin Neshat is a visual artist whose photographs and films show the role of women in Islamic patriarchal society. Neshat's first body of work, *Women of Allah*, is a photographic series which includes black and white images of Muslim women covered with hijabs. She uses veils, guns, text, and gaze as symbolic elements in her work. In her photos, all women are gazing directly at the viewer, often holding a weapon. They have text on different parts of their bodies, enabling them to speak even when forced to be silent. She said, "[B]y studying a woman, you can read the structure and the ideology of the country" (TED Women 2010). Like her, I find power in representing the lives of Iranian women rooted in Middle-Eastern culture. Much like Neshat's photos, my painting *To Love and Obey* shows a nude bride who holds a flower bouquet and has her three sensory organs covered: eyes, nose, and lips. The lace is nailed to the wall to show repression. This painting is symbolic of many young ladies who are forced to get married.

Though I draw most of my content from poets and artists, there are other sources of inspiration as well. Shirin Ebadi is a human rights lawyer and feminist thinker in Iran who has greatly influenced my direction as a Persian woman. She received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her efforts around democracy and human rights in Iran. She was one of the first women who worked as a judge in Iran. In her Nobel Peace Prize speech, Ebadi said, "Women are the victims of this patriarchal culture, but they are also its carriers. Let us keep in mind that every oppressive man was raised in the confines of his mother's home" (Heuser 93) Ebadi wrote many books about women's and children's rights. Her book, *Iran Awakening*, is one of the texts

that inspired me to make work about women's rights. She argues that the religion of Islam conflicts with human rights in Iran and that this blinds women. "Human rights," she says, "is a universal standard. It is a component of every religion and every civilization" (Ebadi 4). I am just one of many contemporary artists illuminating and sharing the lives of women who are silent victims of gender discrimination.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Like many female realist artists, I have a passion to be a voice for myself and other women. All my paintings express my own experience as a woman from the Middle East and the effects of its patriarchal culture. I am speaking for the women there and their suffering. My expressive tools are color, light, and elements of design. With these, I depict the beauty and the purity of these women in hopes of creating a lasting psychological and emotional effect.

Through all my paintings, I am looking for myself. They are from me and part of me. I am also representing the everyday lives of women who are isolated within their society in Iran. This isolation stems from powerful limits imposed on them by the culture at large—a culture they also define as mothers. I am studying and sharing their emotions and feelings in the form of lines and colors in my paintings. My ideas sometimes take the form of women's pain or suffering and sometimes take the form of their pleasure.

My paintings are the stories of my past and present life; together they tell a story of the future. At first my ideas for a painting are just a phrase, thought, or emotion. I comb my mind for all the narratives I have lived, or heard, or known. Writing down my ideas is a way to brainstorm and design a painting. If the idea is figurative, I visualize myself as various women from my past and present. Observation, the news, poetry, and conversation influence my

process. I often find articles about specific women, which lead to discussions with people familiar with these individuals. In the 2013 article “Afghan Women Escape Marriage Through Suicide”, Walsat Hasrat-Nazimi states, “As many as 80 percent of marriages in Afghanistan take place without the consent of the bride, who is often a child. Many of them see killing themselves as the only way out. According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, between 60 and 80 percent of all marriages in Afghanistan are forced. Moreover, in almost 50 percent of cases women are married before the age of 18; in 15 percent they are not even 16” (Hasrat-Nazimi 93). All society forces and limitations against women have push women into depression and desperation. Their bodies from this society are objects for men. Forced marriage is one of the reasons to force women to suicide, especially among young women. Of course, the government never protect women. In Islamic law, thirteen years old girls are eligible for marriage. As a woman from this culture I would like to display this tragedy in my paintings.

After research, I sketch. Sketching from my imagination is always a fun step in my process. I go slowly and visualize my ideas first. The drawings are always rough. They give me an initial sense of a composition. I change arrangements many times before arriving at the best composition. I find it challenging to work with experiences originating in a culture so distant from where I now live. My mind asks me to remember, and slowly the images appear to me.

The next step is to prepare the materials I need. It might be lighting, items for my arrangement, or hiring a model for photos. The lighting is one of my highest priorities. I design each still life arrangement and portrait with specific lighting. The color temperature symbolizes the variation in human skin color. I like to have both warm and cool colors in skin tones. *To Love and Obey* is a great example of this specific lighting in my paintings. To target this temperature

shift through the photographic process, I use both natural and artificial light. My LED light is the perfect tool: it allows me to adjust both color temperature and brightness. I use the LED light for my warmest tones, whereas I use natural light for the cooler temperatures.

I always set up my arrangements for my still life paintings. Photography is the one of the steps for developing my figurative ideas. After making preparations, I photograph models for my figurative works in the same poses and with the lighting of my initial sketch. I include specific symbolic elements to reference the culture or religion. For example, in *Veiled Contempt*. I prepared the white lace and asked my model to pose behind the lace for photographs (Fig. 21). After the photo shoot, I often use Photoshop to design the final composition and perspective, and I do some thumbnails and then small color studies with watercolor or oil before I begin the large painting.

Figure 20. Pegah Samaie. *Photography of Veiled Attempt*. 2019.



Surface preparation is an essential and careful step in the process of my work. I have always enjoyed creating my surfaces. Today, my prepared surface is aluminum. I prepare a large sheet of Dibond aluminum and cut it to size for my paintings. I carefully clean the surface with alcohol and then start to sand and prime it to create a lovely, smooth surface. Today, aluminum is a new surface preferred by many artists. It is durable and definitely lighter than many other surfaces. After the panel preparation, I start to draw. This depends on the details of a given painting, as I sometimes draw on paper and sometimes straight onto my surface. The first step beyond this is to paint a tonal wash, though sometimes I accomplish this through blocking in my drawing with burnt umber and solvent to prepare the surface for the more exacting effort of implying precise color mixtures, values, and form.

I also consider some old master artists when it comes to technique. Stylistically, I am highly influenced by Dutch painters such as Rembrandt. I see Rembrandt as a successful

baroque painter with a knowledge of classical iconography to depict dramatic masterpieces. He uses chiaroscuro, a way of using strong light and the heavy shadow, to create depth or a center of interest in his paintings. I apply these principles in my paintings to bring focus to certain elements such as faces or bodies. In my still life paintings, I push secondary parts into the dark background to emphasize my lighter focal points. (Fig. 8).

I am also deeply influenced by Vermeer, another Dutch artist, for his use of light to create powerful masterpieces. He is known for his effects with natural light in interiors, whether on figures or other subjects. I employ these same tools to target my focal points. He sought not only to incorporate truths of nature into his paintings by recording the variety and beauty of visible world, but also by carefully arranging natural effects to convey a sense of both the transience and the permanence of human existence (Wheelock 163). Vermeer and other Dutch artists also orchestrate light and dark to create a sense of mystery. I love this technique and frequently borrow it for my paintings. *Departure* is one example where I use this technique to highlight the paper as it recedes into the dark background. This puts the focus on my son's bodiless soul, which is important to my narrative (Fig 5).

I use this process to provide a window into my own experiences, and the experiences of other women through my eyes and on my level. My goal is to depict their suffering and their dreams of freedom. All my paintings have a sense of mystery and darkness to highlight my subject matter more clearly. I strive to hold the viewers' attention as they look upon these women's beauty and pain.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a new mother, I have many ambitions for myself and my son. I left Iran about ten years ago to pursue artistic knowledge and a better life. In my graduate program at Laguna College of Art and Design, I have explored different surfaces, techniques, contents, and ideas. My art gives voice to the harsh experiences and societal constraints of Middle-Eastern women. It encompasses psychological aspects of their suffering under the oppression of government, religion, and men. As a creative woman, I faced much difficulty in my attempts to exercise any kind of freedom and independence. The first twenty-three years of my life in Iran were entrenched in wars, violent protests, and revolutions. The sum of these experiences shaped my ideology of life and art. My perception of the role of women in society is no longer ruled by submission or fate. It is sustained by the resiliency and strength of women. My discovery of these attributes in myself have influenced my way of talking about and painting women. I am looking to express this kind of freedom. I want to interpret and translate my emotions and experiences without fear of reprisal and even in the face of retribution. Painting is the expression of my internal emotions in response to the external world. My passion is to stay strong in my path and dedicate my own experience, technique, and time to talking to and working for women. I would like to shed light on women and all those who tend to be forgotten and left in a dark corner of society.

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## APPENDIX



Plate 1. Pegah Samaie, *A Window to Sky*, 2014, Oil on copper, 24" x 36".





Plate 2. Pegah Samaie, *Life Vest*, 2014, Mixed media on wood, 24" x 48".



Plate 3. Pegah Samaie, *Expectant*, 2016, Oil on ABS, 12" x 16".



Plate 4. Pegah Samaie, *Ready to Bloom*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 12" x 16", Hilbert Museum.



Plate 5. Pegah Samaie, *Through the light*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 12" x 16".



Plate 6. Pegah Samaie, *Through the Shadow*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 8" x 12".



Plate 7. Pegah Samaie, *Aiden's Birthday*, 2017, Oil on ABS, 8" x 10".



Plate 8. Pegah Samaie, *The Golden Heart*, 2017, Oil on wood, 10" x 22".



Plate 9. Pegah Samaie, *Vacancy*, 2018, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 16".



Plate 10. Pegah Samaie, *Departed*, 2018, Oil on aluminum, 14" x 18".



Plate 11. Pegah Samaie, *The Heart of Gravity*, 2018, Oil on aluminum, 20" x 30", Permanent collection estival of rt Laguna Beach







Plate 14. Pegah Samaie, *The Shawl*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".



Plate 15. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Contempt*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".



Plate 16. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Attempt*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".



Plate 17. Pegah Samaie, *Veiled Resistance*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 12" x 12".



Plate 18. Pegah Samaic, *Veiled Threat*, 2019, Oil on aluminum, 10" x 15".

**ARTIST'S NOTE**

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