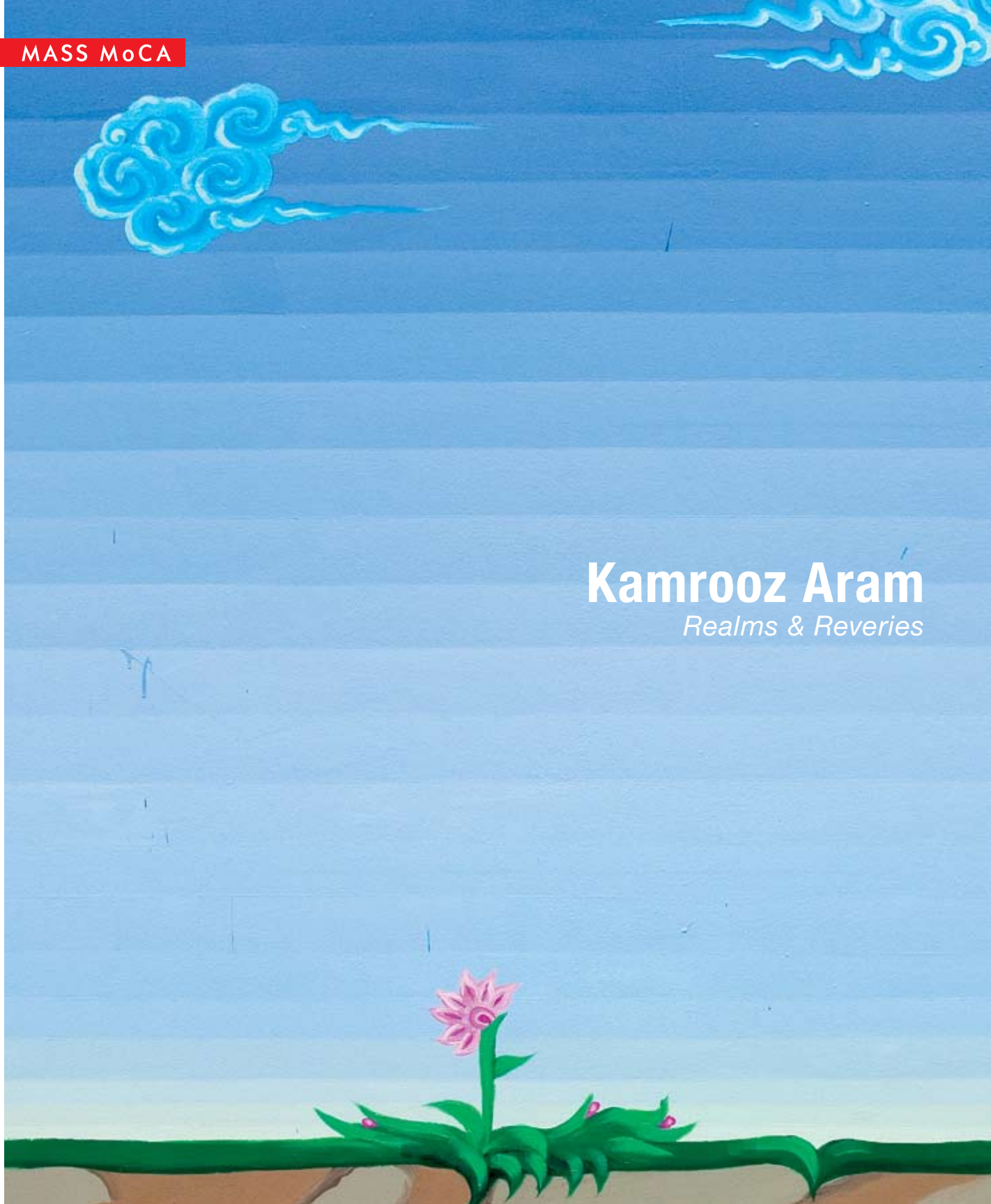
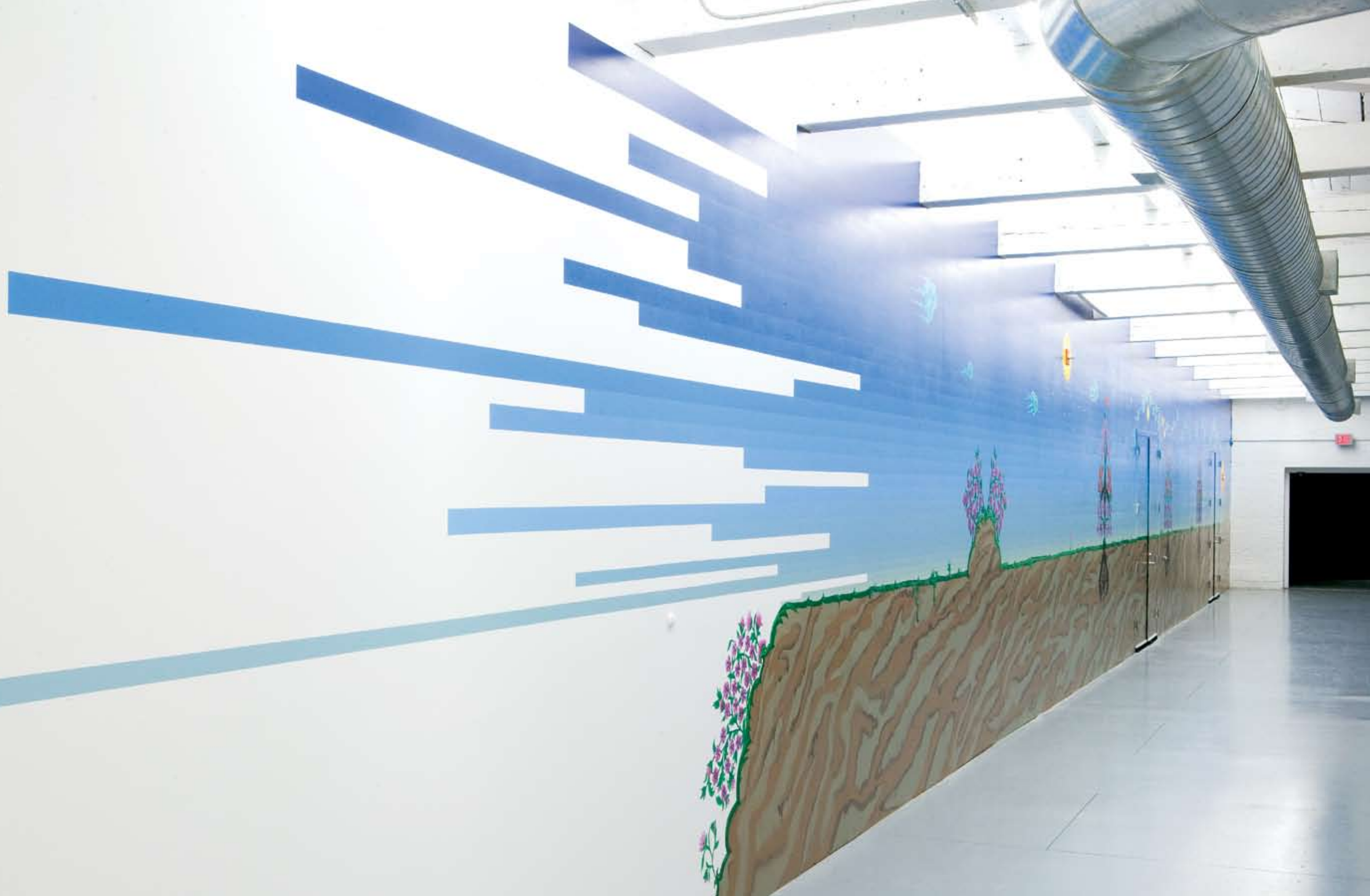
MASS MoCA



Kamrooz Aram

Realms & Reveries



Kamrooz Aram: *Realms & Reveries*

Liza Statton, Curator

Foreword

Joseph Thompson, Director, MASS MoCA

The two weeks in January 2006 that Kamrooz Aram was in residence at MASS MoCA coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's strange – though perhaps historic – piece of political theater, during which the President proclaimed, with giddy rhetorical flourishes, his intention to rekindle Iran's nuclear energy program. Kamrooz kept painting through these turbulent weeks, drafting friends and fellow artists to complete his 100-foot long mural – *Super Celebration Desert Operation Testing Station* – a stunning work that reveals itself to observant museum visitors as a series of peripatetic fragments, scrolling behind the large windows that frame the museum entrance courtyard.

I never asked Kamrooz directly if his mural was responding to what felt like a moment of profound crisis in his homeland, within a region and at a time in which true crises are difficult to separate from the background noise of violence, anger and belief. And the fine balance of Aram's work – its lack of didactic pressure – gave little away as he painted: The heavenly upper range of the mural was illuminated with beautiful stars, bright foil stickers and stylized clouds, arrayed against a precise gradient of blue stripes. The crisp edges of the blue stripes were sometimes broken by errant drips of paint, bits of fluidity and hinted chaos that were then amplified in the swirling brushwork Aram used to render the ground of the mural, a 4-foot range of camouflage brown that anchors the work to the floor. More than anything, that lower register reads as if a cross-section; we are given a vertical cut, through which we see the exposed roots of plants and the thick, impenetrable blackness of crude oil that rises through the roots, an osmosis of infection within the plants blossoming against the sky above.

In two of the strange bushes – those topped by the red and green flags – everything is clearly going to hell. The plants rot, and the viscous black pigment enwraps and chokes the bright flowers, which are otherwise rendered in the same beautifully radiant palette that distinguishes Aram's painting. The black oily pigment becomes a Rorschachian blot, curling into a threatening, fallopian shape below ground, even as the flags unfurl gloriously from the same plants above. Aram has never used flag imagery before in his work, and perhaps that is a visual clue; his incorporation of the green sacred to Islam, and the red which couples with green to form the Iranian flag, seemed particularly poignant to me during those two weeks in January 2006.

I join the MASS MoCA Board of Trustees and staff in thanking Kamrooz Aram for his remarkable act of generosity in painting this mural, which accompanies the excellent exhibition of his recent painting and drawings selected with such refinement by curator Liza Statton, whom we also thank for bringing us such wonderful and smart work. We express our deepest appreciation to Michael Conforti and the Clark Art Institute, who have sponsored this exhibition and catalogue in support of the Williams College Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art. I join Kamrooz in thanking the donors who made the printing of this catalogue possible, all of whom are listed in the acknowledgements page. Kamrooz enjoys the support of a generous group of collectors, gallerists and friends, and after spending two weeks with him, I can see why.

Published with the assistance of
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and The Getty Foundation.

Opposite (detail):

Super Celebration Desert Operation Testing Station (2006)
Acrylic and collage, 12 x 100 feet
Hunter Theater Mezzanine
Mural commission of MASS MoCA
Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA

Celebration/Desert Station (III) (2005)
Oil and collage on canvas, 108 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Realms & Reveries

Liza Statton

Entering Kamrooz Aram's exhibition, *Realms & Reveries*, an array of iridescent colors in a large, abstract landscape confronts your gaze. Moving closer, adjusting your eyes to the electric blues, greens, and pinks in *Mountain Retreat* (2005), several shapes emerge. In the foreground, thick strokes of paint become camouflaged hilltops. On either side, flowering plants creep out from crevices in the mountainous terrain. In the sky, serpentine clouds hover above a constellation of painted lights and translucent stickers, emitting a soft glow. The scene is at once literal and mysterious. Are these radiant flashes of light meant to be distant fireworks or shining stars? The artificial intensity created by color is bedazzling and disorienting. It complicates our sense of location. If the objects in the foreground are mountain hilltops, are we atop or at a distance from these semi-naturalistic forms? Where is this brilliant vista . . . where are we?

This sense of exhilarating confusion echoes Aram's reaction to his first Fourth of July celebration, after moving to the United States from Iran at the age of eight. Aram remembers the fireworks as both captivating and frightening, evoking memories of life in Tehran during the Iran/Iraq War when violent bursts of light appeared in the night sky, producing unsettling moments of tragic beauty.

Aram translates the psychological effects of disorientation into paint with stunning results. In *Realms & Reveries*, his vivid paintings, intricate drawings, and a luminous MASS MoCA-commissioned mural present deceptively complex views of our current visual landscape.

In an age of unprecedented change and technological fluidity, we live and work among a plurality of cultural signs.[1] The mass media dominates all facets of our visual culture, and symbols that were formerly contained by geo-political borders now emerge in unlikely locations. The same image can have multiple meanings depending upon context, an obvious enough conceit but one that Aram exploits with great skill.

Paintings like *Mountain Retreat* (2005) and *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam* (2005) contain humble objects of nature like stars, plants, and birds that become newly exotic when placed in such unexpected surroundings. Although the process of recycling such familiar imagery informs Aram's work, his pictorial vocabulary is as varied as his artistic style. Decorative motifs drawn from Persian miniatures and carpet patterns mingle with glittery stickers, Renaissance icons, and vestiges of early digital culture. These unconventional combinations create destabilizing, yet mesmerizing effects.

TRANSFORMATION & IDEALIZATION

In *Realms & Reveries*, light is everywhere; crystalline-shaped stars, glowing flames, and bursting explosions fill Aram's canvases with pulsating energy. His manifold depictions of light frequently relate moments of physical and metaphorical illumination in which figures appear to be in a state of change. The transformative power of light, and its various effects, has been a central subject of Aram's since 2002 when small flames first appeared in paintings from his *Beyond the Borders* series. Gradually, depictions of light became more pronounced, and the flames became brighter. Shiny stars and small explosions also crept into his canvases.

In *Transformation/Desert Station* (2005), two falcons perch aloft a serpentine cloud. A flame illuminates the profile of one bird; sinewy threads of red and orange paint form the faint, web-like pattern of a net that ensnares the head of the other bird. Glittery star stickers, thick dots of yellow paint, and hot-pink explosions emerge like confetti in the sky above the flowering plant. At this flash moment, everything is in a state of paralysis.

While the painting avoids complete narratives, the iconography of the burning falcon is an oblique reference to images portraying the prophet Muhammad, often found in

Persian miniatures, and to the phoenix. Consumed and then reborn by the flame, this mystical bird derives from ancient mythologies rooted in astronomical and astrological phenomena. Historically, the phoenix has been associated with various Eastern and Western religions as a sign of resurrection and immortality. Aram relates the connotations of the flame to the Persian tradition of Sufism:

> *In Sufi poetry, imagery of fire is used to represent enlightenment and the Divine. One poem tells of a moth flying around a candle and finally flying right into the flame in an act of self-destruction, becoming one with the flame, a metaphor for the Sufi's path of Divine unification.*[2]

In *Celebration/Desert Station (III)* (2005) (a work not included in this exhibition), a smattering of yellow and white brushstrokes forms a brilliant disk of light in the center of the painting. Inside this form, Aram weaves an intricate web of finely painted lines reminiscent of patterns in Middle Eastern decorative roundels and the traceries of rose windows in Gothic cathedrals.

The angels flying in the heavens recall the cherubim figures of Giotto's fourteenth-century frescoes at the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy, whose walls depict scenes from the life of Christ. Aram's angels have multiple religious referents; they evoke Giotto's beatific figures, as well as those portrayed in contemporary Shiite café posters and calendars found in the Islamic world.

In these images, beams of light replace the faces of angels whose floating bodies hover against an acidic blue background. The same light that illuminates these angels also obscures their identity. Within the Islamic tradition, these bursts of light are attributes of specific holy figures. While great temporal and cultural distances separate the angels found in the café posters from those painted by Giotto, both symbolize the presence of the Divine. Their significance to the viewer depends upon one's religious and cultural context. Representations that are revered as holy and sublime in one culture may be viewed as iconoclastic, gaudy, or kitschy in another.

Even with their loose, fluid brushwork and nonlinear narrative organization, Aram's paintings illuminate the cultural rigidity inherent in religious idealism. His representation of light is emblematic of spirituality, but also synonymous with an idealized sublime. In *Mihrab-e-Haraam (Sinful Niche)* (2005), a cluster of stars appears at the center of the composition. Serpentine clouds culled from Persian manuscripts form the architectural frame of a *mihrab*, a prayer niche found on the interior wall of a mosque. Brilliant patterns of light captivate our gaze. This visually intoxicating display of paint and stickers simultaneously intimates the mystery and perhaps even the absurdity surrounding such moments of psychic transformation.

Aram's ongoing series of drawings, *Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations* (2005), speaks to a Western cultural fascination with the exotic and the mystical. In some of these works, empty space envelops the finely drawn figural profiles who stare transfixed by an object in front of them. Other drawings portray undulating patterns of multi-colored leaves spilling out from the open mouths of Aram's anonymous figures. The depictions of transcendental meditation relate to their collective title, taken from Allen Ginsberg's post-war cultural protest poem, "America" (1956), in a line referring to the author's yearning for spiritual enlightenment:

> *My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.*
> *You should have seen me reading Marx.*
> *My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.*
> *I won't say the Lord's Prayer.*
> *I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.*[3]

During the 1950s, Ginsberg and many of the Beat writers had a profound interest in the mysticism of Eastern religions at a time when they perceived that Americans were experiencing a crisis in spirituality.

LANGUAGE & CONTRADICTION

Aram's use of the connotative possibilities of language is as evocative as his use of light. In *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam* (2005), an enormous fiery orb dominates the vast semi-abstract landscape. Suspended between the realms of heaven and earth, this radiant sphere may be a cosmic nebula or desert sun. This vision is apocalyptic and hallucinogenic; everything appears to be melting or burning under the gaze of two hovering falcons.

The high drama of the work is redoubled by its title, which comes from a line in an unsung verse of Francis Scott Key's "The Star Spangled Banner." The last line of the second verse reads, "Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam, in full glory reflected now shines in the stream," referring to the American flag. Indeed, the language of the U.S. national anthem contains multiple allusions to light, like "the bombs bursting in air" and "twilight's last gleaming" that describe visions at once romantic and apocalyptic.[4]

Here, the volatility of verbal language and its visual implications could not be clearer. Many of the titles of Aram's paintings are wry references to the lexicon of Western military jingoism. *Mountain Retreat* (2005), *Celebration/Desert Station (III)* (2005), *The Battle of So and So* (2004), and *The Battle of Such and Such* (2004) mimic the jargon of warfare and refer with deadpan irony to the volatile state of U.S. and Middle Eastern relations.

In *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam* (2005), the camouflage on the ground and the falcons perched atop the

Top:

Shiite café poster

Iraqi calendar with portraits of the twelve Shiite Imams

Courtesy of the artist

Bottom:

Giotto di Bondone (1266-1336)

The Dream of Joachim

Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy

Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY

clouds are part of the visual language of conflict. Camouflage fabric was first developed and mass-produced by the Western military during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to serve as part of a tactical strategy of hide-and-seek. Here, it covers and becomes the physical ground of the painting, concealing the specificity of location and obscuring visibility. What lies beneath it – desert sand, verdant green grass, rocky hillside terrain or something more ominous?

The falcon, an icon with multiple connotations, is an emblem of both Eastern and Western nations. These fierce birds of prey are also familiar symbols of masculinity, the supernatural, and warfare. In effect, they read as tongue-in-cheek references to the "political hawks" of global governments and to the Middle Eastern royalty for whom falconing is still a widely practiced sport.

TRADITION, DRAWING, & OFFICE STORE MYSTICISM

Like light and language, Aram's use of tradition is central to his artwork. As we have seen, many of the formal aspects of his paintings and drawings refer simultaneously to Eastern and Western artistic practices. For example, in *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam* (2005), Aram juxtaposes stylized plants appropriated from Persian carpet patterns with the heavy gestural brushwork reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism. Aram uses techniques like collage and appropriation to demonstrate the discordant coexistence of objects that have profound cultural signification.

Such formal thinking is common to Robert Rauschenberg's "combine paintings" of the 1950s and, more recently, to the work of Shazia Sikander, Yinka Shonibare, and Julie Mehretu. For these artists, the process of recycling and recontextualizing images creates new forms of visual communication that in the gaps between one culture and another, one pictorial space and another, move beyond the boundaries of geography, and the limits of any single cultural coordinate.[5]

Like Aram's bold canvases, his delicately rendered drawings also grapple with the weighty complexities of tradition. The drawings are "visual thoughts" that lightly satirize social issues ranging from the idealization of traditional art forms to American consumer culture. Aram uses a variety of mass-produced materials like graphic ink pens, stickers, award plaques, embellished stationery papers, and other common office supplies to evoke what he terms a kind of "office store mysticism." [6]

The ready-made decorative borders of the certificate papers in Aram's drawings mimic in superficial form the designs of the richly painted ones applied to the pages of ancient Persian manuscript illuminations. Similarly, the reflective surfaces of the stickers and metallic inks are faint echoes of the opulent materials found in these centuries-old pages. The intimacy of Aram's drawings calls attention to the stylized, mass-produced materials that parody the finely ground pigments and gold-leaf appliqué of their Persian ancestors.

Aram's wryly titled series of drawings, *Nothing Heavenly* (2003-2005) and *Envy* (2005), refers to the impossibility of making a perfect image.[7] In these images, Aram juxtaposes his hand-drawn images with the ready-made perfected forms of the stickers in an attempt to achieve a synthetic ideal. In one drawing from the *Envy* series, tiny strokes of ink sketch the portrait busts of an anonymous couple. They appear framed inside the purple border pattern of the light-green certificate paper. Aram places a round, gold-embossed seal above the heads of the couple. The sticker is simultaneously a blazing overhead sun and an enviable, perfectly symmetrical "seal of approval" that is impossible for Aram's hand to reproduce.

The postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha describes art that renews the past to affect the present as an "insurgent act of cultural translation" that seeks to "reinscribe our human, historic commonality." [8] Aside from engaging with traditional Islamic aesthetics, Aram's drawings also tackle the conceptual underpinnings of terms like "decorative," which writers frequently attach to the visual traditions of Persian miniatures and modernist abstraction. Rendered with precision and graceful fluidity, his anonymous forms and figures acquire signification that belies conventional ideas of mere ornamentation.

DIGITAL CULTURE

Aram likens his process of creating the pictorial language of his paintings to the making of early video games such as Super Mario Bros®.[9] For his MASS MoCA-commissioned wall mural along the second-floor corridor above the Hunter Center for Performing Arts, Aram translates the visual format and language from early video games into an image filled with a cast of characters from his own paintings.

Facing the courtyard entrance to MASS MoCA, large windows punctuate this one hundred foot long corridor, allowing approaching visitors a view inside the building. Vivid colors saturate an expansive landscape containing stylized forms and patterns that mimic those found in the digital and natural worlds. The tonal shifts in the twenty-seven shades of blue found in the sky echo the visual styles of early sixteen-bit digital animation, but also the optical effects produced by color in paintings by Josef Albers and Bridget Riley.

When viewed from the outside, hidden objects and unlikely perspectives suddenly appear framed by window openings as you walk along the museum's main entranceway, a simple but effective form of serial animation. Inside, Aram incorporates basic architectural elements into the installation, turning fire alarms, doors, and frames into compositional elements. Although the images in the mural occupy the same wall space, it is impossible to view the mural in its entirety, and Aram uses the architecture to create multiple, fragmented views. He relates the different visual experiences produced by the interactive nature in this work to Si-o-Seh Pol (*The Bridge of 33 Arches*), a seventeenth-century pedestrian bridge located in Isfahan, Iran, where he spent much of his childhood.

Wandering down the corridor, this enigmatic landscape transforms a public hallway into meditative passage. The rectangular bands of this expansive sky create a scrolling effect reminiscent of 1980s video game animation. In certain areas, small drips of blue paint interrupt its rigid symmetry. These accidental traces mark unexpected moments of spontaneity. An electric-green border resembling globs of toothpaste or fragments of Arabic script separates the rationally organized blue sky from the camouflage pattern of brown and green paint forming the ground below. The plants in the murky ground ooze skeins of black paint. Small trickles of oil, or maybe the charred detritus of the plant, leach into the ground. Red and green flags emerge triumphant from the tops of the plants. Fragmented visions of life and death, heaven and earth, joy and sorrow, collide in this digitally inspired landscape. In our itinerate journey, at a poignant moment in history, we consider where we are headed.

1 Jean Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds., Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 233-241.

2 Artist's statement, *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam*.

3 Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 164-5.

4 American history commonly acknowledges that *The Star Spangled Banner* was written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key. His anthem originally began as a poem entitled "The Defense of Fort M'Henry," commemorating the bombardment of Fort McHenry. The song was originally sung to the eighteenth-century British melody "Anacreon in Heaven." Although the poem has four verses, only the first is typically sung today. http://www.smithsonian.org/resource/faq/nmah/starflag.htm

5 Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome," *Third Text* 21 (Winter 1992/3): 35-41.

6 Artist's statement, *The Drawings*.

7 Ibid.

8 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

9 Artist's statement.

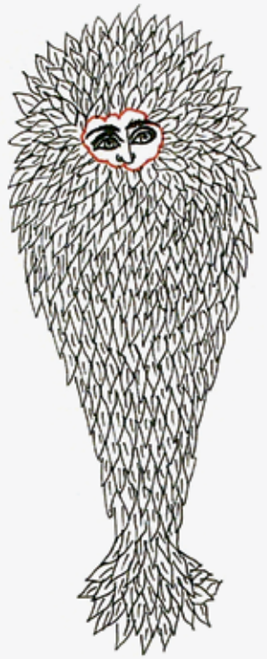
Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Magic Mountain (2005)
Oil on canvas, 38 x 52 inches
Collection of Elisabeth Ross Wingate, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Right and following page (detail):

Mountain Retreat (2005)
Oil and collage on canvas, 52 x 76 inches

Janssen-Schulp Collection, Amsterdam,
courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London



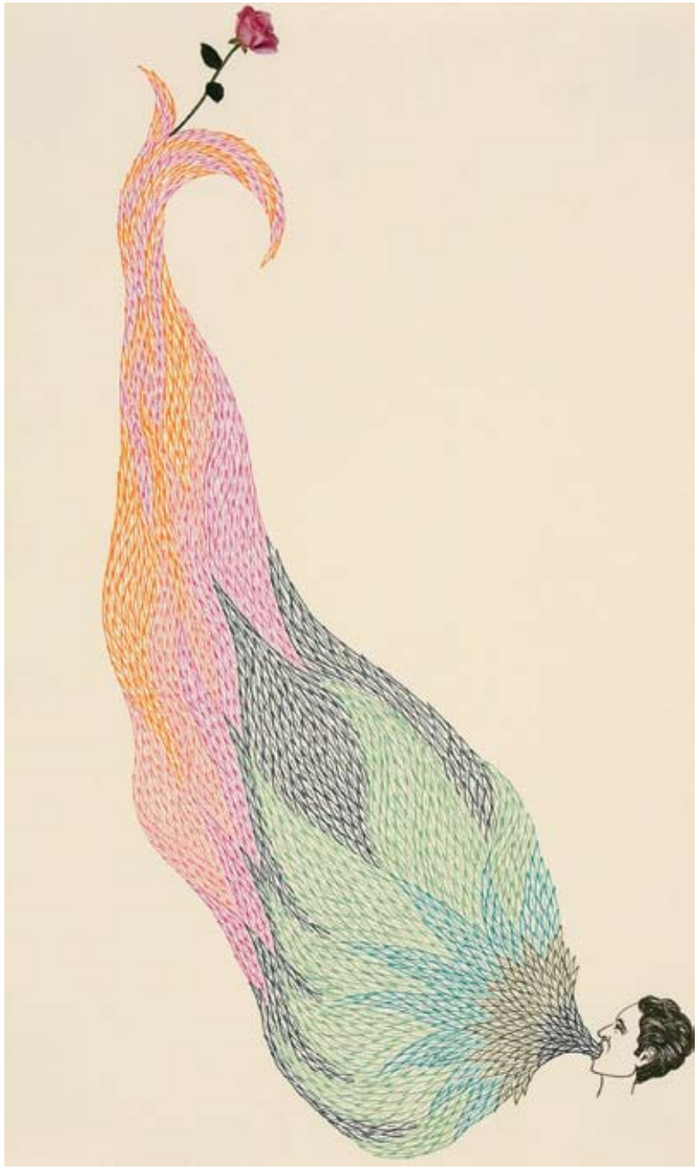
Nothing Heavenly (2003)
Ink on paper, 6 7/8 x 6 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of Steve Henry, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Envy (2005)
Ink and collage on certificate paper mounted on award plaque, 14 x 11 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink and collage on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY



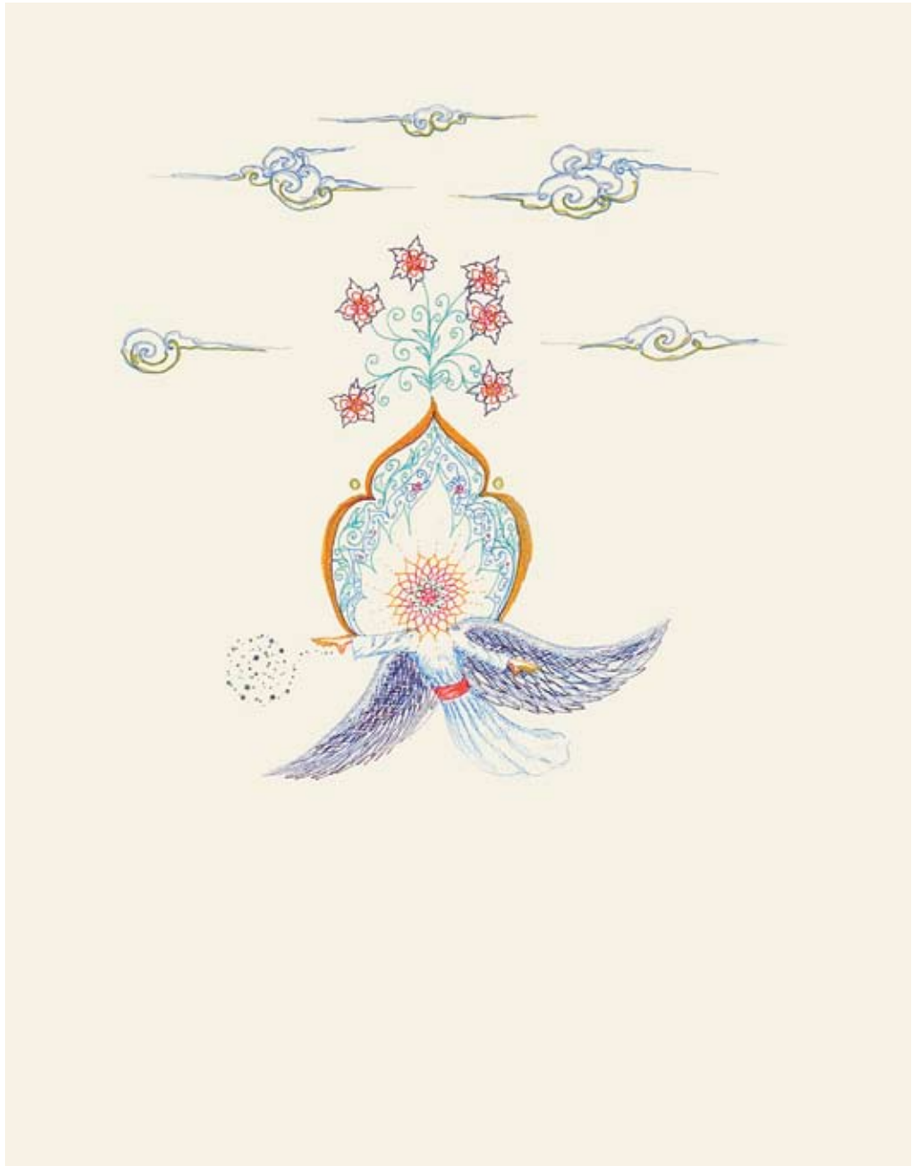
Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink and collage on paper, 12 x 7 inches
Private collection, courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2003)
Ink on paper, 7 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam (2005)
Oil and collage on canvas, 84 x 120 inches
Collection of Robert Feldman, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

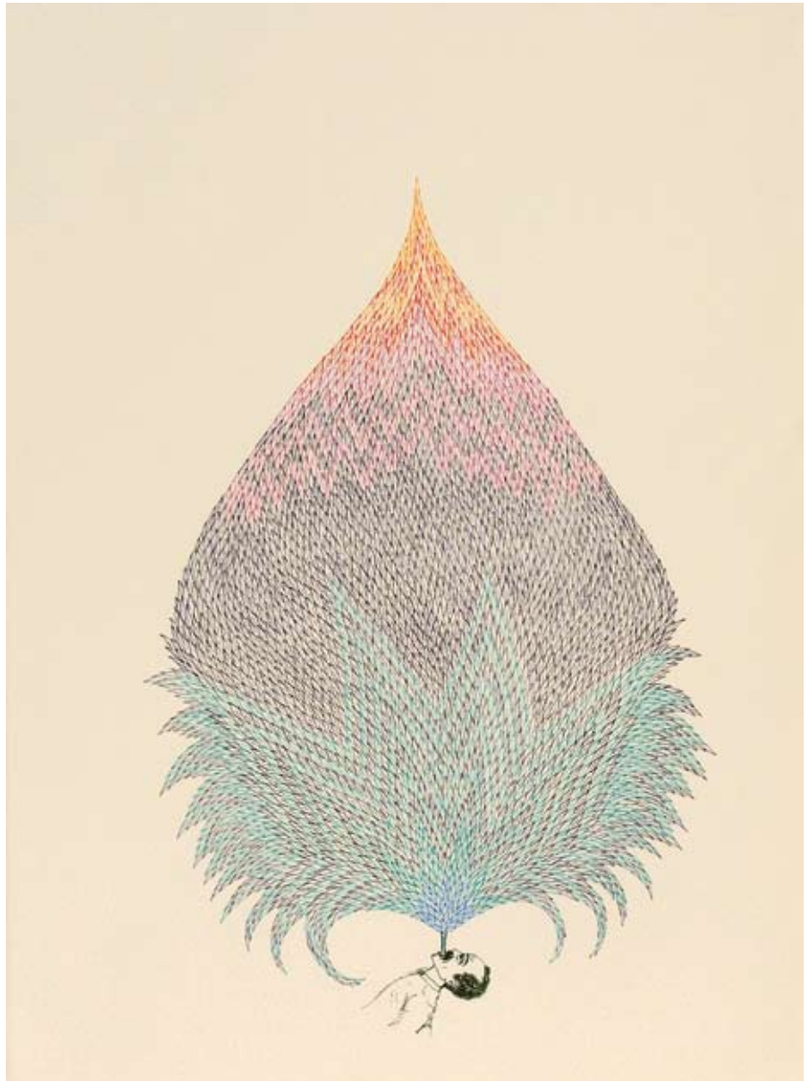
Transformation/Desert Station (2005)
Oil and collage on canvas, 84 x 48 inches
Rosetta Collection, Amsterdam, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mihrab-e-Haraam (Sinful Niche) (2005)
Oil and collage on canvas, 84 x 48 inches
Rosetta Collection, Amsterdam, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London



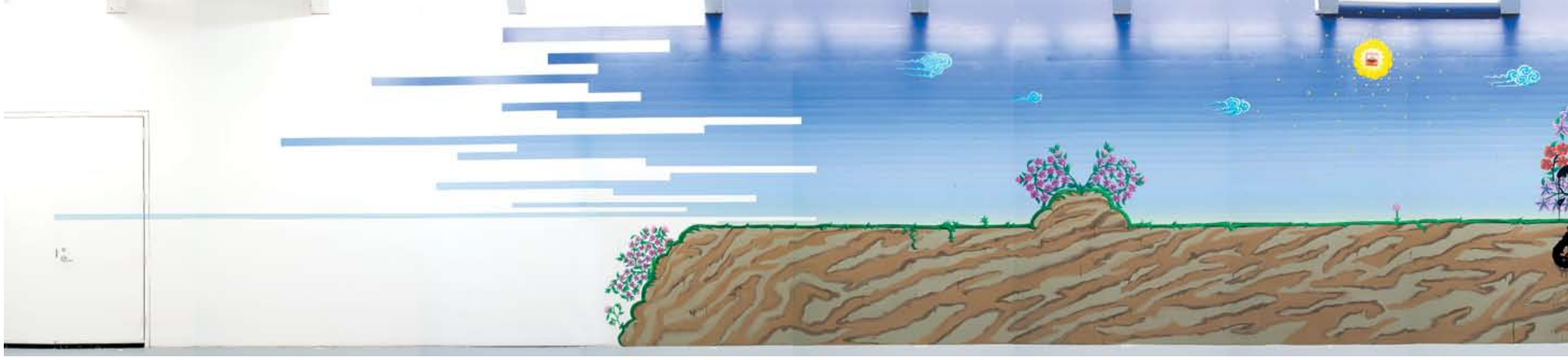
Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Ink and collage on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Private collection, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London



Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink on paper, 15 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Ink on paper, 15 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

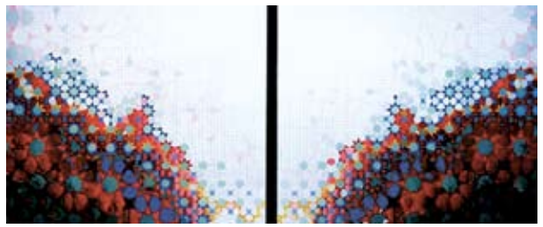


Top:

Super Celebration Desert Operation Testing Station (2006)
Acrylic and collage, 12 x 100 feet
Hunter Theater Mezzanine
Mural commission of MASS MoCA
Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA

Below:

Coming and Returning (2002)
Oil and pencil on canvas, 60 x 144 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Stuart Tyson



Excess of Subjectivity

A Conversation with Kamrooz Aram and Lauri Firstenberg

Lauri Firstenberg: When we met, you were in graduate school at Columbia and working on a series of diptych paintings that were very much bound to the logic of the grid. The paintings were based on a dialectical relationship between modernist tropes and Sufi principles. You spoke of this early work in terms of "contradiction." Could you speak to the evolution of your work from this point to the utter transformation of your paintings? Each series relates to the larger practice yet undergoes a series of major reinventions and experiments. Can you help us trace a trajectory from a work like *Coming and Returning* in 2002 to your recent *Transformation/Desert Station* in 2005? Your work seems to be increasingly iconographic and narrative...

Kamrooz Aram: It's interesting that you chose *Transformation/Desert Station* (2005) as a recent example. Many of the earlier works dealt with this idea of transformation. At the time I was interested in making work that dealt with issues in traditional Islamic art. Islamic geometric patterns and Persian carpets are the closest thing the Islamic world has to Western painting. Throughout my education, I had come across artists from the Islamic world living in the West who dealt with social and cultural issues including a kind of self-Orientalizing exoticism model of entrée to approach identity politics.

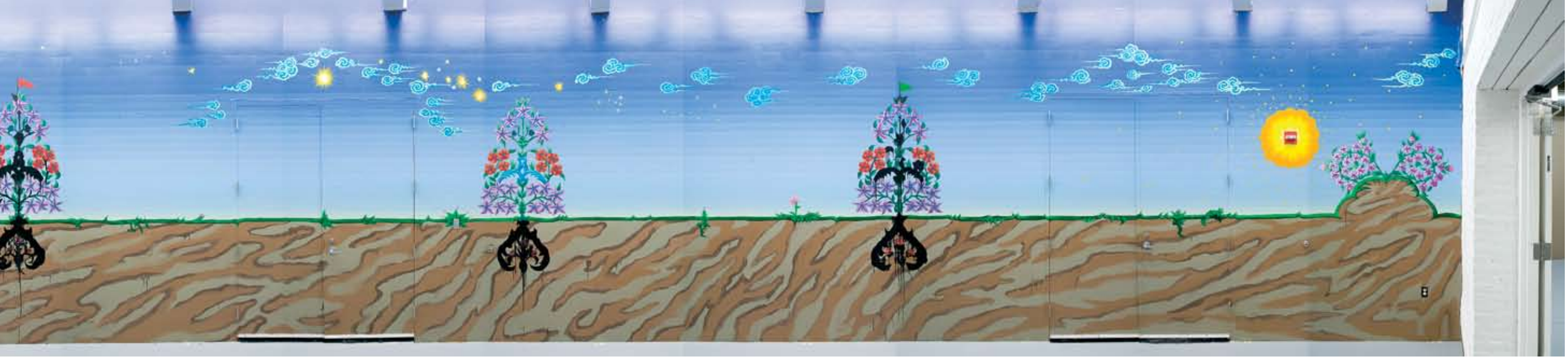
I wanted to make work that was not illustrative of questions of identity, and it was not meant to be apologetic or self-critical. My approach rested in a reading of Islamic culture in the West as territory that was ridden with a great deal of interest and criticism. I was not positioning the work as directly participating in that discourse. I wanted to deal with these issues in a more complex way than merely adhere to the customary dichotomization of East meets West. Contradiction was a means to interrupt this binary position. *Coming and Returning* (2002) was the last of this grid-based geometric work.

I began to make paintings using Persian carpet patterns found in local carpet stores in New York. The relationship between Persian carpets in New York and painting in New York is quite interesting. They are both ridden with signification, but people just want the ones that look good. They intersect at the point of the decorative. These paintings started as an attempt to bring some content back into these decorative forms. Slowly, I began adding to this vocabulary and they became less abstract. Clouds taken from miniatures indicated a sky, the carpet pattern became a tree, camouflage patterns became a stand-in for the ground, and the paintings shifted more and more towards referencing landscape directly.

My first solo exhibition in New York consisted of what I called "tree paintings." The carpet patterns were sort of destroyed and rebuilt over and over again – the paintings were very layered. It was also the first time light started to take on an important role in the work. Romantic bursts of light were literally destroying the carpet pattern in a cheeky actionist manner. I became increasingly interested in an ideology of romanticism. The visual vocabulary keeps growing, and new characters are introduced. Narratives began to form, but vaguely. *Transformation/Desert Station* (2005) is as direct as it gets. I'm not interested in telling one story. The iconography is never something that you can quite put your finger on. For me, it's more about this carnivalesque, absurd, magical and scary present day.

LF: At our last meeting we spoke about the potential of painting and the charged negotiation of politics and aesthetics for a young generation of contemporary artists working in the medium of painting, particularly in the context of America. How do you address this negotiation, and are you looking for a nonbinaristic language to reconcile a kind of polarization of priorities or tendencies?

KA: Exactly. An artist I know recently asked me if I was still making political work. I didn't know what to say; I was kind of appalled that he thought of it this way. At the same time, I wouldn't want to deny that there are political implications in the work. I just don't like oversimplifying and talking about the work as if it is directly about a stated political situation. I hope that any political references in the work are not so definable. As you have probably seen, many artists, curators and writers have the same tendency as politicians to create a binary situation, to talk about things in polar terms. In my case, people can't let go of the East-West thing. This is just an easy and dramatic way to mythologize cultural endeavors.



My first interest in the questions of aesthetics and politics was when I was in college and read Said's *Orientalism* (1978). It sort of set the pace for me. This was a large part of the early work at Columbia. In the recent work, one might be tempted to conveniently reference the Iraq invasion and war, but this is too simplistic. There is nothing in the work that directly references this war. Yet there are direct references to images of destruction and warfare; even some of the titles include language that references military jargon, but in a dislocated fashion. I am not interested in locating these terms specifically. I have even used titles like *The Battle of So and So*. The approach is towards the amalgamation of references and the posing of questions. People get hung up on symbols and signifiers and, for me, the challenge is to provide material for a multitude of readings.

LF: Is your position regarding the political anchoring of your work guided at all by the climate of the market – the fear of politics – its encroachment upon the realm of aesthetics? Does the art world, particularly in New York, allow for a practice such as yours to work in the genre of painting, politically, without a posturing or tendency towards abstraction in order to "pass" in a current climate that promotes, as you say, beauty, the decorative? Who are contemporary models engaged with the traditional terms of sublimity and violence at the site of painting? Who are mentors or colleagues you see as models able to reconcile the aesthetic and the social?

KA: I think we can say that the market is generally interested in aesthetics first and content second, especially when it comes to painting. I think this is okay, to an extent. Painting depends on a certain level of spectacle. If a painting consists only of spectacle, the painting becomes decorative. If the spectacle is weak and content dominates, then the painting risks being didactic. The market, specifically in New York, is obsessed with spectacle and virtuosity. It is like '80s rock; if you can play fast guitar, you make it big.

However, many painters are making work that is at once spectacular and socially engaging. Among my colleagues, Marc Handelman is probably the best example of a painter who really engages the aesthetic and the social in an integrated way. Marc and I were in graduate school together, and he was one of the few artists who really understood what I was trying to do. He would write me pages of notes and diagrams to try to explain what it was he thought I was doing.

At Columbia I studied with people like Kara Walker, Coco Fusco, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Jon Kessler. But I also studied with Terry Winters, Ross Bleckner, and Gregory Amenoff. And there I was, somewhere in between positions. I had an ongoing conversation with Kara about the historical role of painting as a colonialist language, a Eurocentric masculinist medium. I am self-conscious of my participation in this discourse, and it is revealed by the contradictions of content in the work. I came to the conclusion that I was speaking Patois. I think that Kara is a model for young artists who are engaged with social and political questions. Like Kara, Marc and I also talked about the historical role of painting. But he understood why I was painting. There was a period of time when Kara was challenging the fact that I was painting at all.

LF: What is your process in terms of your drawing? Are your drawings studies for paintings or autonomous works?

KA: The drawings are autonomous, though they have recently begun to influence the paintings. The drawings that I am making now began as an exercise in which I would make one drawing in the morning right when I woke up and one at night right before I went to sleep. It was a ritualistic form of visual thinking. The more I made, the more involved the drawings became, and they became a significant part of my work.

It was always important that I made the drawings at home and not in the studio. I thought of them as more casual than the paintings. I also like the idea of drawing as ritual. In my first solo show, I had a room in the back of the gallery painted dark gray with a spotlight on one large drawing. The people working in the gallery had to pick one of five drawings every morning to show for that day. I wanted to bring this element of ritual into the gallery.

The drawings vaguely reference miniature painting, but go against the traditional meaning of miniatures. They are never planned, always intuitive, and any attempt at perfection is futile. In fact, I think they acknowledge the impossibility of perfection, or perhaps they reject the very ideal. The drawings include found forms, certificate papers, and stickers that are collaged into the drawing.

LF: What do these collaged elements represent? What is your relationship to kitsch?

KA: I'm interested in the subjectivity of kitsch. I grew up with a lot of what would be considered kitsch, and I never thought of it as such. It is common for Third World immigrants to the West to find that what they thought of as beautiful and meaningful in the context of their mother culture is now tacky and kitsch. Interestingly, much of this is a result of an attempt at bringing elements of Western aesthetics into traditional Eastern art forms. I've been looking a lot at Shiite religious posters and calendars that draw from Renaissance art but also seem to reference glam-rock posters with the airbrushed, made-up ideal of masculinity. The compositions are super-balanced and the colors, though meant to be heavenly, are quite apocalyptic.

In the drawings, the collage elements are what I think of as a sort of commercial mysticism. The stickers of flowers are the ideal image of a flower. The certificate paper mimics the decorated borders of Persian miniatures. The shiny star stickers in the paintings long to be the gold-leaf stars in a Giotto painting. It's actually kind of sad.

Lauri Firstenberg is the Director/Curator of LA><ART, a new nonprofit contemporary arts organization in Los Angeles. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in the History of Art and Architecture Department.

Exhibition Checklist: (in order of show)

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Mountain Retreat (2005)
Janssen-Schulp Collection, Amsterdam, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Magic Mountain (2005)
Collection of Elisabeth Ross Wingate, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2003)
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Envy (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam (2005)
Collection of Robert Feldman, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Collection of Steve Henry, courtesy of Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, NY

Nothing Heavenly (2003)
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Transformation/Desert Station (2005)
Rosetta Collection, Amsterdam, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mihrab-e-Haraam (Sinful Niche) (2005)
Rosetta Collection, Amsterdam, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Private collection, courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery, London

Nothing Heavenly (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Mystical Visions and Cosmic Vibrations (2005)
Courtesy of the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London

Kamrooz Aram

Born 1978 Shiraz, Iran
Lives and works in New York City

The artist thanks:
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