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Stitching Together West and East: An Interview With Iranian Artist Koushna Navabi

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Exotic. A word that contains worlds. You browse through a dictionary, and you find the word exotic defined as “strange or unusual”. In its archaic sense, it was used as synonym of foreign or alien, while in modern times it came to mean “strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different.” You might think that in the dictionaries of an increasingly culturally homogenized world, there is no more space for this term. On the contrary in contemporary society, where mobility and cultural conflicts are making the headlines, investigating the exotic is particularly important.

As often happens, contemporary art is the perfect key to access this concept. With this in mind, on one breezy British day I met with artist Koushna Navabi in her studio in London. In recent years the Tehran-born artist has started exploring the meaning of ‘Orient’. Her work addresses the relationship between West and Middle East, Iranian identity and gender issues. It is based both on memories and personal experience, but also discusses past and present politics of her native country.

Navabi’s work has always been characterised by a repetitive and laborious production. She uses textile as both medium and subject, realizing knitted sculptures, paintings of the knitted surface, mixed media installations incorporating knitted elements, embroidery and carpetry. She considers art therapeutic for both the artist and the viewer.

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Abnormal IsoButane, 2008, embroidery and print on canvas, 95cm x 65cm

Let's kick off with a biggie. Did you have a moment when you knew you wanted to become an artist?

I don't know if there was a particular moment but I think that if you have a creative personality you are just drawn to creativity. I grew up with a lot of creativity around me as a child. In my family they were all writers and they were into film. My uncle used to do paintings, my grandmother was always making things by hand. Art was always around me.

You left Iran when you were sixteen, and you went to US first...

I went to New York, and attended the high school there. Then I went to Los Angeles and finally came to London. When I was in Iran I was a ballet dancer, and I was studying at the school of music and dance. The school was shut down by the revolution, literally shut down. The next week I was on the plane.

It sounds like a very a quick move out of the country.

It was very quick, very quick. They came to our class with machine guns. Five guys with machine guns and they threw us out and that was that.

Didn't you pursue dance afterwards?

I was going to continue but my parents decided that I should just go to a normal school, because life had changed so much. I just went to a normal school and I thought, you know, I don't think I can take a path of a straight life. And I think it was around there when I decided I wanted to go to art college and study art. Once I finished high school, I couldn't go to university to study art, being an illegal immigrant. At the same time I couldn't go back to the Iran; it was at the same time of Iran hostage crisis. Gosh, it's such a long time ago. So I just basically went underground. In Los Angeles I did the two years college before university and I took art courses, but just a kind of freely. I just went to the classes and learned the different techniques.

So in the beginning were you already interested in embroidery?

No, I did some ceramics, I did etching printing, life drawing, silk screening. Then I made a portfolio and applied for CalArts and I was going there eventually but then I changed my mind and decided to go to Goldsmiths.

Which was not a bad choice as well!

I wanted to go to Europe. I had this romantic idea of European lifestyle and European art, but you know, you can think naively of things (laughs)

I did that plenty of times, you just need to watch a couple of movies and you're done!

From the movies, exactly! I said to my husband who is English: I thought that everybody here would be like the Beatles, but you are not! (laughs)

So you came to London in the early nineties. It was a pretty interesting situation back then...

It was! Goldsmith started becoming really fashionable in the early nineties because it was the beginning of the YBA, the Young British Artists and all that. All the rockstars, Demian Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas. In the beginning I was making sewed sculptures using knitting machines and that brought a lot of controversy at the university. And the more controversial it became the more it made me want to keep the material. Of course that battle is gone now, and I can work freely with the material. I like it, I find it quite therapeutic, it's very labour intensive.

I guess it gets you into a flow state...

Yes, but also one cannot ignore the fact the embroidery and the textile material is typically a female language. It's already making reference to a lot of domestic issue and femininity, and that is a very important aspect of my work.



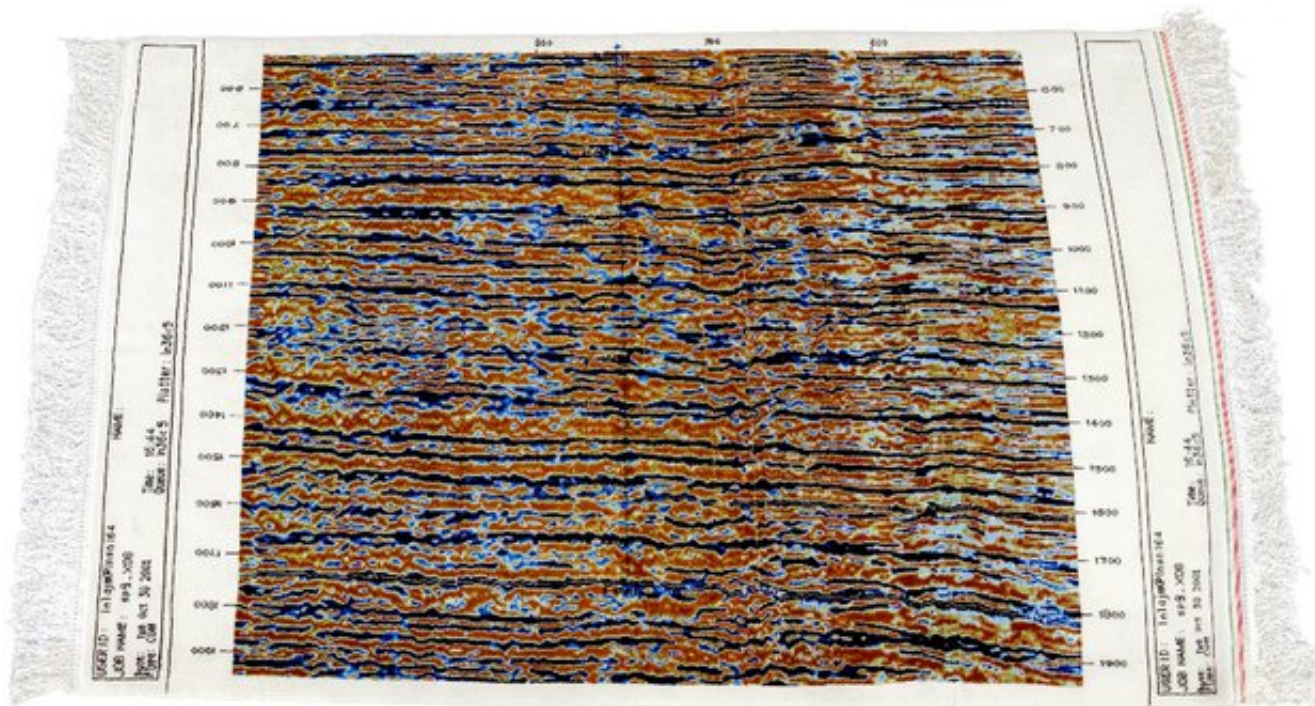
Carter, 2008-9, thread cross-stitched, 28cm x 18cm

In your case the use of these materials is also tied to childhood...

Oh, absolutely. For example I have some cross stitch pieces that are newspaper photographs. One is called Carter and the other one is called Mosaddegh and these were straight references to childhood memory. I did them for my grandmother. She used to sew a lot, and she was always involved in politics, she was very outspoken. She always had the newspaper in front of her and she was reading and sewing at the same time. Then she would make big political slogans and comments and there was always talk going on and everything. So from that memory I did these pieces. I mean, you look at them and they are quite politically charged because it's the images of the Shah and president Carter. You see one person weeping tears and you think, is he crying? But he's not. It's actually a tear gas from the demonstration in the late seventies. The other one is Mosaddegh, arrested when the CIA invaded the Iran. These pieces are very politically charged, but for me they are very personal.

In your work you often address the relationship between the West, the Middle East and the Iranian identity. Is that all based on memories and personal experience, or is there research that goes into it? Or is it a little bit of both?

A lot of the work about east and west is again quite personal, being a middle-easterner having lived in the west for such a long time. I never wanted to make a statement. I rather wanted to question the relationship of looking at one another. My aim is to make the spectator look at the work from inside, rather than from the outside. For example, there is a piece with molecules embroidered on an eastern pattern. I chose the eastern patterns and they are quite similar to William Morris patterns. Then I put oil molecules on it – which is another thing which is associated with the east but there is the involvement of the west with it. So if a western spectator is looking at the work, he's looking at the history of the west and the involvement of looking at east, rather than looking at something exotic. So that was my biggest aim, to undo the exoticism.



Persian Gulf / Carpet, 2007, woven carpet, 130cm x 82cm

I'm very interested in that concept of exoticism. It comes back to the romantic idea people have of some far away country. Sometimes it's just reverie and it's fine, but when it turns into stereotype it can be very bad.

Exactly. Often I've seen echoes of orientalism in the work of quite famous eastern artists. I think that the nineteenth century orientalism should be at an end in the twenty-first century. But maybe we need yet another century until that happens. It's a huge task in my work -to deorientalise the art and humanise it.

Humanise it is a great term for it. Because in the end it is always the individual who is at the center.

It's about living. We live in such a multicultural world and multicultural dynamics. I'm very interested in looking at orientalism and post-orientalism and questioning it. That is why a lot of the times I also go for political images, because that is making the spectator think about the incident. You go back in history and you look at something that has happened, the involvement of the two cultures together. This may sound very cliché, but it's about self and other. You are looking at the self by looking at the other. And I'm trying to do the opposite – making the other look at the self. Another thing you find in my work is the feminist aspect, the reference to the power of feminism and also a reference to women in Iran today.

Can you tell me a bit about your artistic process?

Some works just come intuitively. They happen on an unconscious level. For some other works I did a lot of research. That's the case with my seismic maps of the Persian gulf, which focuses on the core of the politics between east and west since the nineteenth century, namely the oil industry. I went to geophysicists, and I asked them how they look for oil

and they showed me the map of how they do it. I took that map and send it to Iran and have a carpet made into a prayer size carpet, where Muslims pray. The final piece is loaded with codes. But then what you see there, I'll leave it up to you.

You are a multimedia artist working across different media, how do you decide what media best suits your concept?

It depends. Sometimes the idea would come to me from the material. For example, I want to do a piece with the taxidermy animal and knitted material. And then I do a sketch of it, I look at it and then choose if that is the best solution for this piece. And perhaps could be something else. It's a trial and error process.

The taxidermy... do you do that yourself?

Oh no, no... I don't do it myself, at all! (laughs) I work with taxidermists. I tell them what I need, then I do the knitted part, which is always taxidermy mixed together with knitting. Then I give the knitted part to the taxidermists and they do the attachment for me. So, I mean, I had times when I worked with the taxidermists and I would call them and ask "Is the piece ready?" and they would said "No, it's still wet", and I think, "I don't want to know if it's still wet please, don't give me the details, just give me the piece!" The process is quite something.

You have participated to exhibitions of Iranian artists, but your work happens in the west, mainly. Do you ever struggle with the definition “Iranian artist”?

Funny you asked, because when I first started my career seriously as an artist, I was very concerned about being pigeonholed. There was nothing Iranian in the work I was doing before. And every time an art critic would make a reference, for example with a knitted painting, reminding them of a Persian carpet, it would make me mad. Why are they pigeonholing me, you know? I'm just an artist working! It wasn't until ten odd years ago, when something woke up in me and I thought; if everybody is looking at me as the Other, but then I am! You know, that's part of me. And I might be called an Iranian, American, British artist, because I've just lived in Iran, I lived in America and I lived in England. Do I mind that? Not really, no. Because you look at my name and it's not Barbara Smith, it's Koushna Navabi, so for the people the name is going to have a nationality that comes with it. So the answer to your question is, yes, you can call me an Iranian artist.

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