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Concrete Poetry

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Concrete Poetry

by

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Abstract

This text addresses my work as an artist and defines it in the context of the following subjects: The concept of ruins, which highlights the relationship between architecture and landscape; the formal and metaphorical dialectic between absence and presence in abandoned places; and the idea of dystopia, which emerges from that in-between space where the real dissolves into the imaginary. At the same time, my work is inspired by the visual culture of cinema and literature, principally within the science-fiction genre, and draws upon my observation of abandoned buildings in Tehran, my native city. These urban ruins are products of the cultural and political changes triggered by the Iranian revolution of 1979. This text also accompanies my MFA project – a body of paintings and sculptures.

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Introduction

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The main concept of my work is ruins or more specifically abandoned places. I view ruins as palimpsests of past civilization, disintegrated structures often created by war. Ruins may also be abandoned places that signal absence and presence simultaneously: the intersection of the visible and invisible. Fragmented and decayed, no longer serving their original purposes, they point to a loss and an invisible significance. Though they are no longer what they once were, the visible presence of the ruins also points to a kind of endurance.

The theme of dystopia is important to my work; that theme relates to an undesirable or frightening place which appears in fictional works, particularly those set in the future. Dystopias are often categorized by dehumanization, environmental disaster, and/or other aspects of cataclysmic decline.[1] From both literary and historical viewpoints, dystopia is often identified with the failed utopian vision of 20th century totalitarianism.

My work channels these themes through the German romanticist tradition of painting, as well as Brutalist architecture in my sculptural work, while the film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky serves as dystopian science fiction reference point. My relationship to space and architecture emanates from my cultural background as an artist who has lived in a country bearing the traces of war. Iran was still emerging from the 1979 revolution when the Iran-Iraq war erupted in 1980 and lasted until 1988. The effects of war are still reflected in ruined houses and abandoned places. Witnessing the ramifications of war around the city, I have pondered their relationship to the city landscape. Tehran is a developing city that expands the gap between the past and present. The relationship plays a fundamental role in the integration of abandoned places as a concept in my work. I would categorize my experience into three different stages: The Imaginary, The Real, and The Fiction/Fictional. Each has its own special character, yet still impacts my work.

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The Imaginary
Painting and Phantasmagoria

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The Imaginary stage dates back to my childhood in the late 1980s when my country, Iran, was at war with Iraq[2]. Tehran was not directly involved in the war because of its remote location, some 400 miles away from the western borders with Iraq; however, it was bombarded more than a few times. During that period, the sirens wailed across the city, which meant we had to leave our homes and hurry to shelters, basements or some other safe place. I still recall from my childhood the emergency alarm and running down into a dark cube-like basement for shelter. That was the reality of my youth; it has left a blurry image in my mind.

Although my aim as an artist is not to illustrate or reiterate my childhood experience in my work, I consider this memory as a pivotal point. There is an image from that moment in my mind. Still, I keep asking myself: How accurate is that image? How much of it is related to what really happened and how much is from my imagination? What I picture is a dark cube, a red siren (like a blinking traffic light) in a black and white landscape.

Is this the image of what exactly happened or is it a typical image of a similar situation that my mind is trying to mimic? It is a picture my mind creates based on an archive of images from my memory that is loaded with other images over the years: images from media, films, and lived experiences. The uncertainty as to the authenticity of the image fascinates me, and I seek to create that uncertain moment in my work. My work evokes something that stands in the gap between two different eras, akin to what Michel Foucault calls "heterotopia" or "the other space." Foucault writes, "The heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other."[3] In my work, however, the other space comes from juxtaposing a real space and an imaginary space. (Figure 1)

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Ruins form the subject of imagination and contemplation. Travelers to the ruins of antiquity were not only contemplating past greatness but also considering the future of their own societies. Walter Benjamin wrote of ruins as "allegories of thinking."[4] Ruins also evoke the "sublime," as Edmund Burke defines it. For Burke, sublime art or experience "excites the ideas of pain and danger" and produces "the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling," causing "astonishment...horror, terror," while "the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect[5]." In confronting the ruins, a viewer encounters the image of a decaying civilization or, as Marx said, "All that is solid melts into air."[6] The initial experience in confronting ruins is often the awareness of human weakness. At the same time, there is the recognition of endurance of manmade forms. This recognition negates the previous sense of distress over human frailty. For viewers, this dynamic creates a sense of alienation from the ruins. This tension may lead viewers to experience ruins from the perspective of an objective and disinterested subject/viewer.

This is the moment that ruins appear as forms of beauty; in other words, ruins are aestheticized as art objects. In the context of painting, the theme and subject of ruins has become a tradition. This theme becomes an obsession for artists, especially 19th century artists such as Caspar David Friedrich. In my painting practice, I am intrigued by the way Friedrich treats space in his paintings to create an imaginary landscape; he composes a space that is more visionary rather than literal. As Joseph Leo Koerner explains "Although his paintings are landscapes, he designed and painted them in his studio using freely drawn, plain-air sketches."[7]

In this approach, he selects the most evocative elements to integrate into an expressive composition. (Figure 2) There is usually a layer of mist and darkness in his paintings that makes them look more like a memory of a place rather than a real place. This style creates a dreamy aspect in his paintings; they exist between abstraction and realism. In my work, I achieve this

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feature through a specific technique: without first mixing paints and producing shades of color, I apply and use the texture and quality of the paint itself as it comes out of the tube.

I start my painting as an abstract image. I choose the color pallet by imagining a scene and then begin by putting the pigments on a canvas and pouring a mixture of liquid mediums. By moving the canvas and allowing the materials to mix, I take part in controlling the direction of the paint. I continue this process until reaching the point where the texture and color satisfy me. The level of satisfaction comes from the level of intimacy between the surface and my own experience. When the shapes and texture begin to represent a sense of space, I stop the process and embrace the result as a surface to work on; I then build the scene.

Through this process I create a picture that addresses an imaginary space and also references real structures or architectural forms. I use oil paint and mix it with other liquid mediums on canvas and let their contingency and reaction create shapes and textures. The shapes could refer to imaginary landscapes: a deserted landscape, a dry desert, a misty plain, a rocky landscape or even water or the world under the oceans. By using this technique, I try to create a simulacrum of reality, while the texture evokes the visual experience of a cement surface. In the painting *Maybe Summer.2018* (Figure 3) the background that is painted with the technique that I described does not necessarily refer to a particular place or even a typical prospect. Without having an image of the actual bunker, the background resembles either an abstract painting or a detail of a rusty wall. By adding an object that represents a real place and location, I mix the Imaginary and the real together and create ambiguity and an uncanny expression. This technique echoes artists of the modern era such as Max Ernst. Ernst used several techniques in his paintings, including a technique called decalcomania, in which "a piece of paper or glass is laid over a painted surface and then removed [which creates] suction, pulling at the paint to form a scaly, biomorphic texture.

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Ernst's best-known work to employ this technique is *Europe after the Rain* (1940-42) (*Figure* 4) an eerie reflection on World War II as the Nazi ravaged the continent."[8]

Contemporary artists like Mary Weatherford also use this technique. Weatherford employs "spontaneously sponged paint on heavy linen canvases surmounted by one or more carefully shaped and placed colored neon tubes. The canvas—prepared with white gesso mixed with marble dust, and worked on with Flashe paint, a highly pigmented but readily diluted emulsion—supports startlingly diverse applications of color."[9] Carolina A. Miranda describes her paintings "as broad evocations — a physical embodiment of the sensation one gets tooling along a broad avenue in the San Joaquin Valley as the sun dissolves into the horizon."[10](*Figure* 5) Likewise, in my practice, I pursue formal and conceptual studies to combine the Imaginary and the real. The architectural aspect in my paintings opened a new window for my practice and lead me to the creation of sculptures.

The Real
Sculpture and Brutalism

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The second stage of my experience to the abandoned places, which I call The Real, relates to my time in primary school. My school's building was a large house where an unknown, wealthy family used to live before the Revolution in 1979. However, in the days of the Revolution, the family was forced to leave the country and their home; they would never return. The government confiscated the house and transformed it into a public school. On its walls, there were still traces of its previous life; decorated walls and shelves were naively covered with color. There were also two bomb shelters in the courtyard; we could only barely discern the entrances, as they were behind a fence that was always kept locked. That experience has produced in me a paradoxical sense of presence and absence. While the shelters in the courtyard represented a moment from the past that did not exist anymore, the presence of people living there, without knowing the history behind that place, was the real and present moment. (*Figure* 6)

Untitled #3.2018 (*Figure* 7) is a wall sculpture, made out of cement, Plexiglas, and light, which emerged from my sculpture practice that came after my paintings. I have started making sculpture in the MFA program as a response to the architectural aspect in my paintings and also as a reflection of my personal interest in abandoned places and ruins. Although my sculpture pieces are inspired by my paintings, I consider them as a separate field that follows its own path, which parallels my paintings. The sculpture, however, deviates from the narrative aspect in the paintings: it accords with my use of material and abstraction but still follows the Imaginary and the real dichotomy in my work. In approaching sculpture, the first step was to find the right material for the work. In my paintings, I pursue the concept of the ruins in the figure of bunkers in dystopian science fiction. I apply that feature in my sculpture as I investigate the process and presence of the material.

While bunkers function as an architectural element in my paintings, my sculptural direction reflects Brutalism. On the one hand, this style originates from bunkers and military structures, which are a product of World War II. This style was a quick and economical way to renovate and deconstruct the ruins of the destroyed cities. On the other hand, similar to my attitude in painting, which follows the concept of ruins in the past and future, Brutalism also has a cycle of existing in two different zones of time. It appears first as a quick solution to reconstructing the cities; then the style became obsolete, nearly forgotten for a while. Brutalism has now been transformed into a more formal architectural style. In my sculpture, I borrow the visual feature of Brutalism and also use concrete as a primary material. Bare and uncovered surfaces and remnants of the mold that reveal the process of casting are among the Brutalist aspects I bring to my sculptures. (*Figure* 8)

Exposed concrete is favored in Brutalist architecture. I am fascinated by the way material such as concrete is intertwined with historical and social context. I am also drawn to the capacity of concrete to express structure and the potency of matter. Because of its versatility, concrete has a structural continuity between the vertical and horizontal planes, while also expressing strength in tension and compression. In *Redefining Brutalism*, Simon Henley expounded upon the distinctive style:

> After the second Word War, concrete was in vogue. To build in concrete was quite simply avant-garde. Yet, it was more than a style; it is a way of thinking and a way of making. It affected the way things look and the way they feel. It is vivid-'rough' and 'tough'. We associated it with the postwar city. With cities that were badly bombed. Much of the reconstruction was in monolithic concrete: vessels elevated on Pilotis, or Bunker-like with few windows.[11]

The geometric forms in Brutalism are not just an aesthetic choice; they are a result of what the material imposes. In Brutalist architecture, grayish and geometrical forms without any ornaments are associated with a cold and austere nature, which reduced the style's popularity. The other

reason that diminished the popularity of this style was that the raw concrete used in construction often shows signs of water damage and decay; these traces of decay did not seem aesthetically pleasing at that time. As Reyner Banham explains, the failure of Brutalist architecture was it was rejected in public taste[12]. Fayroze Lutta elaborates on this failure:

> Some Brutalist shapes and forms can be beautiful, even complex and structurally surprising. However, all the general public sees now is dirty concrete; scuffed, tired aggregate; and certain shades of brown and green timber associated authoritarian government facilities such as council offices, police stations, prisons, public schools, hospital wards and public housing.[13]

My view is that Brutalism has come to symbolize urban decay and economic hardships that are out in the open for the world to see. I see this style of architecture in the construction of museums, universities, and institutes. And yet I wonder: Why has a new appreciation for Brutalism emerged? And what is the relationship between its connection to the past and the quality of the material? I find the appreciation of once derided architectural styles fascinating and paradoxical. I believe there is something about the timing and duration that creates a distance between phenomena and the social reactions to the phenomena.

Departing from the strict style of Brutalism, dark Plexiglas is an essential material in my sculpture. During the process of research and taking pictures of bunkers for my paintings, I was inside a bunker, a giant empty concrete fortification, at the Tyson Research Center near Eureka, Missouri. (*Figure* 9) The void inside is loaded with history, and memories surrounded me. In a sense, I filled the void with my imagination. It evoked the feeling I had in my childhood memories of being in a shelter or the perception of looking at the empty spaces in abandoned buildings. The space gave me a sense of déjà vu. All those images created a constellation of thoughts and memories and opened up a space for my imagination. I was fascinated by this feeling and began to look for a material that could project the same scene in sculpture. I chose dark Plexiglas because

it adds this aspect to my work and also evokes the dialectic between absence and presence in forms. The simultaneity of presence and absence paved its way in my sculpture not through the narrative and fiction but in choosing the technique and material. In my sculpture, I rely more on the abstraction and expression of material and the dialogue between the paradoxical elements in a piece.

In my view, the best example of an artist who approaches this dichotomy in her work, and more specifically the idea of negative space, is Rachel Whiteread. Like the concept I follow in my work, her casting sculptures are also related to her childhood memories, abandoned objects, and hidden places. She excavates memories like an archeologist hunting for traces of past human life; she has cast a room and then a whole house.[14] The objects employed by Rachel Whiteread are utilitarian, generic things that belong to the post-war generation.

The dark Plexiglas in my work evokes a constellation of connotations from my childhood, the ambiguity of empty spaces in abandoned houses, and the void inside bunkers. I experienced these spaces in different moments and situations in my life. In Whiteread's piece titled *Closet.1988*, she casts a wardrobe belonging to her grandmother. (*Figure* 10) she explains how she vividly remembers the smell and sensation of the darkness she experienced as a child when one of her sisters locked her in her that wardrobe:

> Originally *Closet* was about trying to make a childhood experience concrete: I came to it from that angle. I was trying to think of a material that was as black as childhood darkness, which is fundamentally frightening because you don't know what is in that darkness. I was trying to use a material that would suck the life out of light. I looked at various thing at black felt seemed to be the right material.[15]

Using personal memory is one drive and approach to the work, but apart from that is the history behind each material. By using concrete and Plexiglas, my work refers to a specific period and evokes the history and significance that comes with that history. I found this notion in some work

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made by Irish artist Siobhán Hapaska, who employs a new material called "cloth concrete." This recent invention, a concrete infused canvas, is similar to the function of concrete and was developed for the speedy construction of emergency dwelling. Its use by Hapaska accentuates the biomorphic nature of her work but also speaks to the very contemporary concerns regarding housing for refugees and those suffering the effects of natural disasters. (*Figure*1)

*The Fictional
Cinematic Images*

The third stage of my confrontation with abandoned places is what I call The Fictional; which relates to my recent experiences over the last 10 years, when I witnessed the abandoned places in Tehran, the city where I once lived. In my dialogue with the city as a kind of *flâneuse*, I viewed the places that have been abandoned for thirty years. I saw buildings that are decaying according to their own timelines, indifferent to what is happening around and oblivious to all the renovation and developments. I looked at them as an observer who would gaze upon ruins. (*Figure* 2)

The way cinematic images affect my work relates to how the dynamic of dream and reality is created in cinema. (Figure 3) Looking at the techniques that are used in creating images to blur the boundaries between reality and dream and to evoke the uncanny helps me to conduct a formal and visual practice in my work. One of the key elements in representing The Imaginary is the concept of time. Dream time passes in a nonlinear order. There is no precise beginning nor a clear end. In my work I evoke the nonlinear time of dream by creating scenes that do not refer to any specific date. Although the subject is a real place that belongs to a specific period (the bunkers' history), by putting them in an imaginary landscape, I add a sense of dreams to my work. Changing the color and shifting the tonality of the images is another technique used in cinema to create a sense of dream. In my case, I place my painting and sculptural practice within the dystopian science-fiction genre in cinema, with particular reference to the 1979 film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky.[16] As a director, Tarkovsky is recognized for "the illusion of reality" in his films.[17]

Stalker tells story of a man who embarks on a journey to a mysterious place called The Zone where, legend has it, there is a room that grants the wishes to those who enter. *Stalker* alludes to real events in Russia's past. During the middle of the twentieth century there were numerous nuclear tastings in Russia, but the public was unaware. Towns and villages located near those

facilities were closed off for fear that radiation might spread and lead to wide-scale poisoning. No one was allowed in or out. (Figure 4)

The unnamed city at the beginning of the film is surrounded by fences and the police. It is a closed city. Our hero aims to escape the city to go to the Zone, but the military police make it difficult for him. His mysterious destination is called the Zone for a reason. Zone was the designation for the area of contamination following the nuclear accident. Citizens were forbidden from entering these zones, just like the characters who were forbidden from entering this zone in the film.

In *Stalker* the camera movements are long and slow and graceful, giving the film a dream-like feeling. Visual clues suggest that the trip to the Zone takes place entirely in a dream. The scene where the men ride a railcar from the city to the Zone is long and uneventful. The scene continues for four minutes, until a sudden jump cut transports the audience to the Zone in an instant. As Leonardo DiCaprio says in a scene in the film *Inception*, "You never really remember the beginning of a dream, do you? You always wind up right in the middle of what's going on."[18]

I am interested in the way we as an audience, watching *Stalker*, do not remember how we arrived at the Zone. We are just suddenly there. The film has been presented in a dull sepia tone until the heroes enter the Zone. Once they enter, the movie switches to color. When watching *Stalker*, we cannot merely rely on our senses. Tarkovsky intentionally includes continuity errors or sometimes an out-of-place sound effect. It is difficult to trust our senses because the film is manipulating them. This discordance contributes to the interpretation that the film takes place in a dream. Time operates according to different rules in a dream. We have no idea how long the characters spend in the Zone or how long it took for them to arrive. In one scene, the characters discuss where they need to journey to next. There is a building in the background of the scene; one

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of the men walks to the left and the camera follows him. The man addresses the two other men who are now off screen. This shot lasts for about six minutes. When this character is back to where he started, the camera goes back to its original position, but something is different. The building in the background is now covered in fog and is almost invisible. This happens over the course of a few minutes without the audience noticing. This strange flow of time evokes the experience of dreams: hours can feel like seconds.

My work parallels *Stalker* in that it refers to a real place and historical moment (bunker), and yet that place becomes an imaginary picture/object. Shifting tonality to differentiate between the real space and the dream-like space is another technique in *Stalker* that I also employ in my work. The use of time in the film, creating both science-fictional and dream-like qualities, inspired me to create a picture or object that evokes both past and future, both the imaginary and the real.

Conclusion

In this text, I explained how, in my paintings and sculptures, I create images and objects that explore the concept of ruins. These ruins may be considered as palimpsests of a lost civilization; they suggest abandoned places that signal a simultaneity of absence and presence, the intersection of the visible and invisible. Through images of ruins, my work points to the imaginary and the real simultaneously. Following dystopian science fiction and Brutalist architecture, my work refers to real and historical moments in the past in order to create its own phantasmagoria.

I have sought to produce a constellation of thoughts and concepts that share the same overarching vision but exist in different media. My work began through personal experience and has expanded to cover a vast ground. The starting point carries my cultural and geographical heritage that led to a journey through history, through the past, present, and future. My personal fascination with abandoned places and wondering about their history and background inspired my work; however, the artistic process led me in new directions. I have enriched my practice and vision with theory, philosophy, and the history of art, as well as by mapping the concept of ruins across paintings, architecture, and film.

As explained in this text, I have divided my studio practice and the concept of my work into three different chapters, each of which covers different interpretations of and experiences with abandoned places. The first chapter, The Imaginary: Paintings and Phantasmagoria, illuminates my paintings and my techniques, and elaborates on how the bunker, as the principal subject matter, relates to a real context and an abstract, imaginary background.

The second chapter, The Real: Sculptures and Brutalism, explains the architectural aspect of my work, its formal and conceptual references to Brutalism, and the significance of the material I work with in my sculptures. The last chapter, The Fictional and the Cinematic Images, focuses on the cinematic aspects of my work with an emphasis on the Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*.

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Following the idea of dystopia in science fiction, I explain some of the formal and technical elements in my work, which were inspired by and relate to this unique context.

My studio practice in this two-year program started with painting and was followed by sculptural objects. In both media, however, the dichotomy of The Real and The Imaginary runs through my work. The aim of this text is to share with the audience the artistic process of my thoughts and my practice, and to show how my experiences opened avenues for making images and objects that vacillate between the real and the phantasmagoric, the absence and presence in abandoned places and the relationship between architecture and landscape.
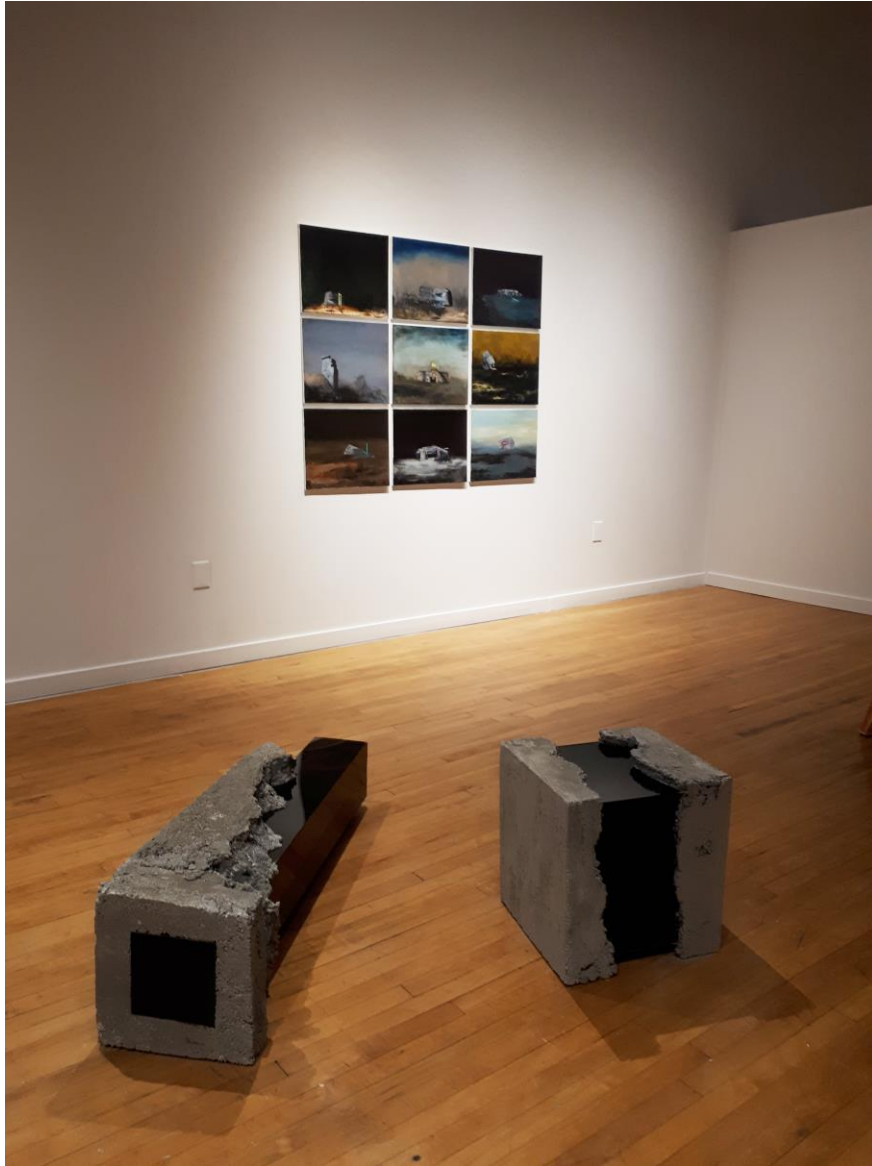
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Illustrations

Figure 1

Sara Ghazi A.

Concrete Poetry. 2018

A grid of 9 paintings. Oil on Canvas, 18 x 22 inches each.

Two pieces cement and Plexiglas

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Figure 2

Caper David Friedrich

Rocky Reef on the Sea Shore. 1824

Oil on Canvas

8.6 x 12.2 inches

Staatliche Kunsthalle Krlesruhe

Figure 3

Sara Ghazi A.

Maybe Summer. 2018

Oil on Canvas

20 x 16 inches

Figure 4

Max Ernst

Europe After the Rain. (1940-2)

Oil on Canvas

21.25 x 57.8 inches

Figure 5

Mary Weatherford

Empire. 2012

Flashe Vinyl Paint and Neon Light on Linen

105 x 79 inches

Contemporary Art (Larry Qualls Archive)

Figure 6

Sara Ghazi A.

Even May. 2019

Oil on Canvas

16 x 12 inches

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Figure 7

Sara Ghazi A.

Untitled #3. 2018

Cement. Plexiglas. Light

15 x 15 x 4.5 inches

Figure 8

Architect: Lyons Israel & Ellis

Old Vic Theatre Annex 1957-8

Style: Brutalist

UK. England

Figure 9

Photo of outside and inside of Bunker No 50.

Tyson Research center. 2018

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Figure 10

Rachel Whiteread

Closet. 1988

Plaster, Wood, Felt

62 x 34 x 14.5 inches

Private Collection

Figure 11

Siobhan Hapaska

Us. 2016

Concrete Cloth, Fiberglas, Two pack Acrylic Paint, Stainless Steel, Oak

53.14 x 43 x 39.3 inches

Figure 12

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. 1977

Architecture: Kamran Diba

Tehran. Iran

Figure 13

Sara Ghazi A.

Crevice.2019

Oil on Canvas

20 x 26 inches

Figure 14

Andrei Tarkovsky

Still frame taken from film Stalker. 1979

Plates

Sara Ghazi A.

*Last summer.*2018

Oil on canvas

16 x 20 inches

Sara Ghazi A.

*Mid December.*2018

Oil on Canvas

16 x 20 inches

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Sara Ghazi A.

*Like July.*2018

Oil on Canvas

16 x 20 inches

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Sara Ghazi A.

*Summer Last.*2018

Oil on Canvas

16 x 12 inches

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Sara Ghazi A.
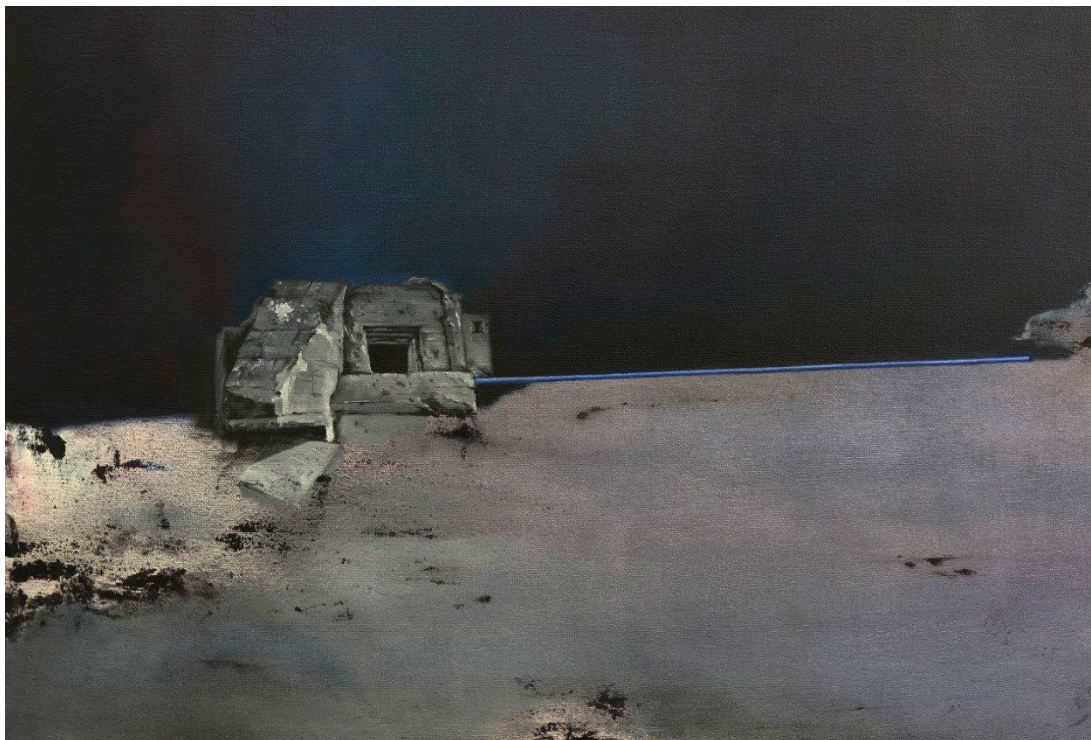
*Late January.*2019

Oil on Canvas

12 x 16 inches

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Sara Ghazi A.

*Niche.*2019

Oil on Canvas

20 x 26 inches

Sara Ghazi A.

*Blue Line.*2019

Oil on Canvas

20 x 26

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Sara Ghazi A.

Untitled #2.2018

Cement, Plexiglas, Light

16 x 17 x 5 inches

From Artist

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Sara Ghazi A.

*Untitled #4.*2019

Cement. Plexiglas. Light

Height 52 inches

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