

"I want to know if life is simply for circling around in a small place until you become old and nothing else, or is there another way to live in the world?"

Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish* (1967)

"Live in freedom, governed by love."

Doom, *Fuck Peaceville* (1995)

'Books', 'fashion', 'music' and 'art' describe in the simplest terms, Iranian born, American artist Hadieh Shafie's world. These words surface repeatedly during our zoom conversation, almost as if they are talismans or incantations uttered to protect and heal, or to imbue the speaker with luck. It is late in the evening for me as I sit in my study in Sydney's eastern suburbs, while Shafie has woken up in Maryland, a state in the northeast of the United States, a region defined by its abundant waterways and coastlines on the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. She established her studio there in 2021 wanting to be close to her family, and to reorient herself and her practice away from what had then become the global epicentre of the pandemic, New York.

Born in Tehran, Iran in 1969, Shafie immigrated with her family to the United States in 1983 at the age of 13. Due to her father's job as a geologist and engineer the family had previously led an itinerant existence alternating between Tabriz and Tehran where her grand-parents lived, followed by a stint in London before returning in 1979 to live in Iran's newly formed Islamic Republic. Attracted by the promise of social justice, freedom and democracy, Shafie recalls her parents being initially excited and enthusiastic about the Revolution, but for her the transition was bewildering and frightening. "At the time I was ten years old and starting middle school. All of a sudden, I had to cover myself, there was a lot of political unrest, the Iran-Iraq war erupted, and life became very hard, very quickly"¹, she recalls.

She describes her schooling and formative years as being fragmented and disconnected: "You make fast friends, and you lose them fast...You become very accustomed to letting go". She was educated in French and Farsi noting that she was "a pretty bad student in everything except art and literature". During this time her

¹ Unless otherwise cited all quotes are from Hadieh Shafie in conversation with Dolla Merrillees, 9 May, 2022.

relationship to and love of books developed. She read eagerly and the books, life changing books, bought and exchanged for her on the black market by her father transported her into another world. In a climate of censorship, they became coveted objects of desire to be read clandestinely, secreted away under clothes, chadors and veils.

Concerned by the regime's crack down on women's participation in education and fearing that their self-described outspoken and boisterous daughter might become politically involved, Shafie's parents sought to leave Iran. A two-week vacation to Austria in 1983 unexpectedly provided the family with the means and opportunity, and with nothing more than their suitcases, they arrived in America. Relieved to not have to return to a life in Iran that Shafie describes as being 'traumatic on all fronts' she settled into high school, subsequently studying painting at the Pratt Institute and performance art at the University of Maryland.

Like many families displaced and dispossessed as a result of war, violence or persecution, as was my own, Shafie's relationship with the land of her birth remains conflicted and her memories of it bittersweet. And as I sit safe and cocooned against the night in my study Shafie's story, as she recounts it to me, is not unfamiliar. My mother, Parvine Merrillees (née Razavi), left Iran in 1941 because of the Anglo Soviet invasion. In the fear and confusion that followed my grandparents decided that my grandmother and the children (my mother and her younger brother) would temporarily relocate to Karachi until the situation became clearer. It was a move that was to have profound consequences on my mother's life. Like Shafie, she left behind family and friends and most of her belongings never anticipating that she wouldn't return to her life in Hamedān.

In time, my mother was able to visit Iran to see her family, but she was never to call it home again. Shafie however has not been back. "I didn't have any of my things, any of my dolls, I didn't have anything. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to anyone", says Shafie. The trauma she experienced prevents her. "I didn't want to go back because I was scared. I have never felt safe going back because all I could remember were the bombings, the social unrest, the unevenness of everyday life. As a child you absorb all these things, but they don't reveal themselves for a very long time."

In America her response to the reality of exile, her sense of alienation and of being treated differently expressed itself through fashion, art, books and music. Her fashion worn as a form of armour and in defiance of her strict parents, the British punk rock music she played as a rebellious teenager an assertion of independence from a repressive culture. As she describes it, “the only way to escape was to read books, to listen to music and to make art, they gave me an independence of thought”. Together these varied experiences and her reaction to them formed the touchstone of her artistic practice, her inspiration and her way of sensing and ordering the world. As an immigrant she found herself at the intersection of two cultures, finding her voice in art and performance.

*

Holding up her phone, Shafie asks me if I would like to see the work for her exhibition in Australia. At a distance the six monochromatic panels remind me of the vintage mod dresses I like to wear, the black and white Op Art inspired fashion of the 1960s, but as she walks closer the intricacies of the composition and form reveal themselves. Constructed of tightly coiled strips of hand-painted paper, the paper scrolls or *ketabs* as she terms them, are stacked into a frame to create a patterned mosaic effect. Each panel has taken four to five weeks to complete, they are physically complex and labour-intensive. Her technique is methodical, repetitive and time consuming but for Shafie there is a meditative almost performative aspect to her artistic process.

I ask to see her desk. I expect it to be orderly and logical but it's overflowing with brushes, band aids, tools and strips of paper spilling haphazardly from piles. “I'm a messy painter”, she laughs. “When I first start it's a huge mess but then as I roll all this material is pulled into the work.” But to my eye it is the primacy of the text that is most striking, the chaotic sea of black ink that overruns her desk. The handwritten Farsi word *eshgh*, meaning ‘passionate love’, is inscribed over and over again on the small individual strips of paper. They remind me of the *tsujiura senbei* or fortune cracker found hidden in the bend of the traditional Japanese fortune cookie, and indeed for Shafie the concealment of the word as it's rolled into the *ketab* leaving behind only a tantalising glimpse is a central tenet of her practice. Inaccessible and

abstracted within the stacked, rolled, and spiked coils, as well as the geometric patterns of the panels themselves, Shafie is asking the viewer to contemplate and reflect on the unseen and hidden, invoking a sense of wonder about what might lie waiting to be revealed from within.

This practice of concealment and discovery came out of her own experience of finding notes and letters in second-hand books and objects, and she was also inspired by Turkmen and Afghan tribal jewellery which held Qur'anic inscriptions and other religious narratives folded or rolled into the lockets and amulets offering both physical and spiritual protection. As a child I remember being fascinated by my mother's antique turquoise and silver amulet, undoing and redoing the clasp to look at the miniature Qur'an nestled within. While it wasn't worn by my mother, she always kept it close by and it was inextricably linked to her early life in Iran. Shafie's focus on the one word, *eshgh*, holds similar talismanic properties. "*Eshgh* means annihilation and exultation for me. *Eshgh* means passion, pain, loss, life and death... By putting it in the curls of paper and holding it dear, it becomes a mantra."²

Iran's New Poetry movement of the 1960s and 1970s drew Shafie to *eshgh* as well introducing her to the works of leading members Sohrab Sepehri and Forugh Farrokhzad. She also draws inspiration from illuminated manuscripts and the writings of Persian poet and mystic Rūmī, but rather than the more formal Arabic calligraphy, her script is more fluid and organic. Influenced in her studies by Cy Twombly and Brice Marden's gestural lines she prefers not to adhere to any rules, writing with a brush or a pencil or pen. "I didn't want to lose my own handwriting because when you learn calligraphy it erases your own mark making...I want it to be raw, I want this to be my voice and it doesn't need to be perfect."

Given the centrality of poetry in Persian culture, it is perhaps not surprising that scenes from seminal works of Persian literature, such as the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* by Ferdowsi (c. 940-1020), intersect with Persian miniature paintings. For Shafie, these miniatures intertwine with her practice on several different levels. In the

² Valentish, Jenny. 'I saw death, I saw love': Artist's secret testament to life in Iran', *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 27, 2021. [https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/i-saw-death-i-saw-love-artist-s-secret-testament-to-life-in-iran-20210730-p58ef6.html]

making of her works for Australia she drew on the paintings' balanced composition and the meticulous attention to detail but also their lack of perspectival depth. As art historian Arthur Upham Pope wrote in his survey of Persian art: "The entire composition is in a single plane. There are no successive curtains of diminishing light, no converging perspectives that break through the surface. The figures are encompassed by no atmosphere and cast no shadows. Neither the individual figure nor the colors blend or merge and modeling, save for the shallowest and most delicate kind, is studiously avoided".³ These characteristics imbue the miniatures with an almost amaranthine quality that is also evident in Shafie's work.

Our conversation has drawn to a close. While my day has ended, Shafie's has only just started. I think of her in her studio, of the countless hours she spends drawing, rolling, cutting and folding; of the painstaking repetition, and of the act of concealing and revealing that gives her practice the feeling that it is without beginning, middle or end. Ultimately, Shafie's art explores the sometimes tense relationship between her American identity and the culture and traditions of the land of her birth. She is an intermediary between two cultures, mediating between the art and in this case its Western audience. She transfers her own experiences of exile, of estrangement, of the untangling of her own self through her practice. She is telling us her story. *Eshgh*, as a continuous expression of this, mirrors her intense love affair and longing for Iran, feeding my own perhaps misplaced nostalgia for a country that I knew as a child as well as through my mother's eyes. Before we say goodbye, I ask Shafie what's she's reading. "I'm reading Proust. And I hope that I'll finish Proust while in Sydney because through him I've found my way back to curling up in a chair, to the pleasure of getting lost in the pages of a book, to the power of telling a story."

³ Pope, Arthur Upham. *An Introduction to Persian Art Since the Seventh Century A.D.* Peter Davies, London, 2021, pp.107.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dolla Merrillees is a writer, curator, cultural producer and public speaker. She frequently presents at museum and academic conferences and is author of *The Woodcutter's Wife: A Stepmother's Tale* (Halstead Press, 2007). She brings a wealth of national and international experience to her work having had senior roles in large scale festivals, museums, cultural spaces as well as the tertiary sector. Merrillees is currently the Director Western Sydney Creative, Western Sydney University and was previously the Director and CEO of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney and the Associate Director, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation. Merrillees is a global emissary for the Sherman Centre for Culture and Ideas and has worked with leading fashion designers, cultural practitioners, and architects. She sits on the Sydney Review of Books Advisory Board and is listed in *Who's Who of Australian Women*. In 2018 she was awarded an Australian Design Honour by the Australian Design Centre.