



FRYE
ART MUSEUM

The Rain Doesn't Know Friends From Foes
Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian

January 26–April 28, 2019

Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian have lived and worked together in Dubai since 2009, when they went into self-imposed exile after artworks by Ramin and Rokni were seized from a private collection in Tehran because their content was deemed provocative. The three artists maintain individual practices and work as a collective to create installations, performances, and videos that build on their perception of life as theater and begin with the “creatures” the three artists become, physically and mentally, through their work.

With an emphasis on “reporting on our times,” the collective makes stop-motion animations that transform found material in order to critically examine contemporary history-in-the-making. Their animations—which they refer to as “moving paintings”—are composed from thousands of individual works on paper, in which the artists have collaged and painted over printed stills from internet videos and television newscasts. By detaching news imagery from its original context, this body of work estranges and opens up its encoded meanings while interrogating the entertainment value of reportage and the voyeuristic role of the spectator as a passive consumer of mass-media spectacle. The artists’ ultimate aim is to break down the “othering” effect of virtual bystanding and promote recognition of our social interdependency and the value of solidarity.

The Rain Doesn't Know Friends From Foes surveys the animations the artists have made to date and features a selection of related works on paper. The presentation marks the US debut of *From Sea to Dawn* (2016–17) and *Macht Schon* (2016), which reflect on the global immigration crisis. Along with another collaborative video, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (2015), the exhibition includes three earlier animations by Rokni, who originated the stop-motion method that the collective has adapted in recent years. By turns joyously irreverent and intensely biting, the works presented here cast a satirical eye on representations of the present, foregrounding the irrationality and violence that underlie our hypermediated reality.



From left to right: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian. Photo: Michele D'Ottavio.

Ramin Haerizadeh (Iranian, b. 1975, Tehran, Iran), **Rokni Haerizadeh** (Iranian, b. 1978, Tehran, Iran), and **Hesam Rahmanian** (Iranian, b. 1980, Knoxville, Tennessee) live and work together in a collective that constantly grows and contracts to include friends, writers, and other artists. The collective has presented solo exhibitions at Officine Grandi Riparazioni, Turin (2018), Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) (2017), Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2015), and Kunsthalle Zürich (2015). A monograph of their work, *Ramin Haerizadeh Rokni Haerizadeh Hesam Rahmanian*, was published by Mousse Publishing in 2015.



Being Together is Enough: An Interview with Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian

By Amanda Donnan, Curator, Frye Art Museum

Let's begin with the basics regarding your work as a collective, since each of you maintains an individual art practice in addition to the work you do together. How would you characterize your individual concerns and strategies—which all hinge on processes of transforming existing material—and how do these inform or appear in the collective works on paper and related videos?

In our everyday lives, objects, animals, food, and humans are all equally shaping a series of events that form our life-practice. There is no division between living and making—they are one and the same—so everything that influences us becomes part of the project. This can be a piece of news we come across, the most recent Instagram star, the films we watch, people we collaborate with, or objects we regularly collect and feel a connection to at a specific time. So the cyclical process of making, discussing, incorporating, researching, testing, finding, and collaborating has been a constant in the ten years of our life-performance, a continuous project of living and working together.

From the early days of coming together, we tried to define a form of self-imposed discipline, a series of strict daily routines that would help define a different headspace that moves away from the more commonly established patterns of thought. We also collect artworks from other artists that we admire and that don't necessarily align themselves with market policies. This discipline has kept us and consequently our house—which is also a studio, a movie theater, a library, a theater set, a museum, and a research center—an independent entity, apart from the city that contains it. So in both our collective and our individual work, we have tried to keep a critical distance from what is considered the norm in order to explore everyday limitations we experience in the world and its replica in our house.

As members of a generation who lived through the revolution followed by eight years of war [Iran-Iraq War, 1980–88] and who now live in exile, it's enough for us just to be together. Of course, each one of us is a different subjective being that functions in its own unique way, but when we join forces, we move toward building a common matter. Every new exhibition is like a volcano crater allowing for an interruption/eruption of the underlying magma that is our ongoing life-project.

The art canon struggles at times to accept the fluidity of a practice such as ours, like a rigidly ordered old system that can't digest the chaos of the amalgamations we create and keeps trying to squeeze us into old boxes that were made in another time. When working collectively with other artists, people, or objects, why should we apply a hierarchical system? While in negotiation with others (between organic and technological, born and manufactured, bred and designed), why should we compete and choose a winner? Why should we pick a string from this woven rug? Authorship has neither importance nor a place here. While we interact productively with others, the idea is to redefine the position of art and artist in its intimacy with life, particularly in times of environmental disaster, technological advancement, the accumulation and polarization of wealth, and the construction of borders and new walls that only cause an increase in xenophobia and racism.

So do you see the imperative to “make sense” or fit into certain categories as repressive more broadly, outside the context of the art world? Your work makes use of the grotesque and carnivalesque, critical devices generally understood to upend social order.

For every project we do, there is a body assembly consisting of a number of people getting together. Every time the bodies collectively agree on a matter, we pause and start rethinking that matter. We

start questioning and evaluating our approach to it and try to find its negative space. We are always on the lookout for unknown territories waiting to be discovered, so a sense of freedom comes from embracing these paradoxes and contradictions. In order to be artists, we have to practice staying away from being artists. To understand ourselves, we don't have to search within but go far away from ourselves. We have to be radical egalitarians and ask for livability for everyone, to paraphrase Judith Butler.

Our practice is about taking in as much as we can in order to understand our time as best we can. It is a love letter to our time. Comprehension is a very important part of this project. When something is not comprehended, it goes into exile. When trying to comprehend something, we have to look at it from different angles. We have to take it all in with all its intensities, high or low. So being senseless doesn't mean being stone-dead and motionless. On the contrary, we try to take it all in, to move on with a new composition, seeking new territories.

Your work is very prescient in terms of the "post-truth" condition we find ourselves in at present—at least in the US, with the attention being paid to "fake news"—reflecting as it does on the bias, sensationalism, and constructed nature of news imagery. Can you speak about your transformation of media imagery and what denaturalizing it is intended to do? Some might see your disfiguration of the migrants in *From Sea to Dawn* and *Macht Schon* as dehumanizing, but the individuals pictured are positioned as types and unspecified masses in the original footage. Paradoxically, perhaps they become more—or differently—visible by being conspicuously concealed.

In the moving paintings, we employ Brecht's technique of representing contemporary conditions while creating a sense of alienation or estrangement from reality. This is done by transforming the majority of the people in the news footage and rendering them unrecognizable. In this way, we aim, as Brecht said, to "exorcise the sentimentalism," create an emotional distance, and elicit "astonishment rather than empathy" from the viewer. We seek to encourage the viewer to recognize the reality of interdependency and the value of solidarity with others.

The arrivant is a being whose being we can't predict, whose arrival is utterly unexpected and unexpectedly unexpected to boot. The strange stranger is not only strange, but strangely so. They could be us. They are us. —Timothy Morton

Is the goal, then, to encourage viewers to reflect on their own passive role, essentially virtual bystanding—which became a subject of debate during the so-called Arab Spring uprisings¹—and motivate collective action?

Yes, indeed, it is to motivate their collective activity and to meet people on an individual level, because the collective work is made of its individual participants and contributors.

The creation of these pieces is extremely labor- and time-intensive. What's the collective process of working on these like?

Preparation for the moving paintings starts by watching and gathering existing news footage or videos found on YouTube, Vimeo or other sources. When we research a subject, we watch as many videos as we can that are related to it, and we also download and archive them. Through constant negotiation, we work our way toward a selection from what we have collected. The selection is based on events and localities that have a greater potential to be talked about more universally and looked at from different angles. Generally, the issues we are dealing with often revolve around power, gender, and otherness.

We start putting the collection of videos together and editing them until we reach the desired narration and length for the project. Then the video is printed out as individual frames. Depending on

the length of the video, we will have a given number of frames to work with. For example, *From Sea to Dawn* is something around six thousand frames. After numbering every frame and organizing them into groups, we spread them all out on long, makeshift tables, and just like in Chaplin's *Modern Times*, robotically and repetitively, as if working on an assembly line, we go through segments of the video, each one of us leaving a trace on every frame. Once finished, we scan them all back into the computer, reorder them on the time line, and finalize them into a moving painting.

In classic painting, the viewer comprehends a painting instantly in a single frame, with zero movements (time), and experiences the traces of one body. Moving paintings are comprehended by being unraveled through time. Each frame is intensified by the traces of not one but three bodies. We strive to provide a field for the spectator to expand his or her experience of embodiment. A field for more to take part in.

You've spoken about the creation of these works as a form of "non-painting" in that they essentially erase or undo the imagery they are made on. Can you speak about that in relation to history and your retelling of it? I was intrigued by a quote from a recent interview in which you said, referring to *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, "Even in the case of a brutal act like [the destruction of artifacts by] ISIS, something new seems to be born, which is history (exhaustion of humanity)."

As Tristin Garcia says, "to not want to be in the world is one way of arriving at the world. To go outside the world is one way of entering into the world." Similarly, by moving away from the painting, there is another way to reach the painting. When looking at history and the way it's writing and documenting humanity, some aspects are missing from it: the perspectives of women, people with disabilities, queers, people of color, animals, the planet. A humanity that has forgotten its underwear, to paraphrase and pervert a line from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

The history of humanity documents two overall aspects: (1) Nobility, which gives birth to new domains of thought and experience, but can also be threatening to the status quo, and brings up the question of freedom and its relationship to the future. It can produce new ethical terms, art, culture, technological achievements, and scientific accomplishments. (2) Vulgarity, which is often reflected in war, destruction, and disasters, the likes of which we've seen in Hiroshima, Auschwitz, et cetera.

In the Middle Eastern context, where the oral culture is more dominant than the documented one, there is no urge to document nobility (the authoritarian regimes would even jail or exile people with achievements they find threaten their existence). Therefore, vulgarity finds more space for maneuvering and is also well documented by the media. This is what we call the "exhaustion of humanity," an unbalanced documentation leaning toward vulgarity.

As Bahman Mohasses, the Iranian artist, observed, when looking at beautiful and well-known mosques, delicate palaces, and monumental landmarks in Iran, we almost never know the names of the architects who built them, but in reading history, we always know who the king was and who killed the king.

The earliest work included in the exhibition, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (2010–11), was inspired by Iranian playwright Bijan Mofid's satirical musical *Shahr-e Qesseh* (1968), which was written as an allegory of the strictures of pre-Revolutionary Iran and adapted from traditional folk tales. I suppose a corollary familiar to most Americans would be George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which likewise uses animal characters to skewer Stalinism in post-Revolutionary Russia. How do you see the function of satire within the context of your practice?

We definitely believe in humor and in the notion of comedy as a way of paving a path in the process

of becoming a new subject. The equality that is applied through comedy helps in thinking about the contradictory times that we all live in. Our aim is to construct a comic situation in which animals and the human-animal are embraced and there is a sense of urgency in accepting being an animal as well as an object, a machine, and all the other things that are excluded from this circle.

Our ten years of life-work performance have formed an environment that has been multiplying in different directions and is woven together organically. This environment is inclusive and respectful to all of life. It may fail at times and flourish and multiply at other times, but it always develops gradually through the interaction of all aspects involved in it. This gradual development can be seen in the moving paintings, through the repetition and multiplication of a triangle or a brushstroke that needs to be repeated hundreds of times. Therefore, the repetition of these forms evolves as they gradually continue to develop. In a way, we are more comfortable with being called "termites" than "artists."

Are there other artistic traditions or cultural artifacts particular to Iran that are reflected in your work? Some writers have drawn a correlation to Persian miniatures. Do you feel that tradition has bearing on your practice?

Persian Painting is a particular art form, so miniature paintings are not traditional paintings. They are considered a school of painting that changed through different dynasties. We are particularly intrigued by a time in the history of these paintings when literature and image start moving away from each other, and what is depicted in imagery is no longer a match to the literary source, the time when Persian Painting came in contact with colonial power and got unbalanced (the late Safavid [1501-1736] and early Qājār [1794-1925] dynasties). They started imitating and becoming more like Western paintings, and, for example, roaring lions become laughing fat cats and so on.

We are also interested in the ambiguity that exists in Persian literature, in which there is no division between genders. Also the language allows for versification of philosophy in poetry. Poets like Nima Youshij, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Forough Farrokhzad, and Reza Baraheni are a few of the contemporary poets whose work could be described as such.

Your titles are always quite poetic and often don't bear any obvious relationship to the content of the works to which they are attached. How did you come up with the exhibition title? Is it a reference to the dissolution of individual identity or a leveling of "me" and "not me," human subject and the external world, that you've mentioned throughout the interview?

The exhibition title comes from contemporary Iranian poet Reza Baraheni's poem "Ishmael." Yes, you said it well! Part of the poem talks about the generosity that is equally distributed to everyone and everything, getting rid of all the binaries and divisions, like the earth itself, where there is no division. Poetry releases the mind from conventions and regulations. It sets the mind in a new state to make new senses, to realize new meanings.

Interview conducted via email in December 2018.

1. See Anand Giridharadas, "Who Is Bearing Witness to the Revolution?" *The New York Times*, February 11, 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/12/world/middleeast/12iht-currents12.html>



Images: Cover: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmadian. *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (detail), 2015. Collage, watercolor, ink and acrylic on paper. 11 5/8 x 16 1/2 in. each. Courtesy of Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde and the artists.

Poster: Rokni Haerizadeh. Iranian, b. 1978. *My Heart Is Not Here My Heart's in The Highlands Chasing The Deers*, 2013. Gesso, ink, and watercolor on printed paper. H: 11 5/8 in. x W: 16 1/2 in. (29.53 x 41.91 cm). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: The Henry L. Hillman Fund, 2013.41.4. © Rokni Herizadeh. By permission.

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