

Uncharted Echoes

Curatorial Statement

The occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Ab-Anbar Gallery, which started its activities in Tehran in 2014, marks the beginning of a new phase for the project. The opening of the exhibition space in London's Fitzrovia, featuring the exhibition “Uncharted Echoes”, signifies a fresh start. Although only a short decade has passed, it serves as an invitation to reconsider, explore new directions, and acts as an accumulation of experiences and relationships built with the many artists that have collaborated with the gallery. To celebrate this milestone, Ab-Anbar invites us to engage in a seemingly paradoxical exercise: reevaluating the past while imagining the future, all within the same intention. If an echo refers us to the memory of something past, to a reminiscence - the echo is initially the repetition of a voice launched into space beforehand that returns to the origin when its waves hit an obstacle -, the echoes of this exhibition remain as yet unexplored, as spaces that are not yet known, as metaphors of what is to come.

The exhibition brings together artworks from artists who have been part of the gallery's rich history in Tehran and others that have recently joined the project. The gallery initially functioned as a symbiotic organism connecting Iranian artists and its diaspora, fostering a creative dialogue, bringing together artists, art enthusiasts, and the general public.

The effects of globalisation have been experienced differently across various geographies, with distinct characteristics and notable differences. While globalisation may exist predominantly in financial realms, it does not necessarily extend universally to culture or art. Art history is not a global phenomenon, and artistic practices are not interchangeable across the globe. The relocation of Ab-Anbar's activities from Tehran to London isn't either a literal translation but rather the establishment of a new framework with an expanded vocabulary.

Since its inception, Ab-Anbar Gallery has witnessed the social and creative transformations of the past decade in Iran, providing visibility and potential impact to artists of different generations and artistic approaches. The gallery has embraced a wide range of disciplines and genres, from interrogative painting practices of the 1970s to explorations of photography, digital

techniques, and imaginative artistic production. Ab-Anbar has become a platform for intellectual, performative, and narrative art across multiple artistic domains.

In 2020, Ab-Anbar reestablished itself in London amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when the world faced unprecedented defiances and a sense of global collapse. The lockdown measures implemented worldwide brought mobility to a halt and resulted in a mixture of perplexity, ignorance, fear, and frustration. The concept of freedom, highly cherished as one of the most fundamental rights, appeared to clash with the "sister value" of equality, and the "ultimate fear", security. The lockdown symbolised a temporary global divide rather than an equalising measure, exacerbating inequality and discrimination. The post-lockdown world seemed to foster even greater disparities, with the poor becoming poorer and the rich becoming richer. However, amidst these circumstances, there arose a potential for a new planetary consciousness, a belief in the unity and uniqueness of humanity, rejecting hierarchical divisions as well as acquiring a growing awareness of our dependency with the non-human that surround us.

Paradoxically, while striving for this sense of unity, the awareness of distinction and separation has intensified, leading to further divisions and polarisation within our species based on ethnicity, religion, language, nationality, and other categorisations. We find ourselves defined by labels, creating a sense of "us" versus "them". The arbitrary borders that divide regions like the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia were established in the past, and we question who can protect us from the consequences of these historical decisions that seem arbitrary now.

In the arts, a sacrifice of specificity and uniqueness has occurred, leading to mixed forms. Art is now hybrid. Since the tumultuous events of the twentieth century avant-garde, the arts have undergone deep transformations, sacrificing the specificity and uniqueness of techniques and genres. They are now heterogeneous, mixed, intermingling with one another, contaminated and enriched in every aspect. It seems that painting cannot exist without cinema, sculpture without architecture, and drawing has also evolved into a

technological activity. Images have transcended their frames and inundate our environment, immersing us in narratives that are theatrical and literary at the same time. This exhibition serves as proof that we are not in a museum that isolates genres in order to preserve, but rather we are experiencing the world of life itself, both real and imagined.

In a way, this exhibition functions as an atlas, not only recounting the history of the Ab-Anbar gallery through the works of the artists who have been part of its vibrant existence, but also reflecting the experiences and expressions of these artists as individuals and inviting new voices in the conversation. Movement symbolises life and it is an essential characteristic of humanity and all living beings, whether or not they possess the ability to wander around by themselves. Throughout history, all cultures and groups, rooted in specific territories, have migrated and evolved across land and sea. People, like cultures do, thrive in movement, through their interactions with others, while isolation leads to decline. Today, after nearly a century of exploring the skies, we are now contemplating the conquest of extraterrestrial territories, with concrete plans to inhabit other planets within our solar system, as well as growing desire to explore the depths of the sea, where the remains of sunken ships lie. However, in this modern era, many of us find ourselves displaced from our original environments due to necessity, obligation, or choice. From south to north, and east to west, in all directions, the preservation of life, the pursuit of freedom, the search for better living conditions, the need to know, or traumatic events continue to compel us to move from one place to another, sometimes risking the most precious aspects of our lives. The different terms used to describe these movements, internal or geographical, such as displacements, exiles, migrations, escapes, shape the identities of more and more individuals every day. Diaspora seems to define a growing number of citizens of a new world. We are all foreigners, regardless of our location, even if we consider ourselves natives of a particular place. Ab-Anbar and its artists explore the experience of movement, continuity, and new beginnings.

Each artist in this exhibition expresses their relationship with identity, origins, and the present moment through their unique artistic language. Regardless of their origin or place of residence, each artist deals with the universal tensions that define any culture, any community: the individual with the group, the inside with the outside and past with present. The works in the exhibition chronologically span from the late seventies/early eighties to the present day, with a focus on the first decades of the 21st Century. This exhibition is about an imagination of the future, about the new conditions to think the times to come.

The Artists and Their Works:

This exhibition is not a retrospective project; it looks more towards the future than the past and exists in an increasingly ephemeral present. I have selected works that are highly representative of each artist's body of work, some of which were created some time ago or very recently, and many of which have never been seen before.

Sonia Balassanian's work is directly inspired by one of the episodes of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran that garnered significant political and media attention at the beginning of the new regime: the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran by revolutionary students. The taking of fifty two American hostages, until the final resolution of the conflict in 1981, symbolised a crucial moment in the history of contemporary ideological confrontations. These events occurred nearly simultaneously with the beginning of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (December 1979) and the Iraq-Iran war that commenced in September 1980. Balassanian, an artist of Armenian origin, combines press clippings from Iranian and Western media with pictorial interventions, calligraphy, and gestural strokes in her series of collages. By overlaying information and emotion, "Hostages: A Diary" (1980) provides an account of events that, though distant in time, were experienced as one of the great international crises involving antagonistic and seemingly irreconcilable enemies. Western values once again clashed with firmly held beliefs in a different kind of world order. Balassanian is a pioneering artist in

reclaiming the image, voice, and role of women in society. Her work combines pictorial expression and conceptual research, incorporating sculpture, installation, and video.

Taha Heydari, belonging to a different generation and having spent most of his life in the United States since his family moved from Iran in 2014, is also inspired by the imagery that the media of that time disseminated about the advent and development of the Islamic revolution. His paintings draw direct inspiration from the scenes portrayed primarily in newspapers or on television. He recomposes and interprets these scenes through figurative strategies, diverse visual recodifications, and a colourful palette, creating a surreal atmosphere that envelops the subjects. Heydari painted a group of men gathered around a table cluttered with papers and various nearly indistinguishable objects (a radio-cassette player, a microphone, what appears to be clothing, two automatic rifles...). In the background, what seems to be a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini presides over the scene. "The Table" (2023) depicts an interrogation scene involving the American hostages captured in 1979, which is also referenced in Balassanian's work. This event profoundly changed the way the United States (and the West) has since viewed Iran. "Full Moon" (2023) is an enigmatic nocturnal landscape in the foreground of which four women dressed in wide black robes and veiled hair are portrayed. Their faces are either completely or partially covered, or blurred. Their hands seem to be occupied with cleaning a large rug or cloth, in the middle of the night, illuminated by the presence of a massive moon overhead. This scene could be interpreted as rooted in a traditional setting. However, we are well aware of the role of women in recent demands for the right to life and freedom of expression, as well as the use of facial recognition technologies in cameras present in public spaces throughout the country. For Iranian women, the decision to wear head coverings or not has turned their bodies into a pivotal social and political battleground. The media, with its optical effects, the weaving of printed image reproductions in the press, and the pixelation on television screens, whose popular expansion coincided with other technologies such as magnetic tape for sound recording and reproduction (cassettes), emerged simultaneously with the revolution

and marked the mass accessibility of iconography, information, and moving images. Heydari undertakes authentic operations of iconographic and chronological heterogeneousness, as if creating collages and assemblages of materials of different origins through painting.

Douglas Abdell, a culturally crossbred artist by definition, offers a radically different approach to painting. Born and educated in the United States as a Lebanese Christian, Abdell returned to the Mediterranean in search of the historical factors that have shaped a complex world around the sea, almost enclosed between three continents, since ancient times. In the early 1980s, Abdell perceived and expressed in his paintings a phenomenon that would still take time to be acknowledged in official discourses: the multicultural atmosphere generated by the coexistence of countless languages, imaginaries, traditions, desires, and fears. Despite having diverse external characteristics, these elements shared a common destiny. In his paintings, the historical Middle East coexists with the economically and culturally influential Far East (Japanese media culture, Chinese characters) within the Western world (Europe and North America). Urban graffiti symbols, representing anonymous voices, had already infiltrated the sacred space of canvases. However, Abdell seeks temporary supports that align with the transient nature of his experiences. In the streets, everything is ephemeral; little remains. He uses packing wood and boxes from intercontinental trade packaging, thus becoming an artist dedicated to understanding the transient nature of a new urban and unconsciously Babelian culture.

Another aspect of painting is explored by Fadia Haddad, a Lebanese artist based in Paris, who delves into forms of abstraction that rely on intellect and the entropy that gestural actions bring to unpredictable outcomes. Haddad's painting is simultaneously cerebral and celebratory, embracing simplicity in materials, colours, and forms. For this occasion, I have selected works that exude formal sobriety and possess hypnotic power. Unlike Abdell's work, for example, Haddad's signs are abstract and do not reference anything beyond the environment of the painting itself. She has organised her work into three extensive series, cultivating them with a profoundly modern spirit of

repetition, variation, and mental and physical discipline. Birds, Masks, and Landscapes dominate her production, characterised by a lack of expressiveness or excessive gestural quality. The chosen works transport us to a symbolic universe of gentle colours and shapes that evoke language, spelling, and symbols associated with writing, such as ellipsis, commas, and parentheses.

Contrary to many characterisations of the intercrossing epoch we currently live in, the early 21st century cannot be labeled as "post." We are not simply "after" anything that holds more relevance than what is yet to come from this point onward. Perhaps that is why we should grow accustomed to using more the prefix "pre" even if we have yet to determine exactly what to pair it with. Drawing and painting, techniques with vast histories, form the expressive universe of several artists in this exhibition.

Majid Fathizadeh briefly explores the tumultuous convergence of formal and material features in the history of pictorial representation, where the faithful reproduction of reality ceases to be the primary objective of painting, instead emphasising its capacity to reinvent the world through narration and illusion—what is left unsaid rather than what is merely seen. Fathizadeh's paintings and drawings possess a raw and incomplete quality, with an indeterminacy that allows his images to tell stories that appear impossible to interpret. These images portray narratives that may seem fantastical but are deeply rooted in the artist's perception of his social, cultural, and political environment. They depict a world where promises of happiness transform into messages of oppression, and excessive competition hinders human solidarity. In a way, Fathizadeh's paintings and drawings point to the crisis of reason proclaimed by Goya as the producer of monsters.

Avish Khebrehzadeh's work, stemming from the realms of drawing and storytelling, is rooted in her mastery of illustration. Her animations, as well as her paintings, blend the human world with the botanical and animal realms in various configurations, always expressing a commitment to the non-human beings with whom we share the planet. The installation piece "Where do we go from here" (2011) features a projection at a 90-degree angle onto the

ground. A circular image is cast upon a surface covered with salt, with a small fish swimming in a deep plate at its centre. Accompanied by the music of stringed instruments, a composition by the Scottish composer John Blackwood McEwen, the work narrates the journey of an airplane circling the centre and flying over seas, deserts, cities, day and night. Sea creatures and birds, likely seagulls, accompany the airplane. The passage of time is conveyed through the succession of landscapes, the shifting light from day to night. Although the airplane perpetually circles around the small fish at the centre, the narrative follows a linear trajectory that concludes as if the eye closes in on itself. Khebrehzadeh constructs a lyrical metaphor about the eternal journey, which also seems to reflect the artist's own condition—born in Iran, migrating first to Italy and then to the United States. Once you have started to fly, you remain in motion indefinitely.

The power of drawing as a medium with great narrative force is evident in the work of several artists featured in this exhibition. One of the most challenging and complex artists in this regard is undoubtedly Seyed Amin Bagheri, an artist born in Rasht, having lived in Shiraz and Tehran to return recently to his birth town. Bagheri, a multimedia artist, considers drawing one of his primary mediums. For him, drawing is a means of storytelling, and in his piece "Tales of a Stateless Parrot" (2022), he extensively utilises visual and literary resources from his cultural traditions. This work is a sprawling horizontal composition related to the demolition of the house where the artist and his wife resided for a transformative decade in Bagheri's life and environment. Concrete events, dreams, and fantasies merge in this graphic epic that serves as both a personal and subjective testimony, as well as the story of a specific period. Bagheri employs forms of representation that deviate from the laws of linear perspective, distributing the viewer's attention within a labyrinthine structure, where each image functions as a word in a long sentence, reminiscent of Arabic, Persian, or Indian customs. Certain forms, which the Greco-Roman tradition might perceive as monstrous, such as a headless body, convey here mythological or metaphysical ideas. Bagheri embraces a rhizomatic narrative method, extending in various directions and plural ramifications within the material nature of the scroll.

If we are to draw any conclusions in this exploration of painting's forms and languages, Raha Raissnia's work provides a perfect opportunity to take a significant step forward. The questioning, crisis, and disruption of painting constitute one of the most significant advantages brought about by photography. Its sharpness, veracity, and fidelity to reality seem to lie at the heart of Raissnia's concerns. In her paintings, drawings, and cinematographic works, she combines and grafts diverse techniques and materials, superimposing them on one another. Her presence in experimental film circuits is evident throughout her work, where drawing, painting, photographic elements, and cinematographic distortions converge. In Raissnia's work, it is never quite clear what we are looking at: whether it's an abstract and gestural exercise, an out-of-focus enlargement, an old document, or an image from the future. "Aviary" (2019) is a cinematographic installation, a real device in which the movement of the image unfolds within a frozen time, perpetually repeating itself. We find ourselves immersed in a world of ruins, shadows, interplay of light, and phantasmagoria, reminding us how the image of the East, especially through photography, includes the destruction of monuments and architectural heritage as a constant resource, a leitmotif.

In contrast to Raissnia's handmade aspect, Arash Hanaei directly embraces the possibilities offered by the digital realm. He is fundamentally interested in visual phenomena, image manipulation, and the construction of new perceptual environments. Hanaei is a prolific artist who works with a variety of techniques and media. In this exhibition, we present works that explore the theme of the city in its various configurations, a theme also explored by other artists in the show. Capital Complex is the title of a series of digital drawings developed by Hanaei between 2008 and 2015 in Tehran. Using his own photographs of the city, the artist carefully removed the sensitive features of the images so that only a linear, almost abstract essence remains. The images document the moment when, during the Iran-Iraq war, advertisements for Western products were giving way to the celebration of the martyrs and heroes of the war and ideological slogans promoted by the government. Hanaei defines this work, now also an authentic historical

document, as a palimpsest, an ancient text that is difficult to understand. Capital Complex anticipates Hanaei's later works, especially those developed in major European cities, after he moved to Paris in 2015.

The urban environment also serves as the territory in which artists, like Hanaei, explore the city's capacity to host communal life. Mohammed Ghazali's work articulates the relationship between open, common spaces and personal histories, often without the presence of human figures. Ghazali investigates the boundaries that separate and unite the author and the spectator, focusing on the margins of photographic mechanics and chemistry—everything that is not human. In the series presented in this exhibition, Ghazali employs a particular visual editing process on photographs, gradually veiling specific areas with medical adhesive tape to direct the viewer's attention to reduced portions of the image. Ghazali subsequently reframes the image using mechanical means, as if healing a wound. Arranged on the floor, on the perimeter of the gallery, the viewer must hold the framed photograph in their hands to examine it closely and identify the invisible parts, ranging from partially to fully sharp. The photographs become a quasi-erotic experiential device.

Exploring the components and material limits of photography, Hessam Samavatian constructs metaphors around personal memory, heritage, and shared history. During one of his trips to Tehran, the artist stumbled upon a collection of negatives discarded on the street, rescuing them from the trash. Upon analysis, some of the spaces and objects captured in the photographs felt familiar to him. Further investigation revealed that his grandmother had disposed of these photographic collections after the death of his grandfather. Since then, Samavatian has utilised this personal heritage as raw material for much of his work. In this case, the images are printed on gypsum plates that take the form of boxes of photographic paper, reminiscent of the commercially available packaging material from which the images were once printed. Gypsum and photography share an unexpected relationship: both can fix an image through a chemical or physical process, whether through the evaporation of water or the transformation and fixation

of a luminous impression. In fact, plaster was historically used as a material to make masks of the deceased, preserving their memory until the invention of photography. In a way, these works erect a dual function of representation and commemoration. By breathing new life into his grandparents' negative images, Samavatian also creates a death mask for the chemical processes and materials that have been surpassed by digital image-capturing, recording, and reproducing procedures.

Particular actions involving the mechanisms of development, copying, reproduction, and degeneration of photographic images have also been part of the strategies developed by Shahrzad Kamel, especially in relation to objects from the past, archaeological, architectural, or heritage-related documentation. In this exhibition, Kamel presents a recent work that transforms her interest in manipulating, accelerating, or altering images into an "account" of the translation of her studio activity into a series of "maps". The working table in Kamel's studio is photographed by a camera suspended perpendicular to its surface. The resulting photographs, taken without a human eye behind the camera, depict various objects as if they were part of an apparently randomly created geography, reflecting the unconscious effects of the artist's thoughts. On the studio table, we find reproductions of historical images, threads, fabrics—a constant reference in her work—fruits, a bonbon, or collections of archaeological objects photographed as if they were to constitute a typological atlas, an informal "Mnemosyne," or a diary that reveals how chance constantly organises and stirs up the materials with which the intellect manifests its activity. In the artist's studio, the monumental is equated with the minuscule, and events occur within it that never become visible even to the artist herself.

The body's absence from the representation of the city and the mechanisms of photographic representation seems to take centre stage in Baktash Sarang's work as he reintroduces figurative, realist drawings into the material world of our exhibition. Initially fascinated by the angular and broken forms of geometric or constructivist sculpture, Sarang superimposes them onto realistic portraits of people, inventing characters that resemble archetypes.

In the works presented in this exhibition, Sarang also explores the relationship between human beings and their environment by extending the concept of dress to that of domestic and residential architecture. Dressing becomes a way of inhabiting, and the room becomes a garment. Within architectural plans and drawings, fencing helmets allow him to evoke the ideas of protection and anonymity, a paradox skilfully cultivated by the artist. Protection, clothing, anonymity, and identity converge in Sarang's drawings, which constantly interrogate the boundaries of the body in inhabited and public spaces.

The body itself becomes the main "material" in the work of Neda Razavipoor, an artist whose work is essentially theatrical and performative. The performance held in Tehran in 2014 was entitled "Oscillation" and staged attempts to visualise what the artist, quoting physicist and writer Nassim Taleb, called "anti-fragility", or "unstable equilibrium" as a metaphor for the human condition. Sorting, classifying, and cleaning the pieces of porcelain or glass that make up a trousseau or domestic heritage precede, in an almost ceremonial ritual, their destruction and a prolonged action of collecting and rearranging. The action represents life constantly on the edge of chaos and the care given to that which remains after the disaster. The exhibition showcases the dress worn by the artist during the performance, as well as examples of the fragments, carefully preserved as memories of objects that were and could be again, in which the costs of destruction (an accident or a sacrifice) intertwine and confuse with those of care and attention. Without nostalgia, the work can be read as a metaphor for the situation in Iran, through the subjective and personal interpretation of the artist.

The condition of being displaced or emigrated is not solely associated with the figure of the vanquished. In the 16th century, a series of migrations began from Europe to America, then referred to as the New World, in contrast to the Old Continent. The colonisation of the Americas consisted of enterprises promoted and supported by states desiring greater wealth and power. The initiation of extractive economies, large-scale enslavement of

African men and women, and the extermination of aboriginal populations, heritage, cultures, and indigenous languages has been labeled evangelisation or simply conquest. The European powers of the time were eager to divide up new territories, and Marlon de Azambuja's "Desembarque" (2016-2023) provides an unusual yet enlightening image of the encounter between the invading European and the local inhabitant in the Brazilian jungle, which allowed the conversation between the two parties: the flight of a parrot served as an interface for communication, the outcome of which is well-known today. Nature and concrete are profoundly antagonistic elements whose meeting synthesises how Western modernity has imposed its "efficacy" on all those other forms of life that are different. Intolerance towards difference is a characteristic of autocracy, despotism, and domination, and it is not limited to faraway places but widespread in all social and political spaces, including the most economically developed ones. "Cruzeiro do Sul" (2023), so to speak, is a portable monument to dissidence, an invitation to see the world from an opposite perspective. A concrete base contains the mould of the inside of a straw hat. To wear it, we must stand "upside down," head down with our feet in the air—a physically impossible position, but one that represents the viewpoint of "those below."

We can consider Nil Yalter's video installation "Trans-Voices" as one of the precursor works in contemporary representation of the figure of the emigrant, fundamentally motivated by the uneven progress in European territories. In the same way as Spanish, Portuguese, Greeks or Turkish Southern populations after the Second World War were massively attracted to the centre of Europe, the old continent continues to attract "guest" workers to carry out tasks that the locals do not consider prestigious or cannot fulfil. The ageing population and declining birth rate in so-called "advanced" societies continue to be factors in the transfer of labor forces from less industrialised regions. There are many ways to be identified as a foreigner, and some of them are not chosen. Yalter is a pioneer in video art with a deep social and political commitment. Her work is at once poetic and documentary, both affirming and stimulating our imagination. "Trans-Voices" is a powerful one-minute video intended ideally for television

broadcasting, accompanied by a text manifesto / poem where the author provides multiple definitions of herself: "I am an artist / A Jew from Thessaloniki / ... / A Greek Orthodox / A nomad / An exile / I am the message / I exist...".

Geometry, proportions, and ordered repeated volumes typical of Islamic architecture are at the origin of Timo Nasser's work. Mathematics serves as both an object and an instrument for understanding and composing works expressed in various materials and conditions: painting, sculpture, drawing, objects, and more. In the three-dimensional objects selected for the exhibition, Nasser explores the plastic possibilities of an invented writing, potentially infinite alphabets, and endless combinations. Nasser's paintings revisit the theme of geometric proportions through multiple symmetries and harmonies, resembling fragments of large kaleidoscopic images. These vibrant and colourful paintings contrast with the chromatic restraint of the drawings or sculptures, creating contrasting a Pop atmosphere with an almost industrial character.

While the structures, actors, and habits that have shaped the world's current configuration remain silently in place, it would be naive to believe that an artwork alone can solve the problems created by centuries of human predatory activity and abuse of power. However, it is in our nature to imagine what we need in order to build another world, not a parallel reality, but one that should exist if possible. We no longer accept the North to symbolise conquerors and the powerful, nor do we want the South to be a metaphor for colonised territories or euphemistically termed "developing." The East is neither far nor in the middle because the West no longer is the only centre of the world.

The future of Ab-Anbar considers this space to develop its program in a new phase and continue engaging with artists from different geographical backgrounds, aiming to reflect the diasporic condition of an increasing number of inhabitants of our planet, displaced by desire, obligation, or necessity. "Where are we going?" becomes more relevant than "Where do we come from?" Identities shaped through movement, neither static nor

permanent, evolve within the fluxes of global conditions characterised by instability and uncertainty. The works of the artists in the exhibition reflect different levels and degrees of displacement, specifically in the representation of identities built through flux.

Regardless of their place of residence, whether in Iran, Europe, or America, the artists create forms of beauty that emerge from the tensions between modern techniques of representation and pre-modern traditions developed centuries ago or throughout the 20th century. These forms intertwine with elements of their origin or heritage, their perpetual displacements, and their imagined, desired future.

Bartomeu Mari