

A painter, from Antwerp to Berlin and New York

THE ODYSSEY OF MARYAM NAJD

David ULRICHS

Educated in Persian miniature painting, Maryam Najd (1965, Iran) moved to Belgium from Iran in 1992. As a painter, she lived, studied and worked in Antwerp. In 2008, after sixteen years, she mustered up the courage and moved to Berlin. This year she has been accepted as an artist in residency in New York. At the time of writing, the visa to allow her to enter the U.S. has not been granted by the relevant authorities. She waits in Berlin for news...

Very few Flemish artists are willing to trade in the comforts offered by the Flemish Community for the uncertainty of the international stage. For many years Maryam Najd lived in Antwerp and worked with Tim van Laere and after that Crown Gallery. Why did she decide to leave? Maryam Najd: “Well, it’s not that I wanted to leave Belgium, but I felt a strong attraction to Berlin. There is so much going on here, in the art world. It really is a very creative city. Also, the art scene in Antwerp – even Belgium – is rather small. So, after many years in Antwerp, I felt that I was getting stuck in a rut. I moved here a year and a half ago; Berlin seemed to promise the necessary dynamism to help me move on...”

And, did it?

Maryam Najd: “So far, definitely. Within one year of my move, I received two invitations to artist residency programmes. I had applied for both residencies because I realised that the most straightforward way to move within the international art scene was through these kinds of institutions.”

Did you have to choose or could you accept both?

Najd: “They both start at the beginning of 2010 and run for one year, so I had to choose and I decided for New York.”

You must be in the middle of packing?

Najd: “Well, honestly I am having some problems getting to New York. Although I am registered as a Belgian artist, my nationality is Iranian and the American authorities consider me as such, it seems they have problems with my country of origin. I applied for a visa months ago, as soon as I received the invitation, but I still have not received an answer.”

Did you have to be there on 1 January to register?

Najd: “Strictly speaking, no, but arriving a few months late is not really the point of a residency.”

In the past, your work has not really been politically motivated. So do you really think your work has something to do with you not getting a visa?

Najd: “That’s true, my work has not been so political, but a few years ago I did complete one painting of Osama Bin Laden entitled ‘self portrait’, so maybe that is why they have a problem letting me into the country!”

Really?

Najd: “No, I just think that in light of the recent terrorist threats, the US government is being extra careful, which I totally understand.”

It seems like perfect timing, since your most recent series of paintings have become more political.

Najd: “Yes. These works are inspired by the recent political developments in Iran, especially the elections in June last year and the civil unrest that came afterwards. Although I have lived thousands of kilometres away from Iran for years, I somehow still feel emotionally connected to the people and the country. This, I realize nearly every time I watch the news and see the Iranians protesting. There seems to be some kind of bond. Perhaps I understand their pain and frustration a little better than people that are not from that region. So those events really affected me and I spent a lot of time on the Internet, on facebook, twitter and YouTube to keep informed on what was going on. I realised that certain images really touched me...”

So, essentially the production process has remained more or less the same; you sift through the media and select images that affect you and then you make the content less obvious, for example by deforming or blurring...

Najd: “Yes. I’m still fascinated at how easily we can zap away – either on the television remote control or with the mouse at the computer – images or news items that we are not interested in and switch over to a different channel, which may be showing a TV-commercial or a soap opera! For example,



MARYAM NAJD AT THE FORMER IRAQI EMBASSY IN BERLIN. PHOTO NADINE DINTER

in my recent series from last year entitled ‘Bloody Blankets, Bloody Blanks’ I also used images I found on the Internet or on television. These works

are about how certain documentary images sometimes don’t move us at all, while others do. For example, it subtly deals with the fact that women are being mistreated and suppressed, not only in Muslim countries, but also in Europe. Since I am a woman, the topic affected me personally, but in blurring the subjects I tried to keep it in a certain sense universal and nonjudgmental. It was actually, while I was applying the last layers to some of the paintings in that series, that the situation in Iran escalated and I realised the feelings aroused in me by the images of suppressed protest etc. in Iran were much more intense.”

Nevertheless, the paintings look very controlled and don’t explicitly refer to the situation in Iran. There is a fabulous portrait of Heath Ledger as ‘The Joker’ and one of a protester holding up a picture of someone who looks vaguely like Ahmadinejad...

Najd: “Well, I already destroyed quite a few paintings, because I felt that they dealt with the subject too directly, they were not universal enough. Of course I

an indirect way and paint it suggestively, rather than in an explicit way.”

So it was self-censoring?

Najd: “I guess. I am not totally free to express whatever I want in my works.”

So your work is also like a mask...

Najd: “Yes, but it shows at the same time as it hides.”

In a way your works are expressions of the fact that you are not able to directly express what you want to say, politically but perhaps also generally, which is a longstanding problem of representation.

Najd: “Well, to realistically represent and reproduce images that come to us from Iran is pointless. Many people watch television but don’t realise what is going on, neither in Iran nor in general. We are numbed. Why would we look at these images, if they were made into a work of art? My type of painting is a silent way of expression.”

In your oeuvre is there only silent expression?

Najd: “My next project, which was my proposal for the New York residency, is a statement. It is an action, an event, and a performance.”

So this will not be a painting?

Najd: “I’m a painter, so painting is a part of it. I will make 192 small-scale abstract paintings of the different flags of the world.”

Will we be able to recognise each flag?

Najd: “No, I don’t think so. I will use the same colours, but the surface will be too abstract for the flag to be recognisable. The working title is ‘Non-Existent Flag Project.’”

You are destroying flags?

Najd: “I am making the statement that flags are not really necessary and that we shouldn’t need them. The performance part will involve all the flags of the world in a ceremonial presentation.”

A kind of ritual?

Najd: “Yes. Involving national identity.”

Will it be surrounded by controversy?

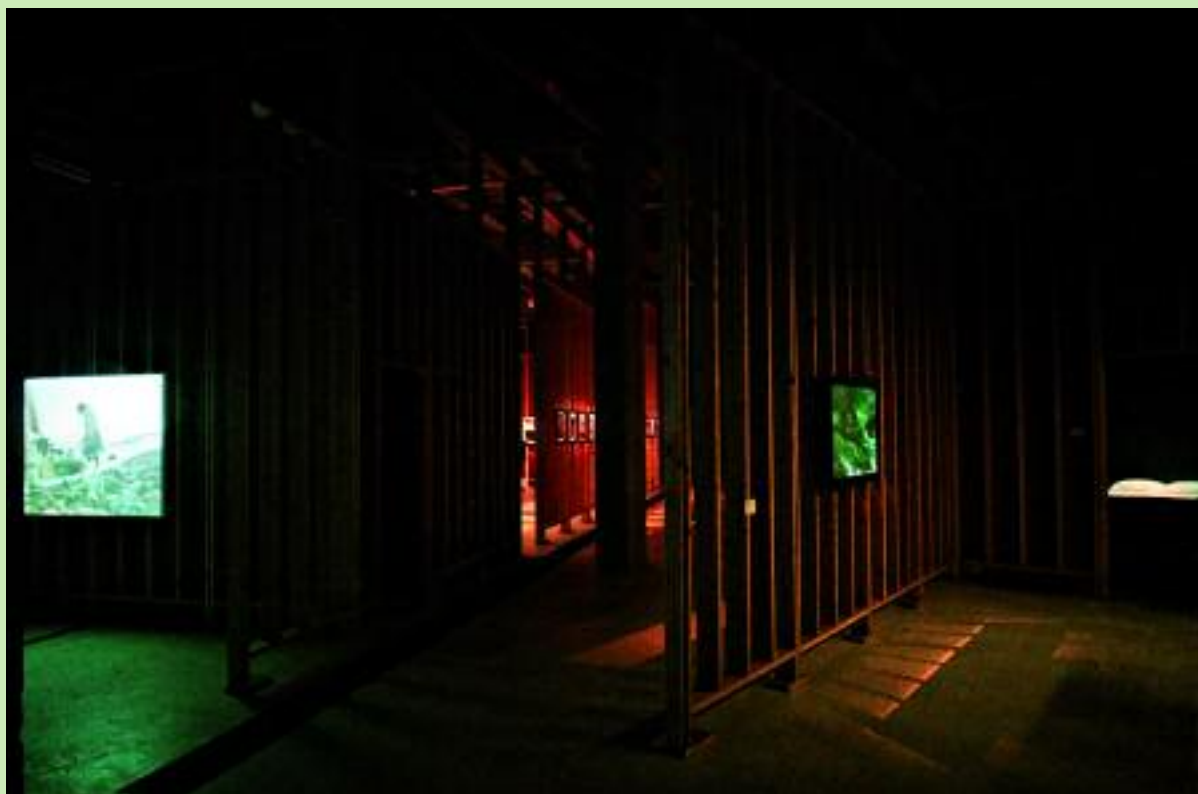
Najd: “Not at all. The idea behind it will show that we can all be united...”

No Borders?

Najd: “Yes. No borders. More importance to life, less importance to what are often just random lines drawn on a map.”

This is a big step in your work, your first performative work and first really explicit statement. Although it will be a universal statement, this will probably be your most personal work to date.

Najd: “I agree. This statement will open up a dialogue with the viewer. The ideas I am exposing are more accessible, so I am also making myself more vulnerable.”



VIEW ON ‘ANIMISM’ IN EXTRA CITY ANTWERP © PHOTO: JEAN-PIERRE STOOP

‘Animism’ in M HKA and Extra City Antwerp

‘Animism’ is a long-term exhibition and publication project presented till 2 May 2010 in Antwerp in a collaboration of Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen and the Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA). A second version of the exhibition will be shown at Kunsthalle Bern from May till July 2010. Subsequent versions will be developed at the Generali Foundation in Vienna and the House of World Cultures in Berlin in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

The project approaches the concept of animism – coined by 19th century anthropologists in the context of the colonial encounter – from a contemporary perspective. It addresses the current increase in interest in animism, which stems from a widespread re-visioning of modernity, by a reflection on aesthetic processes seen through the prism of an exhibition.

‘Animism’ has evolved around two opposed and yet complementary processes: animation and objectification. With works by: Agency, Art & Language, Christian W. Braune & Otto Fischer, Marcel Broodthaers, Paul Chan, Tony Conrad, Didier Demorey, Walt Disney, Lili Dujourie, Jimmie Durham, Eric Duvivier, Harun Farocki, León Ferrari, Christopher Glembotzky, Victor Grippo, Brion Gysin, Luis Jacob, Ken Jacobs, Darius James, Joachim Koester, Zacharias Kunuk, Louise Lawler, Len Lye, Étienne-Jules Marey, Daria Martin, Angela Melitopoulos & Maurizio Lazzarato, Wesley Meuris, Henri Michaux, Santu Mofokeng, Vincent Monnikendam, Tom Nicholson, Otobong Nkanga, Reto Pulfer, Félix-Louis Regnault, Józef Robakowski, Natascha Sadr Haghghighian, Paul Sharits, Yutaka Sone, Jan Svankmajer, David G. Tretyakoff, Rosemarie Trockel, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Dziga Vertov, Klaus Weber, Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

More info: www.mhka.be www.extracity.org