

## Interview with Maryam Ashkanian



*Untitled 3*, 150 x 150 cm, mixed fabric and thread, 2011

How did you get started with your art practice?

In 2007, I entered the Fine Arts University in Rasht, Iran. It was the best decision of my life, and I have taken art very seriously since then.

Your CV mentions that your degree is in painting. When did you start working with fabrics? Did you always work with fabric as a painting medium?

My mother's village is in Gilan (Caspian area), which is one of the main places in Iran for sewing. My childhood was embedded in textiles and sewing. Until I started at the fine arts university, I did not realize it was possible to use textiles as a medium, so I used oil painting at first. Later, I realized that oil paint was not my vision of the world. It took me awhile to understand and realize the numerous possibilities and the flexibility that textiles and sewing could bring to my practice. There were some things I couldn't achieve in oil painting that I can with textiles.

How do you begin producing your works?

My work process begins with my "études" or preparatory sketches, which represent the mental process of each work. However, sometimes the monoprint and the collage aspects of the work take control and become the dominant forces.

Where do you get your fabrics?

I search for old fabrics, and I have my own treasure hunts in the traditional marketplaces as well as private homes. The weekend markets are where I find the best fabrics for my work.

Is there a particular significance to the fabrics themselves?

Of course. You can't find the same patterns and character in new fabric as in old textiles. I'm not trying to make a sentimental issue out of the old textiles, but my lifelong experiences with fabric have given me a different view of them.

Your works seem to have a quilted appearance. Do you employ many layers of fabric?

In my work, I attempt to create a concrete conceptual body formed with many layers to achieve what my inspiration guides me to do.

Why do you add all the variety of layers and textures?

I get lots of personal satisfaction from my work. I work layer by layer until the point that I can say it was a successful dialogue. If I'm not happy with the work, I will separate the unfinished parts and begin again. I do not sign the work until I have realized my concept - even though I may get compliments from others during the process.

Do poems inspire you?

Yes, poetry inspires me. Often, in my mind, there is something meaningful going through a maturing process, and when I hear a word, poem or story, the language guides me unconsciously toward the inspiration that was maturing in my mind. My work starts from the moment I can reconstruct the inspiration for myself. My work is very similar to a writer's work but with a different result.

What are the most immediate influences regarding the form and content of your work?

The major influence in my work comes from my immediate surroundings. These inspirational elements are often very simple things that I witnessed growing up, but they gave me a deeper sensibility toward my work. To develop this further and preserve it, I spend time every month taking photos of distant parts of my hometown and villages in Iran – this way, I don't lose my contact with these elements.

When I look at your work, I immediately think of Ghada Amer. How does the work of Ghada Amer inspire you?

I have never heard of that artist before!

The text from your last exhibition discusses how you have contributed to a history and to moments that represent your past memories and celebrations—things that may have been forgotten but genuinely exist. Do you see yourself connecting with the past in this way?

My movement towards the future has inspired me to learn more about the past. The nature of my work is to discover more about the past through the present. My new works are not nostalgic for the past, but I do not want to be separated from my birthplace and my roots.

Also, the article mentions that your work is the result of a feminine patience based upon a masculine ground: women, symbolically - men, abstractly. For me, this is not immediately evident in your works. Do you find this a useful comparison? Do you think that men and women occupy different spaces in your artworks?

I have not been thinking much about gender issues in my work, not even in the figurative aspect of my work. My work is located between the conceptual and figurative. Men and women have co-existed throughout history, and with all the ups and downs, this has now become a political statement. I am searching in the land of sewing and textiles to show viewers my vision of the world. The more I go forward, the more exciting my work and my world is becoming. What matters for me is to go forward with optimism, no matter what I do.

Maryam Askhanian November 2011