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Hadieh Shafie: The Sweet Turning of the Page



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Art review: Hadieh Shafie at Morton Fine Art

By Michael O'Sullivan
Thursday, May 19, 2011

It's hard not to be seduced by Hadieh Shafie's art, now on view at Morton Fine Art. Maybe that's the effect of the subliminal message hidden in each piece: the word "love."

It isn't in English, but it's easy to spot. Several of the Baltimore-based, Iranian-born artist's drawings consist of nothing but the Farsi word *eshghe*, meaning love or passion, written over and over again in elegant calligraphic script. The word itself forms an abstract design, almost like a skeleton key. In repetition, it's beautiful, even if you don't know what it means.

In some other pieces, it's a little harder to find. The art that Shafie is best known for is made from thousands of one-inch strips of paper, again with the word *eshghe* written on them, but coiled so tightly that you can't even read it. Four of them are on view at M.F.A.

Here's how they're made.

Imagine taking a fortune from a Chinese fortune cookie and rolling it up into a tight little tube. Then imagine taking another fortune -- and another and another and another -- and wrapping each successive one around the last until you have something that starts to look like a tiny roll of toilet paper. Shafie then turns these miniature scrolls on their sides and glues them, by the hundreds, inside a boxlike frame.

One more thing: The top edges of the paper are painted before they're rolled. Shafie typically uses five to 10 colors per finished piece. When the rolls are turned on their sides -- the way a California roll would be served in a sushi restaurant -- all you see is an assortment of radiating, multicolored circles. It's like looking at a psychedelic Whitman's Sampler, flipped up like a painting and nailed to the wall.

Shafie's design sensibility and intuitive grasp of color theory are strong. As geometric abstraction alone, her scroll pieces make dynamite eye candy.

But it is the work's conceptual underpinning that gives it its real charge. By Shafie's own admission, there's a certain obsessive-compulsiveness to their making, revealed in her numerical titles (e.g., "11800"), referring to the number of paper strips that went into making each one. That fastidiousness, however, is tempered by the spontaneity of the colors.



Courtesy Morton Fine Art

Event Information

DETAILS: May 6-June 3:
11 a.m.-6 p.m.

Tuesday-Saturday

INFORMATION: 202-628-2787

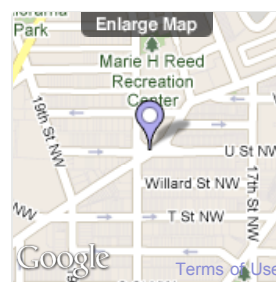
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"There's something really lovely," Shafie says, "about the tension between control and letting go."

She's right. And that tension places the scroll pieces, which the artist says she thinks of like books, in a middle ground between pure formalism and ecstatic performance art. All that handwriting, all that rolling, all that counting -- Shafie likens her process to the dance of the whirling dervishes, which is less a form of entertainment than a religious practice.

In Shafie's case, it's a silent dance. But in the end, her artwork creates its own music, its own poetry, its own whispered prayer.

The story behind Hadieh Shafie's work

Hadieh Shafie first incorporated text into her art about 20 years ago, when she was an undergraduate painting student at the University of Maryland. It was there, the 42-year-old artist says, that the directness of modern Persian poets, such as the late Sohrab Sepehri, sparked her interest in the power of simple, straightforward language.

"I am from Kashan," Sepehri wrote. "I paint for living. Once in a while I make a cage with paper and paint, and I sell it to you to listen to the song of the caged lily whenever you feel lonely."

Though Shafie's earliest scroll pieces contained paper so tightly coiled that it was impossible to read what was written on it, her most recent works are less . . . hermetic.

Though the artist typically begins a scroll by wrapping the paper around a knitting needle -- making it impossible to read what's inside it -- in several of her latest works she has used dowels as thick as shower curtain rods, creating a more interesting and varied rhythm of tight and loose circles.

Those loose circles, where you can finally see a little bit of the writing that's inside them, make her art more of an open book.

-- Michael O'Sullivan

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