

Shiva Ahmadi
Apocalyptic
Playland





Cover Image

Cube (detail), 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 120 in / 101.6 x 304.8 cm

Shiva Ahmadi
Apocalyptic Playland

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Circles (detail), 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on paper
mounted on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in / 101 x 152.4 cm

Al-Khidr, 2009
Watercolor, ink, and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in / 101 x 152.4 cm



Shiva Ahmadi

The Flowers of Evil

Heather Ecker / Head of Curatorial Affairs, Aga Khan Museum (Toronto)

For the past seven years, the Iranian painter, Shiva Ahmadi (Tehran, 1975), has focused her work on a search for an objectivity of corruption. In many ways, this show is a culmination of her explorations.

For Ahmadi, corruption is an integral cancer linking East and West, fed through the arteries of with petrol, and stoked with the apparatuses of nuclear power, war and the increasingly uneasy pressures applied to societies that are forced to sustain it. The expressions of corruption in these works seem familiar: here, the bloody, enthroned ruler holds a grenade, and there, the witless, dependent servant takes orders and creates webs of intrigue and mayhem. Two parties and two equal, interdependent forces at work, creating an anxious atmosphere of instability and uncertainty.

Colours, figures and perspectives drawn from traditional Persian painting provide Ahmadi's archetypal repertoire. But, hers is not a jaded critique of Iran. Her elegant calculations seem to predict the same painful result everywhere, despite a different décor. Fear and opportunism are the universal human weaknesses that fuel corruption; their global connections are suggested in these works by industrial pipes linking power plants, monuments and nations. The principal figures hover over coloured washes in the ground—complex, layered, earthy surfaces—insinuating their relocation anywhere.

In 2006, Ahmadi began these explorations by painting oil barrels with stunning colours, patterns and figures, creating objects that from a distance seemed purely decorative. Up close, one saw the tears, rendered with difficulty, in the resistant sheet metal of the barrel walls and the red paint that dripped from them. War wounds—someone had to get hurt in this enterprise—or female blood? Does it matter? The altered barrels easily encapsulated the ties between oil, money, and violence. It was a simple message, quickly assimilated and nicely compacted, though perhaps not loud enough. When she came to the end of the oil barrel series, Ahmadi asked me one day, "Do you know where I can find a small tank to paint?"

Turning her back on oil, Ahmadi embraced water. With watercolours and inks on Aqua Board, she began to reconsider the tradition of Iranian painting as a means of gaining distance and perspective, but also to define the field of battle. Make no mistake, Ahmadi is a street-fighter.

In her fascinating painting, *Al-Khidr* (2009), which I acquired as a curator for the Detroit Institute of Arts, the field is a liquid green. Two principal figures are seated within the green ground. Enthroned in the center is a faceless, tarbushed dignitary with blood dripping where the features should be. The dignitary is encircled by ambiguous underlings in the form of monkeys. Ominous snakes slither before his throne. In the lower left, a figure in a meditative pose sits alone in a grotto. His flaming halo and the title of the painting identify him as al-Khidr, the Green One, a perennial and immortal prophet and a mystical guide to enlightenment. By giving us al-Khidr, Ahmadi recalls the redemption of the great cycles of time and fate, and wisdom traditions that survive the distortions of organized religion. There is a love of country and culture here, too. The underlying discursive description of a world gone awry is more traditional than Ahmadi might like us to recognize, drawn from Persian literature and shi'i thought.

In Iranian book-painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, scenes with multiple figures, particularly outdoor scenes, were painted from the perspective of a high angle.

The viewer looks down at the action of the story, and takes in multiple narratives from a position above the picture plane. Ahmadi conflates two of these modes: the enthroned prince in a pleasure garden surrounded by his courtly companions, and battle scenes.

In her works, the enthroned prince is no longer a cultivated ruler whose legitimacy is recognized and whose pleasant company sought, but a usurper dressed in sumptuous clothes who lacks the moral compass and obligation of princes: generosity, lawful actions, and protection of the defenseless. Instead of pious humility, the grandeur of the usurper increases with the monumentality and menace of his throne. His field of action expands beyond normal proportions, and he insures the loyalty of the creatures that serve him with blood and humiliation. The armies of monkey figures that Ahmadi uses to symbolize the degradation of servants of corrupt masters are drawn from illustrations of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, though the levels of meaning given them are unrelated to their original context.

Behind the ruler posed on an exaggerated throne in *Lotus*, a traditional Iranian cityscape is strapped up with pipes leading to ominous shapes, nuclear silos, crucibles, missiles and towers. The small bomb or grenade held in the hand of the principal figure is a trigger for the larger, darker structures. In *Pipes*, the concentric rings held in the hand of the

enthroned, bloody ruler are like an emblem of the atomic age. The focus is white hot, and the danger, collective.

These shared archetypes are concentrated in her most challenging diptych to date, *Cube*, also the subject of an animation. Here, an enthroned monkey with followers standing in a prayer posture face toward a Ka'aba with monkey pilgrims. The monkey figures wear white caps, and there is no doubt that Ahmadi's critique is directed toward the corruption of religion for the sake of power. Linking the two scenes are industrial pipes, silos, and reactors, with pipes emerging even out of the Ka'aba itself, the most holy shrine and focal point of the Muslim world. Where does one go from here? Surely this work is the brave consummation of the series.

Ahmadi may draw on sixteenth-century perspectives and twenty-first-century tokens of power, but the dramatic expression in the larger works—tighter in the smaller vignettes—feels closer to history painting of the eighteenth century: A baroque hyperbole of blood and flowers. As in Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra*, these events are witnessed and recorded. But Ahmadi shows us the sources of suffering rather than its miseries. We find ourselves breathing a dangerous and fatal air in the midst of perfumed flasks and sequined fabrics—a hideous bouquet of hypocrisies, *Les Fleurs du Mal*. One still hopes for redemption and resolu-

tion, and perhaps in Ahmadi's next works, the benediction of the poet may also find a place.

Ahmadi is not a literalist, but rather offers signs and clues, she has called it "sugar-coating" and "science fiction." Her medium—watercolour—is the same chosen by the masters of Persian and Indian painting, and her figures respond to a code which she has created herself from the established repertoire. Missing from among the stock characters is an audience—a well-established mode in Shirazi painting whereby a spectator looks onto the main event from behind a hill, finger raised to the mouth. The gesture indicates that here, there is something crucial that requires attention. We are that passer-by.



Pipes, 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in / 101 x 152.4 cm



Circles, 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on paper mounted on Aquaboard
40 x 60 in / 101 x 152.4 cm



Cube, 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
40 x 120 in / 101 x 304.8 cm (diptych)



Lotus, 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
60 x 120 in / 152.4 x 304.8 (triptych)

Rope, 2013
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
45 x 35 in / 114.3 x 88.9 cm





Untitled 1 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
11 x 15 in / 27.9 x 38.1 cm



Untitled 7 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
12 x 12 in / 30.5 x 30.5 cm



Untitled 13 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
20 x 16 in / 50.8 x 40.6 cm



Untitled 14 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
11 x 15 in / 38.1 x 27.9 cm



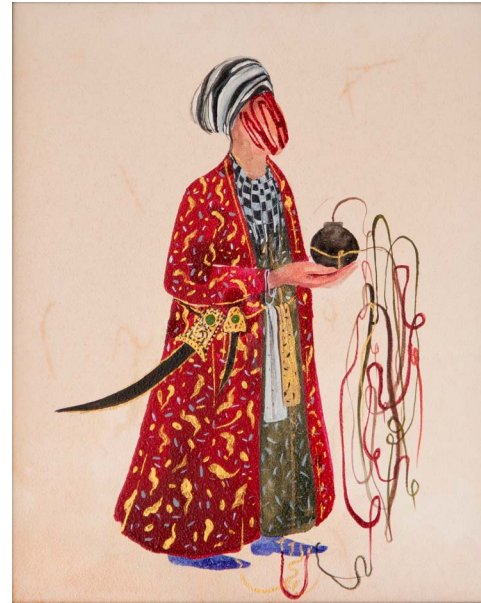
Untitled 12 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
17 x 11.5 in / 43.2 x 29.2 cm



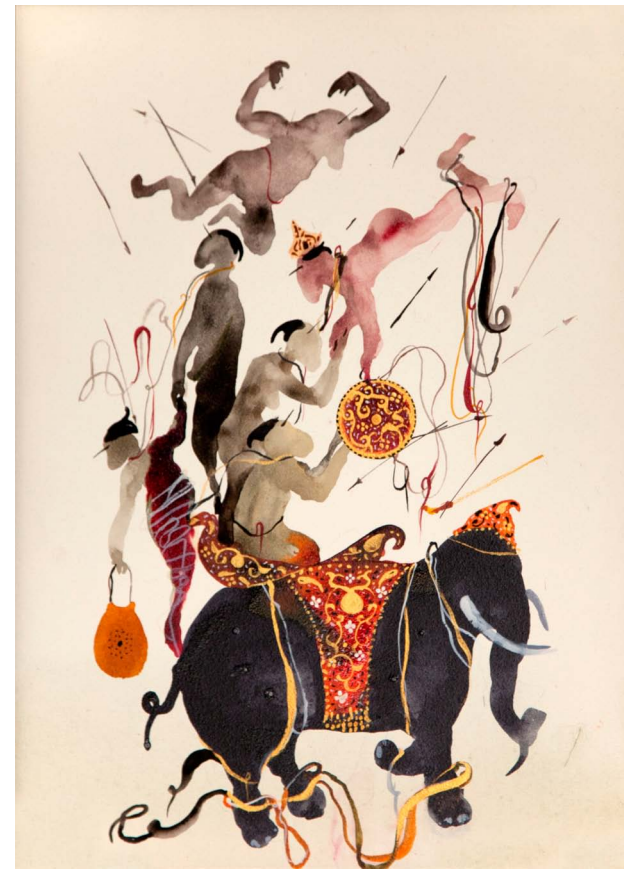
Untitled 16 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
16 x 21 in / 40.6 x 53.3 cm



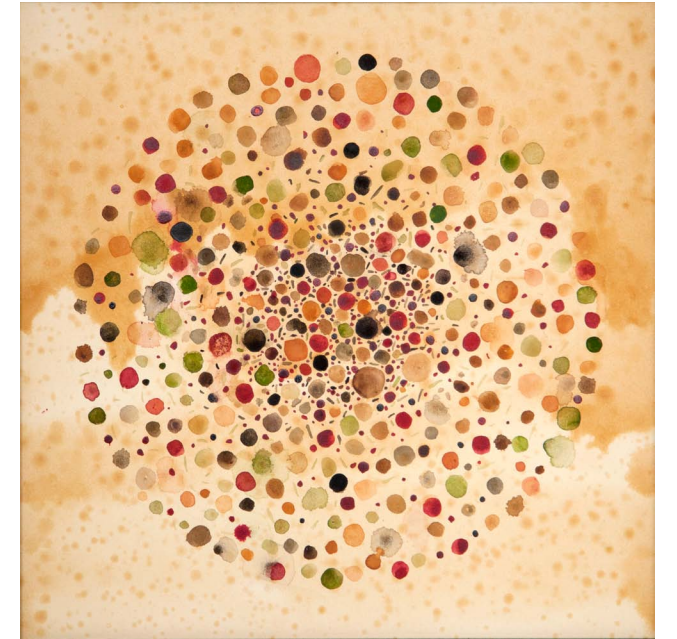
Untitled 2 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 9 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
10 x 8 in / 25.4 x 20.3 cm



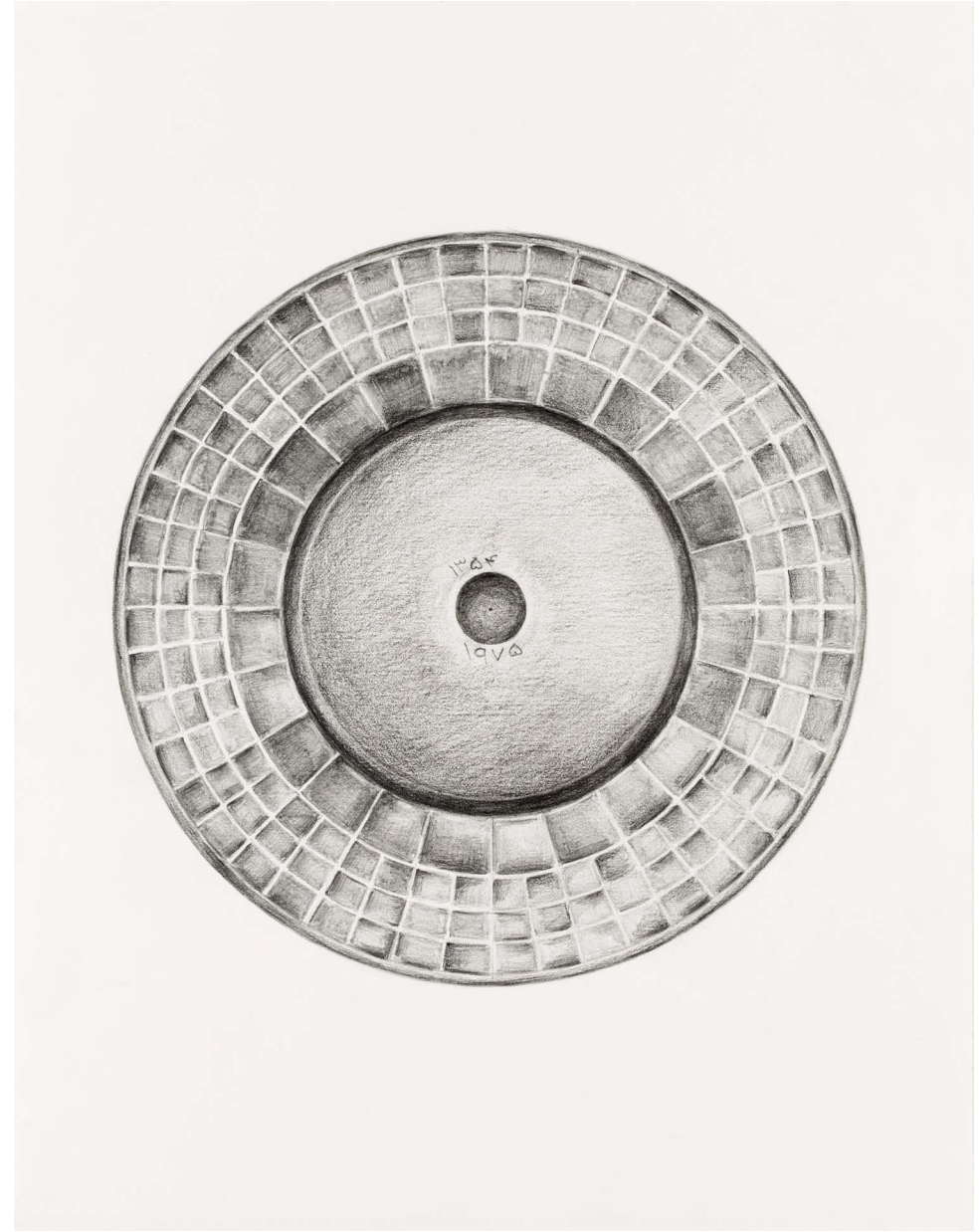
Untitled 10 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
15 x 11 in / 38.1 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 15 (from Throne), 2012
Watercolor, ink and acrylic on Aquaboard
12 x 12 in / 30.5 x 30.5 cm



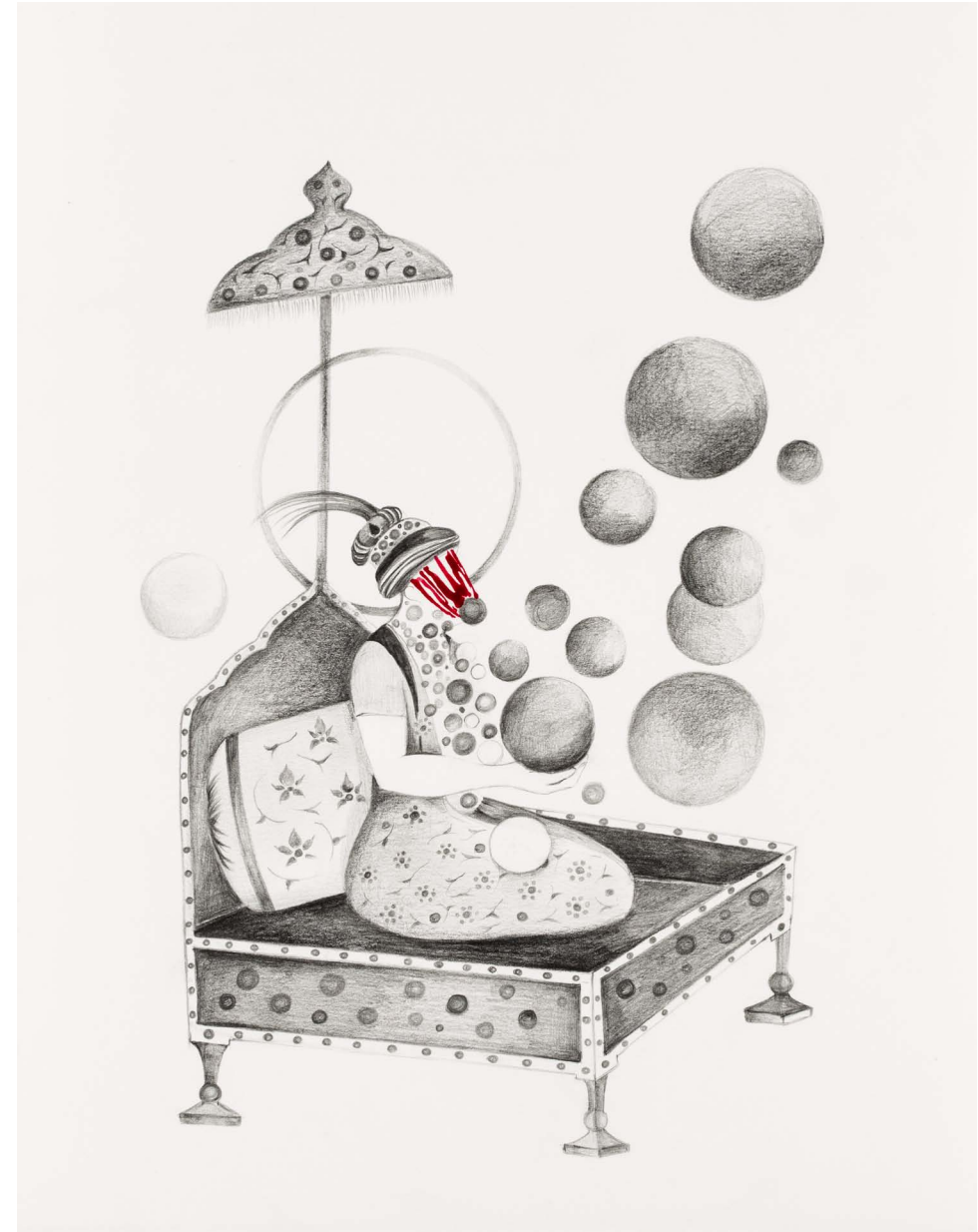
Untitled 1, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 2, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 3, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 4, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 5, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm



Untitled 6, 2013
Graphite on paper
14 x 11 in / 35.6 x 27.9 cm

Shiva Ahmadi

B. 1975, Tehran

Lives and works in Michigan

EDUCATION

2005	Cranbrook Academy of Arts, Bloomfield Hills, MI, Master of Fine Arts, Painting
2003	Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Master of Fine Arts, Drawing
2000	Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Master of Art, Drawing
1998	Azad University, Tehran, Iran, Bachelor of Fine Art, Painting

ART RESIDENCY

2003	Skowhegan Art Residency, Skowhegan, ME
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SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013	<i>Apocalyptic Playland</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2012	<i>Throne</i> , College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, OH <i>Throne</i> , Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE
2010	<i>Reinventing the Poetics of Myth</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2005	<i>Oil Crisis</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013	<i>Small Works Project</i> , Venice Biennale, Collaboration of Library Street Collective, Detroit MI and Benetton, Venice Biennale
2012	<i>The Fertile Crescent</i> , Institute for Women and Art, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ <i>The Rule and Its Exceptions</i> , Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, TX
2011	Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE <i>Jasmin: Oriental Summer</i> , Sabine Knust Gallery, Munich, Germany <i>Art X Detroit</i> , Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, MI <i>[Dis]Locating Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in America</i> , Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE VIP Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, Online Art Fair
2010	Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE <i>Tehran – New York</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE
2009	Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE <i>Iran Inside Out</i> , Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY <i>Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art</i> , curated by Dr. Layla Diba, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
2008	<i>Just Paper</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY <i>Ahmadi & Zhang: Looking Back</i> , the Feldman Gallery at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, OR <i>Distant Shores: Cultural Exchange in Contemporary Art</i> , McIninch Art Gallery, Manchester, NH <i>Splash</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY <i>Conference of the Birds</i> , Leila Heller Gallery, in cooperation with B & S Projects, London, UK
2007	<i>Merging Influences</i> , Eastern Elements in New American Art, Montserrat Art Gallery, Boston, MA
2005	<i>Three Positions</i> , Lombard\Freid Projects, New York, NY <i>Atomica</i> , Lombard\Freid Projects and Esso Gallery, New York, NY Portland Museum of Art Biennial, Portland, ME <i>Cross Current</i> , Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI

2003	<i>Detroit Now</i> , Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Rochester, MI Biennial Art Competition, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
2002	<i>New Shoes</i> , Tangent Gallery, Detroit, MI <i>Exchange</i> , Forum Gallery, Bloomfield Hills, MI
2000	<i>Academics 2002</i> , Paint Creek Center for Arts, Detroit, MI Y2K, MCCA Gallery, Detroit, MI

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2009	Kresge Artist Fellowship, Kresge Foundation
2008	Nominated for Altoid Award by The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
2004	First Prize, NYC 6th National Juried Exhibition, New York, NY First Prize, Biennial Art Competition, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
2003	First prize, Michigan Fine Arts Competition, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
2002/03	John & Irene Sowinski Scholarship Wayne State University, Graduate Professional Scholarship, Wayne State University
2002	Second Prize, 2002 Michigan Drawing Biennial Exhibition, Ford Gallery, Ypsilanti, MI
2001	Thomas C. Rumble University Graduate Fellowship, the most prestigious Fellowship at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ecker, Heather, "Flowers of Evil," *Apocalyptic Playland* Catalog, Leila Heller Gallery, February 2013
"50 Next Most Collectible Artists," *Art and Auction*, June 2012
Stewart, Laura, "Passion for Art: Leila Heller," *Art Bahrain*, May 2012
"Leila Heller," *Harper's Bazaar Art*, Spring 2012
Daftari, Fereshteh, "Altered Miniatures: Shiva Ahmadi," *Canvas Magazine*, March/April 2011
Genocchio, Benjamin, "Shiva Ahmadi," *Reinventing the Poetics of Myth* Catalog, Leila Heller Gallery, February 2010
Genocchio, Benjamin, "Import/Export in the Heat of the Moment," *Art in America*, November 2009, Issue 10
Kino, Carol, "Iranian Shine, Assisted by Expatriate," *The New York Times*, August 2009
Wei, Lilly, "Selseleh/Zelzeleh" at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, *ArtNews*, October 2009
Cotter, Holland, "Iran Inside Out," *The New York Times*, July 2009
Nazhand, Nazi, "Abu Dhabi Report," *Artnet Magazine*, November, 2009
Kaylan, Melik, "The View From Here," *The Wall Street Journal*, August, 2009
Waxman, Lori, "Art Galleries: Iran as You've Never Seen It Before," *Chicago Tribune*, October, 2009
Genocchio, Benjamin, "A Dialogue Between Tradition and Innovation," *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2008
Brown, Joel, "New American Art, informed by the East" *The Boston Globe*, Sep. 2007

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
DePaul University Art Museum, Chicago, IL
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
The Farjam Collection, Dubai
TDIC Collection, Abu Dhabi

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