

EMERGE



Art on Demand 6.3

MOHADESE MOVAHED

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The turbulent state of global affairs in 2020 may feel unprecedented in terms of scale and scope, but the fact is that throughout history there have been innumerable periods of intense political, environmental, and social unrest. Throughout such times, artists have had an essential role to play in documenting, describing, and helping us make sense of challenging events. Working counter to those forces that seek to oppress and isolate in order to ultimately control, artists harness the visual language of art as a powerful uniting force, offering hope and building resilience in the face of crisis after crisis.

For emerging artist Mohadese Movahed, her artistic practice has been central to helping her live through – and make sense of – the experience of living under authoritarian rule. Though currently based in Vancouver, Movahed was born

the psychological toll of a collective society living under such oppression, and sheds a light on what it means to be an Iranian woman in the post-revolution era.

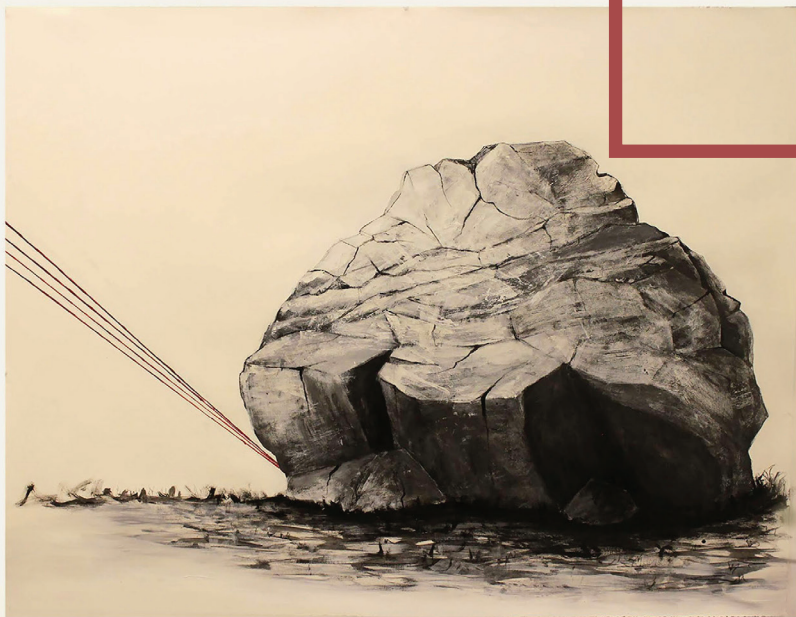
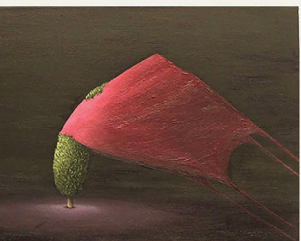
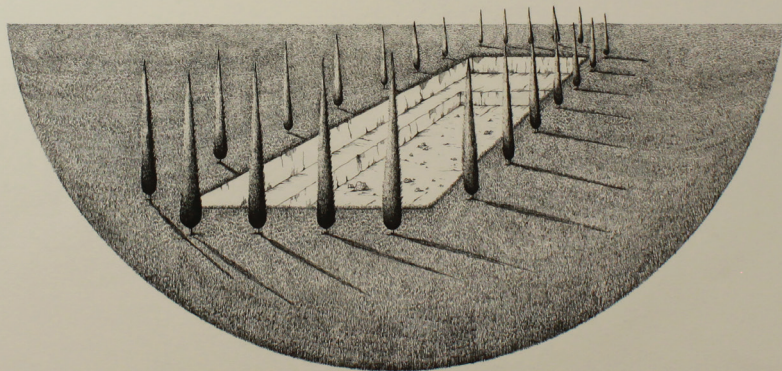
Movahed completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Iran, at the University of Science and Culture in Tehran. In 2017 she moved to Canada, settling first in Saskatchewan to pursue her Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Regina, before eventually relocating to Vancouver where she continues to use drawing, oils, and printmaking techniques in her practice to explore the ongoing emotional toll of living under an authoritarian regime.

Movahed very consciously and carefully employs metaphors in her work to strike a balance between conveying messages of universal significance and an understanding of the human condition, with exploring and expressing

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and lived most of her life in post-revolutionary Iran. It was in the wake of the Islamic revolution of 1979 that the new government cracked down on dissent of all kinds and instituted extensive controls and limitations on the general population. Religious laws were strictly enforced and the rights and freedoms of women were especially restricted. Having grown up and spent most of her life in such an environment, Movahed became adept at editing aspects of her identity in order to conform, and thereby to survive. Her work reflects

her own cultural identity. Cypress trees are a recurring motif in her work, often standing in as a solemn placeholder for human life and vitality. In Iranian culture specifically, cypress trees have been used as powerful symbols of resistance in poetry, literature, and visual art. Movahed experiments with using this cultural icon for the meaning it already carries, and simultaneously imbuing it with new meaning by rendering her cypress trees in ways that could suggest either passivity or resilience. Much like people in



difficult times, Movahed's cypress trees can stand strong and resolute, or can be passive bystanders.

In *Living in the Shadow* (2019), an imposing rock towers over a humble grove of cypress trees, suggesting an encroaching rigidity and impending danger. This intimidating rock form is inescapably threatening, calling to mind a looming fear that dampens any spark of hope. Similar imagery appears in the diptych *Against Compulsion* (2019), which references the Iranian government's mandate that all women must wear the hijab. This work presents a tension between two linked pieces: an oil on canvas painting and a charcoal and oil drawing on paper. The smaller drawing contains a cypress tree – a stand in for a female figure – being pulled and smothered under the weight of a fabric band held taut by a massive, immovable stone in the nearby painting that suggests the government itself. Unlike the colourful tree, the stone is rendered in black and white, suggesting a rigid worldview that enforces a stark definition of right and wrong.

Movahed also uses her work to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners who have challenged the Iranian ruling regime, often evoking specific names in her titles to try to ensure they will not be overlooked in history and their efforts are not in vain. *The Tree of Nasrin* (2019) presents the story of Nasrin Sotoudeh, a lawyer who is passionate about advocating for human rights and as a result is currently facing up to 38 years in jail for defending political prisoners. Movahed's etching depicts a lone tree standing tall amidst surrounding rocky mountain cliffs. Viewers can observe the imposing darkness surrounding the cypress tree, yet sunlight is able to shine through into the canyon. It suggests how intimidating it is to stand alone, but how empowering it is to exist in defiance amidst an imposing display of power and authority.

Movahed's work is in effect a rebellion and a gesture of defiance against the regime she grew up in. She believes that for the people of Iran, political and personal narratives will always be closely intertwined, and so similarly, the personal and the political run throughout her images; it is a collective call for these stories to not be forgotten, for the fight for human rights to continue.

Born in 1988, Tehran, Iran, **Mohadese Movahed** is a visual artist whose studio practice focuses on painting, drawing, and intaglio printmaking. She earned her BFA degree from the University of Science and Culture in Tehran, Iran and moved to Canada to pursue her MFA degree at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan in 2017. Currently, she lives and works in Vancouver, Canada.



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Image credits: Cover: *Living in the Shadow*, 2019, oil on paper, 50 x 37 in. Inside top left: *Death of a Poet*, (detail), 2018, pen on paper, 30 x 22 in. Inside bottom left: *Against Compulsion*, 2019, oil on canvas, and charcoal and oil on paper, 11 x 9 in. and 50 x 37 in. Images courtesy of the artist.

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