IN THE STUDIO WITH MARYAM TAGHAVI

by Felicia Mings

Maryam Taghavi in her studio holding stencils. Photo: Felicia Mings.

An in-studio conversation between artist and educator Maryam Taghavi and curator Felicia Mings. This conversation took place on February 27, 2023, as part of the Art Gallery of York University's Community Resource Program which amplifies the artistic practices, ideals, and lives of artists whose work directly addresses current political and world affairs. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Chicago-based Maryam Taghavi was born in Tehran, Iran. An artist drawn to language and translation, her practice takes form in airbrush and stencil paintings; works on paper; installation; sculpture and performance. Regardless of the media, her work exudes a skillful blend of colour, abstraction, and Islamic motifs. Increasingly, her work has engaged with occult practices as she is interested in the contemporary ways that they are used to fortify people in times of duress.

Taghavi's interest is particularly poignant in light of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that is taking place in Iran. On September 16, 2022, Zhina (Mahsa) Amini, a Kourdish Iranian woman who had been visiting Tehran, died in the custody of Iran's morality police three days following her arrest for "inappropriate attire." The Iranian authorities claimed that she died of heart failure but reports of fractures and bruising suggest otherwise. Amini's death ignited the nationwide protests for truth and justice that soon evolved to include demands for the rights of all women and girls, minorities, and a call to remove from power the current authoritarian regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although not covered in Western media with the same fervor as it had been in the fall of 2022, the struggle for change continues with Amini being regarded as a significant spark in this epoch of women fighting for change in Iran.

"You didn't die. Your name will be a code [rallying call]" is written on Amini's grave and can be thought of in relation to occult fortifying practices such as the evocation of a spirit for protection. Islamic handwritten text or calligraphy is a visual expression of reverence to the spiritual world and a connection to the divine, as *Iqraa* (read) is the first word of the Quran, a religious text that is the literal words of Allah. In considering the ways in which language is activated within the social movement, I was eager to spend time with Taghavi and her work. Amidst a very busy year — *A Leap Has No Return* solo exhibition at Blanc Gallery (April 8–May 14, 2023), a permanent sculpture commission by the City of Chicago set to debut at O'Hare International Airport Terminal 5 (September 2023), and an upcoming solo show *Chicago Works: Maryam Taghavi* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (December 20, 2023 – July 14, 2024) — I was fortunate to have Taghavi host me at her Mana Contemporary studio earlier this year to discuss the ways that Iranian artists, calligraphic arts, the mystic, and the divine motivate and influence her work.

—Felicia Mings

Fig. 1: Maryam Taghavi, *Talismanic Arrangements*, 2021. Laser cut layered 80 lbs paper, 18 × 24 in. Courtesy the artist.

Felicia Mings:
My first question—is the text in the image I'm looking at Arabic or Persian?

Maryam Taghavi:
It's Arabic.

Mings:
In preparing to meet, I was reading about different artistic movements that use Arabic calligraphy as a point of departure and came across, hurufiyah …

Taghavi:
Interesting! 'ḥarf' is a letter as in one letter.

Mings:
Hurufiyah seems to be a term that denotes a modern art movement focused on the extraction of Arabic text into these decorative forms. But this led me down a rabbit hole of various and earlier permeations of Islamic calligraphy such as Nasta'liq. How did you get into a practice that incorporates calligraphy?

Taghavi:
I don't usually talk about it, but I think about it. Crafting our handwriting was vital in our education. It's not just about writing the letters; it's about how you write the letters. I would say my earliest drawings were tracing the alphabet in our exercise books. Each page included words with similar repeating letters. In the first line the words were bold and the remaining lines were thin to be traced by the student. I really loved the repetition.

In my generation, and even more so in my parents' and grandparents' generation, good handwriting is a sign of status. It was important to learn how to write. In school, I think by grade four or five we had calligraphy lessons. Writing persists throughout people's lives. Even at death, a skilled calligrapher writes the name of the deceased, their birth and death dates, a line (mostly from a poem or the Quran) on the gravestone, and the stone is etched, tracing the calligraphy.

The form is really important. I believe it is inseparable to how we understand language. The remarkable work in modern calligraphy and graphic design continuously makes it relevant to the contemporary culture.

Mings:
Is this related to your interest in talismans?

Taghavi:
Yes, talismans may be made up of names or phrases that are believed to possess protective qualities. These are readily available in the visual and material culture that I grew up in. In Islam, aniconism forbids holy figures to be depicted so the holy names are created in these perfect forms that are beautifully ornamented.

Later on, I revisited the talismans that are illegible or *Il'm al-Ghayb*, meaning this way that we've imagined the invisible world and beyond the truths or falsity of it. I'm drawn to that, an attempt to reach for what is invisible, and how it's been done with letter forms alone, the power of letters.

There are two different types of talismans that I have worked with. One is the talismans that are holy names. The work that I'm doing for the O'Hare airport is that. It is the holy names that have been perfected through this calligraphic process, and that itself becomes a talisman. Usually, they resemble the shape of an object or an animal. The one that I'm using resembles the shape of a ship (Fig. 2).

Mings:
Is this the same one that you had at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago (Fig. 3)?

Taghavi:
Yeah. Exactly. I'm appropriating the original form which consists of names that are believed to possess protective qualities. The names inscribed on the talisman are derived from the tale of the Seven Sleepers, a popular story in both Christian and Islamic mythologies. According to the myth, seven men and their dog sought refuge in a cave to escape religious persecution and miraculously stayed asleep for three hundred years. They later awoke, unharmed and unaffected by the passage of time. I made this decision recently to include "Jin, Jiyad, Azadi" into it, which is the Kurdish translation of "Woman, Life, Freedom." [Since our conversation Taghavi has updated the project to incorporate Zhina (Mahsa) Amini's name instead of Jin, Jiyad, Azadi.]

Fig. 2: Abd al-Qadir Hisari, *Calligraphic Galleon*, 180 AH/ 1766–67 CE. Ink and gold on paper, 19 × 17 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louis E. and Theresa S. Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art and Rogers Fund, 2003.

Fig. 3: Maryam Taghavi, *Sleep Hour*s, 2018. On the exterior window of the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. Courtesy the artist.

In Islamic occult practices, there is a branch called sīmiyāʾi which is the arrangement of letters and numbers so that it taps into the hidden knowledge of the universe. These arrangements are called sigils. I trace these sigils from the handwritten version from a 17th century book by Ḥusayn Vāʿiẓ Kāshifī, a prolific scholar who popularized religion. He's written a number of books, but this particular book is on occult practices and the sigils that activate a certain kind of wish. The one that I used for this (fig. 1) are for flight. I was really interested in flight as a metaphor, flight as in leap. The cut-outs are the first works I made. I wanted to reincarnate these wishes. These forms were portals to imagine an invisible world.

The bedtime stories of my grandmother involved some miracle by some prophet from the Quran. I think that's what ignited my curiosity in the power to activate the metaphysical. What if it's for the people, and not about the prophet? Talismans hold our wishes and desires. We are reminded of them by the repetition of either looking at the talisman or uttering them, or any ritual that goes into it. Most of these talismans or sigils come with instructions to activate them. Some of them are really weird and fucked up and amazing. It's like a weird performance art.

Mings:
Have you ever tried to activate them?

Taghavi:
I haven't yet. But I am curious to bring a description and see what happens.

So, there are these two sigils meant to be used as a pair that I got curious about. One is for disappearance and the other is for reappearance. I was thinking of printing these as banners and hanging them (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Maryam Taghavi. *Reappearance*, 2023. Acrylic mirror, 10 x 21 in. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman.

I was blown away by this idea of what happens when you disappear? What constitutes disappearance? Do you lose your form? Do you lose meaning? What does that mean to disappear? And then reappear, it's like this cycle of becoming. To me it's becoming formless. And maybe the ability to become a spirit or occupy different things and then reappear. But then in the context of again thinking about those who are subjugated to oppression. To me, that context is really relevant. It's like the bodies, memories, and desires of all of these people that have disappeared or have been rendered invisible—what happens in the reappearance.

Mings:
There's a particular tone or intensity of each hue—even if it's yellow or orange or red—and I think that's interesting to see across your work.

Taghavi:
I think so too. Yellow in various civilizations has been associated with divinity, and gold is the highest version of it. I'm very comfortable with yellow. I'm easily seduced by it.

Mings:
Considering the colours and forms in your work, do you intentionally look back to movements or schools within Persian art for your own practice—like the Saqqakhaneh movement—that have also incorporated talismans?

Taghavi:
Saqqakhana was a term applied to a group of artists who emerged in the 1960s and were trying to use folkloric elements inherited from the Islamic and Persian visual and material language. Parviz Tanavoli is one of the artists who archived these talisman objects of various kinds. He's been really adamant about collecting and archiving. The talismans appear in the everyday, but they can also be marginalized because in modernism claims that this is superstitious and that the whole imagination around belief in the power beyond what we know is frowned upon.

Artist Monir Farmanfarmaian, who just recently passed away, worked with mirrors. Her works are these meticulously arranged geometrical forms, and she was the only woman out of that group. For me, in connection to that time, also being away from Iran, looking at it at a distance, and also with everything that's happening around women's rights, especially since the revolution—I feel like talismans carry a different type of meaning for me than they did for the Saqqakhaneh artists.

I think a lot about reincarnation of these forms, but what is the agency that I am inserting in these works as a woman? I'm playing with color, scale, and material. The relationship of these forms to desire and the fulfillment of desire. Where does my desire lie in all of that? Me as in, a self that is connected to many, many selves.