

Azar Pajuhandeh

Gliding Through Surfaces

by Nine Yamamoto-Masson

With its gentle insistence and methodological probing, Azar Pajuhandeh's art has the power to pierce the surfaces of her objects of inquiry. Here, abstraction is a method of transformation: surfaces that had hitherto appeared impermeable and mute, like a wall, become nodal points at which her inquisitive look generates new meanings and possibilities.

Pajuhandeh's minimalist artworks – often two-dimensional, or of a reduced three-dimensionality like the reliefs in *Alamat* – offer dynamic interpretative interfaces, autonomous zones of critical activity and aesthetic intervention. In these zones, her artistic inquiry acts like an expanded *reframing* of the cultural artifacts she examines, guiding the viewer through their surfaces, exploring their deeper implications and allowing for other possibilities to take shape.

This is particularly apparent in her two series *Alamat* and *Soraya's Drawing*. Both are elegant and mysterious assemblages, enigmatic pieces of a puzzle. As one follows the artist's logic and guidance, one comes to recognise the complex interrelations that the artist has unearthed, like a detective-poet-archaeologist, and that animate the core of these puzzles.

The imposing *Alamat* consists of four large forms hanging on a wall, sometimes exhibited as standalone pieces. Each one is a different arrangement of the same basic square unit, vertically connected with bookbinding techniques that lend these shapes both rigidity and flexibility. The matte black of the hard geometric shapes absorbs the light and stands in stark contrast to the white walls. Upon closer inspection, one sees that an ornamental relief is tiled across the squares – their arabesques curling over the entire formation, unifying it and overriding the gaps and divisions. Some of those shapes are abstract, floral, organic, vulvic, others more figurative: the shape of an embryo is clearly recognisable on one of the pieces, tightly nestled in a protective uterine envelope.

The piece is titled after the cultural artifact it references: an *alamat* is a metal banner carried through the streets in the religious Shi'ite Muslim ritual procession during the ceremonies of the holy month of Moḥarram that commemorates the martyrdom of Ḥosayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Moḥammad, in the Battle of Karbala.

The *alamat* and attending ritual was very familiar to Pajuhandeh since childhood, as they play a big part in public, political and religious life in her home country Iran.

An *alamat* banner is typically as wide as a street, with a tall, phallic central staff, adorned with hanging textile ornaments and long swaying feathers. It is carried in the front of the procession by a rotation of strong men; each man carries the heavy *alamat* alone for a few steps. To carry and to touch the *alamat* are immense honours. Women are very central to this ceremony's historical origin and narrative aspect, as everybody but the women was killed in the Battle of Karbala, so their survivor eyewitness testimony made them messengers of history. Yet, in this ceremony, men are the only ones actively participating, chanting the story of Ḥosayn's martyrdom, while women remain passive spectators on the sidelines.

Pajuhandeh was struck by the genderedness of shapes, material, ritual, public and narrative space. The artist's *Alamat* is a secular reimagination of the traditional Shi'ite *alamat*, based on the questions she raises about the dense fabric of social relations that traverse it. She modified its structural form and reduced it to basic units of abstraction by breaking up the stately horizontality, instead emphasising a long vertical oval base, replacing metalsmithing with bookbinding materials and techniques, adorning it with evocative ornate arabesques in subtle relief, giving it stillness by hanging it on a wall in an indoor space. Thus, she imagines a different kind of *alamat*, one that feminises the male-dominated ritual object and acts as invitation to reflect on the dimensions of gender relations, social relations, narration, performance, power in urban space, history, ritual, and politics.

The artist's background in classical painting and profound knowledge of European Old Masters paintings inform her artistic approach in deconstructing rigid compositions and social designs. In the series *Soraya's Drawing*, she forensically dissects the social relations and cultural forces contained in an old family photograph, easy to miss at first glance. One part of the series is an assemblage of blown-up details from that black and white picture of wedding guests, taken at a wedding in Iran in the 1970s, before her birth and before the Iranian Revolution. Most people in the picture are her relatives. Trying to piece together the photograph and the protagonists via the disparate close-ups hanging on the wall, one can recognise a few young women in the group: beautiful, with striking, friendly eyes and glossy long dark hair, wearing fashionable dresses. The blown-up details are where the artist's questions are located, focal points of her scrutiny, of her autoethnographic piercing through the surface of the photographic image: a young man's face reflected in the surface of the glass table; the subtle eroticism in a close-up of woman's arm, the soft curves of her round shoulder covered by a sheer lace long sleeve; a woman's sleek black hair flowing down her back... This presentation of femininity would not have been possible in public after 1979. One close-up at the top left is of a woman's knees as she is sitting down, knees coyly pressed together, the hem of her black skirt barely covering the two pale globes of her knees. But at second glance one realises that her actual hemline is *above* her knees – the extra few inches of coverage, in the shape of a curved teardrop, are *drawn* on the photo. It was the artist's own mother, Soraya, who covered up her sister's knees in the photograph, as she felt she was not thin enough to exhibit her knees, while her own were visible, since she thought her own body thin enough to wear a short-hemmed dress.

Decades later, Pajuhandeh, Soraya's adult artist daughter, remains profoundly intrigued by this shape covering her aunt's knees. Her mother's explanation is not satisfactory to her, given the post-revolution politics of women's bodies and clothes, the common retroactive (self-)censoring of photos, rendering women's clothes more modest with the simple analogue method of pen or marker on the photographs.

Soraya's Drawing unfolds like a detective's investigation diary: using abstraction as a method to highlight other aspects that are hidden, the artist turns the viewer into a witness of her attempt to trace the genealogy of the mark. Trying to understand the gesture of image manipulation, the artist manipulates the trace of the gesture. She retraces her mother's gesture, copies and repeats the curved mark – the gently curved teardrop Soraya placed on her sister's knees – thousands of times across a dozen drawings. The resulting large drawings take on a eerie quality: they are beautiful and mysterious, well-balanced in composition, in their reduced formal vocabulary based on a repetition and rearrangement of that singular shape. In some drawings the mark is repeated so often as to fill the entire surface; in others, it appears more sparsely, in clusters. Knowing the origin of that shape unlocks several other levels of meaning in these drawings. Mentally, spatially and aesthetically it connects them to the large montage of blown-up analogue photographic fragments that form the context of this mark.

The artist uses her mother's "drawing" as a lens to guide her exploration of not only the social relations in the scene depicted (the worldly, sophisticated solemnity of a family get-together around the social-religious-political ritual of a marriage celebration) but also in the trajectory of the photograph as a cultural and familial artifact, the hands that touched it, manipulated it, the eyes that examined it, the places it was exhibited in... These questions now traverse the new arrangement of photographic blow-ups and drawings that articulate the artist's investigation. With obsessive forensic precision Pajuhandeh maps the social forces at place in the almost baroque scene of the original photograph.

"My work is about questions," Azar Pajuhandeh says. "It's a questioning, asking what would happen if I choose to present things differently, to challenge and reinvent something that seemed solid. It's not about the answers. It's about the ambivalences – what happens if I open up a space for these ambivalences to become apparent."