

## Ring-A-Ring O' Roses... We All Fall Down

### Katrina Kufer looks at the complexities of fragility in the practice of Iranian artist Azadeh Razaghdoost.

On one hand, one could say that fragility is a weakness, but on the other, that the ability to *be* fragile is in fact a testament of strength. The oeuvre of Iranian artist Azadeh Razaghdoost encapsulates this dichotomy, embracing stereotypically feminine motifs but executing them with brute fortitude in a creative process that begins with energy and slowly burns out, only to begin again. Mirrored in her depictions, Razaghdoost's entire artistic existence appears a constant cycle of strength to fragility and back again.

Crimson and maroon activate Razaghdoost's white canvases in varying ratios (in her most recent series *In The Storm of Roses*, there are few flashes of bare canvas) as her expressionist brushwork forms abstracted roses, triangles or vases reminiscent of wombs, and hearts, but not because she is female and speaks to a feminine public, instead, she happens to *be* female so anatomical forms are closer to erotic features than gender-based values, flowers are vehicles for the ephemerality of life and beauty, and the red indicates the sanguine, as well as a nod to desires earlier in her life to be a heart surgeon. The connotations of her unconsciously chosen imagery is misleading; Razaghdoost is an artist who strongly asserts that her works are spontaneous expressions more akin to European Romanticism than any trigger-happy gender categorisations.

But it is a difficult conceptual boundary to abandon as Razaghdoost's works also are often presented hand-in-hand with 19th-century poetry (Baudelaire and Blake are regulars). Again, she asks the viewer to question their assumptions: poetry inspires her work (no), poetry completes her pieces (no) and references her Iranian heritage's longstanding connection of art and prose (no). Rather, the poetry is often an extra sensorial bonus used to enhance an existing mood shared by the poem. Sometimes, it is simply a means to an end for a title, but what the use of poetry as an additional tool really does is reveal her introspective nature. The works exude an energy that is almost painfully inwardly focused – the drips and swipes (reminiscent of Van Gogh, Anselm Kiefer or Georg Baselitz, artists she likes) are so emotive that the energy that originates from the inside out is palpable – unlike the socio-political or figurative orientations of her Iranian contemporaries. Razaghdoost seems to thrive on symbols that aren't exotic, surreal or inaccessible. Her visual language is universal largely because she has adopted simplicity as her medium, a move sparked by a large painting she made in 2005 of a big heart on a pale pink background. "I experienced a kind of awakening – I really don't know why I painted such a big heart," she says. "It is still odd for me, but after this work, I entered a special abstract atmosphere."

This disconnection between the results of her creative intuition and their origins isn't necessarily problematic as it lends her work an authentic and consistent voice, which more often than displays agony, sometimes crossing into what seems like literal bleeding. "It is an expression of a tremendous beauty which is so inconsistent and then dies so soon," she explains, before anecdotes disclose the true

depth of entanglement of work and life. Her home and studio are filled with roses and for a long while she surrounded herself with crimson and maroon objects, and she doesn't question why. It simply is what fascinates her, and from a casual remark on the blooms once they have decayed ("I see a violence in dried roses, they are no longer delicate, they become fragile, but sharp"), we again see the common thread that unites her painting and life philosophies. Soft, but not. Yet again, Razaghdoost has used feminine motifs with feminine wiles to reveal that all is not feminine at all.

"As a child, when I fell down and became injured, I would play with the injury, I liked to see it bleed," she reminisces. The agony or open-wound approach throughout her body of work is not reflective of a taste for the abject or catharsis of her own internal pain, but rather a means to tackle the human condition with (symbolic usage of) a material that both sustains and destroys us. In a way, Razaghdoost is, without saying it, painting the sublime, and crimson is the logical chromatic embodiment. Even what she does say, when questioned on what scent would accompany her works ("roses and the warm, greasy scent of burnt-out candles"), is perfectly reasoned. The oeuvre reveals a sensitive painter who spends her time considering the dualities of existence and the inevitable cycle of destruction and revival that all living things go through. "While I am painting, I am never tranquil, I am filled with excitement that I transfer to the canvas," she says. "The more I work, the more my body functions as a medium." But as her works so clearly describe, what surges forth eventually comes to a quiet end: "I work so energetically that after a couple hours, I burn out, like a candle, and then I must return home, sit down in my garden, water my flowers and turn off the lights." Nothing is comparable to this, she states, and so she begins again.

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