

Whilst most children harbour fantastical dreams of becoming a pirate, a prince or a princess, Azadeh Razaghdoost's childhood wish was to become a heart surgeon. Although as an adult she came to choose the path of an artist, her very first series of works, produced in 2002 for her final project at Tehran's University of Art and entitled *Figurative in Disguise*, were a collection of macabre collages which she had collated from images cut from medical journals. Razaghdoost's earliest creations expressed what was to become an enduring fascination with the medicinal and the macabre, creating unnerving hybrids from photographs of dissected torsos and fish heads. Like Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915-1995), who trained and practiced as a doctor before becoming a painter and sculptor, Razaghdoost's work connects the seemingly disparate spheres of art and medicine through her own lyrical take on abstraction. Although her early desire to become a physician has come to dictate her artistic preoccupation with the heart as a leitmotif and a predilection for gory shades of red, there is no clinical distance as regards emotional involvement. In Razaghdoost's hands, the organ becomes a throbbing metaphor for the tribulations of life; she constantly links the intensity of feeling prompted by our romantic or existential crises back to the biological fallibility of the human body.

Razaghdoost's work meditates on the experience of life, death, eroticism and romance in a manner which doesn't shirk from the sexual, the explicit, and the violent. Yonic, uterine forms are nearly indistinguishable from the shape of each stemless bloom; the erotic potential of the blossoming flower, so famously harnessed by American painter Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986), is rendered in suggestive downward pointing triangles of dripping petals. Whilst in Razaghdoost's paintings the heart expresses everything from delirious passion to debilitating sorrow, it shares a direct visual link to what are radiant, engorged renderings of the female sex. This sense of femininity inherent within her use of motifs is not to be seen as reflective of a feminist agenda, however. The 'feminine' in these paintings is in a sense that of the eternal, the symbolic. In the innate delicacy associated with hearts and flowers, Razaghdoost aims to evoke a sense of romantic sentimentality attached to 'the feminine' that has a timeless and universal appeal; her work is not solely reflective of a woman's experience of love, and neither that of a man's, it is more that she sees her work as an illustration of the feeling itself.

Harnessing a sense of the visceral is the key component of Razaghdoost's practice. She works in a conspicuously large format, needing a ground that would be big enough to contain the passion and rage which spurs her practice. Each piece is a result of an emotional outpouring; a visual response to that stir deep in the pit of the stomach. Each mark made upon the canvas is an automatic impulse driven by some sort of agony, be it love or grief. The result is always deeply personal, but in its abstraction evades revealing any direct source of inspiration: it could be the nostalgia of childhood memories, a fraught passage from a teenage diary, even an excerpt of poetry by a Romantic poet, from Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) to William Blake (1757-1827), or a line from the experimental work of the tragic Spanish writer Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936). Many of the titles with which she christens her works are taken directly from their oeuvres, most notably those paintings under the rubric of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and the *Sick Rose* series, each named in homage to Baudelaire and Blake respectively. Razaghdoost's morbid fascination with humanity extends

beyond the body to an almost voyeuristic interest in emotional turmoil. For her, the appeal of these figures lies in not only their writings, but in the extreme depth of feeling these poets experienced and then expressed as they navigated through life.

Despite her titles, by Razaghdoost's admission the inspiration of poetry is largely indirect, hanging like a spectre around her canvases. The poetic conventions of sick roses and flowers of evil are constantly alluded to as motifs, but they are referenced directly in name only, chosen as a caption in that they help to conjure the emotional space within which the works were created. This power of suggestion draws conceptual parallels with the practice of Persian artists in the seventeenth century, who, in the compilation of single sheet compositions for composite albums (*muraqqa*) - as opposed to paintings intended for narrative manuscripts - would cut and snatch couplets from lyrical *ghazal* poems to frame central images. This disruption of an expected, linear connection between word and image created a tertiary level of meaning; the two elements began communicating in a state of ambiguity rather than clarity, creating a mood for each other rather than providing an explanation. Razaghdoost's hearts and roses recall those eulogised by the likes of Hafez (1326-1390), Sa'di (1210-1292), Blake and Baudelaire alike, but they infuse the work with a romantic lilt, rather than yoking it to specific verses or quotations. These works are not, in other words, to be interpreted as a straightforward illustration or interpretation of a text. Poetic 'inspiration' finds Razaghdoost in the loosest sense; instead of acting as the 'subject', poems instead form the propelling spark or the atmosphere for a piece, with the artist often finding herself feeling increasingly distant from this initial source as a work, or a series, develops over time.

Any evocation of the Persian art of beautiful writing is done subtly through the gestural use of line. Rather than taking on a sustained practice of calligraphy or making it the central element of her work, an altogether more informal script is incorporated via the Persian and English words which are scratched across select pieces by Razaghdoost. They fade in and out from behind washes of paint, slowly becoming illegible, or else they are part-swallowed by deep layers of impasto. Each word is given an urgency, appearing to rip itself from the canvas upon which it was originally tattooed. We read, just, the ghostly remnants of "oh rose" scraped into the bottom of a work from *The Sick Rose* series; Blake's opening line becomes a short, sharp gasp before it disappears completely. The *Letters* series (2010) envisaged each work as a page upon which Razaghdoost scrawled love letters and private memories in oily, congealing paint. Abstraction, however, has come to claim the audience's attempt to read these words, negating again any direct link between word and image. Letters are created out of decisive strokes of brush or pencil upon the canvas which, in their considered compositional application are belied by the tempestuous appearance of the dripping, swirling paint. In other passages, marks are made with such vicious abandon that they make abrasions into the painting's ground. The tension inherent in an emotionally visceral drive and a physically unruly method in Razaghdoost's practice is often contrasted with a sense of thoughtful deliberation and a sensitive, measured use of space and colour. The artist will regularly apply paint directly with her own hands, arms and even elbows, deserting the intercessors of brush or pencil to physically close the connection between artist and work. She describes her hands as "controlled weapons", seeing them as tool instead of flesh, with the canvas instead becoming the body which is slowly bloodied by her scratching and pummelling. This practice is a mark of ownership as much as it is an intimate process of transmitting her raw emotions; without her own bodily involvement, Razaghdoost cannot

conceive of a painting as truly her own product.

The physicality and apparent abandon of her technique draws comparison with Abstract Expressionism and the associated subdivision of Action painting. There is particular resonance with the work of the late Cy Twombly (1928-2011) in Razaghdoost's marriage of dynamism and delicacy. Like Twombly - who also often drew on poetry for creative stimulation and who himself also produced multiple cycles of rose paintings throughout his career - the colour red is used liberally. Colour symbolism is constantly toyed with. As it was Blake's "bed of crimson joy", red is also the hue of roses, pomegranates, passion, blood, and danger, and it weeps, viscous and deep, from virtually all of Razaghdoost's canvases. It produces a striking contrast with the milky paleness that covers the expansive ground of each work. This unadorned backdrop can be read as the evocation of Baudelaire's "le canevas banal de nos piteux destins" which is bemoaned in *Au Lecteur*, a cynical section of *Fleurs du Mal* addressed to his sinful readers. Razaghdoost's affinity with Baudelaire is exemplified by her interest in the author's preoccupation with locating a sense of beauty within contexts of loss and deterioration. Just as the fragrant tuberose begins to smell of rotting flesh towards the end of its flowering, romance and decay are intertwined by Razaghdoost in what is an undoubtedly beautiful visual language. She sees these themes of love, life and death as inseparable; a constantly revolving circle in which one forever leads into the other. The consistent leitmotif of the sick rose is, after all, a specimen which was once a living, growing flower, but it is also representative of death, becoming gradually covered by its own malady, or left on the grave in a silent act of memory. In the weeping heart and pulsating yonic form, she melds the sacred and the profane. The ubiquitous use of red is sometimes equated to the blood shed by Christ during the crucifixion, the abstract equivalent of the encrusted drops that line his wounds in Renaissance art. This symbolic link is not only to an expression of the ultimate sacrifice but appeals to the protracted sense of suffering which informs all of Razaghdoost's paintings. Pools of crimson stain the canvas as if it was left there as the trace movement of a surgeon's bloodied hand onto his white apron. This 'blood' can also be conceived as menstrual, overflowing from the chalice of the womb, or, with Persian poetry in mind<sup>1</sup>, the liquid rubicund paint draws an immediate parallel with wine and the libations with which Hafez would stain the prayer mat or spill over the threshold of the tavern door. Meanwhile, in her most recent works, a limited palette has been extended to include calm, ethereal shades of blue, grey and green, which produce a dramatic visual pause from the searing, uncompromising paintings previously dominated by red. These cooler tones appear as breaks in the cloud within what is, overall, a tempestuous oeuvre.

For Razaghdoost, the subject of her 'Iranian-ness' as an artist is by no means a reductive act of labelling. Living and working in Karaj - a large city just west of the capital and her birthplace, Tehran - she is unavoidably an Iranian artist. However, unlike many of her contemporaries, who tackle national identity as the focal point of their work, Razaghdoost declines to restrict herself to a practice that is self-consciously Iranian. As much as specifically Persian elements of calligraphy and poetry find themselves tied into Razaghdoost's canvases, she extends her reach to nineteenth-century British and French

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<sup>1</sup>"Dye your prayer-carpet in wine

If the "Magian Teacher" commands it:

For the true traveller understands the path

And the proper procedure at the inns."

From: Alston, A. J., *In search of Hafiz*, (London: Shanti Sadan, 1996)

literature as well as Christian imagery – all subjects which are approached out of her own personal impulses rather than from any affinity resulting from her nationality. Although no less proud of the rich literary and artistic heritage of Iran, she baulks at the idea that the range of her practice, both in subject matter and technique, should be strictly tied to art forms and subjects that are directly descended from it. She is also wary of neo-Orientalist readings which tend to haunt the work of contemporary artists from across the Middle East and those of Iran in particular; often, even if no socio-political critique or even engagement with traditional art forms are consciously invoked by the work or the artist behind it, these topics still tend to form the basis of interpretation. Whilst she is widely considered as one of Iran's most active young painters, Razaghdoost's openness to material beyond her homeland indicates a universality beyond a concern with borders. Razaghdoost's raw art instead comes to distill the volatile charge of emotions which enlivens and gives meaning to human experience across geographies and histories, however disparate.

Natasha Morris, London 2016