

Kaleidoscopic Worlds

By Valerie Behery

The intricate, multicoloured patterns created by artist Sanaz Mazinani belie a concern with the effects of news media on public consciousness and political understanding. Underline takes a closer look, to discover the surprising details to be found in these eye-catching designs.

Sanaz Mazinani's work exerts a mesmerising effect on viewers. The colour and geometrical complexity that characterises her art immediately draw us in only to unfurl news images which, endlessly deployed over social media, we all recognise but no longer see. The visual comparison between the patterns of global newsfeeds and those of decorative arts is jarring, forcing viewers to question the nature of political and journalistic communication while still offering them a rich aesthetic experience.

Mazinani was born in Tehran in 1978 and lived there until the age of 11, when she moved with her family to Toronto, Canada. Now largely based in San Francisco, the Iranian artist is represented by the Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto and the Ab Anbar space in Tehran. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, and *Canadian*



Sanaz Mazinani. Image courtesy of the artist.

Art and forms part of private and public collections, including the Canada Council Art Bank, the Cleveland Museum of Art and San Francisco International Airport. Mazinani has just received a new public art commission for Google's San Francisco offices.

UNDERLINE: You spend time in Iran, exhibit there, and produce work that is informed by Iranian Islamic art and aesthetics. How central is this Iranian dimension to your identity and work?

SANAZ MAZINANI: I often think that the visual world that I have encountered in Iran and travels abroad over the years has allowed me to decode and better perceive all my experiences. The incredible Iranian architecture, tapestries and carpets that I have had the privilege of immersing myself in have registered in my psyche over the years and finally emerged as

unique artworks. By engaging with their metaphors and symbols, I investigate the way visual perception informs our understanding of ourselves and one another.

UNDERLINE: *Iran Revisited* (1999-2013) explored your sense of belonging to and displacement from Iran, but its nodal theme was to unpack Western stereotypes of Iran. As someone who lives across cultures, are you more aware of the power of images in shaping societal attitudes and worldviews?

MAZINANI: I still recall the precise moment when I fully understood the power of images. I was 21 years old and a burgeoning activist. We had just organised a student rally in front of the Ontario Legislative Building against tuition increases when I was interviewed for television. That evening, when



Sanaz Mazinani, *Trump on TV* (detail)

watching the news, the edited version of the interview was so incredibly far from the reality of what I had discussed with the journalist, and the documentation of the march so unreasonably biased, that it shocked me to my very core. I realised at that moment that the media possesses tremendous power to sway public opinion and therefore shape society. Soon after, I began the *Iran Revisited* series to show the Western world my perspective of Iran and bridge the gap between my reality and the news images circulating of Iran at the time. I simply documented what I saw and started seeing the themes of 'complexity and beauty' and 'tradition versus change' emerging. This series tries to convey the latter, revealing the reality of life in Iran with both its ambiguities and the transcultural attitudes of its people.

UNDERLINE: In 2011, your work underwent a momentous shift. You began using infinite patterning to bring together media images from the West and the Middle East, to deconstruct the 'clash of civilisations' discourse and the strange aestheticisation of war and weapons in contemporary culture.

MAZINANI: Yes, my work continues to struggle with the notion of the image and its link to the militarisation of culture. I think a great deal about how images inform us and what they leave behind. Because photography is more accessible than ever, it feels even more crucial to question how a photograph functions and what it is capable of. In short, I am captivated by the politics of sight. These works probe how we read photography as a visual language and experiment with duplication, cropping, colour, light and



Sanaz Mazinani, *U.S.A./IRAN*, 2014

the variance between what the human eye sees and what the camera can record.

While the changed imagery that I utilise, such as drones, underscores an increasing militarisation of the world, I also aim to locate similarities between my two 'homes'. For example, *National Assemblies* is a photographic montage that I created for a public art project titled *U.S.A./R.A.N.* (2014) to mitigate the perceived divide between Iranian and US identities. In this piece, images of the National Assemblies of Iran and the United States are interwoven to create a repeating pattern. While the exterior architectural styles of the two structures differ greatly, the interior assembly halls share many similar spatial qualities.

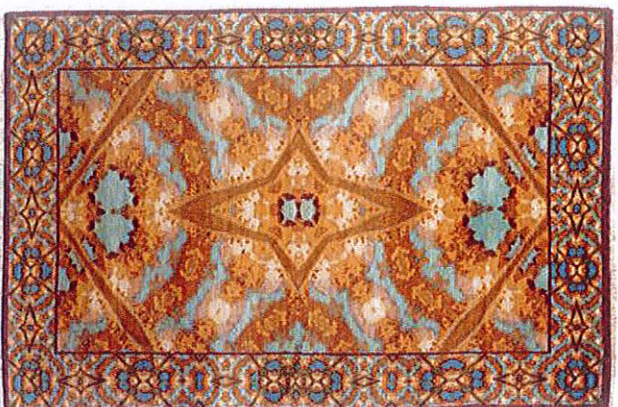
UNDERLINE: Your work evokes Iranian Islamic art and yet pattern making, which exists in all cultures, possesses something universal. In your work, it serves to bring together East and West, image the continuous loop and politics of the news media, suggest the possibility of alternative interpretations of events, while also creating visual beauty.

MAZINANI: Yes, this work involves a process-intensive method of composing images based on patterns. I create intricate montages that when inspected up close reveal new details. I'm interested in exploring how networks of connections can be moulded and modelled through

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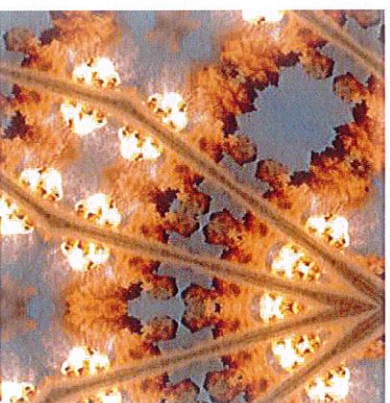
the repetitious circulation of visual signals that censor or demonise representations of 'the enemy'. Often conflict is depicted in ways that permit us to consume the event from a distance and perceive death and destruction as justifiable. Repetition in my work acts as a shorthand for the circulation of images: the many people who view them and share them from screen to screen. I specifically use popular images that are already in circulation to create new juxtapositions that might not have been considered harmonious before. The patterns in my work also function in the same way as mandalas. They invite reflection and meditation. Even though the content is difficult, the works always offer an alternative balanced symmetrical space-image if viewed from a distance. These geometric patterns may go beyond the representational to leverage the semiotics of pattern and deliver an entirely new message that reflects upon the nature of modern existence in a globalised world. Drawing upon a historical visual language, they lead us to consider the nature of our individual connections on a global scale.

UNDERLINE: Social justice is a core concern of your art. Could you tell us something about the work you designed recently for the *Sanctuary* project, which broaches the issue of the globally displaced?



Sanaz Mazinani, *Sanctuary*

MAZINANI: I designed a rug that was handwoven in Lahore. *Sanctuary* was a travelling exhibition curated by the FOR-SITE Foundation and was composed of thirty-six rugs, designed by artists from twenty-one countries, that tackled the issues of migration, politics and belonging. I wanted to use an image that spoke to the incredible process and work that it takes to create a rug. Reflecting on the forces of creation and destruction, I chose an image of an explosion as my source inspiration. For me, the symbolic likeness of an explosion stands in for an act of violence, but also for depictions of power. The explosion structuring the rug design becomes a sublime entity to be feared and adored; its ability to obfuscate with the smoke that it produces becomes a metaphor for politics, a symbol for the veils that simultaneously obscure and complicate reality. ■



Sanaz Mazinani, *Explosion* (detail)

For more information about Sanaz Mazinani's work visit:
http://www.sanazmazinani.com/all_projects
<http://usairan.portfoliobox.me/>
<http://www.for-site.org/project/sanctuary/>

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