

Garments of Silk and Gold

Interview with Nazanin Hedayat Munroe

John Shorb

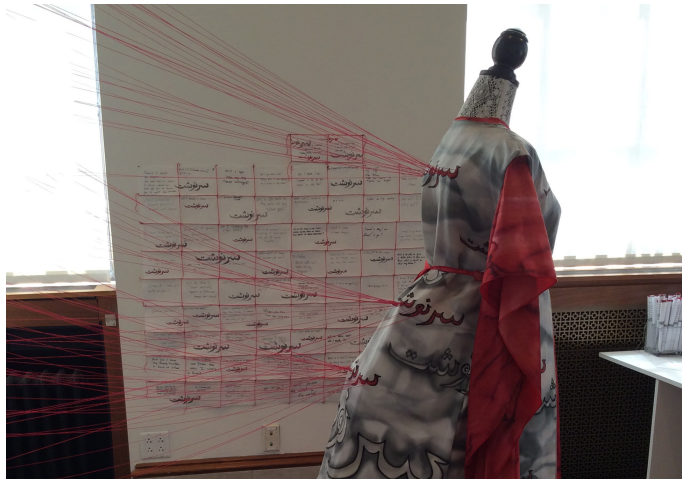
Nazanin Hedayat Munroe creates complex installations, often incorporating textiles, a life-long passion of hers. Munroe has just completed her doctorate in art history, with a focus on the history of textiles, at University of Bern in Switzerland. She holds a BFA from Savannah College of Art and Design, an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art and an MA in art history from San Jose State University. Munroe recently had a piece in the exhibition “Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired By Traditional Islamic Art” at the Doug Adams Gallery at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She has also exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the de Young Museum of San Francisco, and the Detroit Institute of Arts. She is teaching “Arts of the Islamic World” as an adjunct instructor at CUNY in New York. I met Munroe over lunch in New York to discuss her extraordinary installations.

How does religion or spirituality figure into your work or to your art practice?

Much of my inspiration comes from mystic Sufi poetry. Rumi, Hafez, and Nizami are the poets I go back to the most. Over time, I found myself being drawn more and more to the spiritual side of Islam, really manifested in Sufism and Sufi poetry. As an artist, I think the act of creating and connecting to my viewers once I’ve made a work is a spiritual process; I believe that when you are creating,

it comes from something larger than yourself. It removes you from your ego, and you become the recipient of something greater, and this speaks to viewers. I do find that, after 20 years of showing my work, viewers will always respond most to works that I created with the purest intention and the most honesty—even if I’m questioning things.

That comes across in your work. I wanted to talk about your piece “So... This is the Afterlife...”



Nazanin Hedayat Munroe
 100 Destinies
 2015
 Mixed media installation: Silk handmade garment, resist-dyed; thread; cardstock; map pins
 Courtesy of the artist

This piece was inspired by 13th c. poet Rumi. In one of his poems, he mentions *sabzpūsh*, translated from Persian as “one adorned in green,” referring to the celestial beings that become your companions in the afterlife; there is a Qur’anic reference to this as well which also says that in the afterlife, the believers will be adorned in garments of silk and gold. As a textile artist, I was very taken by this sumptuous description. At the same time, I was at a point in my life where I was deeply unhappy; I suddenly felt like I was trying to do the right thing and it didn’t turn out the way I had been led to believe. I had this thought: what if the afterlife is not this wonderful place? It was

a kind of intellectual and spiritual cynicism that was clashing with what up to that time had been a stable set of beliefs. So I wrote this poem in second person on a mirror-like silver veil in front of a figure in a green silk garment, which transfixes the viewer into someone who gets to heaven and isn’t happy there.

Then the piece came out of a period of doubt.

Yes, and this was my intuition speaking to me through my artistic process. How many of us work on listening to our intuition? But to listen, I have to clear away the cobwebs of my daily life. I love being



Nazanin Hedayat Munroe
 100 Destinies
 2015
 Mixed media installation: Silk handmade garment, resist-dyed; thread; cardstock; map pins
 Courtesy of the artist



Nazanin Hedayat Munroe
So...This is the Afterlife... (detail, front view)
 1998
 Mixed media installation: Silk handmade garments, feathers, silk panel with vinyl lettering
 Courtesy of the artist

in my studio working with silk and dye. It's a form of meditation for me.

Your larger installations are often rooms that invite people into this kind of experience.

I think of them as sacred spaces, as places for contemplation. In 2007, I created a piece for a performance-based exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art called "Destiny House," inspired by 14th c. poet Hafez's work. My parents practiced this form of divination, called bibliomancy, when I was growing up. You start with a closed book of Hafez's mystic poems, say a prayer for him, and then you ask Hafez a question on

which you need advice, with utmost sincerity. You can just whisper it, but you have to speak the words. Then you open your book to a random page for his answer, revealed in the poem. Following this concept, I wanted to do live readings for visitors, fortune-telling in a way. I put out colored rice paper and markers, and asked people to write anonymously their questions for Hafez and then attach them to the outside fabric of the space. The entire space was filled within two hours. I sat down with museum visitors and performed a divination reading for each person. It was a great experience. People were so sincere and genuine. Viewers asked serious questions like "will I conceive a child?" or "will I



Nazanin Hedayat Munroe
Destiny House
 2007
 Mixed media installation: Silk organza panels, rice paper, handmade book of Hafez poems
 Photo by Ivan Weksler
 Courtesy of the artist

marry my boyfriend?" And I did hear back that Hafez's response was right.

I'm interested in this mystical quality of your work and especially how it relates to your piece "100 Destinies."

Based on the same concept of bibliomancy, for my piece "100 Destinies," I wanted to ask a Hafez a question every day. Normally you do this when you hit a crossroads and you're struggling to make a decision so this is a twist on that. The clothed figure represents the individual asking the question. I used a Persian-English book of Hafez's poetry and copied my 100 poems onto the wall behind the figure in Persian, noting a significant

word with a drop of red dye and connecting it to the garment where I dyed it red, on the back. The figure is connected to her decisions and her history by these threads.

For this work I resist-dyed silk with the word *sar-nevesht*, which means "destiny" in Persian, and fashioned it into a garment. This word literally translates "written on your forehead." I like that term. Shades of grey hand-painted on the garment represent the dilution of Persian culture for me, as a first-generation American; red dye on the inner garment and threads represent bloodlines, my own ancestry, and the idea of multiple destinies or parallel universes.