

THE
DRAWING
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Raha Raissnia *Alluvius*

December 1, 2017 – February 4, 2018

Curated by Amber Harper



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Raha Raissnia and I were first introduced by the composer John Zorn, who selected her as well as her husband and collaborator Panagiotis (Panos) Mavridis to participate in the 2016 *Basement Performances* series at The Drawing Center. I visited their Brooklyn studio for the first time in the middle of that winter's worst blizzard. Raha and Panos welcomed me into their space and without hesitation drew the curtains; set up Panos's handmade electronic instruments; pulled the projectors, slides, and film loops off the shelves; and began to perform. I observed as analogue film loops were carefully layered onto projected slides of Raha's drawings, and the physical quality of time-based media became a visible, palpable thing. The exhibition Raha Raissnia: Alluvius affords the opportunity to foreground the importance of drawing in Raha's practice.

Above all, I would like to thank Brett Littman, Executive Director, and Claire Gilman, Chief Curator, who supported and guided this project from day one. I am privileged to have two mentors who care so deeply about their field. From Miguel Abreu Gallery, Miguel Abreu, Anya Komar, and Alan Longino deserve special recognition, for without them this exhibition would not be possible. Special thanks also to The Drawing Center's staff: Joanna Ahlberg, Managing Editor; Peter J. Ahlberg, AHL&CO; Noah Chasin, Executive Editor; DéLana Dameron-John, former Development Director; Dan Gillespie, Operations Manager; Molly Gross, Communications Director; Bruno Nouril, Development Director; Kate Robinson, Bookstore Manager; and Olga Valle Tetkowski, Exhibition Manager as well as curatorial interns Isabella Kapur and Ximena Kilroe. Finally, I am incredibly grateful for the generous support of The Drawing Center's Board of Trustees and the exhibition funders, without whom this exhibition would not be possible: r/e projects; Jill and Peter Kraus; Catherine Lagrange; MZR Gedenkstiftung (Karen and Robert Rom), Switzerland; The Kadre Family Collection; and Rhombus Press. Special thanks are also due to Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, and Ab/Anbar Gallery, Tehran.

Cover:

Raha Raissnia, *Fountain*, 2017. Charcoal on paper, 36 x 60 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

Row 1 to 3:

Raha Raissnia, *Canto*, 2017. Graphite and acrylic medium on paper, 9 x 12 inches (9 from a series of 10 drawings).

Row 4 to 5:

Raha Raissnia, *Alluvius*, 2016. Mixed media on paper, 12 x 19 inches (6 from a series of 12 drawings). All works are courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

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Raha Raissnia: Alluvius

The densely-composed charcoal works on view in *Raha Raissnia: Alluvius* are based on images culled from the artist's personal archive of found photographic slides. Following Marshall McLuhan's assertion that the "content' of any medium is always another medium," one might argue that the content of Raissnia's drawings is photography.¹ Yet, the drawings on view in the present exhibition are distinct from her photographic sources; rather than producing direct copies, Raissnia abstracts the images she works from, laboriously drawing and rephotographing the original image, transferring the image between paper and celluloid until it becomes unrecognizable. Contextualizing Raissnia's drawings within a broader consideration of photographic representation, *Alluvius* shows how Raissnia uses drawing to question photographic images, and even change or expand their meaning.

Raissnia grew up in Tehran during the 1978–79 revolution, and she often accompanied her father, an amateur photographer, on trips to the city center to document mass protests against the Shah. "I knew what my father was up to with his camera everyday going to work," Raissnia remembers, "several times without my mother knowing he took me downtown to show me what was going on."² Her father's photographs show men and women wearing both secular dress and chadors, marching while carrying portraits of Mohammad Mosaddegh, the progressive leader ousted with help from the United States in favor of the reactionary Shah, and portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shia Muslim religious leader and politician who came to power after the Shah was overthrown. In 1983, at the age of fifteen, Raissnia left Tehran with her mother and emigrated to Houston, Texas. When her father passed away a few years later, she inherited his photography equipment, which she would later take with her on visits to Tehran. "On my first few trips

back," Raissnia writes, "with his camera in hand I took slides obsessively; always of what was going on downtown."³

Mirroring her father's photographs, Raissnia's own early documentary works present complex yet legible scenes that speak to the changing political situation in Tehran. It might be said, following Susan Sontag, that Raissnia's early photographs "bore witness to the real—since a person had been there to take them."⁴ Raissnia's recent abstract drawings, based on projected and rephotographed 35mm slides, obscure the message conveyed by the photographs on which they are based. As a result, Raissnia interferes with the observer's ability to derive information from the image. At first glance, Raissnia's large-scale drawing, entitled *Fountain* (2017), appears abstract: a white disk floats at the center of the composition against a dark, textured ground, and the observer is left wondering what the drawing represents. One's comprehension of *Fountain* changes when learning that the drawing is based on an image found in a box of discarded 35mm slides labeled "Sultanate Architecture," one part of a cache of material that Raissnia collected when Brooklyn College threw out its visual resource archive.⁵ The elliptical form at the center of the drawing in fact represents an empty ablution fountain from a mosque courtyard, that is no longer in use. To create *Fountain*, Raissnia projected and rephotographed the slide at an oblique angle, and then drew from a new grisaille picture, further skewing, flattening, and blurring the already aged and discolored image.

Raissnia's drawings of photographs counter the function of photography presumed at its invention: the representation of an unequivocal image, one that bears a closed meaning that the observer can easily read. In the famed 1839 presentation to the French Chamber of Deputies, the physicist François Arago argued that the state should acquire the patent for the

daguerreotype, an early photographic process, because the medium could be useful for surveying foreign territories and thus serve as a tool for expanding the imperial colonies.⁶ The photographers Luigi Pesce and Antoin Sevruguin, among others, sent images of the ruins of Persepolis (ca. 550–330 BCE) in southwestern Iran to ethnographical societies and museums, fixing an image of Iran in a state of deterioration in the European Orientalist imagination. The clarity of images by Pesce and Sevruguin served to communicate an incontrovertible narrative to viewers, one that perpetuated stereotypes of the Middle East as falsely in need of Western protection.⁷ Though Raissnia's *Fountain* also presents an image of an archaeological site (a mosque that has fallen into disrepair), by projecting, re-photographing, and ultimately drawing the original photograph, Raissnia's work resolutely inhibits the observer's ability to derive concrete knowledge from the image.

Drawing is a critical part of Raissnia's approach to abstraction. For a recent series entitled *Canto* (2017), which like *Fountain* she based on photographic projections, Raissnia repeatedly applied charcoal marks until the surface of each drawing became almost entirely redacted. To understand the purpose of abstraction in Raissnia's work, one might consider Roland Barthes's distinction between the obvious and the obtuse meanings of images. Barthes tells us that the obvious is a forthcoming and legible meaning, one "which presents itself quite naturally to the mind"—such as the image of a fountain in a mosque courtyard.⁸ By contrast, the obtuse "seems to open the field of meaning totally," which is to say that the obtuse might contradict or occlude what at first seems obvious within the image.⁹ "Like the blunting of a meaning too clear, too violent," as Barthes wrote in another context, Raissnia's drawings bring the meaning of photographs from her archive away from the obvious

and toward the obtuse.¹⁰ Indeed, by scrubbing, scratching, brushing, erasing, and redrawing each work in *Canto*, Raissnia reopens the meaning of the photographs on which each drawing is based, questioning the photographic claims to truth that characterized the original image.

Raha Raissnia: Alluvius affords an opportunity to relate Raissnia's drawings to the artist's long-term engagement with photography, addressing interpretations of the medium assayed by Sontag or Barthes while complicating the primary purpose of photography established by Arago: the communication of an incontrovertible truth. In dialogue with the aforementioned figures, Raissnia's abstract drawings embody the distortions inherent in photographic representation by exaggerating the formal distance between the appearance of the original image and the final work. While the surfaces of Raissnia's drawings, like those in the *Canto* series, may seem bare, the absence of figuration does not indicate the absence of content. By expanding the meaning of photographs through another medium, Raissnia's work speaks to the possibility of drawing, above all, as a way to revisit, abstract, question, and change the images we use to construct identity.

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 8.

2 Raha Raissnia, *This Long Century*, www.thislongcentury.com/?p=9112&c=318.

3 Ibid.

4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 26.

5 Conversation with the author, July 11, 2017.

6 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 144–146.

7 Ali Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran," in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 of 4, Qajar Art and Society (2001): 144.

8 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 54.

9 Ibid., 55.

10 Ibid.

