

OMID MOKRI BIO

My education began in Tehran, Iran in 1978 at Honarestan-e Honarha-ye Ziba, the foremost art institution in the country at the time. Since that time, my studies have continued across the United States. I studied fine art at the Rhode Island School of Design and 3D animation at the Academy of Art University. I hold a Bachelor's of Fine Arts from the California College of the Arts and Crafts. My experience with art in academia continued when I taught art classes at Diablo Valley College.

I have displayed my work at two solo shows and numerous group shows. My 2009 show at Studio Quercus, *Vanitas: New Work from Omid Mokri*, used newly wrought iron and bronze sculptures and monochromatic oil paintings to convey themes of man's vanity and the eetingness of life.

In 2015, my solo show *Images from Inside* took place at Diablo Valley College. *Images from the Inside* portrayed works I completed while incarcerated. These works were completed using whatever materials I could find, whether that meant staining a bed sheet with tea leaves to prepare it as a canvas, or pulverising colored pencils into paint that I applied to discarded linens using a paintbrush made from hair and an old spoon. These works would take months to create due to the constant risk of confiscation.

My work depicted the impact of incarceration on the human soul, and asked the question: what happens to the human soul when it is reduced to a number? By painting, drawing and sketching to hopes, fears and pain of my fellow inmates, I hoped to highlight the racial injustices and inherently inhumane aspects of incarceration.

The work I created while incarcerated was shown at a number of group exhibitions during that time. I developed my style of resourceful re-employment. My work underscored the paradox of using human warehousing as a means of rehabilitation, juxtaposing plein air fine art techniques with objects found in the prison yard.

RUMINATIONS

What is Asian America in the 2020's?

Asian America in the 2020's was best described by Ijeoma Umebinyuo's poem, "diaspora blues," which reads: "So, here you are too foreign for home too foreign for here never enough for both." Diaspora communities from Asian countries struggle to mesh what are all too often diametrically opposed eastern and western ideologies, resulting in a unique third culture that does not fit neatly into the boxes of "Asian" and "American."

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, Asian America seems to be turning increasingly inward with a critical lens, questioning power structures that we have traditionally benefited from at the expense of Black and Indigenous peoples of color, and hoping to make

reparations by elevating their voices. Part of this cultural subversion is centering on non-white art, offering a perspective that has been sorely missing from the art scene.

What is Asian American art?

Answering the question “what is Asian American art” is impossible to adequately address. How can one person explain the breadth and depth of the artwork created by Asian artists in America, not all of which is distinctly “Asian American” and may fall into the general definition of “artwork.” As we continue critical conversations about white-centered artistic spaces, it is vital to shift the definition of non-traditional work by Asian American artists to the broad category of “art,” lest we set the default of “art” to works by white Americans. My best attempt to answer this question thus centers on works that draw from traditions of Asiatic cultures. Because Asian Americans have a degree of separation from their ancestral lands, we face the choice between drawing from traditional works or forging our own path or a combination of the two.

Asian American art takes elements of some of the oldest cultures and occasionally applies them in modern day to convey often political messages of longing for homelands destabilized by western wars. Bringing these traditional motifs and styles to today’s art conveys the multifaceted struggles of existence and resistance for model minorities in 2020’s America.

Iranic cultures are on the fringe of the traditional notion of “Asian Americans”, not quite fitting into South Asian or East Asian geography. Comparing Persian art to European and Asian art makes it apparent that Iranian artists are significantly more aligned with Asian than European methods of painting.

Does such a thing exist?

Absolutely. My art is heavily influenced by the 18th century Qajar dynasty commissioned paintings of the royal court. Systematic gaps in artistic accessibility led to my self-taught foray into restoring miniature and large scale paintings from this period, aiming to bring traditional techniques and materials to modern artwork. As there is not the same body of literature on recreating traditional works of art from classical Asian schools of artistic expression, Asian American artists often find themselves faced with the decision of abandoning the old ways or trying to emulate them through trial and error.

In particular, Middle Eastern countries have placed severe restrictions on the study of traditional artwork, making it near impossible to access artistic archives and literature without being imprisoned for political subversion. In light of these restrictions, many Iranic peoples have returned to the traditional, apolitical practice of calligraphy, painting poetry and religious texts as a mode of creative expression where anything else is viewed as a criticism of the regime. Being an Asian American artist in 2020 allows me to paint what artists in the Middle East could only dream of freely painting. It means having the privilege of being able to disseminate this artwork and perspective in the U.S., where many people harbor a heavily biased view of who Iranians are. Being an Asian American artist in 2020 means speaking not only for yourself, but also for the thousands of artists in your homeland whose voices are being stifled.

It also means speaking out against the injustice in your new homeland. Much of my recent work reflects the fragility of life and racial vulnerability to the prison industrial complex. Leaves and flowers make up the backbone of my latest sculptures, demanding to be handled with care lest

they crumble. Such is the line minorities, especially Black and Indigenous peoples, must delicately tow to avoid succumbing to the political system built to oppress them.