

مسافر

Mosafer (The Traveller)

By

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Abstract

This thesis poses questions about the preservation of culture and language amongst generations of Iranian immigrants living in North America. It investigates the socio-cultural implications of hybridity as they relate to interethnic exchange and the globalizing process of travel and translation. Working with notions of “third space” or “the space in-between” (Clifford, 1992; Bhabha, 1994) and Farzad Sharifian’s research on the globalization of English (2012), this work explores how the use of the hybrid language Persian-English affects an Iranian sense of identity in a globalized world. Susan Stewart’s discussion on the agency of objects to generate narratives which are central to a cultural experience (1993) is discussed as it applies to the use of objects in the artworks being examined in this paper. An analysis of several contemporary autoethnographic works from recent art history, such as Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988), Zineb Sedira’s *Mother Tongue* (2002), and Ala Ebtekar’s *Elemental* (2004), is used to form a basis for a discussion of hybrid identity and how inherited language can complicate cultural exchange. The artistic projects that come out of this research are *Ma Miaeem va Miravim* (*We Come and Go*), 2016, and *Soghat (Souvenir)*, 2017. *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)* is an artist book based on the first-grade English book, *We Come and Go* (1954), which employs a hybrid translation of Persian-English—in which Persian words are written using the Roman alphabet. *Soghat (Souvenir)* is a series of sculptures made from everyday objects and string, which investigates how culture travels through objects. These artworks are discussed to explore ways in which meaning can be lost, gained, or altered, through the substitution of signifiers and the co-mingling of cultures.

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Dedication

To Sepehr & Kasra

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1. Introduction

Ethnography is the study and description of customs and social practices common among a group of individuals. Data gathered on-site through direct observation of and participation within the group is known as fieldwork. This was a common research practice of cultural anthropologists during the first half of the twentieth century. In the past few decades ethnographic research of this type has been critiqued on the grounds that it is not possible for an outside observer to obtain “pure” knowledge of an othered culture. Alternatively, ethnographic works created by artist-ethnographers through fieldwork, community-based projects, and artistically motivated-research offer a first-hand cultural experience liberated from the predefined interpretations and pedagogy ingrained in the research of early cultural anthropologists. These recent artist-driven works often aim to decolonize the social, political, and historical implications of representation while reclaiming cultural identities, histories, and narratives. Both cultural anthropology and contemporary art address notions of representation, but while cultural anthropology provides a written description of culture and civilization, contemporary art turns a cultural experience into an artwork which can create a new space for different interpretations to be considered.

My artistic projects, *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)* and *Soghat (Souvenir)*, are two autoethnographic works which reflect on my experience of living both in Iran and Canada.

Through these works I have explored notions of hybridity, narrative, language, and their representation in text. *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)* is an artist book based on the first-grade English book, *We Come and Go*, from the Dick and Jane series; this work employs a hybrid translation of Persian-English in which Persian words are written using the Roman

alphabet. *Soghat (Souvenir)* is a series of sculptures made from everyday objects and string which investigates how culture is contained within and travels through objects. The phrases ‘*Ma Miaeem va Miravim*’ and ‘*Soghat*’ in the titles are, respectively, translations of ‘We Come and Go’ and ‘Souvenir’ in Persian-English. These works employ techniques of layering and fragmentation as a means to open a new space, inviting the audience to imagine an Iranian immigrant’s experience of travelling to another culture. Implicit in these artworks are questions about the declining preservation of culture and language amongst generations of Iranian immigrants.

2. Between Words, Between Cultures

In “Travelling Cultures” (1992) James Clifford critiques the practice of anthropology, suggesting that in order for anthropological culture to represent “global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances, then one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones” (Clifford 101). In Clifford’s view, culture is fluid rather than static. It is a site for travel—travel as a more neutral and theoretical term which refers to displacement—a site of intercultural knowledge where travellers from different cultures meet, and each traveller changes due to its encounter with other cultures. He suggests that while there is no “ground of equivalence” between travellers from two cultures, there may be “at least a basis for comparison and translation” (Clifford 107). Clifford’s definition of ethnography has influenced many scholars, writers, and artists and has brought elements of ethnography into a much wider range of practices, a field that now includes contemporary art. One of the ways cultural and artistic practice can investigate the preservation or erosion of cultural identity is by

exploring what is lost or disrupted in processes of translation, through migration of signifiers, or from cultural displacement.

A large part of the immigrant experience is tied to language, with connections to heritage and history. Giving a generation of Persian-Canadian children a voice, deeply rooted in Persian culture and a sense of homeland, is an important role of retaining the Persian language. However, Persian is not an option among the second languages offered by the Vancouver School Board. Teaching Persian to first-generation children of Canadian immigrants is the responsibility of the parents. In a post-colonial world, the challenges of learning Persian are deeply connected to a sense of heritage. Language in this sense is a sort of inheritance, something that is passed down from the past, a tradition.

According to Farzad Sharifian, a scholar of cultural linguistics, during the 1970s it was prestigious for many upper middle-class Iranians to send their children to English schools during the summer break; as well as sending high school graduates to the United States for higher education (Sharifian 137). The most significant westernization of Iran occurred during the 1960s and 70s when the former King (the Shah) attempted to realize his vision of what he called the “*tamadone bozorg*,” (Great Civilization). It was during this period that English became the most predominant foreign language. Elite foreign language schools primarily used English textbooks with western content, further integrating western ideals into the Persian upper classes.

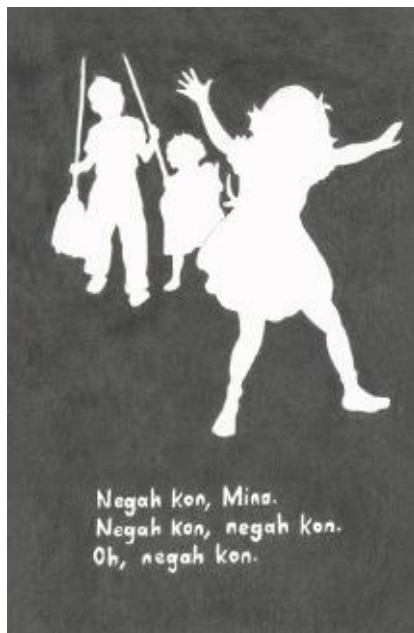
In spite of numerous periods of westernization, and the global and historical tensions introduced through cultural exchange with western powers, the Persian identity persists and continues to respect its origins—albeit while still allowing some new integrations of its traditions into some new hybrid forms. A more recent increase in online interactions amongst the Iranians living in

the West in the last few decades has led to the development of a new English-based hybrid translation, Persian-English. As mentioned above, in this form the traditional Persian language is written using the Roman alphabet instead of the traditional Persian characters.

Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go) is an artwork which focuses on these changes to the traditional Persian language in written communication. Such deviations to the language have an impact on both the children of first-generation immigrants—growing up in an anglophone culture—and on their parents—whose primary language is not English. The illustrated pages of the artwork draw parallels to the first grade English book, *We Come and Go*, from the Dick and Jane series (published in the 1950s) and translates it into Persian-English. The coloured illustrations from the children's book are reproduced in black and white with some thematic changes and translations. The contrasting differences between the artwork and the original illustrations bring forward the impact of English on Persian by comparing the implications of these two languages and the devices through which they are taught to children. The historical tensions on a global, transnational sense of Persian identity throughout the westernization and globalization of Iran serve to further inform the imagery presented in the artwork.

Published in 1956 in Chicago and intended for first graders, *We Come and Go* is the second pre-primer from the popularized North American Dick and Jane series written by William S. Gray et al. During the 1950s-1970s, about 85% of American elementary schools used these books as educational tools in their classrooms; they can be seen as a sort of snapshot reflecting American

postwar values and dreams¹. Their colourful illustrations depict three children, Dick, Jane, and Sally from an idealized white middle-class American family. The children are shown to be beautifully dressed while playing around their American-style house, complete with a white picket fence. They play with many toys, such as big toy cars, nice bicycles, and beautiful red wagons; they also have a cute dog, Spot, and a cat, Puff. I was exposed to these books as a child while learning English in Iran. Only after moving to the North America, did I realize that the kind of living which was illustrated in the English books such as Dick and Jane series is not the way most people live here.



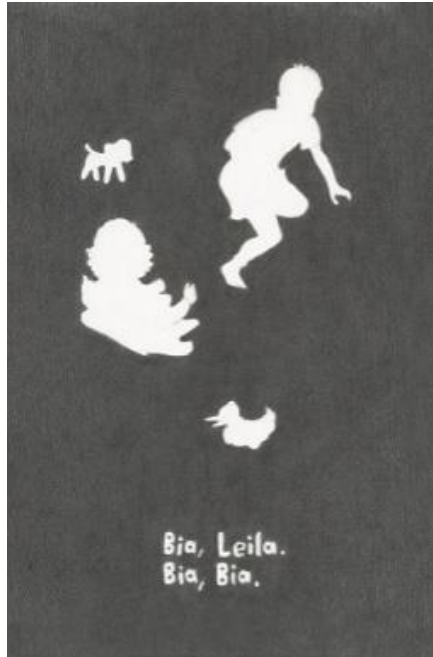
(Fig.1) *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)*, graphite pencil on paper

¹ Trip Gabriel, an American journalist in an article published in *The New York Times* suggests that, the book's subtitle is "Learning and Living the American Dream" (Gabriel web).

In *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)*, the children's names, Dick, Jane, and Sally have been replaced by Iranian names, Babak, Mina, and Leila, and the colourful homogenized images of the source book, *We Come and Go*² were also translated: Graphite pencil was used obsessively to draw in several layers of dark lines covering the parts of the pictures depicting the 1950s-60s white children playing outside—which were not the ways Iranian children played at that time. For example, some of the toys in the images such as roller-skates, a wagon, and a big toy car have been covered (Fig 1,2). In other settings, the white picket fence has been replaced with a high brick wall which is a common element in the design of houses in Iran, and a motorcycle has been added as it is a common delivery vehicle in Iran instead of the milk van shown in the source book.

Replacing North American toys and other objects with traditional Iranian objects and motifs is used as a symbol for preserving Iranian cultural heritage and to represent the fear of the growing influence of western culture on children and youth. As a result, the dark graphite drawing in the artist book is in stark contrast to the colourful homogenized American portrayal in the original book of *We Come and Go*. The children in the images are reduced to a sign of their whiteness to reflect on the socio-economic issues of the time suggesting that teaching English through Dick and Jane series was also about educating young children about white American values and traditions.

² <http://venezky.stanford.edu/modern/dick-and-jane/>



(Fig.2) *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)*, graphite pencil on paper

In this artwork, the meticulous work of covering the pages with the graphite pencil, the repetition of applying multiple layers, and the labour involved in the translation of the phrases from English into Persian-English attempt to illustrate a parallel to the difficulty of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture. Suggesting ways in which meaning can be lost or altered through the substitution of signifiers.

The technique of applying dark graphite around the absence of the figures is a representation of the complex act of attempting to assimilate into another culture and to become fluent in it. This technique coupled with the erasing of western cultural objects aims to highlight the impact that English (and the spread of western culture) as the dominant language of globalization can have on other cultures, potentially leading to a kind of cultural colonization.

In *Measures of Distance*³ (1988) artist Mona Hatoum translates a letter written by her own mother to her daughter. The translation can be read as a palimpsest between text and speech (many second language users speak their mother tongue but cannot read it). The writing of Hatoum's mother scrolls across the screen in Arabic, her 'mother tongue.' Simultaneously Hatoum reads aloud a translation of her mother's words in English to her daughter. Hatoum explores notions of home and displacement emphasizing the adaptation of textual and linguistic traditions. A generation of children of immigrants has grown up either not speaking their mother tongue or being able to communicate through speech rather than written text. How do these disruptions in language shift our relationship to a sense of homeland, heritage, and cultural rootedness across generations? What are the emotional impacts of losing one's mother tongue on both children and their parents? The fragmented conversation of mixed Arabic and English (also known as code-switching) highlights the complexity of the relationship between a mother and her children who speak different languages. Hatoum's work suggests that she is not only displaced geographically but also linguistically and therefore psychologically.

This view is also evident in *Mother Tongue*⁴ (2002). In this work, artist Zineb Sedira explores the intergenerational relationship between three women in her family (her mother, her daughter, and herself) through the use of language. Sedira's family immigrated first to France and then to England. Sedira's mother speaks Arabic, Sedira herself speaks French and her daughter speaks English. The fragmented layering of this autoethnographic storytelling highlights the slippages that happen across three generations, two sets of mother-daughters, between Grandmother-

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMAU2SfkXD0>

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/154326390>

Mother-Daughter. This work illustrates the difficulty to create a conversation between these three generations and its emotional impact on the subjects. While both *Measures of Distance* and *Mother Tongue* also evoke a sense of nostalgia in the audience, *Ma Miaeem va Miravim* (*We Come and Go*) and *Soghat* (*Souvenir*) aim to reflect critically on the present influence of English as a dominant language of globalization on the Persian language and culture without creating nostalgic feelings. Implied in the use of Persian-English in these works are questions of what may be lost in the adoption of western signifiers to express a uniquely Persian experience.

2.1 English Influences on Persian

In *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Maryam Borjian, a scholar of cultural linguistics, describes how Persian was the lingua franca for a vast region extending from Turkey to Central Asia and India between the 14th and the early 19th centuries, but as a result of British colonization it gradually lost its status and was replaced by English. At the beginning of the 19th century Iran came into contact with the West for the first time, “whose progress, prosperity and development was a source of fascination and admiration to Iranian intellectuals” (Borjian 41). According to Borjian, during this time English and other European languages entered Iran, however, Persian continued to be the national language and European languages remained as foreign languages of instruction within the country’s education system.

In another article on the influences of English on Persian, “Globalization of English in World Englishes,” Farzad Sharifian suggests that at the beginning of the twentieth century French was the dominant European foreign language in Iran. What is notable is that English replaced French

during the 1960s when the country experienced a period of significant westernization under the rule of the Shah, the former king of Iran (Sharifian 137). Many American advisors and technical experts came to assist the country in its new planning, and as a result, there was a need to teach Iranians the English language. The Shah's vision was to update and westernize the country, in his view English was the language of modernization. During this period, two main foreign schools for teaching English were opened in Iran: Iran-America Society and Iran-England Society. Sending children to these schools for higher educational purposes became popular for many Iranians. They had native English-speaking teachers and used textbooks with western content. This era can be understood as a period of soft colonialism when the United States aimed to subtly spread its international influence—the implications of which are still playing out today in terms of globalization.

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution the foreign English schools were closed and the new government made a huge effort to “cleanse English of its western baggage by commissioning local experts to develop materials in English for school and university curricula” (Sharifian 140). During the 80s in Iran, many textbooks were newly translated from English to Persian and a new, purely Persian, vocabulary was introduced to replace even some of the scientific terms.

2.2 Persian-English

Globalization and the increased use of the internet during the last two decades have changed the way that English language content has shaped the modern Persian experience. Now, many desire to learn English to be able to use various online communication technologies to communicate

with others around the world, both personally and professionally. As a result, there has been a huge increase in the number of English schools in Iran; in my hometown of Isfahan there is an English school on almost every street corner. Another aspect of globalization is the huge increase in the Persian diaspora living in the West. While many Iranians move to English-speaking countries, the availability of modern online communication tools have provided new means of interaction. Many Persian speakers living in the West choose to communicate through online technology using a mix of Persian and English which Sharifian calls “Persian-English,” as discussed previously, forging traditional Persian characters and using the Roman alphabet to phonetically represent and express Persian words.

The long-standing discourse surrounding cultural hybridity introduces a “third space” or “the space in-between” as a site of fluid interactions between immigrants and society in the modern western nation state. The internal contradictions in the third space, as Homi Bhabha discusses in *The location of Culture* (1994) is in direct opposition with how we learn, cultivate and perform identity. How does one construct the narrative self as a product of an immigrant nation? Persian-English is an example of hybridity referring to the space in between the heritage language of Persian and the language of the new space, English, and the internet.

According to Sharifian, Persian has a complicated socio-cultural basis with “a rich repertoire of politeness and courtesy ... even those Persian speakers who are quite at home in English will tend to express their appreciations and gratitude more intensely than is the norm in western varieties of English” (Sharifian 145). In their online communications, they commonly use Persian-English in order to express gratitude when some Persian words of *taarof* (gratitude) seem to be untranslatable. The gaps in translation essentially led to the development of Persian-

English. This has angered some traditional Iranians who are quite concerned that on the internet Persian becomes a language which is only good for leisure time and greetings instead of serious matters. Moreover, the common use of Persian-English on the internet impacts the spread of Persian written in its correct, traditional way using the Persian alphabet.

The cultural theorist Edward Said compares the ways ‘home’ is presented in two literary classic works, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and T.S. Eliot’s *East Coker* (1940). In his view, ‘home’ for an immigrant is similar to Gulliver’s sense of homely comfort which he lost forever, a home which is not redeemable like Eliot’s presentation of home. This view describes *Mosafer’s* (the Traveller’s) sensation of having a hyphenated Persian-Canadian identity, of being between *homeland* and home. Similarly, the new hybrid translation of Persian-English is the home presented in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. It is in-between Persian and English, it looks like English, reads Persian, but does not fully belong to either language.

My current artwork, *Soghat(Souvenir)*, references an old Iranian tradition, *Soghat*, in which it is customary to buy gifts for all of one’s family members and friends when travelling. *Soghat* means “souvenir as a gift,” it is always a gift for someone else as opposed to the western practice of buying souvenirs for one’s self. The Isfahan’s 16th century Grand Bazaar in Naghsh-e-Jahan Square is one of the popular places to visit for tourists and Iranians who live abroad, since it offers traditional merchandise made by local artisans—some of the objects in this artwork were purchased at this place. Shopkeepers/artisans in this bazaar often use string to wrap the objects they sell to prevent them from being damaged. Their use of string and the care taken in wrapping the traditional objects and handmade artifacts has influenced the creation of *Soghat(Souvenir)*.

3. Objects, Memories, and Narratives

Soghat (Souvenir) is an autoethnographic work composed of six sculptures made from everyday objects wrapped in black string. The American literary scholar Susan Stewart states that “objects have the capacity to generate narratives and serve as traces of lived experiences.” She suggests that the souvenir speaks to a language of longing and desire; by evoking the process of remembering, and providing only a trace to enable a connection, the souvenir frustrates the possessor’s attempts to repeat the same lived experience. In her view, the souvenir always remains incomplete, partial, and needs to be supplemented by a narrative (Stewart 135-136).

Soghat is different from Susan Stewart’s definition of “souvenir,” the mass-produced objects one brings back from a vacation. While in Stewart’s writing the souvenir is something collected by a visitor travelling to another culture, the collection of souvenirs that comprises *Soghat (Souvenir)* represent cultural memories from my homeland, Iran. Instead of serving as tourist objects, to remember experiences, *Soghat (Souvenir)* is representative of both my lived experience growing up Persian in Iran and the transitional experience of returning to my homeland as an Iranian immigrant to Canada.

Each work in the series presents an everyday object imbued with subtle significance, each has its own title which includes the name of the object in Persian-English as well as its English translation: *Sini (Tray)*, *Kaashi (Tile)*, *Sher (Poetry)*, *Oot’to (Iron)*, *Kafsh (Shoes)*, and *Skateboard (Skateboard)*. Together they make up a collection of objects that represent the care and protection taken when the objects are seen as tokens of phenomenological or collective

memory; objects which the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty states contain a, “personal life, expression, knowledge and history.”⁵

Some of the objects which make a good *soghat* from Vancouver are everyday household objects such as electronic products (computers, phones ...), western branded clothing (Adidas and Gap), and children’s toys (Barbie and Lego), which are not easy to find in Isfahan. Similarly, Isfahan handcrafted artifacts and books of Iranian poetry are among popular traditional objects to bring to Vancouver. Thus, a souvenir for an Iranian immigrant depending on the route of transit is a functional object (Canada to Iran) or an object to preserve a cultural connection (Iran to Canada).

According to Stewart the souvenir has a double function: it authenticates a remote past experience and, at the same time, discredits the present. In her view, the present is either “too impersonal, too looming or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent” (Stewart 139). For many immigrant families, it is common to decorate their homes with traditional objects from their hometown to keep the memories alive and to make them feel at home. For instance, the copper tray hung on the wall at one’s home can bring the memories of the Isfahan Bazaar, conjuring memories of people talking and local artisans hammering.

In *Elemental* (2004)⁶ artist Ala Ebtekar explores cultural displacement and its impact for both the Iranian immigrants and their children growing up in western culture. Ebtekar, an American-based artist and a second-generation Iranian immigrant, turns the gallery space into an Iranian

⁵ Quoted by Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

⁶ <http://bidoun.org/articles/ala-ebtekar-elemental>

traditional coffee-house interior with its traditional furnishings and objects, including wooden benches covered with rugs, hookahs, and Persian teacups. By painting the domestic objects in the coffee-house white, Ebtekar draws attention to the decorative features of his installation, printed Persian floral motifs, ornaments and signs taken from Persian miniatures paired with Adidas branded sneakers and tracksuits. His work aims to highlight what is not visible, what is absent—namely the interactions, the exchange of cultural roots, music, poetry, stories and paintings that typically make up traditional Iranian coffee house culture.

While the objects in *Elemental* were displayed in a domestic Persian space, painted white, they almost became part of the background. Almost the inverse of Ebtekar's presentation, the objects in *Soghat (Souvenir)*, wrapped in black string, stand out in the space becoming highlighted in the gallery as dark objects standing out against the white background. By mixing traditional Persian miniature painting with street-style design culture, Ebtekar is suggesting that we may benefit by drawing across cultures, experiences, and generations in order to make them uniquely our own—similar to Clifford's discussion of cultural hybridity mentioned above. A new generation will not experience being Persian in the same way their parents did, but they can still honour and respect those traditions and cultural memories while integrating Persian identity into their contemporary transcultural experience.

The use of black string in the *Soghat (Souvenir)* series is employed to hide, protect, and preserve the precious cultural signifiers for the Persian diaspora. It aims to highlight the changes in cultural traditions and the influence of English and western culture by presenting both traditional and contemporary objects together. By placing the objects on plinths, this work borrows from the vocabulary of ethnographic display of cultural artifacts, but by obscuring, protecting, and

wrapping the objects, it places them in the context of art objects. This work aims to convey a reclaiming of Persian cultural identity while decolonizing it from ethnographic strategies of representation.

The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha critiques the western representation of other cultures as homogeneous, holistic, historically continuous and uninterrupted (Bhabha 200). In his view, historians and ethnographers traditionally presumed to have the narrative authority to produce pedagogical knowledge of another culture. At odds with the ethnographer's construction, the notion of performative identity refers to the agency of the hybrid figure who offers a different cultural discourse which disrupts the signification of "the people" as a singular, homogeneous group of people. In Bhabha's view, the narrative aspect of performative identity interferes with the authoritative pedagogy by "casting a shadow between the people as 'image' and its signification as differentiating sign of Self, distinct from the Other and of the Outside" (Bhabha 212). The use of the colour black in both the *Soghat (Souvenir)* series and *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)* attempts to represent the impact that English (and the spread of western culture) as a dominant language of globalization can have on other cultures, figuratively "blacking out" meaning and obscuring forms.

3.1 Objects from Home

Soghat (Souvenir) consists of six sculptures: three traditional Iranian objects—a copper tray, a few blue tiles, and a book of Persian poetry; and three from western culture—a skateboard, a pair of high-heeled shoes, and an iron. The process of wrapping these objects in string has completely

changed the relationship between the objects and their cultural context (their audience). In Iranian culture, all six of these objects are part of the normal experience of culture that include both traditional Iranian and contemporary western objects. They are all in use in Iranian culture, however they may have different users. In Canadian culture the three traditional objects lose their function (beyond that of cultural souvenirs.)

String turns the objects into a time capsule, freezing the objects and their narratives about the present time, the socio-cultural implications of hybridity, the rise of English in Iran and the desire to learn about western culture amongst Iranians. The meticulous work of wrapping the objects in string in *Soghat (Souvenir)* aims to protect and preserve the objects, their fragile histories, cultural knowledge and the personal life that they represent. This is in opposition to the labour of love performed by Shopkeepers (mostly men) in the Isfahan bazaar—they wrapped the objects in string to protect them from damage. By displaying the traditional objects and the contemporary objects together in the gallery in the Canadian context, this work attempts to challenge the way the audience reads cultural meanings into these objects while drawing attention to the changes in cultural traditions.

Description of the objects in *Soghat (Souvenir)*: In *Sini (Tray)* (Fig. 3) the copper tray was purchased at the Isfahan Grand Bazaar from a local artisan. This type of tray is in common use in Iranian homes as well as restaurants offering traditional Iranian food; The blue tiles in *Kaashi (Tile)* (Fig. 4) are also hand-crafted by local artisans in the same bazaar and are similar to the ones used in the structures of the historical places in Isfahan. Their symmetrical designs have influenced many contemporary Iranian artists living in the West; The book of poetry in *Sher (Poetry)* (Fig.5) is called Divan-e-Hafez and is written by one of the most popular Iranian poets

of the Medieval Ages, Hafez. This book has been translated into English many times—however, its translations are very different from the original work; The skateboard in *Skateboard* (*Skateboard*) (Fig.6) represents youth culture, their acts of freedom and independence. It references the influence of western youth culture on Iranian youth. In Iran, this sport is also popular among girls which is different from north America; The high-heeled shoes in *Kafsh* (*Shoes*) (Fig.7) is a symbol for the spread of western cultural norms for dressing up across the world. Iranians traditionally dress up more formally as compared to north Americans—particularly west coast casual lifestyle; The iron in *Oot'to* (*Iron*) (Fig.8) is a symbol for the influence of western style clothing. As mentioned above, Iranians traditionally wear more formal clothing, such as men's suits and women's dresses, as compared to north Americans. All six of these objects represent mobility and migration, and how culture changes as a result.



(Fig. 3) *Sini* (Tray), from the series *Soghat* (Souvenir), tray and string, 2017



(Fig. 4) *Kaashi (Tile)*, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, tile and string, 2017



(Fig.5) *Sher (Poetry)*, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, book and string, 2017



(Fig.6) *Skateboard (Skateboard)* detail, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, skateboard and string, 2017



(Fig.7) *Kafsh (Shoes)*, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, shoes and string, 2017



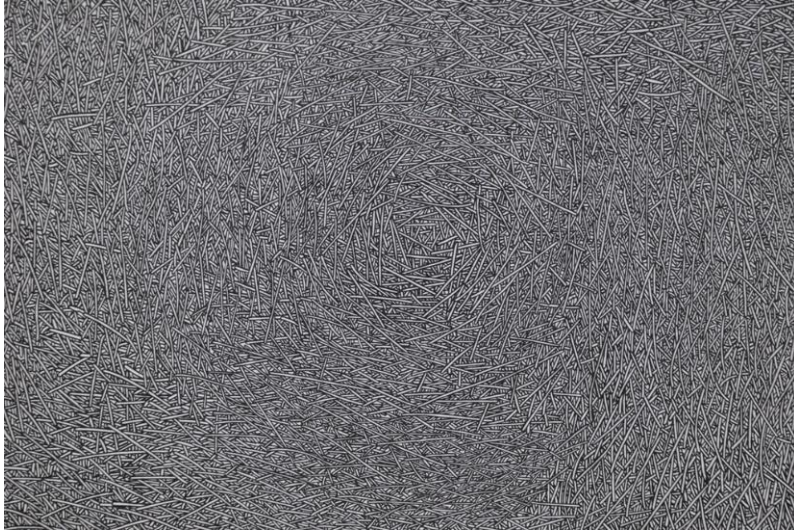
(Fig.8) *Oot'to (Iron)*, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, iron and string, 2017

3.2 Drawing with Black String

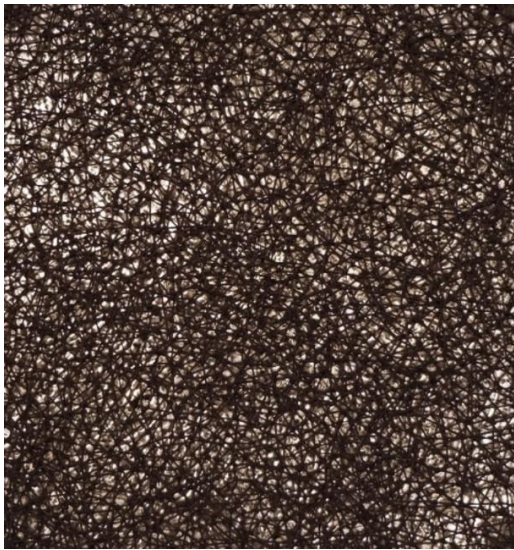
In *Soghat (Souvenir)*, the process of wrapping and knotting string around the objects creates three-dimensional drawings. Similar to the way an artist uses graphite pencil to draw a line by connecting two points, the string has been used to connect two knots. The colour black also refers to drawing materials, such as graphite pencils, pen and ink, and charcoal.

In recent years, basic drawing materials such as a graphite pencil, used to an extreme to create large abstract drawing was the focus of my work. In these types of works, a certain line or pattern is drawn freehand repeatedly to create a unified drawing without any focal point (Fig.9). This kind of drawing creates a sophisticated visual pattern which aims to pull the viewer's imagination into a different world by getting lost in the details of the drawing's fine lines. I have used similar technique of intense repetition in the spontaneous act of wrapping the objects in

string in *Soghat (Souvenir)* (Fig.10). The viewer is drawn to observe the tradition suggested by the collected objects and the cultural knowledge which their concealed forms can still communicate.



(Fig. 9) *Lost details*, pen and ink on paper, 40" X 40", 2013



(Fig. 10) *Sini (Tray) details*, from the series *Soghat (Souvenir)*, tray and string, 2017

The use of string also nods to craft techniques such as crochet, knitting, and embroidery, which are traditionally seen as women's work. In Iran, girls are introduced to some of these techniques

in high school (girls' schools). My mother also taught me a little embroidery and knitting at young age. In fact, the same crochet hook was used in wrapping the objects that my mother gave me when we moved to Canada. However, the use of the string in *Soghat (Souvenir)* is very different from making crochet. The process of wrapping was accidental and did not follow any conventional weaving techniques or any specific stitch patterns. One has to become deeply involved in that process and that mood which takes days or weeks to complete, and by the end, it is impossible to remember where the wrapping started and where it ended. In *Soghat (Souvenir)*, string is not a typical domestic material to make a blanket, instead its soft flexible quality helps to make the hard objects transcendent.

The use of the black string in *Soghat (Souvenir)* recalls the visual language of abstraction in the contemporary artworks of Chiharu Shiota, a Japanese artist based in Berlin. Shiota uses the material to weave a large network of string around everyday objects, such as chairs, keys, and clothes. She uses string to represent the stories of the objects and traces of people's life through abstract drawing of lines and knots in space. In her work *In Silence* (2008)⁷ several chairs and a piano are caught within a massive web of black string. The piano loses its voice and no one can use the chairs, as a result, the room becomes silent. Objects have their own life and their own history, string freezes the objects to preserve their precious stories. While the everyday objects in Shiota's work are a symbol of memory and nostalgia and do not belong to any specific time or any particular culture, the objects in *Soghat (Souvenir)* relate to the present time when many Iranians leave their homeland and immigrate to another country—bringing with them the objects

⁷ <http://www.chiharu-shiota.com/en/works/?y=2008>

that help making their new place feel like home, that help them hold on to a sense of place they have left.

The objects in *Soghat (Souvenir)* are gifts from home wrapped in excessive quantities of string; they can be seen to represent one's fear of losing something very precious, a culture, a tradition; while at the same time the string frustrates the viewer's ability to fully engage with the objects themselves; they offer a representation of cultural protecting, respect and preservation. The tension presented through the complex weave is at odds with the pressure to use the objects and to perform our expected relationship with them, but like a palimpsest one can only catch a glimpse of its inner layers, an interior body of knowledge that is rooted in personal life and expression.

4. Epilogue

Today, people move around the world more than ever before. They bring with them their traditions, values, and histories; arguably, their cultures change as a result of mixing with those of their new homes. My works, *Ma Miaeem va Miravim (We Come and Go)* and *Soghat (Souvenir)*, aim to create a conversation about the importance of preserving Persian cultural heritage amongst future generations of Iranian immigrants while also drawing attention to the role of English as a dominant language of globalization and its impacts on other cultures. When an Iranian family immigrates to a western country, preserving their cultural heritage, and in particular the mother tongue, can be challenging and yet very significant. Through wrapping precious traditional objects in string, *Soghat (Souvenir)*, transforms an Iranian immigrant's

experience and memories of travelling to another culture into timeless cultural artifacts, objects of art which speak to a collective Persian experience. When presented in a gallery, the traditional objects resist the simple categorization of their stories by cultural anthropologists. Culture is not a set of artifacts or objects but is the way that the members of a particular group use them as tools of cultural remembrance.

While addressing issues of cultural preservation, my work also endeavours to raise questions of identity through focusing on the impact of the hybrid translation of Persian-English on the preservation of the Persian language and culture among Iranians in diaspora. These works aim to challenge the audience to see Iranian culture and its changes from a different perspective while providing a unique opportunity for discussion generating questions and open our minds to different perspectives.

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