

Dichotomy as a Mirror

By

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Abstract

This multidisciplinary installation is composed of the following: three large frames covered with small fragmented mirrors each containing a portrait painting, an assemblage, two head sculptures that have their own pedestal, three life-sized sculptures, an installation made up of numerous fingers on artificial grass, and a sculpture of a large hand holding a head between two fingers. Each of these works explores concepts of gender, sexuality, identity, and beauty and references different aspects of these definitions through various techniques and materials. Some works, directly/and indirectly, depict the subject of gender and stimulate feelings such as love, desire, beauty, grotesqueness, irony, death, fear, melancholy, glamour, tragedy, grief, and rejection. We all experience these feelings in different ways when remembering moments in our lives. I attempt to share these feelings and emotions through the doors of gender.

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Introduction

The themes and subjects explored in my thesis emerge from the challenges and concerns of my life. My artworks have always circled around the concepts of eroticism, orgasm, sexual violence, and the complexity of sexual relationships. In fact, I have come to understand that I have worked on the aforementioned topics subconsciously while trying to keep them private. In Iran, I was unable to show any of my work publicly because of the Islamic laws and practices, which viewed such topics as norm violations. I did not change direction by working on subjects labelled as acceptable by the society; instead, I pursued the expression of my feelings and interests about sexual concepts. As Georgia O’Keeffe said: “Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant, there is no such thing. Making your unknown known is the important thing— and keeping the unknown always beyond you.”¹ I have chosen to follow this path for my art career.

In the beginning, I found directly expressing sexual ideas and themes challenging. While restrictions may have impeded the public showing of my art, these limitations encouraged me to create and portray the forbidden sexual elements metaphorically. Instead of directly representing a sexual organ, I created sexual atmosphere using parts of the body such as hands, feet, fingers, nails, and hair. I have also taken inspiration from nature, creating sexual symbols which depict concepts such as sex, desire, love, relationship, violence, orgasm, and issues related to sex and gender. In one of my exhibitions in 2017 in Tehran, after seeing my work, a woman said to me: "I thought I entered a sex shop!" I was simultaneously shocked and happy because I had achieved the atmosphere I was seeking.

During this period, I found new mediums such as painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, photography, installation, video, and animation as well as new techniques to explore these sexual concepts. I believe each medium has its own potential to convey an idea in a unique way and highlight aspects of a larger and more complex one. Experimenting over the years has helped me to create a distinct body of work.

1. Renee Phillips, “Art and Quotes by Famous Artists.” The Healing power of art and artists, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.healing-power-of-art.org/art-and-quotes-by-famous-artists/>.

By researching physical and virtual spaces and learning through personal experience, my ideas have emerged slowly. Over the past few years, I have come to understand that these concepts of my work exploring gender, identity, beauty, and sexuality consciously and unconsciously arose from within myself: through the concepts, I perceive my own identity and sexual self-awareness. This was difficult to see while living in Iran. I ignored my sexual orientation unconsciously for 28 years due to a lack of education and freedom. I suffered in a religious and traditional country where expression of sexuality is fiercely taboo. In Iran, homosexuality and/or having sex with a homosexual is a crime and punishable by execution. According to the laws, bisexuals can only marry as heterosexuals.²

With this social and political framework in mind, the reason for my inner conflict is rooted in being a bisexual woman. I define myself as living along a spectrum and in-between two concepts - two genders - which I have portrayed in my works. I question the society's dichotomous ideological system by redefining binary categories, such as men and women, their sexual boundaries, the essence of harshness and softness, as well as beauty and ugliness.

Portraits

A function of painting has been the recording and preservation of events and stories; so too, portrait painting records and describes important contextual historical concepts and remembrances. Several factors play a part in making this genre very popular throughout art history - such as, the universal use of oils and canvas, the increase in commerce which in turn created a large group of wealthy middleclass landowners and entrepreneurs, and the use of portraiture as a way of making a permanent visual record of individuals' families.³ As time passed, portrait painting emerged among other societal classes and became even more popular.

2. Hossein Zeynali, "مجازات هم جنس گرایی در اسلام و قانون مجازات اسلامی." Published August 16, 2020, <https://www.sena2015.com/v/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AA->. html.

3. Portrait Art (2,500 BCE - Present): Portrait Art History, Characteristics, Types of Portraiture." Visual Arts Cork, accessed March 3, 2021, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/genres/portrait-art.html>

In addition to highlighting the physical traits of an individual, a portrait attempts to present personality and spiritual attributes of its subject.⁴ Artists from the 17th century to the present in western culture - such as, Rembrandt van Rijn, Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Lucian Freud, Sarah Lukas, Marc Quinn - have explored portraiture in various media: painting; photography; printing, and sculpture.

Having this approach in mind, I suggest artists begin by exploring and recognizing themselves first. Through the creation of self-portraits, I probe my features and identity by looking in the mirror for a long time - touching my face, skin, pimples, nose, lips, scars to gain knowledge. Through such close observations, I recognize and embrace my beauty and imperfection, a combination of qualities, shapes, colors, and textures. This close physical self-inspection may be a portal for artists to discover the inner and outer layers of their identities and psyches.⁵ However, this process of self-recognition may take a long time, as Vincent van Gogh suggested in his letter to his brother Théo, in September 1889. “They say—and I am willing to believe it—that it is difficult to know yourself—but it isn’t easy to paint yourself either.”⁶ It may be difficult to recognize your true self at first through a close physical investigation let alone painting the self and showing various layers of characteristics and behaviour. Artists must be aware of their inner selves to reflect them externally.

Every portrait painter reflects a part of their self and identity in the image of their subjects. For instance, Elizabeth Peyton reflects her feelings in her portrait paintings.⁷ She painted David Hockney in 1997-98 when he was in his 60s. However, Peyton reflected her youth, the more tender age of 32, at the time of painting Hockney's portrait. While journalist Carly Berwick suggests that "Peyton is 'measuring herself up' against Hockney, this could also be another expression of familiarity with the subject, albeit (as is typical of Peyton)

4. Cécile Martet, “Art History's 6 Most Legendary Portraits,” *The KAZoART Contemporary Art Blog*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.kazoart.com/blog/en/6-famous-portraits-in-art-history/>.

5. Ellen Oredsson, “Why Are Portraits So Important in Art History?” *How To Talk About Art History* (blog), February 9, 2020, <http://www.howtotalkaboutarthistory.com/reader-questions/portraits-important-art-history/>.

6. Tori Campbell, “The Artist Self Portrait. A Moment of Introspection.” *Artland Magazine*, June 3, 2020, <https://magazine.artland.com/the-artist-self-portrait-a-moment-of-introspection/>.

7. “Elizabeth Peyton.” *The Art Story*, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/peyton-elizabeth/>.

at one remove.”⁸ Peyton may have been psychologically and subconsciously interested in other famous male artists like Hockney; indeed, she searches for her own identity in those artists. She said in her interview with the online platform CAF: “...But I’m very inspired by people who...touch me, people who help me feel my feelings in a way...”⁹ Through such an approach, I have also searched for my missing-self by painting portraits of my community: I put them together like puzzle pieces, so that I can slowly complete my own picture and find myself through them.

The human face is the predominant part of the body that presents the fundamental characteristics of an individual. In portrait paintings, the audience can grasp information, such as societal status, identity, gender, interests, occupation, and/or aspects of personality or belief. I carefully craft these visual clues representing human temperaments to narrate stories of people in my work. When I choose to paint a person, I am making decisions around what story to tell about that individual, what visual clues to use, and how to position my subjects. There is no such thing as a neutral portrait: while painting, I think about the look and the gaze of the portrait; what objects the subject carries; what clothing and pieces of jewelry the subject wears and what meaning they convey, as well as the gesture, body language or expressions of the subject.¹⁰

What, Why and How

For the past two years, I have been documenting the LGBTQIA+ community's presence through portrait paintings. I have painted portraits of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, drag queens, and queers and hung them side by side as a large installation. Peyton said in an interview “...Most of the portraits in the NPG -National Portrait Gallery- were made of successful people. Heroes, artists, makers, transformers: people in power. The sitters perhaps did not realize, but as time passes one understands that all their

8. “Elizabeth Peyton.”

9. Paul Laster, “Elizabeth Peyton: ‘Help Me Feel My Feelings.’” Conceptual Fine Arts, updated January 30, 2020, <https://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2016/12/19/i-portrait-people-who-help-me-feel-my-feelings-an-interview/>.

10. Ellen Oredsson, “Why Are Portraits so Important in Art History?”

choices — their gestures, clothing, etc.— show cultural values adhered to and rejected. They tell us everything about everything.”¹¹ Images of important and powerful people throughout history have always been captured by paintings for future generations. In this project, I decided to paint those who have been excluded and ignored, who do not have status in society, including some who have been killed. Registering this minority population and highlighting their presence in today's society may help future generations to better understand such discrimination, and lead to more open thinking about gender and self-awareness.



Between series, Oil on canvas, 25x20 cm (each), 2019-2020

I choose oil colors to paint these portraits. It allows me to incorporate the aesthetic culture of queer while also describing the violence against them: rough brush strokes and different textures on their skin, hair, clothing, accessories, and tattoos. Through such techniques, I developed an aesthetic encompassing beauty and the grotesque. Arthur Danto also argues that beauty and morality are interconnected, as expressed through Kant's statement, "...beauty is the symbol of morality, even if connected [...] by way of a kind of analogy. Beauty, Kant writes, introducing an unlovely term from rhetoric, is an hypotyposis

11. "Portrait Art (2,500 BCE - Present): Portrait Art History, Characteristics, Types of Portraiture." Visual Arts Cork, accessed March 3, 2021, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/genres/portrait-art.htm>



Heaven, Oil on canvas, 50x40 cm, 2021

of morality, presenting moral concepts with certain vividness and poetry.’’¹² It can be inferred that beauty is the vivid picturesque description of morality and that this view has impacted and been internalized by the dominant heterosexual culture. As these established norms deepen over time it becomes harder to challenge and redefine them. Do these definitions of beauty contribute to a history of the LGBTQIA+ community as perverted, sick, criminal - far from moral and ‘natural’ and ultimately ugly? Having this theory in mind, I argue that the art and culture of the queer still seems strange, and the beauty of this community is not yet normalized. Through painting, I have tried to address the issue by juxtaposing something beautiful next to a grotesque object.



Waited, Oil on Canvas, 50x40 cm, 2021



Detail of the *Waited* Painting

Mixing a variety of techniques and textures, I have tried to highlight the existence of queer people in my work while rejecting culturally established concepts of beauty. My paintings often focus prominently on queer individuals' parts of bodies and accessories - nose, lips, ears, hair, clothing, and jewelry - giving vivid textures to these areas. By highlighting these features, the paintings create a texture of 2D and 3D as a metaphor to emphasize the community's presence in society. Most countries have oppressed this minority group politically and socially, but people within this community challenge such social norms

12. Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Peru: Open Court, 2003), 47.

by being visible. As seen in the maps below, there are many countries that exclude and punish LGBTQIA+ people. In such theocratic and traditional countries as Iran; Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals are sentenced to death.



Map of Countries that Criminalize LGBT People¹³



Map of Iran that Criminalize LGBT People¹⁴

All of these works are small canvases that invite the audience to approach and that create an intimacy with the painting – a closeness less present in the real world. As the audience approaches the portraits, their perception of the gender of the subjects is challenged. For instance, when the audience looks at some of these paintings from afar, they think it is a woman with heavy makeup, thick eyelashes, long and died hair and accessories. As they get close to the work, the gender, identity or sexuality of these individuals is revealed through rough skin texture and unshaven facial hair, moustache or body hair. I aim to ask the following questions: What do gender, identity, and sexuality mean based on these works? Who has attributed these definitions and on what terms? Who has dictated and portrayed normalcy and sanity through heterosexuality?

Non Goldin states that her "desire was to show [drag queens] as a third gender, as another sexual option, a gender option. And to show them with a lot of respect and love, to kind of glorify them because [she] really admire[s] people who can recreate themselves and

13. *Map of Countries That Criminalise LGBT People, scale not given* [Map]. "Human Dignity Trust," accessed March 6, 2021, <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/lgbt-the-law/map-of-criminalisation/>.

14. *Map of Countries That Criminalise LGBT People: Iran, scale not given* [Map].

manifest their fantasies publicly. [she] think[s] it's brave"¹⁵ My works address drag queens both as fascinating and also as metaphor of my bisexuality, "a third gender." Like drag queens, bisexuals can easily shift their sexuality, identity, societal roles and relationships; for example, in my case, shifting from being straight to lesbian, from living in heterosexual society to homosexual society and transforming my performative role. As an artist in a heterosexually dominated society who recently became aware of my bisexuality - adapting and acknowledging it - painting drag queens was a fitting metaphor to present this gender and sexual switching.

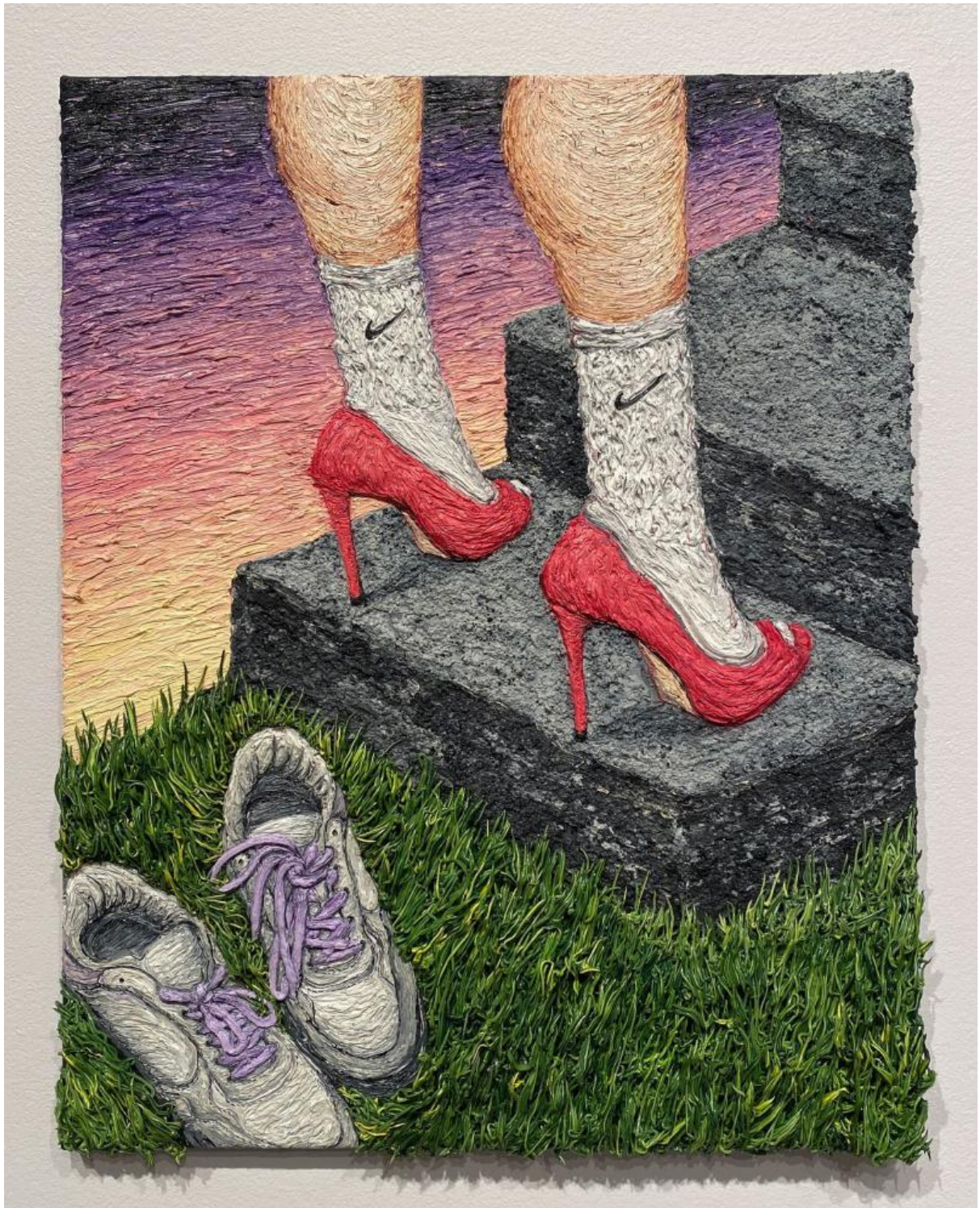
These portraits engage the audience and open a conversation with them without judgment. The portraits' direct gaze draws the viewer's attention and creates a sense of connection,¹⁶ inviting them to come closer, to discover characters, and behavior, and to engage with them in an intimate way not typical in everyday life. These subjects are inspirations from the real world. They demonstrate the LGBTQIA+ community as the Other. The paintings provide opportunity for individuals to bridge a gap between themselves and the LGBTQIA+ community. "[T]he additional eye-tracking experiment show[s] that participants [spend] more time viewing the portrait's eyes and mouth when the portrait's gaze [has been] directed towards the observer... They thus involve observers in implicit inferences of the painted subject's mental states and emotions."¹⁷ Therefore, the viewer attributes more to the portrait psychologically and begins a mental conversation with it.

Another aspect of these portraits is that there is no specific background in the paintings; indeed, the surface surrounding the subjects is painted in light colors demonstrating that the figure or portrait belongs nowhere but in the viewer's imagination. To focus entirely on the portrait subject without assigning place allows the audience to locate these characters anywhere within their imaginations, such as, streets, a friend or family's house, a party, universities and offices, or even in their own homes. For example, in Rineke

15. Miss Rosen, "Nan Goldin: The Beautiful Smile." Feature Shoot, April 12, 2018, <https://www.featureshoot.com/2018/04/nan-goldin-the-beautiful-smile/>.

16. "Elizabeth Peyton."

17. Ladislav Kesner, "Perception of Direct vs. Averted Gaze in Portrait Paintings: An FMRI and Eye-Tracking Study." National Library of Medicine, August 2018, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29913388/>.



Sunset, Oil on canvas, 50x40 cm, 2021

Dijkstra's photos and videos, especially the *expo een Ode Stedelijk*¹⁸ video shown in Museum Amsterdam in 2017, the audience see teenagers dancing in front of the camera against a white background with the sound of music heard from afar. These choices require the viewer to pay attention to the subject matter rather than the background.

As mentioned earlier, Iran, as an Islamic country, has many restrictions, limitations, and taboos. Being gay, lesbian, and bisexual is a serious crime and carries a death sentence. The previous president - Mahmood Ahmadinejad - declared the government has always suppressed and excluded the LGBTQIA+ minority community from the society. The Iranian government considers such minority groups as a threat to their ideological propaganda. Mahmood Ahmadinejad went so far as to claim "[...] in Iran, we don't have homosexuals [...]"¹⁹ Nevertheless, such a political attack on the Iranian LGBTQIA+ community has raised questions among the public, who ask: whose LGBTQIA+ photos, videos and content is on the Internet and in public spaces then? In Iran, if someone's identity is revealed as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual while visiting a doctor, there are only three options to prevent their death sentence: i. marry the opposite sex in a heterosexual marriage, and start a family; ii. undergo gender reassignment surgery (GRS) to fit into one of two categories, male or female, or iii. repent while suppressing their sexual orientation and increase the frequency of prayer.²⁰ The Iranian government forces them to change their bodies physically and suppress genders mentally to fit within the heterosexual mores. If they refuse GRS, they will either be executed or have to flee the country. In 2005, two 15-year-old boys were executed in public because of their homosexuality.²¹ The Iranian LGBTQIA+ situation is heartbreaking as can be seen in the documentary, *Iran's 'sex-change' solution*, produced by Ali Hamedani in 2014. In the video, a psychologist expresses her concerns by saying that "those who change their gender come to us and complain, they don't like their look, they feel depressed and a number

18. Feelgoodbv, "Rineke Dijkstra: expo een Ode Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam," June 1, 2017, YouTube video, , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZuBb50m2-w>.

19. Aparat, "احمدی نژاد: در ایران همجنس باز نداریم," 2017, Aparat video, https://www.aparat.com/v/di-6ax/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF%DB%8C_%D9%86%DA%98%D8%A7%D8%AF%3A%D8%AF%D8%B1_%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86_%D9%87%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3_%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2_%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85.

20. Ali Hamedani, "BBC World- Iran's 'sex-change' solution," November 13, 2014, YouTube video, , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg51RnpGn9k>.

21. Ali Hamedani, "BBC World- Iran's 'sex-change' solution."

of cases are committed suicide after [GRS] surgery."²² Besides, Shadi Amin, an Iranian lesbian activist, asserts "...[a] lot of people think Iran is the paradise of transsexuals, I say it is a hell of homosexuals."²³



Taking Some Rest on a Pink Fur, Oil on canvas, 35x28 cm, 2021

Another limitation I faced in Iran was the lack of historical, gender-centric information regarding the queer community in Iranian history. I recently found a digital version of a book, *Women with Moustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, by Afsaneh Najmabadi about the history of gender, sexuality, and beauty norms stating that,

Drawing from a rich array of visual and literary material from nineteenth century Iran, this ground-breaking book rereads and rewrites the history of Iranian modernity through the lens of gender and sexuality. Peeling away notions of a rigid pre-modern

22. Ibid

23. Ibid



Angel of Self, Oil on canvas, 50x40 cm, 2021

Islamic gender system, Afsaneh Najmabadi provides a compelling demonstration of the centrality of gender and sexuality to the shaping of modern culture and politics in Iran and of how changes in ideas about gender and sexuality affected conceptions of beauty, love, homeland, marriage, education, and citizenship. She concludes with a provocative discussion of Iranian feminism and its role in that country's current culture wars. In addition to providing an important new perspective on Iranian history, Najmabadi skillfully demonstrates how using gender as an analytic category can provide insight into structures of hierarchy and power and thus into the organization of politics and social life.²⁴

This book helped me start researching gender and sexuality in ancient Iran where surprisingly, no criminality for homosexuals existed. Indeed, homosexuality was completely normal as people's relationships were not characterized as heterosexual or homosexual. After the arrival of European colonialism in Iran in the 19th century, Iranian culture was transformed; this included the supplanting of Iranian attitudes with European heterosexual ideologies. Such clashes were not limited to Iran, "[...]in many cultures same-sex relations have played an integral and socially accepted function, but have nevertheless taken quite different forms."²⁵ As European settlers exerted their power and influence, Iranians' sexual and gender tenets became defined by Europeans' dichotomous system of gender ideology.²⁶

Some paintings from the Qajar period {an Iranian royal dynasty of Turkic origin ruling over Iran (1794–1925)},²⁷ depict two affectionate men, appearing as females, embracing each other or making love. Notions of beauty were largely undifferentiated by gender in early Qajar; that is, beautiful men and women were depicted with very similar facial and body features rather than being categorized as males and females. Sometimes, a piece of

24. Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards, Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2005, <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520242630/women-with-mustaches-and-men-without-beards>.

25. Nikki Sullivan and J. R. Cadwallader, "The Social Construction of Same-Sex Desire: Sin, Crime, Sickness," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (NY: New York University Press), 2003, 2.

26. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "BEAUTY, LOVE, AND SEXUALITY," in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppqcv>.

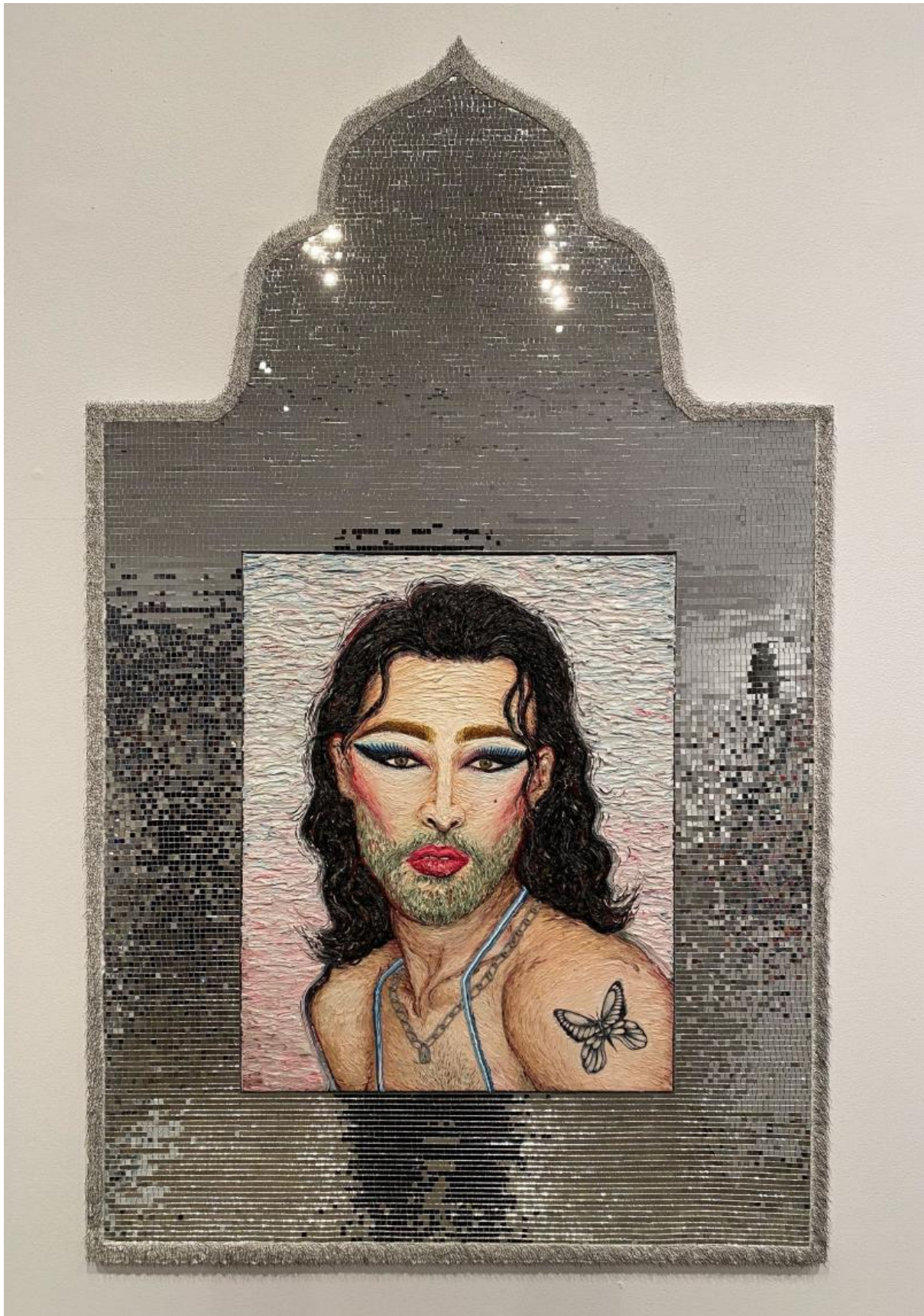
27. "Qajar Dynasty." Iran Chamber Society, accessed March 1, 2021. <https://www.iranchamber.com/history/qajar/qajar.php>

clothing, like eadgear, distinguishes Iranian men from women.²⁸ Following European colonization at the end of the nineteenth century, gendered portrayal of beauty became explicit in Iranian paintings. Depictions of male beauty and male-male loving disappeared due to European dichotomous ideologies. Royal portraits of men and women after the late Nasiri period no longer show any sign of those beautiful physical features, such as the slim waists and delicate facial features of earlier decades.²⁹

The Qajar kings commissioned paintings for the walls in their palaces and mansions. Mirror work played an important role in Iranian architecture, especially in the Qajar period. Based on this research, I have borrowed both materials and non-heterosexual ideas from Iranian history. With the large MDF frames, I attempted to conjure ideas of both the old miniature paintings as well as Iranian architecture. I covered the surface of the frames with small fragmented mirrors, applied individual false eyelashes next to the mirrors, and painted the edge of the frames to depict a fusion of an independent identity apart from the community's impacts. Through the use of such emblematic materials, the mirror frames become a monument for the Iranian LGBTQIA+ community killed, raped, ignored, scared, as well as fled and freed.

28. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Early Qajar," in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, (University of California Press), 2010, 11-25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppqcv.6>.

29. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Early Qajar," 26-60.



Shahriyar, Oil on canvas, mirrors, false individual eyelashes and modeling paste medium on MDF sheet, 115x70 cm, 2021



From left: *Dornaz, Tirdad and Sufia, Shahriyar*, Oil on canvas, mirrors, false individual eyelashes and modeling paste medium on MDF sheet, 115x70 cm, 2021

Assemblage

Since childhood, I have had an urge to make assemblage and collage - selecting, juxtaposing, and pasting colorful materials of varying textures together to make something new. I believe the impulse to use such a technique is rooted in my sexuality, and perhaps unconsciously to make sense of a range of disconnected materials. Inspired by Sigmund Freud's theory of dreams and the unconscious, surrealist artists often combine disparate found objects to create surprising and unsettling sculptures.³⁰ This method provides an opportunity to

30. "Assemblage – Art Term." Tate, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/ assemblage>.

discuss, metaphorically, many aspects of identity, gender, beauty, and the grotesque as well as other sexual issues. As the philosophy of assemblage,

Frames social complexity in the emphasis of fluidity, exchangeability, and the multiple functions through entities that create their connectivity. Assemblage theory asserts that, within a body, the relationships of component parts are not stable and fixed; rather, they can be displaced and replaced within and among other bodies, thus approaching systems through relations of exteriority.³¹

At the early stage of assemblage, the juxtaposition of several images and materials may seem irrelevant and meaningless, but new ideas reveal themselves through correlation, step by step. The process of making assemblage is challenging and absorbing. I gather found objects and buy materials that I think will be useful and interesting to work with, such as bits of mirror, beads, fur, synthetic nails and eyelashes, fabric, hair extensions, etc. Then, I begin to mingle these with photos I have collected from magazines, newspapers, and/or websites.

Unlike my paintings and sculptures, which are more straightforward and vocal, assemblage presents a different approach. Painting and sculptural works express a message indirectly through all their components: I believe such indirectness comes from an individual's unconsciousness. I begin on a completely white canvas, without any previous sketches and without assigning any borders. The combination of direct and indirect approaches, abstract and representational, reveal different layers of the theoretical concepts of sexuality and gender, which provide the viewer with clues to the artist's unconscious and conscious mind. However, understanding the intention and concept of a work of art may seem challenging for the viewer at first.

One of the most important mediums in my work are pieces of mirror - implying the religious and cultural history of Iran. During my childhood, my family and I visited many religious places within Iran, like mosques, where the walls and ceilings are covered with billions of fragmented mirrors in different shapes and forms which is called *ĀĪNA-KĀRĪ*. This is "the practice of covering an architectural surface with a mosaic of mirror-glass. It is

31. "Assemblage Theory." Texas Theory Wiki, accessed March 7, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160314011817/http://wikis.la.utexas.edu/theory/page/assemblage-theory>.

often dismissed as a gaudy and decadent kind of Persian architectural decoration..."³² By staring at those mirrors and their reflections for a long time, I attempted to see my whole face in all the disconnected pieces by moving my face around in front of them to find an appropriate angle; but that failed all the time. Instead, I found every part of my face and identity reflected in a separate piece of the fragmented mirror. Based on Lacan's "Mirror phase theory":

In his paper titled *Mirror Stage* (1949), Lacan expounds the concept of the mirror stage that occurs between 6-18 months of a child's development, when the child begins to draw rudimentary distinction between the self and the other, as it encounters its image in the mirror...[t]he image reflected ... the "Ideal I"[,] ...The child also realizes that,... its body was in "bits and pieces" and realizes the danger of returning to that stage... [,]the world of predefined social roles and gender differences, the world of subjects and objects, the world of language.³³

I realized that using fragmented mirrors, as per the aforementioned childhood memory, is a metaphor for finding identity and sense of self through observing a shattered image of self rather than a fully "predefined" image of heterosexuality. This led me to reflect this idea in my portraits and to question the audience about their own identities; for example, where is my real self? Why am I torn to pieces? Is there something missing in my identity? Is something broken or lost in me? Who has created my identity and when was it created?

By using individual eyelashes in my work, I am highlighting one of the most important aspects of gender and identity – the existence of natural body hair. These eyelashes represent beards, moustaches, and both male and female body hair. Their use raises questions regarding the natural presence of body hair, rather than its censure or making it a problem and "excessive". As Rebecca Herzig, explains in her book, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*, about the history of body hair, white men control white women's beauty and have identified hairlessness as a symbol of racial progress and superiority. After 1859, many scientists

32. Sims G. Eleanor, "ĀĪNA-KĀRĪ," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/7, 692-694; an updated version is available online, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/aina-kari-mosaic-of-mirror-glass>.

33. Nasrullah Mambrol, "Lacan's Concept of Mirror Stage," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, April 22, 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/04/22/lacans-concept-of-mirror-stage/>.

misapplied Darwin's theory of evolution to argue that race was an evolutionary continuum where "savages" were closer to animals and white "civilized" people were the most evolved form of human beings. Based on this racial view and white ideology regarding hairlessness, body hair was seen as a marker of animality and barbarism. Therefore, the existence of hair on white women's bodies became viewed as excessive.³⁴ Herzig concludes that "[w]ith body hair, particularly women's facial hair newly yoked to evolutionary atavism, individual pathology, sexual inversion, and mental illness, efforts to remove hair boomed. Experts and laypeople alike began devoting fresh energy to 'remedy[ing] the evil' of superfluous hair."³⁵ The patriarchal systematic ideology regarding body hair became rooted in the Americas and penetrated other continents over time. As a result, in the 21st century, the majority of women adhere to this patriarchal hegemony and undergo a myriad of cosmetic surgeries to remove or discipline body hair. At the same time, concepts of beauty and gender continue to evolve even in the context of male privilege. The idea of beauty has been defined in different ways in various contexts and cultural histories. For example, based on Najmabadi's book and Iranian historical documents regarding beauty in the Qajar period, facial hair and fatness were criteria to categorize a woman as beautiful. Viewed from a Western lens/ideology, it is difficult to distinguish gender in such paintings; indeed, the audience cannot categorize those individuals as men or women.³⁶



Half Naked, mixed media on canvas, 35x28x4.5 cm, 2020

34.Rebecca M. Herzig, "Bearded Women and Dog-Faced Men: Darwin's Great Denudation," in *Plucked: a History of Hair Removal* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 63-74.

35.Rebecca M. Herzig, "Bearded Women and Dog-Faced Men: Darwin's Great Denudation," 74.

36. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Early Qajar,"11.

Other gendered issues relate to institutionalized preconceptions in society: the attribution of feminine traits to men who lack body hair, or how women who accept their body hair and reject its removal are seen as having masculine features. Herzig states that hairiness has become a symbol of visible gender and sexual difference between males and females. Managing female appearance so that it is distinguishable from the male was an approach to control women's agency and freedom in the 19th and 20th centuries. Women's body hair removal became a tool for gender social control, which categorized women based on the dominant masculine criteria of beauty.³⁷ Therefore, body hair continues to play a pivotal role in defining an individual's gender, identity, sexuality, performance, and beauty. My work challenges definitions of beauty while attempting to redefine them. I deliberately chose to use eyelashes, an element defined as beautiful by the dominant masculine system. I locate, repeat, relocate and highlight eyelashes on a surface, like a canvas as a human body, or on men's dress shoes and women's high heels. I encourage my audience to touch the shoes covered with eyelashes and to feel the body hair. Surprisingly, women often touch those shoes and tolerate their disgusting surface; however, men typically reject approaching these symbols of body hair. Observing these gender-based reactions encouraged me to further pursue this subject.

Sculpture

Through sculpture I present themes, ideas, and subject matter from a different perspective. Since sculpture is three-dimensional, it adds a realistic aspect to my work. Recently, I began making heads and busts. In my paintings, I have been working on two- and three-dimensional LGBTQIA+ portraits using several textures of paint on canvas. Sculpture allows me to realize fully three-dimensional creations, rather than being limited to surface techniques. With sculpture I can develop creative ideas using a greater variety of materials. I continued the same method as in my assemblages, that is making them freely without previous sketches. It was challenging to define the LGBTQIA+ community's gender and identity in these portrait sculptures.

37. Rebecca M. Herzig, "Bearded Women and Dog-Faced Men: Darwin's Great Denudation," 64.

I use male foam stereo models as the base; the heads provide more room to shape and alter. I cut parts of the face, such as nose, cheeks, forehead, neck and lips, to create various gender types. By choosing an in-between space, a fusion of masculinity and femininity in the facial parts, I attempted to demonstrate those living in-between gender. As Susan Sontag states, "What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms."³⁸ Showing the beauty of dichotomies, male/female, beauty/the grotesque and softness/harshness, highlights such "difference" not based on patriarchal labels. Using epoxy clay and acrylic paint, I add many materials used in my assemblages, such as: mirrors, fur, fabric, candles, artificial hair, colorful hair extensions, artificial eyelashes, artificial flowers, photos, beads, nails, glitter, and chains, as symbols of queer culture.



I Am Carrying My Beauty Everywhere, mixed media, 71x66x38 cm, 2020

38.Susan Sontag, *Notes On "Camp"* (Partisan Review, 1964), 4.

"Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility - unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it - that goes by the cult name of 'Camp.' ... Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy."³⁹ My sculptures follow the theme of "camp" demonstrating a mixture of exaggeration, fascination, passion, intensity, glamor, the outlandish and the naïve.⁴⁰ I add irony, melancholy, fear and death so the audience has a better understanding of a queer individual's feelings throughout their life. Feelings, based on this "sensibility," may be familiar and exotic at the same time. For instance, as a bisexual artist, I have a complicated paradoxical relationship between my internal self and behavior and external society; this manifests as stress and pressure in which my real self feels suppressed. I reflect such suppressed feelings and emotions vividly by exaggerating and overemphasizing aspects of my work, via materials, themes, and concepts. These sculptures draw viewers to discover details and textures stimulating feelings of the uncanny - seduction and repulsion simultaneously. These feelings are present in all my work.



Something Is Missing, mixed media, 168x26x18 cm, 2021

39.Ibd

40.Ibd

This sensibility of the familiar and unfamiliar can be observed in one of my works, *Dreamers*. Through the use of mirrors as eyes, when the viewer approaches the work, instead of the eyes of this character, they see themselves. This shift to see their own eyes creates a safe space that opens the opportunity for an internal dialogue and the discovery of the familiar. As the distance between the viewer and the portrait disappears, so too do the defined patriarchal and heterosexual borders. Subconsciously, the audience begins to empathize and discover themselves through the work; for a moment, they feel their paradoxical inner-self.



Dreamers, mixed media, 153x39x33 cm, 2021

These life-size heads and busts are replicas of human-body portraits and provide a more realistic and tangible space for the audience to relate to, and to experience sensations common among all human beings such as sincerity, obscurity, lunacy, and love. Through demonstrating "[c]amp taste [in my sculptures,] a kind of love, love for human nature [has been highlighted]. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character' [, like using eyelashes on the statues' faces and fragment mirrors on their skulls]. Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it."⁴¹ The playful use of "awkward intensities," an unusual and strange atmosphere in which the audience encounters gender, identity, and sexuality of the LGBTQ+ community, now encourages them to "enjoy" the suppressed, unseen commonalities among them.

41. Ibid

The more I make these sculptures, the more I reflect and find myself through them; subconsciously, I choose all the materials to form my fantasies. As Marc Chagall states, "Love and fantasy go hand in hand."⁴² Traces of my unconscious compel me and raise questions for me, and I build other sculptures to answer these questions. Through "camp taste" and fantasy, safe spaces between the audience and sculptures are created. In the work *Find Yourself Through Myself*, there is a figure where one face is in front of the viewer with no chest and abdomen; the torso is replaced by a head in reverse, the back of the head facing the audience. The viewer observes the upper head and the lower one, which holds a mirror and so sees themselves and the lower face in the mirror simultaneously. In doing so, a fantasy of the double life experienced by bisexuals is depicted. The lower head seems sad and has turned its back on everything, yet it holds a mirror in its hand because it does not want to be far from its real-self.



Detail of *Find Yourself Through Myself*, mixed media, 70x66x40 cm, 2021

42. "Love and Fantasy Go Hand in Hand: Marc Chagall / Bella Rosenfeld Chagall." Love and Fantasy Go Hand in Hand | Marc Chagall / Bella Rosenfeld Chagall, www.cocosse-journal.org/2019/11/love-and-fanta-sy-go-hand-in-hand-marc.html.



Find Yourself Through Myself, mixed media, 70x66x40 cm, 2021

As mentioned previously, mirrors are used in these paintings, assemblages, and sculptures - sometimes placed on the sculptures' scalps or as skin - to express Lacan's mirror phase theory. When the audience looks into these shattered mirrors, they see their own faces scattered and fragmented. Using fragmented mirrors as skin metaphorizes identity and gender as complicated concepts - integrated, defined, and predetermined within society.



Do You Wanna Ignore the Layers of the Evidences? mixed media,
115x57x37 cm, 2021



God's Hand, mixed media, 155x80x8 cm, 2021

Finger Series

The finger series is a project focusing on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Judith Butler, an American philosopher, critic, and feminist, addresses important issues about gender, identity, LGBTQIA+ groups, body and gender expression in society and politics. As she states,

...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceeded; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.⁴³

I argue - the index finger represents both sexes in a single body limb - the phallus image and long red nails indicate masculinity and femininity. I believe representing the index finger as a symbol of both sexes in a single form is of great importance. In body language, when people want to point out something important, they use the index finger. Thus, I have used these fingers to express the pressure and control that have been imposed on the LGBTQIA+ community regarding their identity, sexuality, and gender in dominant society. For instance, in 1477, Katherina Hetzendorfer, a German woman was drowned due to having had a long-term sexual relationship with her housemate and acting and dressing like men.⁴⁴ " One of the interesting things about the trial notes is that Hetzendorfer's crime has no name in the proceeding. Instead, it is implied that she was hanged for committing a 'crime against nature' (*crimen contra naturam*), for 'acting like a man', and thus transgressing gender norms, rather than for being what we might now call a lesbian."⁴⁵

43. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in *Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31. [jstor.org/stable/3207893?seq=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893?seq=1)

44. Nikki Sullivan and J. R. Cadwallader, "The Social Construction of Same-Sex Desire: Sin, Crime, Sickness," in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, (NY: New York University Press), 2003, 3.

45. Ibid

Based on my last project, " The Repetition of the Certain Action", and such cultural/historical documents, I was inspired to make hundreds of plaster fingers, paint them with acrylic, varnish them with resin, and paste long red nails on them. For the installation, I arranged the index fingers together on artificial grass to form the word "NORM". As referenced in the aforementioned historical evidence, "transgressing gender norm" has been a critical topic in heterosexual patriarchal society. To highlight the dictation of patriarchal rules, the Arial font is used in capital while bolded. This font touches on government regulations where people are warned to obey them. Consequently, the following questions are raised: Who sets the rules? Why? And why are they so strongly enforced? What is a NORM and why do people have to obey these rules and to follow others' opinions without thinking, or knowing about their identities, tastes, desires, and way of living.



NORM, mixed media on wood sheet, 106x70x10 cm, 2020

Repetition plays an important role in my works. It is everywhere - from rows of portraits installed side by side; to mirrors, beads and tiny portrait photos in assemblages and sculptures; to multiples of fingers and individual eyelashes. By repeating a form, it draws attention to an idea or theme. Sometimes this repetition evolves into rhythm or texture, which I see as a subset of repetition. In fact, my practice and the way that I am making art is a repetitive action. The phenomenon of repetition occurs in human behavior and the role that society has proscribed for its collective identity. According to Butler's argument "if 'identity' is an effect to discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity, construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as compulsory heterosexuality?"⁴⁶ The role is realized through adherence to and repetition in society, but it raises these questions: What is real in this situation? How can we distinguish the difference between reality and unconscious programming?

Conclusion

By using diverse mediums, I aim to show different aspects of gender, identity, sexuality, and beauty that upend patriarchal norms. By creating work in several sizes, I invite the audience to come closer and discover feelings and emotions within them. They are encouraged to become involved in the works, especially the characters of the paintings and sculptures, which are much less accessible in the real world. Proximity and the permission to touch helps the audience to feel what an individual from the LGBTQIA+ community might sense in patriarchal and heterosexual society. I wish to share all these known and unknown feelings - rooted in my consciousness and unconsciousness, both directly and indirectly- that have resulted from fundamental questions regarding the definition of norms, performative roles, natural desires and beauty in society. I am eager to motivate the audience to take a look, once again, at all these dictated definitions - like the moment of looking in a mirror to see one's inner self - to redefine and reexamine such concepts.

46. Judith Butler, "Subject of Sex/Gender/ Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 24.



Installation view, *Dichotomy as a Mirror*, 2021

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