

# Shahpour Pouyan

Winter in Paradise



In contemplative works of art astonishing for their intense beauty, sophistication, and virtuosity, Shahpour Pouyan critiques oppressive power in all its forms. Politics and the weight of history have been inescapable forces throughout the artist's life. He was born in Iran in 1979, the fateful year when the country's last royal dynasty was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution. Pouyan grew up in Isfahan, a jewel-like city with domed mosques and grand palaces built when it was the capital of the Seljuk (r. 1038–1194) and Safavid (r. 1501–1722) dynasties of Persia. His father worked as a military engineer and their family lived on an air force base, which became a target of nighttime bombings during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–89). In 1988 his family moved to Tehran, where Pouyan pursued a multidisciplinary education in mathematics, painting, philosophy, and physics. During a brief period of rapprochement between the United States and Iran, he moved to New York in 2011 to study and earned a master of fine arts degree in new forms and integrated practice from Pratt Institute. He currently divides his time between London and Tehran.

Eloquent in his use of materials, Pouyan creates art in a variety of different media. Ceramic sculptures have constituted the core of his practice since 2014, when he saw pottery advertised as therapeutic for people dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and realized that, as a child of war, he suffered from PTSD himself. Pottery is also meaningful to the artist because of its long, venerable history in the Iranian plateau, in cities such as Kashan and Nishapur. Elegant shapes and colors make even simple ceramic objects, such as a bowl or jug, from there visually arresting. While Pouyan belongs to this tradition, he expands its expressive possibilities to have contemporary resonances.

*Winter in Paradise* is Pouyan's most extensive solo museum show to date. Presenting three major projects from the past decade, it features examples of the drawings and sculptures for which he is best known

and introduces an ambitious new virtual reality (VR) experience. The exhibition explores the artist's use of architecture as a vessel for his ideas. Domes and towers are recurring motifs. Pouyan credits the serial paintings of the Eiffel Tower by Robert Delaunay (1885–1941) and of churches by Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956) for inspiring him to focus on monuments in this way. For research Pouyan has traveled throughout Iran, visiting the built remains of its past empires. "I observed empty landscapes, ruined palaces, and mosques," he says about those trips. "Imagining the flow of life in these places is a deeply melancholic experience." His work carries with it a haunting sense of loss.

### ***Monday Recollections of the Muqarnas Dome***

In thirty-nine drawings, Pouyan depicts the Imam al-Dawr, an eleventh-century tomb monument built about one hundred miles north of Baghdad, Iraq. The mausoleum was significant for having the earliest known muqarnas dome, an invention of medieval Islamic architecture that spread far and wide and became one of the tradition's defining characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Light and multifaceted, muqarnas is an ornamental flourish rooted in mathematical complexity. Other contemporary Iranian artists, including Monir Farmanfarmaian (1922–2019) and Timo Nasser (b. 1972), have similarly been fascinated by their intricate forms. Pouyan was especially struck by how the Imam al-Dawr anticipated postmodern European architecture. The building became one of his lodestars and he tacked a photograph of it to the wall of his studio, hoping to visit it one day. Before he could, the Islamic State group (commonly known as ISIS) demolished it in October 2014. It is one of the many cultural heritage sites in Iraq, Syria, and Libya that ISIS has destroyed as it seeks to erase the past and establish a new totalitarian regime.

Devastated by this loss and failing in his attempts to describe the monument verbally to his friends, Pouyan embarked on a highly



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disciplined memory exercise. Every Monday morning starting April 6, 2015, the artist created a drawing of the building based on details he could recall without looking at his photograph, ranging from the decorative brickwork of its base to the interlocking tiers of the muqarnas (fig. 1). He marked the creamy white paper primarily in pencil, including gold pencil, and there is a poignancy in his selection of a medium so easy to erase. Some forms are incomplete; some lines are faint. In each drawing there is a tension between his dedication to

the monument and the fragility of memory. On December 30, 2015, the thirty-ninth week, Pouyan abandoned the project when he realized he could recall nothing else about the building.

More recently, in an open-ended series, the artist has been revisiting the Imam al-Dawr by producing ceramic sculptures that embody it. High fired to make the clay strong and durable, these are deliberately the most indestructible of Pouyan's sculptures, although he recognizes that someday they, too, could break if handled carelessly. He glazes the crowning muqarnas dome in colors including black, blue (fig. 2), brown, and green. Less somber than the drawings, these reincarnations offer a way to see and experience the monument in three dimensions. Evocative containers of memory, they serve as time capsules preserving information about the tower for future generations.





## ***We Owe This Considerable Land to the Horizon Line***

The clay sculptures in this installation each represent an architectural motif appearing in one or more of the three dominant building styles in Iran: Islamic, fascist, and brutalist (cover). Historically used by rulers in Pouyan's native country and elsewhere, the forms, even on this small scale, speak the language of domination and subjugation. The array of simplified geometric shapes recalls the objects and fragmented architecture found in medieval Persian miniatures (fig. 3). Following brutalist tenants, Pouyan leaves the material out of which the sculptures are made exposed and without decorative flourishes. The small edifices resemble sandcastles or, when viewed as an ensemble, a desert metropolis.



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The installation's title paraphrases a line from Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* (1998) that describes the God's-eye view of Baghdad during the 1258 Mongol invasion.<sup>2</sup> Pouyan stresses that "the three-dimensionality that was subsequently added to flat miniature painting was too costly—it was the result of the collapse of an empire. This can be seen as a metaphor for how expensive it is to develop awareness and learn from mistakes."

As in Giorgio de Chirico's (1888–1978) strange paintings of silent streets and buildings drawn from his memory (fig. 4), this city is uninviting. Many of the buildings lack doors or windows, granting no way in or out. Pouyan's scene serves as a dystopian allegory for the dangers of totalitarianism, patriarchal rule, and the loss of individual freedoms.



## ***Winter in Paradise***

The exhibition's crescendo, *Winter in Paradise* is Pouyan's first exploration of VR. He exploits the medium's ability to transform the themes of his art into an immersive experience.

Sparking the idea was Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966), a black-and-white film about the life and turbulent times of the fifteenth-century Russian icon painter of the same name. In a striking, dreamlike episode that captured Pouyan's imagination, snow falls inside a battle-torn church that Rublev had spent years ornamenting with painted wooden icons. The people who had taken refuge inside the church during wartime are also gone.

Pouyan's own cinematic scene—rendered under his direction by Siavash Naghshbandi (b. 1987) with a soundscape by Saba Alizadeh (b. 1983)—is set in Iran in the Friday Mosque in Ardestān, a desert city northeast of Isfahan that flourished under the Seljuks. The vast, well-preserved eleventh-century building features gracefully pointed arches and a square-domed chamber that rises high into the sky. Like other Seljuk mosques, its brick construction is enlivened with delicately carved stucco. Outside the edifice, the artist places a cypress, a multivalent symbol of everlasting life, freedom, righteousness, and truth used in Persian art. This particular tree is the sacred Cypress of Abarkuh planted by the prophet Zoroaster, founder of Iran's ancient Zoroastrian religion.

Five minutes in duration, the VR experience appeals to our full sensorium in novel ways. It situates us inside the medieval mosque, a kind of space unfamiliar to many of us, in a country most of us have never visited and enables us to look around and walk through the exquisite structure. Rarely used today, as religion plays less of a role in daily life, the building is empty. Only the grandeur of the past remains. Among the sounds are a blowing wind, the crackle of a fire, a mysterious voice, and a Persian stringed instrument. After a while,





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snow starts falling from the dome, inspiring wonder, and we begin to hear footsteps intended to represent our own. The work is visually and aurally stunning, and the feeling of winter in this unexpected place is enhanced by the chill in the room. Yet, through an arch we can see the sun shining on a majestic cypress tree (fig. 5). It is not far away.

Here, as in other works, the artist layers time. Essential to Pouyan's concept is not just the Iran of long ago, but also a poem entitled "Winter" (1956) by Mehdi Akhavan-Sāles (1928–1990) about the country's more recent history.<sup>3</sup> Well known in Iran, where verse peppers everyday speech, the poem describes an air that is bitter, cold, and cruel, concluding: "The land is devoid of life, / Dimmed are the sun and the moon / Winter is rife." The poet uses a winter frost as a metaphor for the political climate in Iran following the toppling of its popular, democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (1882–1967) in 1953. Mosaddegh stood for Iranian sovereignty and

nationalized the country's oil industry, which foreign companies had always previously controlled. Like many Iranians, Pouyan sees Mosaddegh's time in office, which lasted just two years, from 1951 to 1953, as one of the only periods of democracy anywhere in the Middle East. A chill wind is also felt today in Iran. Sadness triggered by despair infuses *Winter in Paradise*.

Etymology is one of Pouyan's interests and his use of *paradise* in his title is significant. The origin of the word can be traced to ancient Iran, where Persian kings built beautiful walled gardens shaded by cypress trees in the desert, calling them *pairidaeza*. The word later recurs in the texts of Zoroastrianism and then in those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to refer to an eternal garden. Today, Iran as a whole is demonized by the dominant discourse of the West, but Pouyan complicates the narrative by showing it also has gifted the world with the concept of paradise, a heavenly place we all dream about. The artist presents us with a richer, more nuanced view of his country, people, and culture. This is one of many instances where Pouyan situates his art at a meeting point of Eastern and Western ideas, thereby opening new avenues of thought.

Trinita Kennedy  
Curator at Large

### Notes

1. Yasser Tabbaa, "The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning," *Muqarnas*, 3 (1985): 61–74.
2. Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*, translated by Erdağ Göknar (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; originally published Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1998), pp. 111–12.
3. Visit [MehdiAkhavanSales.com/Winter](http://MehdiAkhavanSales.com/Winter) to read English translations of this poem.

## Illustrations

Cover: Shahpour Pouyan. *Untitled*, from *We Owe This Considerable Land to the Horizon Line*, 2017. High-fired ceramic; 23 5/8 x 18 1/8 x 7 7/8 in. Collection Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics, Leeuwarden, Acquired with the support of the Mondriaan Fund. Photo courtesy of the artist and Bertrand Huet / Tutti image

Fig. 1: Shahpour Pouyan. *Week 31, November 2, 2015*, from *Monday Recollections of the Muqarnas Dome*, 2015. Mixed media on paper; 12 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 2: Shahpour Pouyan. *Muqarnas Dome*, 2023. Glazed ceramic; 20 1/8 x 7 1/8 x 7 1/8 in. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 3: Attributed to Mir Sayyid 'Ali. *Nighttime in a City*, probably a folio from an illustrated manuscript, ca. 1540. Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper, 11 1/4 x 8 in. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet, formerly in the collection of Louis J. Cartier

Fig. 4: Giorgio de Chirico. *The Tower of Silence*, 1937. Oil on canvas. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, Lazio, Italy. Photo © Stefano Baldini/Bridgeman Images. © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

Fig. 5: Shahpour Pouyan. Still from *Winter in Paradise*, 2024. Virtual reality installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

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