

Hood Downtown Features Iranian Painter's Works of Psychogeography



In late 2013, Bahar Behbahani began a series of paintings inspired by her contemplation of identity. She first came to the United States from Iran in 2003. For a while, she moved between Tehran and the United States, then relocated permanently to New York in 2007. As a significant leitmotif of Iranian cultural experience, Persian gardens represented a logical recourse for Behbahani in trying to address her sense of being away from home. The

suite of paintings, installation, and video in this exhibition, part of her ongoing *Persian Gardens* series, captures her engagement with what she describes as the psychogeography of place and memory. *Bahar Behbahani: Let the Garden Eram Flourish*, on view at Hood Downtown January 5–March 12, 2017, was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, and generously supported by the Evelyn A. J. Hall Fund and the Cissy Patterson Fund. Opening events on January 12–14 include a Dartmouth student night and members and public receptions with the artist, as well as a public conversation between the artist and the exhibition's curator, Hood Curator of African Art Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, in the exhibition.

“Bahar Behbahani’s immersive work invites profound reflection,” says Nzewi. “She has developed an original vocabulary with which she mines history and personal memory. With Persian gardens as frame of reference and conceptual backdrop, she bridges time and space. Our students and faculty will draw incredible insights from her impressive paintings, which connect her Iranian and American experiences. We are indeed delighted to be the first American museum to show this career-defining new body of work.”

Artist Bahar Behbahani says, “I’m hoping my work raises questions without clear answers. I’m very interested in challenging our perceptions.”

An engineering tour de force, Persian or Iranian gardens have gripped human imagination since their emergence in the sixth century BCE. These walled gardens comprise multilateral structures, connecting aqueducts, networks of water channels, and surrounding trees and vegetation that remain lush all year in the middle of the desert. As objects of beauty, they have attracted people from different walks of life throughout the ages, from the Persian rulers who created them to evoke their personal transcendence and political power to the diplomats, common folk, scholars, and soldiers who have sought out their orientalist enchantment. Haunted by the spirits of fierce power play, Persian

gardens are marked by tragedy, love, betrayal, death, and redemption, and mirror Iran's fraught histories, past and present.

In the *Persian Gardens* series, Behbahani does not pursue a utopian fantasy or affirm the orientalism that the Western eye seeks in the gardens. Instead, her intensely layered vocabulary, which draws upon the schematic architectural plans, ritual geometry, and ornate aesthetics of Persian gardens, as well as the poetry they evoke, describes the histories that attend the gardens. We are invited to absorb Behbahani's rich and complex narratives woven on canvas. She approaches Persian gardens as a metaphor of politics and poetics and seeks the intersection of the public and private there. Highly gestural, Behbahani's work can be placed within the tradition of mark making and abstraction. It should not be seen strictly through the lenses of eastern, Persian, or Iranian aesthetic traditions. Hybridization, mirage, structures, memory, fantasy, and the power of imagination are some of the things that come to mind when looking at her paintings.

Born in Tehran in 1973, Behbahani pursues a multidisciplinary practice that includes paintings, video, installation, and performance. Her work has been featured in major venues, biennials, and art festivals and is in many public and private collections. She obtained her BFA (1995) and MFA (1998) from the University of Tehran's School of Fine Arts at a time when the principal form of expression for many Iranian artists was abstraction. This arose out of the necessity to speak with subterfuge due to the political dynamic at play in the country then (which has since improved). The last few years have seen a growing interest in Iranian art in Iran and in the international mainstream, and *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* is also a metaphor for this recent development in the art world.

About Hood Downtown

During the interval of the Hood Museum of Art's construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown, located at 53 Main Street, Hanover, NH, will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Many of these works by a diverse group of artists will be on view in Hanover for the first time. Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

About the Hood Museum of Art

The mission of the Hood Museum of Art, as a teaching museum, is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. This dynamic educational and cultural facility houses one of the oldest and largest college collections in the country, with more than 70,000 objects acquired since 1772. Among its most important works are six Assyrian stone reliefs that date from around 900 BCE. The collection also presents art from other ancient cultures, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Papua New Guinea, and many more regions of the world. The Hood seeks to inspire and educate through direct engagement with original works of art and offers access to the rich

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diversity of its collections through ongoing highlights displays, special exhibitions, an online collections database, and a wide array of programs and events. The museum is presently closed for expansion and renovation work that is anticipated to end in early 2019.

About Dartmouth

Founded in 1769, Dartmouth is a member of the Ivy League and consistently ranks among the world’s greatest colleges and universities. Dartmouth has forged a singular identity for combining its deep commitment to outstanding undergraduate liberal arts and graduate and professional education with distinguished research and scholarship in the arts and sciences and its three leading professional schools—the Geisel School of Medicine, Thayer School of Engineering, and the Tuck School of Business.

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Image caption: Bahar Behbahani, *Let the Garden Eram Flourish*, from the *Let the Garden Eram Flourish* series, 2016, mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

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