

Rokni Haerizadeh

08.25.14



Rokni Haerizadeh, *Subversive Salami in a Ragged Briefcase*, 2014, gesso, watercolor, and ink on printed paper, 11 3/4 x 15 3/4". From the series "Subversive Salami in a Ragged Briefcase," 2014.

Rokni Haerizadeh, including paintings from the series

"*Subversive Salami in a Ragged Briefcase*" and the animated video *Letter!* (both 2014), are currently on view at the New Museum as part of "Here and Elsewhere," a major exhibition of contemporary art from and about the Arab world, which is on view through September 28, 2014. Here Haerizadeh discusses these works and his process.

GROWING UP IN TEHRAN DURING THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR had a big impact on my generation. Thinking about life and death as a kid makes you serious. The TV programs at that time mostly depicted Islamic propaganda of the war, martyrs, and religion, but sometimes during the weekends they showed movies by directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Akira Kurosawa, and Sergei Eisenstein, as well as the Eastern European school of animated cartoons. When I was a kid and a teenager, these films were the only things around that inspired questions about art. Seeing, for example, a beautiful landscape with a man silently walking around for ten minutes moved me, and I wondered: Is that a movie? Is that art? It felt like a privilege to grow up with this kind of cinema as well as Abbas Kiarostami's films, which were screened in movie theaters in Tehran. It was an escape, a way to survive and to think more imaginatively.

Letter! is part of "Fictionville," an ongoing project of drawings and videos, or moving paintings. In 2009, when I began creating this series of works, I was inspired by stories that feature animals as narrators, such as the ancient Indian story *Panchatantra*, as well as *Shahr-e qesseh*, a play written by Iranian actor Bijan Mofid. In my work, I am depicting people as animals not to dehumanize them, but rather to emphasize the dear beast inside all human beings. I examine violence as it is used in the media, but I do this without being judgmental or offering a moral lesson.

To make these works, I collect frames from YouTube and TV news broadcasts, print them on letter-size office paper, and then prime them. I'll spread a group of "frames"—usually around forty sheets—on my studio table and move across the group, painting on each sheet individually like in an assembly line. The process takes place in stages; the first is a geometric abstraction in which I attempt to equate the background and the foreground in each frame. For example, I might find a rhombus-like form in the image made up of a policeman's hand in the foreground, holding a protester's body, combined with the shape of a spectator's leg and a passing car in the background. Then I repeatedly draw over and across these images until the geometric shapes are embedded within the image and lose their sharp edges and become more organic. Through repetition, the image slowly morphs into identifiable objects and shapes, and creates a narrative of its own that is unfaithful to the original image of protest. My moving images are like drawings with the added element of time. They trace experiences in real time, just like action painting. The individual dots shifting around the image are like a pulse—they leave with you the sense of the work as a living, breathing thing.

The title of my recent group of paintings, "Subversive Salami in a Ragged Briefcase," takes its name from a line in Allen Ginsberg's poem *I Beg You Come Back & Be Cheerful*. For me, the salami in the title refers to the protester and represents sweat and a salty body. The ragged suitcase made sense to me as well because I am displaying these paintings horizontally in a glass display case instead of putting them vertically. It is as if the paintings are looking for the sun.

— As told to Naomi Lev