Things that trouble the digestion: Ramin Haerizadeh's creaturely personas

By Media Farzin

"It's the characters," he corrects me gently. "They're the most important thing."

I haven't spoken to Ramin properly in many years, not since Tehran. I remember an early solo of his in 2003, digital photographs that played with symmetry and repetition. Later came gender-fluid self-portraits and performances, where the collage sensibility became forceful and wonderfully absurd. Later still, his move to Dubai with his brother Rokni, and sprawling collaborative installations that were marked by their characteristic humor and rebelliousness, but on a wilder, more confident scale. Now, on the eve of his first solo in many years, I'm trying to pin down what defines his own approach.

"The creatures make the work," he repeats. I've been asking him about people and places, about the objects in his collages. He's open about these specifics, but I get the sense that they're not where the work's meaning resides. Ramin has always resisted putting product before process. His ongoing body of work is formed by a daily practice, a merging of art and life that motivates and forms the artworks. Over the course of several Skype conversation in August and September 2017, he described some of these processes and concerns.

"It's a creaturely way of living," he explains.

"I get up in the morning, and I go about my day in character." He describes some of these personas to me, and sends video performances of others. Auntie Katy carries a Chanel purse, wears a snout mask, and spends a lot of time at the local Dragon Mart, where she buys plastic fruit, kitschy souvenirs, and fake flowers that often end up in the artwork. There's a bearded mermaid with bits of trash in her blond afro, who snacks on marshmallows while listening to an oceanic soundtrack; "Marie Antoinette's twin sister," in poufy leopard print skirt and powdered wig, who comes over for tea and Persian poetry; and Lara Croft (or "Lara Craft"), with brown wig and dark shades, who loses a gunfight and turns into a rose.

With his brother Rokni and Hesam Rahmanian, they've been "the Lettuceheads," who wander blindly around their house, running into furniture and breaking things ("around the same time that ISIS was destroying historic sites," he adds offhandedly). The Lettuceheads would become the protagonists of "The Birthday Party," the group's 2015 show at the ICA Boston. Before that, they were "the Maids," a nod to the Jean Genet play of the same name where a pair of domestic servants enact, with ritualistic fervor, sadomasochistic games that bring out the cruel power dynamics of their daily lives. "We saw a lot of parallels with the situation of Middle Eastern artists," Ramin says cheerfully.

I ask him about the reason for these rituals. "Discipline forms the soul," he says simply. I recognize the phrase of French philosopher Michel Foucault's, about the detrimental effects of disciplinary structures—how schools, or prisons, or the very idea of sexuality can enforce certain behaviors in our lives and on our bodies. "We turn that inside out and take it positively. We make our own discipline. We have our daily activities: getting up at a certain hour, working out, making art, reading, talking, watching films. It may lead somewhere, it may not. But it's more about the activity than object-making." He pauses. "We become creatures. That's how the game starts."

It's in character that Ramin often returns to his older canvases and assemblages. Many of the works in the present show are a palimpsest of layers, their surfaces collaged over with new objects and materials, and also photographs of the very same work. "A fussy character might revisit a work made by a casual one, reworking, adding, and layering," he explains. "I may not know why I'm doing something, and it may not end up working. But it gradually builds up, arrives."

I ask him how these newer works connect to his earlier training as a photographer. "When I started out, [in the early 2000s in Tehran], nobody would take you seriously if you worked in digital. I always felt the scanner could be a camera lens too," he muses. "Now, with new cellphone cameras, everyone's a photographer. And I'm much more interested in using what's already out there, all of these existing photographs." Ramin's found imagery, like his found objects, open up the work to outside energies and processes, and to all the contingencies of photography in the age of what Hito Steyerl has called, in reference to the new regime of endlessly circulating digital files, "the poor image."

By rephotographing the same image—as he does in Son of Godzilla (2015-17), where, among other repetitions, a hand holds a crumpled version of the larger work—the artwork itself becomes a found object, pushing the idea of originality even further back. For Ramin, the goal is to produce "interruptions" in the image, small repetitions that stagger and stutter the flow of representation. In many cases, as with *First Rain's Always a Surprise* (2017), a recent series based on family photographs, the edges are marked by visible rips and tears. "It's a political act, to tear the image," he offers. "To not be limited by the material."

Collage has a venerable political history: from Dada photomontage to Martha Rosler's *Bringing the War Home*, artists have used the juxtaposition of mass imagery to reveal the flipside of the media's official story. But in Ramin's *Still Lifes*, a series based on news photos, the expressive symmetry of the deformations, especially the doubling of faces and bodies, has pulled the events out of a specific time and place, deprived them of their ideological message. The photographs become archetypes of a news photo—recognizable as a medium, but lacking content. "News photos can seem so uniform, so based on classical Western art historical values," he tells me. "I try to break that, to take the motion out of the image—by giving it symmetry, for example."

And always, there is Ramin's own body: a thumb, holding down the news images in the *Still Lifes*; crumpling the image-within-the-image in *Son of Godzilla*; more directly in the family snapshots of *First Rain*. These body parts are reminders that collage is also about witnessing. Found imagery is subjected to distortions and deformations in order to reflect reality as it is experienced. These images are pulled out of their ordinary settings—magazine, family album, news site—and turned into objects of contemplation and interaction.

I ask Ramin about the role of his body in his work, and whether this recent series connects to his earlier self-portraits. "It used to be my face," he agrees, "but now it's mostly body parts. It's like I've been dissolved in the image, like I've entered the work. In my performances too, I wear masks a lot," he adds. And what does this presence signify, both there and not there? "It's about a creature getting to know their surroundings," he says. "The creature gets up, googles things, reads, and interacts with their ecosystem." I wonder about witnessing the world in such a creaturely mode, what kind of view it might represent.

I ask about his formal decisions. The personas might change, but surely the artist is the same? "I'm present in the whole process, yes, but what remains of the activity is still a *ramz.*" A *ramz* might be a mysterious trace or a code—a work that is not about sense or deliberate decisions. "Gathering these objects, placing them alongside each other in ways that might be meaningless, it's like casting a spell," he reflects. "It's like you turn into a shaman, creating voodoo objects." The wildness of collage seems to offer a refusal of hierarchical structures and calls to order—a way of troubling the rational mind as much as the digestion, perhaps.

Refusals are important to Ramin. I've always been attracted to the queerness of his work, a joyful gender-fluidness that is

Installation view of *To Be or Not To Be, That is the Question. And Though, it Troubles Digestion*

playful and funny and strong—bodies and bellies and beards and breasts, real and fake, somehow male and female both. But I'm not entirely sure how to broach this, perhaps held back by my Iranian sense of decorum. I ask him, instead, about the importance of the feminine in his work—the many female poets referenced in this show, the painters included in his collaborative installations, and more specifically here, his mother's archive of personal photographs, which are the foundation of *First Rain's Always a Surprise* (where the title is a line from the poet and painter Etel Adnan).

"We're trying really hard to rethink masculinity," he says, speaking collectively now. "We try to take the machismo out of our art. We do this with material, a lot of the time: we try to redefine what fragility might be, or labor, or gender. We have to be careful, of course—we're three men, and feminism can turn into sexism. But we try. Being aware is important. But what you read you have to also practice." He adds: "It's important to us to keep this quality of being minor." We are both thinking, I'm sure, of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "becoming minor," a political position that for the philosophers was exemplified in the writings of Franz Kafka. To become minor is to position yourself against majorities (the state, or fascism, or any other "diabolical powers"), and to write from a minor position within a major language.

We talk about the impact of the patriarchal, paternalistic atmosphere of the Tehran we grew up in. "It left a strong impression on us: always running away from fathers, the shadow of fathers—at home, at school. We're determined to say no to the father, the master." Oedipal Fathers; political Masters—I think of *The Maids*, and press him further. "The cross-dressing, the gender fluidity, and the sexuality [in my work]—people had really strong reactions to that [in Iran], very homophobic responses." And not only in Iran, I gather, though he doesn't go into the details. "Gender is important, the idea of the body as a battlefield. We're always fighting."

The creaturely, as literary scholar Eric Santner has written, is another way of speaking about the biopolitical. Biopower is an idea associated with Foucault: the major political questions of our age, he proposed, are those of population management: food, shelter, and water; who is to be allowed life and from whom it is to be withheld. For Santner, the encounter with biopower, can, under certain conditions, transform our very sense of self. Humans become present to their "creaturely life" when exposed to a sovereign authority—the moments they are held captive to it, like animals.

At our most creaturely, we are caught in the crosscurrents of power, exposed and vulnerable. Creaturely life, for Santner, is a product of extreme conditions; of man's "exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity." The creature is a witness to the machinations of power, present at the scene, but unlike the human, it lacks access to mediation or representation.

Creatureliness, then, can also be turned on its head: an unmediated witnessing of political power that refuses recourse to typical forms of expression. Animals, German philosopher Martin Heidegger famously wrote, are "poor in the world," in contrast to the "world-forming" qualities of men. The creature does not "form" the world in speech, representation, or the law; it occupies the world much like the poor image does for Steyerl, being ultimately "about its own real conditions of existence." The creature, then, is presence rather than representation.

Of his mother's photographs in *First Rain*, Ramin tells me: "I'm interested in how a face changes over time; how historic events register on faces." In *First Rain*, he juxtaposes and layers moments from the same time period: say, a family gathering with a political protest, "injecting the events back into the photograph," as he describes it. But we don't have access to these social or political moments, not exactly: we see their effects registering in lines and forms and compositional movement. We sense a witnessing, a participation in these events through the affective quality of the formal disruptions. These are *creaturely* creations: the site of a bodily and felt witnessing of power as its circulates through people, objects, and images.

Ramin's creatures, I realize, aren't authors, even though they have been given authorship of these works. They're a creaturely space that he inhabits, where things have a mystical power, a force of refusal and rebellion that lies beyond norms, conventions, or Masters. It's a place of this world, imbricated in its politics and crises and joys, but also beyond. The creaturely is a space that is absurd and wild and imaginary, and also true.

He agrees. "To stay there, that's the work."