



Infertile Fields

■ Zahra Shafie ■

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As a figurative painter, the human body has always been an important concern of mine, however, my view of the human body is not as an isolated figure, but rather something that is always related to its surroundings. The close relationship between humans and nature and the need to maintain this relationship led me to create a world in the upcoming collection where plants are a rich source of form and color and have a wide range of visual personalities, more than any other natural element in interaction or confrontation with humans.

My world is a transition from reality to fantasy, and this path begins with my most tangible experience with plants, but just like the reality of life, this experience does not remain untouched and immune to the power of the mind. Gradually, plants give their place to human elements and symbols are born until a world appears in this imaginary universe where plants find human personality and characteristics.

 Zahra Shafie



Oil on Canvas
190x190 cm

Image in Integration and Fusion of Contradiction

In the modern approaches to literary and artistic criticism, particularly from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the body and its various functions and perceptions in visual arts and literature have been of great importance. It is during this period that we can speak of a genre called "body writing" or "body art," which is closely intertwined with the political and ideological context of post-1968 France. The body became central, and many related discussions emerged in psychoanalysis and semiotics with a fresh perspective. In the past three decades of the 21st century, artists, critics, theorists, and writers made attempts in their own ways to explore and recognize meaning in the body and the tangible sensory experience. Each of them sought to reidentify the coordinates of the body in their own unique manner. The body and the new metaphor of embodied geography have been one of the main concerns of a critical approach called spatial-geography, which is based on the discovery and understanding of the perceptual experiences of writers and artists. This critical approach, which has established several chairs in French academic institutions since 1980, has consistently strived to comprehend the language of the body as the starting point of perception and understanding. Its roots are deeply intertwined with psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and thematic criticism. Given what has been stated and in connection with the works of Zahra Shafie, it is evident that the artist has utilized both space and the body to give birth to meaning. Thus, an understanding of the spatial-geographical perspective is required to examine such an insight in her works. This approach emerges organically from within the corpus and is not an imposed or theoretical constraint. Shafie employs three approaches or strategies in her paintings, which are manifested in the composition, color palette, and the relationship between the body and geography. These three strategies, or rather three guiding principles, as previously mentioned, include the redefinition of subject, a fresh perspective on geography and space, and a novel behavior towards the language of the body. We will briefly discuss these three strategies and attempt to explore the artist's engagement with them in her perceptible world in this short article. It is evident that our focus will be on entering Shafie's world through the lens of spatial-geographical criticism, and these three strategies are among the key subjects analyzed in the reference books of this critique.



Modern Deconstruction and Redefinition of the Subject

In his departure from Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," French poet Rimbaud writes, "It is a mistake to say 'I think'; one should say 'Thought occurs to me.'" In this manner, the subject is described in relation to someone else and an external command: "I am someone else." The body transcends its self-recognition as the center of every discourse and thought, thus the subject opens up to the other and moves towards someone else. This movement from the other to the self and from the self to the other is a redefinition of the relationship between mind and matter, thought and body. Based on this perspective and to understand this movement towards the other in the realm of visual arts, some critics, following the theories of French linguist Émile Benveniste, have defined a type of relationship between portraiture and the viewer. According to this view, the direction of gaze determines the presence of the other. By examining attachment discourse and detachment discourse, these critics consider portraits with direct gazes to be in connection with the self, here and now, while portraits with indirect gazes and detachment discourse are seen as in disconnection with the self, here and now.


Oil on Canvas
(small pieces compositions)

By examining Zahra Shafie's approach to portraiture, one can generally consider the eyes as the prototype of the face. This facial feature behaves differently in almost all paintings, often avoiding direct gaze and being in a state of discursive detachment. Even when the eyes have a direct gaze, they typically avoid a face-to-face encounter, resulting in either an incomplete or interrupted connection. Thus, the eye structure has an incomplete and fragmented perceptual cognition. It should be noted that the face in this context corresponds to all its moral burdens, which cannot be reduced to mere physicality. Similarly, the eyes are not reducible to a physical organ; instead, they are in complete connection with the other and directed towards the other with openness. In this collection, the eyes play the primary role in concealing and moving towards the other. Such eyes, which sometimes establish a connection with the external world, are considered as a "response to the world". Shafie's subjects are sometimes in a fundamental rupture from the world, as if they have exited the lived space to retrieve themselves in another imagination or to perceive others from any direction other than mutual perception in the here and now. Therefore, the eyes sometimes move towards someone else (rarely in a direct face-to-face manner), and other times they seek retrieval of self and the other. This suspension of perceptual cognition is a result of discursive attachment and detachment. Such subjects must explore the very corners of their world for contemplation and retrieval of the other. They may even look at a fragment of their own body, become diverse, and retrieve themselves. This characteristic of Shafie's works, where sometimes multiple panels are painted, is one of the elements of generating meaning in relation to the body. The diversified body separates from itself, looks at itself or one of its own body parts to reach a "pure self," a self free of imposed interpretations. Thus, various frames with multiple layers and the artist's relationship with themselves and others are formed, based on a continuous interplay of attachment and detachment through the practice of perceptual Phenomenology. Through her exploration of doubt in the gaze, Zahra Shafie shapes a space filled with self-reflection with the gaze from the other. The gaze becomes a central question in the process of creating this collection.






Oil on Canvas
190x190 cm



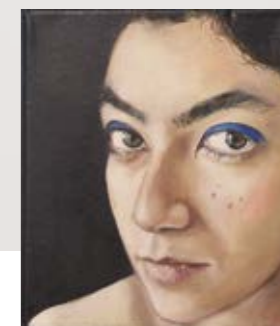
Oil on Canvas
20x67 cm



A New Perspective on Space

The concept of space and place has been one of the key topics in the criticism of art and literature in the 20th century. As time passed, it became the primary factor in artistic and literary analysis of the 19th century, considering the two World Wars, colonization, and the rapid growth in the early 20th century, as well as environmental issues and more. Now, in our examinations of spatial-geography, we constantly refer to the pair of space-time in the works of artists.

In Zahra Shafie's works, we can observe that place does not have a specific reference. In fact, we encounter a construction of a mental space, which is itself one of the factors in the birth of meaning in painting. According to the theories of spatial-geography critics, this space can be classified into three categories: perceptual space, conscious and imagined space, and experienced space. Perceptual space in Zahra Shafie's works is connected to tangible and real actions, which establish a relationship between various characters and the plant and floral space within the paintings. In this sense, plants and flowers, with all their peripheral symbolic ethos of growth, decay, and withering, have a meaningful connection to these characters who sometimes seek after themselves, as mentioned before, and sometimes face the audience directly. The absence of a specific reference for place and space leads to the creation of an imaginative dimension related to the perceptual space. Based on this, the body of nature becomes more cultural, and the body of humans and the faces, by necessity, must search for themselves.






Oil on Canvas
40x37 cm

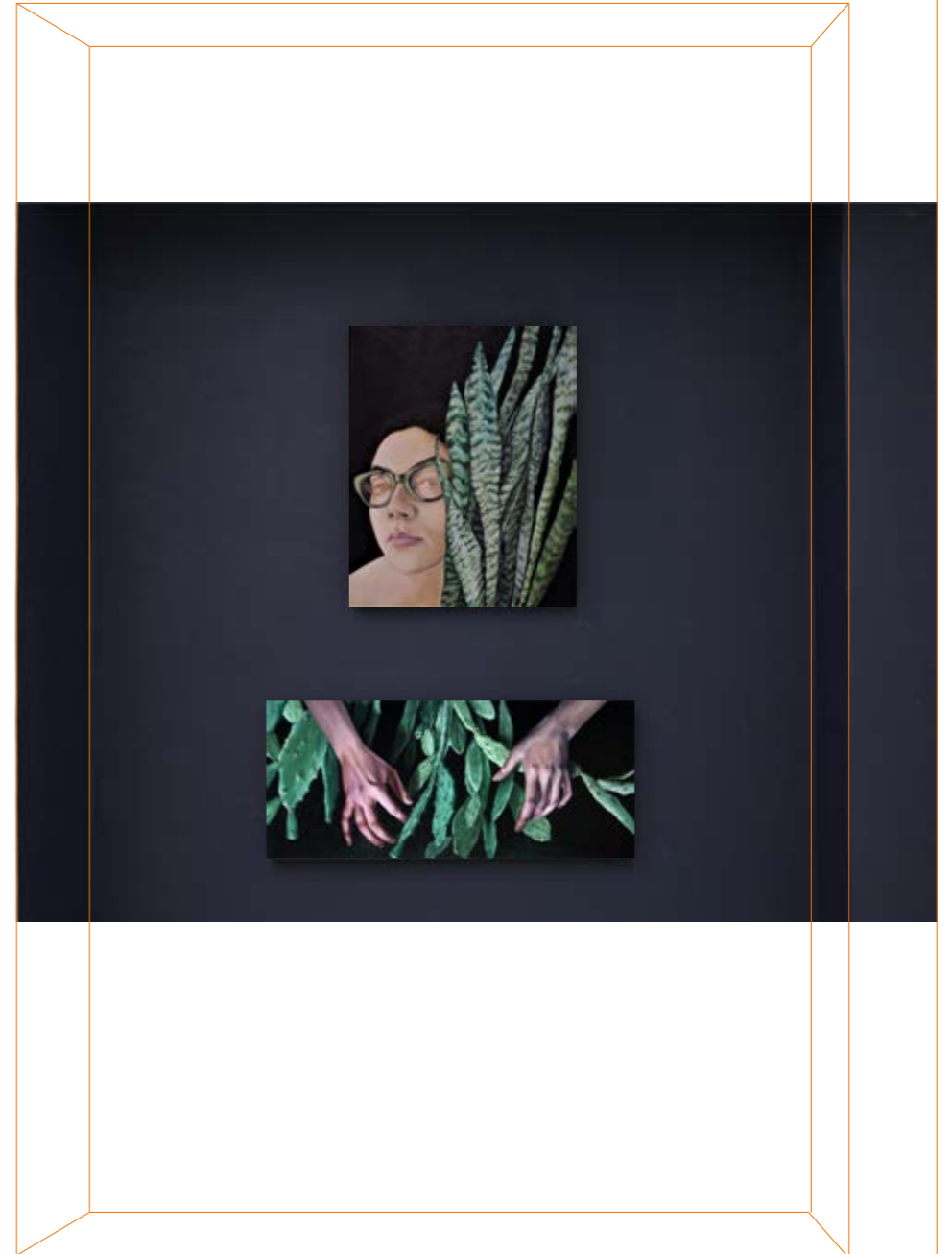


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In the second category, we encounter a narrative map in Zahra Shafie's works, which navigates through all the planetary landscapes and leads itself towards the scenery, to witness not from afar but rather taking flowers as the first reference of the narrative map of planetary existence. However, the artist's intention in drawing such a narrative map was not solely to represent the fact that we are surrounded by both culture and nature, but rather to sometimes take us towards a culturalized nature and other times towards a naturalized culture. This nature itself is a manifestation of art. This nature, in its various forms and in connection with bodies, reminds us of all the bodily forms that we have encountered in our daily life and are unaware of, and this is the language of the body that the artist has discovered in nature. In this sense, we draw and even cut the map of nature based on our bio-culture. This is how the experienced space is created:

This experienced space means delving into the landscape and its representation, not in the sense of reality, but by surpassing the myriad sensations and meaningful perceptions that the body and mind possess. It takes shape through the everyday language, metaphor, and symbolic forms. Something happens in the artist's perceptual world that not only gives us the key to interpreting the work but also exempts us from complete access to all meanings and constantly places the audience on the threshold of a meaningful event. This meaningful occurrence and the third space are the most essential dimensions of Zahra Shafie's works.

The artist's space is formed by the reconstruction of the existence of the body in an unknown space: where prohibition and restriction, fragmentation and emergence, vegetation and body, nature and culture collide and give birth to a kind of polyphony. It is worth mentioning that most of the artist's portraits depict the expression of emotions such as anger, hatred, screaming in pain, etc., and it is for this reason that Zahra has managed to invite all senses and emotions into this polyphonic and discursive junction, where the most contrasting senses collide with each other. All this is made possible through the help of a new perspective and the creation of a unique language that has emerged beyond the body as the center of perceptions. In the next section, we will delve into this unique perception of the body and the specific language of the body.




Oil on Canvas
100x143 cm




Oil on Canvas
100x140 cm

Language of the Body

When we speak of the body, we can observe two tendencies in art and literature: firstly, an approach that sees the body separate from the mind, detached from it, and disconnected from the world of meaning. In this perspective, the body is considered as a collection of organs and is seen separately from the universe. Alongside this structural behavior towards the body, we encounter another kind of embodiment that attempts to transcend the duality of body/mind and considers the body as the site of the encounter between matter/mind, subject/world, and signifier/meaning. This type of embodiment presents a visual depiction of the cosmic body, where the human mind is manifested in the physical form, and at the same time, this body, on a psychological scale, is also regarded as the subject. Therefore, in the cosmic body, the body of the subject, the body of the world, and the body of image (color, matter, painting tools) converge and harmonize in an improvised orchestration. It is here that the body, being connected to the external world, possesses its own rationality and becomes the center of thought.

In the works of Zahra Shafie, through the representation of certain parts of the body, such as the throat, hands, nose, etc., the notion arises that "the human is there, here, with that body, here and there." Within the space, entangled with the body of the world and intertwined with it.

The limbs are not meant to represent the physicality of the body but rather serve as the meeting point of the internal and external, the human and the universe. Perhaps here we should refer to the expression of Mallarmé, the French poet, who speaks of a poetic text where painting no longer speaks of representation but rather the body of the painter breaks free from traditional representation and carries a new discourse: The body, with all its determinations, is placed on the canvas, and it is not only the imagination but also the imagination integrated with the body which speaks and expresses itself.





Oil on Canvas
20x17 cm each



Oil on Canvas
65x34 cm

Oil on Canvas
54x40 cm



Oil on Canvas
100x150 cm






Oil on Paper
48x41 cm

Written by  Sohrab Ahmadi

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22
54
46
48

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