MUSEUM FRIDERICIANUM

# Fariba HAJAMADI

Echolot

## Reconciling Opposites

Since the mid-80's, Fariba Hajamadi has been producing an art that set out to diagram and re-construct the Western narrative of the Other long before such critical tactics had entered the mainstream of contemporary artistic practice. Beginning with the museum as the locus of Occidental civilization's based reading of non-Western forms and practices, Hajamadi tacitly declared it to be something like the scene of a perpetual crime against humanity insofar as it enshrines the trophies of a deep cultural misunderstanding, and labels them authentic. No matter how high-minded the enterprise of appropriating another culture's treasures may have seemed only a generation or two ago, it is impossible for a well-informed person to experience such booty today without at least some contextual and semiotic strings firmly attached (and even obstructing the view). This is not to argue that such awareness detracts from the experience of beauty or sublimity in such displays, but rather that the position of the conquering aggressor cannot ever be separated from that of the person who seeks redemption through enlightened study, since one invariably tends to ride on the coattails of the other. Although the angles, composition and color in Hajamadi's final images betray her position as an intruder in this temple of Western privilege, she ultimately seeks to perform a bit of subterfuge of her own, by showing how vulnerable this point of view is to a sudden act of reversal.

What most interests Hajamadi as visual evidence of this unequal conflict is the hidden ideological agenda that frames the museum's presentation of its treasures while it seeks to conceal the imperial policies and beliefs that provided the historic conditions for their current ownership. Owing to increased public awareness that many claims of ownership of cultural treasures (e.g., the Elgin Marbles, Nazi war booty) are highly conditional at best, the generic museum whose images she plunders appears, in her rendering, to be less than comfortable with its possession of the relics and treasures that lie within its vitrines and hang upon its walls. Combining photography, painting and installation techniques to present a composite image of the museum as a kind of displaced ethnographic sideshow, Hajamadi succeeds in both questioning the museum's authority, and in forcing her viewer to see the site of display as the quintessential locus of the struggle for cultural meaning. Hajamadi does not neutralize the process of exoticization so much as she re-frames it in other, even more stylized terms that make it appear as if the most commonplace conventions of museum display could in turn become a re-sacralized point where the excluded/collected culture comes to recognize itself through the shards of its formerly cohesive identity. As a result, the twin processes of dis–orientation and de-orientalization that take place in Hajamadi's art seem as comfortable a paradigm for museological practice in the coming century as any we are likely to experience.

By examining how museums envision themselves and their erstwhile possessions, Hajamadi is prodding us to consider how critical theory works as well. Even in the most fervent analyses of Western cultural hegemony, it is difficult if not impossible to completely displace the aura of having once been colonized from the objects one is studying. Post-colonial theory, for example, does not propose that these mute objects can speak any longer with »their« voices, but asks us instead to circumscribe our encounter with them from within the same interrogation that led to these cultures' surrendering of the symbols of their birthright to the West. A visual artist first and foremost, Hajamadi is less taken by that scenario than with the possibility that she can contribute to the formation of even newer critical paradigms by bringing these works into the present moment with both their visual integrity and our critical sensitivity relatively intact.

Choosing her museum sites according to their fulfillment of several overlapping criteria (conventional hierarchies of arrangement, adherence to formal typology, etc.), Hajamadi begins with the visual positioning of the spectator in relation to the framed artifact: formal and at a slight remove. Like her, we are locked into a middle-distance that does not permit us to enter into the frame for closer inspection. This visual restriction is exacerbated by the fact that the artist presents these museological dissections to us as slide-projections and corners, thereby underscoring both their remoteness and their visual weight. On the other hand, the elaborate re-coloring that Hajamadi has performed upon the images reveals an intensely personal dialogue between the artist and the artifacts themselves, as well as an explicit desire to make the tableaus appear more vivid than they may have been in reality. This is not repossession so much as it is an act of reclaiming the artist's poetic right to describe the scene as it has been subjectively experienced. Her work seems to argue that although the museum's meanings can no longer be contained by such obsolete formulations as those which brought it into being, she also cannot pretend as an artist that the museum will eventually be re-conceived and re-built according to her reading of it. Caught in this stand-off, the decision to re-infuse this scene with an entirely fabricated program of color signals Hajamadi's reluctance to consider the subject closed until she finds herself able to suffuse the remembered image with her own subjective relationship to it.

If the most noticeable stylistic shift in Hajamadi's work as it is experienced in the present exhibition stems from the intensity and saturation of color within these slide projections, there is a marked degree of continuity in her deployment, outside the darkened areas, of seemingly antique images mounted on wallpaper that depicts repeated scenes of ethnic and sexual violence. As these composite scenes explicitly link the acquisitive Western gaze to the destruction of cultural patrimony, Hajamadi's artistic intervention enables us to see either the object of desire or the conditions of its seizure, but never both in the same view. While the relationship between the two modes of working seems clear, a marked distinction between the two prevails in terms of the positioning of the spectator relative to the object of desire. In one mode we are simultaneously closed out and passive, while in the other we have been brought into the inner sanctum, only to have our position »corrected« in terms of the object's cultural mandate to remain elusive. Although in the experience of Hajamadi's work it is never entirely clear how we are to turn the critical discourse back onto our own act of looking, this awareness seems to reside in our experience of the museum once we have turned away from this particular installation. At once drab and overly physical, as if could no longer maneuver within its own restrictions, the absence of a critical subjectivity within the »real« museum makes us seek refuge in the imaginary one, even if its subjective essences are intended to vanish in the harsh light of day.

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