

NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE – ALA EBTEKAR IN CONVERSATION WITH SARA RAZA

Sara Raza

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Ala Ebtekar is an Iranian-American artist whose practice explores the juncture between history and myth. Forging a multi-faceted project that melds Persian mythology, science, philosophy and pop culture together, his work returns us to the past as a way of envisioning the future. Currently Visiting professor at Stanford University, Ebtekar encourages his students to explore the potential in the relationship between art and science fiction and, in this conversation with Ibraaz's Contributing Editor Sara Raza, discusses the practice of sampling and re-mixing, derived from his early experiences as a DJ, and his quest to locate a history of Iranian science fiction stretching as far back as the Sufi poets of the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries.

Sara Raza: Having academically trained as a filmmaker, how do you apply the principles of filmmaking – directing, splicing and cutting – to your artworks, especially your book works?

Ala Ebtekar: It is interesting that you raise this question, as the book that I am currently working on functions within the same parameters as a film and even has a soundtrack. I think that when we speak of time-based media, films and video are discussed more than books. I am trying to assert how a book or a publication can be read as a possible time-based media work. By this I mean that there is a sequence of moments and images that can be stretched or squeezed in time, depending on how the viewer/user uses the book – and speed, in turn, influences the flow

and time lapses as you turn from, say, page one to ten. A series of images, a sequence of pages and a chapter, can complete the message or narrative and serve as an alternate reading of what time-based media could be. In my two recent shows at The Third Line Gallery in Dubai and the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, as part of *Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989*, I showcased works that explored how a sequence of images that became chapters in a book could collapse into one single still image as a singular work.



Ala Ebtekar, Elsewhen // project space, 2012, installation view, The Third Line, Dubai. Courtesy of the artist.

SR: Would say there is a degree of sampling and re-appropriation employed within your practice, a mash-up of art disciplines?

AE: Yes, you could say that. I am fascinated with multiple channels of visual cultural dialogues that emerge from synthetic or hybrid identities. It is a methodology I feel I established as a teenager. I used to DJ on the radio and at parties and became accustomed to sampling, sequencing and mixing. Later on, hip hop music and culture further cultivated that approach and became inherent to my work. I am also indebted to my former professor Carlos Villa, with whom I worked closely exploring ideas around collage and assemblage, during my undergraduate studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. I see a lot of these influences still prevalent within my current work.

SR: What other media do you explore that best suit your practice and how do you see these evolving in the future?

AE: I work in many diverse media but it always starts with a drawing for me and I always keep sketchbooks by my side. My early installation works and paintings all stem from drawings and you see this in my manuscript works as well. The format of books and publications as a medium is also something that I will continue to revisit, revise and remix, considering the different shapes a book series or publication can take throughout its lifespan. It is a constantly evolving, ongoing project.

SR: You are currently a visiting professor at Stanford University – how does your teaching filter back into your practice?

AE: Teaching is an important part of my practice, as I think it is important to work with younger generations on a regular basis. It allows me to better speculate on current and future trends and behaviour in society, which then feeds back into my work and is especially relevant to my interests in sci-fi, a genre that my students take an avid interest in. At Stanford, where I teach as visiting faculty member within the department of art and art history, I work across both undergraduate and graduate level, and a good proportion of my students major in science and engineering. It has been interesting to observe this student cohort and their approach to art, and encouraging them to merge both art and science together – two disciplines that they would ordinarily try to keep separate.



Ala Ebtakar, *The dark midnight, fearful waves, and the tempestuous whirlpool (5)*, 2011, mixed media digital pigment print, 100 x 66 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

SR: Your recent works explore a relatively unknown genre of Iranian art and history, which is the probing of science fiction and a possible futuristic narrative. What was the inspiration behind this?

AE: Western sci-fi has also been a long-standing interest of mine but it was difficult to locate any concrete examples of it in Iranian art or popular culture. Despite my research, I could not identify any current solid evidence of any writing or visions of sci-fi. There is, of course, a rich Persian history of study into the cosmological world that was propelled by Sufi doctrine. Elements of the genre of fantasy, for example, can be found in such historical classics as the 11th-century poet Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, and in many paintings and miniatures. I guess you can even see traces of magical realism in the works of 12th- and 13th-century poets Nizami and Attar, who blurred fiction and non-fiction and the past and present within their works. There is also the Sufi philosopher Suhrawardi, whose works often read like surreal dreams, and who speaks of an imaginary world.

SR: Why do you think there is this absence?

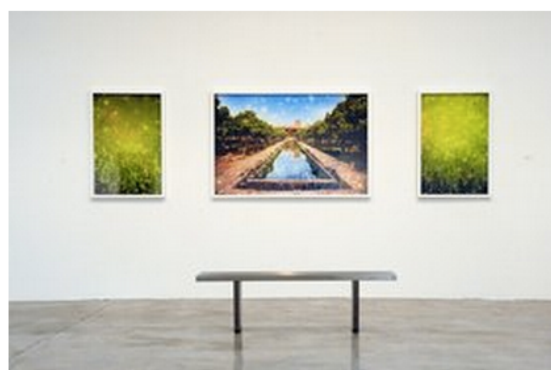
AE: The ideas about cosmology and illusion outlined by our predecessors remain largely untapped by contemporary Iranian artists and writers. Perhaps this is due to nostalgia for the past and what I see as a nostalgic representation rather than any kind of progressive nostalgia. Interestingly, I think the symptom of simply glorifying the past in contemporary art and literature reveals a lot about the current condition and mindset of the society and culture of Iran.

SR: Within your recent show at The Third Line Gallery in Dubai, you referenced the work of American sci-fi novelist Robert A. Heinlein within your portrayal of futuristic literature in Iran. That was an interesting source, wouldn't you say?

AE: Heinlein is definitely one of the writers I have been looking at for a long time, as his works are not so concerned with so-called gadgets and operas of the future world. Instead, he conveys human interactions and relationships and ironically these speculations serve as a critique of our contemporary lives. Heinlein served in the navy and began work as an engineer just before the Second World War, which was, needless to say, a pivotal moment in history. He later turned his attention to writing and pursued a career as a successful novelist.



Ala Ebtekar, *Rapture*, 2011, mixed media digital pigment print, 100 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Ala Ebtekar, *Paradise*, 2012, installation view, *Elsewhen*, The Third Line, Dubai. Courtesy of the artist.

Similarly, his contemporaries Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke also established themselves as engineers or scientists before writing sci-fi literature.

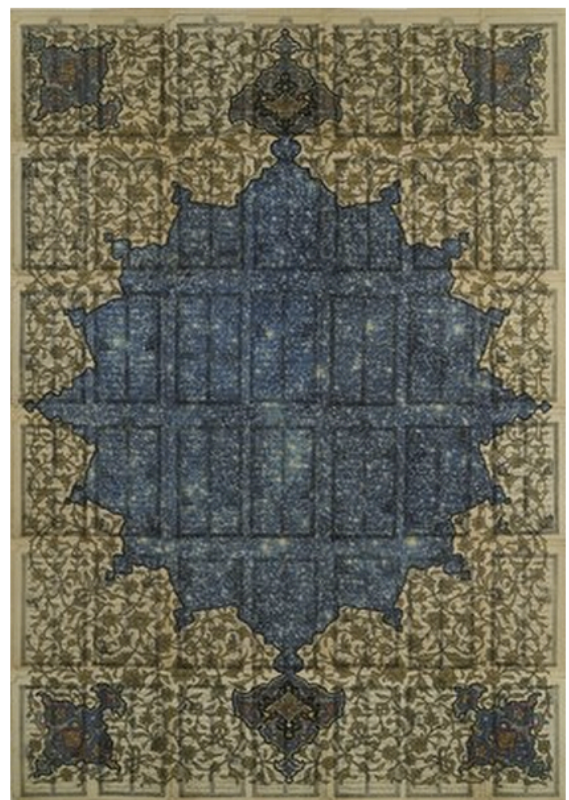
Incidentally, Iran boasts an abundance of scientists and engineers and Iranians have been noted as holding some of the most advanced posts within the dual fields of science and engineering. I would be interested to see how many of these modern-day Iranian engineers or scientists would turn to writing as a means of deconstructing the changing and divided society that we find ourselves in. Perhaps they might be inspired by some of the great Persian poets such as Attar or Ibn Sina, who served multiple roles as philosophers, scientists and writers.

SR: Besides referencing literature, what other methodologies did you employ in attempting to cover futuristic research?

AE: I have been travelling back and forth between Iran and the US trying to identify and create what I word term a 'future visual cultural study' and speaking and interviewing various artists and contemporary scientists. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with some of the most important living Iranian scholars and poets to discuss my research and ideas. However, in terms of what there is on paper, there is very little documentation available and I see it as part of my practice to experiment and investigate this first-hand through my art.

SR: What challenges have you so far encountered or foresee in exploring an artistic research in which little material actually exists?

AE: It has definitely been hard to find written material but that just adds to the challenge and creative process. I am in an exciting position to create a new body of research and explore an uncharted territory and this is definitely a project that I see myself investing in for the long haul as a contributor to the advancement of Iranian art and cultural knowledge.



Ala Ebtekar, *Coelestis (after Hafez) 1*, 2011, mixed media digital pigment print, 83.8 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

About the artist

Ala Ebtekar (born in 1978 in Berkeley, USA) has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, a touring exhibition originating at the AsiaSociety, New York; 2006



California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, and most recently *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989* at the ZKM Museum for Contemporary Art in Germany. Ebtakar holds a BA from the San Francisco Art Institute (2002) and an MFA from Stanford University (2006), where he is also a visiting professor. He lives and works in San Francisco.

About the author

Sara Raza is an independent curator and co-editor of *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine for West and Central Asia and a visiting lecturer at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. She co-curated the 2nd Bishkek International, Kyrgyzstan (2005) and the 6th Tashkent Biennial, Uzbekistan (2011) and is a former curator of public programmes at Tate Modern and worked as editor and curator in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin and Asia Society, New York. Recent curatorial projects include projects by Yael Bartana, Reza Aramesh and Ergin Çavuşoğlu for ShContemporary, Shanghai (2008), Bastakiya Art Fair's Art School programme, Dubai (2009), Shezad Dawood at Plug In ICA, Winnipeg, Canada, Erbossyn Meldibekov at Art Hong Kong (both 2010) and Ergin Çavuşoğlu at The Pavilion Downtown Dubai (2011). Raza is a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art, London and holds an MA in Art History and Theory from Goldsmiths College.