



ZAN NEW YORK

ISSUE 02

WINTER 2025

“For the winter edition, we faced the cold with themes of displacement and also sought warmth in the themes of home.”
- Eliza Ahern, *Managing Editor*

CONTENTS

LETTER BY THE EDITOR	3
TWO BIRDS BY NATASHA TRIPATHI	9
YOU BETWEEN LEMON TREES BY FRANCESCA KRITIKOS	10
THE META EFFECT	11
JOURNEY TO NEW YORK BY CHINGYA HU	15
AGAINST THE GLASS BY ERIN TATUM	18
SIDE BY SIDE BY ROYA FARASSAT	19
CONTRAPUNTAL: BHAGAVAD GITA BY SHALINI RANA	24
THE WRITER'S WINDOW BY NANCY SANDLER BASS	25
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH MISHA ILYIN	27
FINDING SUCH STILLNESS BY BIANCA ISABELLE CRUZ	35
FINDING HOME BY RAY TSOU	36

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THE IRAN I KNOW



Norberto Perez, *Ladies Please!*, Oil on linen, 2024

a letter by the editor in-chief

Where are you from?

This is one of the questions I've been asked the most in America. I know many people answer it differently, and some even feel offended. What are you asking me? What are you trying to find out? I guess most of the time, I've looked very much like a woman that comes from an oppressed country.

I'm Iranian.

Now that we showed the world how hard we can fight back against our difficult, harsh, and impossible regime, it feels empowering to say where I'm from. To me.

Oh no. Women are so unsafe there. You have no rights. Don't you fear your home country?

That's partly our reality and mostly what all non-Iranians know about us. It doesn't matter how fearless you are as a woman and who you're fighting, or what you're fighting for. If there's a grand oppressive force on the other side, the only focus is that you're being reduced. Fuck the fact that so many Iranian women and girls died in the name of freedom. We mourned and cut our hair mountains and oceans away. We love our home and we *do* have rights. We just can't practice them anymore. Women have certain rights that slowly get criminalized one by one. Anywhere outside Iran? Yes, now that too. But fuck all the resilience we have shown as Iranian women because in the end, this story is told in a space I did not create—It is a fragile bubble created for you to slam the Middle East, but you still cannot tell the truth.

So, what was it like moving there, (as a helpless child who was forced to go live in her motherland)?

It was amazing. It was scary sometimes. It was exciting and full of flavor. I can still smell the leaded-gasoline air of Tehran on my clothes and my hair. I moved to Iran when I was eleven. I slowly eased into reading and writing Farsi, and my American accent slipped away while speaking my mother tongue. Then literate enough to recite the majestic poetry of Hafez and Saadi. All while dancing to Britney Spears on my headphones in my bedroom that overheard the beautiful sound of Azaan from a mosque a couple blocks away. There was balance between the meditative religion of people I knew, and the freedoms I had in my own family, and I know I am privileged to know that balance. But there were challenges too. The Islamic Republic and their followers can quickly catch you doing non-Islamic things, like selling CDs of illegally downloaded Lady Gaga discography in school or plucking your eyebrows when you're not supposed to. Or not wearing your headscarf and being the morality police's prey.

Do you have to wear a headscarf in Iran?

Short answer, yes. Long answer—my cousin and I were alone in her house, and we wanted to watch a movie. We only had pastries that we were going to share with our parents later with afternoon tea, so we couldn't touch those without seeming greedy. We wanted chips and ice cream. The perfect duo: the salty, crispy Maz Maz chips and a delicately sweet vanilla cone. Or maybe an ice cream doll. It was this delicious vanilla and chocolate bar in the shape of a doll's face wearing a hat, but the chocolate eyes and mouth was put on so bad that the face always looked all messed up.

“Let’s just go get our snacks from the shop a block away. You don’t need to change” my cousin said. She grabbed a long headscarf and I followed her with approval. I was wearing a t-shirt and leggings, and she was wearing a long sleeve top with her headscarf. We walked together past the creepy abandoned house on her block. She showed me the broken glass from the basement. Apparently, druggies were living there. The house next door was having a party. We could hear the Sasy Mankan playing and we were mockingly singing along. The thing with Sasy Mankan was that the lyrics were so bad and cheesy, but the beat was so catchy. It made you *Gher* (moving your waist) subconsciously. We were about to turn right on the shop’s block until we heard a police pager. My cousin stopped me and we hid behind the wall. I was curious so I looked over.

“There’s a van, it’s white and green” I said. Then I saw a woman in a black veil and an officer talking into his pager.

“Rahil, run but be quiet!”



Norberto Perez, *Run but be Quiet*, Oil on board, 2024

I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears and my eyes twitching with every step. I realized that was the morality police. We were running so fast, and that one block felt like twenty. While my cousin was unlocking the street door, I could hear a car engine coming closer into our block. Before I could see if it was the van, my cousin pulled me inside and slammed the heavy door shut. We looked through the gaps in the wrought iron fence and luckily the car sped away from us. We still don't know if it was the van, and I'm glad we don't. That afternoon we just sat in her room. We didn't watch the movie, and we didn't have ice cream. But our parents came back, and we promised we wouldn't tell them.

What was school like in Iran as a girl?

I went to an all-girls school that was in a very liberal district of Tehran, the capital. Most families who lived in that area weren't religious and our school was less religious than the rest. But there were some surprising things that got me into trouble. My school was very focused on our grades and our skills. We'd often get reprimanded for not getting A's or for having a Facebook account. I remember being asked by my academic advisor to log the hours I'd spend on social media. I always lied because I was addicted to chatting with my friends on Facebook and Yahoo Messenger right after we had spent eight hours together.

Our school still reenforced a lot of the laws of the country. For example, girls wore uniforms covering their body and a head covering. Inside the school, sometimes girls were allowed to take their head coverings off or to let it rest on their shoulders. This was only if there were no males present in school or if we were indoors. However, some of us didn't wear it during gym class in the yard. I remember our superintendent telling us to keep our head coverings on because some construction workers in the building next door could see us.

“These men are watching you, right there” the superintendent said and pointed to the sky.
“And God too.”

Me and my friends would wait until she gave up and turned around to laugh super hard at her efforts. But I remember getting braver the longer I was at that school. We slowly let our hair show during recess when we went into the yard, too. The key was being in groups and not alone because it was harder for them to punish us all. One day, me and my friends were sitting in the yard with our head coverings on our shoulders. Mrs. Baghayi, our superintendent who was friendly but tough came up to us. We already knew the drill; she'd ask us to put our head coverings back on, we'd smile and ignore, she'd insist, and we'd joke about how it was good for the construction workers' mood to see our beautiful, luscious hair, and she'd ask us to go inside.

“Ladies, please. I’m tired of telling you this. Just put it on and take your break.”

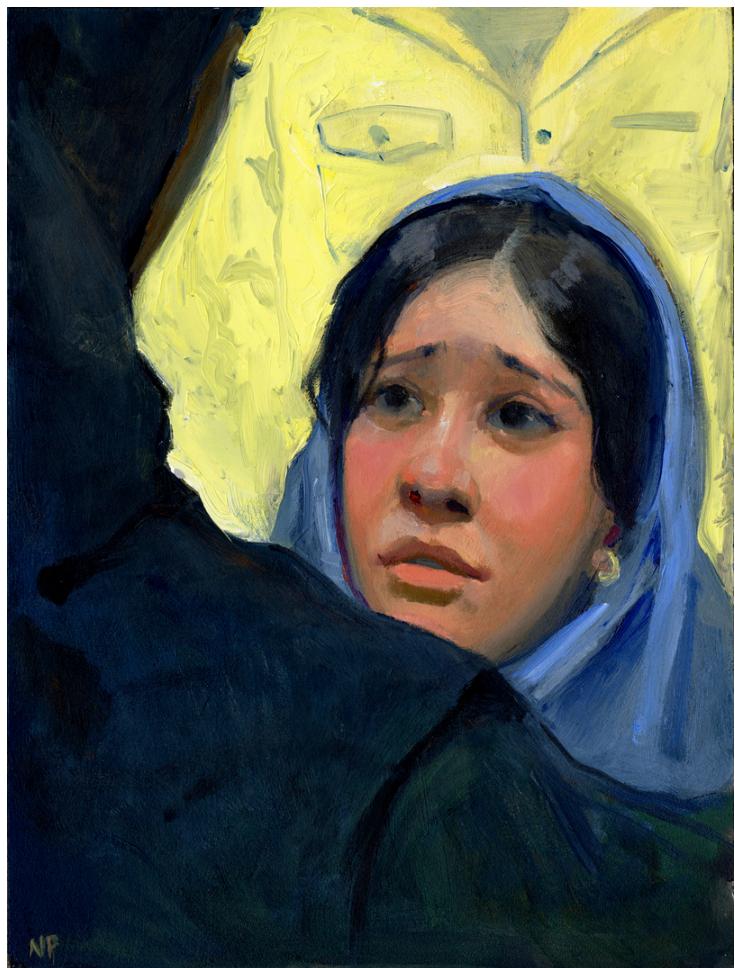
“But Madam, why? The construction workers aren’t even here today. Is there a male pigeon flying around?”

“Then at least go sit inside the slides on the playground. I don’t want the principal to see you from her office.”

And that was it. Recess was over and we successfully had our hair out while she begged us. It was almost a power trip for both sides of this battle to get what you want .

Did you get into trouble in Iran?

I was able to run away from the morality police at thirteen. But I didn’t know that the morality police was everywhere. We thought our school was super chill for not punishing us for not wearing our head coverings. And they didn’t, they were quite gentle compared to other schools. So, we grew confident and even a bit stupid. I was born with the unibrow gene. The one depicted in Persian drawings of women that are wearing the beautiful traditional dresses. But that unibrow looks way off when you’re wearing a navy-blue school uniform that is two sizes big. I hated my unibrow. So, one day I plucked it off. And then shaped my eyebrows too. I was going on vacation so it felt good to look like someone else.



Norberto Perez, *Thin Eyebrows*, Oil on board, 2025

Norberto Perez is an illustrator and painter based in New York City. His work primarily focuses on the human figure to tell a story. He also uses traditional mediums to create emphasis on form and mark making.

Every school week, the superintendent inspects the girls’ nails and faces. All nail polish is prohibited, and so are long nails. Any makeup must be wiped off, and then there is the secret rule of not touching your natural eyebrows. By the time I was a student in Iran, waxing and threading your upper lip (mustache) was fine. But my cousins both got kicked out for a week for doing that in their time. The superintendent would normally just look at our faces, but if we had done something suspicious, she’d whip out this small eyebrow brush from her pocket. Then she’d start brushing up our eyebrows to see the damage done.

Surprisingly, when I got back from my trip, that didn’t happen...at first! I came so close. I almost passed. But our school had hired a second superintendent while I was gone because obviously the first one wasn’t as effective. She was also the school’s accountant, so she had seen us all and even made friendships with some of us.

One day, she saw me going to class and called me by my surname as most teachers and staff do.

“Ahmadi!”

I turned around and felt uneasy. I had a feeling something was wrong. Ms. Babayi, the second superintendent walked up to me and stared at my thin eyebrows. And that’s how I got caught. I tell the story in detail how I had to tell my mom to call her and eventually got suspended for a week. I thought it was the most idiotic thing ever. Although, it resulted in me bonding with my mom over a similar experience she had.

You would really go back to Iran to visit? Why?

Yes, because. Because when you have a home, you believe in the power that holds that home together. The people that I came to know in Iran are still with me, everywhere I go. The strength of Iranian women is something that has never failed me. The entire reason I made this magazine was because I wanted to empower them and thank them for giving me strength and perseverance.

I hold on to Iranian love. And I feel that love by so many women I have met here in America, too. I taste it in the food we make for each other, the gifts we give, the languages I’ve been taught. And I’ll forever give back the strength and kindness of my mom, my grandmother, my cousins and lovely teachers who showed me we are more powerful together than when we leave each other behind. Just like our small groups in school when we didn’t wear our headscarves. Or when we show up for our rights at a greater scale.

Of course I want to go back once, to embrace my loved ones and look at myself in that bedroom mirror where I danced to Britney Spears. I want to see how far I’ve come. I want to look at my thin eyebrows now in that mirror. I want to let my hair fall on my shoulders in Tehran. I want to crank up *I'll Do It* by Heidi Montag, wear the most y2k outfit and go out without even carrying a headscarf in my bag, knowing this time I’m not alone. Maybe the thought and picture of my home is more beautiful than its tectonic state. But I love her forever.

TWO BIRDS BY NATASHA TRIPATHI

Today I saw two birds in the sky and thought it was us.

Do you remember when you taught me that song?

I was five
and when we sang, I put my hand on it and prayed.

Like a river, mann ki shakti.
Its momentum, mann ki shakti.

But not really. Not the blue of it.

You said mann means mind,
And ma it echoed. So I put my hand on it and prayed.

Time suspended and we were clear—
I mean,
you were vast.

We rippled and dangled by threads
and I didn't know

The space between us had always been there, woven together
frame by frame.

Recently I thought I had found the blue of it.

It echoed.

Can I open the surface of sound?

It stopped.

As its pulse reemerges, I feel an imprint in waves.
I follow it home on my mother tongue.

You Between Lemon Trees

by Francesca Kritikos

*This wood that cooled my forehead
at times when noon burned my veins
will flower in other hands. Take it. I'm giving it to you;
look, it's wood from a lemon tree*

—Giorgos Seferis

We were lying down on the beach in our underwear, and you were bitching at me to make sure sand didn't get in your lighter as I unclasped my bra and turned the music louder. You chain-smoked and I looked at the sun until I saw purple. Mostly I could never tell what you were thinking. But each time you coughed, I looked for the fear of God in your eyes.

Later we went all the way to the end of the boardwalk and I stopped to gaze at the little treasures being sold like names written into rice kernels and beaded necklaces and glass picture frames. I liked to imagine them after their faded luster caused their sentimentality to diffuse into sea-salted air, little broken pieces forgotten and buried in garbage cans, their predestined homes. I wondered if that's how God looked at us. You went ahead of me and watched old men fish with your head craning downwards toward the vague tumult, only the water was too dark to see anything, and I wondered what you were really looking at.

We walked back after I bought a Jacob's ladder and watched the wood blocks abuse each other cacophonously because I wanted to love collision like you did. There was a man standing in the sand where the splintering wood met the earth with a Heineken in one hand and a radio in the other telling me excitedly that he could talk to aliens. I wanted to give you to him. We left to get milkshakes. Then we went back to the rust-colored stone cottage on the beach.

I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. Through the windows I watched you pace around outside smoking. I closed my eyes and clasped my hands together, praying for you to evaporate with the smoke emanating from your slack mouth. But your body stayed there, languorous in the humid air. In the center of the garden among the fat blades of grass there was a clothesline where our underwear was drying, strung up between two tall lemon trees. I watched you not hang yourself from it. It was impressive.

THE META EFFECT

examining online censorship with artist Jerry Weiss

Jerry Weiss reached out to *Zan* to share his recent experiences with Meta's new algorithm, its' hindrance on artists reach online, and the overall experience of being shadow banned. Jerry Weiss studied drawing with Roberto Martinez in Miami, FL, and drawing and painting with Harvey Dinnerstein, Robert Beverly Hale, Ted Seth Jacobs, Mary Beth McKenzie, and Jack Faragasso at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design in New York City. He currently teaches a Figure painting and Figure drawing class at the Arts Students League of New York.



Susan Reading (detail), Oil on Linen, 1986

Since their inception, social media applications have given many creatives of all fields the space to showcase and promote their work. In particular, platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr came to be such successes in large part through their appeal to artists. These virtual spaces not only allowed for artists to reach and expand their audiences, it also allowed for dialogues and sources of inspiration, without many limits. While there have always been policies and filters in place against extreme materials, Instagram and other platforms allowed for potentially subversive work to be displayed, including depictions of nudity. However, a troubling shift towards suppression has emerged in the last few years. For artist Jerry Weiss, a notable and alarming change is how Instagram, acquired by the Meta Platforms in 2012, seeks to censor those capturing the human form.

We asked Jerry about his experience with the new patterns in Meta's censorship. While Jerry's Instagram covers both figurative and landscape paintings, he noted that the posts that are targeted are usually ones including the human figure. These censorships often come as a "warning" from Instagram stating that the user has violated the community guidelines. The warning states that "this decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content." This means that while figurative art is not explicitly against Meta's guidelines, it is automatically recognized as sexual content. Along with the warning, Instagram gives users the option to "edit or remove" such content in order for the user's account "to be okay for recommendation again."



Edit or remove content



Consider editing or removing this content. It may take up to 24 hours for your account to be okay for recommendation again.



This decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content

August 12



This decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content

July 31



This decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content

July 29



This decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content

July 29



This decision is based on our guidelines on sexually explicit or suggestive content

June 23

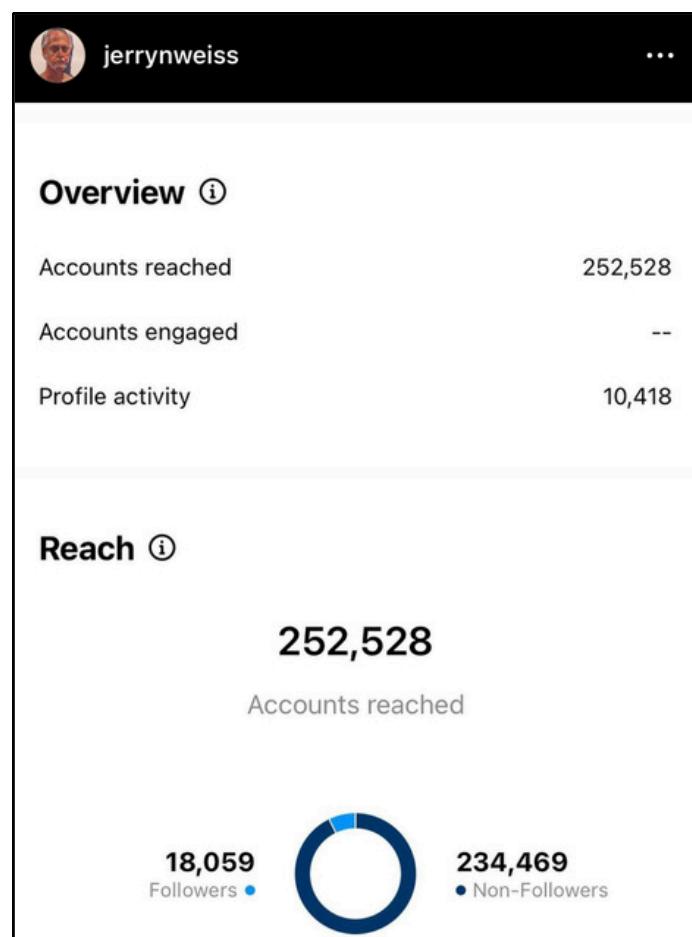
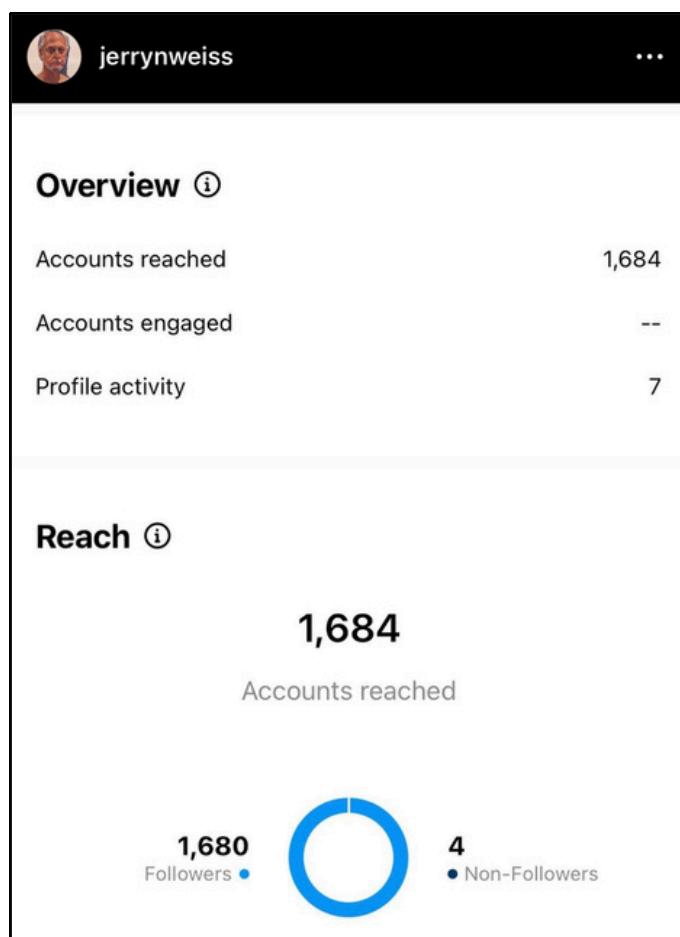


The screenshot shows how these warnings usually appear on a user's account. While they usually do not remove the content themselves, Instagram wants users to remove this type of content or to alter it in a way so that it won't be on the platform anymore. If the user refuses to change it, their ability to reach more audiences is compromised.

The issue, Jerry argues, lies in the fact that Meta recognizes any resemblance to the nude human form as inherently sexually explicit. In doing so, it undermines the field of art itself by denying the understanding that capturing the human form is a necessary part of the arts. The idea and construct of art is lost in the digital guidelines.

Not only does this passive aggressive admonishment degrade the artist, it still acts as censorship by impacting their ability to expand their audience. Once a user keeps their “problematic” content on their account, their content will not be shown to non-followers. Instagram warns users of this after their incoordination with their “Recommendations Guidelines.” Such accounts “won’t appear in places like Explore, Search, Suggested Users, Reels, and Feed Recommendations.” If the user continues to disagree with Instagram’s decision, they are given the option to appeal. While Instagram must take another look, this type of content may still not be approved.

Furthermore, while they may allow the content to remain, this is an illusion of choice. When asked how this impacted his reach on Instagram, he mentioned how “Meta’s shadow ban has resulted in a more than 90% decrease in reach to my Instagram followers, and a nearly total suppression of reach to new accounts. The ban is ostensibly an algorithmic response to posting figurative art, but it doesn’t lift for other art—my metrics are even worse when I post landscape paintings. Despite persistent requests for review, I continue to receive notices that figurative art is not considered appropriate to share with new accounts.”



The suppression may be concealed in niceties and false choice, but the data shows us that Instagram is becoming less friendly to artists unless they fit in the box Meta provides. The first image is Jerry Weiss' metrics of his painting post in May 18, 2023 when his content was being targeted regularly. The second image show the statistics of a particularly well-viewed painting posted the previous year.

The struggle of sharing art on a platform where many people spend many hours of screen time is becoming an impossible task. When I asked Jerry about the worst consequence of Instagram's shadow ban, he responded that "The consequences are at least twofold. By suppressing viewership, it has become much more difficult to reach prospective art collectors, and to disseminate information about upcoming classes and workshops." Jerry also noted that "undoubtedly the effect of Meta's policies has been harmful. My correspondence with other artists who have reached Instagram employees confirms my experiences. Meta has no interest in assisting or even enabling a level playing field for visual artists. Its priorities are focused elsewhere."

Since this interview occurred, several current events have highlighted more than ever that censorship and control by a select few are a real threat, not just to artists, but to their audiences and to all consumers of media. The importance of an uncensored forum online for artists is fundamental for an artistic and free society.



A JOURNEY TO NEW YORK

BY CHINGYA HU

I was born in Taiwan. As a child, I not only enjoyed drawing but was also deeply fascinated by Japanese manga. It didn't take long for me to realize that I loved Japanese culture. Although I chose a completely unrelated field of study in university, I still worked hard to learn Japanese outside of my academic courses. In those days, many people dreamed of studying in English-speaking countries, but I was different. After graduating from university, I went to Japan to study Japanese and eventually found a job there, which marked the beginning of my career in Japan.

In Japan, I led the life of a typical office worker, with a 9-to-5 job that I frequently changed. I didn't think much about life or work, simply going with the flow. At that time, foreigners were rare in Japan. I felt that if I, as a foreigner, could live an ordinary life like the locals, that would be enough. I worked diligently like other women my age—earning money to dine out, occasionally traveling abroad, and sometimes rewarding myself with a designer handbag.

Despite my efforts to integrate into Japanese society, as time passed, I gradually lost my passion for life. By 2015, my life had become monotonous. That was when I started dedicating my Thursday evenings and precious Saturday nights to learning oil painting at an art studio. What began as six hours of painting a week slowly became something much more significant. I began to schedule all my meetups with friends on Sundays, and if they suggested meeting on Saturdays, I would choose painting over meeting them. Even my gym schedule was arranged so that it wouldn't clash with my art class time.

At the same time, my work became increasingly demanding. I began working overtime regularly and was often the last to leave the office. While everyone else went home, I would stay quietly catching up on routine tasks. I rarely saw sunsets anymore, and gradually, I started to feel frustrated and dissatisfied. The final straw came when I had to miss my Thursday oil painting class because of work commitments.

One day, I stumbled upon an inspirational book that changed my life. The story was about a Japanese person who moved to New York and became a manga artist, fulfilling her dream. The core message of the book was simple: you don't need any grand justification, just do it if you want to. In that moment, an old dream of mine from childhood resurfaced: not only did I want to immerse myself in Japan, but I also had always dreamed of going to the United States to study and pursue a major that truly interested me.

Without hesitation, I quit my job, emptied all my savings, applied for a student visa to the U.S., and chose New York as my next destination, following in the footsteps of the author in the book.

Coming from a traditional and conservative society in Taiwan and Japan, I didn't know anyone my age who was going abroad to study after turning thirty. Moreover, I wasn't pursuing a field that society considered economically practical, like business or computer engineering. Most of my friends at my age already had families, children, and stable careers. Some thought I was crazy or naïve and as a result, I lost a few friends. But years have passed, and I've never regretted that decision. I gradually realized that I would rather live a crazy life than one so ordinary that it feels meaningless.

Before moving to the U.S., I had visited New York as a tourist. At the time, I was just an ordinary traveler with some impressions of Times Square and the Statue of Liberty. I didn't particularly like the noisy and busy atmosphere of the city. However, when I decided to go to the U.S. to study art, I knew that New York was the best place to learn. During my first year in New York, I faced countless challenges. The winter here was colder than any city I had lived in before, and I often felt uneasy walking through unfamiliar areas due to safety concerns. My English skills were still poor, and communicating with locals made me feel isolated. I even struggled with cultural differences while dating people from different backgrounds and found myself feeling overwhelmed by loneliness, contemplating giving up on my life here.

But as the years passed, I look back and realize how far I have come. I began to see New York as my second home. I grew fond of the 24-hour subway. I came to love the diversity of people from all over the world. As for myself, from being an art student practicing in the studio every day, I gradually began to identify as an artist—not only because I created, but because self-exploration and growth became the most important aspects of my life. My life became more uncertain, and I'm still searching for my own artistic voice—the message I want to share with the world. This journey has been anything but ordinary, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

AGAINST THE GLASS BY ERIN TATUM

Born the same
But always different
A chasm I can't cross
Right alongside you
Fractured reflections
Glint with resilience

You wave your hand
Wholly uninterested
In my parity
“No peer of mine.”
Humanity lost
In casual whispers

Without regard
For truth or heart
Surface separations
Dismember my ambitions
A grief unmourned
And still a spark within me

Such tantalizing clarity
Possibilities in focus
Held aloft by determination
Or perhaps delusion now
Patience my only ally
Through reality's cold winter

Every sunrise
Holds a chance
“Maybe today,”
With a wry smile
I lean my forehead
Against the glass



Roya Farassat, *Daddy's Girl*, charcoal and colored pencil on paper, 2023



Roya Farassat, *Mommy's Boy*, charcoal and colored pencil on paper, 2023

ROYA FARASSAT

SIDE BY SIDE

Roya Farassat is an Iranian American visual artist living in New York. Her abstract and figurative work includes drawings, paintings, and sculptures. She received her BFA from Parsons School of Design and has been widely exhibited at galleries and museums in United States and abroad. Farassat was nominated for The Victoria and Albert Jameel Prize and The MOP Foundation Contemporary Art Prize and awarded residencies from Henry Street Settlement and The Makor Steinhardt Center. Her work has been reviewed by The New York Times, The Financial Times, The Brooklyn Rail, The Boston Globe, Artcritical, Art Radar, Hyperallergic, W Magazine, and Flaunt Magazine.

The following poem has been written in response to these paintings *anonymously*.

THE JUNCTURE BY “JANE DOEXCI”

A handful of mulberries under the kitchen table,
dried and shrunken, like the time I was too small to be five.
If I held your hand loosely, the sand fell through
my fingers and drifted off your palm.
I put on your hat and looked in the mirror
to make you appear twice—putting on your shoes,
tying your lace by the front door.
In the master bedroom, your genetic hotspot
where I evaporated for just one moment.
Up until eleven, I forced myself into an elbow stand
until I cut my arm with a nail on the ground.
I kept my legs above my head, and watched the red pond
beneath me grow. I wondered if this is where I was born,
in the circle where fear and life become one substance.



Roya Farassat, *Sisters*, Charcoal on paper, 2021

“Growing up in Iran, I navigated complex social, political, sexual, and religious influences that shaped identity across generations. My artistic approach is deeply psychological and playful, weaving reality with imagination. Through satirical portraits, mostly women, I depict solitary moments and various relationships, exploring hetero normativity, tenderness, and platonic connections. Having experienced patriarchy firsthand, I address the objectification of women by delving into their inner psyche with elements of humor, irony, and at times, profound sorrow. My work often features a tension between opposing forces, symbolized by the figures’ distortion and compression against the canvas. I aim to evoke empathy through intuitive painting, seamlessly transitioning between representation and abstraction in each piece.”

-Roya Farassat



Roya Farassat, *Honey to my Mouth*, Charcoal on paper, 2021

CONTRAPUNTAL: BHAGAVAD GITA BY SHALINI RANA

When goodness grows weak, song vessels me inward
When evil increases, like a tremulous tide
I make myself a body. I enter a strange home.

This is a contrapuntal poem; it can be read from multiple directions. The italicized lines come from the Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God by Swami Prabhavananda (translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood). The non-italicized lines are written by the poet.



Nancy Sandler Bass, *Julia by the Window*,
Oil on Canvas with Fabric Remnants, 2023



Nancy Sandler Bass, *The Writer's Window*, Oil on Canvas with Fabric Remnants, 2024

The Writer's Window is a reference to Vernon Lee and Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson, who were collaborators in the 1890s. Lee was an author who wrote about art, while Anstruther-Thomson was a Scottish author and art theorist who lectured on experimental aesthetics. Their work together influenced Lee's later interests in the psychological aspects of aesthetics. "The actual place is Il Palmerino in Italy. These paintings capture Nancy Sandler Bass' emotional connection to Italy and to Il Palmerino; to its history and its beauty.

To Nancy, painting is a deeply intimate process. Through her work, she strives to evoke universal connections, capture the essence of time and place, and create a mutually shared experience with the viewer. Her goal is to create paintings that resonate emotionally with viewers, allowing them to reflect on their personal history and experiences while transcending the boundaries of language.

Nancy's use of color and texture transforms fleeting, intuitive moments into vivid, tangible expressions. These transitory images are imbued with familiarity and understanding, inviting audiences to connect from their own experience.



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: *MISHA ILYIN*

Misha : To create this figure I actually used a language model (Dall-e) that turns a text prompt you gave it into the image. The prompt was to create a porcelain sculpture of how the American person sees the Russian person. And then based on this image I made a physical copy of a figure. This is how the sculpture came out like a person who, you don't really understand if they're singing or screaming. Also with the hands behind them, it looks like they are tied, and they look like they're wearing a police outfit. It was interesting because these language models are learned from publicly available information (mainly from the internet) and eventually capture all the biases including what the perception of a Russian person is. It worked perfectly. There is another prompt I made, similar but for how the Russian person sees the American person. And strangely enough, it turned out to be a figure in a praying stance that you saw earlier. I just started to play with another series recently.

Misha : Then I started multiplying those figures, making copies, and then the series became a separate project. If you look at both of those types of figures one next to another, one figurine is very pious and submissive. The other is very much in control like a guard or a person that is being controlled maybe under coercion. Therefore, the project became about submission and control, the dynamic between these two; a spectrum, almost like extremities in BDSM practices. I started to decorate each of them differently. I also developed avatars for each of them and started to paint those avatars on the back. Some of these avatars were also generated [by AI]. Each one shows what type of person they are or the kind of attitude they have. Submissive, controlling, persuasive, different types of symbols representing those attitudes by character of each of those figurines. What does it remind you of? Why were you interested in this one (here) in particular?

Zan : Strange contrast... I can sense fear in it.

Misha : Fear of something?

Zan : From something, as if something's going to happen.

Misha : Is it like you look at it and you feel it, or it's like this figurine represents this certain feeling?

Zan : This one does not every single one of them are.

Misha : Do you think they are screaming or singing?

Zan : I thought they were answering.

Misha : Yeah, they're kind of in the middle of a word.

Zan : Yeah. The first thing I thought was that they're captured. Captive.

Misha : This is what I thought about them with their hands behind them. The series that I was doing with my praying figures, which is the American, the Russian, somewhat became unimportant. I started to transform them. By cutting this figure--cutting the limbs and transforming them into the pose of another figure. So that is why the praying figure starts to get into this position, standing and its arms behind its back. I was thinking a lot about this narrative of how one pose (submissive) morphs into another, one that is of control. This process of transformation became one of my interests and became a subject of interpretation and current focus of this project.

Zan : What color is the most important to you?

Misha : I would say black. It's a color and almost not a color. It's something that creates a form or it creates a shape, like when you draw. I think it's important to me because my work is not necessarily painterly. I'm not painting, I'm drawing. Even with the avatars it's more constructing things rather than expressing things. That is why I see myself as a sculptor rather than a painter. I think everything starts from the color black.

Zan : Do you think it's because it's also very practical and technical?

Misha : Yeah. There is something very technical about it. It's very minimal.

Zan : So let's go back to the way that Americans see Russians figurines; Was it easy for you to find this figure? Did it come to you really naturally or did you think about it for a long time?

Misha : I wouldn't say that it came to me. It came out of this language model, out of all this massive amount of data fed to it, but you can say by chance as well. Because every time you ask the model to generate the image based on the same prompt, it can be different. You make a prompt and then it generates an image for you. But the thing is, every time you make even the same prompt, it can generate a different image. So naturally you are curating the outcome. You are the one who is selecting which image talks to you according to this prompt. So in a way, yes, it came to me. I chose this image out of the multitude of them, maybe several iterations. But then when the right one comes, you immediately know that it's the right one because you feel it captures something about how the Russian person can be perceived.



Photo from Misha Ilyin's Studio

Misha : And then there were other kinds of images similar to the image that came out first, it looks a bit like a kind of policeman or someone in the Army. It's also like it became captured and stopped, like, they were about to say something and then there is no sound or any words coming out. So, the image can be perceived differently and changes its meaning with different interpretations. It looks like a choir. Which is also something very communal. And there is someone who is directing this choir, and with all these boys looking figures, which adds another strange symbolic layer to the meaning. And perhaps some relevance to religion.

Zan : Is there something about Russian art that you miss?

Misha : Good question. Miss may be...Not the exact word. But there is more Russian art that I started to appreciate lately. I don't think that I'm missing the art or the Russian art practice, but I think there are art practices that I understand a bit better and appreciate more for the reason that I became a bit estranged and have some distance from it.

Misha : There is a Russian avant garde that became a bit more clear for me. There is also a kind of the art of the 19th century that I found very stale and backwards when I was living in Russia. But now I start to appreciate it more. Before, I didn't understand what was specifically Russian about it. It looks like it's impressionism. Any classic art traditions of the 19th century. But then I started to see some certain things that were very Russian. Either it looks very much like Russia or it has a Russian attitude of showing or depicting things. One of them is the Russian Jewish painter Levitan, who is considered to be one of the staples of Russian classical painting. He was capturing the essence of Russian nature, I think.

Zan : Do you think you would adopt that into your work or not?

Misha : It's very hard to adopt. It's very representational and it needs to be really skillful. There is a lot of training required to paint this way. It's really about dedicating yourself to the painting and mastering it to a certain level to express it that way. Russian art is very related to the text and narration, and they use the text, and use the text whenever it's appropriate and not appropriate. I like that it's very poetic rather than analytical. Which in a certain way distinguishes Russian tradition from the Western ones; American or British tradition which are more analytical.

Zan : What are you tired of seeing in the arts? When you go to shows or when you see people working? What are you just tired of?

Misha : What annoys me is that I see other people's work and I begin asking myself the nagging question of why? Why is it important? Or what's the reason [that this particular art] is there and why I'm supposed to see it. I think that a lot of seeing art became for me as an artist a form of professional development, and not just seeing art as how the artist's audience sees it.



Photo from Misha Ilyin's Studio

Misha : Is it the best thing? Why, why, why am I seeing that. But actually I know what can be really annoying, it is to read the statement of the show. Like a summary of the show and not understanding how it's connected to the work at all. Or the statement is so pompous and full of art jargon because it tries to make something out of work that you literally feel is not that, or probably it's much more than what it is.

Zan : It's a really good answer. You already answered this a little. But how does language affect the visual frame?

Misha : The language is very important for me because I think on a personal level, there's a difficulty to express myself. Even with the Russian language, it always comes out as something that is not clear enough. And I think being an immigrant or moving from my country and from the language and environment where I am, (from Russia) it became even harder. Sometimes I feel like a toddler; like you develop your own language but no one really understands you. They understand that you want something or you're happy. But the sounds don't make sense to others. But you still want to talk. You want to express yourself. And for some reason you think that it's the best way to do it, to use the language. So I use a lot of words, I use a lot of language, but it's not very clear. It became even less clear when I started to express it in my art. As I mentioned in Russian culture, the language is important. And it's also a big part of the art work. In the literal or nonliteral way. Meaning it's a part of the piece itself, or it's somewhat related or there is a piece and there is a text about it.

Zan : Do you think that the culture with the language makes you talk in a way that's not super clear and direct. Some languages and some cultures are like that. Is that how Russian is and does that affect you still, even when you're speaking another language?

Misha : Yeah. I think in general, the Russian language is more descriptive than analytical. So it gets to the point through describing things. And that is why it's very poetic; In Russian you talk about something and through this thing you're describing you are actually trying to make a point. You must take a lot of detours to get to the point, which can be very annoying for the listener. When I listen to myself, I understand that the way I talk is not direct. It's more about the walk, taking the roads rather than getting to the destination. You're enjoying looking at the sightings while you're like la la la la...Then like you're kind of okay, you're analyzing and you get to the point. So you see, I forgot. What was the question?

Zan: No, you answered it perfectly.

Misha : That is why I am attached to language, it's both poetic and analytical. But I personally struggle with the expression. That is why I'm trying to use all the mediums so people would understand me.

Zan : That's amazing. If there's one emotion that you could express through all these mediums, but especially through sculpture...what's that emotion? Which emotion would you use to convey to people when they look at your work or when they read your work?

Misha : If we think that there are several basic emotions...Anger. Joy. Sadness. Repulsion. Shame. And there is something else...

Zan : Guilt.

Misha : Guilt. What else?

Zan : Envy, jealousy.

Misha : Envy and jealousy are more like some form of anger for me, I guess. The shades of anger are numerous. so. Among them I would choose joy. In a strange way it comes from the instructions. With the instructions or when you give it to the language model, you still write the instruction by saying, draw me or create the image. It's an instruction itself. So there is something calming when someone directs you. It's almost tranquilizing, which is a dangerous thing. But it's also like when we meditate or when we do sports. When we do something very repetitive, it brings you to a certain state where you switch off your mind. And some form of lightness and joy comes out of it, because you're just being directed. You give the control over your body, over your thoughts. It would be the feeling that I want to convey. The kind of focus that makes you estranged, and this estrangement gives you this joy and calm. A lot of people feel calm because someone finally tells them what to do. They don't need to decide what to do.

Zan : So it's like a relief.

Misha : Relief? Yeah.

Zan : Are you emotional?

Misha : No. But I have bursts of emotions, like a burst of jealousy or a burst of joy or burst of anger or burst of love. But it's never just an eruption. It's very difficult for me to actually connect to my emotions. It feels like I can never access my emotions directly. I can only mediate them through some metaphor. Like what the art does.



Photo from Misha Ilyin's Studio



Los Baños, Bayog
Philippines

FINDING SUCH STILLNESS BY BIANCA ISABELLE CRUZ

If you find yourself
In a foreign place
Know of its' stillness
and Reflect
An unknown embrace
Consumed in the dark
So feel

Immersed in the light
Still
Find yourself Finding
Space

For faith

FINDING HOME BY RAY TSOU

I sit in the living room of the small New York apartment I rent, freshly showered, my nails wet with polish. I begin to reflect on what “home” means; my mind wanders to the week before.

One day last week, I woke up naturally, put on the most comfortable clothes I could grab, and headed out without a bag. I slipped my wallet, phone, keys, earphones, and lip oil into my pockets and took the subway. I returned to the small theater I often go to. As I watched a film on screen, I tallied up all the people I’ve been to this theater with, and what we saw: Two first dates (*Chungking Express*, *In the Mood for Love*), an outing with a new friend (*Passages*), my brother (*Monsters*), old friends visiting from Taiwan (*Pink Flamingos*, *Enter the Void*), and countless times by myself (*Benedetta*, *Emilia Pérez*, *Memoria*, *The Lost Daughter*, *The Innocent...*).

After the movie, I walk through a light rain and take the subway home. On the bridge where Manhattan meets Queens, the train makes my favorite big turn. I always try to sit in my favorite window seat every time I ride the train home to enjoy the view. Every day, I see this turn on my way out and back. From Queensboro Plaza to 39th Avenue–Dutch Kills, I look out the left window at my favorite nighttime cityscape. Once the turn ends and the view fades into the shadows of buildings, my reflection appears in the glass. I study my face, then glance at my reflection in the opposite window. I see myself, in comfortable yet cool-looking clothes, curled up contentedly in my seat.

At that moment, I think: To the version of me from five, ten, or even fifteen years ago, I’ve truly become the person I wanted to be. If I could go back and tell my teenage self about my life now—the experiences I’ve had and have, the mundane details of my day-to-day—she’d think I’m so cool. She’d look up to me. She’d be excited about her future. But what about me, today? Why am I still unhappy?

I’ve left the home where I grew up and moved to this city alone. I miss home, but at the same time, I came to search for it. I look for home in my morning coffee, in every new job, in the streets between New York’s skyscrapers. I search for home in the connections between reality and the internet; I seek it at parties full of strangers, in the perfume I wear every day, and in the half-asleep thoughts before I drift off at night.

As the train goes on, my thoughts continue to two years ago, when I went on a trip back to Taipei. I went to all the places I wanted to go, ate all the foods I missed, and saw all the people I wanted to see. At the time, I also had to write an artist’s statement for an exhibition. I’d never liked writing those—I found (and still find) it hard to define or explain myself and my art. Usually, I would’ve included something about how I was feeling at that moment - to at least capture some reality of who I am at that point in time.

But at that time then, in a haze of thoughts, I wrote: I decided to move to New York to practice letting life grow from zero, to practice being aware of every breath I take, every word I say. To practice letting the tree grow tall, so my friends can sit beneath it, reading or napping. I believe New York will arrange things in its own way; I also believe that as long as I sit cross-legged wherever I am, that place can be home.

Just when my mind wandered back to that place and moment in time, the subway arrived at my stop. I walked home on autopilot, ate a proper meal I cooked myself, took a shower, went through my skincare routine, and started thinking: What will I do tomorrow? What time should I wake up? If it's not too early, should I curl up and watch another movie in my room tonight? Stretch or dance to some music I've been loving lately? Have a glass of wine and read a book? Or draw something to capture my current aura and state of mind?

I don't remember what I ended up doing the rest of that day. But today, the last day of this year, I've chosen to sit down and type these words. As I type, I'm thinking about what to wear for new years eve, reflecting on the past year, and looking ahead to the next. In this kind of moment, I feel a tingly sensation, a vague one. One that is not entirely certain, but with a glimmer of possibility—that perhaps, potentially, maybe—as the thought filters through a smooth layer of chances - I am home.