

Iranian-American Artist Shadi Yousefian on the Power of Snail Mail

BY ASHTON COOPER | NOVEMBER 13, 2013



Shadi Yousefian
(Photo courtesy of the artist)

Thirty-five-year-old artist **Shadi Yousefian** (<http://www.shadiyousefian.com/>) was born in Tehran, but moved to the U.S. when she was sixteen. To keep in touch with her family after she'd emigrated, Yousefian sent and received hundreds of letters. In her current show at **Shirin Gallery NY** (<http://www.shiringalleryny.com/about/>), the mixed media artist cut, soaked, and pinned many of these deeply personal letters to the walls of the gallery. ARTINFO spoke with Yousefian about writing letters, destroying them, and cultural duality.

In your show at Shirin Gallery, you have created an installation composed of letters sent to and received from “distant loved ones.” Who are those loved ones? Did you actually write and receive all of these letters?

When I moved to the United States in 1995, writing letters was pretty much the only way to keep me in touch with my loved ones, who ranged from cousins and best friends to Dad, Grandma, and my teacher. Yes, we actually wrote all of those letters, some of which were as long as 70 pages. Many served as detailed diaries of our day-by-day experiences.

What does it mean to use paper letters in an era of digital communication?

In 1995 when my friends and I wrote these letters, digital communication didn't exist (or at least was not common for the majority of people). Maybe if my move from Iran took place a few years later, we would have only kept in touch through email and other digital forms of communication.

In my opinion, traditional paper letters and digital letters are different in several ways. The act of writing a letter by hand (as opposed to typing) in and of itself makes a letter much more intimate and personal. Each hand-written letter is different from the other depending on the person who wrote it and how he/she felt at the time of writing it. One can tell who wrote the letter from the handwriting before even reading it.

Also, the fact that a hand-written letter is not as editable as a digital letter makes it more spontaneous and truthful to the moment. It almost has a therapeutic quality to write paper letters since you are taking down your thoughts as they flow out.

In addition, traditional letters can take several days to weeks to reach the other person and there is some kind of longing involved in the process. It almost feels like receiving a precious gift when you open the mailbox and find a letter.

What does it mean to then destroy these letters through cutting, soaking, gluing, and pinning?

What triggered this project to begin with was when I pulled out these letters from the boxes they were stored in and read through them. I realized how I had forgotten the details contained in them. I felt like all the information that was embedded in them was fading away, and what was left was only knowing that they carried so much emotion and love. I wanted to make these emotions last forever.

It was definitely a strange experience to cut these letters into fragments and to rearrange them in new forms. I could even say it was a painful experience to cut them, but in a way, I knew that by destroying them I was giving them a new life and immortalizing them as pieces of art. Even though most of these fragmented letters are no longer readable, their essence has remained untouched and has been protected.

Also, in the same way that writing these letters once had a therapeutic effect, the repetitive act of cutting, soaking, gluing, and pinning them had the same kind of therapeutic effect. It was almost ritualistic. It felt like I was reshaping and preserving the past.

You came to the U.S. from Iran when you were 16. How has being part of those two cultures affected your practice?

Being part of two distinct cultures has made me who I am and, naturally, it affects my art. In my earlier works I mostly dealt with the issue of cultural duality and double identity. Since I moved to the United States, I've often felt like I have two separate identities, Iranian and American. Even though there are many similarities between the two cultures (since we're all human and connected through media and other forms of cultural exchange), the values that are rooted deep within each culture can never change and will always be different.



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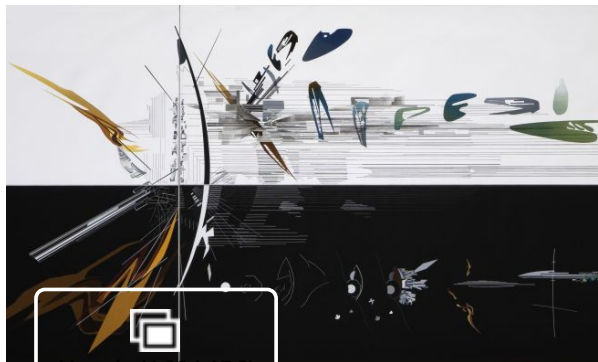
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