

BRILLIANT VEILS

Amir H. Fallah Creates Vibrant Artworks That Question Cultural Boundaries

BY GEORGE MELROD | MAR 7, 2023



Break Down the Walls, 2022; acrylic on canvas; Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

Entering a room of portraits by Amir H. Fallah, the first thing you'll notice is that you can't see their faces: the figures are cloaked. In one, the subject sits draped in a richly patterned blue-and-purple shawl, cradling what looks like a gilded African head in its lap. In another, a figure with purple arms strikes a pose seemingly drawn from ancient Near Eastern art, swathed in a lustrous cloak with a dragon design, the creature's snarling face overlapping the subject's.

"I think of all of my work as kind of psychological portraits, and not literal portraits," Fallah says. "Is a portrait someone's physical likeness, which really doesn't tell you anything about who they are? Or is a portrait like someone's experiences, their personality, their beliefs? So with the veiled figures, you have to focus on everything else to try to figure out who this person is, from the fabric that they're covered in, the objects they surround themselves with."

Yet these veiled portraits constitute just one facet of Fallah's oeuvre. A new solo survey show at UCLA's Fowler Museum—known for its ethnographic holdings—demonstrates just how far the artist's omnivorous vision has expanded over the past decade. Titled

“The Fallacy of Borders,” the exhibition includes painting, sculpture and even a set of stained-glass windows. No less significantly, it also reveals the breadth of Fallah’s interests, which span from skateboard culture and textile design to scientific illustration; from Persian miniatures and modernist abstraction to obscure ephemera. Melding elements of high and low, East and West, ancient and modern, his works doggedly question boundaries that separate people, cultures and genres. At times it almost looks as if he took elements from various wings of an encyclopedic museum and threw them into a blender, then laid out the results into a dreamlike rebus.

That sense of drawing from a medley of sources is embedded in Fallah’s biography. Born in 1979 in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution, Fallah and his family first moved to Turkey and Italy before coming to the US as refugees. He got his graduate degree at UCLA before settling in Los Angeles, where he was steeped in a rich Latino culture. “Yeah, I’m all over the place,” he says. “I’m a cultural mutt. My wife is Puerto Rican, and my son is half Iranian, half Puerto Rican and American, you know? And he looks white. Also, I’m very dark-skinned for an Iranian, so nobody ever thinks I’m Iranian. My wife happens to look Irish. So none of us looks like who we quote-unquote ‘are.’”



Amir H. Fallah, *Protector 1*, 2022; acrylic on canvas; Courtesy of the artist and Ginsberg Family Collection.

In 1996, Fallah started *Beautiful/Decay*, a DIY zine, which grew into a full-color publication and attracted a wide cult following (and is featured prominently in the show). In the decades since, his practice of sampling snippets of disparate imagery and design has expanded through the use of online digital archives, from which Fallah liberally gleans to discover elements for his works. “A lot of times I don’t even know the origins of a lot of them,” he explains. “So I don’t care about its initial context. I’m seeing it as the raw ingredients, that I’m giving new life to.”

In combining images from far-flung sources, Fallah is only building on the sort of fluid cultural exchanges that are rooted in history. As an example, he notes how dragons, often regarded as a Chinese motif, can also be found in Persian artwork. Sitting before the largest painting in the show, he points to a pair of angels on the left half of the canvas. “They look Asian, but they’re actually Persian, they’re from a Persian miniature,” he says. “So am I appropriating something that’s Asian? Or am I appropriating something that’s my own?”

The wall-sized work also includes the image of an Alpine maiden from an old-time matchbox cover, a pair of mirrored flamingos, and a hand holding out a pigeon like a peace offering, laid out across a grid-like armature. The mirror patterns suggest a Rorschach print, with dualities of good and evil, or opposing perspectives, while a Rubik’s Cube hints at the need for addressing puzzle-like challenges. But the title, *Break Down the Walls* (2022) reveals a darker reality, alluding to the policy of separating migrant children at the border during Trump’s presidency. The issue holds special relevance to Fallah, himself an immigrant, with a son the same age as many of those detained.

“I want to visually seduce the viewer with ornamentation, decoration, bright colors, patterning, and make them spend time with the work,” he elucidates. “And the more they spend time with the work, they realize that it’s not just like a candy-coated sugary snack. It’s very much about reality. It’s a way to make the dark realities of the world more swallowable.”

In recent years, he has expanded the range of sources that inspire him to include evocative lines of text, and themes from children’s stories that he reads to his young son. But although his dazzling colors and designs may look psychedelic, Fallah himself has no interest in drug culture. “The irony is I don’t even drink,” he laughs. “I’ve never smoked a cigarette, never smoked pot.” Instead, they draw from his fascination with graffiti and skateboarding, and with digital imagery. “These are also the colors of advertising, or of illustration,” he reflects. “I feel like I’m just using the palette of our time. Which is loud, bold and in-your-face.”

The effect tilts into the realm of the sublime in his stained-glass windows, which employ modernist geometries and primary colors as a scaffold for cryptic tableaux of veiled figures, posed amid natural history elements like lizards and mollusks and eerie

anatomical illustrations; illuminated from behind, they lend the gallery the mystical aura of a chapel.



Amir H. Fallah, *Silent Sounds*, 2021-2022. Courtesy of the artist and Dio Horia Gallery.

Beyond the Fowler exhibition, Fallah will also be having two other visible projects around LA to coincide with Frieze week, making the winter something of a Fallah-palooza. In February he's opening an exhibit of new paintings at Shulamit Nazarian, called "A War on Wars," which he sees as a "meditation on all the horrible things of war, not just in Iran."

On the building's façade, he's installing a large neon artwork, created with the neon artist matt dilling, inspired by the current protests in Iran. Titled *Chant*, the piece depicts a female-faced sun encircled by the words "Woman Life Freedom" in English, Farsi and phoneticized Farsi. The sun had long been a Persian national symbol; when the Pahlavi dynasty took over the country, they removed the female face from its depictions. In restoring it in his radiant public artwork, Fallah honors the Iranian women who are currently protesting with such bravery and resolve. When it's sold, 100% of the funds will be donated to human rights charities.

This attests to one final aspect of his practice: that beneath Fallah's curiosity lies compassion. Not merely an act of eager cultural mixology, for all its crafty flair, his work feels like a private assertion of hope. It's all about the possibility, and durability, of cross-cultural dialogue. Rooted in Los Angeles, with its irresistible amalgam of cultures and visual stimuli, but impelled by a fascination with the visual expression of diverse peoples and geographies, he's both an LA artist and a global one. Which makes him perhaps uniquely qualified to address some of the issues of nationality and identity that confront us today.

"I want to make work that's about this period in time that we're living in—the good, the bad, the ugly," he says. "I want people to like look back and be like, oh, this work marks this period in human history. It's not nostalgic for a period in time that he wasn't in. It was exactly about the time that he was in, right now."

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An Interview with Amir H. Fallah

Haley Laningham



For Those Who Fear Tomorrow, 2022 (acrylic on canvas)



Photography credit: Joshua K Flynn

Amir H. Fallah's work defies the norms of Western portraiture. His figures are covered; he paints borders in ways which intersect the visual field of his pieces. His sculptures, too, are faceless—their bodies interrupted by negative space in the shape of a warplane or shell. In the suite of work we published, the viewer will find collage-like paintings and veiled figures armed with ornate weapons from Persian history. Fallah's own artist statement says the following:

Amir H. Fallah creates paintings, murals, and installations that explore systems of representation embedded in the history of Western art. His ornate environments combine visual vocabularies of painting and collage to deconstruct traditional notions of identity formation, while simultaneously defying expectations of the genre for portraiture by removing or obscuring the central figure. Fallah wryly incorporates Western art historical references into paintings formally rooted in the pattern-based visual language of art historical works from the Middle East. In doing so, his paintings possess a hybridity that reflects his own background as an Iranian-American immigrant straddling cultures. Neither of this world nor the next, Fallah's works reside in the liminal space of being 'othered.' The paintings utilize personal history as an entry point to discuss race, representation, and the memories of cultures and countries left behind. Through this process, the artist's works employ nuanced and

emotive narratives that evoke an inquiry about identity, the immigrant experience, and the history of portraiture.

In this interview, we seek to discuss the historical context of these works and to provide a more detailed sense of the personal inspiration behind many of Fallah's artistic choices.

See more of Amir H. Fallah's work in Vol. 42.1 [here](#).

Haley Laningham: This question feels imperative to begin with. In an interview with *The New York Times*, you speak on the impact the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has had on you. You say you have many family members still in Iran and detail your cousins' wish that people globally would amplify their voices during this time. You say you would indeed describe what is happening there as a revolution. How does the Woman, Life, Freedom movement connect with your current work? Can you speak specifically about this connection in any of the pieces you've given us to display?

Amir H. Fallah: Almost all the work I create connects with the current Woman, Life, Freedom movement. So much of my work deals with issues of identity, politics, immigration, and more. As an Iranian born in 1979, it's impossible to escape the effects of the 1979 Revolution and its long-lasting ramifications. The current conditions in Iran are the descendants of the coup in 1953 orchestrated by America and Britain, the placing of the Shah by the West, and ultimately his overthrow by the Islamic Republic in 1979. All these events are interconnected. As a result, if I create any work about myself, I am also addressing both the history of Iran and the current climate there. It's inescapable for this generation of Iranian artists.

For instance, *For Those Who Fear Tomorrow* is about my first memory in Iran. It was an air raid in Tehran where an entire community had to run out of their homes and into the streets in fear of the high-rise apartments being bombed. It's about the collective trauma of living through war and fearing what tomorrow will bring. *Foresight Prevents Blindness* is also about the Iranian Revolution and how an entire generation (my parents' generation, specifically) was tricked by the Islamic Republic. They were sold a false bill of goods. They were promised democracy, but they got something much worse than the Shah.

HL: In previous interviews, you reveal that the process leading up to your figural paintings, which refute norms of portraiture, involves going into people's houses and observing their belongings and domestic spaces. You say you do this to investigate ways of depicting identity with an absence of the features around which people are often profiled—probably, I think, in the same way you were and are profiled as an Iranian-American man. You want to make the portraits psychological, or like “Rorschach portraits” which you mention in your [guest lecture](#) with Cranbrook Academy of Art's deSalle Auditorium (available on YouTube). Was your process the same for *Defender*, *Guardian*, and *Peacekeeper*?



Foresight Prevents Blindness, 2022 (acrylic on canvas)



Guardian, 2022 (acrylic on canvas)

AF: Originally, the veiled figures were portraits of friends and peers. However, over the last couple of years, I've shifted, and they all have become self-portraits in a sense. These three works were part of my show *A War on Wars* at Nazarian/Curcio Gallery last year. The show was a meditation on the long-lasting effects of war and was conceived and made while I watched the minute-by-minute footage of the war in Ukraine on my phone. Watching the POV footage of everyday citizens running into bomb shelters, fleeing tanks, and becoming refugees overnight made me think of my own childhood during the Iran-Iraq War. These three paintings each depict a figure holding a historical weapon from various periods of Persian history. They are these beautifully engraved and detailed weapons that are sold at auction and end up in museums. With enough time, their utilitarian purpose of being killing machines vanishes, and they are seen as beautiful, sculptural objects to be collected and coveted. I was thinking about how with enough time, the blood washes away from these symbols of death and destruction, and they have a much more sanitized life anew.

HL: In an interview with *WOW x WOW*, you talk about how you began using painted borders, inspired by Persian miniatures, in order to tell the viewer that all they need to pay attention to in the piece is already present. This choice was in part a resistance to Western norms in art. You describe this Western inheritance, saying, “In contemporary painting you hear a lot about how the canvas is an illusionistic field for the artist to create on. The painting is meant to continue off of the canvas, and the viewer is supposed to complete the image in their mind.” What led to your decision to draw the borders in a way which interrupts the visual field of the piece, as in *For Those Who Fear Tomorrow*, *Urn*, and *Foresight Prevents Blindness*?

AF: The borders began as a nod to Persian miniatures and as a way to define the edges of the works. However, over the past 15 years, they have become deconstructed. They weave in and out of the picture plane, pushing and pulling various figures and objects. My goal is to complicate the picture plane, using them as a path through the

painting and creating uneasiness in the works where, depending on where you look on the painting, the image can either look flat or have depth. For me, this reinforces the feeling of them being a psychological space rather than a literal space. It's a space where anything can happen, free of the laws of physics, gravity, depth, and space.

HL: What do you feel some level of collage enables for your work? Do you mean for it to reflect the demands of being an immigrant, constantly piecing one world together from past and present?

AF: That's an interesting idea, but it's not something that I've thought about before. For me, collage allows me to bring together disparate images that don't belong. It's a flattening of hierarchy, and therefore allows me to talk about the complexity of the times we're living in. When we're on social media, in seconds we can read the news, see a photo of our friends at brunch, watch a video of a fashion show, view a post from a comedian, and engage with an art historian writing about Aboriginal art. There is a flattening of high and low, old and new, East and West. Collage allows me to create work that is a documentation of this time we're all a part of. It allows me to put advertising, Persian miniatures, minimalist painting, hip-hop culture, and current politics all on the same playing field without any hierarchy.



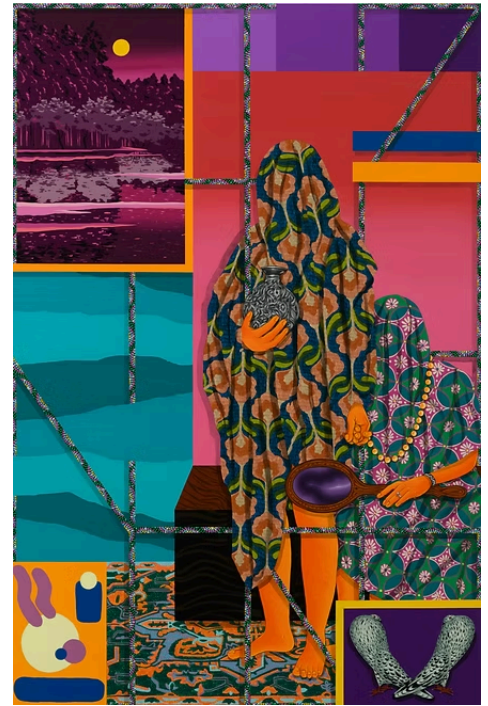
Planes Above, 2023 (acrylic, aluminum, hardware)

myself better than anyone else, so looking within is where I start. The trick is to try to make something deeply personal that has a broader meaning and connection to those who don't know you. It's something I'm constantly thinking about in the studio.

AMIR H. FALLAH received his BFA in Fine Art & Painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art and his MFA in painting at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has exhibited extensively in solo and group exhibitions across the United States and abroad. Selected solo exhibitions include The Fowler Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson; South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings, SD; Schneider Museum of Art, Ashland, OR; San Diego ICA; and the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland, KS.

In 2009, the artist was chosen to participate in the Ninth Sharjah Biennial. In 2015, Fallah received the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant. In 2019, Fallah's painting *Calling on The Past* received the Northern Trust Purchase Prize at EXPO Chicago. In 2020, Fallah was awarded the COLA Individual Artist Fellowship and the Artadia grant. In addition, the artist had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson, accompanied by a catalogue, and a year-long installation at the ICA San Jose.

The artist has works in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama; Jorge M. Pérez Collection, Miami; Albright Knox Museum, Buffalo; Deste Foundation For Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece; Xiao Museum Of Contemporary Art, Rizhao, China; McEvoy Foundation For The Arts,



Urn, 2022 (acrylic on canvas)

HL: What do you think the negative space in the sculptures you've let us publish, *Planes Above* and *Lost and Found*, represents? I'm especially interested in this fighter jet inside *Planes Above*.

AF: These flat sculptures are part of a body of work called *Silhouettes*. I was pondering what it would be like if the experiences that define and change us not only affect us mentally but also physically alter our bodies.

What if these experiences resulted in our physical structure changing and morphing? The bodies start as generic silhouettes of a figure, but as they move through time and space, they absorb symbols and images that connect to a certain memory, event, or life shift.

For *Planes Above*, the image of the plane is the silhouette of the most common Iraqi plane that bombed Iran. As I mentioned earlier in the interview, my first memory was of an air raid. It was nighttime, and I could hear the planes but couldn't see them. At the age of four, I made a gun-shaped gesture with my hand and pointed it to the sky, pretending to shoot the Iraqi planes down. It's a powerful memory that I still carry with me to this day. Ironically, the plane was built by America and supplied by the U.S. to Iraq. For me, it's a strong symbol of the complicated history of the two countries that I love and their bizarre and complex relationship with one another.

HL: Also, in your interview with *WOW x WOW*, you say, "I've found that the more I look within, the better the work gets." I really love that. Can you elaborate on where in your body your process starts, and how you get yourself to bring creative ideas to fruition and completion?

AF: As I get older, I let more and more of myself go into the work. A lot of the work is about me trying to figure out my place in this world with all its contradictions. When I became a father almost nine years ago, the work underwent a dramatic shift and became more personal. The stakes seemed higher, and every time I went to make a work, I thought about what my kid would think of it once he was an adult. My process these days is very intuitive. For instance, when I decided to do a show called *A War on Wars*, I was watching nonstop TV footage of war. I was thinking about my parents having a young kid during wartime and trying to figure out how to keep him safe. As a father, I was putting myself in their shoes. It was all I could think about, and the show was just an extension of my anxieties about the state of the world. It felt natural to make that work. For me, that's the best way to work. I know

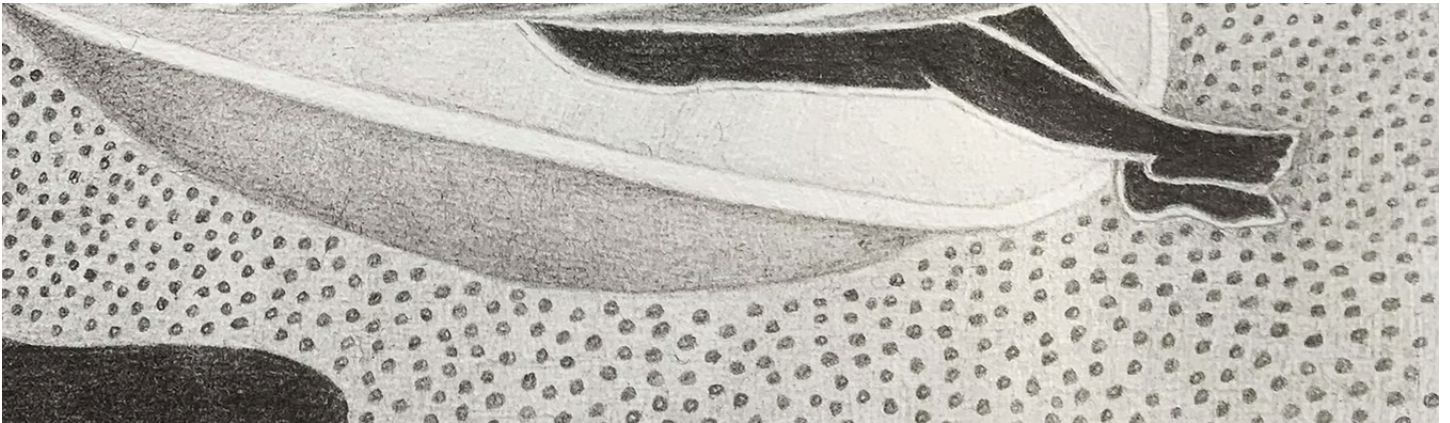
San Francisco; Nerman Museum, Kansas City; SMART Museum of Art at the University of Chicago; Davis Museum, Massachusetts; The Microsoft Collection, Washington; Plattsburg State Art Museum, NY; Cerritos College Public Art Collection, CA; Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, CA; and Salsali Private Museum, Dubai, UAE.

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Portrait of the Artist: Fallah surrounded by some of his more recent works.


MAGAZINE

The Provocative, Enduring Power of Amir H. Fallah

The internationally acclaimed Iranian American artist strives to illuminate human nature. It’s a quest honed at UCLA.

By Shana Nys Dambrot | Photos by Joshua Flynn

January 18, 2024

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As a young painter, Amir H. Fallah M.F.A. ’05 found UCLA’s program a bit ... intimidating. Towering figures of the Los Angeles art scene — people like Lari Pittman, Catherine Opie, the late John Baldessari — would often pop into the studio and review students’ work. And then offer contradictory feedback. There were two options: feel defeated, or feel inspired. Fallah chose well.

“In the end,” he says, “I found my path.”

Now the Tehran-born sculptor and installation artist is a global phenomenon, with pieces in shows from Athens to Shanghai. Specifically, Fallah is recognized for the eccentric beauty and mysterious power of his narrative maximalism. He arrays carefully chosen scenes with veiled figures, meaningful personal and cultural objects, lush botanica, citations from pop culture, Eastern and Western visual traditions, mythology, folklore, autobiography and literature — all in a crisp, precise, detail-rich and chromatically saturated style that unifies the whole. That his work has deeper meaning is apparent from first sight; that those new meanings continue to reveal themselves in contemplation is a big part of their power.

Frequently autobiographical, but equally engaged with broader social issues and cultural dynamics anchored to his diasporic experience, Fallah’s visual lexicon has accrued and accumulated since his earliest memories. Born in Tehran in 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution and overthrowing of the monarchy, he was not yet 5 years old when his family fled the country, feeling betrayed by the revolution’s false promises. They moved several times before settling in the U.S. when he was 7.

Growing up in northern Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C., Fallah yearned for a more exciting cultural milieu, so in high school he started his own: a photocopied black-and-white 'zine that would eventually become *Beautiful/Decay*. He then headed to nearby Baltimore to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art.



Joshua Flynn

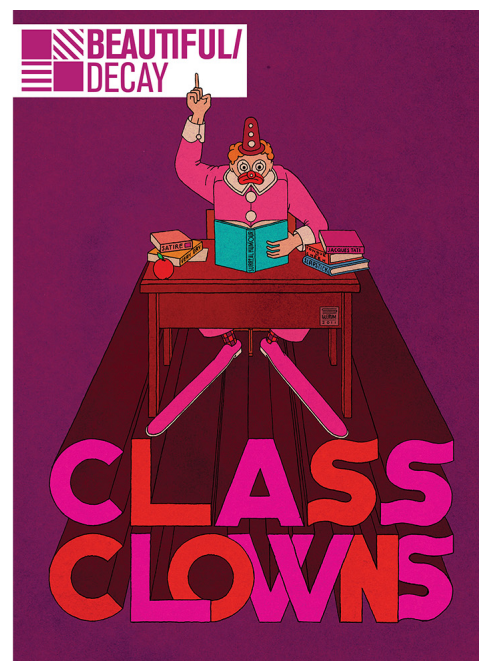
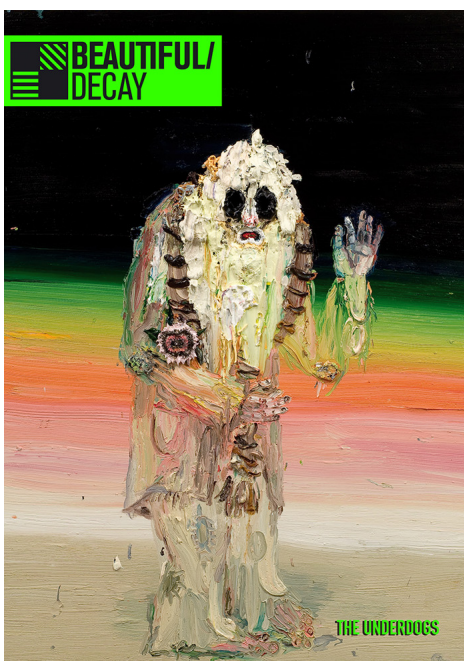
Fallah's work includes striking pastiches. His paintings, one gallerist notes, transport visitors "into a magical place."

The foundations of Fallah's mature style were laid during his undergraduate studies in Baltimore, but it wasn't until he was accepted into UCLA as a graduate student that he truly encountered the art world. "I flew out here for a tour," he recalls, "and it just blew me away. When I went into the studios I thought, These kids are making the stuff I want to be making. It felt like all the work was museum ready, polished."

He enrolled. In the years following that M.F.A. program, Fallah watched in despair as many of his UCLA classmates went onto major gallery and museum shows, while he looked on from the sidelines. "I was literally the only person without that," he says with a wry smile. He finally showed in Dubai in 2005, one of the first contemporary artists to exhibit at a mainstream commercial gallery in the United Arab Emirates.

"I remember telling my teachers, 'Hey, I got offered to show in Dubai, at The Third Line, and most people were like, 'Where is that?'" he says. "Dubai was not what it is now. So, I had this very weird entry into the art world."

It wasn't his only unconventional entry point. *Beautiful/Decay* was a black and white 'zine Fallah created when he was in high school, then promptly forgot about. Then, in his final year in undergrad, he restarted it as a full color magazine, funded through the sale of four paintings at a group show in New York.



Courtesy of Amir Fallah

A series of covers from Fallah's cult 'zine, *Beautiful/Decay*, which he founded in high school but restarted his final year of college.

"I made \$2,000, and I pooled it with another \$3,000 that I had saved up from painting murals. And I thought, 'What am I going to do with \$5,000? I've never had so much money!'" At the time, Fallah was living in New York and would take the subway between Brooklyn and Tribeca when he would buy the magazines *Artforum* or *Juxtapoz* for the ride. "I'm 21, 22 years old and *Artforum* is so boring and dry. And then *Juxtapoz* was all tattoo art, hot rods, goth. *Artforum* was not accessible at all, but it was the type of art that I liked, and *Juxtapoz* was very accessible, but it wasn't the type of work I liked, so ... "

Beautiful/Decay was reborn to close that divide. "I wanted to make a magazine that was accessible but informed, and bridged that gap between subcultures, popular culture and underground culture with contemporary art. Because those were my interests."

When he moved to L.A., the magazine grew organically. By the time he graduated from UCLA in 2005, it was paying for itself. It had an office, and the publication became his day job. But it was his painting — at night, on the weekends, early in the morning — that would change everything.

Getting noticed

Seth Curcio, a partner at the contemporary art gallery Shulamit Nazarian Los Angeles, first noticed Fallah through *Beautiful/Decay*. "I was in art school when the magazine made a huge impact on me," he says. "It merged so many of my interests — art, graphic design, graffiti, music and fashion. Through the magazine I eventually learned about Amir and his artwork, and that has led to nearly 20 years of friendship and collaboration."



Joshua Flynn

Elizabeth East, a director at L.A. Louver gallery, also recalls working with Fallah during those early years in L.A., shortly after he graduated from UCLA. Two of her colleagues visited his studio and left “deeply impressed by his ambition and imagination,” East says.

And they put their gallery muscle behind him. From among more than 100 artists considered, Louver chose Fallah as one of 12 for its *Rogue Wave '07*, a collection of prestigious group shows spotlighting emerging artists. “Amir’s large-scale sculpture — as well as paintings and photographs — transported visitors into a magical place,” East says. “Since then, Amir’s work has undergone an incredible evolution. And, somehow, he manages to be a lovely person at the same time.”

Eventually, Fallah chose painting over the magazine, although random copies are still available on eBay. Its influence still manifests itself in Fallah’s work, notably in the omnivorous visual references and giddy simultaneity of his compositional layouts.

“A lot of the new work I call ‘grids’ are really paintings within paintings,” Fallah says. “And I got the idea from doing magazine and book layout, and engineering this visual hierarchy where there’s a lot of information on the page, but it’s structured so that it’s not overwhelming. I’m such a maximalist. In my work, I’m always trying to talk about five things at once. This is a way to structure the chaos. It’s a direct link to my background in design and publications.”

A bow at the Fowler

In 2022 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, curator Amy Landau wanted to include *Beautiful/Decay* in Fallah’s first solo museum presentation in Los Angeles, a show titled *The Fallacy of Borders*. Fallah was resistant. He’d made an effort to distance his art practice from his publishing role.



Joshua Flynn

One of Fallah's many process books. "Once I had a son," he says, "suddenly all I was thinking about was, 'What do I believe in? What do I want to teach this kid?'" The work became a reflection of that."

"But she said, 'I think you're thinking about the magazine in the wrong way. Look at your paintings. When you were putting together this magazine, you were working thematically on every issue, and you were bringing together disparate people and putting their work side by side. So having an illustrator next to Cathy Opie, and Wangechi Mutu next to Jeremy Scott — this clash of high and low, of East and West — really, it was a part of your art career.'"

He continues, "She kind of blew my mind. Curators are awesome: She revealed something to me about myself that I didn't realize."

It wasn't the only way the Fowler show grew from those old magazine days. Kris Lewis, part of the interim director cohort at the Fowler and currently director of the Henry Art Museum in Seattle, first met Fallah in 2008, when she answered an ad for a marketing position with *Beautiful/Decay*. "I wasn't familiar with the magazine and wondered why," she says. "The graphic covers were exciting, the artists featured were cutting-edge, and the content was thoughtful and engaging."



Todd Westphal

Fallah speaks about his art at the Fowler opening reception.

Fast forward 10 years to fall 2018 when, as part of her work for the Fowler’s Contemporary Council, Lewis reached out to Fallah to organize a studio visit.

“His visibility as an artist was rapidly increasing, and for good reason,” Lewis says. “His work is important. I was first drawn to the graphic nature and bright colors in his work. He was also conveying timely critical themes that involved race, identity, diaspora and homeland, inviting viewers to question boundaries and borders that separate people and cultures.” She then pays Fallah the greatest compliment an artist can receive: “I learned from it.”

When Lewis floated the idea at the museum of an exhibition with a local artist, Fallah was a natural fit. “Amy Landau — who prior to coming to the Fowler as the director of education and interpretation, was a curator of Islamic art — came forward and said she would curate the show,” says Lewis. “She’s a dynamo. The show [between January and May 2023] was absolutely stunning.”

A son — and a shift

So much of the conversation around Fallah’s work is keyed to a metacritique of the modern information ecosystem. But it would be a loss to discount the more personal aspects as well. Fallah was interested in, and mined in his work, multicultural perspectives such as his own Iranian American experience in an immigrant family. But when he became a parent, he started to rethink everything.

“Up until I had a kid, I was dealing with portraiture,” Fallah says, “but not specifically self-portraits. I wasn’t looking internally; I was painting other people. But once I had a son, suddenly all I was thinking about was, ‘What do I believe in? What do I want to teach this kid?’ And the work became a reflection of that. It was a turning point for me.”



Joshua Flynn

Much of the power of Fallah's art emanates from his mixed-media approach. His work, says Kris Lewis, the director of Seattle's Henry Art Museum, "is important."

One of the first manifestations of this new dynamic was a stained-glass sculptural piece for an exhibition at Shulamit Nazarian in 2017. Based on the same draped-figure motif that had become a foundation of his paintings, the piece was a self-portrait, depicting Fallah holding his infant son in a style that recalled religious art with a certain Renaissance sensibility.

Fallah has come to embrace glass, working with David Judson, president of the influential Judson Studios in Los Angeles. "We have just collaborated on our fourth project together," says Judson, "and we have evolved with each one. Despite its being an ancient craft, new and innovative methods are being discovered daily. And Amir masterfully navigates between these old and new worlds."

Perhaps no one has had a closer perspective on Fallah's evolution as an artist since those UCLA days than his wife, Jessica Lopez. "It has been an interesting journey," she says. "I feel it's gotten to this place where it's so layered, and there's so much meaning. It's been really gratifying as a partner over 20 years to see him find his voice." And yes, his identity as a dad. "It really speaks to the idea," Lopez says, "of what values we are going to instill in our child."

It's safe to say that fatherhood did not sugarcoat the work. "If anything, it got darker — like, really dark," Fallah says. "I think the work now is more serious and poignant. And way more political. Because I'm thinking about the future a lot more."

Fallah recently completed work on a botanical-themed mural celebrating local Los Angeles history at the newly refurbished Hollywood Park in Inglewood. He then traveled to China, for his first show with Gallery All in Shanghai. He has also completed two new sculptures, three-foot dimensional bronzes, further expanding his material repertoire into the classical sensibility. "It's dealing with what it means to be approaching the second half of life," he says. "And a lot of that pertains to being a parent, too — wondering, 'How is this story going to end? Am I where I want to be? Have I done all the things I wanted to do? What have I not done yet?'"

Well, let's see: He's traveled the world, graduated from UCLA, made his parents proud, fallen in love, become a dad, created an iconic publication, and mastered painting, as well as stained glass, graphic design, metal sculpture, and murals. He shows all over the world, teaches, continues to learn. What has he not done yet, indeed?

Read more from [UCLA Magazine's Winter 2024 issue](#).

ARTS + CULTURE

Fowler Museum showcases work focused on cultural inheritance, identity

New exhibition spotlights pieces by UCLA alumnus Amir H. Fallah



Courtesy of Amir H. Fallah and Shahin Tabassi

Amir H. Fallah, “No Gods No Masters,” 2020; acrylic on canvas.

UCLA Newsroom

January 19, 2023

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Opening Jan. 29, the Fowler Museum at UCLA presents “Amir H. Fallah: The Fallacy of Borders,” the artist’s first museum exhibition in Los Angeles.

A celebration of Fallah’s vibrant maximalist style, more than 25 works of painting, sculpture and stained glass contend with urgent themes of cultural inheritance and identity formation. Fallah earned his master of fine arts in 2005 in painting at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture. An [opening celebration](#) will take place Saturday, Jan. 28 from 6 to 9 p.m.

Born in 1979 in Tehran at the height of the Islamic Revolution, Fallah and his family moved several times before he arrived in the U.S. at the age of 7. Throughout his career, he has mined intimate aspects of his immigrant experience to forge an alternative portraiture, one that resists reductive characterization. This exhibition highlights the visual strategies and influences that underpin Fallah’s approach, which blends elements of his Iranian American heritage with those of other global traditions and their adaptations in Los Angeles’s diasporic communities.

Organized around eight thematic nodes, the Fowler presentation features collaborations, commissions and long-standing series in a range of media. Visitors can hear commentary by Fallah, exhibition curator Amy Landau, award-winning graphic designer Willem Henri Lucas, who is a professor emeritus of design media arts, and David Judson of Judson Studios by scanning QR codes on their phones.

“This exhibition spotlights Fallah’s broad visual literacy, experimental drive, and creative receptivity — all anchored in his migrant experience,” said Landau, director of interpretation and education at the Fowler. “He narrates from trauma and celebration, as well as his roles as a husband, father and confidant, which lends a deeply humane aspect to his social critique.”

Read the full [news release about “Amir H. Fallah: The Fallacy of Borders” \(PDF\)](#) on the Fowler’s website.

ARTS, THEATER & FINE ARTS

Q&A: Amir H. Fallah, Amy Landau explore identity in exhibit 'The Fallacy of Borders'



Amir H. Fallah stands beside his work "Silent Traveler." The stained-glass piece is part of the Fowler Museum's "The Fallacy of Borders," a collection of more than 25 pieces by Fallah. (Ethan Manafi/Daily Bruin staff)



By **Paria Honardoust**

Feb. 20, 2023 9:55 p.m.

This post was updated Feb. 27 at 8:39 p.m.

The Fowler Museum's latest exhibit is transcending boundaries.

Until May 14, the Fowler Museum will feature Iranian American artist Amir H. Fallah's "The Fallacy of Borders," which is an amalgamation of pieces comprising paintings, stained glass, sculptures and textiles that explores and challenges conceptions of identity, personhood and diaspora among other themes. Curated by Amy Landau, the exhibit seeks to raise inquiries concerning societal notions of borders and culture – depicted in saturated colors and boundless layering of lines and imagery.

"The Fallacy of Borders"

Amir H. Fallah

Fowler Museum

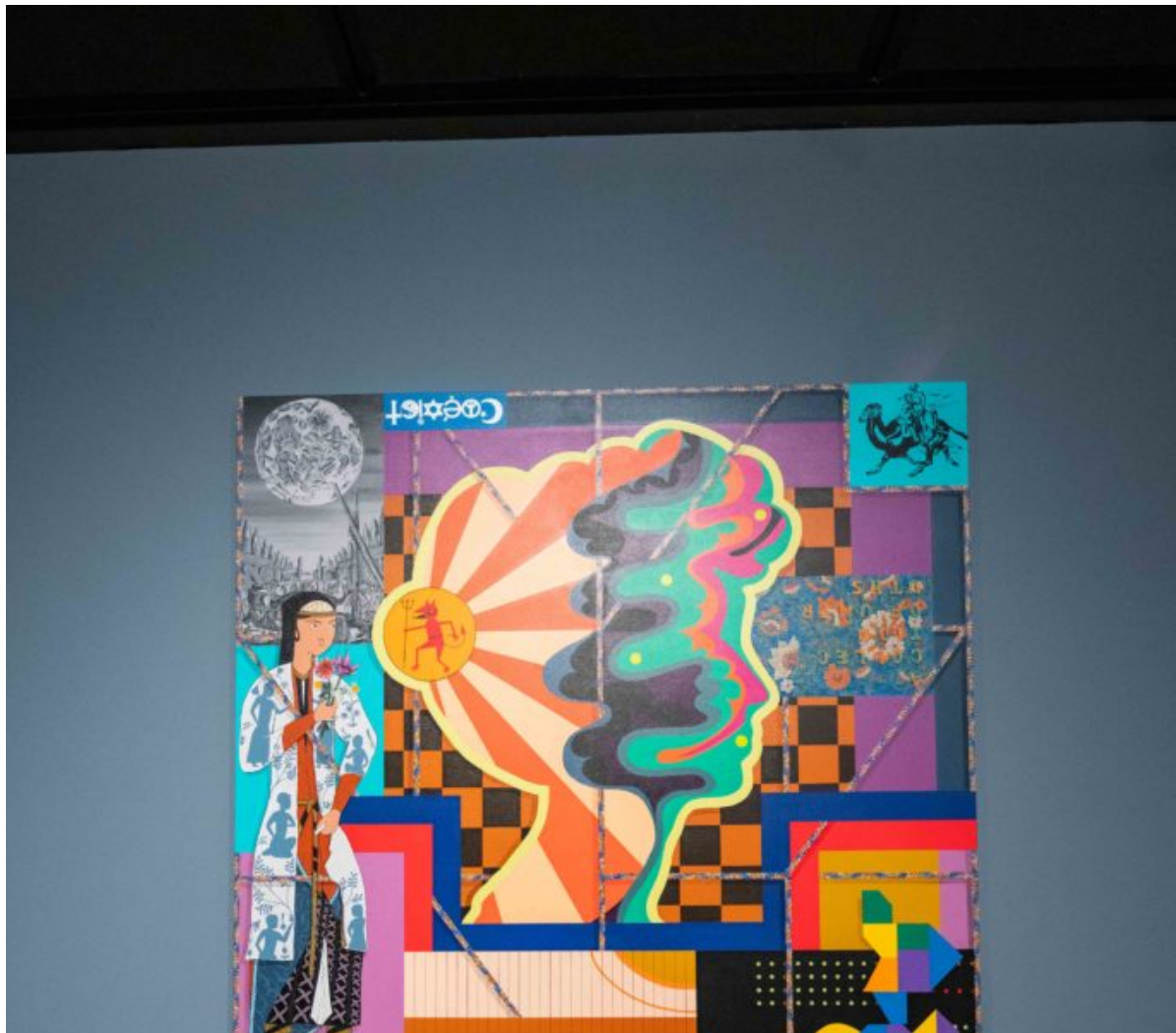
Jan. 29 to May 14

Fallah and Landau spoke with the Daily Bruin's Paria Honardoust about themes of personal upbringing and identity expressed in Fallah's art and the approaches to collection curation.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Daily Bruin: What was the inspiration behind the title "The Fallacy of Borders"?

Amir H. Fallah: The title was actually an idea that the curator Amy Landau came up with, but it really speaks to a lot of the things that I'm interested in my work, really stemming from my own background of coming to America as a refugee and how borders around countries are these invisible lines that are drawn by those in power. They're constantly being moved and manipulated and changed by whoever essentially has the biggest army, and they're really not things that are real. There's nothing that separates America and Mexico or America and Canada. It's just that a government decided to create this invisible barrier where on one side, people don't have access to the same privileges that people on the other side do. So a lot of my work tackles these complex issues around immigration, border issues, refugee issues and all the complexities that surround it.





Silhouettes, a piano and vibrant colors and patterns compose “They Will Say a Collection of Untruths,” a painting featured in the exhibition. (Ethan Manafi/Daily Bruin staff)

[Related: [Getty Center spotlights intern voices in captions for rarely-seen drawings exhibit](#)]

DB: How has your cultural background, upbringing and experiences influenced your art?

AHF: I was born in Iran, so there’s definitely a lot of Iranian influence on the work. But there’s also a lot of influence from other cultures such as Mexican culture, American culture. I grew up living all over the world. I view myself as a cultural chameleon who really doesn’t belong 100% to any one culture, but really has had to create my own kind of hybrid identity to blend and survive. And that has to adapt to a wide array of beliefs, traditions, histories. So a lot of my work is dealing with these issues of “What does it mean to be Iranian? What does it mean to be an American?”

DB: What was the process like choosing the displayed pieces at the exhibit?

Amy Landau: Amir and I worked on that together, and we wanted to choose an early work. The earliest dated work in the exhibition is from 2014, which is a portrait of his wife, and then we went to the latest works, which are his sculptures. Then we had this wonderful opportunity to design the seating together. It’s in the “Beautiful/Decay” room that’s focused on the art and design magazine that he created. He started when he was 16. We created seating based on one of his Tondo paintings.

DB: In your art, a lot of your subjects are veiled. What is the significance of this?

AHF: When I first started doing those portraits, I was thinking about how what we physically look like doesn't really tell much about who we are, our nationality, our background, our family. What we look like is a very superficial read of who we are as a person. And so historically, portraiture has always been about showing people's physical appearances. So I came up with this idea of doing a series of portraits where you don't show anybody's physical likeness. Their skin color is concealed. The skin in the paintings are these dayglow, orange colors. The bodies are generalized.

[Related: [Q&A: Curator Carlee Forbes talks new exhibit on African art history at Fowler Museum](#)]

DB: How would you describe the exhibit to someone who has yet to visit it?

AL: He (Fallah) is a deeply humane and wildly curious individual. He's a kind and generous spirit, and all of that comes across in his work. So going through the exhibition, one has the sense of his humanity, his curiosity and his kindness. And his work can be enjoyed for the rich colors, the patterns of different images, and they could also be engaged in terms of the moral and ethical stories he tells.

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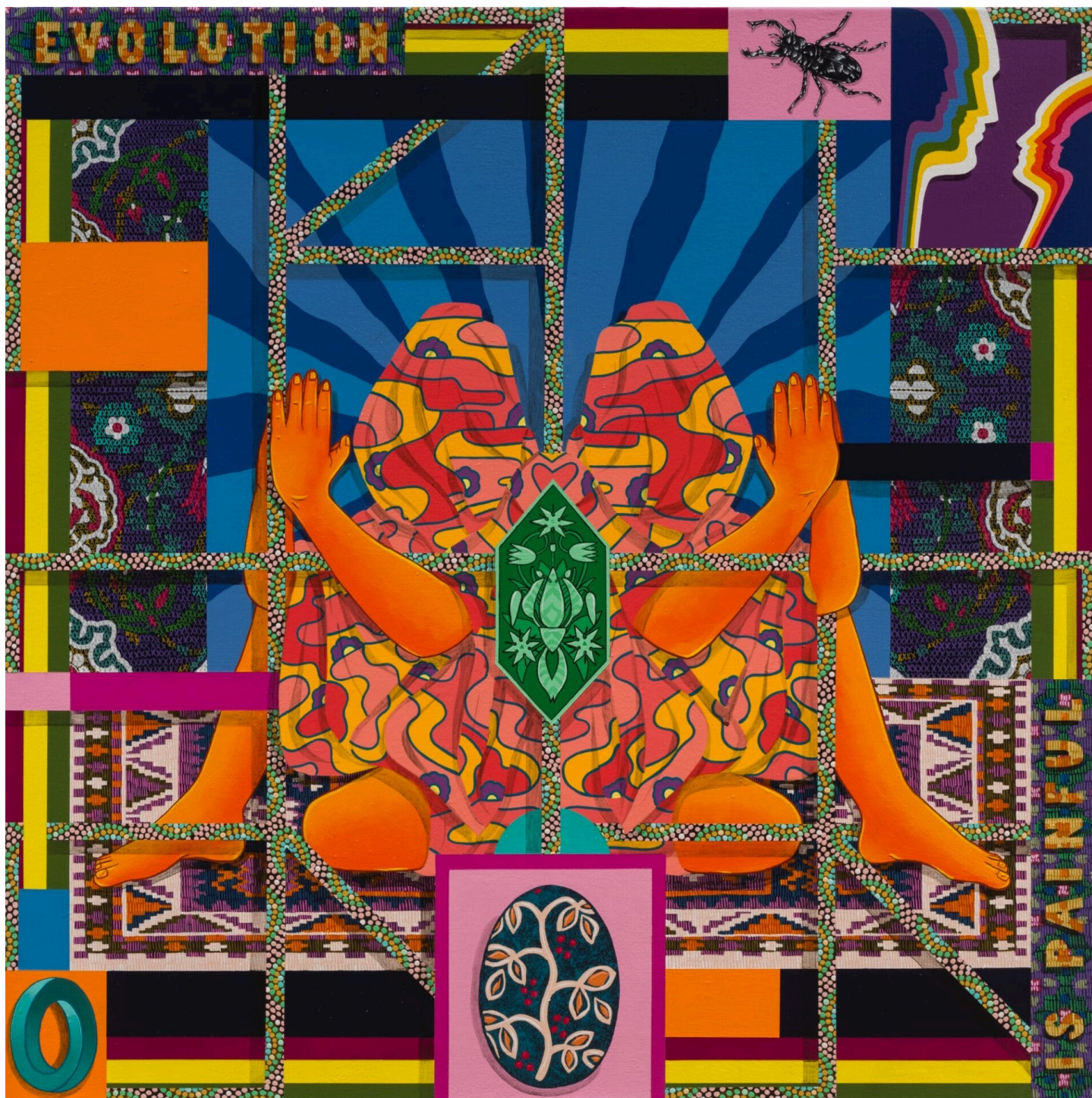
Paria Honardoust

COMMENTS

COLOSSAL



Menu






“Evolution Is Painful” (2023), acrylic on canvas, 3 x 3 feet. Photo by Ed Mumford, courtesy of the artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles. All images shared with permission

Amir H. Fallah Puzzles Together Monumental Narratives in His Bold Maximalist Paintings

February 21, 2024

Art

Grace Ebert

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“Most of my work begins from an extremely personal place,” says Amir H. Fallah. “When I speak on politics or the environment, I start with my own experiences and try to create something that has a broader reach. It’s the only way I know to make work that feels sincere.”

Based in Los Angeles, Fallah was born in Tehran in 1979, a year of revolution and political upheaval that ultimately brought his family to the U.S. His works in the last few years reflect this early encounter with war, migration, and the ways identities are obscured, mutable, and multifaceted.



“Holiday” (2023), acrylic on canvas, 6 x 6 feet. Photo by Ed Mumford, courtesy of artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles

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Lavish with patterns and textures evocative of ribbed, woven fabrics, the artist's works are unabashedly maximalist and comprise dozens of allusions to biological specimens, Persian miniature paintings, architectural arabesques, cartoons, material culture, and more within a single frame. Each painting and sculpture begins with a personal narrative that Fallah widens to a broader context, ultimately translating the idea visually by scouring an enormous archive amassed during the last five years. He explains:

I go through the database and pull 25 to 30 images that generally fit the narrative of the work. From there, I move the images around, shift scale, manipulate color, and combine images until the work comes to life. The best way to describe my sketching process is to compare it to a puzzle where you have all the pieces but have to spend days assembling them to get them to fit. For some works, I make 10 to 20 variations and spend months making small adjustments before finalizing the sketch. From there, the work gets drawn on canvas, and the rest of the process is intuitive, with decisions made on the fly.

Sometimes scaling six feet, Fallah's canvases layer bold motifs, figures, and objects in a way that has an inundating effect, both drawing the eye in several directions and confronting the viewer through their unignorable size. His subjects appear cloaked in patterned fabrics that mask their exact identities, prompting a fundamental question: what do we actually learn about someone by simply looking at their face? Just as Fallah pieces together imagery from a multitude of sources, he asks us to do the same, to search the multitude of visual information and histories tucked into his works and begin to create a rich, entwined tapestry of human life.

If you're in Los Angeles, you can see one of Fallah's paintings from February 24 to March 14 at [Phillips](#) for a collaborative exhibition with [Art for Change](#). Find more on [his site](#) and [Instagram](#). ♦

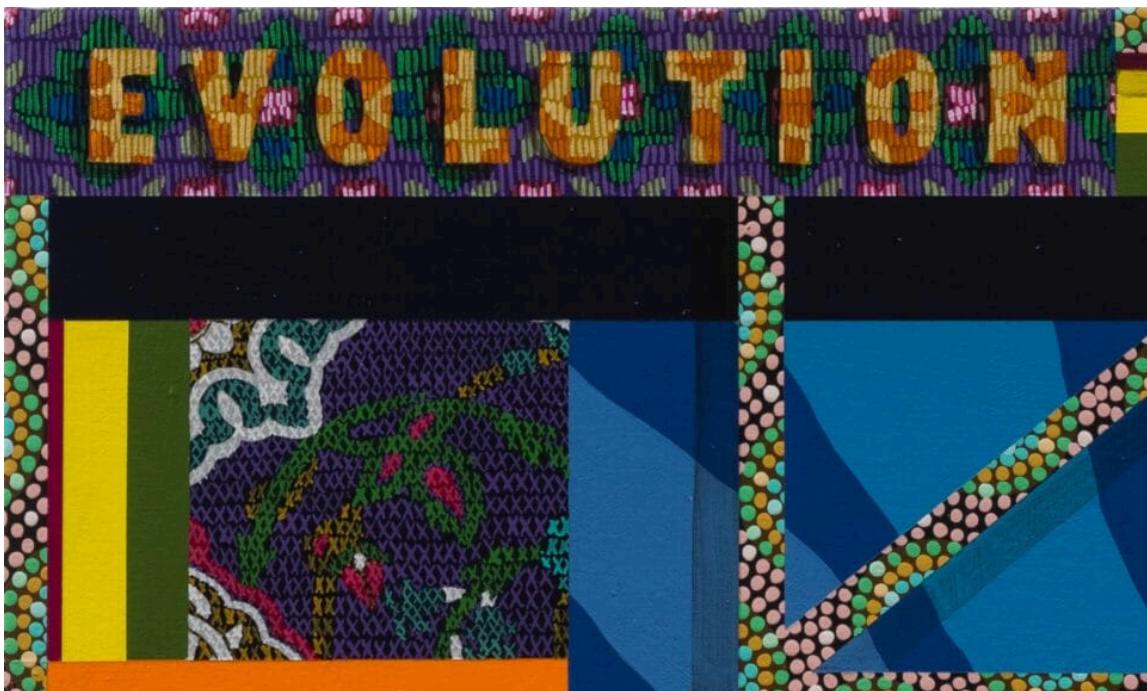


Detail of "Holiday" (2023), acrylic on canvas, 6 x 6 feet. Photo by Ed Mumford, courtesy of artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles

Advertisement



“Look At The Sky Tonight All Of The Stars Have A Reason” (2023), acrylic on canvas, 3 x 4 feet.
Photo by Ed Mumford, courtesy of artist and Gallery All, Shanghai, China



Detail of “Evolution Is Painful” (2023), acrylic on canvas, 3 x 3 feet. Photo by Ed Mumford,
courtesy of the artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles



"Perpetual Life" (2023), bronze, steel, and marble, 191.4 x 83.2 x 74.9 centimeters. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery All, Shanghai, China



Left: “Lost And Found” (2022), aluminum, hardware, acrylic paint, 72 x 36.62 x 25.30 inches. Photo by Alan Shaffer, courtesy of the artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles. Right: “Empire” (2023), acrylic, aluminum, hardware 72 1/2 x 35 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches. Photo by Alan Shaffer, courtesy of the artist and Nazarian/Curcio, Los Angeles



“Unlock” (2021), acrylic on canvas, 32 x 18 inches. Photo by Alan Shaffer, courtesy of the artist and Dio Horia Gallery, Athens, Greece

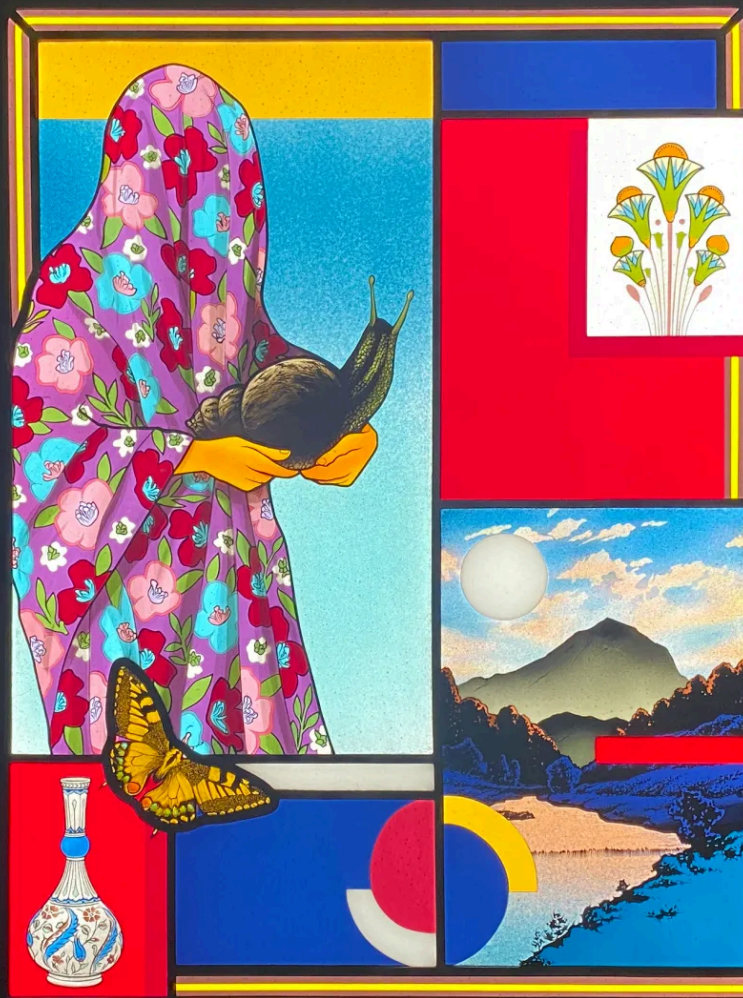
Art

Los Angeles as a Cultural Stir Fry

Amir H. Fallah's beautiful objects reflect a shadow side, a decay of borders, trust, and stability that comes with the trauma of immigration.



AX Mina April 24, 2023



Amir H. Fallah, "Silent Traveler" (2021–22), stained and fused glass, custom LED panel, aluminum frame (all photos AX Mina/Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — This city is neither a melting pot nor a salad. A cultural melting pot implies that the cultures blend and merge into one, making them indistinguishable from each other. A cultural salad implies that the cultures remain distinct, even while creating a singular whole that can be interesting because of the combination.

Los Angeles is, instead, a good stir fry — mixing, merging, blended flavors and ingredients that maintain distinctness while invariably changing each other. And like a good stir fry, the recipe for being an Angelene varies by family.

Los Angeles artist Amir H. Fallah, who arrived in the city by way of Tehran and then Turkey, understands this deeply. In “Cowgirl,” a large circular painting that contains the eponymous figure, Fallah combines a range of symbologies into a stir fry that feels at once of the city and a challenge to what the city represents.

“For the artist,” the exhibition text explains, “the flourishing flora around this tondo’s perimeter serves as a metaphor for the American promise of fertile soil and opportunities for all.” Alongside the anime-like cowgirl, a Black Panther logo, a traditional West or South Asian figure, and a gilded horse all come together — questioning the idyllic promise of the cowgirl. The work is in the style of a tondo, or Flemish garland painting, which usually contains a portrait within the frame. Fallah has left it blank with turquoise.

The Fallacy of Borders, on view at the UCLA Fowler Museum through May 14, is the first solo exhibition of the artist, whose bold, bright paintings, sculptures, and stained glass pieces communicate a rich array of cultures, perspectives, and influences, all formed by the many diasporas that shape Los Angeles, alongside his own cultural heritage as Iranian American.



Amir H. Fallah, “Cowgirl” (2020), acrylic, spray paint, and collage on canvas

The show is organized by major themes: New Worlds | Old Worlds; Sculptures; Portraiture; Allegory; Autobiography and Canvas | Stained Glass; and Objects | Memories. The thematic arrangement helps us filter the works through the perspective of major influences in Fallah's life. In the Portraiture section, for example, we see his interest in the primacy of objects and gestures in shaping identity. If his tondos challenge the idea of centrality implicit in a circle, his portrait series challenges the idea that a subject need be identifiable by their face.

In "Life," a figure under cloth holds a gray heart, its valves and chambers on full display, and in "Be Still," another figure holds its hands in the dharmachakra mudra, or mudra of teaching. The figures' arms are yellow and violet, respectively, their faces hidden under colorful prints. Race, gender, class, and other markers fade away, as Fallah instead represents his subjects through the objects around them, after meeting with the sitters to discuss what's important to them. The Autobiography section offers a glimpse into the artist's immigration journey. His painting "No Gods No Masters" includes depictions of Middle Eastern stereotypes, such as Aladdin on a flying rug, and a Nosferatu-like specter behind a 1920s flapper in a red dress.

His monumental work "Break Down the Walls" contains a litany of symbols and images that speak to the show's title, representing the struggles of immigration, especially in a hostile environment. "I made this sketch," Fallah explained in the exhibition audio, "during the last year of the Trump presidency. Watching the news I was devastated by what was happening at the US-Mexico border." It reminded him of his own experience coming to the United States, and he wondered how his life might have played out differently had his and his family's access been denied in a similar way. The work's title references the music of hardcore band Youth of Today, whose themes of immigration continue to inform his politics.

A keyhole at the center opens out to an alternative life: a dove represents messages, angels reflect good and evil, and a traveler looks off into the distance. Fallah calls them symbols, but to me they also read as archetypes, connecting the modern-day experience of immigration with the ancient experiences of wandering, nomadism, migration, and loss. "These symbols represent the complex situations that all countries deal with surrounding the issue of immigration," he noted of his painting. "Who is allowed in and who is kept out. Who is safe and who is in harm's way. And most importantly, who gets to decide."



Amir H. Fallah, "No Gods No Masters" (2020), acrylic on canvas

Scattered throughout the show are sculptures, each made of hand-painted sheets of aluminum. They continue the visual themes of the paintings, with cutouts that represent various organs. From far away, and even up close, they look more delicate, as if made of cardboard rather than metal. They are complemented by the gorgeous stained glass pieces he developed with Judson Studios, established in 1897 in Los Angeles and the country's longest-operating stained glass workshop. The textures of both the sculptural and glass works bring to life the bold color choices and iconography of Fallah's art.

Rounding out the show is an array of covers of *Beautiful/Decay*, an art and design magazine that Fallah led as editor-in-chief and creative director while completing his MFA at UCLA. Donated by photographer Fubz, a longtime collaborator, the magazine covers show the artist's wide interests and creativity, and a selection of *Beautiful/Decay* hoodies from artists and galleries like Aya Kato and Deitch Projects reflect the bold pop of the moment.

"Beauty and decay" is, perhaps, the best way to describe the yin and yang of Amir H. Fallah's work. Aesthetically speaking, his pieces are sumptuous, beautiful, and inspiring, breathing life into the symbols and subjects he chooses to paint. But the themes he explores reflect a shadow side, a decay of borders, trust, and stability that comes with the trauma of immigration and of existing in a country with a growing culture of rhetoric and violence against immigrants.

In “Protector 1,” a cloaked figure holds what looks like an Egyptian bust, and in the distance a Japanese woodblock-style print features another figure gazing out from a cliffside onto water. According to the exhibition text, the painting is about the downsides of cultural preservation, which so often entails taking cultural heritage from one country in order to showcase it in another. But in the context of this show and its themes I tend to see it another way: as an immigrant holding onto whatever piece of the past they can, knowing it, too, could one day be taken away.



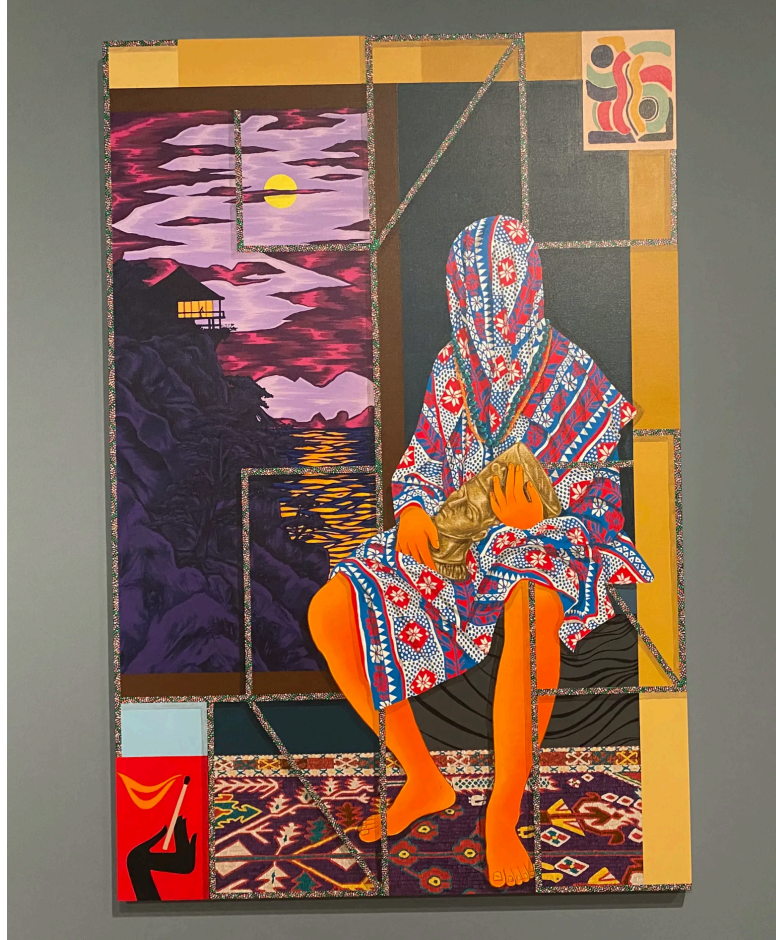
Amir H. Fallah, “Body and Soul” (2022), acrylic, aluminum, hardware



Amir H. Fallah, "Life" (2021), acrylic on canvas



Covers of *Beautiful/Decay*



Amir H. Fallah, "Protector 1" (2022), acrylic on canvas

Amir H. Fallah: The Fallacy of Borders continues at the Fowler Museum (308 Charles E. Young Drive North, Westwood, Los Angeles) through May 14. The exhibition was curated by Amy Landau, director of education and interpretation at the Fowler Museum.