

FROM VEILS TO WEEDS: GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL ART IN IRANIAN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

ABSTRACT — This article examines how Iranian women artists use environmental art to critique political power and societal structures, focusing on gender and ecology. By transforming landscapes and integrating the human body as both medium and symbol, these artists merge personal experiences with broader socio-political issues. Their work fosters critical conversations on resistance, collective memory, and environmental engagement in Iran, using art as a platform for witnessing and advocating societal transformation.

FRAMING THE DUAL CHALLENGES OF IRANIAN WOMEN — Iranian women navigate a multi-layered social and cultural framework where deeply entrenched traditions, alongside restrictive legal structures, dictate gender roles and curtail opportunities for self-expression and representation. Simultaneously, Iran grapples with critical environmental crises, including acute water shortages, widespread pollution, and industrial encroachments that degrade its natural landscapes. These ecological issues, often politicized as subversive acts, add layers of complexity for activists, as sustainability initiatives are frequently framed as challenges to state authority. For women, these challenges are not separate but interconnected. Restrictive societal norms converge with the tangible impacts of environmental degradation, positioning women uniquely at the intersection of the public and private spheres. This dual burden underscores their critical perspective in addressing these intertwined struggles, as they bridge personal narratives with broader societal and environmental concerns. In examining the intersection of environmental art, gender, and cultural narratives within the Iranian context, contemporary women artists employ their works to challenge and reframe traditional gender norms and environmental issues. By using the body as a dynamic canvas, these artists critique societal constructs, demonstrating the interplay between identity, culture, and nature. Their engagement with nature and myth provides a platform for exploring and reinterpreting the relationship between gender and the natural world.

THE BODY AS A SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPE — The concept of *landscape* can be extended beyond natural scenery to encompass the

dynamic interactions between environment and human influence. In this sense, landscape signifies a terrain shaped by both natural processes and cultural practices, reflecting the evolving relationship between individuals and their surroundings (Pungetti 2005). This understanding of landscape, which integrates environmental factors and human impact, provides the foundational basis for environmental art (Felman and Laub 1992, Frosh 2006, Blocker 2009). Artists therefore play a key role in this process by using their work to capture and convey personal and collective experiences through visual and textual means (Chute 2016).

— In Iranian environmental art, the landscape becomes a symbolic extension of the body, a space where personal and political narratives converge. Artists like Tara Goudarzi and Atefeh Khas embed themselves within natural settings to create compelling performances that express resistance and resilience. These works, among others, will be examined in the following sections to illustrate how Iranian environmental artists merge body, landscape, and narrative in their practice. By transforming these landscapes into stages for visual and emotional storytelling, these artists challenge societal norms and explore collective memory (Wildy 2011). This interplay between body, landscape, and narrative lays the groundwork for understanding witnessing as a central concept. Witnessing, in this context, becomes more than passive observation; it evolves into an active, dynamic process of engagement with ecological and socio-political landscapes.

THE CONCEPT OF WITNESSING AS A CONSTANT BUT DYNAMIC LENS

— The notion of witnessing is essential to understanding how Iranian environmental artists respond to and navigate the intertwined ecological and socio-political challenges they face, especially within restrictive political contexts. For Iranian women, art serves as a powerful form of bearing witness – a way to articulate both personal and collective struggles that might otherwise go unspoken. In this context, witnessing is not limited to the observation of events; it extends to how these artists use art to document their experiences and the environmental destruction around them. Through this lens, witnessing becomes more than observation – it is a flexible, evolving practice that allows artists to address social and ecological issues within their unique political climate. To fully grasp this approach, it is essential to see witnessing as a fluid and adaptive framework that reflects the nuances and subtleties of each artist's engagement with environmental issues. This analysis applies witnessing as an evolving lens across different

works, allowing it to take on varied forms – from subtle emotional evocation to direct activist statements – to present a holistic view of how environmental artists in Iran navigate resistance. By using nature as a symbol of both resilience and resistance, these artists expand the idea of witnessing beyond passive viewing.

— As Stoddard describes, witnessing requires active engagement that goes beyond merely seeing; it involves comprehending events within their broader social and environmental context (Stoddard 2009: 30). In environmental art, this form of witnessing calls for an immersive experience, integrating the artist – and ultimately the viewer – into the narrative of the landscape itself. This dynamic fosters a reflective connection with the environment that moves beyond surface-level observation, resonating with insights from scholars such as Felman and Laub (1992), Frosh (2006), and Blocker (2009), who emphasize how witnessing in art involves an empathetic and engaged response. In this process, witnessing transforms both the artist and the audience into co-participants, inviting them to reflect on the interconnectedness of nature, social structures, and political power. This depth of engagement positions witnessing as a form of *visual activism* (Demos 2016), which is adaptive and resilient within Iran's socio-political landscape. For artists, witnessing entails a personal and physical commitment to the landscape, shaping how they interpret and represent both ecological and societal challenges. For audiences, it means moving beyond passive observation to active interpretation and internalization, fostering a deeper understanding of the impact of human actions on the environment.

— This dual role of witnessing – as both personal reflection and public engagement – highlights how Iranian environmental artists use their work to address themes of degradation and resilience. As Chute (2016) suggests, by capturing personal and collective narratives, artists activate a kind of witnessing that encourages viewers to reconsider the intricate connections between nature, society, and political realities. In essence, their creative acts within nature, even through minimal interventions, elevate environmental art to a form of activism and social critique.

PERSONAL EXPLORATION TO COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT — Environmental art, as a global practice, frequently engages with themes that explore the interplay between humans and their natural surroundings, including considerations of sustainability and, in some instances, environmental degradation (Kastner and Wallis 1998, Smagula 1983, Spaid 2002, Bower 2011, Weintraub 2012). In the

Iranian context, these themes are similarly significant but often intersect with distinctive socio-political dynamics. While some Iranian artists foreground ecological concerns in their work, others employ environmental art as a platform to engage critically with cultural and political issues, reflecting the complex entanglement of art, society, and activism within the region. These works often take the form of site-specific installations, land art, or public interventions that directly interact with the environment. These artistic practices reflect Iran's geographic and cultural diversity while also illustrating the growing significance of environmental art as a tool for social critique and activism. Many of these works adapt Western conceptual and postmodern art forms, integrating them with traditional Iranian representations of the environment. This synthesis creates a unique aesthetic that incorporates abstract perspectives and localized narratives, positioning Iranian environmental art within both a global and a culturally specific framework.¹⁾

— Environmental art in Iran has faced significant challenges tied to both its emerging status and the socio-political landscape in which it operates. A lack of public awareness about environmental issues, inadequate infrastructure for contemporary art, and limited institutional support have hindered its visibility and development (conversation with Darzi 2019). Government policies have historically prioritized traditional art forms over experimental practices, leaving environmental art with minimal resources. Furthermore, cultural and political barriers, including censorship and restrictions on public spaces, have constrained artists' ability to engage critically with pressing ecological crises.

— The roots of these challenges can be traced back to the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which brought significant cultural and political shifts. During this period, experimental art forms, including environmental art, were marginalized as the state emphasized traditional and Islamic values. Discussions about pre-revolutionary artistic practices, such as those showcased at the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–1977), were suppressed for over a decade. The festival had been a landmark event, blending avant-garde experimentation with traditional art forms in natural settings, and its influence lingered informally despite these restrictions (Afshar 2019). However, the lack of public platforms and institutional support for innovative practices disrupted their continuity.

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To provide some background, this new wave of art, encompassing video art, performance, and multimedia, showcases a unique blend of international trends and local characteristics. It often explores themes such as mythology, mysticism, and the interplay between tradition and modernity, reflecting the dynamic and evolving landscape of contemporary Iranian art. For more about this issue, see Pamela Karimi's *Alternative Iran: Contemporary Art and Critical Spatial Practice* (Stanford University Press 2022).



// Figure 1

Film still from *The Garden of Stones*, Kimiavi 1976. Scene depicting the life of Darvish Khan and his remarkable stone garden. Iran, 81 min.

EMERGENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ART AS A GENRE — To address the evolution of site-specific and environmental art in Iran, we can take Darvish Khan Esfandiarpour's Bagh Sangi (The Stone Garden), created in 1963, as a pivotal example in the evolution of Iranian site-specific and environmental art (Mahmoodi 2015). A deaf and mute landowner displaced by the Shah's land reforms, Esfandiarpour transformed his garden into a powerful symbol of loss and resistance by suspending large stones from dead tree branches [fig. 1]. Featured in Parviz Kimiavi's 1976 film *The Garden of Stones*, the garden is portrayed as a site of defiance, with scenes depicting Esfandiarpour hauling stones and his garden's defilement by a masked figure (Khanjani 2015). The film's closing image – Esfandiarpour hanging from a tree – is widely interpreted as metaphorical, with the true circumstances of his death remaining ambiguous. Now a registered cultural heritage site in Sirjan, Kerman Province, *The Stone Garden* endures as a profound statement blending personal tragedy with socio-political critique, securing its place within the narrative of Iranian environmental art (Nafisi 2011: 393).

— Environmental art in Iran began emerging as a distinct genre in the 2000s, influenced by new art forms that diverged from Western "postmodernist" and conceptual art (conversation with Nadalian 2019). This movement, rooted in unconventional practices like performance, multimedia, and environmental art, adapted global trends to Iran's cultural context, addressing themes such as mythology, identity, and the clash between tradition and modernity (Pakbaz 2002:128). Two key phases mark its development: the pioneering efforts of Ahmad Nadalian in the late 1990s and the rise of active platforms like Persbook in the 2010s. Nadalian, driven by a need to escape Tehran's restrictions, began creating art in remote natural locations, transforming his personal practice into a collective one involving local communities (Grande 2007: 39–42).²⁾ His initiatives laid the foundation for an environmental art movement in Iran that reflects on both ecological and social concerns.

— In 1996, Nadalian founded the *Paradise Art Center*, which played a pivotal role in promoting environmental art in Iran.³⁾ According to a personal interview with Nadalian (Hormuz residency, 2019), the center organized its first nature-based art festival in 2003, which later evolved into a series of 59 environmental art festivals held across the country. These festivals are not held annually but are event-based, responding to specific environmental concerns. For instance, in 2009, festivals were organized at Lake

2)

Ahmad Nadalian, a noted land artist, creates temporary installations known as *Chideman* from carved stones and pebbles, considering remote natural spaces as "utopian ideals" and "lost paradises" to escape the pollution of Tehran, which he views as "polluted in every way: environmentally, politically, and morally" (Grande, 2006, pp. 32–34). His work is featured in the documentary film *The River Still Has Fish* by Mojtaba Mir Tahmasb (2003), which documents the damage to Nadalian's carved stones by construction workers and highlights the adverse effects of human intervention on Iran's natural environment. Additionally, Nadalian's environmental art is discussed in Robert C. Morgan's article "Marked in Stone and Sand: An Iranian Sculpture Brings his Art to the River, Beaches – and Parks" (*Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2008), Edward Lucy Smith's book *Art Tomorrow* (Terrail Editions, 2002), and Barbara Stieff's *Earth, Sea, Sun, and Sky: Art in Nature* (Prestel 2011). For more details on their programs and initiatives, visit the [Paradise Art Center's website](#).

3)

The Paradise Art Center also established the first artist residency in Iran, further supporting the development and recognition of environmental art within the country. Subsequently, Nadalian expanded his artistic practice by setting up numerous land art residencies. These residencies were situated in diverse locations such as Tehran, Polur in Mazandaran province, and Hormuz Island in the Persian Gulf. This geographic variety reflects his commitment to integrating his art with different landscapes and cultural contexts, enriching the dialogue between his environmental art and the distinct ecological and social environments of each site. For more details on their programs and initiatives, visit the [Paradise Art Center's website](#).

Urmia and the Gavkhouni Wetland to raise awareness of issues such as illegal hunting, water shortages, and pollution. Often structured as collaborative workshops, these festivals have engaged students, young artists, and local communities. Nadalian's workshops on contemporary art practices inspired voluntary participation, equipping participants with theoretical and practical skills. For instance, the 2007 festival on Hormuz Island focused on emerging talents to ensure continuity in environmental art practices. These initiatives provided spaces beyond academic settings for creativity, encouraging artists to connect with nature and address environmental challenges while nurturing a new generation of environmental artists in Iran.

— Building on Nadalian's foundation, artist and curator Neda Darzi emerged as a key figure in Iranian environmental art. Persbook, a non-profit initiative she founded in 2010, initially operated as an online gallery before evolving into a platform for site-specific art projects. The name "Persbook" combines "Persian" with "book," a nod to Facebook's social connectivity, highlighting its aim to bring Iranian artists together in a collaborative space. While the name carries an ironic reference to a digital platform known for global outreach, Persbook maintained a focus on fostering local, community-centered artistic exchanges.

— In a personal conversation with Darzi in Tehran in 2019, she shared insights into Persbook's significant role in Iranian environmental art. Persbook grew out of Darzi's earlier efforts in the 1990s, when she organized trips for art students from the Art University of Tehran to the Shemshak ski resort. These trips facilitated communal collaboration through discussions, performances, and shared artistic exploration in natural settings. Though initially non-digital and physically grounded, this communal approach later informed Persbook's online phase. The initiative gained momentum in the aftermath of the 2009 *Green Movement* protests, which were a series of political demonstrations in Iran advocating for democratic reforms following disputed presidential elections. The term *Green Movement* refers to the political color of the reformist campaign, not environmental advocacy. During this politically charged period, Darzi used art to channel "collective healing," fostering solidarity and offering a positive, community-based outlet for artistic expression in response to the repression many experienced during and after the protests.

— Between 2010 and 2016, Persbook primarily operated in the digital realm, connecting artists through shared works that bridged local environmental and cultural issues with modernist

approaches. Over time, Darzi expanded Persbook's focus to include site-specific installations in remote areas of Iran, integrating physical and communal artmaking with its digital presence. For instance, in 2015, Persbook organized an event in the village of Qourtan, Isfahan Province, where artists collaborated with local residents to create installations highlighting the village's historical architecture and cultural heritage. Another notable project took place in 2016 in the Hyrcanian Forests of Mazandaran Province, where artists developed installations emphasizing ecological preservation and the importance of forest conservation. Despite bureaucratic challenges, Darzi's initiatives successfully brought together artists to revitalize decaying spaces and engage with local communities. These events advanced discussions on eco-art and provided platforms for emerging Iranian artists to explore diverse artistic forms while addressing pressing environmental issues.

— In the evolving landscape of Iranian environmental art, Persbook has played a pivotal role in empowering women artists through site-specific projects and collaborative installations. By providing platforms for female artists to engage with pressing environmental issues, Persbook has fostered opportunities for artistic expression that addresses topics such as ecological preservation and the intersection of gender and cultural heritage. For instance, projects like *Handwork [Dastkaar]* (2020), have enabled women to lead initiatives that merge artistic innovation with environmental advocacy, which will be explained in the following section. The initiative's inclusive approach actively promotes women's leadership in project conceptualization and execution. By emphasizing collaborative and participatory methods, Persbook has broken traditional gender barriers, positioning women as central figures in artistic dialogues. This focus has significantly enhanced female representation, blending feminist and environmental perspectives. Specific events have invited women artists to reclaim neglected spaces, transforming them into platforms for public engagement and raising their visibility in both artistic and community contexts.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF REPETITION — As environmental art in Iran continues to navigate the complexities of ecological degradation and political resistance, artists are increasingly experimenting with diverse materials and techniques to deepen their engagement with landscapes and environmental themes. Similarly, other art forms, such as fiber art, merge cultural traditions with modern activism to address pressing social issues. This dynamic interplay between materiality and artistic intent is exemplified

by initiatives like Persbook, where contemporary Iranian artists reimagine traditional practices to provoke critical reflection and challenge societal norms. Fabric and textiles, often considered precursors to fiber arts, are foundational to this visual art form. Fiber art encompasses aesthetic creations using natural and synthetic materials such as plant fibers (cotton, linen), animal fibers (sheep wool, goat hair, silk cocoon), and synthetic fibers (acrylic, plastic) (Constantine and Larsen 1980, Parker 1989/2019). While historically linked to domestic labor and perceived as “decorative,” fiber art evolved during the twentieth century, particularly with the rise of second-wave feminism, into a powerful medium for social critique (Turney 2009, Parker 1989).

— In the 1960s and 1970s, fiber art gained prominence as a vehicle for feminist activism, challenging traditional gender roles by repurposing crafts like weaving, knitting, and embroidery for public and political engagement (Greer 2011). This practice, termed “craftivism,” blends craft and activism, using the tactile nature of fiber arts to address issues such as gender, consumerism, and industrialization (Greer 2011: 170–176). By incorporating conceptual and abstract elements, fiber art has expanded beyond traditional craft, engaging with themes of gender, identity, and social politics within postmodern frameworks (Rosenberg 2007). In Iranian culture, carpets and textiles have historically been produced in the domestic sphere, with women’s labor often undervalued or invisible. Contemporary Iranian fiber artists challenge these traditional norms by blending sewing, weaving, and embroidery together with modern expressions, addressing themes such as femininity, labor, and identity. These works recontextualize the repetitive motions of craft to critique societal expectations and gender roles while also engaging with broader cultural and environmental issues. By transforming private, domestic crafts into public expressions, these artists use textiles as tools for social commentary and empowerment. Contemporary Iranian fiber artists expand on traditional textile practices, reimaging them as powerful tools for public discourse and critique. By moving crafts like weaving and embroidery from domestic settings into public and collaborative arenas, these artists challenge entrenched perceptions of gendered labor and domesticity. This innovative approach bridges traditional craftsmanship with contemporary artistic practices, fostering dialogues that address cultural narratives, environmental concerns, and the evolving role of craft in modern art.

— This transformation is exemplified by Persbook’s *Handwork [Dastkaar]* project, the 10th Contemporary Art Annual held

in 2020 at the Sahib House in Kashan, Iran. Situated within the Manouchehri House – a celebrated example of traditional Iranian architecture – this project highlighted Kashan’s architectural heritage while connecting historical crafts with modern artistic expressions. *Handwork* prioritized objectives such as fostering collaborative and participatory art practices, supporting emerging talents, and encouraging meaningful interactions between artists and communities. These goals reflected a broader commitment to integrating environmental and cultural themes within contemporary Iranian art practices. Building on earlier initiatives, the project began in 2017 in Qourtan, Isfahan, with a focus on fiber art recycling and environmental engagement. It brought together participants from previous Persbook sessions, including the 9th annual event in the Hyrcanian Forests. Contributors created handmade woven and sewn pieces that symbolized a human chain through collective weaving and making, emphasizing community-driven collaboration.

— The *Untitled* project, featuring tapestry and macramé, was a cornerstone of *Handwork* [fig. 2]. This initiative incorporated Kashani motifs and traditional building techniques, recontextualizing woven and embroidered materials to bridge historical and contemporary frameworks. Spearheaded by Neda Darzi during the pandemic, the project included prominent artists such as Hoda Akhlaghi, Farzaneh Shahri, Farideh Ebadi, Narges Mohammadian, Elham Rahimian, and Mitra Makoui, whose collaborative efforts explored environmental and cultural themes through fiber art. By redefining the role of domestic crafts, *Handwork* challenged traditional gender norms and elevated practices like tapestry and weaving from private, household activities to public expressions of environmental and social critique. The collaborative and site-specific nature of the project provided women artists with a platform to create large-scale works, emphasizing their agency and presence in an art scene historically dominated by men. This transition blurred boundaries between the domestic and public spheres, empowering women to redefine their artistic practices while expanding their cultural and environmental significance.

— In the context of site-specific art and fiber art’s engagement with cultural and gender themes, the artwork *My Land is Qamsar* by Neda Darzi, in collaboration with Naghmeh Shirvani, serves as a notable example [fig. 3]. The installation consists of forty crocheted pieces, adorned with red and pink flowers, which float

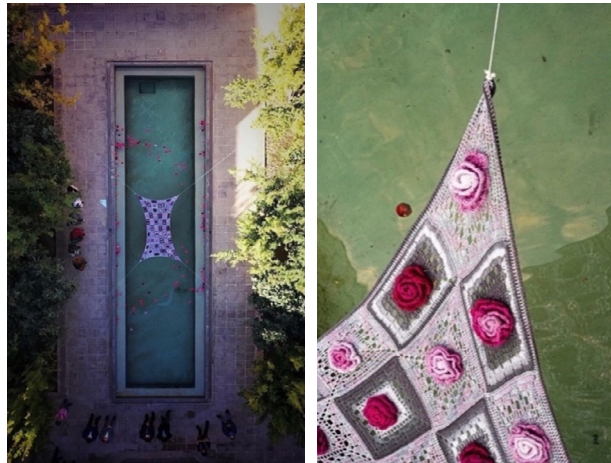


// Figure 2

Participatory Artwork, *Dastkar Project*, *Untitled*, 2020. Artists: Mansooreh Bagharaee (Crocheting, 4×2 m), Toktam Hemmati (Tapestry & Calligraphy, 150×300 cm), Hoda Akhlaghi (Tapestry, 3×3 m), Farzaneh Shahri (Tapestry & Macrame, 1.5×1 m), Narges Mohammadian (Tapestry & Sewing, 2.70×1.30 m). Manouchehri House, Kashan, Iran

on a large pond at the performance site. These threads symbolically connect the female body to the traditions and structures of the house, bridging the intimate labor of women with broader cultural practices. As part of the *Handwork* project, this piece embodies a feminine, environmental, and cultural approach, critically exploring gendered spatial arrangements within Iranian culture.

— The piece draws its inspiration from the desert region of Qamsar, Kashan, known for its historical and cultural significance in rose water production. This tradition, led predominantly by women, has long been a cornerstone of the local economy. Women, often the heads of households, gather annually to collect and process rose petals, a laborious process that has sustained the community for generations. By employing traditional craft techniques like crochet, the *Handwork* project engages with craftivism. This dynamic process of making reflects a continuous state of “becoming” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987), where artworks are not static but evolve through ongoing transformation. Crochet therefore plays a key role in this collaborative work under *Handwork*. Each stitch, like those in knitting, repeats to form intricate patterns, with each loop holding transformative potential (Turney 2009: 7–8). This repetition reflects the ongoing labor of women in Qamsar and symbolizes the continuous cycle of work and cultural preservation. The floating crocheted roses serve as a metaphor for the intricate connection between human effort and natural processes, much like the cyclical tradition of rose water production. Rather than focusing on their physical interaction with the water, the artwork highlights the symbolic transformation and persistence of cultural practices through the interplay of craft and nature.



// Figure 3

Neda Darzi (in collaboration with Naghme Shirvani), *My Land is Qamsar*, 2020, Crocheting, 2x1 m, Manouchehri House, Iran.

EMBODIED LANDSCAPES — As Iranian environmental art continues to explore deeper intersections of culture, identity, and nature, artists are increasingly addressing issues of gender and societal expectations. In this context, Atefeh Khas's *Virgin* reimagines both the body and the landscape by positioning a veiled female figure within the natural setting of Chahkoo Canyon on Qeshm Island, where the harsh, weathered rock formations serve as a backdrop [fig. 4].



// Figure 4

Atefeh Khas, *Virgin Series*, 2015. Performance, Chahkoo, Qeshm, Iran. Digital photography, printed on silk paper, 50x70 cm.

The figure is draped in a flowing white veil, which cascades over the rock surface like a continuation of the landscape itself. The contrast between the delicate fabric and the rugged stone creates a striking visual tension, symbolizing the interplay between femininity and the timeless strength of nature. This choice of setting and material emphasizes the relationship between the human body and the environment, where the veil evokes both purity and mystery while visually blending the figure into the surrounding rock, suggesting a symbiotic connection between womanhood and the earth (Cassirer 1951, Eliade 1956).

While caves are universally associated with creation, rebirth, and renewal (Cooper 1987: 126) – such as the Dikteon Cave in Greek mythology or India’s Ajanta Caves – they hold particular significance in Iranian culture. Figures like Spenta Armaiti and Anahita embody maternal and nurturing values tied to the earth and fertility (Boyce 1982: 72, Dostkhah 1991: 300). By situating the female figure in such a symbolically loaded environment, Khas taps into the maternal values tied to Iranian cultural memory, echoing ancient goddess symbols that portray women as central figures of “life, continuity, and renewal” (Malinowski 2013: 103–106). Building upon the exploration of environmental art and its connections to spiritual and cultural concepts, spaces are understood as more than physical entities; they carry symbolic meanings and cultural representations (Löw 2006). Tara Goudarzi’s work exemplifies these themes through her innovative reinterpretation of the body and the landscape. Her artwork *Curl Up*, set on Hormuz Island, reflects a personal journey of introspection and self-discovery [fig. 5]. The photograph captures Goudarzi curled in a cave-like crevice amidst vibrant, layered rock formations. The rugged textures of the earth contrast with her diminutive form, symbolizing the tension between human fragility and the overwhelming power of nature.

For Goudarzi, curling up and physically compressing herself into the environment is a deeply symbolic act that intertwines introspection, primal instincts, and a return to origin. She describes this as physical research – an embodied exploration of identity and belonging (Goudarzi 2011). By placing her body in confined spaces



// Figure 5

Tara Goudarzi, *Curl Up*, 2011. Performance, Hormuz Island, Iran. Digital photograph, (Photo by Shahnaz Zarkesh).

within expansive landscapes, she investigates the tension between fragility and vastness, using the physical act as a tool for reflection. This immersive gesture strips away societal constructs and markers of identity, allowing her to reconnect with a fundamental sense of self. The posture of squatting invokes a symbolic return to the embryonic state, bridging the physical and existential by prompting questions such as: Who am I beyond societal roles? How do I relate to the larger cosmos? Through this intimate connection to the earth, Goudarzi transforms her body into a medium of inquiry, examining themes of origin, identity, and interconnection. Her work emphasizes how physicality can engage with broader concepts of belonging and existence. By hiding her body within natural elements like tree hollows or stones, Goudarzi transforms these spaces into sites of refuge and introspection. This mirrors the symbolic significance of both caves and wombs as places of birth, renewal, and mystery (Lawlor and Toadvine 2007). Her work intertwines personal identity with broader cultural and existential themes, reclaiming agency within these often-concealed spaces.

— To grasp the meaning in environmental art and its cultural implications, theoretical frameworks can help interpret Goudarzi's work. Identity, shaped by bodily expression and cultural symbols, is central in contemporary Iranian art. Visual representations show how a lack of self-awareness can reduce identity to mere physical forms (Rose 2011: 90). Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity suggests that gender is not an innate quality but rather a set of behaviors and actions repeatedly performed, shaped, and reinforced by societal norms (Butler 1990). These repeated actions create the illusion of a fixed identity, but Butler argues that this performativity can be challenged and subverted through deliberate, disruptive acts. In *Curl Up*, Goudarzi integrates her body with natural landscapes, using her physical gestures to question and reinterpret these societal norms. By curling up and compressing herself into the earth, she symbolically rejects the external roles and expectations imposed on femininity. For Butler, the performativity of gender is enacted through continuous repetition of societal behaviors (Butler 1993: 219–220), but Goudarzi interrupts this cycle by removing herself from societal frameworks and recontextualizing her body within nature. Her act of blending into the environment disrupts traditional expectations of how femininity is performed and allows her to explore a more fluid and introspective identity. Through this embodied gesture, Goudarzi aligns with Butler's argument that societal constructs of identity can be resisted and reimagined. The act of physically merging with the earth becomes a metaphor for

shedding socially constructed identities and embracing a sense of self that is interconnected with nature and free from external impositions. Goudarzi's work reclaims her body as both a site of resistance to societal norms and a medium for reflecting on existence and belonging.

— Tara Goudarzi's exploration of identity through environmental interactions can be extended to challenge dominant ideologies using José Muñoz's (1999) concept of "disidentification." Her work disrupts fixed identities and subverts traditional portrayals of femininity, particularly those aligned with societal expectations of visibility, beauty, and compliance. In many cultural contexts, including Iran, traditional portrayals of feminine identity often emphasize overt visibility, aesthetic conformity, and adherence to gendered social roles. These portrayals frequently reduce women to passive, decorative figures, defined more by their appearance than by their agency or individuality. Goudarzi's *Mask of Yellow Weeds* (2009) exemplifies this critique through performance art [fig. 6]. By obscuring her face with yellow weeds, she resists societal norms that equate visibility with feminine identity. This act of masking creates a visual dialogue between the human body and the environment, symbolizing the fluidity of identity and its disconnection from socially imposed roles. Goudarzi herself describes her process as unsettling yet transformative, noting that obscuring her reflection allows her to redefine identity beyond conventional constructs.

— The artworks discussed illustrate how female figures interacting with natural environments or mythological themes question, reframe, and resist inherited constructs of identity. For instance, in works like *Handwork* and *My Land is Qamsar*, the body is depicted as intertwined with environmental and cultural elements. *Handwork* symbolizes the deep-rooted connection between women and nature in Iranian culture, while *My Land is Qamsar* situates the female form within a specific geographical and cultural landscape, underscoring the relationship between human and environmental elements. These pieces reflect how the body, as a site of both personal and cultural significance, engages with environmental themes. In *Virgin*, Khas contrasts the delicate veil with the rugged landscape, symbolizing the tension between femininity and the enduring strength of nature. This juxtaposition critiques traditional gender roles, positioning the female body as both part of and in contrast to the natural environment. *Curl*



// Figure 6

Tara Goudarzi, *A Mask of Yellow Weeds*, 2013. Cloud Forest, Shahrud, Iran. (Photo by Mohamad Mehdi Motevali Taher).

Up further explores the intimate connection between body and landscape. By curling up within the natural environment, the artist portrays themes of renewal and introspection, challenging conventional gender representations and highlighting the body as a site of constraint and empowerment within nature. In *Mask of Yellow Weeds*, Goudarzi obscures her face with natural elements, symbolizing a deliberate departure from traditional femininity. This masking disrupts gender stereotypes and societal norms, using the body as a metaphor for reclaiming identity and confronting broader cultural and environmental narratives. This engagement with nature and mythology reflects a deeper cultural context that shapes artistic expression, ultimately revealing how these artists address and redefine the complex interplay between gender, nature, and cultural identity. The body in these artworks is conceptualized not merely as a physical entity but as a cultural and political landscape imbued with personal and collective narratives. Iranian women artists leverage this conceptualization to interrogate and reshape prevailing narratives about gender and power. By portraying the body as a dynamic arena for cultural negotiation, environmental art serves as a potent vehicle for expressing and critiquing societal norms and expectations. The women artists in this study view the body as a landscape with personal, cultural, and social meanings. Aligning with Sobchack's (2004) contemplation of the body as "home" – a place of both constraint and possibility – these artists reclaim and redefine the role of the female body in contemporary Iranian art, blending personal, cultural, and environmental narratives into potent acts of resistance and reimagination.

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Figure 1: Khanjani, R. S. (2015): *Fact, fiction, and eccentricity in Parviz Kimiavi's images from The Garden of Stones*. *Offscreen*, 19(6). URL: <https://offscreen.com/view/garden-of-stones> (10.2020)

Figure 2: Courtesy of Persbook. Image sourced from the Persbook website: persbookart.com

Figure 3: Images sourced from the artists' Instagram (@nedadarzi) and the Persbook website (persbookart.com)

Figure 4: Courtesy of the Artist. Image sourced from the artist's website: www.atefekhhas.com/virgin-series.html

Figure 5: Courtesy of the Artist. Image sourced from the artist's website: www.arttara.com/squat.html

Figure 6: Courtesy of the Artist. Image sourced from the artist's website: www.arttara.com/squat.html

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