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Identity, memory and the poetics of veil: Iranian artists Sepideh Salehi and Kamran Taherimoghaddam at New York's Rogue Space Chelsea

By **Brittney**
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New York-based artist Sepideh Salehi explores identity, social relationships and cultural heritage in collaboration with her husband and partner Kamran Taherimoghaddam.

Rogue Space Chelsea holds the collaborative exhibition “Strappa: Dialogue and Performance” by Iranian couple Sepideh Salehi and Kamran Taherimoghaddam.



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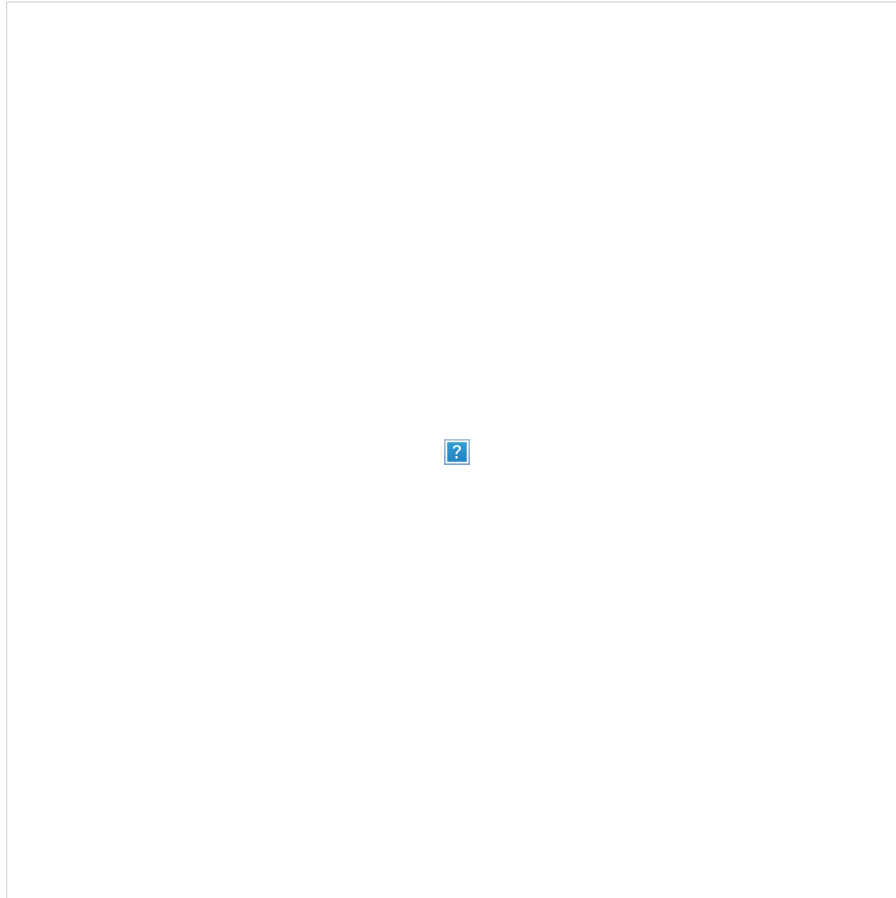
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Sepideh Salehi, 'Mohr Portrait', 2016, photography installed on wood panel with frottage on Japanese paper, 20 x 24 in. Image courtesy the artist.

“Strappa: Dialogue and Performance”, curated by Roya Khadjavi Heidari, runs from 3 to 8 March 2016 at New York-based [Rogue Space Chelsea](#) – a commercial venue with a programme of outreach and charitable events promoting art as a means of change and development in countries like Nepal, Haiti, Syria and Palestine, among others.

Control and conflict: performance and video

The husband and wife duo's exhibition builds upon the video project *Strappa* that [Sepideh Salehi](#) and [Kamran Taherimoghaddam](#) made in 2005. The title derives from the Italian verb 'strappare' (to tear) that here is used in the imperative tense, expressing the idea of control and conflict in relationships between men and women. In the video, a male figure and his female counterpart seem to argue through gestures, with their faces not appearing on the screen. While the woman expresses ire, vehemently ripping pieces of cloth, the man plays a *daf* (Persian frame drum) by gently brushing a plate, playing with it as it was a goblet drum and conveying a sense of comprehension and tenderness.

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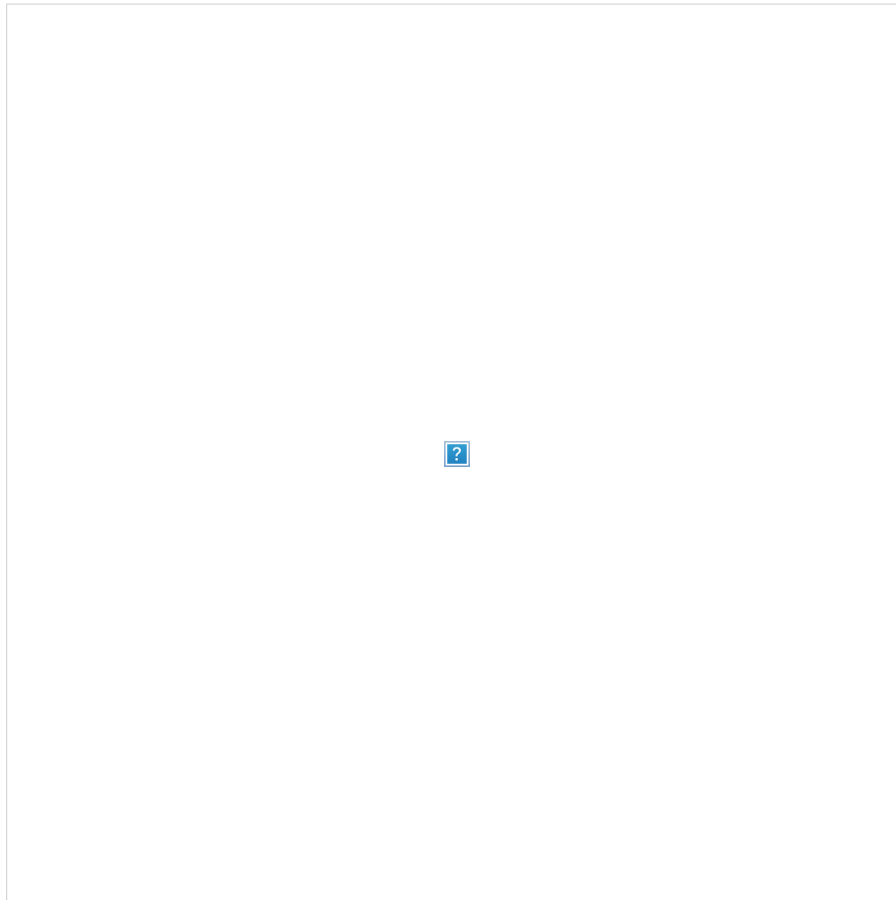
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Sepideh Salehi and Kamran Taherimoghaddam, 'Strappa', 2016, still from video. Image courtesy the artists.

If this very first version stages the mutual implication between a man and a woman, focusing on the power dynamic within a couple, the latest remake of *Strappa* (2016) broadens the discourse around the bond connecting human beings – particularly, between men and women in today's society. This is further investigated in the dialogue between Salehi's and Taherimoghaddam's recent painting and photography series presented in the show, reflecting on tradition, memory and identity, while offering an overview of the two artists' practice.

Strappa (2016) speaks the language of 'collective' through the visual element of the group, which is very present both in the artists' collaborative way of working and in Iranian society as a whole. Salehi and Taherimoghaddam re-propose a reflection on the notion of coercion in relationships, suggesting the ways this may be derived from gender issues in our society – regardless of religion, nation or culture. The idea of the struggle between males and females is embodied by the band of men playing a percussion instrument from Iran called *tonbak* – here used to reference tradition – and the women tearing pieces of cloth apart, symbolising the rebellious sentiment of becoming visible through break and possibly change.

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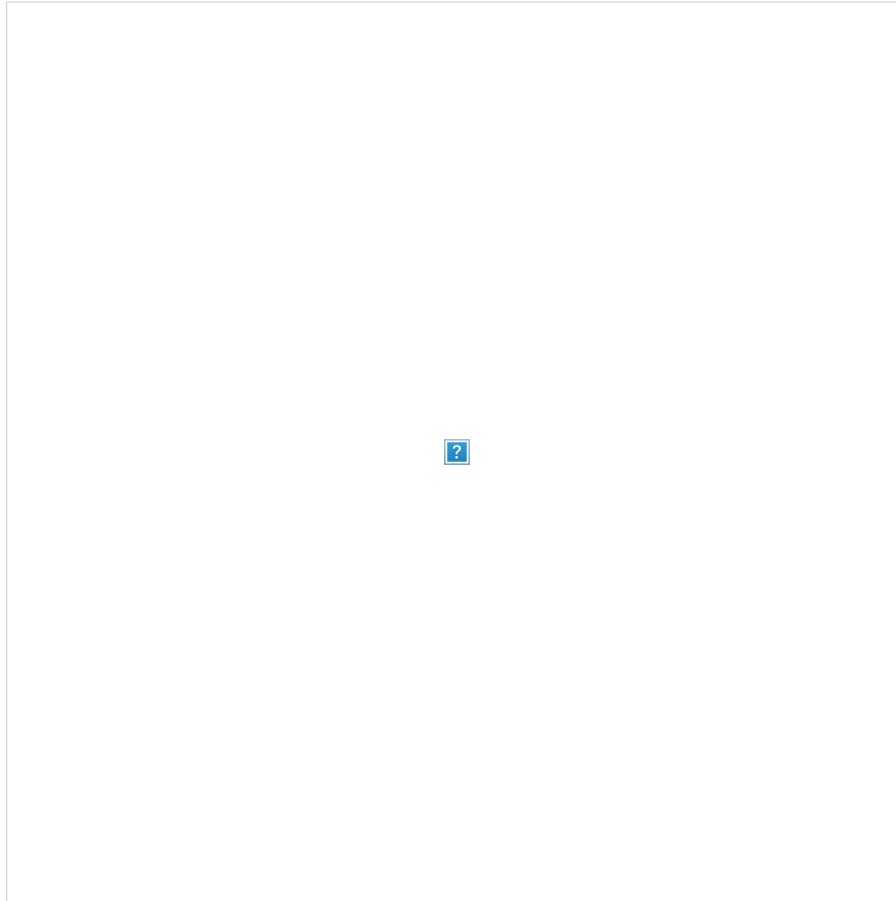
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Sepideh Salehi and Kamran Taherimoghaddam, 'Strappa', 2016, still from video. Image courtesy the artists.

A Feminine Perspective: the art of Sepideh Salehi

The individual work of New York-based Sepideh Salehi spans printing, photography and video animation, and revolves around the poetics of the veil as well as the stories from her own country of origin. Salehi's work primarily relies on paper, from which she creates videos, collages, drawing, photography and painting. The latter often includes a layer of writing and sewing.

Such a manual process is seminal to the artist's language and identity as an Iranian woman; however, the topics she explores, namely the power, the violence, the identity straddling national borders and cultures, as well as the role of women in our contemporary world, raise questions that refer to a more universal way of thinking. As Iranian academic [Mehri Honarbin-Holliday](#) explains in her essay *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* (2008),

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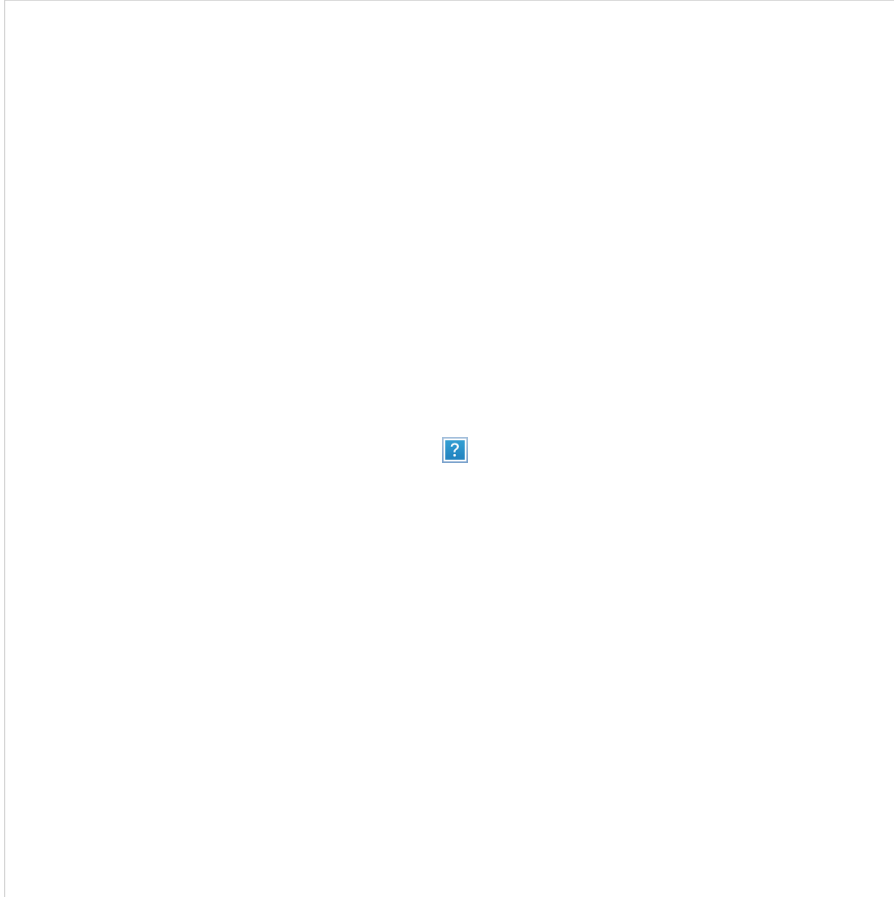
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“to determine the meaning of concepts such as identity, autonomy, and agency, we increasingly refer back to the experiences of individuals. Similarly, in identifying the shape of the bigger picture in society we examine the condition of the personal.



Sepideh Salehi, 'War & Peace series II', 2015, ink-watercolour pencil with collage on paper, 10 x 7 in (work size without frame). Image courtesy the artist.

Such connections between global occurrences and Salehi's personal experience of them are also seen in videos like *Ah Sigh* (2012-2013), *Yellow Door* (2013) and *Waltz in Blue* (2013-2015). In these works, each of the stories are taken from actual news, the characters of which – protesters or journalists – take part in occurred events.

The artist then uses the video recordings and the documentation of unpleasant events in Iran sourced from the social media and other digital references. The result is a combination of cruel reality and dream-like imagery, where the bodies and the surrounding space have lost their original appearances. Yet, true-to-life gestures, movements and actions keep the viewer anchored to the brutality of the real world.

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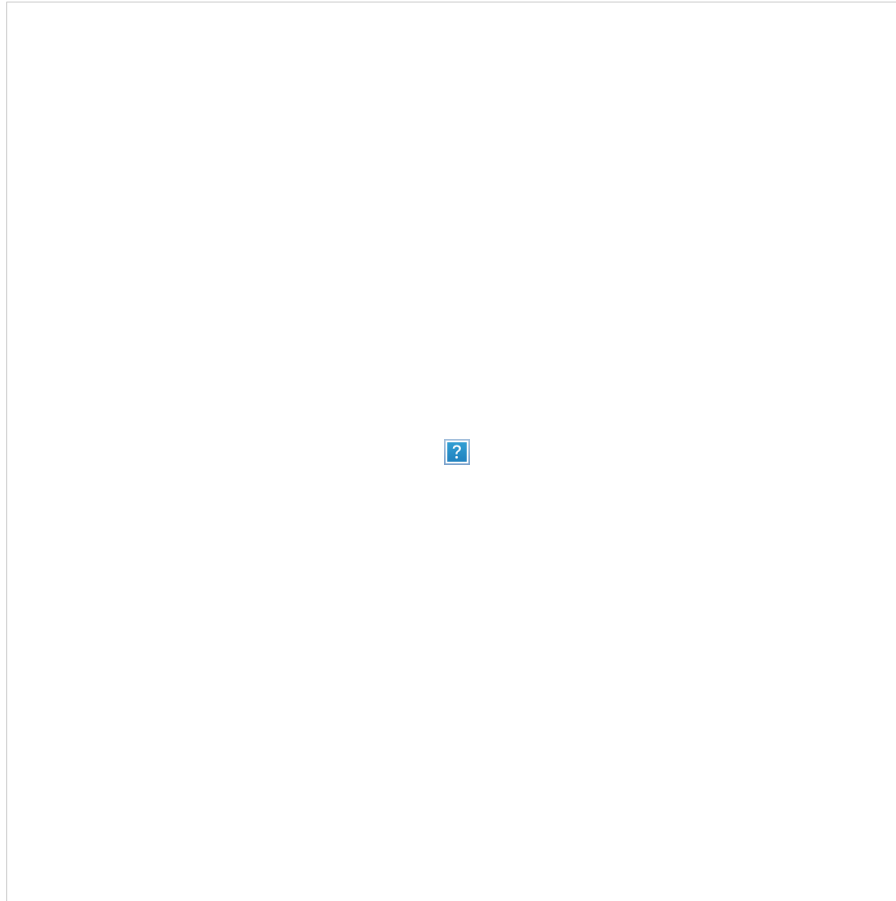
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Sepideh Salehi, 'Mohr Portrait', 2015, photography installed on wood panel with frottage on Japanese paper, 20 x 24 in. Image courtesy the artist.

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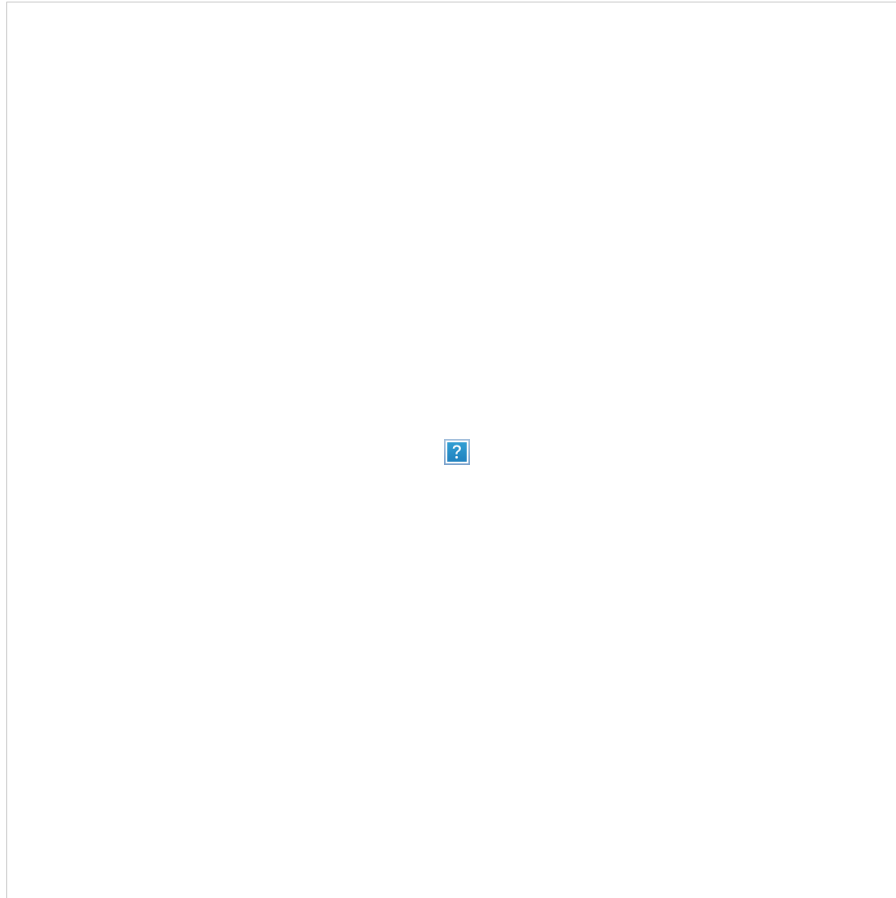
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Sepideh Salehi, 'Mohr Portrait', 2015, photography installed on wood panel with frottage on Japanese paper, 20 x 24 in. Image courtesy the artist.

The image of the veil

The image of the veil covering, obscuring, even censoring is pivotal to Salehi's research. Whether it stimulates fantasies of penetrating beyond the "filter" or claims feminine passivity, the veil is a clear reference to the still present issues of social and political repression in Iran.

In the series *Mohr Portrait* (2015) photography and frottage on Japanese paper overlap, resulting in female figures depicted with their faces covered and a transparent pattern delicately laying upon them. In this work, under the softness of the covering layer, the "shield" references the woman's oppressive condition in Muslim society, while recalling the experience of artists growing up in a country where the control of every aspect of social and personal life is extreme.

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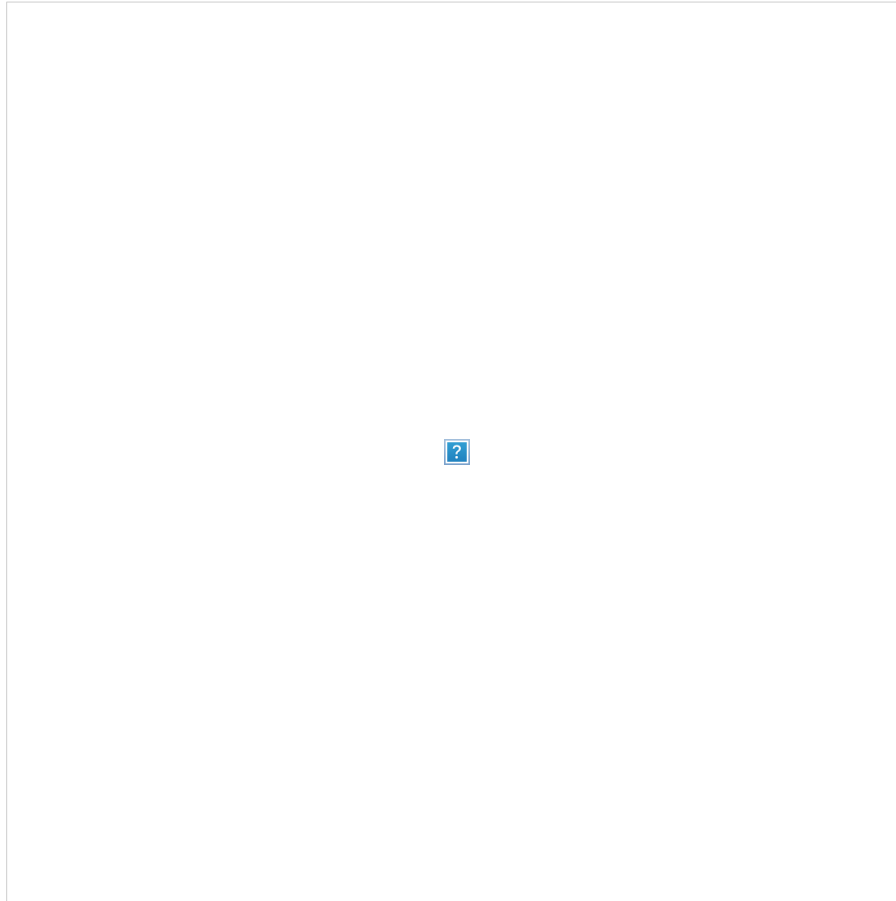
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Sepideh Salehi, 'Untitled', 2015, pencil, frottage and collage on Japanese paper installed on wood panel, 36 x 36 in. Image courtesy the artist.

As the artist further explains in the essay accompanying the exhibition,

“*The concept of covering up, hiding and privacy are all of interest to me. Utilising writing and words as a form of drawing is one way I find my imagery. These drawings emerge from a union between the immediacy of line and the direct and literal communicative properties of writing. Separation from home and family, longing and the use of traditional letter writing are all addressed in my works.*

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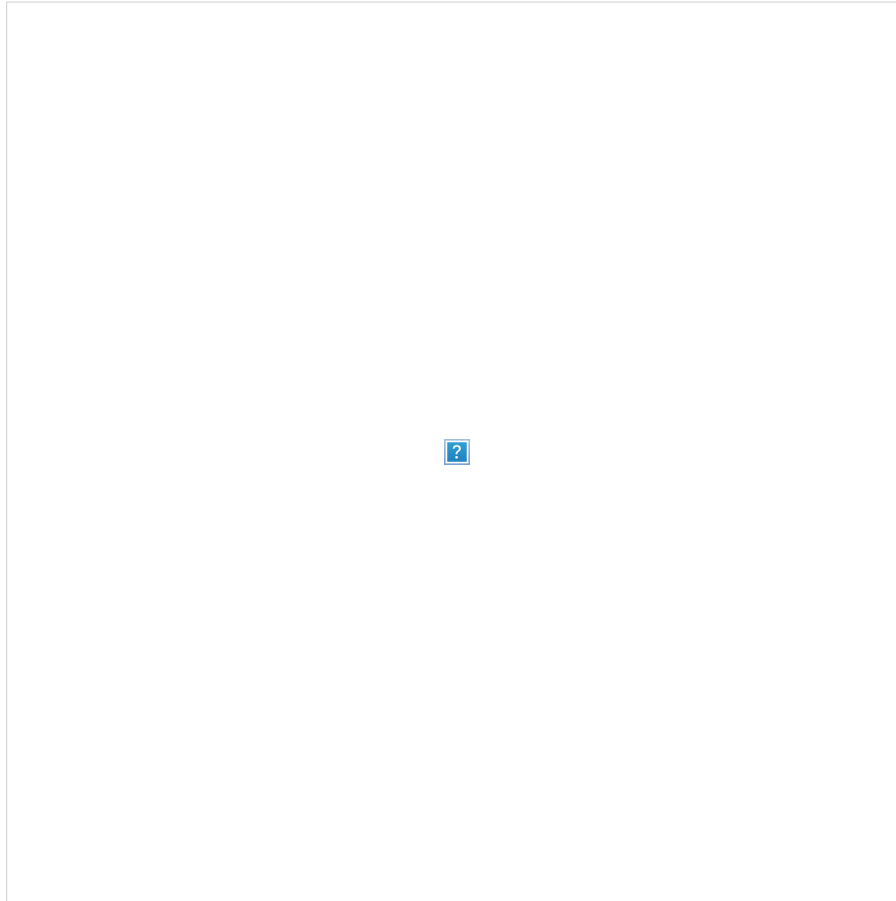
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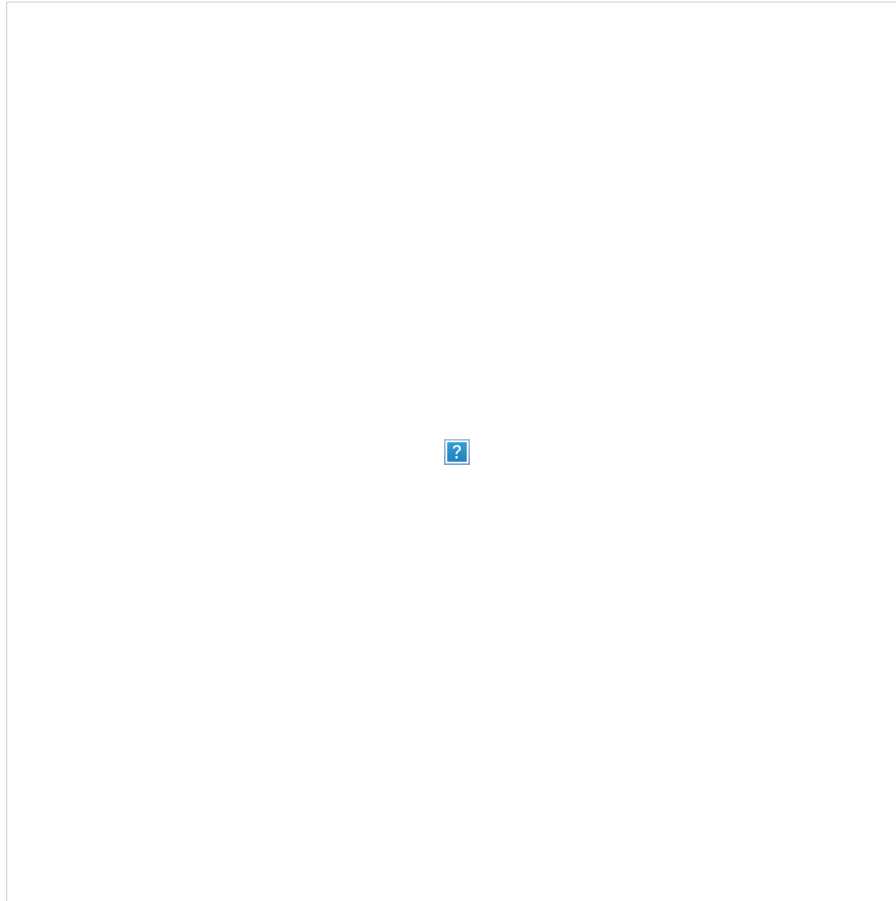
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Sepideh Salehi, 'Memories I', 2007, pencil, frottage and collage on Japanese paper installed on canvas, 49 x 59 in. Image courtesy the artist.

Similarly, the series of paintings *Memories I* (2007-2015) and *Memories II* (2010) depict more abstract subjects; they evoke mental projections and blurred events from the past, which are hidden in our subconscious and coming to surface through the act of rubbing and drawing.

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Sepideh Salehi, 'Memories II', 2010, ink, pencil, frottage on paper, 22 x 30 in. Image courtesy the artist.

Quoting Salehi's words from her artist statement,

“The repeated images of the stones create a rhythm leading me in the end, to an imagery revealing layers upon layers. They form a pattern, or echo words that become evident through this deliberate meditative work process.

Carmen Stolfi

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By **Brittney**

Brittney is a writer, curator and contemporary art gallerist. Born in Singapore and based in New York City, Brittney maintains a deep interest in the contemporary art landscape of Southeast Asia. This is combined with an equally strong interest in contemporary art from the Asian diasporas, alongside the issues of identity, transmigration and global relations.

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