



Raha Raissnia

Selected press



# FRIEZE

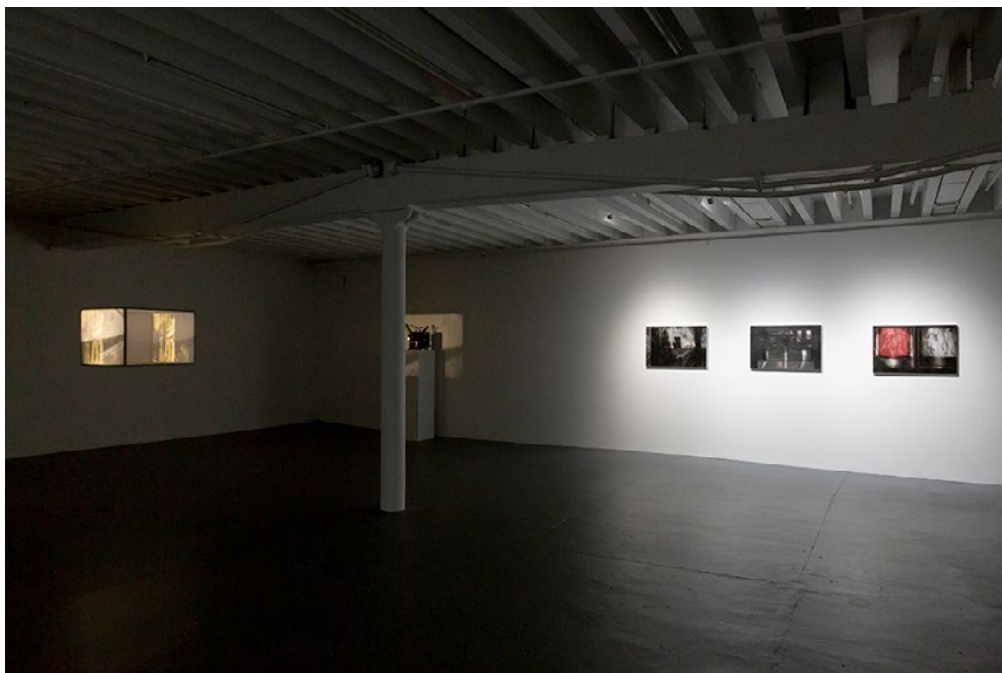


Raha Raissnia, 'Galvanization', 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

As we are hurled towards the future ever faster, pawing desperately at the glowing glass of our devices as we go, it feels like nothing could be more anachronistic than the analogue. For those artists like Iranian artist Raha Raissnia, whose 'Galvanization' is on view at Miguel Abreu in New York, it must seem like they are a part of some esoteric order, a steward of the secrets of the very recent past.

In densely layered 16mm films and heavily worked, quasi-photographic canvases and works on paper that make up her show, Raissnia's devotion to the vagaries of celluloid – its rough grain, its susceptibility to scratches and spills, its finicky relation to light – is palpable and infectious. In interviews, she makes clear that her passion sprang in part from the influence of her late father, an amateur photographer who would take her on childhood adventures in the streets of her native Tehran to photograph protests against the Shah in the lead up to the Iranian Revolution. She occasionally uses his old negatives as raw material for her art. Perhaps equally influential was the impression left by her work in the early 2000s at Anthology Film Archives in New York, where she hungrily set herself upon the banquet of the organization's offerings. But it is evident that the thrall in which Raissnia is held by photography and film transcends the merely personal and extends to a universal concern with the nature of memory.

Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the ravishing pair of films, *Galvanoscope 1* (2018) and *Galvanoscope 2 (Film A and Film B)* (both 2018) – the strongest in the show. Tentative, flickering and dream-like, the films are projected onto floating cubes of white scrim, which key up their already spectral qualities and lend them the luminous density of projector beams filtering through clouds of cigarette smoke in theatres of a bygone era. (For



Raha Raissnia, 'Galvanization', 2019, exhibition view.  
 Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

*Galvanoscope 2* she projected two looped copies of the same three-minute film on both sides of the scrim cube, which doubled the disorienting effect, especially as they inevitably fell out of synch.) Painstakingly constructed using a collection of slides of an abandoned 14th century Indian mosque that a friend rescued from the refuse of Brooklyn College, which Raissa re-photographed with a 16mm camera in her studio, the films have the flavour of some of the early avant-garde cinema that helped form her vision. Stan Brakhage comes immediately to mind. But unlike Brakhage, master of the celestial and the intimate, Raissnia's films are suffused with nostalgia, as if these architectural forms obliquely connect her to some kind of ancestral memory, or perhaps to the imagined life she was unable to live when she was exiled from her homeland.

The paintings and works on paper in the exhibition were slightly less sure-footed. Some, like the pair of brooding, melancholic portraits – one of a bowed, ghostly head (*Untitled*, 2018), and the other of a corpse-like hand (*Novice*, 2017) – have a satisfyingly grubby haptic quality. Other, smaller-scale works on canvas that are clearly based on roughed up photographs look weak in comparison to a suite of similarly rendered works on paper, their transfer to canvas making them seem somewhat gimmicky and tawdry. Oddly, this is not the case with the largest canvas in the show, *Shade* (2018), a haunting image of a what appears to be an empty courtyard, that summons up the sun-blasted chiaroscuro of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's famous first photograph.

In all of these works, memory seems a smudged thing, an accretion of sorrows or nameless longings, a pile of waterlogged books in a flooded library. But this feeling is anachronistic, too, in a world where we no longer stash our love letters in shoeboxes or pluck our photo albums off the shelf to take a stroll through the petrified forest of our past. This is the poignance of the analogue: it reminds us that memory itself has come to lose some of its texture.

# Art in America



Raha Raissnia, *Shade*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

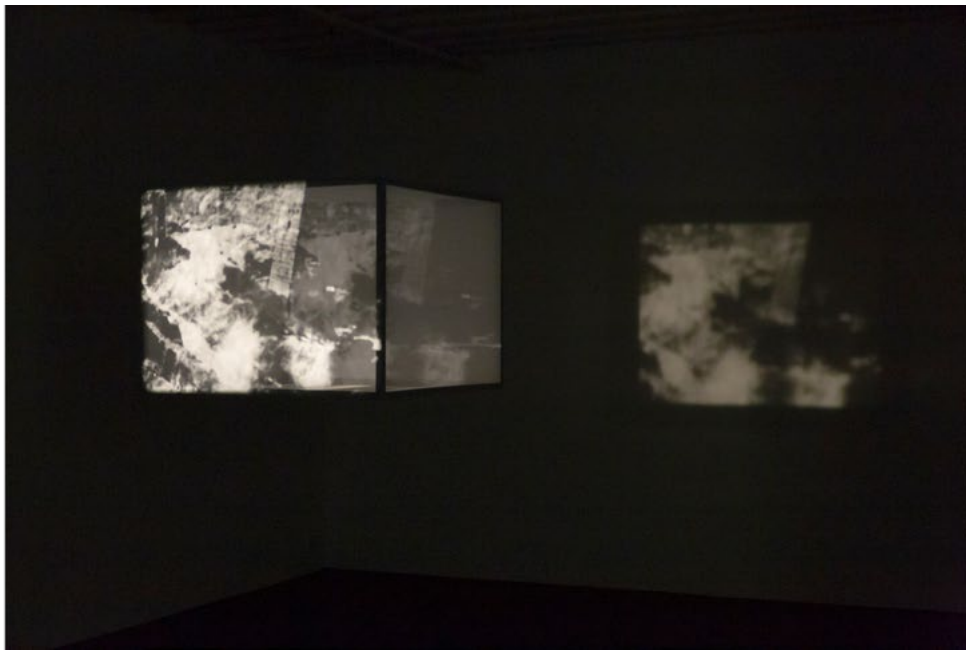
The films, drawings, and paintings in Raha Raissnia's latest show at Miguel Abreu, "*Galvanization*," interrogate the camera's capacity to faithfully record subjects or to represent historical moments. Depicting details of photographic images in heavily abstracted form, the works stimulate historical material by reframing its particulars. Traces of architectural features and body parts appear amid densely matted textures or dissolve in palimpsests, the artist highlighting the rhythms and movements common to personal memory.

Much of Raissnia's source material for the works came from a set of 35mm slides labeled "*Sultanate Architecture*" that was discarded by Brooklyn College. The images show the ruins of a fourteenth-century mosque. She also used other found slides and her own photographs. In her large-scale painted portrayals of the materials, the overall scenes are eschewed for dark alleyways, dirt roads, and ornament on facades. *Shade* (2018), for example, shows a shadowy, unmarked box in the middle of an otherwise vacant street. The source photo's grain is meticulously represented in thick, tenebrous layers of paint. In some areas, the surface of the work is coated with shiny gelatin, somewhat warping the image underneath and providing a protective polish.

*Alluvius* (2018) is a suite of twelve mixed-medium drawings on paper hung in a floor-to-ceiling grid. Many of the compositions are bifurcated, as if showing side-by-side film cells snipped from the reel. Occasional fragments of bodies appear—a hand here, a face there. But when one steps back to see the work as a whole, it shape-shifts. The spatial connections between the drawings suddenly feel less informed by the filmic frame than they do by architecture: chiaroscuro renderings of interiors, bedrooms, and windows dominate the overall composition. Raissnia's dense mark-making within her depictions of these spaces collapses surface and depth.

The installations *Galvanoscope 1* and *Galvanoscope 2 (Films A and B)*, both 2018, consist of 16mm films projected onto cubic, lampshade-like scrim structures suspended from the ceiling. The first installation features a single film. The second overlays two reels projected onto the cube from opposite sides of the room. The various projections in these installations switch rapidly between close-ups of ornate mosques, pans of unpaved roads, and slow sequences showing cloudless skies. The scrim structures, with their multiple mesh panels, divide the overlapping imagery at the same time that they flatten it. In *Galvanoscope 2*, the two three-minute, sepia-toned films projected onto the cube play on top of each other, their superimposition producing a flickering, layered picture of Iran. Each image in the footage lingers for a moment before dissolving into the strobing of light.

Although the images Raissnia used for the works in the show correspond to specific times and places, in her hands they become less coordinates for mapping historical narratives than they do generative, perceptual conduits for excavating, challenging, and reprocessing visual cultures. Raissnia does not simply present past events, but tests the ways in which we are trained to remember them.



Raha Raissnia, *Galvanoscope 1*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York



# BROOKLYN RAIL



Raha Raissnia, 'Galvanization', 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

Raha Raissnia's atmospheric new paintings, drawings, and projections share much with the work she exhibited at The Drawing Center last winter. The first things a visitor to Miguel Abreu's Eldridge Street location will encounter, in fact, are twelve drawings that were included in the earlier show and which collectively share its title: *Alluvius* (2016). These drawings, as well as the bulk of what follows, incorporate and transform photographs of a ruined fourteenth-century mosque—Raissnia discovered them in a discarded collection of 35mm slides marked "Sultanate Architecture." Despite this continuity with past projects, the new exhibition is anything but a retread. It has its own distinct logic and consistently highlights tense interchanges between photography and painting, architecture and the body.

Although much of Raissnia's recent work originates in found imagery, the relationship between source material and a finished painting or drawing is anything but straightforward. Often, the process of translation involves a cannibalism of images. Raissnia will create a graphite drawing loosely based on a slide, then project another slide onto the drawing, photograph it, and produce another work from the result. This process may continue for several cycles, and in large-scale propositions usually involves the addition of dark oil paint and a thick gel medium. The result is a near-monochrome palimpsest of ambiguous images and painterly marks that, in the most extreme cases, approach total abstraction. In *Untitled* (2018), one of the most inscrutable works included at Miguel Abreu, a wide band of aggressively textured black pigment traverses the breadth of the painting, largely obscuring the

indistinct images below. Pale rectangles in the upper right quadrant of the panel—windows, perhaps—dissolve into a frenzy of gestural handling as they encounter this passage. Here, Raissnia's transformative process is demonstrated in microcosm.

Traces of descriptive subject matter do, however, remain. In several of the *Alluvius* drawings, spectral faces and hands emerge from the walls of the ruined mosque, suggesting how the bodies that inhabit and move through architectural space endow it with meaning and historical weight. In similar fashion, *Aviary #3* (2018) turns the mosque's decorative program into writhing, amorphous figures that seem to body forth from their architectural setting. The visual distortions that produce this illusion are owed to the dramatic texture of heavily worked paint, as well as Raissnia's photographic procedure: when re- photographing the source slide she approximated the effect of an anamorphic lens. *Untitled* (2018) makes use of other imaging technologies, combining a motif previously used in the *Alluvius* drawings with an x-ray and a sonogram. The viewer sees through the skin of the built environment to bodily forms beneath—architecture literally impregnated with a human presence. This work notably features the most dramatic color in the show, a rich red that covers half the painting and intensifies its organic, visceral effect.



Raha Raissnia, *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

The centerpieces of the show are two projected works, *Galvanoscope 1* and *Galvanoscope 2 (Film A and Film B)* (both 2018). Raissnia is well known for performances in which she manipulates two analog projectors in real time, combining images from each in an improvised dialogue that parallels her way of working with photographic slides, drawing, and painting. By contrast, the projectors at Miguel Abreu run automatically, each showing a predetermined three-minute loop. They nonetheless highlight the complexity, even unpredictability, of Raissnia's process, and at the same time develop the bodily and architectural themes of the paintings and drawings on display nearby. *Galvanoscope 2 (Film A and Film B)* consists of two projectors, facing each other from opposite ends of a large gallery space. Between them hangs a rectangular box, fabric stretched across a wooden armature. Each projector casts a series of images onto the box, but its surface is transparent, allowing the two projections to blend. Because of the fact that whichever projector is nearer imposes its images more powerfully, each side of the box displays a distinctive combination of the two films. *Galvanoscope 1* uses the same two series of images, but Raissnia has already combined them so they can be shown from a single projector. The two films, however, are not simply overlaid one on the other. Raissnia actively manipulated each of them, so that the final work approximates the experience of her performances. Together, the two *Galvanoscopes* testify to the surprising and diverse effects Raissnia can produce from a set repertoire of found images.

The *Galvanoscopes*, like most of the exhibition, foreground the "Sultanate Architecture" slides. Here, however, the material that Raissnia has combined with them is extremely dynamic, featuring dramatic effects of movement, shifting light, and shadow. This animates the viewer's relationship with Raissnia's found photographs, and evokes the embodied perceptual experience of moving through an architectural environment. Not only can we imaginatively project ourselves into the space of the ruined mosque, but we become, at the same time, acutely conscious of the gallery environment itself. The rectangular boxes which the *Galvanoscope* imagery is projected onto, respond to the shape and dimensions of the exhibition space, activating the visitor's passage through the show. It is here that the installation, designed in close collaboration with Abreu himself, particularly shines. The *Galvanoscope* boxes occupy surprisingly large expanses of empty space, allowing a genuinely environmental experience to develop. In this way, the design of the exhibition responds to the content and effect of Raissnia's imagery, lending her enigmatic architectural and bodily fragments a resonance and immediacy that might not otherwise be so obvious.



# ARTFORUM



Raha Raissnia, *Fountain*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

"All a blur": We describe monotony the same way we describe chaos. Raha Raissnia's drawings, despite their quiet consistency, have their genesis in revolution. Amid the 1979 uprising in Iran against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the artist, then a child, accompanied her father to the streets of downtown Tehran, where he would photograph demonstrations. She inherited his interest in the medium, and in "*Alluvius*"—her debut solo museum show—Raissnia reckons with tensions of identity and form by rephotographing and then drawing found archival imagery amassed over time. Rather than contest the notion that the camera lays claim to utter truth, Raissnia unsettles distinctions between media to suggest how images are laundered into personal truths. Perception becomes a kind of skeleton key, one remade and remade again unto meaningful divergence.

*Alluvius* (2016), one of two series here, consists of a dozen mixed-media drawings. One can make out urban architecture; a wraithlike face; and a spectral human hand cupped into a claw, reaching into darkness. The smaller charcoal drawings that form *Canto* (2017), blurry and luciform, appear less drawn than impressed. Occasionally, shadows resolve into human silhouettes, slurred by Raissnia's translation. The exhibition's centerpiece is in the corner, where an analog projector relays a carousel of hand-painted, 35-mm slides onto a framed scrim. Slides depict faces and hands as time nearly stills, expiring in slow, satisfying ticks. The source image for a larger work, *Fountain*, 2017, was scavenged from the trash (a box of slides had been thrown out by a lab at Brooklyn College). The drawing, muddily Photorealist, depicts a seemingly abandoned mosque's empty fountain. While a different artist might have used this backstory to evoke annihilative neglect concerning personal and national memory, Raissnia, through her process, suggests a more generative decay.

# THE NEW YORKER

**Raha Raissnia**

The Drawing Center

December 1–February 4, 2018

In a show titled "Alluvius," the Iranian-American artist exploits the smeary versatility of charcoal in abstract drawings based on photographic sources. Although they're full of unidentifiable shapes and apparition-like streaks of light, the works are tethered to specifics of time and place—there are some clues in their velvety depths. "Fountain" vaguely suggests a courtyard, with a round indent at the image's center; derived from a discarded 35-mm. slide that the artist found, which was labelled "Sultanate Architecture," it depicts the ablution fountain of a mosque. Raissnia, who was born in Iran and lived there during the 1978-79 revolution, cites childhood expeditions with her father to photograph protests against the Shah as a formative experience. The family relocated to the U.S. in the eighties, but she has returned to Tehran as an adult, to shoot slides of locations she visited in her youth. Considered in this context, her drawings, twice removed from their original sources, present photography as a poetic but unreliable witness to histories both public and private.

## BROOKLYN RAIL



Portrait of Raha Raissnia, pencil on paper by Phong Bui

Raha Raissnia's first solo exhibition in a museum, *Alluvius*, opened in early December at the Drawing Center. Organized by the museum's Assistant Curator, Amber Harper, the exhibition highlights Raissnia's mixed media work on paper as a central element of her multivalent practice, which encompasses film, photography, and performance. *The Rail's* Managing Editor, Charles Schultz, met up with Raissnia to talk about her formative years as a young artist, the animism of analog projectors, and how the abstract qualities of music relate to her work.

**Charles Schultz (Rail):** When did you first know you wanted to be an artist?

**Raissnia:** Probably my first year at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I had financial problems and I thought I would have to drop out. I remember thinking if this really happens, what would I do? There was just nothing else I could see myself doing. That's the first time, I knew then.

**Rail:** But you stayed.

**Raissnia:** Yeah fortunately. I really liked the school, I really liked what I was doing, and wanted to be there. There was nothing else. So you know, it worked out, I just have a lot of student loans now. But maybe it was good for me, because it kind of pushed me to appreciate the opportunity, and to work hard.

**Rail:** Did you have any teachers in Chicago who were especially meaningful to your progress there?

**Raissnia:** I studied closely with two women—Barbara Rossi and Susanne Doremus—who are still professors there. Barbara Rossi is one of the Chicago imagists. She taught





Raha Raissnia, *Alluvius*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

drawing. Every semester I studied with her closely and she was very supportive. I studied painting with Susanne Doremus. They were both so insightful and intelligent...incredible teachers. I really looked up to them and felt grateful to be able to study with them.

**Rail:** What were your drawings like back then?

**Raissnia:** They were I think better than now. [Laughter] Freer in a way, very visceral, very private, mainly because I felt so ignorant about art so I would do them secretly in a way for myself and would get very nervous when I had to show them in class. They were very much about my feelings and about my family. But I also responded to all the great romantic paintings in the museum: The Art Institute of Chicago that was in the same building. I was very much taken by Titian and all that flesh with his free flowing gestures.

**Rail:** You were in Chicago, where was your family?

**Raissnia:** My mom was back in Iran. My mom and I left Iran three years into the war in 1983. We went to Houston first because I had an uncle who was working there, and we waited for my father to wrap things up in Iran and join us. It took him three years. He came in 1986 and unfortunately had a sudden heart attack. He died after two weeks of arriving. I was just about to graduate from high school then and when I left to go to Chicago my mom returned to Iran.

**Rail:** How old were you then?

**Raissnia:** I was fifteen when we immigrated.

**Rail:** Fifteen, wow. And of course there was no email then, and international phone calls were not cheap. How did you keep in touch?

**Raissnia:** My father had the soul of a poet, he wrote a lot—maybe a letter everyday to us all when we left and before it to my brother because he had left earlier. In all his



Raha Raissnia, *Alluvius*, 2016 (detail). Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

handwritten letters he describes and conveys much of what happened socially and politically in Iran during and after the revolution and the Iraq - Iran war that followed it. Of course the letters also describe what was happening to our family. My father wasn't active politically, but then everybody was involved and affected somehow, you couldn't not be. He was excited at first about the revolution but soon after with the war it became disastrous for everyone. We had to leave because of it, my family was torn apart.

**Rail:** Your father was also an amateur photographer, right? Did you ever get to go out shooting with him?

**Raissnia:** Yes he loved photography. He had a nice camera, many lenses, and slide projectors. He really liked slides.

**Rail:** What sort of things did he photograph?

**Raissnia:** Family and things around him like nature, mostly, when we went out of the city...everyday life. He was really into it and always had his camera with him everywhere. During the revolution he was very active in street photography, mainly of all the mass protests which took place downtown right near his office. Several times he took me to the demonstrations without my mom knowing! It was sort of dangerous, but he was so excited and wanted me to see it!

**Rail:** What was that like?

**Raissnia:** I remember everything very well. I was about ten or eleven years old. There are pictures of me from the day the Shah left, I'm holding flowers because everybody was celebrating. Life during the revolution was very very exciting and everyone was on the edge. My father had an amazing sense of humor and was very down to earth, so life was sort of pleasant I remember.

I had a cool father. He was an avid reader of poetry and literature.

**Rail:** Did he encourage your creativity?

**Raissnia:** His influence on me was great but it was actually my mom that nurtured that in me and provided me with opportunities. She was the organizer. I did well in drawing

at a very young age, but I didn't do well in school mainly because it was severely strict. I couldn't obey and always got into trouble. The only thing I had going was with art projects. All the students would ask me to do their projects for them and in return they would let me cheat and pass me the answers during exams [Laughter]. At a very young age my mom made it possible for me to study privately with a well-known painter—I think I was nine when I started. My Dad was anti-bourgeois, and that was too bourgeois for him. So he didn't support it.

**Rail:** Who was the painter?

**Raissnia:** His name was Ostad Katouzian. He was a realist painter, famous for portraits of beautiful famous people, lots of women but also Dervishes and girls from the countryside with colorful folk outfits. He also painted still lifes and landscapes. Later I went back and looked at his paintings and I'm not sure if I really like them.

**Rail:** But he was a good teacher?

**Raissnia:** Definitely. It was a great experience to hang out in his beautiful old house and garden with walls covered with his paintings. He only had three students, two older—one of whom became his wife later—and me. I was the young one. He would give me lessons and I would paint from still life and flowers in the garden. He also sometimes would let us watch him paint. He had models coming in everyday. Later I copied some of his paintings and learned a lot from that.

**Rail:** Did you take art lessons in Houston, before going to the Art Institute?

**Raissnia:** I arrived in Houston in the early '80s and I didn't speak any English. I learned French as my second language. Somehow the school was so loose, so lawless, unlike Iran, and they allowed me to attend classes without knowing a word of English. But yes, I did a lot of art classes. That's the only thing I did, I didn't pass anything else, but somehow I still graduated [Laughter]. It's kind of amazing.

**Rail:** Where did you go after you graduated from the Art Institute?

**Raissnia:** I went to San Francisco for a few years, then I moved to New York to go to grad school at Pratt Institute in 1995.

**Rail:** And that was when you got involved with Anthology Film Archives?

**Raissnia:** Yes, soon after I moved to New York I walked into Anthology one night to see a movie. I didn't know anything about the place. I walked in and there was Sogo sitting in the box office with a big smile welcoming me and my friends, saying go in, go in, don't worry about paying! We watched a documentary on Thelonius Monk, and it was so great! I immediately knew what a special place it was. Sogo later became my roommate and a very close friend. Sadly he passed away few years ago. Soon after then I dropped out of grad school mainly because I couldn't pay for it and did everything I could to attach myself to Anthology and to all the people working there. I begged to do anything, clean the bathrooms, the theaters, take tickets, anything I could do and as



always they were so welcoming. Later they paid me for what I could do. So for several years I was there just about everyday.

**Rail:** Do you remember the first time you met Jonas Mekas?

**Raissnia:** I knew he was very special right away when I first saw him. I remember specifically one time at Anthology he was signing his book I had nowhere to go. He greeted me with a smile and he signed the book for me. I'll never forget that. I think that was the first time I interacted with him.

**Rail:** What sort of things did you do at Anthology when you weren't cleaning or checking tickets?

**Raissnia:** I just hung around. I watched movies. I was friends with Dalius, and August who lived there—they were the artists in residence. August made posters, films and paintings, he had an art studio there. He also played a lot of music with Dalius and their friends in the basement. I sometimes moved boxes around in the library and sat in Robert Haller's classes there for NYU. I watched a lot of amazing films.

**Rail:** Sounds great.

**Raissnia:** It was the best education! I felt blessed.

**Rail:** And was it at Anthology that you had your first shows in New York?

**Raissnia:** That's right. Jonas—and really everyone there—was so open and generous. Even though I wasn't a filmmaker, I was just some kid, you know!? But I curated two group shows—I put all my friends in it. [Laughter] Later on I did my first solo show there.

**Rail:** Can you tell me about that experience?

**Raissnia:** Sure. It opened a week or two after 9/11. I remember I had no money to buy the wine for my opening. One night I was doing my card invitations and the rumor was that the subways were dangerous so I rode my bike into Manhattan from Brooklyn, and right near Anthology as I was riding on the street at night with drizzling rain I found three bundles of cash on the pavement! Obviously it must have been drug money wrapped in rubber band. It was \$2,200 dollars. I paid my rent for two months and bought several cases of wine for my opening. A gift from hell!

Strange things happened right after 9/11. It was in response to that show that musician Briggan Krauss invited me to collaborate with him and it was through this collaboration that I began working with film and performance for the first time. Briggan told me that he was inspired by visual artists. He liked Joseph Cornell in particular, I remember. So right away we came up with a system of working and named our collaboration "Systems." We began with him giving me a short piece of music he made and recorded, I listened and responded to it by making a drawing which I gave to him to respond to by making another short piece of music to give back to me and on we went. We came up with other systems of working and only after a month or so two of my artist friends from Pratt who had just started a band invited us to open for them at a dive bar in Brooklyn.

**Rail:** That was your first performance?

**Raissnia:** Yes. So right away I was like, “what are we gonna do?” One thing I had was an old vintage projector lying around. It didn’t have a carousel so it right away suggested that if I were to use it I would have to make a long strip of film. I then very quickly got the idea to use hundreds of copies of slides of my drawings and paintings (back then I documented my work with slides), paint on them directly, collage and paste them down on colored Mylar and feed them through the projector by hand.

**Rail:** I’m trying to imagine this gig, how did it go?

**Raissnia:** Oh, the gig was so great. I think three people came, three special friends. There was no stage. I sat on a chair, put the slide projector on a table and projected on the wall. We played for ourselves basically and my friends in the band played their hearts out, I will never forget! Soon after that I had my first solo show at Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea and for that show Briggan and I did many performances and invited other artists and musicians to join in and collaborate with us. This happened in 2004.

**Rail:** And you’ve stayed with analog projectors. When I was at the Drawing Center I noticed a digital projector permanently attached to the ceiling, which you chose not to use. The analog projector has a certain legacy as a historical/cultural object, but it’s also noisy. That repetitious click and pop of the slides changing, it’s very steady—

**Raissnia:** Like a pulse.

**Rail:** Like a pulse, exactly. Is that part of your attraction to this object?

**Raissnia:** I’m very attracted to the analog projectors, perhaps because they are sort of like living things with animism. For example they behave unexpectedly, they get moody and respond differently with changes in temperature and so on. I don’t know, they are more fun to handle than video projectors. I also like them because I can take them apart, modify them to my need. I like getting my hands into them. I am open to high-end technology and make use of it when I need to but I like performing with film projectors, and so far I like how they work in installations.

**Rail:** What about the slides? They are all the original slides that you hand manipulated?

**Raissnia:** Right. You cannot reproduce those exactly in the same way. With slides, it’s light that is being filtered through actual images on film. If I were to use the scans with video projector, the images would be fake, just digits sitting on the surface. It’s never the same.

**Rail:** Are those the slides that you’ll use for a performance later on in the exhibition?

**Raissnia:** Yes, those slides are also part of another piece titled Nadir III that is only for performance. It’s the third part of a series. It uses a Super 8 film that is hand painted along with a double projection screen that is uniquely designed by me. I manipulate the

film and the slides by hand in order to control the speed of their rotation and the amount of light they project.

**Rail:** Can you describe how you operate the projectors in your performances?

**Raissnia:** I often use several projectors at once, so most of my pieces are made with various parts that I combine and manipulate live in an improvisational manner. For *Nadir II*, I separate the slides into two carousels, so one hand can cover one slide while the other hand is manipulating the other slide being projected. I sort of fade them in and out covering certain parts, pausing and revealing other parts with another hand. The viewers often can't tell what I am doing so they keep looking back and see nothing clearly in the dark.

**Rail:** When I think about the title of that piece, *Nadir*—the opposite of a high point—what compelled you to give this body of work that title?

**Raissnia:** It was something about the suggestion of the underground, the lower realms, which I thought to give attention to as a good thing, a positive thing. I thought it's a good thing to celebrate.

**Rail:** To celebrate what's beneath. That makes me think of the large drawing in the exhibition, *Vestige*, which looks like a floor, but perspective is very close to the floor. I thought, "When do you see the floor like this?" When you're lying down? Kneeling? It's a perspective that aligns with a kind of nadir, too. What's the story with this floor?

**Raissnia:** A friend of mine, Briggan Krauss, whom I talked about earlier, found a box of slides in the garbage where he works in the media lab at Brooklyn College. They were documents of a great abandoned mosque in India from the Sultanate period that lasted between the 13th and 16th centuries, a period magnificent for its Indo-Islamic architecture. I rephotographed all those slides from projecting them onto different screens in my studio and made a film work that Briggan and I performed once in Brooklyn, in 2013, I think. *Vestige* and the other large drawing *Fountain* that's hung next to it are derived from that body of work.



Raha Raissnia, *Vestige*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York



**Rail:** So the mosque was abandoned, and the slides of the mosque were being abandoned...

**Raissnia:** That image of the floor is a segment of the floor of the mosque that I zoomed in on and photographed. When I was making work for this show, I thought of this body of work and went back to look at it carefully and found those two images to work with. They somehow related to the other works I was making for the show in an interesting way I thought.

**Rail:** How so?

**Raissnia:** I respond to images in a very intuitive way, so it's difficult for me to say clearly. I think I was intrigued by the fact that they were less abstract and more specific and recognizable to a degree. There are other connections but I would need a lot more time to explain.

**Rail:** Well, I'm naturally drawn to the literary elements of works that, like yours, have such density that there seems to be more possibilities of meaning because the obvious meanings are obscured. When I was thinking of the title of that floor drawing, *Vestige*, it seemed very clearly linked to the word "alluvius," which is both the title of your show and a body of work. Both words reference a trace of something that's passed.

**Raissnia:** Yes well that's the thing, with *Vestige* I was intrigued by that image of the floor, because of how many people had stepped on it, because of all the cracks and the holes in the floor. And yes, that relates so closely to what alluvius is. I only found this connection later as it's always the case with my work. I seep myself in the images, respond, make work, and later find connections between them. This is my process.

**Rail:** The texture of that drawing, the labor of your hand, gives that essence to the image. A photograph, or a film still, could never create that feeling in the same way. The image would just be too flat, too smooth.

**Raissnia:** Yes, I tried to do that. I tried to enhance the textural aspect in a physical way. That's perhaps one of the reasons or the urge behind needing to draw and paint the photographic images I collect. When I make a painting or a drawing from a photographic image the challenge is always to make it come off stronger. It's very difficult to do. I don't always win!

**Rail:** Whether or not the viewer knows the source, everyone can relate to an image of a floor. It's just so archetypal. And because it looks so heavily trafficked, it transmits this sense of age. When I think about how that sense of age correlates with the meaning of a vestige, as it relates to this well trodden floor, I wonder what these traces refer to?

**Raissnia:** Yes, the remnants of all the footsteps, the traces left, you know? I have a few small felt rugs that came from an old mosque in Iran. People used them to pray on for I don't know how long. I love knowing that about them. I think I was drawn to the floor of that mosque through this.

**Rail:** Prayer takes place so close to the floor, and suggests to me the idea of being humble, or penitent. Recognizing that there's something that's bigger than you, that you can't fully grasp or understand entirely.

**Raissnia:** Yes, and that's why some people become believers in God. The ones with the big egos don't usually. [Laughter]

**Rail:** So that image came from a found photograph, but when you go out to make photographs do you have a plan in mind?

**Raissnia:** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. For my last film, *Longing*, it just happened that I was up in East Harlem with time to kill. [Laughter] I got stood up and I was there for an hour, so I started photographing and recording with my phone. And then two years later I started thinking about that area and took out to see what I had recorded. I sensed that there was a lot there to revisit and so I made plans to go back in several trips. It's not an easy place to photograph so I came up with ways of hiding my camera and had to adjust my attitude and the way I moved through space. So I switch from just casually carrying my camera as everyone does now to going to photograph in a more planned manner.

**Rail:** Can you walk me through your process behind all the drawings in the show?

**Raissnia:** Yeah, sure. All the works here were derived from my photographic works with 16mm film and slides. I went through a lot of raw footage and outtakes and carefully selected images I thought I could work with for this show. My process is very layered. I re-photograph, modify in the computer, print and reprint the selected sources until they are ready to be interpreted into drawings. I say interpreted because I give myself a lot of freedom to change the original image as I draw it and draw into it. As I said before the challenge is to transfer the photograph and bring to it a distinctly unique quality that only drawing can bring forth, a quality that is very different from a photograph.

Areas of some of my photographic works are of my paintings and drawings because in my studio images get recycled. I often project images onto paintings I have in studio and film and photograph them. So, the paintings and drawings enter back into the film and later get re-interpreted to other paintings and drawings. In my show at the Drawing Center the double screen I project the slides onto uses a painting. So there is a lot of crossover between the medias in my work.

**Rail:** The way your process feeds itself to create itself reminds me of the Egyptian snake symbol, Ouroboros—the tail eater.

**Raissnia:** I like the fact that I can photograph life; it's food for me. Using a moving image camera and still camera that generates so many images—I love the fact that I can go through so much, pause and look at each image carefully from scans of films in my computer. I started as a painter and I am still fascinated by what a still image can carry. But then, of course, the moving image, the photographic material has its own magic and beauty. So I'm sort of addicted to switching between the mediums. When I exhaust myself in one I switch to the other, maybe similar to how painters like Picasso or Miró would switch from painting to sculpture, and of course one always informed the other.

**Rail:** Giving one medium a break enables you to see it in a different way when you return to it later.

**Raissnia:** Of course, that's always great. I think the reason painters liked sculpture was the release from the flat surface. I think the reason Lucian Freud enjoyed looking at sculpture so much had to do with that. It's a very different experience than looking at the model and translating it two-dimensionally. Similarly I receive something different from moving imagery and also moving through actual space to get an image than drawing and painting on a still surface.

**Rail:** Can you tell me a bit about that screen you use to project your slides on at the Drawing Center? It looked home-made.

**Raissnia:** In my old studio I used the same wall for my projections as I did for my paintings. One day I turned the projector on and it shined right onto my painting and the effect was very surprising. It gave me an idea to layer various surfaces to project on. For this piece in the show I have layered two different paintings on stretchers held together within a frame. The outer layer uses a sheer fabric that I have painted faintly with gesso. It both reflects the light and lets it penetrate through and hit the back layer that is a painting made with black paint on gesso. The surface of the black paintings is textured and varnished in parts glossy and in parts matte.

**Rail:** The painted background behind the screen reflects and absorbs the light, then?

**Raissnia:** There's space between the outer screen and the back screen, so the thing brings much depth to the projected images of the slides, creating an optical effect that is sort of three-dimensional. Also richer in tone and texture.

**Rail:** I could just see the beginning of the effect in the gallery.

**Raissnia:** That's often the problem with doing installations in a gallery—the lighting is always tricky. I need light for the drawings and paintings, but I need darkness for the films and slides. So when the room is small it's difficult. But in this show unlike all the previous ones I have had I am intrigued with the faintness of the projection! It's subtle.

**Rail:** One of the things I was thinking about when I was looking at the *Cantos* drawings is how they seem to be variations on one another, and how an essential characteristic is this blur. In film, blur typically occurs because something has moved too quickly in front of the lens, or the lens has moved—the blur always refers to some kind of speed. So I was curious, in your drawings, how you thought about this blur as an aesthetic decision.

**Raissnia:** There's no aesthetic decision, I arrived at the images through the use of superimposition and montage. Everything is from real life—the objects, abstracted forms, blurs you see and the spaces. I have this urge to layer and superimpose images. I kind of see it as a natural urge similar to the way our minds work maybe. As we go through life our minds jump around from one thing to the other and in this process we make sense of the world, or we don't but just experience it that way.



Raha Raissnia, *Canto*, 2017 (detail). Courtesy: the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

**Rail:** I think it's interesting how layering so many different images that are coming from reality removes you—removes the viewer—from a direct experience of reality.

**Raissnia:** Yes, I think what I am attracted to is how suggestive they become rather than being literal. This abstract quality, found similarly in music suggests in the viewer all kinds of feelings and visions that are not there literally!

**Rail:** We haven't mentioned your series of screen prints, *Nóstos*, which also relate to the idea of memory. Can you tell me a little about how you selected those images, what you drew from?

**Raissnia:** I looked back at many of the recent works I've done on paper and made a selection carefully. In thinking about the title I suddenly saw them as scenes from a movie. It's very nice to title works, because everything comes together somehow, always bringing with it meanings and metaphors. *Nóstos* in Greek means homecoming. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has gone through a tumultuous life or journey and longs to return home heroically. He has *nóstos*. But *nóstos* can also relate to nostalgia, which is a combination of longing for home mixed with pain. So, Achilles on the other hand in the *Iliad* had nostalgia and not *nóstos* because he decided to die heroically rather than returning home heroically. Several of the images in this series have the same head that is the same character in different settings. To me this head is my hero having *nóstos*. I envision him returning home at the end. I like happy endings!



## THE DRAWING CENTER



Raha Raissnia in her studio, 2016

I had the pleasure of visiting artists Raha Raissnia and Panagiotis Mavridis in their studio Sunday afternoon where we discussed techniques for expanded cinema and Mavridis' original hand built instruments. After a private viewing of one of Raissnia and Mavridis' pieces, a thirty-minute series of black-and-white film loops intermeshed with drawing and live instrumentation, I had the opportunity to speak with Raissnia about expanded cinema and the influence of avant-garde film on her drawings and installations.

*Amber Moyles: Could you describe the term expanded cinema and the meaning of this term for your work?*

Raha Raissnia: I see expanded cinema as a live event in which the artist engages in creating cineatic works in the presence of the audience. It is, we could say, a dense exploration of light as it manipulates cinema's structural elements with regards to space, time, projectors, and screens. My own work with expanded cinema is layered and permutational. It incorporates other areas of my practice, which are painting and drawing. I make use of both old and new technologies, and I rely heavily on what my hands can achieve.

*The piece that you and Panos will perform at The Drawing Center as part of Basement Performances is titled Mneme. What is the significance of the title for this work?*

Mneme in Greek means memory. In Greek mythology Mneme is one of the three muses. She is memory personified. Her two sisters are Aoide, muse of song and music, and Melete, muse of study. When I finished making this work and showed it to Panos, he said it made him think of the way our memory works. The work is made out of pre-existing materials that I cut, painted, and collaged together, making something entirely new. So, after reflecting a bit, I agreed with him that, yes, this is in fact analogous to the way our memory functions; Mneme puts together bits and pieces from the past and forms new meaning in the present.

*You worked at the Anthology Film Archives for a number of years. Can you describe the effect this experience has had on your work? Is there a particular film you came in contact with that has influenced your practice?*

It's been a long time since I worked at Anthology, but its influence on my work and life continues. Working there was an education, and through my experience I learned about the works of a number of significant artists who are known historically, but I also learned tremendously from the people who worked and showed there and who are now my great friends. Major influences have been works by Stom Sogo, Jonas Mekas, Harry Smith, Andrew Lampert, and Martha Colburn, to name just a few.

*How has working with musicians and live instrumentation, and with Panos who constructs his own instruments, informed your work?*

Music and sound play a major role in both inspiring and forming my works. In general, I aspire to the temporal and experiential condition of music, which are suggestive, abstract, and ambiguous. The work and sensibility of the musicians I collaborate with inspire me. Our collaboration is very focused but in a free manner in which we work independently. Rehearsal is key and it is becoming more and more important to me. I consider my projectors as my visual instruments that I play live, very similar to the way musicians play their instruments.



Raha Raissnia and Panagiotis Mavridis, *Mneme*, 2015. Projector and sound performance. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

*Movement, or the ability to embody motion, has been described as the essence of cinema. Your projection performances are both cinematic and still, combining characteristics of drawing (a static medium) and cinema. How would you describe the contrast between stillness and motion in your work?*

Several aspects that belong specifically to drawing are used in my film works. One aspect is the direct hands-on manipulation of the photographic image on celluloid through both scratching or fading and the application of ink. The other aspect is incorporating pre-existing drawings done on paper through photography, filming, printing, and collage. And the final aspect of drawing used in my film is stillness. Because I mostly perform my film works, I can play with both stillness and motion. I can break apart the frames, create individual images as slides, make long strips of film that I can hand feed and *manipulate*. I can also slow down the frame rate from 24 frames per second to one frame per second and even pause on that for as long as I want. This is all done of course through the use of various types of projectors that are at times modified by hand.

*There is a quote from Agamben that reads: "paintings are not immobile images, but stills charged with movement, stills from a film that is missing." If the same could be said of your drawings, is it possible to describe the missing film from which your drawings would have been taken?*

That is a nice quote, but there is no film missing from my drawings. They belong to the same world, with the same theme. What separates the two, drawings and film, is the overall composition. The drawings are a concentrated force whereas the films flow and transform. Each frame of the film longs for the next one to come immediately after.

# BOMB



Raha Raissnia, *Untitled*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

They say that stolen fruit is the sweetest. It's always a pleasure to steal terms from another discipline—it automagically bestows an enlarged perspective on the work, suggesting it might strain against garden variety containers.

Raha Raissnia's show of drawings and paintings *Series in Fugue* at Miguel Abreu this past fall led me to consider the form of the fugue. The fugue, literally "to chase, to run away, to take flight or flee," designates repeating musical motifs that will chase after each other in turn and variation, in call and response, echoing and reforming, multi-threading, layering, and running circles around each other.

There's a Google group devoted to the art of the fugue where recently musicians were deep in disagreement over the possible existence of a visual fugue—since Walt Disney, case in point, had failed so miserably with that silly animation of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor in the opening scene of *Fantasia* (1940). Oskar Fischinger showed more than a little dissatisfaction with that filmed experiment in visual music after Disney changed his design. His infamous parting of the ways with Disney was nothing if not a sworn vow to non-objective reality, where abstract art aspires to the condition of music, not its illustration.

There is nothing silly in Raissnia's dark and complex 2D works—oil and gesso, wood, charcoal, and ink are in dynamic conversation with the photographic and architectural, taken from her own film material via image transfers. All devoid of color, all moody tones and shadows, murky then sharp, all shifting depths, edges in motion, dissolution, dispersion, and gathering storms. A perfect foot peeks out from under a smoldering robe. A huddled form lies crumpled on a mattress framed by scaffolds and stairways to the infernal depths. If this were music it would be industrial.

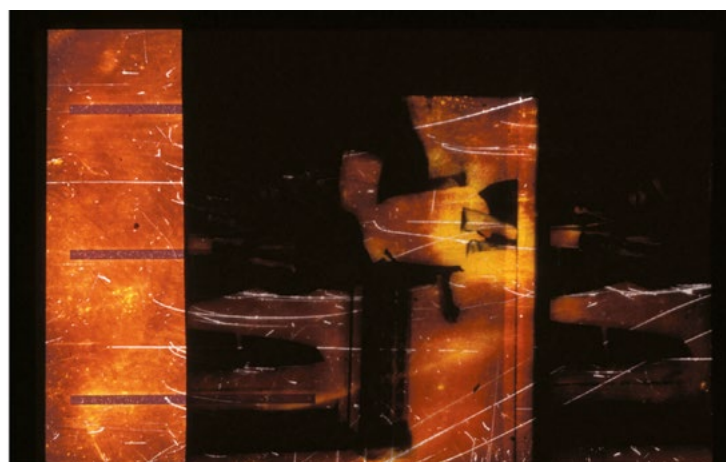




Raha Raissnia, *Untitled*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

For all the static works in this show, it is worth emphasizing that Raissnia's various projects over the years have been intensely stirred in a homemade cauldron of film, performance, musical collaborations, and slide projections, often loudly and simultaneously. One sweltering night last summer, for instance, Raissnia performed live in Abreu's empty loft space with various 16mm films and slides projected onto one of her larger paintings, accompanied by Dalius Naujo's Search and Enjoy choir. It was an intense, reckless, and unforgettable evening. A shifting fugue took place amongst all the mediums present to produce that work—in time, in space, in voice, alive and absolutely unpredictable.

*Series in Fugue* clearly related to this densely layered process, though it sometimes felt as though Raissnia was trying to arrest the very thing she set loose that night in the loft when she made a painting and bombarded it with light and sound. What was that thing but some kind of wild ephemeral synaesthesia? I am sure it is asking for the impossible to want to locate such energy inside a 2D work. Maybe that's what those Google group musicians felt when they insisted that a visual fugue was an impossibility.



Raha Raissnia, Two hand-painted collages, 35 mm slides overlay



Raha Raissnia, *Glean*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Marta Cervera and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

Art makes contradictions possible. It can make us believe that we're somewhere else, transform this into that, make the verbs "being" and "seeming" one and the same. The surprising thing about Raha Raissnia is her enormous capacity for conjoining figuration and abstraction (terms we've been taught to think of as incompatible). In her works we don't get to distinguish forms, and yet we never feel ousted from them. What's more, we live in them, walk through them, hide.

This show viewable at the Marta Cervera Gallery reveals Raissnia's work process: starting from something strongly realistic in order to deform it and make it indistinguishable.

Technique, in this case, is clearly displaced so as not to be recognizable. This artist uses oil on canvas as well as painted slides, photographs and even x-rays, demonstrating in each case that depth can become surface without ever missing the mark. Face to face with Raissnia's works we cannot be sure of the technique as she seems to use them all at once.

Raissnia maintains that synesthesia is a fundamental concept in her art, looking to the convergence between painting, film and music to achieve it. In particular music, capable as it is of conveying plasticity through hearing. Notable in this sense is the film-performance piece in the exhibition which ably sums up all her aspirations. It brings to mind Rudolf Schwarzkogler and his 1965 *Wedding- Action*, where the same blurring of boundaries between technique and artistic media is evident; in Philip Corner, Macunias and Tehching Hsieh. We are also reminded of Wodiczko and his projections on urban buildings. Indeed, Raissnia's works strongly suggest shadows and absences, almost like an expressionist film. We feel as though, fleeing

from something, we find ourselves suddenly in these ever-so-dark rooms. Once there, something strange happens: any signs of depth or volume disappear. The use of collage in some of these works reinforces the juxtaposition of techniques, the same way as different kinds of shots combine to make a film sequence.

The filmmaker Eggeling spoke of film as “pure creation”, ideal for restoring the temporal dimension missing from painting. Hans Richter in turn insisted on the great discovery that was cinema for resolving certain problems relating to the coordination of forms, color and simultaneity. In this way, only the transformation of forms, their development and projection in space would be sufficient for constructing films that would in an ambiguous way be extensions of painting.

It is precisely in this ambiguous territory where Raissnia works. This artist seems to move between expressionistic vehemence and the self-containment of abstraction (self-containment only in appearance since, as is well known, the code is one way of hiding the scream). Almost like in Ansel Kiefer, there is a preference for shade and darkness as ideal places for photographic creation, in other words, starting from the light. Insisting on art's capacity for making the improbable into something possible, this Iranian artist demonstrates that one can derive darkness from luminosity.



# ARTPULSE

## REVIEWS



Raha Raissnia. Installation view at Galeria Marta Cervera. Courtesy of the artist and the gallery.

### RAHA RAISSNIA

Galería Marta Cervera – Madrid, Spain

By Paco Barrágan

Gallery Marta Cervera presents the first solo show of Iranian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Raha Raissnia in Madrid. The show consists of a film-performance installation titled *Glean*, a series of oil on canvas, and drawings on graphite.

Raha Raissnia has studied among others at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; in addition, she did an internship between 1995 and 1999 at the Anthology Film Archives in New York. She has had solo exhibitions in New York since 2004 with Thomas Erben and with her actual dealer Miguel Abreu, and in Paris with Galerie Xippas. Finally, she received a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in 2008.

This brief introduction gives us a good idea of the consistency and continuity of Raissnia's artistic practice, and especially her interest in film, or more precisely in the moving image. She was born in Tehran, Iran in 1968 and emigrated to the United States in 1983. It is easy to sense that her origins inform her pictorial practice, which in its turn informs her cinematic installations.

In line with the artistic experimentation carried out by artists like Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood, Fabian Marcaccio, Tim White-Sobieski, Ori Gerhst, and Monika Bravo, just to name a few, Raissnia too explores in a challenging manner the way how we can construct a painting in the early 21st century in a society that is on one hand mediated by an excess of images—whether moving or still images, be it photographs, video stills or television—and on the other, whose

representations are enabled by new gadgets like iPhones, digital cameras, or Google Earth.

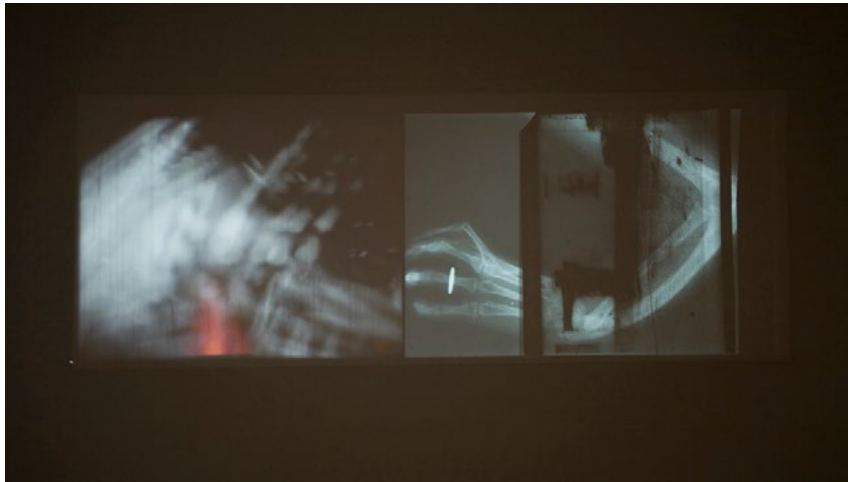
When the visitor enters the gallery, he sees around six mid-sized paintings in black and white; immediately to his right there are a series of small works on paper carried out with ink and graphite; to the left in the dark room we find one of her signature and, if we may say so, iconic film projector installations titled *Glean*. *Glean* is a projection of found 16 mm footage that has been painted and altered by hand and onto which 35 mm slide projections have been overlaid. The interplay between static images (slides) and moving images (found footage) surely concites in the viewer not only the very essence of film, but also the idea of a painter playing with a colorful palette. It all looks like a sophisticated high-tech moving painting, where abstraction and figuration constantly challenge each other by articulating, and sometimes only hinting at, aleatory forms and textures that play with synaesthesia. Raissnia herself has stated on several occasions that her work "aspires to music and develops like a musical piece."

Her paintings on their turn are predominantly black and white, and one has dark red in addition. This series seem less rigid than former paintings where one could sense a more severe contrast and distribution. Here forms mix and interact smoothly with the background creating mysterious landscapes that basically revolve around binary oppositions like life or death, fantasy or reality, nature or constructed landscape, and tradition or innovation.

Raissnia's work all has a natural flow to it, and she is surely an artist to watch as she has been able to reinvent in a challenging manner past and present. ■

(November 4 – December 31, 2010)

## BROOKLYN RAIL



Raha Raissnia, *Free Way*, 2005-08. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Marta Cervera and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

The Miguel Abreu Gallery is low lit for "Free Way," Raha Raissnia's composite 35mm slide projection and 16mm film. Her big black and white paintings and small drawings don't suffer from the dimming, a testimony to the toughness of all Raissnia's work—you can see it in the dark. It's as if the sci-fi illustrator H.R. Geiger were to make something that the cleaver-wielding minimalist Barry Le Va would approve. If your creepy meter isn't reading high enough, a throbbing soundtrack pulsing through the gallery ought to jack it up.

Everything in the exhibition is about looking very closely. The imagery is abstract, but what comes across is a sense of exploring some sort of organic-mechanical system through a magnifying glass. The film is a composite of found 16mm footage spliced together and then painted and altered by hand. Some representational imagery—from x-rays, in particular—does appear, but for the most part the sensation of dark motion and changing textures dominates. Raissnia overlays the 16mm footage with 35mm slide projections thus doubling the image and deepening the sense of immersion in an alien landscape. What little color she uses (the only place it appears is in the films) seems carefully inserted to highlight the severity of the rest of the palette.

Raissnia's paintings are large without being monumental and the emotion they convey is severely compartmentalized. This is different: we're familiar with painting that intentionally avoids emotion to evoke contemporary being, but less so with painting that attempts to pinpoint exactly what form our present feeling takes (as if we are any less emotional today than we ever were). The paintings' movement seems cinematic. When their black interlocking forms – sometimes jagged, sometimes curved—bleed



occasionally into the white ground, it's like mist on marble. A brooding classicism underpins these dark surfaces, a labyrinthine hive extending beyond the picture plane's boundaries. Is it adapted from some other source, lifted from life as is the 16mm footage? It seems not. The forms feel found in a more organic sense. Either way, Raissnia has invested them with the power of imagination.

There's plenty of tributary history in Raissnia's work. Stan Brakhage's films are a colorful relative but there's a clearer family resemblance in the abstract films of Hans Richter from the 1920s. The mood is less somber with Richter, but the sense of a system in which elements of form repeat themselves against the mobile backdrop of cinematic time is germane. The idea of photography and film usurping painting is as long gone as the '80s. Raissnia draws on film for her painting then seamlessly exhibits the two media side by side.

# MODERN PAINTERS

ART / ARCHITECTURE / DESIGN / PERFORMANCE / FILM

## Reviews



### RAHA RAISSNIA

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

Oil on canvas is one of the oldest technologies of representation; at times it can seem downright archaic that artists still smear blobs of colored pigment around on bolts of stretched linen. Yet in painting there survives a potential to represent spaces and scenarios that don't have an indexical connection or procedural relation to the current culture of instantaneity. For painters such as Raha Raissnia, painting's condition of fantastical or utopian invention is always in tension with newer mechanical and digital technologies.

In Raissnia's recent suite of abstract paintings, she applies white paint to black gesso in gridded formations of complex and dense structure. These improbable architectures of merging vectors and skewed intersections convey both vertigo-inducing velocity and the blur of a chaotic instant hastily arrested. The unusual technique of applying stark white paint to a dark ground lends a harsh, *Alphaville*-esque quality to the work, as though even blinding fluorescent light struggles to blanch a pervasive gloom. The comparison to cinema is not far-fetched; also shown is a film of hand-painted slides in which painting is collaged with found 16 and 35 mm footage in a palimpsest of 20th-century visual culture.

Experiencing Raissnia's work is like witnessing a parallax view: new technologies seen through older and possibly wiser ones. In today's omnipresent language of technological connectivity—networks and matrices—often the effects of such semiotic constructions overshadow the material reality of their impossibly vast structures (of massive server farms in remote corners of India, for example), or their elaborately minute forms (recent innovations in nearly invisible silicon nanocircuits). Raissnia's richly constructed works give material existence to those ineffable intricacies. —EVA DÍAZ

# Flash Art

NEW YORK

R E V I E W S

RAHA RAISSNIA

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

Resistance and seduction, the works of Raha Raissnia, dense black-and-white graphite drawings and equally intense paintings reduced to the same tonal range — same freighted density of tenebrity — how they tempt with their refinement whilst ultimately refusing to yield! The picture plane, push and pull of foreground and perspective, leads one further and further into the tangle, the mechanics, bowels, looking for a way through, irresistibly led to some potential space that lies way back at the other side. Surely it might be possible to navigate the topography of these marks, the *mappa mundi* of such jagged terrain, to embark on something like a narrative, a journey, traversing the ambiguities, deserts and oasis, the final ranges of these limitless plots?

Yet the actual surfaces of Raha's works refute the lure; the drawings are so packed, so thick, their shiny skein becomes almost reflective and the paintings have been sanded to an absolute smoothness, a silky finish at odds with the angularity of content. We are not allowed to enter, only admitted so far, the artist's defiance offering us an object, a perfect, polished object that is also a life, a whole world. There is something metaphysical to the gravity of these compositions, a beautiful sincerity we could only refuse out of embarrassment at the richness of the gift. If so, one might say they echo a certain postwar European abstraction, Pierre Soulages or even André Marfaing. But as gallerist Abreu puts it so pertinently, "By analogy, the effect of her practice is reminiscent of the moment when the miraculous films of her countryman Abbas Kiarostami first stunned Western audiences, at the very time modern cinema was declared a thing of the past!" For the artist, Iranian heritage cannot be entirely dismissed; terms such as 'Islamic science fiction' or 'coded calligraphy' have been applied, but ultimately the numinous potency of these works shifts us from banal biographical to utter universal.

Adrian Dannatt



RAHA RAISSNIA, view of the exhibition "Stele" at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2006.

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