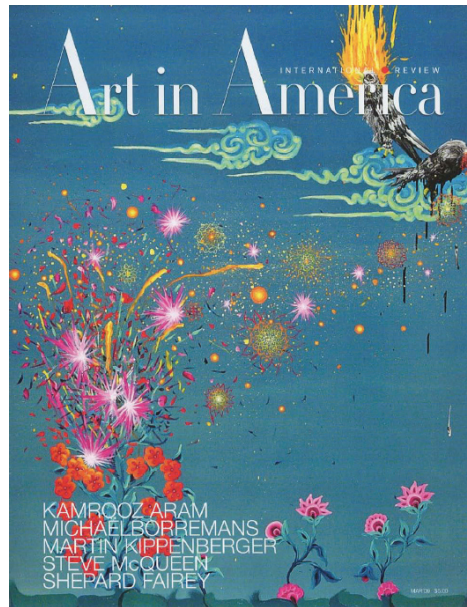


Art in America

Kamrooz Aram

By Gary Indiana
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KAMROOZ ARAM'S PAINTINGS have a lot going on in them—explosions, showers of light, flights of nimbus-headed angels, flapping flags and pennants, whizzing snail-shaped clouds, flowers spraying from camouflage, flames shooting from vegetation and looming falcons, slurries of color drooling and dripping through space, shreds of bright matter wheeling in glistening skies.

Velocity and visual amplitude typify this artist's canvases, as if he were fixing as many elements of a rapidly mutating dream as he could remember. Not that they're formally chaotic (or invariably packed with incident); Aram is usually partial to symmetry and internal pictorial logic. Crypto-Abstract Expressionist veils and drips combine with *things* that are unmistakably things; the style of his work as well as its manifest content effect a hybridization we could liken to a familiar but not-quite-nameable, liquefying plant, maybe one that swallows live prey.

Aram was born in Iran in 1978 and has lived in the United States since age eight. His work riffs on imagery found in Persian miniatures and carpet patterns, Shiite posters and Arabic writing, but this material figures in contexts where original cosmological systems or hortatory meanings dissolve, or blend with Western analogues. There isn't a pointed collision of cultures in Aram's pictures, but rather the fluid synthesis artists conjure from what they encounter in waking and dreaming life, which can be events of trauma or epiphany or, just as easily, the casually registered minutiae of a walk down the street.

In a mass-mediated world, it's impossible to slice a scalpel line between cultures, between "East" and "West" or similar binary constructs. The world's contents have mingled in a vast collective potlatch available by Internet, cell phone, television, satellite and an ever-expanding inventory of connective gadgetry that looks at us while we look at it. While this universe of data is "virtual,"

existing in spaces beyond our direct physical experience, it has merged with reality in a frantic delirium. One can at best stage encounters of differing sign systems and signifiers, pluck things from local contexts and set them in larger, homogenizing schemes, shift them from the subjective to the seemingly ontological. We strip the signs of meanings and intentions, and reconstitute them as bytes of the polymorphic imaginary.

The space of early video-game graphics, Aram noticed at an early age, closely resembles that of Persian miniatures. The spatial arrangements in much of his early art derive as much from one as the other. Likewise, the Persian or Islamic motifs in his pictures indicate meaning in the broad sense of universal sign-age rather than insist on arcane specificities. He has observed that what serve as sacred objects in one culture—the Virgin of Guadalupe, the mystical encryption layered into Persian carpet designs—become kitsch, or ironic decoration, in another. The sources he cites for his work come from a globalized, supersaturated realm of peripatetic and mutative images, the quick-registering cacophony of contemporary visual Esperanto.



Rally at the Gates, 2008, oil on canvas, 72 by 84 inches. Photo Adam Reich.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery.

There's no way to read Aram's work didactically, or to find in it a conventional kind of "otherness" confronting its viewer. It does reference the complicated and violent interplay of the West with what is called the Near or Middle East—or, perhaps more accurately, it models, in broad, almost cartoonish fashion, the strange condition of interwoven cultural signifiers and debris the viewer associates with that encounter. As Aram said in a 2006 conversation with Lauri Firstenberg, "The iconography is never something you can quite put your finger on. . . . It's more about this carnivalesque, absurd, magical and scary present day."



Three Trees, 2004, oil on canvas, 52 by 66 inches.

While it takes a particularly determined optimism to apply “magical” to the present day, we do live in carnivalesque times—carnivalesque in the sense of Ensor or Bosch, anyway—and Aram has clearly been influenced by sources that emit some magical resonances, including psychedelic art, cathedral ceilings, Giotto, the preternatural light in Ross Bleckner’s paintings, as well as the brilliant coloring and fantastic geometries of Islamic art, the figural novelties of ancient miniatures and other art redolent of transcendence. The stormy landscapes of August Strindberg, with their flecks and drizzles of thick paint, rock outcroppings, indeterminate horizons and mist-shrouded flowers, also come to mind—although they’re probably not among Aram’s inventory of sources.

The not exactly this/here, not exactly that/there quality of Aram’s paintings is their most consistent thematic inclination. A series of oil paintings on canvas begun in 2002, “Beyond the Borders,” gives a good example of this oscillating tension, the overall title referring both to the edges of Persian carpets from which Aram extracted patterns, and to national boundaries. The viewer discerns, in muzzy fashion, the elements drawn from textiles—garlands of flowers, a central burst of leafage and bloom, set against large fields of colors—but many of the forms have been repeatedly layered with paint, their precision shaken up, while the background is crisscrossed with assertive expressionist brushstrokes. Reds and blues, from bright cadmium and maroon to cyan and gray-blue, limned with olive green, form the most vivid representational parts, except in the last of the series, where the central, flanging-out horticultural image becomes bright white, and some of the abstract yellow near the painting’s edges suggests fire.

In *The Battle of So and So* (2004), the generalized flowers and plants Aram uses appear to grow from a flat landscape in which the mottled ground resembles the jigsaw pattern of military camouflage, while what serves as the sky is traversed by distinctly artificial clouds.

The clouds resemble the whorled condensations found in Persian miniatures, stretched at their nether ends to evoke vapor trails, or perhaps to manifest the baraka—in Islam, a psychic fluid said to emanate from sacred objects. Similarly stylized clouds appear in pre-Renaissance and Renaissance paintings—Mantegna’s, for example; in Aram’s, they are among the recurring motifs that indicate cross-cultural similarities: the garnish of depicted spirituality or states of exaltation.

The pictures I’ve described, lush and appealing as they are, simply indicate a direction, perform certain virtuosic operations, and fill the eye with sometimes indigestible information. Aram wants to complicate the question of where the viewer is in relation to the image, and he does, though an impression of clutter distracts from the strength of his line and his dexterous application of paint.

Far more effectively terse, dynamic and coherent compositions are achieved in works that make emphatic use of light, rendered as starbursts, speckles, crescents and spots of pure white bleeding through shrouds of rich purples or greens, like collaged decals of stars. An arresting mix of the abstract and the concrete occurs when Aram exercises more overt control over both. A salient example is *Three Trees* (2004), where some of the black tree forms, rooted in a vertical segment of camouflaged “earth,” sprout and bloom into color, the budding efflorescence of each tipped with rising fire; they stand curved or stressed by wind against a layered field of light blue and green, and three squidlike blue clouds cross the picture’s upper atmosphere. We are given broad leeway in reading this picture, but there are constraints: the camouflage suggests a field of military operations, the black trees flaming oil wells, the clouds the disputed and egregiously “sacred” (i.e., lucrative) geography we associate with flaming oil wells and war. It also could be a less specific evocation of the merger of beauty and violence. At the very least, what we’re looking at is “somewhere,” albeit a phantasmal rather than a photographic somewhere.

The figural arrangement of *Three Trees* recurs in numerous paintings in which the “trees” resemble candelabra or lamp forms; Aram sometimes shifts away from the tripartite arrangement, just as he sometimes reduces or multiplies the numbers of hawks and falcons, clouds and angels, radiating light forms and scattered stars. Sometimes the works are composed like landscapes with a few nods to perspective, though more often they require a circular or anamorphic scan from the viewer,

leaving large areas of light and color, and nonrepresentational forms, unmoored, so to speak, in a space of reverie. The nocturnal birds are in some cases vigilant and predatory, while others appear more pacific and unthreatening; we are offered an oneiric, otherworldly sensation of drift between disturbance and pleasure, conflict and serenity.



Untitled, 2007, from the series “Revolutionary Dreams,” pen on paper, 44 by 30 1/2 inches.

Aram’s paintings are big—*Celebration/Desert Station (III)*, 2005, at 108 by 60 inches, is an average size—and possess a correspondingly large event quality. The artist has an unerring handle on the spectacular and the cryptic, and a shrewd grasp of how to activate a viewer’s imagination. In a fairly short period, he has developed an engaging trove of painterly methods and signature icons, their metaphoric associations durable yet elusive. His recent work has included a 12-by-100-foot mural and an installation of paintings at Mass MoCA in 2006, whose calligraphic passages demonstrate his amazing use of black. The mural, when seen through Mass MoCA’s windows, had the reverse effect of Aram’s childhood experience of glimpsing things while passing inside the Bridge of 33 Arches in Isfahan. The synecdochic views of the mural’s background of vertical, graduated blue stripes, through the window panes, broke the work into discrete grids.

Aram’s preoccupation with the mingling of violence and epiphany, with war and celebration, and with signifiers of revolutionary “belief,” whether religious or political, has become ever clearer in canvases with titles like *Last Gleaming*, *The Persistent Celebration of Glorious Determination*, *Blazing Glory* and (my favorite) *Mystical Visions Undetected by Night Vision Strengthen the Faith of the Believers and Make Their Enemies Scatter*. Aram indexes the American and Iranian revolutions, and revolutionary belief and fervor in general, through the symbology of flags, “noble” birds of prey, the celestial ephemera of bombs and fireworks, and the quotation of anthems. In doing so, he sutures two ways of seeing the same agitations of matter; the celebratory and the destructive are in fact both aspects of nationalistic ritual. Fireworks and bursting bombs have the same awesome visual effect, and an exalted state of visionary bliss may closely resemble the luridly bulking objects revealed by night-vision goggles. The makers of war promise heavenly glory, while the rulers of nations appeal with irrational but viscerally persuasive homilies. The projection of power is, as another of Aram’s titles puts it, *Enduring, Continuing, Eternal*.



Celebration/Desert Station (III), 2005, oil and stickerson canvas, 108 by 60 inches.

A radiantly seductive alternative can be seen at work in paintings such as *Blazing Glory* (2007), where a solitary angel wafts through a sky of peaked gradations of blue emanating from a central effusion of white light that hides the angel's face (in deference to its holiness). One can't help noticing that this sumptuously painted figure, borne aloft on its vermilion-shaded wings, is being blown to smithereens below the belt, perhaps a casualty of too much divinity. More obviously afflicted, or blessed, are the avians of *Transformation/Desert Station* (2005), which experience incineration while perched on clouds skidding above a pyrotechnical display of floral origin. Or this might be the Rapture of the Raptors; at a certain altitude, beatitude and annihilation look rather alike, as Stanley Kubrick demonstrated at the end of *Dr. Strangelove*.



Supreme Elevation, 2009, oil on canvas, 72 by 108 inches. Photo Adam Reich.

Aram's drawings, strikingly dissimilar from his paintings, focus on revolutionary dreams and delusions in fine-line colored inks, pointillist dots and virtuoso draftsmanship. Many show generic wise men or mullahs in turbans with a sort of varicolored leafage pouring in fanciful patterns from their mouths, sometimes counterpointed across the drawing by the figure of an American Black Muslim wearing an Afro hairdo; I think of the aleatory fields of leafage, if that's what it is, as verbiage: ensorcelling dogma, a concretization of seductive rhetoric. In one such drawing this insinuating kudzu engulfs an assortment of children's heads. In another, a phantasmagoric tissue of bubbling clouds issues from a gun fired by a hand in the lower center of the image. The mannerist invocation of the political gesture and the religious ukase is unambiguously ironic in Aram's drawings, especially when the key figure is recognizable as Jane Fonda or Angela Davis. At the same time, there's nothing inherently scornful in Aram's irony. If such drawings come to any conclusions, it's simply that revolutionary wishes are always with us and, at least in Aram's view, are always failed.

Aram's latest paintings revisit many of the forms he has previously used, reconfigure them and introduce new ones. For the most part, they have a succinct and immediate effect, bringing the eye instantly to their primary shapes and subjects, like the centered camouflage mound in *The Pinnacle of Pride and Inherited Glory* (2008) that tapers upward and becomes a plinth for a crystalline, star-haloed sculptural object. Flowering plants growing from both sides of the mound curve in the direction of this Brancusian object. At equal distances from the mound, two smaller, flaming flowers suggest votive candles or torches; the shiny, muted yellow background of the picture frames the overall arrangement in a slightly queasy, dawnlike space. The mound readily suggests an excremental pedestal for a trophy, with new vegetal life pushing out of it, as in the aftermath of some forgotten human triumph.

The mound's shape evokes the mihrabs of mosques, empty niches that indicate the direction of Mecca; this roughened mihrab form is inverted in *Everything Scatter* (2008), becoming the U-shaped sides of a valley, or culvert, again with flowers growing from it, through which we see a gradated expanse of blue that could be sky or a body of water. In the center of this expanse floats a peculiar yellow and white object, an indefinable spray of something with the texture of pencil shavings. The mihrab concavity has its architectural double in Coptic devotional niches and recesses in Catholic churches used for statuary; again, Aram invites multiple readings that emanate from the idea of faith—belief, the ineffable—with a light-handedly droll touch of skepticism.

In other new canvases, Aram reworks the carnivalesque with heightened fervor. He sets a signature eagle atop one of four mounds in *Supreme Elevation* (2009), blanching it into an ominous ectoplasm and sending a paling green and yellow aurora borealis shooting out from it in spectacularly shaded ruffles; in *Rally at the Gates* (2008), a veritable forest of weirdly shaped blue stalks is planted under an ascending-jellyfish yellow dome, against a variegated red "sky" with multiple blue slashes or

wounds. Here the clouds really have become snails, an army of them, slithering across the bottom of the painting in overlapping rows, conceivably munching away at the vegetation. In *Ecclesiastical Fashion Show* (2009), we see a panoply of vaguely liturgical imagery suggestive of Christian, Coptic and other ceremonial objects and costumes ranged before a purple-black cruciform area dappled with motes of white and pellets of color. Other parts of the painting contain cascades of stormy blue and pink-white objects that resist identification.



Ecclesiastical Fashion Show, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 by 84 inches. Photo Adam Reich.

These pictures compel the eye to a central point where, with the exception of the hawk, we simply can't give a name to what we're seeing. Even Aram's most pared-down and bluntly assertive works elude the construction of narratives in the same way that dreams, according to many studies, are not narrative at all but scattered mental pictures the dreamer fashions into a story upon waking to make sense of raw material in the unconscious. Aram's visions capture tumult and turmoil, and in the work overall, a certain lividness troubles the exuberant depiction of, for lack of a better phrase, the enthusiastic sense of life—the fireworks, the extravagance of mystical illumination, the glory of battle, the spectacle of religious and national triumphalism. For however sumptuously or deliciously Aram presents it, he's picturing the apocalypse, the human finish line our digitized, cybernetic lives are racing toward, as an ever-more-demanding empire of signs banishes the subjective space for reflection.