

# The New York Times

## East in the Eye of This Beholder

By Karen Rosenberg  
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“I’m interested in what makes something Eastern, what makes something exotic,” the painter Kamrooz Aram says. His curiosity is part personal, part generational. He was born in Iran in 1978, the year that Edward W. Said’s seminal book “Orientalism” was first published in the West and a year before the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power.

Mr. Aram did not discover Said’s book until college, but it has been pivotal for his art. (So has the Iranian revolution, although he has lived in the United States since he was 8 and prefers not to discuss his background.) The imagery in his paintings shifts between Giotto angels and Shia imams, the flying carpets in video games and the magical space of Persian miniatures.

Much has changed since Said laid out his theory of Orientalism: globalization, jihad, identity and postidentity politics; new museums in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While working on the paintings for “Of Flame and Splendour,” his current show in Chelsea and his first with the Perry Rubenstein Gallery, Mr. Aram pondered “a newer Orientalism, which is less harmful but still problematic.”

It began, he said, with the era of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat poets, “everyone moving to Tangiers and practicing Buddhism — a little Eastern sampler.” A current example of this brand of Orientalism, he said, is the West’s piecemeal approach to Indian religions (yoga, the Kama Sutra): “It’s a very shallow way of tapping into something that’s much bigger and deeper.”

In Mr. Aram’s most recent work the floral and geometric motifs of his earlier paintings have given way to charged, sometimes divisive symbols: hawks, angels and mosque architecture. Often these forms have multiple meanings. Birds, for instance, might refer to American nationalism or to the tradition of falconry, as depicted in Islamic art.

And as a graduate of Columbia’s master of fine arts program, Mr. Aram can’t help but throw in references to postwar painterly dogma, like extra-wide gestural brush strokes and aggressive splashes of turpentine. These too are double-edged, reflecting his suspicion of rigid belief systems (inside and outside the art world).

“The New Vortex Plunges Into the Heart of the Present,” the show’s most complex painting, below, takes its title from the Vorticist manifesto, signed in 1914 by a group of British artists. The Vorticist movement, a variant of Futurism, burned out after one exhibition, but the acerbic manifesto has endured as a fiery footnote. For Mr. Aram it’s a reminder of the dangers of the doctrinaire “that artists can come up with a really absurd idea and stick to it.

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**HAWK** Hawks are a recurring symbol in Mr. Aram's paintings and the focus of another work, "Supreme Elevation II," in his show "Of Flame and Splendor." The hawks are often interpreted as a reference to America, but he said the Middle Eastern tradition of falconry is just as relevant. "The first hawk that I painted was taken from an Islamic scientific illustration, kind of an Islamic Audubon."

**FLAG** The forked end of the flag was inspired by the split sword of the Shia imam Ali. For Mr. Aram, Ali's sword evokes both spirituality and violence.

**BLACK SQUIGGLES** To the untrained Western eye these looping lines and drips punctuated by dots might resemble Arabic script. Mr. Aram said he sees them more as an aggressive formal device: "I think of them as very disruptive, messing up the painting or even contaminating it."

**AREAS OF LIGHT** These luminous circles, which have been compared to imagery in Ross Bleckner's paintings, were made by wiping the canvas with a turpentine-soaked rag. Elsewhere Mr. Aram creates a similar effect with opaque white paint. "I was educated when there were so many different ways of painting," he said. "For me it's important to have a variety."



IMAGE COURTESY OF RAMROUZ ARAM AND PERRY RUBENSTEN GALLERY, NEW YORK/ADAM REITH

**CLOUDS** The stylized, spiraling cloud formations "are derived from Persian miniatures, quite directly," Mr. Aram said. He also compared them to the flattened clouds in the early Super Mario Brothers video games.

**GREEN** Mr. Aram associates this shade of green with night-vision technology. "I've been interested in the double meaning of night vision, as in the biblical night vision versus the military night vision," he said.

**EXPLODING ANGEL** Mr. Aram recalls seeing angels with faces covered by bursts of light on posters in Shiite cafes. (Islam prohibits the depiction of certain holy figures.) In his painting the image is more ambiguous: "It's this romantic burst of light, which is also maybe blowing his head off," he said. The angels in Renaissance painting are another source of inspiration, Mr. Aram said, explaining that he was awed by Giotto's Arena Chapel on a visit to Padua, Italy.