

AMIR H. FALLAH

A STRANGER IN YOUR HOME

In Amir H. Fallah's painting *Life's Epic Poem* (all works 2017), part of his most recent body of work in the exhibition "A Stranger in Your Home," an Iranian-American husband and wife are shrouded in sumptuous fabrics in their Beverly Hills home, set against prized possessions. A commemorative plate with the double lion insignia alludes to the troubled reign of the last Shah of Iran. An extensive art collection, depicted in red and white, ranging from European blue-chip artists to African masks, marks their wealth and successful acculturation in their new home country. A National Medal bestowed by an American president is worn by the husband, confirming an unwavering pride in an adopted homeland—one where nonsensical immigration restrictions currently threaten its multicultural fabric.

Combining monumental European portraiture tradition, the flatness and layering of pictorial elements in Persian miniature illumination, and the brilliant palette of Pop art and graffiti, Fallah reconsiders the portrait genre for a contemporary world in which systems of power are increasingly diffused and called into question, and where identity is fraught with contentiousness. Having traveled to Israel for a solo exhibition earlier this year, and returning to the United States after the announcement of President Donald J. Trump's travel ban for individuals from seven Muslim-majority countries, the Tehran-born, Los Angeles-based artist suddenly felt unwelcome in the only place that he has ever called home.

Audio recordings of Fallah's friends and acquaintances describing uncomfortable or distressing immigrant experiences in America played on a loop near Shulamit Nazarian gallery's entrance, recounting the ordeals of being perceived as an outsider in the US. The exhibition was the culmination of these conversations and the time spent in the subjects' homes; Fallah's paintings are composed like staged portraits and invented still lifes. All of the figures in these portraits are veiled, creating a disorienting yet satisfying clash of specificity and generalization, named and anonymous—although the portraits refer to specific people and unique emotions and accounts, empathy for all those affected is encouraged.

As told in a conversation with Fallah, *Split Between Faraway Lands* depicts a young female artist who is Korean in descent but was adopted at an early age by white, Midwestern parents. She has never known the country, culture or language that her physical appearance implies. The figure is surrounded by an eclectic array of childhood toys, personal mementos and art projects that indicate her multilayered identity. A painted border hems in the diamond-shaped canvas, but it also crosses over and zigzags across, fracturing the neatness of a singular identity.

Kaleidoscopic in color and replete with neon pinks and oranges, an ordered sense of disarray pervades these canvases: "Being an immigrant feels very chaotic; the news [right now] is very chaotic . . . I'm attracted to the chaos," Fallah explains. *What We Left Behind* explores the tumult and the exigent circumstances of an exodus to another country through the items that a family brings along—jewelry and photographs expectedly make the cut. In Fallah's image, gold chains, diamond-encrusted pendants and an abstract rendering of a wallet-sized photograph are tangled throughout untamed flora, which the artist frequently uses as a surrogate for humanity.

Two years ago, Fallah became a father, germinating a hopeful outlook for the future. At the center of the exhibition, a rudimentary abode houses a glowing, purple-and-gold stained-glass image of a cloaked man meant to represent the artist. He cradles a sock monkey—his son's favorite plaything (produced in the US since 1890, the toy is as American as apple pie), and a stand-in for the Iranian-American-Puerto-Rican toddler. Fallah's mother's voice reverberates throughout the cozy hut as she describes their harrowing journey from Iran to the US, including two years waylaid in Turkey when the family lived with prostitutes after their savings were stolen. It was worth it. She says: "I am an American, and I am proud of being an Iranian-American." Radiant light beams surround the father and son in a sacrosanct image, leaving visitors with the promise of a revised American dream, one that might be fulfilled after trial and tribulation.

JENNIFER S. LI

AMIR H. FALLAH
Split Between Faraway Lands
2017
Acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

