



Of Mourning and Revolt: Episodes from Barbad Golshiri's 'Curriculum Mortis'

February 23 – April 7, 2023

Thomas Erben is honored to present ***Of Mourning and Revolt: Episodes from Barbad Golshiri's 'Curriculum Mortis.'*** In his solo exhibition at our gallery in 2012, we presented his latest sculptures; with this exhibition, we offer a selection of video and photography, dating from 2002 to 2022. Now living in exile in France, Golshiri was born in 1982 in Tehran to a literary family (his mother, Farzaneh Taheri, is a prominent translator and his father was the eminent writer Houshang Golshiri). His practice ranges from the visual to the textual, from video, photography, sculpture and performance to critical writing and what he calls *taphography* (the art and practice of documenting cemeteries, creating grave markers, cenotaphs and memorials).



What Has Befallen Us, Barbad?, 2002.

Single channel video, black and white, silent, 27 minutes.

Edition of 9 (+1 AP).

The earliest work in the exhibition, the 2002 silent video ***What Has Befallen Us, Barbad?*** shows flocks of hair – a nuclear material that is a barometer of power in the Islamic Republic of Iran – landing on a blank surface as in a drip or gestural painting. The performer is recorded cutting off his/her hair. The gender of the protagonist remains unclear. Current reading (embraced by the artist) would process it as female, but we are told the scene was inspired by the artist's own experience, when working as a young journalist he was compelled by his employers to cut his long hair.



In Mourning, 2014.

Video, HD, black and White, silent, 28 minutes.

Edition of 9 (+ 1 AP).

Hair occupies a focal point in a number of works in the exhibition. *In Mourning*, a silent video from 2014, records the artist and his sister, dressed in black, dyeing their mother's hair as a gesture of mourning. His father's new tombstone made by the artist lays in the foreground. The original tombstone was vandalized by the regime's agents. The key to understanding the ritual resides in a quatrain by the Persian poet Rudaki that inspired Golshiri: ***Not for this reason black my hair I dye / To look more young and vices new to try / People in time of grief don raiment black / I black my hair in grief at old age nigh.***

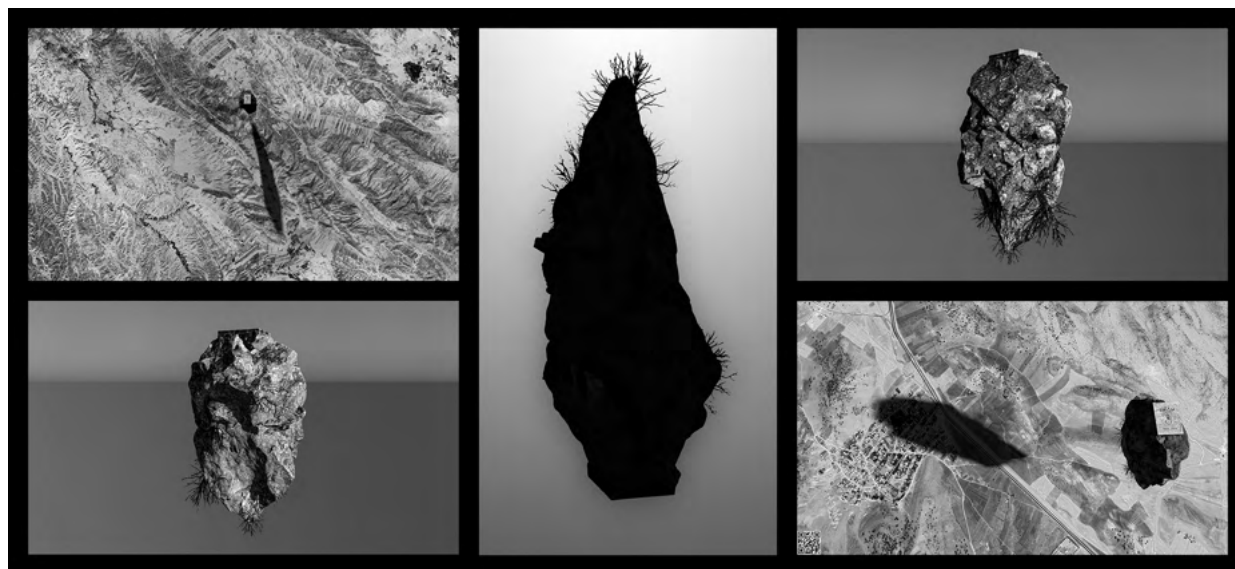


Installation view of south wall.

Golshiri is not subscribing to the parameters of solo exhibitions. Joining him, Maryam Ashrafi, an Iranian social documentary photographer, was invited to add her voice to the exhibition. Her singularly arresting photograph, ***San Francisco, October 1st, 2022***, features a young woman demonstrator captured defiantly brandishing a bundle of cut hair in one hand while holding in the other the picture of the Jina (Mahsa) Amini, the young Kurdish Iranian woman whose murder, while in custody of the 'morality police,' ignited the uprising globally referred to by its slogan 'Women, Life, Freedom.'



Young Woman cutting her hair in a 'Women, Life, Freedom' demonstration in San Francisco,
by Maryam Ashrafi, October 1st, 2022.
Pigment inkjet print on photo paper, 120 x 80 cm.
Edition of 9 (+1 AP).



Sarv-e Sangar I (Prologue To Navid Afkari's Tomb,) 2020.

Expo UV ink on plexiglass, LED light, wooden frame, acid free cardboard, 69 x 151 cm.

Edition of 3 (+ 1 AP).

Victims of events other than those who perished in the current revolution feature in this exhibition. Navid Afkari Sangari, for instance, a wrestler and a dissident, was executed in 2020. He is commemorated in photographs titled **Sarv-e Sangar I**, 2020 (lightbox), and a video, **Sarv-e Sangar II**, 2021. In no way translating the title as 'Cypress of Sangar' does any justice to the multiple references Golshiri alludes to, but it may be useful to know that 'sangar' (literally 'fort', 'trench', or 'stronghold') is also the name of Afkari Sangari's native village in the Fars province, where his beloved Persepolis is located. Golshiri borrows the image of his cypress from bas-reliefs at Persepolis. Every trace of his tomb having been obliterated, including the cypress planted nearby, Golshiri prominently displays boulders and the uprooted cypress and resurrects the man through his own voice, recounting the tortures he and his family endured and the injustices of the system.

As in the previous case, again a QR code is placed on the actual grave and leads to the current video (<https://navidafkari.info/>).



Sarv-e Sangar II, 2021.

Video with music and voice of the executed wrestler and dissident, Navid Afkari Sangari, his brother, Vahid, and the judge. Verses by Ferdawsi, sung by Negar Booban.

Video, colour, sound, 19 minutes.

Edition of 9 (+1 AP).



L'Inconnu de la Scène, 2012.

Video, HD, colour, sound, 60 minutes.

Choir: Dabésse, Nathalie Rigaux, The Late Christophe Otzenberger.

Edition of 3 (+2 AP).

The gallery presents for the first time in North America, videos of two performances, ***L'Inconnu de la Scène***, 2012, and ***Orifeus and Oublietta***, 2017, Golshiri staged in Paris and Bruges respectively. Their juxtaposition is illuminating in that it invites a comparison between the engines of submission in Islam and Christianity. The complexity of these works deserves prolonged scrutiny. Suffice it to say here that the performance in Paris took place near the Seine, to which Golshiri alludes in a title that also refers to the performer on the stage (Seine, scène). Reverberating in the oversize megaphone the protagonist is wearing, the pre-recorded choir resoundingly pronounces a pseudo-liturgical text, propelling him into actions that parody religious ablutions, rites, and regulations. In this multilayered narrative, deliverance arrives in the finale where the performer succeeds in imposing his own will by drowning the voices that directed his blindly performed actions.



Orifeus and Oublietta, 2017.
Video, colour, sound, 54 minutes.
Edition of 3 (+2 AP).

While *L'Inconnu* entails indoctrination through repetitively arduous actions, ablutions, recitations, with *Orifeus* Golshiri turns his attention beyond Islam and Iran. He shifts gears to a higher degree of traumatic pain, physical torture, and self immolation, routinely described in visions of afterlife, as in Hieronymus Bosch's original triptych, *The Last Judgement* (Groeningemuseum, c. 1486) which takes on the entire background of the performance space. The artist, who still carries the scars of his performance, always wished to show this work to people who did not care about his background.

The occasion for the performance was the *Bosch in Bruges Festival* in 2017 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Bosch's death. The announcement to the artist's talk later at the Courtauld Institute in London, describes the performance as such:

Golshiri recounts the world of Bosch accompanied by the soprano Sarah Van Moll, actress Juliette de Castille (pseudonym), the choir of Collegium de Dunis and their conductor Ignace Thevelein. The libretto is based on the English translations of the hymn *Dies irae* and the composition is based on secular and religious works of Burgundian composers together with Alfred Schnittke.



Orifeus and Oublietta, 2017.
Video, colour, sound, 54 minutes.
Edition of 3 (+2 AP).

Without even delving into Golshiri's myriad historical, musical, doctrinal, and aesthetic references, the mere contrast between the beastly acts the incapacitated performer is subjected to and the angelic music pervading the video (and the gallery) conveys the dark aura of religion, the *Dies irae*, the day of wrath when torture is legitimized, atrocities condoned and deserved. In interpreting the exhibited works, one can attempt to move beyond a religious reading and view the artist's itinerary from his early video, *What Has Befallen Us, Barbad?*, to this point as a path leading from a poetic imagery of silent protest to what could be construed as a damnation of any ideology fueled by hate and violence.



Installation view of east wall.

(from left to right) *Sarv-e Sangar I*, *Sarv-e Sangar II*, *Eulogy of Wearers of Black Raiments*.

With *Eulogy of Wearers of Black Raiments*, 2020, a lightbox, Golshiri approaches his subject from yet again a different formal perspective. As in antiquated certificates, edicts, and other formal documents or illustrated manuscripts, Golshiri compartmentalizes texts and images into sections. The focal scene, flocks of hair plucked from the video *What Has Befallen Us, Barbad?*, is framed by scripts executed in a variety of calligraphic modes, such as Qarmatian Eastern Kufic used for the epitaphs above and Timurid Nastaliq and Safavid Thuluth below. One might say written expressions of different voices in even different languages (in Persian and Arabic, the language of the Koran). Praise or profanity remains concealed under the beauty of the calligraphic mask. Above, the angel Gabriel, who lacks one wing and points with one hand to a black square on his heart and gestures with the other towards one of the two epitaphs on top, presides over the entire eulogy. At the bottom, the F of the alphabet from the word Waqf (meaning endowment), stretched to the length of a sword, signs off on the ceremonial contract. While the writing may appear opaque, the angel and the sword clearly set the tone in this episode of the *Curriculum Mortis*.

No text is ever ornamental in Golshiri's work; all derive from thorough research and convey the artist's message. Asked to decode the piece, he explains "What I have made here is all about non-being and death and destruction." Understanding the range of his sources (Suhrawardi, Nizami, Khomeini, and sacred texts, to name a few) and the subtlety of his irreverence, however, calls for an investigation beyond the scope of this text. An old version of this piece won the third prize at the *6th Tehran Contemporary Painting Biennial*, 2003. It was acquired by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art but, inexplicably, it is no longer in that collection. The exhibited variation was created in 2020.



Eulogy of Wearers of Black Raiments, 2020.

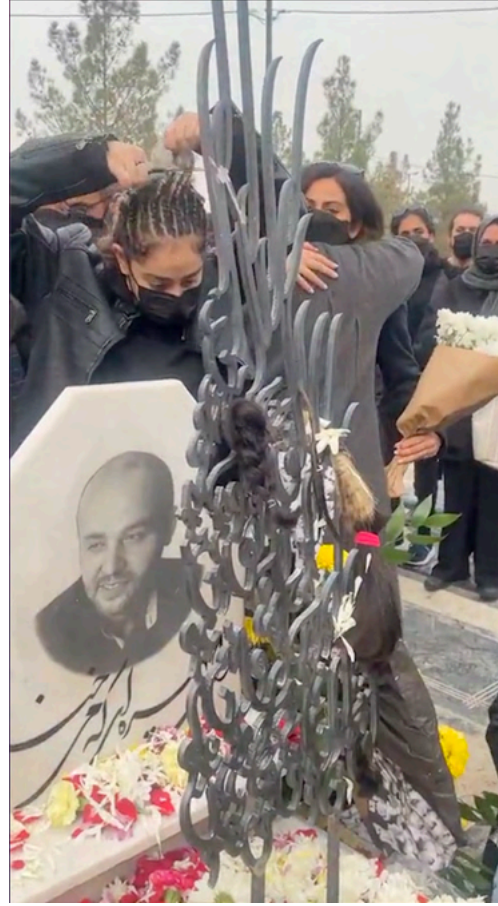
Expo UV ink on plexiglass, LED light, wooden frame, acid free cardboard, 153 x 89 cm.

Edition of 3 (+1 AP).



Oil on Canvas, 2018.
 Pigment inkjet print on photo paper, 60 x 90 cm.
 Edition of 6 (+ 1 AP).

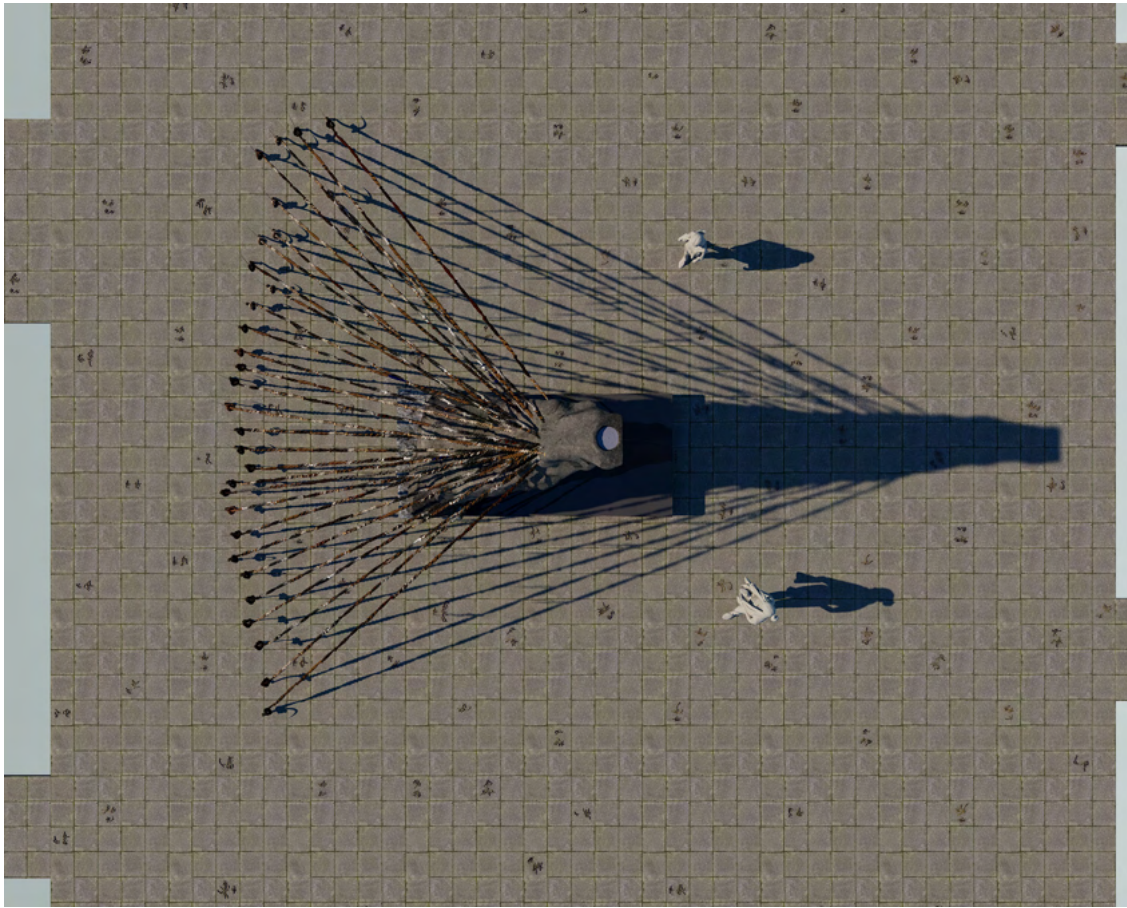
With ***Oil on Canvas***, a photograph dating from 2018, a different area of Golshiri's investigations is included in the exhibition. The image offers a plunging view of the central atrium of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA), which owes its existence to the petro-dollars that flowed into the country in the 1970s. It captures the museum's acquisitions from before and after the 1979 Revolution. Noriyuki Haraguchi's ***Mind and Matter***, filled with oil (commissioned by Kamran Diba, architect and the museum's founding director), reflects on its surface the post-revolutionary acquisitions: the oil on canvas portraits of the two Supreme Leaders by Keykhosro Khoroush, installed by TMOCA's staff, at the highest possible location. In Golshiri's installation, the lowest position is allotted to this photograph which also reflects a window view that recalls prison walls. The Shah attended the inaugural festivities but, doubting that in fact Haraguchi's pool contained oil, soiled his hand by touching what appeared to be a polished mirror. Reflected in the dark abyss at the museum's heart, oil, history, art and politics commingle.



The tomb of Ali Roozbahani, 2022.
Video, colour, sound, 2:58 minutes.

One more victim of the movement, Ali Roozbahani, who was gunned down on his birthday and passed away in November 2022, features in Golshiri's ***Curriculum Mortis***. Since a tombstone designed by Golshiri cannot be installed under the current security conditions, only a metal sculpture devised as a portable object immune to vandalism, was presented to the family. It is composed of the movement's slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" in Persian, Kurdish, Azeri Turkic, Balochi and Arabic, combined with the name of Ali Roozbahani. Golshiri continues to create similar sculptures and memorials for other victims of this revolution.

The QR code pasted on Roozbahani's actual grave directs visitors to the video presented in this exhibition.



Memorial of Jina (Mahsa) Amini and the victims of the Women, Life, Freedom Revolution in Iran, 2022-2023.

Video of project to be realized in stone, cement, human hair, brass, bronze, wood, steel, with explanatory comments by the artist.

Video, 3 minutes and 47 seconds.

A great number of works in the exhibition divulge Golshiri's idiosyncratic mission, one that in Andreas Huyssen's words might be described as efforts to "sabotage organized forgetting." Subverting and redirecting the attention from curriculum vitae to **Curriculum Mortis**, Golshiri chronicles the annals of death while creating mnemonic objects and images that bring the vanished back into memory, if not to life. His efforts stand in stark contrast to how state terror in Iran weaponizes death and propels its minions to actions seeking ultimate erasure and compulsory amnesia – when, for instance, graves are vandalized, corpses robbed, or the dead buried anonymously. For Golshiri, the noted, remembered, protected and honored individuals belong to a tribe of innocent victims, silenced dissidents and freedom fighters. Examples abound. In the **Memorial of Jina (Mahsa) Amini and the victims of the 'Women, Life, Freedom Revolution' in Iran, 2022-2023**, for instance, the voice over narrates the following:

The history of this yet unrealized memorial began when a cement block was placed on the grave of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in her native Iranian Kurdistan. On this cement block one can read in Kurdish: "Dear Jina, you will not die, your name will become a symbol". And it has.

We kept the same cement block for the base and reproduced the epitaph in rusty bronze. The proposed memorial stone stands precariously on the unfinished base: in the process of becoming and at the same time falling.

Hundreds of braids of hair – one for every victim of this revolution – are turned into ropes. These hair-ropes are sewn to the falling stone at one end. At the other end, they are attached to sickles with their handles planted into the ground. A small basin is carved into the top of the stone to hold rainwater for birds. On the smooth side of the stone, the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" is written in polished brass in several languages spoken in Iran. Facing the base, there is a sloping stone, chiselled on the sides and polished on the surface. A bronze ear is installed on the polished surface of the stone as a reference to Amini's bloody ear, the first evidence of the regime's crime.

Those who come to this memorial can lie on this cold sloping stone, put their ear to Jina's bronze ear, and listen to the narratives of this revolution: slogans, songs, music, and biographies of the victims. The area around the memorial is paved with stones. On some of them, names of the victims and where they were killed are inscribed in brass and in *shikasta* Persian script. Enough space separates them so that people can walk without treading on them. Wheelchairs too may pass through. The expanse of the area will depend on the



Yet Again, 2011.

A Passion play for of Ezzatollah Sahabi and the killing of Haleh Sahabi, Behesht-e Fatemeh Cemetery, Lavasanat, Tehran, 2011.
Hundreds of A4 paper.

A drastically different kind of memorial, titled **Yet Again**, 2011, is presented as a stack of texts visitors can take away. It concerns the murder of the activist Haleh Sahabi at the funeral of her father Ezzatollah Sahabi in 2011, where the artist too was present. In contrast to the memorials of known individuals, subversively, Golshiri presents three idyllic images shot in the north of Iran, containing graves of executed dissidents. Several references inform the title **Mehr-e Khavaran**, 2018, literally 'The Eastern Sun'. On one level, it recalls the first verse of the regime's anthem. More generally, the term Khavaran, by now turned into a generic term for all mass graves of dissidents, was originally used for the notorious cemetery in southeast Tehran, created after the Revolution. It was at first reserved for religious minorities considered to be apostates. Soon after it turned into a mass grave for executed dissidents.

YET AGAIN

BARBAD GOLSHIRI, 2011
TA'ZIA (REENACTMENT/PASSION PLAY)
TO COMMEMORATE THE DEATH OF EZZATOLLAH
SAHĀBI AND THE KILLING OF HĀLEH SAHĀBI



Time: April

H: A tombstone. North of Bêhêst-ê Fâtemê Cemetery, Lavāsânât, Tehran. Horizontal, long and narrow. Black granite. Old and damaged. No epitaph. Four wooden wedges west of **H** in line with **H**'s four corners. **R:** Rooftop, right side of the grave, behind cemetery's north wall looking down at **H**. **H1:** Woman in her mid-fifties. In plain white long-sleeved worn out dusty dressing-gown down to her ankles. Long grey hair. Bare foot. **H2:** Old man in his eighties. Dress identical with **H1**. Long white hair. Bare foot. **P:** Eight men in identical grey long sleeved worn out dressing-gowns down to their ankles. Old black rubber gloves. Bare foot. Long grey hair. **SG:** South Gate, cemetery main gate. **NG:** North Gate, few steps north of **H**.

At dawn **P** enters the cemetery from **SG**: carrying 4 iron crows, 4 shovels on shoulders. Curved and pointed ends damaged. No sound, footsteps only. **P** paces in slow tempo toward west then north wall. Reaches **H**. Circles around **H**. Heads up. No sound. Long pause. No sign of mourning. Heads bowed. Iron crows under the tombstone. Two lift lower side up and toward west and down on wedges. Two others: do for upper side. No pause. Four others dig the grave with shovels. North of **H** earth piles. Leave the tools east of **H**. An instant. **P** turns about and leaves the cemetery from **NG** in slow tempo. Not a sound. Footsteps only. Toward adjacent eastern alley then up the building. An instant. **P** stands on **R** looking down at **H**. Long pause. **H1** climbs up the grave. Turns and gazes at the grave. Long pause. Takes a shovel and climbs down. Digs the earth for a good while. Earth piles as before. Climbs up. Turns and gazes at the grave. Long pause. **H2** rises and climbs up. Stands by **H1**. They do not touch. **P** leaves **R** and enters the cemetery from **SG**. Path as before. Faster tempo. Reaches **H**. Circles around **H1** and **H2**. Four men lift **H2** onto the shoulder; first **H2**'s right shoulder onto a bearer's right shoulder, then **H2**'s right foot onto a bearer's right shoulder, then his left foot onto a bearer's left shoulder and then his left shoulder onto a bearer's left shoulder. Followed by bearers, the group goes hastily ten steps toward west, stops brusquely. **H2** falls off on the ground. **H1** hastens toward them. Stops behind them. Long pause. **H2** is lifted onto the shoulder as before by the other four then ten steps toward south. **H1** is left behind. **P** stops as before. **H2** falls as before. **H1** hastens as before. Stops as before. **H2** is lifted onto the shoulder as before by the other four. Ten steps toward east as before. **H1** is left behind. **P** stops as before. **H2** falls as before. **H1** hastens as before. Stops as before. **H2** is lifted onto the shoulder as before by the other four. **P** ten steps toward north as before. **H1** is left behind. **P** stops as before. **H2** falls into the grave. Two climb down the grave. Lay **H2** on his right side, his face toward southwest. Shake him for a good while then climb up. **P** circles around **H**. Heads up. No sound. Long pause.

Four fill half the grave with shovels. Others watch. No pause. Iron crows under the gravestone. Upper side up then toward east and down on the grave. Repeat for lower side. Heads bowed. An instant. **P** turns about and leaves the cemetery from **NG** now in faster tempo. An instant. **P** Looks down at **H** from **R**. **H1** hastens to **H**. No pause. Picks an iron crow and inserts under the lower part. Cannot lift it. **P** leaves **R** and enters the cemetery from **SG**. Same path. Faster tempo. Reaches **H**. An instant. One picks an iron crow, aids **H1** and lifts lower side up then toward west on wedges. An instant. Two pick iron crows and lift upper side up then toward west on wedges. **P** Circles around **H**. Heads up. No sound. Long pause. Heads bowed. Turns about and leaves cemetery from **NG** in slow tempo. On **R** as before. Long pause.

H1[murmurs]: Dusk is yet to come.

P leaves **R** and enters the cemetery from **SG**. Same path. Fastest tempo. Reaches **H**. No pause. Tombstone is removed as before now in faster tempo. Grave is dug as before now in faster tempo. Comes out **H2** as before. No pause. **H2** is Lifted onto the shoulder as beffroi. Tombstone is placed on the grave as before by the other four. **H1** motionless. **P** ten steps toward west, south, east as before now in fastest tempo. **H2** falls off at each halt. When **P** halts before **H**, **H2** falls on tombstone and is lifted as before. Bearers change after each fall as before. **H1** hastens and stops as before. Repeat till dusk.

While **P** steps toward west, **H2** halts by the grave. Stands still.

H1[murmurs]: Dusk already.

P completes another cycle as before. Reaches **H**. Those ahead stand by **H1**. Bearers move on to complete the cycle. Tombstone is removed as before by the other four now in fastest tempo. **P** does not stop. **H2** does not fall. **P** reaches **H**. Stops as before. **H2** falls into the grave as before. Two climb down the grave as before. Lay **H2** on his right side in fast tempo, his face toward southwest. They shake him for an instant then climb up as before. **P** circles around **H**. Heads up. No sound. Long pause. Four fill half the grave as before. Others watch. An instant. **H1** is brought onto the shoulder in the same order as before. Cycle as before now in slow tempo. One cycle only. **H1** falls off at each halt and is brought onto the shoulder as before. **P** reaches **H**. Stops. **H1** is thrown in the grave. Two climb down the grave as before. Lay **H1** on her right side, her face toward southwest. Shake her for a good while. They climb up now in slowest tempo. **P** circles around **H**. Heads up. No sound. Long pause. Four fill the other half as before. Others watch. Long pause. Tombstone is placed as before now in slowest tempo. Heads bowed. Long pause. Tools on shoulders. **P** turns about and leaves the cemetery from **NG** in slowest tempo. Repeat every April.



Mehr-e Khavaran II, 2018.

Pigment inkjet print on photo paper, 90 x 60 cm (also available in 60 x 40 cm format).

Edition of 6 (+1 AP).

In contrast to the memorials of known individuals, subversively, Golshiri presents three idyllic images shot in the north of Iran, containing graves of executed dissidents. Several references inform the title ***Mehr-e Khavaran***, 2018, literally 'The Eastern Sun'. On one level, it recalls the first verse of the regime's anthem. More generally, the term Khavaran, by now turned into a generic term for all mass graves of dissidents, was originally used for the notorious cemetery in southeast Tehran, created after the Revolution. It was at first reserved for religious minorities considered to be apostates. Soon after it turned into a mass grave for executed dissidents.



Mehr-e Khavaran II, 2018.

Pigment inkjet print on photo paper, 90 x 60 cm (also available in 60 x 40 cm format).

Not on view.

Edition of 6 (+1 AP).



Mehr-e Khavaran III, 2018.

Pigment inkjet print on photo paper, 60 x 90 cm (also available in 40 x 60 cm format).

Edition of 6 (+1 AP).



Contumacious Is He, 2014.

Digital print on Canson Infinity Platine Fibre Rag, 90 x 60 cm.

Edition of 6 (+1 AP).

Finally, ***Contumacious Is He***, 2014, a black and white photograph, is installed above eye level in a corner of the gallery. It is a deliberate nod to *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10*, 1915, where Kazimir Malevich, subversively, chose to hang his *Black Square* painting where traditionally the most sacred religious icons hang in Russian Orthodox homes. Golshiri appropriates the blasphemous gesture from Malevich, an artist who has profoundly impacted his thinking. He applies it to a photograph of a 'found object' of sorts, a tombstone with an epitaph displaying a misspelling that drastically alters the meaning from 'Immortal is He' (a reference to Allah), to 'Disobedient is He'; be it God or the buried dissident.