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*in New York City*

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### **10.28.13 — HOUSES AND TOMBS**

Topics: Barbad Golshiri, Hayv Kahraman, Jack Shainman, Thomas Erben

**Hayv Kahraman** has passed through a dizzying array of nations and cultures, as if borne by the air, and so have the women in her art. How, then, do they carry so much weight? The very shape of a painting defies gravity. And then the women waft across, as if diving or reaching for the sky.

Their translucent whiteness makes them that much more ethereal—and the thicker white of their faces, like masks or caked makeup, that much more inhuman. Human they are, though, and so is the space that they inhabit between their lives and New York, in a show that closed at **Jack Shainman** October 12.

Kahraman bases her paintings on the floor plans of houses in Baghdad, her birthplace. Their pieces fit together at all sorts of odd angles, without the firm order of a picture frame and horizon line, but with ample precedents. The diagonal joins could come right out of fifteenth-century **Islamic art**. Some have a floral pattern in the central court, perhaps the symbol of a fountain or rejuvenation. Not that these blueprints are blue, but the browns could arise from the ink in a Persian miniature, an Iraqi woman's skin tones, or the wood panel itself. If the last also makes explicit painting as material object, just as in geometric abstraction, so do the shaped panels—not unlike the *Polish Village* series in wood for **Frank Stella**.

Here east does not so much meet west as confront it and move on, never sure what it has left behind and where it can go. Do the women themselves know? Their black hair and white faces borrow from Japanese art. Yet their muscular turns belong to the Italian Renaissance, lending them dignity and agency, and some of their outlines nestle neatly within a room. They could be floating above the houses, remembering them, constructing them, or trapped within them. Other women (weaker and closer to her earlier work)

huddle more sullenly against lighter colors and vaguer geometries. One must also glimpse these few in a room apart, through grillwork out of decorative tradition in place of a door.

Has the artist found a home? She is not letting on, but she has come to rest in San Francisco, at least for now. Her art, though, seems quite at home in each of its points of origin, while acceding authority to none. An immigrant and a woman, Kahraman makes art about the outsider, after a decade of war has displaced entire populations. Yet that still leaves open questions of autonomy and responsibility. In a show called "**Let the Guest Be the Master**," a demand for hospitality may easily become more.

For Barbad Golshiri in Iran, east *can* meet west, but the encounter may be lethal. Marble slabs overlap like fallen dominoes, as *Death Sentence*. Scrap metal and ashes fill an industrial trough inscribed with the name *Beckett*, in a dark memorial to the darkest of writers, and Golshiri himself consigned paper to the flames. Also face up on the floor lie rough stones, rusted iron, a barrel too well sealed for sustenance or water, and a skull staring at its own reflection. With so much solemn variety, he might stretching things to say that he makes only tombstones, which ran at **Thomas Erben** through October 26, but he turns the gallery nonetheless into a graveyard.

Here the gravest of encounters end in silence. The face of the barrel reproduces *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele* by **Jan van Eyck**, in which the jowled canon can barely maintain his frozen smile even in contemplation. Here, though, the painting shares a holy space much like its own with a hooded figure in the hush before torture. Without a tapestry or celestial throne, its arched windows admit emptiness rather than light. Across the floor, Jan receives in tribute that low arc of rusted iron. The sole inscription on both is in braille, leaving mute voices to supply translation.

As editor of the works of Samuel Beckett, Golshiri's sympathies are with the translators—between east and west, Persian and English, authority and trust. One of the two jagged stones is already his and the other for the assassinated translator of Jorge Luis Borges, after Iran attributed death to cardiac arrest. For his most makeshift grave marker, Golshiri pares away the greatest of Muslim commands: *There Is No God but God*. It becomes a no less unaccommodating epitaph, *No God*. There may be no final and faithful translation, but there can be wiser ones, and wisdom comes in recovering the weight of words.

**NOTE:** Sorry even the most recent of the two closed just this weekend, but this art blog has been really busy. At least I can often use it myself as a reference when I barely recognize an artist with a show coming up.) For now, there is more on that part of the world in "*Iran Modern*" at Asia Society, which I promise to review in this space before it closes.