

Ala Ebtekar's *Elsewhen*

Kevin B. Chen

Informed by what it means to be a part of the 21st Century diaspora, Ala Ebtekar's paintings, drawings, and installations since the late 1990s have envisioned what the present could look like if it collided with history and mythology. Challenged by a desire to look towards the future and how to manifest this impulse into new work, he began researching the literary genre of science fiction, where depictions of space flight, new technologies, and time travel set the stage for narratives of realistic speculation about the future. Although the genre has important antecedents in the West — Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1620), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), and works by modern writers Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. Le Guin, and William Gibson — Ebtekar had difficulty locating examples of this type of writing in Iran. One reason may be that the philosophy permeating much of Persian literature focuses on the now. In works by celebrated poets such as Rumi and Hafez, a recurring refrain to embrace the moment and to acknowledge that yesterday has transpired and tomorrow remains unknown is pervasive. *But what about tomorrow? What would a future Iran look like? What do Iranians and those in the diaspora see the future holding for them?*

Posing these questions, Ebtekar presents two new bodies of work exploring concepts of alternate realities, space, and utopia against the backdrop of photographs of the famous Tomb of Hafez located in Shiraz, Iran and actual book pages from Hafez's revered collection of works, the *Divan-e-Hafez*. In the Persian-speaking world, Hafez is regarded as an extraordinary poet whose verses are infused with mystical love and philosophical depth and also as a seer, a "tongue of the mysterious," who was divinely inspired. For centuries many have consulted the words of Hafez for guidance on subjects such as travel, illness, or finances. Holding the *Divan-e-Hafez*, they close their eyes, make a wish, randomly turn to a page, open their eyes, and recite the poem, receiving an amalgamation of poetic rapture, existential guidance, and moral inspiration.

Serene pools and well-maintained flowerbeds and gardens surround the Tomb of Hafez, providing an optimal environment to pause, breathe, and pay homage to the beloved Persian poet. Ebtekar envisions how this moment of reflection could look, where in the momentary interlude from daily reality, a world fully imbued with physical properties of the cosmos and the potential inherent in a perspective expanded beyond this world is plausible. Similarly in the series of paintings on pages of the *Divan-e-Hafez*, Ebtekar visualizes the emotional and spiritual manifestation of reading Hafez, a time of suspended reality where poetic illumination is possible, imaginative variations on the present are infinite, and the portal to the cosmos is literally embedded within Hafez's verses. Ebtekar not only conjures up representations of the transcendent ineffable, but also suggests a world where an expanded frame of reference can lay the foundation for realities alternative to what currently exists.

Kevin B. Chen

Chen is an artist and curator based in the San Francisco Bay Area and since 1998 has been a Program Director at Intersection for the Arts, widely considered to be one of the most vital and important cultural centers on the West Coast of the U.S.