

Sometimes regression can be retroactive, a move backward that actually catapults you forward. When French philosopher Gilles Deleuze published his dissertation in 1968, the year the Second French Revolution led students to occupy the Sorbonne and workers all over Paris to go on strike, he suggested returning to the past could actually push you into the future. “It is because nothing is equal, because everything bathes in its difference, . . . that everything returns,” he wrote. You feel your way through memory and repeat history because you have changed, so shouldn’t the results be different this time around?

Ala Ebtekar moved back to make “Coelestis (after Hafez)” and the other intricate images he printed then painted into large, old manuscript pages. Patterned and concentric, the paintings have, at first glance, a traditional, ritualistic feeling. Perfectly spaced golden vines move in from all sides toward star-shaped openings, each arm of which resembles a Persian window cut into an Esfahani-style palace. Given the manuscript Ebtekar worked into, by Persian poet Hafez who wrote in the 14th Century, has achieved divine status, the ritualism of these paintings fits almost too well -- except that Ebtekar’s particular approach to precision and repetition is informed more by the language of pixels and vectors than ink and parchment.

“Mostly, we open [Hafez’s] book and see what happens to our future,” said Afghan poet and diplomat Masood Khalili, who read Hafez aloud to Ahmed Shah Massoud, his friend and the Minister of Defense, the night before Massoud’s 2001 assassination. The page he opened to said this: “Tonight you two are together. Valuate, many nights go, many days disappear. You two will not be able to see each other again.” This, of course, proved true.

Even though military crises and maneuvers would characterize their whole friendship, Khalili and Massoud bonded more over a shared faith in poetry than politics when they met in 1978, right after the Saur Revolution. That same year, 1978, marked the end of the period of Iranian leisure Ebtekar revisits in “Ayandeh-nameh,” another body of half-nostalgic, half-futuristic work. With civil unrest boiling over, discos, nightclubs and additional pop havens receded then disappeared. In Ebtekar’s prints, which, like the Hafez paintings, are symmetrical in an almost ritualistic way, pop tropes reappear accompanied by references to made-up space programs and time travel. The prints look like festive National Geographic photographs recreated in Second Life, and they pull you into a weird, in-between space, though you can’t quite tell what you’re between: 1970s and now, the familiar and the unknown, reality and fiction, digital and analog?

One of Ebtekar’s “Ayandeh-nameh” images “The dark midnight, fearful waves, and the tempestuous whirlpool” shows twisting yellow light against a night sky, like fireworks that erupt in animated action films when a spaceship takes off or a mystical submarine pulls up from the sea. Another shows a mostly-blue room with clouds for a floor and a ceiling that dissolves into stars; uninhabited, the room emanates a surreal breed of serenity. The effect of these two images together is painfully optimistic. They pull together already-familiar languages of romance, regality, pop and possibility and, in doing so, seem to want represent what *could be* real. Destiny

doesn't go in any one direction, they suggest, nor is it necessarily one thing over another. It could hover forever here, mixed-up, in-between but hopeful.

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