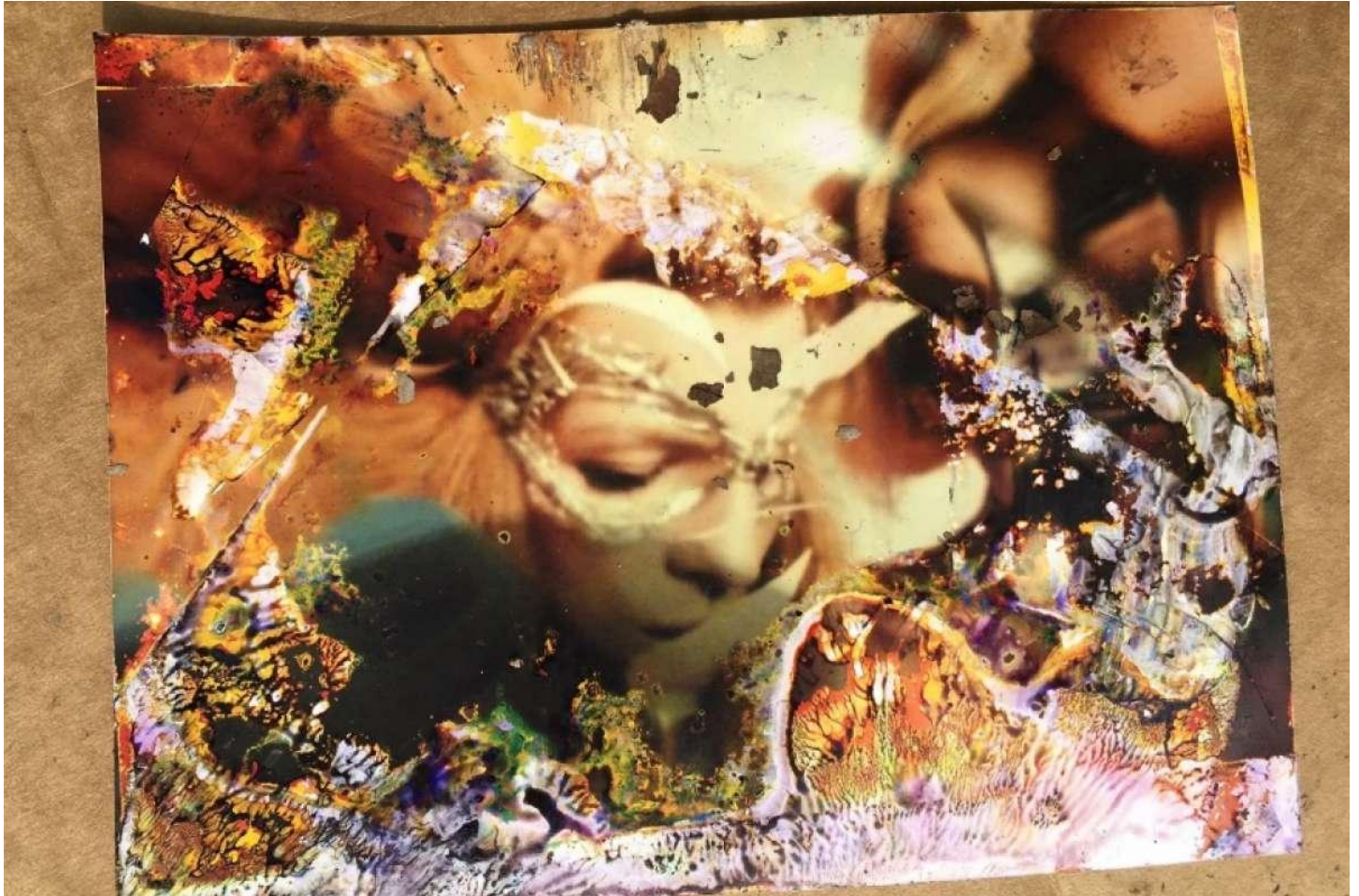


LOCAL // GRAY MATTERS

Harvey ruined years of my art. The ruins are beautiful.

Avisheh Mohsenin, for the Houston Chronicle

Sep. 22, 2017 | Updated: Sep. 22, 2017 12:09 p.m.



Floodwaters damaged years of artwork and other artifacts in Mohsenin's Houston studio. But beauty can be found in the damage.

Photo: Avisheh Mohsenin

I got married and moved from Chicago to Houston last fall, where my husband is based. We bought a house in a wooded area overlooking a ravine, with a studio space in the lower level where I placed my art and artifacts.

I am an economist by day and an artist by night. Over the years, I created works on paper and collages, printed photographs in a darkroom set up in my pantry and exhibited them regularly. I collected art from local artists in Chicago and my many travels.

As an immigrant away from her home country, I also kept boxes of family photos, handwritten letters, childhood slides and memorabilia from my late father's world travels.

Unlimited Digital Access for 99¢

Read more articles like this by subscribing to the Houston Chronicle

SUBSCRIBE

All of these I kept in that space.

The day before Harvey hit Texas and the rains arrived in Houston, my husband and I moved all these items as well as his drawings from architecture school and blueprints to higher shelves in the studio. We prepared ourselves and our belongings for a potential flood of 3 feet to 4 feet.

This room flooded at an all-time high, up to its ceiling.

A week later, entry was still impossible and a demolition crew had to use axes to break through its doors on Labor Day. I geared up with boots, a mask and gloves to be present when they broke in. It was impossible to step in the room: Everything had come down – Sheetrock, ceiling, furniture, paint and all the items we had meticulously "saved" were now in ruin, a mixture of mud and water.

Some items had floated up with the high waters and attached: a brush stuck on the wet wall, small boxes atop the visible skeleton of the room.



Floodwaters damaged Mohsenin's Houston studio, even leaving a paintbrush stuck to the wall.

Photo: Avisheh Mohsenin

In the darkness of the room, the first thing I felt was assault, a blow to things I had worked hard for. But the first image that appeared on a pile of debris was a photograph of a dance group in Iran who performed at our wedding.

It was surreal to see everything destroyed – but also beautiful to be reminded of happy times. A new perspective was forming.

The crew spent a full day taking mounds of debris out of this zone of carnage, deconstructing what was already destroyed. As they pulled various boxes and handed them to me with a sense that I interpreted as sympathy, they waited patiently as I kneeled on the muddy porch scavenging through the smelly piles.

It was sad and heartbreaking to see packs of photographs, handwritten letters and my memories stuck together in contaminated fluid. In a state of mourning, I started frantically taking photos of what was visible and salvageable: a photo of my late father and myself, one of

my sister and my mother, letters with now illegible phrases, friends from the past, grandparents long gone, ex-loves from the predigital era.

They appeared smiling, as if wishing me strength.

At first the sense was a sense of loss – loss of things you hang onto and cherish. I felt guilt and remorse for not having moved things to the first floor (which also flooded, but not as intensely). I felt anger at having bought a house near a bayou. I felt sadness that most of these images were not digital or digitized and the negatives were not salvageable. All my sculptural artworks were absolutely destroyed.

But the chemicals from the negatives and slides and the floodwaters had washed down and created new abstract images. Amid the mixed feelings and the frenzy of not hindering the work of the demolition crew, I ended up in a creative frame of mind: that vortex of peace and serenity that one experiences when deeply immersed in the creative process. It was as though I was back in a darkroom, where nothing else mattered but the creation at hand. The abstract and washed-out images had transformed into beautiful visuals that spoke of loss, but also of happiness. They showed both sides of an emotion. The same way that one can experience moments of calmness and peace when going through the loss of a loved one. These images were a visual manifestation of that sensation.

Working against a backdrop of a flooded bayou on the results of years of concentrated creativity and treasured collectibles covered in brown muck, my sadness, guilt and anger changed into appreciation, gratitude and healing. If these objects could resurrect themselves, why couldn't I?

I kept a few things. Cleaned them as much as possible, dried them for days and stored them in new boxes. What I have salvaged from the flood is a number of washed-down photos and muddy canvases, but more importantly a reminder that no matter how hard or devastating a situation is, you can try to find something to hang onto and gain hope.

As I lost my physical art studio that I loved and most of my cherished artworks, I gained a new project: I plan to exhibit a series of these salvaged images for raising funds for the victims of the Harvey floods, especially those whose livelihood was damaged and lost much more than I did. The message would be one of hope and resilience and the beauty found in ruin.

Avisheh Mohsenin ([@avishehmoh](https://www.instagram.com/avishehmoh)) lives and works in Houston.

Bookmark Gray Matters. *It speaks of loss, but also of happiness.*

©2018 Hearst