

Avisheh Mohsenin - Playing Fields

By Sabine Casparie, March 2021

Avisheh Mohsenin knows well how to turn adverse circumstances into art. Her previous series of photographs and photocollages was conceived during Houston's Harvey, when she turned her flooded family photos into new and original works, using the blended colours and chemicals as compositional tools.

And then last year, Covid hit and Mohsenin found herself confined to her home with her husband and her one-and-a-half year old daughter. Much has been written about the special burden that the pandemic put on mothers, who, after years of striving for equality, suddenly found themselves back at home again doing laundry and cooking and taking care of children. Mohsenin, who also has a job in economic consulting, equally found herself juggling motherhood and work and the restraints of the pandemic. So she decided to use the time with her daughter creatively, and incorporate it into her art.

Going to playgrounds, once they were open again, was one of the few things Mohsenin could do with her daughter outside the house. Sitting there, watching her daughter happily discover the colourful worlds of slides and swings and climbing racks, Mohsenin started to see these 'playing fields' as a starting point for a new series of work. She especially noticed the formal properties of the various slides: their bright colors and interesting shapes, the way the light fell onto them at different times of the day. The slides became a research project: Mohsenin would search online for the best ones, then visit the playground and photograph them, sometimes travelling far distances to catch the most unusual ones.

One part of the series *Playing Fields* consists of colourful photocollages on paper or board, using the same technique of her previous works, cutting out and putting together parts of the photographed slides into new combinations that betray their original source. The resulting designs are bright and intricate and highly detailed; the individual parts of the slides, no longer recognisable, appear like hyper-real brushstrokes. These hybrid structures look organic and artificial all at once, like futuristic flowers. You can almost sense the buzz and excitement of the little toddler legs that have whizzed through the slides, the rush of energy contained in the otherworldly forms.

A second series is more geometric, using basic forms like the circle and triangle and squares. The photographs shown here in a grid, are derived from experiments with light, space and color in the studio. But they still take as a starting point the rich visual world of the child. Mohsenin used a set of small objects, sourcing her toddler's toy box for doll house furniture, a tiny red chair, a bookshelf and a ladder, adding balloons and a broken piece of a model house – a bridge-like form – that her husband, an architect, left in the garage. She combined the tiny objects with few objects such as stones – remnants of nature found by her daughter on their walks. The objects are staged in the studio, using different set-ups and lighting to create reflections and shadows, then photographed and sometimes digitally coloured by hand, like finger-painting on the screen.

These miniature worlds are playful, yet they also reference the history of staged photography by artists such as Thomas Demand, who photographs finely detailed

maquettes of rooms where important historical events took place, and Laurie Simmons, who creates domestic scenes inhabited by tiny female toy figures. Mohsenin has always been interested in the physicality of photography. Are photographs just images, documentation, or are they physical objects in their own right? What is the value of objects and our material attachment to them? What is real and what is constructed?

Mohsenin was also inspired by the work of artist Siah Armajani, who, like Mohsenin, moved from Iran to the United States. Armajani uses the language of architecture to explore ideas that are political, philosophical and poetic, resulting in architectural models and realised structures that are often dysfunctional and absurd. The bridge-like object in *Playing Field* is reminiscent of Armajani's famous bridges – some in the form of models and some realised in public works. They are structures that do not connect things, but instead are an open invitation, an imaginary linking of minds.

During these strange times of Covid confinement, we all have to find inspiration closer to home. But it takes an artist to turn the everyday into something beautiful and lasting. Mohsenin's work reminds us that even when we are locked in our homes and our cities, our imagination can never be curtailed. And sometimes all it takes to see the world afresh is through the eyes of a child: full of wonder, curiosity, and joy.

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