

LOCAL // GRAY MATTERS

Harvey made ruins; I made art

Avisheh Mohsenin

Aug. 24, 2018 | Updated: Aug. 24, 2018 4:58 p.m.



The attempt to save pieces damaged by Harvey led Mohsenin into a creative state where she could rediscover beauty.

Photo: Avisheh Mohsenin

Hurricane Harvey, which hit Houston in August 2017, submerged my home art studio in its floodwaters for days.

The blow of the destruction of memorabilia, family slides and artworks was similar to a feeling of being violated. The attempt to save these damaged pieces proved to be futile. But in the heat of the moment, as I started to familiarize myself with this new kind of loss, something

happened: I entered into a creative state — working with the muddy images, discovering them in their new state.

They were no longer images of loved ones or cherished works of art. They became surfaces with sophisticated lines and colors as though made mindfully and with intent. The accidental effect of a ravaging incident was a silver lining.

The year that followed the flooding was one of remediation, reconstruction and adaptation. Living in a house without a kitchen for months, we were forced to cope as though we lived on a campsite. We found ourselves converting a bathroom sink to an exclusive kitchen sink. Our bedroom became a multipurpose quarter similar to nomads' tents. The heart of the house — the library — became a storage area. Space and the amount of it one needs to live became a constant thought.

Through all this, though, we constantly reminded ourselves that there were people going through much worse. *This too shall pass.*

Unlimited Digital Access for 99¢

Read more articles like this by subscribing to the Houston Chronicle

SUBSCRIBE

The boxes of flooded photos and slides sat in a cramped garage busy with construction going all around it for months. I would go to them once in a while, trying to dry the photographs again and again, to edit them for the show I had promised. Now, the result of these experiences and the discovery of new meaning for my damaged art studio is the focus of "Resurface," now at Vaughan Mason Fine Art.

"Resurface"

What: Exhibition and artist talk with Avisheh Mohsenin

Where: Vaughan Mason Fine Art, 3510 Lake Street at Colquitt

When: Saturday, Aug. 25, 1 p.m.

[Click here for more information](#)

The works in "Resurface" come in two series: The "excavation" part presents the damaged images in the form of reprinted archival photographs. They are the product of a slow marinating in a mix of photo chemicals and floodwaters. Their new altered state has an archaeological element: from the stamped movement of water to the process of figuring out what is and what was. They serve as a reminder of the power of nature that should not be underestimated and the urgency to take care of it.

As I excavated through years of photographs, I also asked myself why I had kept them in boxes for so many years. What did I *really* see looking at them now? What role did they have in documenting or reinterpreting my memories? What happens now that I don't have them? What do they mean in the context of how photography has evolved in today's world?



For Mohsenin, creating works of art became a healing tool after Harvey.
Photo: Avisheh Mohsenin

The "reinterpretation" part of "Resurface" includes collages I made using images of our house under construction. Not long after examining questions about attachment, materialism and memories — like a drunk pouring another glass — I was at the store buying art materials, printing hundreds of photos of damaged images and cutting them. The collages are the results of this exercise of recreating and not letting go. The source material is entirely from images related to the aftermath of Harvey.

Some of the collages reinterpret the destruction. Putting pieces of doors and windows and chairs on top of each other on a canvas felt like rebuilding. Saving an image of a seriously damaged artwork by another artist felt like paying respect to the artist's creativity before burying their art. The collaging of covered furniture in a dusty living room was a way of being in charge of the devastation and not its victim.

Creating works of art became a healing tool and one that induced patience and perspective — eventually resulting in new meanings.

This too did pass.

Avisheh Mohsenin ([@avishehmoh](#)) lives and works in Houston.

[Get the Gray Matters newsletter. It's the product of a slow marinating.](#)