

RESURFACE – Avisheh Mohsenin at Vaughan Mason Fine Arts Aug 4-Sep 1, 2018
Foreword by Patricia Restrepo

“The powers of nature are never in repose; her work never stands still,” Adam Sedgwick, one of the founders of modern geology, wrote in 1842. Houston found this adage to be painfully true in late-August of 2017, when Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Texas. Dumping more than 27 trillion gallons of rain over Texas, some parts of Houston received more than 50 inches of rainfall. Harvey became the wettest Atlantic hurricane ever measured, even forcing the National Weather Service to update the colors used on its weather charts to reflect accurately the deluge. Hurricane Harvey left one-third of Houston completely flooded and, consequently, countless individuals homeless. Not only did the city physically descend from the weight of the water, temporarily sinking by almost an inch, but the hearts and wellbeing of many citizens in the city sank as well.

Among the eight million cubic yards of garbage produced by the floodwaters—soggy drywall, molding flooring, and personal objects—were the handwritten letters, pre-digital photographs, and art collection of Avisheh Mohsenin. Fortunately physically uninjured as she was out of town when Harvey struck, Avisheh returned to her studio, not more than 600 feet from Buffalo Bayou, which had been submerged in floodwater for days. Having moved to Houston a mere ten months prior, one can only imagine the heartache, frustration, and trauma she suffered, coupled with the gratitude knowing that it could have been worse.

Luckily for us, the artist’s innovation and creative impulse can be as equally active as nature’s ravaging power. Instead of losing her grounding to suffering and immobility, Mohsenin almost immediately began documenting: documenting the soaked letters from her family, many of whom are no longer living, documenting her personal photography collection, and documenting artwork she had collected over the decades. When she looked at the results of this documentation, Mohsenin was able to distance herself from the loss of these memory aids and nostalgia in order to appreciate the beauty and strangeness that had been created in the floodwater’s wake. Although her collection of photographs was clearly no longer mimetic and referential, the altered photographs were able to take on a renewed and generative power in their ability to display emotion through large swaths of painterly color. Mohsenin rightly recognized the thematic correspondence between these altered images and other bodies of her work, which also explore issues of memory, loss, and dislocation. The parallels are clear. In some of her distorted personal photographs, the water had obscured the faces of her family members, rendering them bizarre and almost inhuman. They also exposed a new vulnerability in their forcing her to return and reconsider documents of a past that she had long kept boxed up—images of an early boyfriend, an old apartment, a past life resurfaced.

While kinships could be drawn between other works produced following a disastrous situation, I find more productive conversation emanating from comparisons to work in which the artist cedes power, agency, and control to forces

of nature. Take Jessica Warboys's *Sea Paintings*. To create the painting, Warboy produces on the beach, she casts mineral pigments directly onto a damp, folded canvas, which she then submerges in the sea before bringing it back to shore. This process allows the ocean's waves and life to move and disperse the pigment of her paintings with stunning results.

In addition to acknowledging and respecting the seemingly mindful beauty that resulted from the flooding in the *Excavation* part of her series, Mohsenin also shifted this painful documentation process into a productive and empowered one by collaging the altered archival photographs. In this part of the series, which she terms *Reinterpretation*, Mohsenin reclaims agency in her ability to retell and reframe her past, fragments of which were taken forcibly from her. Creating her own poetic narrative through the layering and reconfiguration of certain visual elements, including interior shots of her flooded home, Mohsenin demonstrates her ability to dislocate her victimhood by producing a compelling series of work that is relevant not only for Houston audiences but the field of contemporary art at large.

Patricia Restrepo
Writer, Independent Curator, and
Assistant Curator & Exhibitions Manager at
Contemporary Art Museum Houston
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