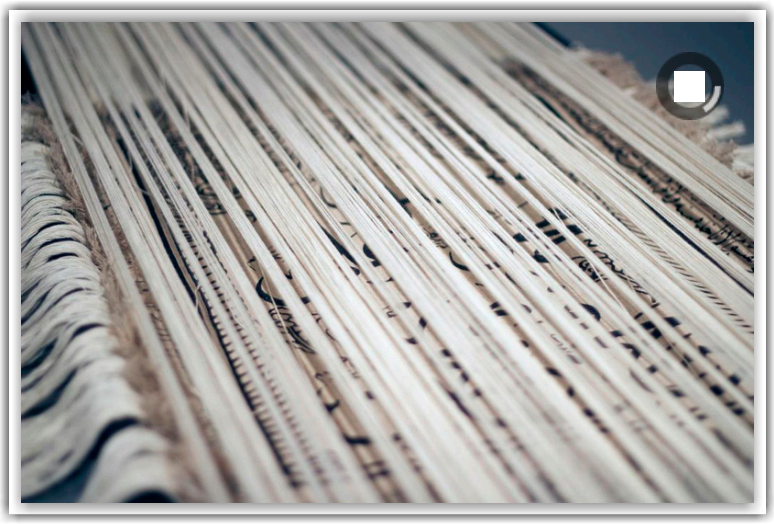
Visual Arts: Sara Madandar

Prayer Rug:

A Conversation with Sara Madandar

Taylor Bradley



Sara Madandar is an Iranian artist enrolled in the MFA program at UT. In her paintings, sculptures, video and performance, Madandar explores her experience living in and between Persian and American cultures. I met up with Sara to discuss her recent body of work on exhibition at Co-Lab from February 22nd – March 1st, 2014.

> I wanted to cover the body; I usually like the sense of covering the piece. –Sara Madandar

TAYLOR BRADLEY: **How did your thinking about "Prayer Rug" develop while you were making it?**

SARA MADANDAR: Well, when I began working I was just thinking about making my body on the canvas. I stood in front of the canvas and asked someone to draw the outline of my body and then I painted it black, unraveled and restrung it so you can't really see the shape of the body on canvas, just on the strands.

TB: **It's more like a shadow?**

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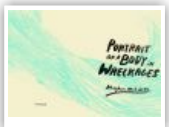

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SM: Yeah, exactly. I wanted to make a shadow. And I put the prayer rug in the middle to cover the sensitive part of the body, for women. The point of the piece is that you see it at an angle, so when you are standing in front of it, here, you can feel the piece on the floor.

TB: **When I saw the piece last, there was another unraveled canvas on the wall. I forget, was there anything on it?**

SM: No, it was just strands on the wall that I took from the piece but it was like absence of the piece on the wall. One isn't better or worse, just different installations.

TB: **Can you talk about the prayer rug a little bit?**

SM: Right, I wanted to cover the body; I usually like the sense of covering the piece, you know? When I began it, I thought to put a prayer rug my mother gave me in the middle [Sara gets a bright pink velvet rug out of a drawer]. So I attached this to the piece first but I really didn't [like it] … because no one could get it, so it becomes more personal. I started to think to make the prayer rug that's there now, as a silkscreen print … after that I thought I need a frame, you know, to show [the painting] and so I made the frame my body size. For sure, I wanted to put it on the floor, but I needed to stretch it. I wanted to show more tension and I used nails on the edges like they are trying to hold the strands on the frame…. You can't see the shape of the prayer rug clearly, and it lends more depth to the piece.

Usually in my work you can see the body. For example, in [the small "Bodies" paintings] I use the shape of my body to draw smaller patterns of my bodies on canvas.

"Bodies" (2014)

TB: **How were those pieces made?**

SM: These are pieces I sew with sewing machine on canvas. I use the sewing machine to bring an aspect of technology or machinery into the work. The interesting part is, because the machine is fast, I can't control the lines. So the thread goes out of the line and I like it. Because when you sew with your had you're trying to control the lines but with this, you can't.

TB: **It's hard to draw with this machine.**

SM: Yeah, so I just play with the shapes they make out of lines. Because usually when you work, you want to control everything … especially when you have a show, and your process and work becomes more serious so you want to control the work. But the sewing machine, it wasn't like that, it wanted to control me and my work.

TB: **Do you feel like there is a connection for you between your sewing and domesticity or femininity?**

SM: Actually, I really like sewing things and I sew many pieces in Iran. I haven't liked to sew clothing, but I really like the machine.

TB: **And in these paintings you also have something covering the bodies like in the prayer rug piece. Can you speak to its function here?**

SM: These shapes hide the bodies, especially the sensitive area.

TB: **Like "Prayer Rug," too.**

SM: Yeah, and feet at the bottom, I think of men with foot fetishes, so I painted those darker to cover them.

TB: **So covering the body for you, how do you relate to that tendency in your work?**

SM: It's like the function of the clothes and dress. When I came here, I experienced a huge culture shock. I don't feel that I am not in Iran anymore or that I'm not here, so it's in between. When I go to Iran and you see that you have to cover yourself in the street and public spaces, and here people are free, you know [laughs]. And another thing, I read an article by Lucian Freud about the nakedness and nudity and how "nudity" is like the body you are born with, so it is close to nature, but "naked" means the body without clothes, you know? So, he compared those words and it was so interesting to me…. Yeah and I think how people judge each other from the covering and the dress code, how politics can control, especially women. Or men, I don't know, but my issue is more with women.

TB: **Well, because you know what it's like.** [laughs]

SM: Yeah. [laughs]

"In Between" (2014)

TB: **I also saw your other plaid pieces, how did those evolve overtime? Some seem much more linear than others.**

SM: You see this is [pointing to "In Between"] the original pattern in the middle of the painting.

TB: **That's fabric?**

SM: Yeah, it's not painted in the middle; it's fabric. Historically, men in Iran wrapped this fabric around themselves in public bathrooms, as a towel, to hide their body. So you know this is a masculine object, and the function is to cover the body so for this reason I use that fabric.

TB: **So you feel like this piece is more masculine than the other "Body" paintings?**

SM: I feel for me it's interesting that this fabric was masculine but it was red, you know? For me it's not masculine.

TB: **It's sort of like a compromise, that we all have to cover ourselves?**

SM: Yes, but when they wrap around the towel you see down here [gesture towards her legs], you know, so I just dislocate the dislocation of the feet to the top.

TB: **It's great, you know, like you were saying about female erogenous zones, for men it's different and, here, their upper bodies are left out of the picture, out of the composition. And then you cover their groin, which also happens to be in the middle of the painting, covering the center of the painting—I feel like I want to see the rest of the painting.**

Maybe it's not good to say, but I don't care about audience. –Sara Madandar

TB: **It's funny, on the way over here when we were talking about teaching undergraduates: has teaching influenced your work or your practice at all?**

SM: Hmm, I don't think so.

TB: **No?**

SM: Because, maybe this semester I just began enjoying teaching until last semester because of my language problem I didn't like teaching and I missed connecting with the students because sometimes we would talk and I would miss part of it. But I think as time goes on, I'm just getting into the religious thing [in my work] and the thing I don't believe anymore. I want to deconstruct my belief, my mind that changed from the beginning of immigration from that time to now.

TB: **How long has that been?**

SM: Three years.

TB: **Had you been to the US before?**

SM: No.

TB: **Wow, did you speak English before?**

SM: No.

TB: **That's incredible.**

SM: Yeah, I learned English to pass the University's language exam. But it was totally different from … that you can't communicate with the people here. Because of their accent, because of the word they use that's not in the books! [Laughs]

TB: **Right, I remember living in Chile—and I'm sure I do it too—they always forgot how fast they talked.**

SM: Yeah! They forget that it's difficult for me to understand them. Sometimes I get tired of asking questions and just show that you understand but you don't understand. [Laughs]

TB: **Does language ever come into your work?**

SM: No, no. I just use Arabic because of the religious part. Many artists use that alphabet in their work to make more beautiful.

TB: **As decoration?**

SM: Yeah, so I don't like that part of that. It's hard when you use something like a veil, they ask me about it. I mean, it becomes kind of like a stereotype, too.

TB: **I feel like your work is so personal and isn't heavy handed in its politics, the "Bodies" paintings, for instance, have such a playful atmosphere. Everything is so charged these days, here in this country, and you really seem to get across the sense of a personal experience, and keep the polemic political discourse at a distance.**

SM: The difficult part is, my work is going on the edge. That, for example here the American audience, they don't get it so much, you know, the concept? And in Iran they don't understand why I make this work because they haven't experienced, you know, my way.

TB: **How so?**

SM: They think that because when you are in the limited situation and believe something you think, that the whole world is in that place at that location that you are living because you don't experience living in the other location. But when you go to the other location, and the other location is freer, you see that there are different people that live in different ways. There are many different things you can experience and you think about things that limit your view, you know, as you look at the world. You start questioning yourself, but before I couldn't.

TB: **Sure, you had nothing to compare it to.**

SM: The work I am making, is what I am experiencing. The people living in Iran might think I have such audiences in America and that they like my work in this line, but no.

TB: **Ha, right.**

SM: It's like an experience now, these are my issues, I can't, for example, go work on the other issues because these are that ones I am living! [Laughs]

TB: **Do a different kind of issue!** [Laughs]

SB: So it's hard.

TB: **I understand, I think for me, when I look at your work, I'm not sure how much I might be missing in translation but a specific point of view still comes across. It doesn't feel like you are speaking for other people. How do people from Iran living here relate to your work?**

SB: Yeah, but because some part of it is personal and depends on if you grew up in a conservative or open-minded family. For example, when you live in the open-minded family in Iran, it's so different from when you live in conservative family.

TB: **It's not the same culture shock, you mean?**

SM: Yeah, the limitations were different for me coming from a conservative family. I was so limited in Iran.
Maybe it's not good to say, but I don't care about audience.

TB: **It's good to say.** [Laughs]

SM: Yeah, I don't care because when you think of the audience, you make work for the audience. But no, I'm just making something that makes sense for me and is my issue and is the way to show [myself]. So if I were a writer or a poet I would do something else, so as an artist I just make worlds in order to communicate. Many people encourage me, "you should go pick your audience," but is impossible when you—

TB: **What?!**

SM: Yeah! It is one of those questions, "Who is your audience?"

TB: **Yourself!**

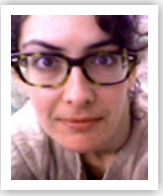
SM: You know? So, but when you put your work outside, for example in museum and gallery, there are many people from different areas so I can't pick people, okay: you! you! you! come to see!

TB: **Exactly.**
SM: If I just want to make work for audience, it's a problem that might change my process and work.

TB: **I think the work is there to be connected with and there will be people who do and people who don't.**

SM: Yeah, I don't think about audience because I can't say most of the audience here is American and if they don't know my background and culture so well so it's hard for me to make something they can understand.

TB: **You just make what you understand.**
SM: Yeah, exactly. I can just talk about my background and the mixture of the two cultures now.



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