

## Sanaz Mazinani

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**Sanaz Mazinani, U.S.A.I.R.A.N., 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view.**

*Sanaz Mazinani is a San Francisco–based artist whose work explores the relationship between perception and representation. Her installation U.S.A.I.R.A.N., 2014, is currently featured in “5 x 5,” a program of contemporary, temporary public art spearheaded by the Washington, DC, commission on the arts and humanities. Mazinani’s work, which appropriates the exterior of a vacant library at 1300 H Street Northeast in DC’s thriving H Street Corridor, is on view until November 21, 2014.*

**U.S.A.I.R.A.N.** is a public art installation that activates a vacant space by covering all its windows with a set of twenty-one digital montages. The imagery used was all sourced online and brings together photographs of Tehran and Washington, DC, that challenge the negative representations of Iranians that are seen in popular media in the West, as a means to take control of our own image.

The site is a former library, which has lain vacant since 2009. It used to be an important community hub, so when I found out that it has been purchased by a developer who had plans to demolish it and build yet another condo in this already fast-gentrifying neighborhood, I knew that I needed to use its incredible architecture for one final hurrah.

The building is incredibly unique. It's octagonal with a set of twenty-four windows, eight of which are curved, so I was excited to use it as an urban forum of exchange. I was commissioned by Out of the Box Projects for "5x5," with a premise to create a public art installation that would speak to issues regarding the theme of home(land). Since the project is in the US capital, I wanted to respond to the cultural void created by the absence of an Iranian Embassy. In the 1960s and '70s, the embassy was a site of cultural exchange, with events featuring Iranian performers and artists that drew the likes of Andy Warhol, Elizabeth Taylor, and Frank Sinatra to DC. Today, not only is that singular venue long closed, but there are immigration restrictions in place that make it difficult for Iranian artists to present their work anywhere in this country. So this work's initial inspiration was to throw light on the void of Iranian arts and culture in the US due to sanctions and the politics at play today.

The process of visiting the site and conversing with DC residents allowed me to understand exactly how little Americans know about contemporary life in Iran. The project slowly morphed into a kind of representation of Tehran juxtaposed against DC, wherein the montaged images on the windows do the heavy lifting of presenting a new perspective and proposing an alternative view of Tehran. I knew I wanted to create a public installation that would be alluring from a distance, but also difficult. The imagery uses patterns reminiscent of Islamic ornamentation superimposed onto this midcentury American building. By merging and colliding images of the US with those of Iran, the work forms surprising visual links and narratives.

While installing the work, I had a chance to talk with many neighborhood residents. One comment that stood out was: "Aren't those two countries at odds with one another?" This was the golden question for me. I want to call attention to the significance of perspective and position, and to recognize the ever-changing political relationships that are manufactured around nation-states. Above the building, for instance, waves a double-sided flag that reads, SPEAK A NEW LANGUAGE, SO THAT THE WORLD CAN BE A NEW WORLD. This Rumi quote appears in both Farsi and English, and it references the power of arts and literature to alter the imagination.

The project is rather accessible, with blunt contrasts and comparisons that leave space for viewers to formulate their own questions, providing a physical forum that agitates our understanding of difference. The installation is viewable during the day and at night, when the entire building turns into a giant light box. And that really speaks to my interest in photography and what it does in the public sphere. Repetition and reproducibility empower images with the ability to construct and define history. This installation becomes an alternative to the dominant narrative. The images have all been plucked out of their own contexts. Combining photographs of Tehran gathered through a variety of online sources—which are not normally printed in newspapers—with similar photos of DC reveals the kinship between these cities.

— As told to *Katie Anania*