

Immigrant memories inspired these siblings' art collab — then the travel ban nearly tore them apart

Sister and brother duo Sanaz and Mani Mazinani debut new work in San Francisco this month

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Canadian artist Sanaz Mazinani. Born in Iran, she is currently based in San Francisco where she will open two new exhibitions this month. (www.sanzamazinani.com)

Canadian artist [Sanaz Mazinani](#) has been living and working in San Francisco since she was doing her Masters at Stanford University — and shortly after Donald Trump won the U.S. election this fall, she reached out to her brother, Toronto-based artist [Mani Mazinani](#), to collaborate on two new pieces. A sound piece and a sculpture, she says they're "inspired and responding to our current political climate."



Toronto artist Mani Mazinani.(Instagram/@manimazinani (Photo: Jill Aston))

Those works will appear in Sanaz's new solo exhibition, [Signal to Noise](#), opening February 16 at San Francisco's Camerawork gallery. Mani needs to be there for the install — so he can help put the unfinished sculpture together, for example.

But a few days ago, America's "current political climate" disrupted their plans.

The Mazinanis were born in Iran, and they moved to Ontario as kids. Both maintain their own individual practice, but in the last year, they've become collaborators. They communicate online for the most part, sharing sketches and plans over Skype, but as Mani explains, they also travel between Toronto and San Francisco "fairly regularly" to work together in person.

[Trump's travel ban](#), which blocked people from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S — including, [initially, dual-citizens of Canada](#) — affected the siblings, like so many people around the world.

"It's both an artistic thing and a family thing," says Mani of the threat the ban posed. It affected their plans for the exhibition and future work, but also their day-to-day lives. If Sanaz, a U.S. green card holder and new mom, visited her brother and parents in Canada, would she be allowed to go home?

For now, Mani says he's going to San Francisco. By the time you read this, he'll be en route, and he's confident that he'll be able to travel without issue. "It's hard to comprehend otherwise," he says. "I grew up in Canada."

The siblings' shared experience of leaving Iran is actually what brought them together as collaborators, they explain. It started last fall, when Toronto's [Koffler Gallery](#) presented [Yonder](#), a group show exploring Canadian artists' experience of immigration and displacement. (The exhibition is now appearing at the [University of Waterloo Art Gallery](#) to March 4.)

Sanaz was asked to participate. "I wanted to talk about my experience coming to Canada and realized it was so embedded in the experience of my brother. They were so intertwined. I was 11, and he was about four years old."

For a 2015 piece, *Threshold*, Sanaz had reached out to her brother — asking him to design the sound and video elements since he'd done plenty of work in the mediums.



Sanaz Mazinani. Installation view of *Threshold* at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, 2015. (www.sanzmazinani.com)



Sanaz Mazinani. Installation view of Threshold at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, 2015. (www.sanazmazinani.com)

The installation involves dazzling, mirrored mosaics — both hung on the wall and covering an 8 x 8 foot sculpture in the centre of the room. The patterns, which are inspired by Islamic ornamentation, reflect and fracture the viewers themselves, but also the video piece — an endlessly tumbling kaleidoscope, created with footage of movie explosions.

(Incidentally, the installation is actually appearing again in a group exhibition opening at [San Francisco State University Feb. 18.](#))

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But for the show at Koffler, Mani says they decided to work from conception to execution for the first time — "a total 50/50 collaboration."

The result was a piece called *What Language Are They Speaking?* The experience, he says, "worked out really beautifully."

"I think it was especially meaningful that we're siblings, artists," he says. On a practical level, they understand each other's strengths and weaknesses. And, he says, their "shared memory is really important."

Almost 30 years ago, their father was accepted into a PhD program at the University of Windsor. "The Iran-Iraq War was happening," says Sanaz, so with no Canadian Embassy in Iran, the family moved to Syria, then Turkey — where they lived for months, "every day going to the Canadian Embassy there, hoping we would get in."



Installation view of *What Language Are They Speaking?* at Toronto's Koffler Gallery, 2016. (Courtesy of Mani Mazinani)

"The whole thing was supposed to be a matter of weeks, you know," says Sanaz of the family's immigration process. "But the process took a year-and-a-half, and for a year-and-a-half, my family was separated," while their dad studied in Windsor.

Reflecting on the U.S. travel ban, she says, "It feels unbelievable that this is happening."

"It's unbelievable the kind of divisiveness that this is causing and will continue to cause. I think it's really important to talk about it," she says.



Sanaz Mazinani. Trump on TV, 2016. (www.sfcamerawork.org)



A close-up view of Trump on TV, a digital collage by Canadian artist Sanaz Mazinani. (Courtesy of the artist)

The new sculpture she's created with her brother — *Dark Sight* — is not specifically responding to the travel ban, but it does address Trump's rise to power and the spread of misinformation.

The metal frame of the piece is meant to suggest two eyes, or binoculars — "binary vision," she explains. A series of coloured Plexiglas panels will be hung on the structure, starting at eye level. Individually, each panel is attractive and vibrant and illuminated by sunlight coming in through the gallery window. But lined up, all the viewer will see is darkness.

"In a way, it's meant to stand in for all the layers of information — or the layers of biases that are presented— and how different people perceive the world," she explains.

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"Trump was spreading a bit of hate speech during the time [of the election] but because he was a presidential nominee, of course media felt a responsibility to cover his words," she says. "But simultaneously what happened is his ideology was being spread and we took a step back, I think, by having that kind of dialogue become normative again."

"This piece that we're making together is really important to me as a critique of Donald Trump, and the current status of the responsibility of journalism, quality of journalism."

Another solo work, *Trump on TV*, addresses a similar theme. A new addition to her series [*Frames of the Visible*](#), it's a large digital collage that repeats news photos of Trump, including one taken at the final presidential debate.

Like the other works in the series, Sanaz has used the found photos to create a dizzying geometric pattern. It deals with "how conflict and politics are translated through photography and through repetition," she says.

"I really wanted to have this photographic piece become a conversation point about how important media actually was in giving voice to Trump," she explains.



Sanaz Mazinani. Together We Are, 2011. (www.sanazmazinani.com)



Sanaz Mazinani. Detail of Together We are, 2011. (www.sanazmazinani.com)

Sanaz says she will continue to respond to the political reality in the States through her artwork, and she is in the early stages of planning a new performance piece which she hopes to debut in late March. Whether she will continue living and working there, however, is a more difficult question.

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Sanaz Mazinani, artist

Closing borders, she says, can only weaken arts and culture in the United States. "The beauty of this country is going to diminish without cultural diversity. I mean, the more voices and the more ideas that come together the stronger the country will be."

"I'm not going to live here forever, you know. I have an exhibition coming up in Paris; I have projects coming up in Canada. I need to be able to cross borders and have the freedom that's given to all citizens. So I won't choose to live in America if I'm limited in my freedom to traverse the landscape."

"But at the same time, I kind of want to stay here and fight the fight along my friends. I don't know, I don't know. It's kind of a tough answer."