Crossing A Cultural Divide: The Art of Sanaz Mazinani

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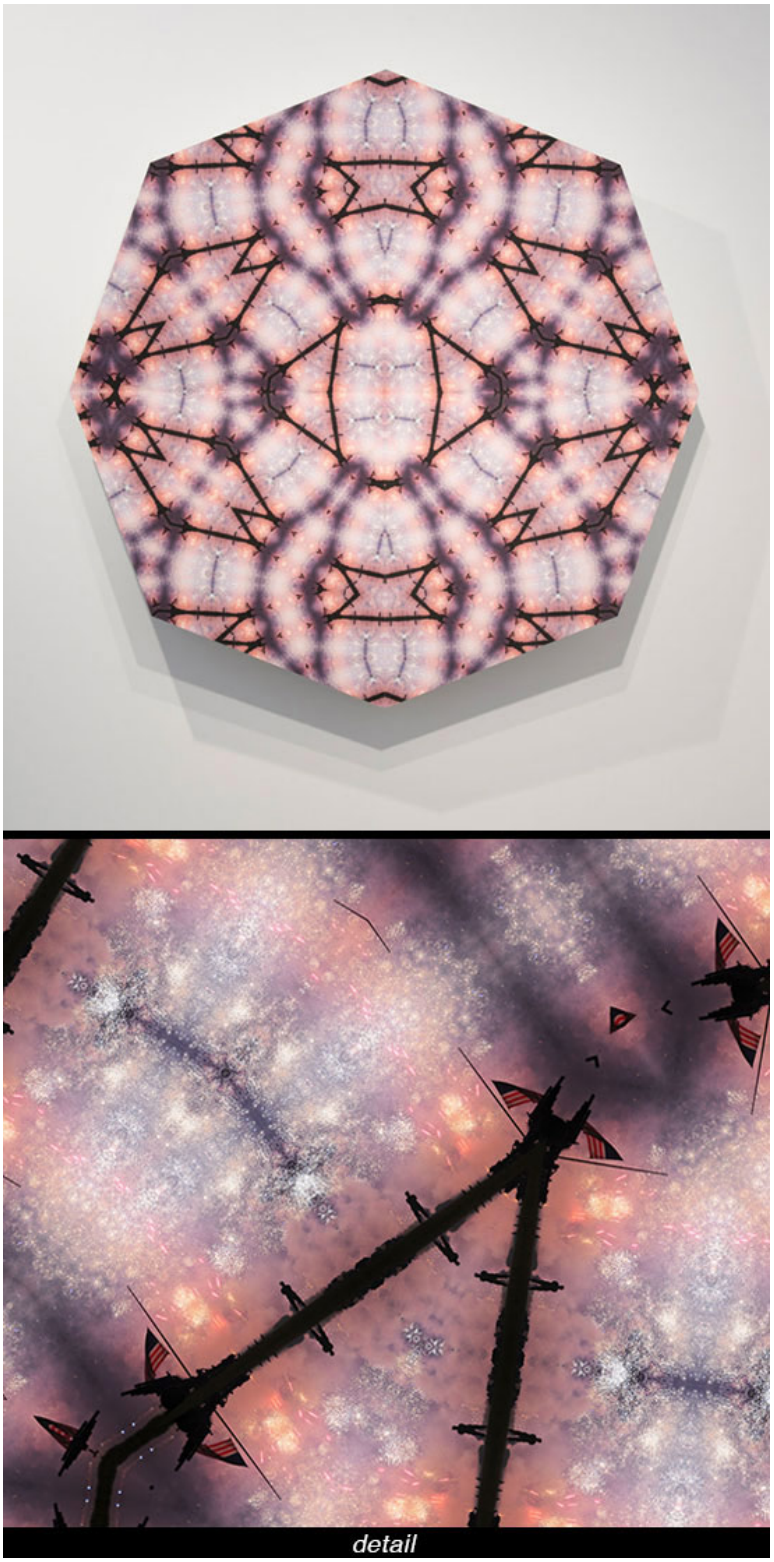
Speak a new language, so that the world can be a new world. – Rumi

This quote from the 13th century Persian poet and scholar Rumi is an apt one to use in discussing the work of the Iranian-Canadian artist Sanaz Mazinani. In fact, this quote was featured in one of her architectural installations that was shown in Washington, D.C. More about that later, but for now let's look at how that line from Rumi distills Mazinani's interests.

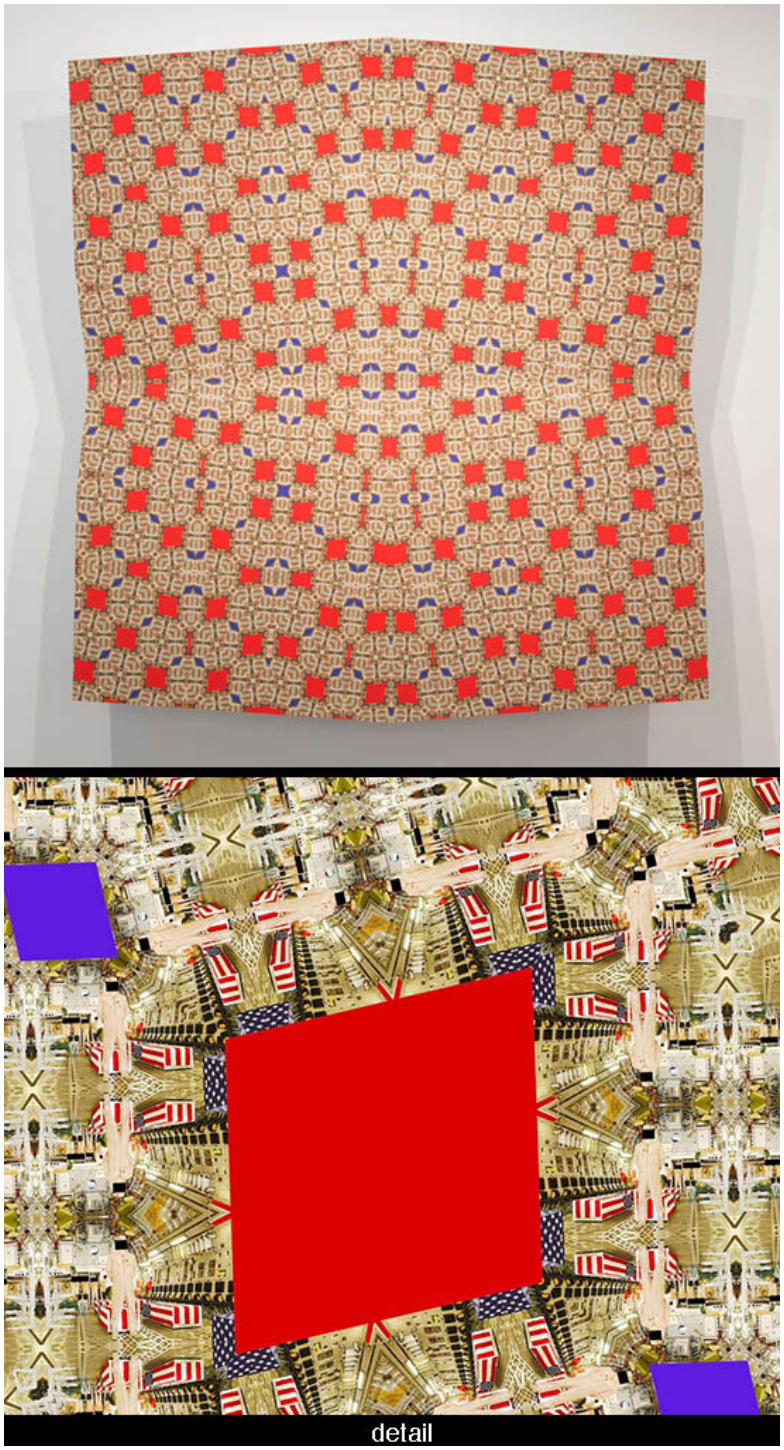
Mazinani believes in the power of the visual image. She sees experience as mediated by the thousands of images we encounter daily – online ads, news pictures, shared social media photos, archival images. By employing an artistic practice that carefully investigates, and then reuses these images, she creates a new sphere where dualities exist and meaning is revealed.

Combining multiple found photos Mazinani makes large scale kaleidoscopic photographs. The images mirror each other, distinct and yet merged together. From a distance the works appear abstract, taking the form of ornate islamic patterns. Upon closer inspection the individual photographic components emerge, and with them the specific social and political content contained in each image.



These photographic artworks reflect Mazinani's heritage. Born in Tehran, she moved to Canada at age 11. Her work is part of the unstable middle ground that arises between east and west, constantly shifting in response to current events. The Islamic patterning

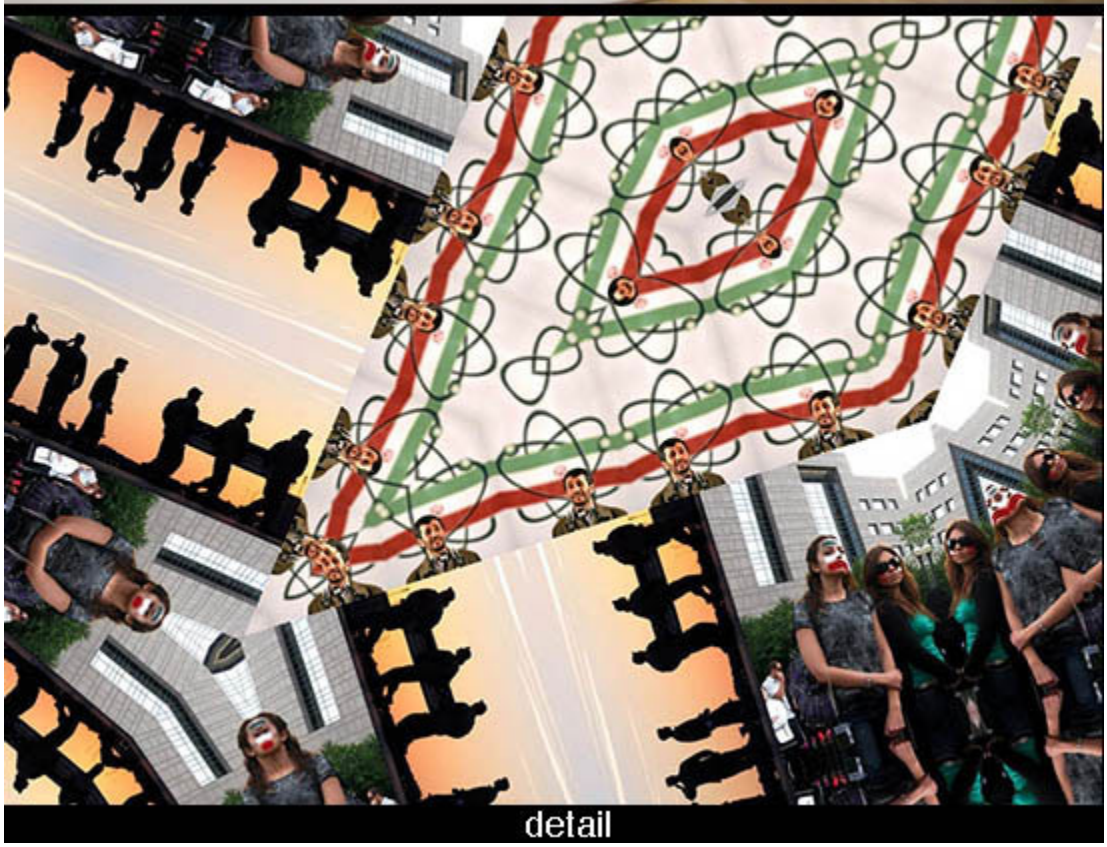
she uses is only a partial reflection of her identity. As viewers we bring to the work our assumptions about Islam, about our distance from it, about it's "otherness." On closer inspection of the work we discover that we have more in common than we expected, for the work has grown into something larger and more complicated.



detail

Manzinani works as a visual artist, a curator and an editor. In all three roles her primary focus is on issues of social justice. Her work is part of a dialogue about cultural identity and media representations. She wants to educate her viewers so that they can become active interpreters of the avalanche of images that claim to represent truth in the world.

detail



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In 2014 Mazinani took over a long vacant library in Washington, D.C., creating a temporary architectural installation. The space was slated for development and Mazinani wanted to reclaim the original community nature of the site before it was razed.

U.S.A.I.R.A.N. contained 21 digital images. According to Mazinani "*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.*
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."
Who would have anticipated in 2014 when the piece was made how far we've moved away from the ideals of cultural exchange. Mazinani is currently working on two exhibitions that are scheduled to open here in San Francisco, her current home. Her brother had planned to fly in from Canada to assist her but his trip has been postponed indefinitely due to the unconstitutional travel ban put in place by our wild-eyed, orange-haired, truth-compromised, leader (I just can't use the word President for this man).