



## FARIBA HAJAMADI

### History is in the Caption

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Culver Center of the Arts at UCR ARTS

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### Fariba Hajamadi in Conversation with Judith Rodenbeck

At a moment when debates over cultural representation and institutional power dominate headlines, *Fariba Hajamadi: History is in the Caption* examines how cultural, educational, and public institutions shape narratives of history and culture. The exhibition presents a series of works by Iranian-born, American artist Fariba Hajamadi, whose practice blends photography and painting to create layered, imaginary spaces. In this conversation, Judith Rodenbeck speaks with Hajamadi about the bodies of work featured in the exhibition, her experiences during the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s, and her immigration to the United States in the 80s.

**Judith Rodenbeck:** You've sometimes been associated with the Pictures Generation for your cerebral approach to photography.<sup>1</sup> Much of that work was influenced by cinema and secondary media like magazines. By contrast, your work engages museums as a platform for exploring patterns, repetition, and even a kind of restrained minimalism. I also see you drawing on histories of acquisition, display, and women's history.

There's a continual play with syntax and pseudo-symmetry, even in these early works. You often employ a flipping diptych structure.

**Fariba Hajamadi:** Many of my collages mimic architectural structures, but their symmetry is intentionally "fake"—a constructed stability that reflects how institutions frame and conceal histories.

#### Under Cover, 1995

**FH:** The early works in the exhibition include two of the last pieces in which I applied photographic emulsion directly to Formica and processed it in the darkroom, just as one would photo paper. The ideas and compositions were carefully developed through maquettes for each piece—those maquettes are also included in the exhibition.

The idea for the series *Under Cover* came from a photograph I took in an Italian museum. During the summer, the galleries were empty, and all the paintings were covered with newspapers and tape for protection. That image stayed with me and became the seed for the series title, with individual works extending the concept through newspaper snippets.

Each maquette is essentially a collage or assemblage. For these works, I photographed the front pages of newspapers from different countries—many depicting war scenes or other forms of violence. In the final pieces, the museum paintings appear covered with the front pages of newspapers.

### **Victims Breed Their Executioners, 1990**

JR: In this work, the photographs are unmanipulated, but the collage process produces a non-reality that looks photographic. The triptych seems to be interested in the facticity of the photograph. Shadows and angles give sculptures a de-realized quality such that the sculpture becomes much more alive.<sup>2</sup>

FH: These effects are achieved by layering a transparent image on birch, allowing the panel's pattern and grain to emerge. To create the veneered panels, I collaborated with a cabinetmaker, matching color and grain for symmetry. Some panels hang at an angle, as if fallen, which I find compelling—that slight tilt introduces a sense of instability within an otherwise ordered composition.

JR: You made this during Desert Storm.<sup>3</sup> Themes of containment, control, and engagement with imperial histories emerge strongly.

### **Museum Interiors, 2019–22**

JR: In works like *Girl with Queen's Lyre, London* (2020) and *Repose at the British Museum* (2021), diptych elements converse with each other, often placing figures in the middle or in deep space, while curtains push into shallow space.

FH: I aim for images that feel immersive, as though you could step inside them. Yet these are fictional spaces: only parts are derived from my original photographs. Everything is assembled to create a specific feeling—solitude, introspection, and often, the presence of women. These works are printed on bridal satin, which adds another dimension.

JR: *Queen's Lyre* is based on the British Museum, showing a Sumerian lyre from Ur, c. 2600–2400 BCE. The diptychs establish chromatic relationships with other works like *The Story of the Moroccan Court* (2020) and *Fiery Storm* (2020), with muted secondary oranges and blues reminiscent of spices rather than paint.

FH: I like that. In the diptychs, one panel is white satin and the other a colored satin. Areas of color come from the fabric itself, with additional black paint added. The process builds on my earlier photo-emulsion work but uses inkjet printing on satin. I source inexpensive fabrics from markets and surplus stores; the color of the satin becomes part of the work.

JR: Your work evokes painting, set design, and museum imperialism. I'm reminded of cinematic references—Alain Resnais's *Statues Also Die* (1953), Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), even the figure placement strategies employed in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018).

FH: I obsess over proportion, perspective, and staging. Museums are like theatrical sets where stories unfold, and in my work, the staged symmetry reflects and questions how power shapes narratives. I photograph models in situ—students or museum visitors—and sometimes modify the background digitally. The pristine museum setting, emptied of context, speaks to imperialism and the history of acquisition.

JR: The spaces feel domestic yet monumental. Strangely, even in their sparseness, your interiors induce a sense of claustrophobia.

FH: Reflections in floors and “watery” effects are deliberate. Works like *Fiery Storm* and *Submerged with Van Dyck* (2020) manipulate historical imagery, flipping axes or pairing historical paintings with contemporary images to create new narratives.

JR: In *Submerged*, the painted figure is trapped within curtains, echoing spatial symmetries.

FH: *Moroccan Court* draws from an immersive gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It features a reconstruction of a fictional Islamic school for men only made by combining artifacts freely. By contrast, my version of this gallery is a closed interior meant to evoke a woman's domestic space. It's a “fake of a fake,” a reimaged interior.

JR: It's theatrical—the emptiness invites the viewer into the space.

FH: *Poppies and Demons, In Maharaja's Tent* (2019) was my first large-scale inkjet work. I photographed the floral textile panels at the Met, originally from a maharaja's tent. Illuminated pages with two *divs* from the Met also appear.<sup>4</sup>

JR: Like pages from the *Shahnameh*, separated and sold individually by Imperial British dealers?<sup>5</sup>

FH: Exactly. And the *div*—pre-Islamic, trickster-like figures from Iranian and Indian folklore—resonate with childhood stories of good and bad behavior. I like weaving familiar cultural motifs into my images.

JR: The triptych *Hagia Sophia with Gli* (2020) is spatially symmetrical yet visually perplexing, pulling the eye in multiple directions.

FH: The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul—and its Instagram-famous cat Gli—inspired this work. I constructed the space imaginatively, though all photos come from that location. Arches are repeated and modified digitally and by hand-painting, creating a complex puzzle of historical architecture.

JR: Let's move on to *Spilled* (2022). The scene suggests a violent act in the museum.

FH: *Spilled* originated from my photographs of the Met's Islamic galleries, taken after their 2011 reorganization. I used a single image of a carpet, duplicating it to cover both the walls and the floor's reflective surface. The resulting scene combines water-like reflections, blood-red ambiguities, and *div* imagery to construct a layered, unsettling narrative. A book on a stand, depicting a *div* in an act of violence, evokes themes of preaching, ritual, and cultural conflict.

### **Crows, Cranes, and the Sleeping, 2025**

FH: For this new installation, I drew on 18th-century Toile de Jouy wallpapers, known for intricate narratives with idyllic pastoral themes. I chose motifs inspired by Iran's visual and political landscape: oil, war imagery, *divs*, crows, megaphones, and turbaned mullahs. Hangings, flying *divs*, and crows create a charged environment. This work reflects our contemporary reality, not an idyllic landscape.

JR: This is the syntax of our environment. And right now, it really is. Despite their fantastical quality, these images are deeply rooted in documentary source material, including war photography. In Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940)—his anti-Hitler film—loudspeakers fill the barber's town.

FH: Yes! My ceramic megaphone and terracotta sirens carry symbolic, inverted functions; the sculptures propose sound but are mute, fragile, and intentionally non-functional.

### **From Medical School to Art School**

JR: Tell us about your background. How is it that you became an artist?

FH: I was born in Esfahan. I wanted to go to art school, but my parents wanted me to apply to medical school. Despite scheming to avoid it, I ended up enrolling in med school, but threats and unrest at the school convinced my family to let me leave on a student visa. When I arrived in the US, I enrolled in an art program. I was an undergraduate in Michigan during the Iranian Revolution.<sup>6</sup> That period heightened my awareness of political violence and history. I've returned to Iran only twice in the last forty years.

Judith Rodenbeck is a professor in the Department of Media & Cultural Studies at UCR. This edited exchange was prepared in conjunction with the exhibition *Fariba Hajamadi: History is in the Caption*, curated by Joanna Szupinska, senior curator, with support from Hannah Waiters, curatorial assistant, and on view at UCR ARTS: Culver Center of the Arts from June 28, 2025, through March 22, 2026. UCR ARTS is part of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at UCR.

<sup>1</sup> The Pictures Generation names a cohort of artists who were critically engaged with photography, mass media, and strategies of citation and appropriation. The name derives from a 1977 exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, held at Artists Space in New York, and from the critical essay of the same name that Crimp published in the journal *October* in Spring 1979.

<sup>2</sup> That is, there is a play with the evidentiary quality of the photograph—its facticity—over and against the form and dreamlike staging of the sculpture, which makes it seem to come “alive.”

<sup>3</sup> Desert Storm was the codename for the Gulf War (1990–91), an armed conflict led by the US against Iraq following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

<sup>4</sup> A *div* is a divine or semi-divine being from ancient Persian mythology, later demonized in Islam.

<sup>5</sup> The *Shahnameh*, or “The Book of Kings,” is a monumental epic poem written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in c. 977–1010 CE and is the national epic of Greater Iran. One of the most brilliant copies, the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, contained more than 250 hand-painted miniatures, and was one of the treasures of the Ottoman Topkapı Palace in Istanbul. When the Ottoman Empire fell, the volume passed through the hands of various wealthy European and American collectors, one of whom eventually cut up the book, selling off some pages privately and donating some 78 of the paintings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972.

<sup>6</sup> The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, also known as the Islamic Revolution, culminated in the ousting of Mohammad Reza, the last shah of Iran, and ushered in the Islamic Republic of Iran led by Ruhollah Khomeini, an Islamist cleric.

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