

## Super

18 November 2020

### Sara Rahbar

<https://superprojectsnyc.cargo.site/Sara-Rahbar>



Capturing the pattern of militarism endemic to American legacy, Sara Rahbar adorns American flags with used military paraphernalia and constructs puzzle-like compositions from the wooden stocks of guns and found objects. Materializing the universal experiences of both pain and hope, she casts contorted limbs, hands and feet in bronze. Her work is this and much more.

Rahbar lives and works in New York City.

#### **What is your rose and thorn of the past week?**

I feel like I'm in a dream these days, like Alice in Wonderland, nothing feels real or solid. The good is always when I get a new idea. Sometimes it feels impossible in this climate, everything is so heavy, there is so much to work through on a daily basis. You just want to be able to move forward, you just want some peace of mind. The rose would be continuing to have ideas, any kind of continuation, even though I'm super lost right now.

I guess the thorn is having ideas and wanting to move forward with them, but not knowing when I'm going to be able to get back into the foundry or go on road trips searching for objects again. I like moving fast. When I get a solid idea that I am excited about, I want to be able to make it immediately. Not being able to move as fast as I want is really painful right now. All the flea markets and second hand shops that I usually went to in search of objects to make my sculptures have been shut down. I usually spend the summers collecting, and then I attempt to piece things together after I have accumulated a good amount of stuff. But right now everything has stopped. There are some shows happening, but the process has completely shifted. And every one's like, "this is the new norm, get used to it." I am trying to stay present, accept change and flow with what is in front of me, but I think that we can all agree, that these are some seriously challenging times that we are living through.

#### **Have you been able to go to the foundry at all since quarantine started?**

They closed for a long time, just like everyone else, everything came to a blinding halt. I had cast a bunch of body parts and objects, and I was waiting for them to come out of the oven, and then suddenly they closed for several months. They eventually opened during the summer, but by then I was foggy, my ideas were all over the place, I had so much distance from it that things got a bit scrambled in my mind. I went back and began piecing it together again, maybe the separation, the distance from the work will be helpful in the end. I have a solo show coming up in November at my gallery, Carbon.12, in Dubai, I'm very excited about it. I'm showing the work that I made during the lockdown.

**In other interviews you talk about trusting the process and allowing for things to happen as they come. Do you think that kind of mindset is helpful in these specifically precarious times?**

You have to find your way of survival through difficult and challenging times in life. In the end, I had to surrender, there was no way around it. I had to let go of my false sense of control. I had to trust my instincts. We're all born with, my dogs have it, despite the fact that they spent their entire lives in animal testing laboratories, cold, sterile, kept away from anything natural. But when they got out, I saw their instincts come back to life. When I got sober, became vegan and started meditating, I felt my instincts return to me as well. The calmer I became, the smoother the work flowed, the softer and lighter everything became.

**How did you learn to take a backseat to the process? Have you always sort of had that mindset or is that something that you really had to work on doing?**

I really had to work on it. I still am, it's an ongoing process. I remember In AA they always used to say, "you should be grateful for your addiction, because it brought you here." I didn't understand that until a decade later. Having so many issues with anxiety, depression, addiction and trauma, I was forced to work on myself constantly, there was no way around it, if I didn't I would sink, that much was clear. I became vegan and "spiritual," started realizing that the more still I am, the clearer the work becomes. I can't force things. I started looking inward, and the more inward I went, the louder my inner voice got. But I'm not sure if I would have taken this path if I was not constantly battling addiction, depression and just generally being so uncomfortable in my own skin all the time.

**Can you talk about your upcoming solo show? Is it a new series of work?**

I think the good thing about being in these strange and challenging times is that it pushes you, propels you forward somehow if you let it. If you just flow with it, instead of becoming paralyzed with fear. I just felt so much pressure, I was scared at first, flooded with anxiety and fear of the future, and then all of a sudden I detached. Not sure if it was the lack of sleep or all the meditation and nature walks that I took with my dogs. Whatever it was, it pushed me into fuck it territory, whatever will be will be terrain. I could feel the shift in myself, and the new-found freedom in my work. I cast three different pieces of wood that were parts of an old tool, and like pieces of a puzzle everything started coming together and making sense, I love it when that happens. The arms and legs that I cast are resting on these objects, it's like the aftermath of something. The show is called "The Space Between Us," dismembered body parts on architectural-like objects alongside my newest body of work "Animals."

**It's so clear, formally, that the assemblage works are more cluttered and so was your mind at that time. There's a funny mirroring going on.**

With the flags, and with the War series, there were so many objects, so much stuff. I needed so badly to say something, I was screaming at the top of my lungs. Once I calmed down, I felt I could say everything with just two objects, and realized that there is no need to scream at all, the calmer I am the clearer everything becomes. It's all about being in flow with life, I see that now.

With 206 Bones, War and the flag series, there were a million collected objects pieced together. The Confessions series is body parts and maybe one collected object. The body parts in certain positions, say everything that I want to say. I am always working on saying more with less. Clarity, conciseness, like a swift punch that knocks you out.

**Can we go back a little bit to your development as an artist? You went to FIT and then Central Saint Martins. The flags involve a ton of textiles, did you study fashion or design?**

When I was at FIT, everything was so chaotic, I was so lost. I always made work, but I never thought "this is going to be my life," because I didn't think I could support myself from it. I thought "I have to do something else to make money, and then just do this on the side to stay sane." There weren't any artists around me, I didn't quite understand what it meant to be an artist. I was super young and lost, doing drugs and drinking. I was just a mess. I basically followed a friend to FIT. I just thought, "shit everyone is going to college after high school." I hadn't even applied anywhere else, didn't even fully understand the SATs. I didn't know shit, I was just not there. I was dealing with so much emotional stuff. I barely graduated high school, I'm still not even sure how I graduated. I wish I had been better, more together, but I wasn't.

I remember coming across Alexander McQueen and John Galliano and thinking, "this is like sculpture, I could do this, be happy, and make a living at the same time." I was obsessed with McQueen. I just wanted to be an artist and make things, but I wasn't sure how I could do that and be able to survive. I had to survive, there was nothing to fall back on, so I thought couture is kind of like sculpture. One day I was reading up on Alexander McQueen, and I saw that he went to Central Saint Martins. I instantly knew that I had to go there. I knew that I could not move too far away from sculpture, from art, or I would go even crazier than I already was. I didn't apply anywhere else, I didn't have a side plan. I just tried to do the best fucking portfolio that I possibly could, and to be honest I didn't quite understand what a portfolio was at the time. I bought some sketch books and just wrote poems, drew, photographed, collaged, put everything that I had into it. I felt like this was it, and there was no going back, so I gave it my all, and I got accepted! I saved enough money for the first year, I was so broke and at that time you would give a hundred dollars and get back fifty pounds, it was super expensive to live in London, but somehow I made it work for a year.

**I can see a lot of parallels with McQueen, in terms of the mood and tonality, it's almost mischievous.**

He was magic, pure magic.

**How did you find eventually find solid ground, a foundation for your work and life?**

FIT was an absolute nightmare, it showed me everything that I didn't want. Central Saint Martins was a dream come true, they didn't care how or what you made, they taught you how to think, and they gave you total freedom to dream, play and experiment. It was the best time of my entire life. I felt so free, so alive, I was in heaven. That gave me the freedom to make my first piece, that led to a body of work that I would work on for the next 15 years. This body of work was my entrance into the art world, it sustained my life, and it all came out of a space where anything was possible. Everyone was doing the craziest things, and it was fine. That's what I needed, freedom, room to breathe. It was such a beautiful environment.

**I noticed a portion of the flags have Farsi written on them, and they have very poetic titles. Are there stories behind certain works? Is there a narrative?**

I can't read or write Farsi, because I left Iran when I was very young. I went back to Iran in my 20's and I couldn't read anything, it was super frustrating. I remember seeing the texts as beautiful abstract shapes. That's what is reflected in the work. When I finally stopped going back, the Farsi faded from my work, I shifted tremendously and so did the work. It always moves with me. After a few years into the flag series, the flags became really dark, militarized. It felt like the endless wars and violence everywhere were being soaked into the very fibers of the flag. The flags continued to become darker and darker, and heavier through time. I don't have a specific story for each one. That series felt like a long relationship. It was an obsession, I couldn't stop doing it if I wanted to, it was as if something beyond what I could put into words was speaking through me.

**I'm thinking about how much time you must have spent with these materials that are usually used in war, really getting to know them. Was it a tiring experience to work with material that has a very different, more violent, purpose than what you were using it for?**

There was this drive, I feel like I was just a vessel for this energy. I sometimes feel uncomfortable saying it's my work, because this stuff comes from places that I can't explain, can't quite put into words. It comes and it keeps pushing me until I make it. There is definitely guidance, a calling that I feel, and I let it take me wherever it needs me to go. I can't work with new objects, they can't be shiny and clean, they have to be used, kicked around and beat up. Some of the objects have very particular spells and stains, personal messages written or carved on them. I needed that life in the objects and the materials that I worked with. It was important to me that they had lived and survived the test of time. I don't like clean, perfect looking things. Life is messy. Maybe because I feel like I'm messy, imperfect, bruised and in pieces. By piecing these objects together, and in finding the work, I am piecing myself back together again. It's so cathartic for me.

### **Where did you source those materials, Army Navy stores?**

I would go to Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, to fairs, to flea markets. Sometimes, the vets would be trying to get rid of their stuff because they didn't want the memories. Some were sourced online, if I was looking for something very specific; like coal miner tags or a military backpack, but they always needed to be used, second hand. Online is always tough. I only do it when I am absolutely desperate. I need to touch the materials, it's a visual thing that needs to happen, it's instinctual. Viewing things off of a cold computer screen is never my preference.

### **When you source it from the Vets, do you ever ask them about the objects?**

Some people would be willing to talk about it, and they would share stories with me. Sometimes it was their stuff, other times it would be their family member's things, or someone had passed and they inherited it. These are sensitive subjects: violence, war, pain, death. Lots of strange and uncomfortable stories are attached to these objects. And Because I'm a girl, and I kinda look Middle Eastern-ish it gets a bit awkward at times. When I was buying bullets, grenades and guns, they would say "why don't you go get your husband and come back or where's your husband young lady?" It was always a mixed bag, I mostly tried to be incognito, just blend into the environment, get what I needed and to get out.

### **I was also wondering if there's any specific influence of literature in your work, because it feels like your titles are poems, like "Wandering from One Strange Place to Another, Anxious Prostitutes and Sleepless Nights."**

That's a really heavy one that you picked! The first titles were sometimes full paragraphs, but now I try to keep them short and to the point, like "uncomfortable" or "grasping." I'm trying to say and do more with less. I used to write poetry, I used to write a lot. I actually wasn't sure if I was going to be a writer, a poet, an architect or a sculpture. I just wanted to make things, to build something.

There was always this violence in the works, and then the titles are soft and romantic. I don't know where that came from. I always felt the piece was finished with the title. That title was from a very specific time in my life. It's always a reflection of what I'm going through, I can't lie or keep things in, everything always bubbles to the surface somehow. There's no hiding from the truth.

### **Do you ever read writing about your work that you really disagree with?**

Yes. There are so many different ways of looking at something, so many different perspectives to consider. I'm not trying to brainwash people into thinking a certain way. I think art should make you think and question, not force things on you. I want layers upon layers, for new ideas and emotions to emerge every time people see the work.

For example, the Flags series has been interpreted in so many different ways. It is so heavy with history, violence, and war. There are so many layers there, but people like to simplify it to: "it's about her identity as an Iranian American." I don't believe in nationality, organized religion or countries. None of these made up concepts are of importance to me. If anything I find them strange and unnecessary, causing further distance between us. We are all one, everything is connected. We are all sharing this planet together, none of us knows where we came from or where we are going after this. We are all just hanging out on this floating green and blue ball temporarily together. I guess all of these unknowns are just too frightening for people to bear, so they make up all of these stories to give themselves some sort of false comfort.

### **What do the crosses symbolize for you? They're recurrent throughout many of the series.**

Living in America, you see the flag and various symbols of Christianity everywhere. Jesus Christ, for me, is more about surrendering, guilt and shame. It has all these layers, it's heavy with time and history. I was constantly seeing the flag and the cross, eventually it found its way into my work. It wasn't so much about Christianity or the American flag, as it was about the emotions and conversations that are associated with these symbols. The weight and meaning that we give them.

## **How and why did you arrive at bronze for the Confessions series?**

I always wanted to work with bronze, it was an obsession. At the end of my time at Central Saint Martins, I was sure that I was going to study sculpture, but I didn't have the money to continue, so I had to leave. I had to work with what I could and build from there. The work just kept growing and getting heavier. I was always pushing myself towards sculpture, towards bronze, it was inevitable. There was a point with the War series where I was working with prosthetic legs and arms, and I felt like the body parts needed to be more human, I needed textures, pores. I needed tense gestures, trauma, frozen in states of anxiety. The prosthetics take you so far, but they're kind of flat, I needed actual arms and legs. My instinct, my gut, told me that I needed to find a foundry and cast my body. I also needed it to be human scale. There was no way around it anymore. But I still had to work within a budget, so I started where I could with what I had. An arm, then a leg, just kept adding to it, changing the gestures, building on the body.

Making the stressful positions and gestures was very important. I felt like I needed that to be in the sculpture. It needed it to be more human. That's also how I felt with all the nationalism and war pieces, I needed to humanize it, I needed it to be specifically about pain and to feel that tension physically. They're still objects, but you can see the hands, it could be your hands. It's scale is your scale.

It feels like a move away from themes like war, as if it comes down to a personal violence, or a localized pain.

The work grew and expanded with me. I started to calm the hell down and get more in touch with myself. I'm constantly trying to get more authentic and more to the core of things. People in pieces, dismembered bodies, lost in the things that they made, or are trying to make. The aftermath of people attempting to survive in this world.

The objects are anchored in place, but action is very much embedded in the function of these objects. There are hands, guns, and feet.

Embedded is a good word to describe it. Whether it's the cast body parts or the tools and guns, they have life in them, I can feel it when I'm making the work. They are heavy, they carry so much weight. That's what I'm looking for, a reflection of life: raw, sometimes painful, imperfect, broken, yet still fighting to continue.

We are pushed together, compressed, on top of each other, tearing each other apart. A lot of the objects in the 206 Bones series are objects that are meant to hold things in place, to control, to push things down and create tension.

The first five years of your life is your foundation as a human being. My first five years were tense. Everything was uncomfortable. I was a child who was dealing with issues that I couldn't explain or understand at the time. When you are in an environment where your parents, who are supposed to guide you, are too overwhelmed with their own challenges to care for you, you are forced to take care of them and yourself. I was always trying to hold things together, so that they don't fall apart. I'm still doing that, only now it's with the pieces that I make. I spend all of my time making objects that make sense to me, that give me a sense of calm and peace. Nothing makes sense to me on this planet, it's all so strange and alien. I make this work in order to survive being here, and to somehow make sense of all of this chaos. There is so much violence, so much pain, my brain just can't make sense of it. We would be so much better off without it.

When I was young all we did was move from place to place, so much uncertainty and chaos. We left Iran, running away from war, and the revolution. Then in the states we moved from house to house, there was always so much tension around me, all I wanted was to feel safe and secure, to stop running. And now as an adult piecing together my life's work, all these things come into play, how could they not. In the end, it's about the human condition, not Iran or America, it's about being alive on this planet, attempting to survive and make sense of it all.

**It does feel like you've moved back to the basics of emotion, pain, and the shaping of these relations.**

I want to get to the most bare, basic level, to the core of the human condition. I want people to feel things when they see this work, I'm not here to decorate.

**You're shrugging off all these other things, and this is what's left. The pieces where the arms are locked or the fingers are gripping seem very hopeful.**

I think part of that is that there were so many times in my life where I just wanted to let go. With addiction and depression, some days were just too much to handle, it's exhausting. There's this piece that I did for the show, it's called Grasping. I think that it's accurate for the times that we are in. Sometime it feels like you are slipping off of the edge of a mountain, so you cling on to anything that you possibly can, so that you don't fall off and disappear into the abyss.

There are so many layers, compressed down to things that we all share. Maybe I don't really need to know what your experiences are because I can just feel it too.

That's exactly it. It's about trauma, pain, love, violence. It's about emotions and experiences that we can all relate to. There is always a wider lens to look through, a bigger picture to see.

**Do you have a dream project?**

Being able to go to the Foundry and cast, not just body parts, but whole bodies, in awkward positions. I have all these positions in mind. I want to cast what trauma looks like in our bodies. I want to capture the rawest emotions that I can, our bodies always tell a story. That would be my dream, no compromises, major life size pieces, some outdoor, some indoor.

**Are you interested in public sculpture at all?**

I wasn't before, but the more I see public sculpture, the more I want to do it. I want to bring uncomfortable, awkward bodies into everyday public spaces.

**I wanted to ask about your solo show. What is your goal in the endeavor of making a solo show? Is it kind of more narrative or experiential.**

For me, it's more emotional. When I was younger, it was a different drive, now it's more thoughtful, I move slower, I'm softer, it's more about spilling open. I'm just much clearer in what I want to say, and what I want to put out there. I want to trigger emotions. Two years ago I had a show with Carbon.12, it was called, Salvation. There were people crying and feeling so many different emotions while viewing the work. I want that, I want to trigger emotion in people, move them beyond words.