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The Brooklyn Rail  
April 2019

Kour Pour: Manzareh/Keshiki/Landscape  
Countering the Western discourse of abstraction



Kour Pour, *Persian Landscape (Crop)*, 2018. Block printing ink on canvas. 84.25 x 58.5 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ever Gold [Projects].



Kour Pour, *Foreign Traveler*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Ever Gold [Projects].

In December 2012, an exhibition opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art called *Inventing Abstraction: 1910 – 1925*. In its accompanying book publication, MoMA's director Glenn D. Lowry explained that the show was a centennial celebration of the year when, "in several European cities, a handful of artists—Vasily Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, Francis Picabia, and Robert Delaunay—presented the first abstract pictures to the public."

The past few years have proven fruitful in undermining and ultimately disproving this narrative that dates the birth of abstraction to a few men in 20th-century Europe. *Hilma Af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (2019), currently at the Guggenheim,

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offers an alternative to the story by proving that the Swedish artist beat Kandinsky et al., to the punch. It was in 1906—six years earlier—that af Klint began her large-scale series of Theosophy-inspired abstractions called “Paintings for the Temple.”

At Ever Gold [Projects] in San Francisco, the *Manzareh/Keshiki/Landscape* is another such rebuttal—this one shedding light on the non-Western traditions of abstraction that go back centuries. This solo exhibition of the Los Angeles-based artist Kour Pour’s paintings and woodblock prints draws inspiration from—and demonstrates the parallels between—several Asian and West Asian practices. *Manzareh/Keshiki/Landscape* should be considered a direct rejoinder to the 2012 exhibition at MoMA; in fact, it represents Pour’s second such attempt to set the record straight.

Alongside a previous show at the same gallery in January 2017—*Earthquakes and the Mid Winter Burning Sun* (2017), which paired the artist’s paintings with works by Kazuo Shiraga—Ever Gold [Projects] put out a zine consisting of Pour’s reading of the MoMA show’s exhibition book. Pour re-titled the text *Re-Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925*, and systematically annotated each Eurocentric assumption and outright falsehood in the text. Written in a yellow highlighter, a black marker, and a red pen, Pour’s acerbic marginalia calls the MOMA show out for its willful ignorance of non-Western artistic traditions. “Bullshit!,” he writes in response to Lowry’s conjecture that Europe’s new mania for abstraction was so radical in 1912 that “comparison with the past was impossible.”<sup>2</sup> To the claim that the MOMA exhibition took on a “transnational perspective” in its consideration of abstraction throughout the “Eastern and Western Europe and the United States,” Pour replies: “It doesn’t look far enough.”<sup>3</sup> In subsequent pages, Pour follows up with examples of traditions left out of this cannon—most of which are reprised, through his paintbrush, instead of his pen, such as Japanese Ukiyo-e prints, tantric art, Chinese landscape painting, and Islamic art (which, in fact, was Lowry’s specialization before he became the director of MoMA).

*Manzareh/Keshiki/Landscape* continues Pour’s work of countering this discourse, this time through works that reference, and in turn unveil, the vast history of non-Western abstraction. The show spans both of Ever Gold [Projects]’s galleries, consisting of eight series of paintings and woodblock prints, for a total of twenty-three works. Pour sources his inspiration primarily from Persian and Japanese traditions, as indicated by his title—*Manzareh* and *Keshiki* both mean something close to *Landscape*, in Farsi and Japanese (they are often translated as “view” or “scenery”), though India and China are present, too. The result, though culturally variegated, is esthetically and chromatically coherent—and quite breathtaking.

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Pour is best known for his paintings of intricate Oriental carpets; two such works are included in this show. *Foreign Traveler* (2019) is based on an Indian carpet from the 17th century, reproduced through a process that layers silk screening, hand printing, sanding, and painting. Long viewed as inferior to and derivative of Persian rugs, Indian carpet weavers nevertheless came to be considered the most “painterly” of their trade, as “they learned to employ dyed yarns just as painters used pigments, which resulted in a coloristic range and sophistication otherwise unknown.”<sup>4</sup> In this painting, Pour has taken the coloristic range to a stunning technicolor extreme: horsemen dance over its bright marigold center, framed by an edge pattern of deep reds and bright blues. The other rug painting is the chromatic counterpoint to *Foreign Traveler* (2019). It’s called *Beige* (2019), and is a nod to the traditional European customers, who preferred their Oriental carpets in muted colors. Rug imagery is reprised in fragmented, close-up form, in Pour’s “History Painting” series (2019). Here, the pleasure is seeing—in the vivid color and sharp detail of acrylic paint on canvas—the narrative scenery that is harder to discern on a rug underfoot. In this series, too, Pour uses sanding to wear down bits of the painting. This method of course adds a pleasant extra element of “rug-ness” to the paintings, but it also serves as an allusion to the erasure of the patterns and geometries of Oriental carpets from the history of abstract art.

“Persian Landscape (Crop)” (2019) is a series of three block prints taken from part of a Persian miniature illustrating “Sam on Mount Alburz,” a story from Iran’s national epic, *Shahnama, the Book of Kings*, written by the poet Ferdowsi between 982 and 1014. Pour cropped out and blew up the rocky portion of the miniature and turned it into an abstracted print, with each of the three works in the series colored in different shades. They recall one of the centerpieces of the MOMA exhibition—Morgan Russell’s *Synchromy in Orange: To Form (1913–1914)*—but with softer edges and more harmonious chromatic combinations.

By zooming in to one abstracted corner of a once-figurative work, Pour simultaneously zooms out to a global perspective, forging a link between the micro-view and the macro. For just across the hall in the other gallery are several more series of block prints that clearly resemble the rocky mountains of Mount Alburz, though they hail from wildly different source materials. The *Chinese Influence* (2019) pair of prints reference traditional Chinese landscape paintings; the “Cropped Landscape (Hiroshige)” trio pay homage to the great Japanese Ukiyo-e artist mentioned in the title, as do *Yellow* (2019) and *Red Monochrome Landscape* (2019).

Displaying together works inspired by so many different regions and artistic practices may seem at first to point to the supposed global modernity of today, but in fact it

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serves more aptly as a reminder that culture exchange is hardly new. Ultimately, it serves as Pour's final rebuttal to the MOMA text. It echoes another comment from his 2017 zine responding to Lowry's claim that the "birth" of abstraction stemmed from a "new modern culture of connectivity," and that thanks to "trains, automobiles, and steamships [...] [national] boundaries became porous."<sup>5</sup> As Pour's marginalia demonstrates, this logic remains within a speciously hermetic notion of Europe—as if the travel and communication among artists that inspired the shift to abstraction were only taking place between dominant European powers. In fact, as Pour notes, Lowry's citation proves the opposite—that Western artists of that time period had increased access to non-Western cultures. The Orientalism of nineteenth-century European art is accepted as one of its defining features, associated with and explained by its coinciding with colonialism. But the "Orientalism" of abstract art has been for the mostly obscured behind narratives of Western innovation and modernity.

-Hadley Suter