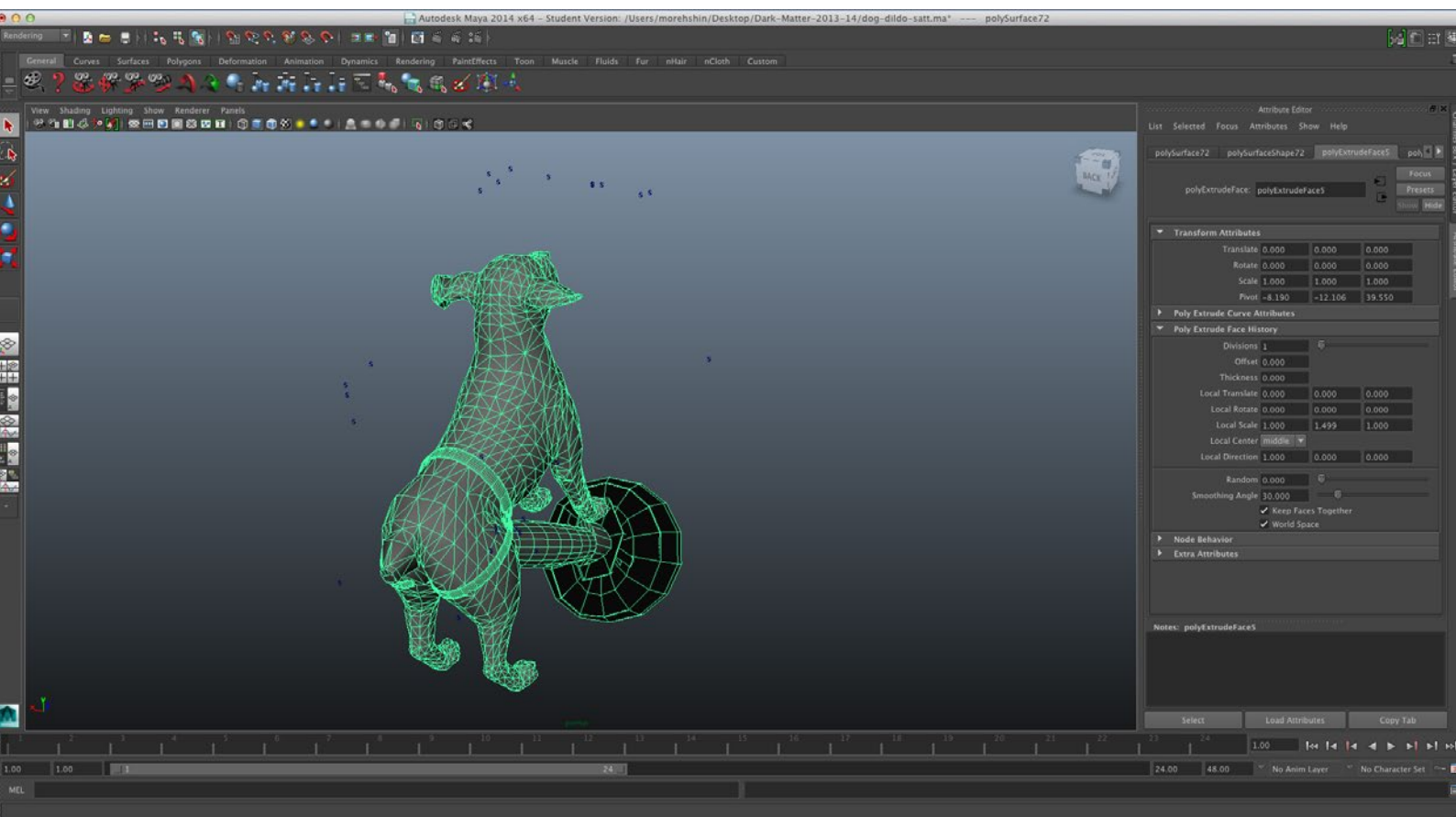


Interview

BRIDGING THE GAP: AN INTERVIEW WITH MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI

Morehshin Allahyari is a new media artist born in Iran and living in the United States. She has presented her work at numerous exhibitions and conferences around the world, including a TED conference, the Nasher Sculpture Centre and the Dallas Museum of Art. Talking with AMA, Allahyari discusses her work with particular reference to her pieces *Like Pearls*, an interactive web-based collage of Iranian spam emails, and *Dark Matter*, a series of both virtual and 3D-printed sculptures combining objects which are forbidden in Iran.



Can you begin by introducing your work?

I'm really interested in political and cultural issues, mostly focusing on the Middle East and, more specifically, Iran. However I'm also interested in the use of technology to talk about these issues and pushing the boundaries of the technology that I employ. When I'm using software such as Maya, it's the experimental and critical aspect of that which really interests me, and how it lets me approach a topic from a different angle as opposed to the usual commercial use of the medium.

How have your experiences of being in an artist in Iran and the US differed?

As an artist in Iran there are certain limitations — you learn how to censor yourself and your work. It becomes quite a dangerous process, as somehow you are giving in to the system, knowing that if you say certain things, or if your work is about certain issues, you can get into trouble. Just being aware of this fact made the process of my work very different, in that I had to choose topics which wouldn't be so political or which wouldn't send political messages. For example, the cultural issues I looked at in my recent work *Like Pearls*, which criticises the perspective of women's bodies as seen from a hyper masculine culture, both from a western and an Islamic stance, I could never work on in Iran. Since I moved to the US and decided not to return to Iran I have more freedom to work on the projects I'm really interested in.

Process *Dark Matter*
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What kind of role would you say censorship plays in your work?

It's interesting because in 2009 I started a series of works specifically on censorship, which began as looking at censorship in Iran but then expanded to looking at countries like China and North Korea. It interested me because it's something I've dealt with a lot in my daily life — even during the first couple of years when I moved to the US, I wanted to go back to Iran, so I still had to censor my work. I did a lot of performances which treated censorship in an ironic but also serious way.

How important are politics and activism in your work?

If you're from a place like the Middle East, or if you grow up constantly dealing with politics in your daily life, you don't have the privilege of not approaching political issues in your work because it's so embedded in many aspects of your life. Every decision that you make, from what you are going to wear to what you watch, all comes down to something political. It is because of this direct influence that I think that both politics and activism are so important in my work and in the work of so many other Middle Eastern artists. Even being in the US for the past seven years, there are still aspects of politics such as sanctions which have a direct influence on my life.

In a lot of your work you use multimedia and new technology — why does this appeal to you more than traditional artistic methods?

I think firstly because of my background — I did my bachelor's degree in Media Studies, which was very much based on media theory and social science. One of the reasons that I'm interested in digital media is because it hasn't been used as much and it doesn't have the same history as traditional artistic methods. I was interested in the ways in which I could push the limitations of new media, and make it different to a lot of the other traditional work that comes out of the Middle East. Secondly, I think it is because of my general interest in technology and the possibilities that it brings for my work. Every day there is something new being released, which gives you the opportunity to think about how you can use this new technology to influence your work in a critical way. It's this limitless aspect of technology which interests me as an artist and which gives me so many options.

Your work *Like Pearls* tackles the paradoxical representation of women in Iran — how do you think gender issues relate to your work?

What specifically interests me in *Like Pearls* is this mashup of the sexual and the romantic that I collected from spam emails sent to me from Iran. In these I saw these sexualised, but at the same time censored, bodies of women which feature in the piece. Under Iranian law these websites cannot publish a nude female body so instead they have to come up with these incredibly strange aesthetics as a solution to censor out the bodies. Instead of what you usually see in Iran, in magazines and books, which is that the body is blacked out (I remember going into public libraries and seeing that the female body was blacked out, and just thinking how strange it was that somebody was spending their time doing that), they use different colours and textures, even just white instead of black to censor out the body. In doing this, they are keeping the aesthetic not directly censored, which I find really fascinating. As well as the aesthetic side, I was also interested in the concept - it's all geared towards men, selling this underwear to men for their wives/lovers. So basically, you have both the westernised female body in that the woman is objectified, but the women are also objectified in the Islamic sense. There is a saying that a woman in a hijab is like a pearl in a shell, telling the woman to cover herself so her body will become more valuable; an example of the objectification of women's bodies but in a completely different way from the Western example. I wanted to combine this with the masculine aggression of the spam in these emails.

***Like Pearls* is an interactive piece, the viewer scrolling through and clicking on certain parts of the site to reveal pop ups — how important do you think it is to directly involve the viewer in your work?**

Not all of my works are interactive in this sense but with this particular piece I wanted to make the viewer experience the same feeling that they would if they were receiving this spam in their email; you might accidentally click on something and then something unwanted will pop up. I also wanted to include the messages which came along with these advertisements, but a lot of them were in Farsi so to include a wider audience I translated them into English. I think with this piece you have to spend more time to discover it; if you go and see something which happens very quickly, it's just action then reaction; you have such a small amount of time to engage with the piece.

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In *Dark Matter*, the combination of objects, such as the dog and the dildo, can seem to have a kind of surreal humour — what role do you think humour plays in your work?

That's a really interesting question because I feel like for a long time my work was very serious. The more I grew as an artist, the more I learned the importance of using humour to talk about serious issues. It doesn't necessarily lighten the gravity of the topic, but more exposes the ridicule of it. So in *Dark Matter*, I am combining objects that are forbidden or unwelcome in Iran. When you step back from the piece and think about how ridiculous it is that things like dogs and satellite dishes are forbidden, then the humorous aspects of these 3D sculptures start to make more sense.

Your works are very much tied to your self identity, but do you think they also have a much broader application?

I think it is interesting to try and find a line between the personal and the universal. I try to talk about my personal experiences but also to engage an audience which is not specifically Middle-Eastern or Iranian. Maybe in a way you can think about it as being a cultural ambassador, bringing awareness to some of these issues. Also central to my work is the balance between complex concepts and relationships which are tethered to emotion. In every single project, I think of ways to exploit and expand the personal to the collective. For example, in a recent body of work called *The Romantic Self-Exiles*, I seek to understand the relationship of a diasporic existence. I use 3D animation and narrative to build landscapes and to reconstruct memories of home. I use a cinematic and surreal aesthetic to push the limits of real and unreal, memory and imagination, locality and universality, time and space.

Speaking about the role of cultural ambassador, do you see yourself as this? If you do, how do you go about bringing Iranian culture to the US?

I don't actively think of myself as a cultural ambassador, but somehow my work always go back to topics which are trying to raise awareness about something. It goes back to what I was saying about activism. I have never really consciously thought about trying to explicitly raise awareness, but it comes in subconsciously. I get a lot of responses where people are shocked by, say, the fact that certain objects are forbidden in Iran, but I think my work goes into it in more depth by exploring how we relate to these objects and what role a 3D printer could play in creating a historical collection and documentation of our lives.

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When you moved to America, how was the transition between the Iran and the US?

I had travelled to the US before as my mum was a flight attendant, but I always think travelling to a place is very different from living there. Also, when I first travelled to America it was before 9/11; post 9/11, people had very specific ideas about the Middle East, kind of thinking of all of the countries as the same. When I would say I was from Iran, I would always get strange stereotypical questions, which I guess were because of the preconceived notions people had about the Middle East because of the media. I always had to explain to people that it was different. This was a huge part of my move from Iran, but I also tried to deal with it by getting involved with collaborative art projects (I did one called IRUS Art and one called *Your Night/My Day*) which worked with artists in Iran and the US. I wanted to create a dialogue which was free of politics, in which we could connect as individuals and not just nations.

Moving from one culture to another means you're working in two languages; how have you found working in a language which is not your mother tongue?

It's a very complex process. My interest in art stems from creative writing, and I'm a good writer in Farsi, but in English it's completely different. However I also feel like having access to the two languages, being able to think about the world in these two different ways, is an incredibly amazing experience which changes how your brain works. It's fascinating because, like a lot of other aspects of my life, my relationship to language is about co-existing, living in two different worlds and learning how to go back and forth between the two and accepting and enjoying this idea of 'betweenness'.

Finally, what are you working on at the moment?

I'm currently working on a new series of animations, similar to some of my previous works such as *The Romantic Self-Exiles*, which combines 3D rendering with narrative. I want to explore ideas about architectural spaces and our relationships with spaces and landscapes in the virtual world; it's interesting that my relationship to the spaces I left behind is purely virtual. As an artist using technology and living outside my home country, this virtual relationship is something that I am interested in exploring. ■

#dog #dildo #satellite-dish
Morehshin Allahyari

