

AILEEN BAHMANIPOUR



Catalogue for the exhibition **Technical Problem**  
by Aileen Bahmanipour

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# DISSECTING THE BODY POLITIC

by Marina Roy

“For the point is not that I am a collection of identities, but that I am already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage...”

— Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 68

The source of the red droplets that ornament *Wonderland* is a headless body—the cross-section of a human neck spurts blood cells out into the picture frame from severed carotid arteries. There are so many other elements to look at in this composite image, but it's the monstrous detail of the decapitated cross-section that engrosses me. My eyes begin to play tricks on me—new eyes and mouths materialize in this cut, as if it were populated by other creatures. This flight of fancy is more a symptom of pareidolia<sup>1</sup> than reflecting any intention on the part of the artist, but it points to something integral to Aileen Bahmanipour's aesthetic and politic. We, as humans, are not the stable selves we imagine ourselves to be. We are not only composite beings, made up of the cultures we are born into and the multifarious events and encounters we experience through our lives, we are also literally not ourselves—we are a walking microcosm of otherness. At the biological level, we are made up of one-tenth human cells and nine-tenths other microorganisms. Eventually, our body parts, organs, vessels, and fluids will break down into simpler units, helped along by this otherness that is an integral part of us, to become new life. What was once contained and discontinuous will spill over and become continuous with the world again. But while we are still living, one feels the constant pulsing between systole and diastole, autopoiesis and poiesis, control and becoming.

This headless body, shooting its lifeblood in two wondrous arcs through the air, is still visibly alive. Nature and culture are haunted by similar decapitated undead figures. The male praying mantis, the acéphale, and Saint Denis come to mind—figures immortalized by surrealist and nationalist imaginaries. The figure in *Wonderland* holds up what appears to be an entanglement of snakes and ladders. Is the body caught in the ups-and-downs of medieval fortune, or is this symbolism pointing to the remainders of a mythic-prosthetic? Aileen Bahmanipour's illustrative paintings (2012-2015) reference Persian miniatures, and a great number of them also focus on the legend of King Zahhak. This acéphale appears to represent one of the evil king's victims. The figure holds up a transparent sheet between thumb and index finger, exhibiting a drawing of a labyrinth, a broken ladder, or a

meandering fence—perhaps a foreshadowing of her works made on acetate transparency (2016-2017), also included in this exhibition. What does it mean to be at once dead and alive? To be undead and holding up the tracings of past or future entrapments? It has been scientifically proven that past trauma gets translated into the DNA of our descendants.

In the history of Persian art, the miniature had the potential of being more political than mural painting, as images were enclosed within albums (*muraqqa*), or were integrated as illuminations into the textual flow of books. They made their way into private collections rather than being fully exposed to the public, meaning that content could be more freely expressed because it escaped imperial-religious scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Persian miniatures from the 12th to the 16th century display a dazzling use of mineral-sourced colour and a mesmerizing detail. Structured around the presence of the frame, the picture plane is broken up into text and image areas, inside and outside the frame, with select use of cut-away areas to expose the inside of architectural spaces. In Bahmanipour's contemporary take on the miniature, these interior and exterior framed spaces remain in place, but also multiply through the repeated use of the cross-section diagram.<sup>3</sup> The strategy feels forensic, the artist cutting through appearances, peeling back layers of Persian history and ideology, in order to better understand how cultural and biological identity overlap and convolute over time.

In Bahmanipour's works from 2012-2015, the miniature tradition, medical illustration, politics, mythology, and natural history come together to form a composite image. The composite image itself has a strong tradition in Persian art.<sup>4</sup> But in its politicized form it blossomed in Europe in the 17th century. It consisted of an illustrative style that composed the 'body politic' as an accumulation of elements allegorizing political representation: “The relationship between community and 'representative' was one of symbolical embodiment or even mystical union before it moved towards delegation and political agency...”<sup>5</sup> Bahmanipour stitches together composites from scraps of Persian literature and legend, Eastern

and Western art history, as well as modern anatomical illustration, to speak to a shifting Persian identity.

The recurring snake motif and decapitated body reference the legend of King Zahhak. According to Ferdowsi in *The Book of Kings*, as a child Zahhak was influenced by an evil counselor named Ahriman, who made Zahhak kill his own father, clearing the way for him to become king. Ahriman then plants a kiss on both of King Zahhak’s shoulders, such that a snake sprouts up on either side, where his lips made contact. The two snakes cannot be removed as, each time one is cut off, it immediately grows back again. Ahriman advises Zahhak to kill two men each day so that the snakes can feast upon their brains, preventing the snakes from devouring Zahhak’s own brain. Bahmanipour describes these daily killings as sacrificing “the thinking power of an entire nation” and describes the legend of Zahhak as similar to what goes on in “contemporary Iranian society, in which the government suppresses new ideologies just because of its fear of losing central political-religious power.”<sup>6</sup> In another one of her miniatures, *Bivar Asp*, the margin/frame of the picture contains floating brains and the repeated horse motif. Bivar Asp is another name for Zahhak, meaning “he who owns ten thousand horses.”

Human and nonhuman animals tend to be rendered in a modern scientific manner, incorporating anatomical cut-away views, and activating a grotesque interpenetration of bodily entities, all of which casts a rather morbid shadow over this series of works. For this reason, the repeated cell and brain motifs found in the margins should not be framed as upholding an exclusively decorative function. These grotesque dispersals and interlaced elements flesh out the realities of a hybrid bodily existence—every cell can be penetrated by another cell, and therefore every atom carries within itself the blueprint of any number of future potential configurations. We are a product of our biology and of our environment—we float in a fluid state between immersive iterative imaginaries and mutating hybrid identities.

To reiterate: we are offered not only views inside of the body, including the pathways that bodily fluids take before leaking beyond the body’s borders, but we are also given an active view of interacting bodies: creatures interpenetrate, exchange cellular matter and information, come to dwelling in one another, parasitically enter and spread across boundaries, and devour one another. Bahmanipour’s paintings reflect something of the wonders illustrated in Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini’s 13<sup>th</sup>-century cosmography titled *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*. Similar to the many illuminations adorning this treatise, Bahmanipour juxtaposes ‘accurate’ renderings of natural history with fantastical and unheard-of interactions between biological entities (e.g. a horseshoe crab penetrating an eyeball). But where most of Qazwini’s writing focuses on describing and hierarchizing the wonders of nature according to their place in God’s creation— on an ascending plane from base-material to transcendental—Bahmanipour’s work challenges the politico-religious foundations of such traditional texts: instead of passing judgment on animals’ biological worth against that of “man’s”, she represents animal figures as stand-ins for political allegory. In *Field Trip*, a dead tree trunk—filled with bees seen in cross-section, and supporting a bird feeding on one of these insects—represents a very specific political incident: a chain of murders and disappearances that befell Iranian citizens, including dissident writers, intellectuals, and activists between 1988 and 1998. While still shrouded in mystery, these killings and disappearances have been attributed to hardline “Iranian government internal operatives” who desired to quash the “cultural and political openness’ being attempted by reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami and his supporters.”<sup>7</sup> Humans have of course recognized bees as animals with a complex culture, the bee colony used allegorically in fables to stand in for human social behaviour.

In *Sucking My Tears*, the snake’s tubular body redirects fluids from the endocrine glands into the trap of the anthropological machine<sup>8</sup>: the eye sheds tears, the tears feed into a pipe, the pipe transforms into a snake, the snake wends its way through the ribcage and squeezes a breast, the breast releases droplets of milk, and the droplets scatter

across the picture frame. This grotesque bio-mechanical circuit illustrates how power feeds off the tears of the people, exploiting the most vulnerable, including the precarity of women who nourish and provide the emotional labour for an entire nation. The woman’s body and perspective, traditionally underrepresented, is shown here as part-object. Reflecting in a similar vein on how contemporary political economies takes advantage of the defenseless, Judith Butler speaks to the need for a new body politics “that begins with an understanding of human dependency and interdependency, one that ... can account for the relation between precarity and performativity.”<sup>9</sup>

Bahmanipour’s exhibition title, *Technical Problem*, could be taken at face value, our attention directed toward the difficulties of rendering complex images that move from inside to outside the body or framework, confusing picture plane and skin surface. Digging deeper beneath the surface, one detects the secret inner workings of power—how it manipulates the flesh of the body politic—leaving it dissected, exposed, surveilled, exploited, and writhing in agony. The technical problem lies in our representation within political existence—there can be no forcing a unified general will of the people, there should only be a responsibility to care for a cross-section of interdependent diverse beings, each one mattering as much as the next.

<sup>1</sup> A psychological phenomenon characterized by the mind perceiving a familiar pattern where none exists (e.g. seeing a face on an inanimate object).

<sup>2</sup> One thinks of the influence of Islam, which tended to disapprove of figurative art.

<sup>3</sup> In her more recent works from 2016-17, this cross-section as device extends to or is replaced by the use of transparent acetate sheet material, which is folded over and over on itself, in order to give a similar feeling of entering into the depths of a hidden interior, only to find oneself caught in a palimpsest of contour lines.

<sup>4</sup> “Although composite animals have figured throughout the history of Iranian art, they enjoyed a notable revival in the last third of the sixteenth century. Unlike the harpies and sphinxes of medieval Iranian art, composites under the Safavids consisted of humans, real and fantastic animals, and demons (divs) combined into the shape of known animals such as horses and camels. The origins of such images are unknown, although some scholars believe that the concept originated in ancient Central Asia. Some have suggested that these images reflect the dominion of the heavenly over the natural world and, by implication, the power of a ruler over his land and people. Other interpretations propose that the composite aspect of the animals allude to the mystical idea of the unity of all creatures within God, while the animals themselves represent base instincts that must be overcome to achieve spiritual purity.” [http://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674\\_10151320400956675](http://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674_10151320400956675)

<sup>5</sup> Dario Gamboni, “Composing the Body Politic: Composite Images and Political Representation, 1651-2004,” *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe/Cambridge: ZKM/MIT, 162

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the artist’s website.

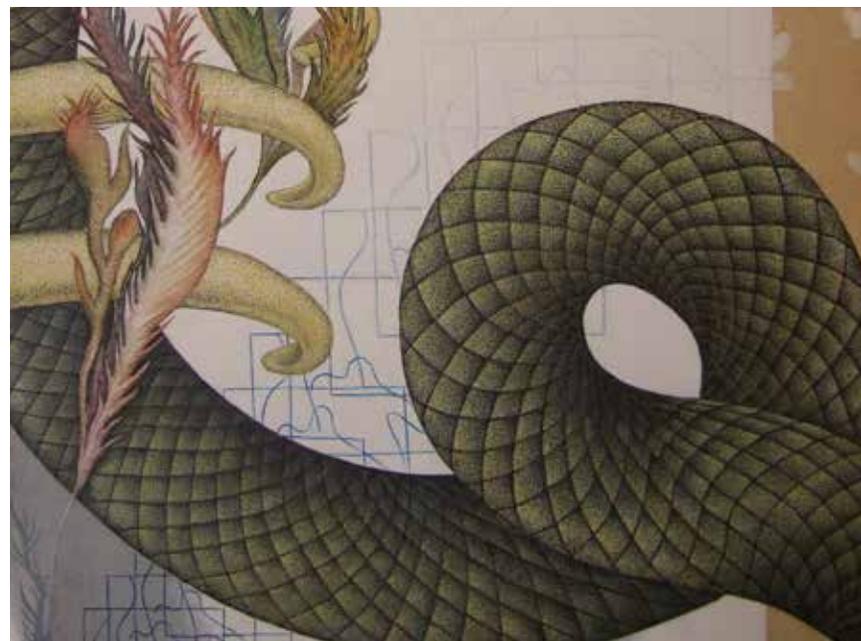
<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chain\\_murders\\_of\\_Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chain_murders_of_Iran)

<sup>8</sup> The allegorical machine is a term coined by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open*. It is an apparatus which ensures that some people are treated as lesser beings than others. It is epitomized in that ‘originary’ separation between humans and animals, which arises from a schism within the very fabric of the human animal.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 206-207.



**Sucking my tears**  
2014  
90\*125 cm / 36\*50 inch  
Tea, acrylic, and watercolour on canvas



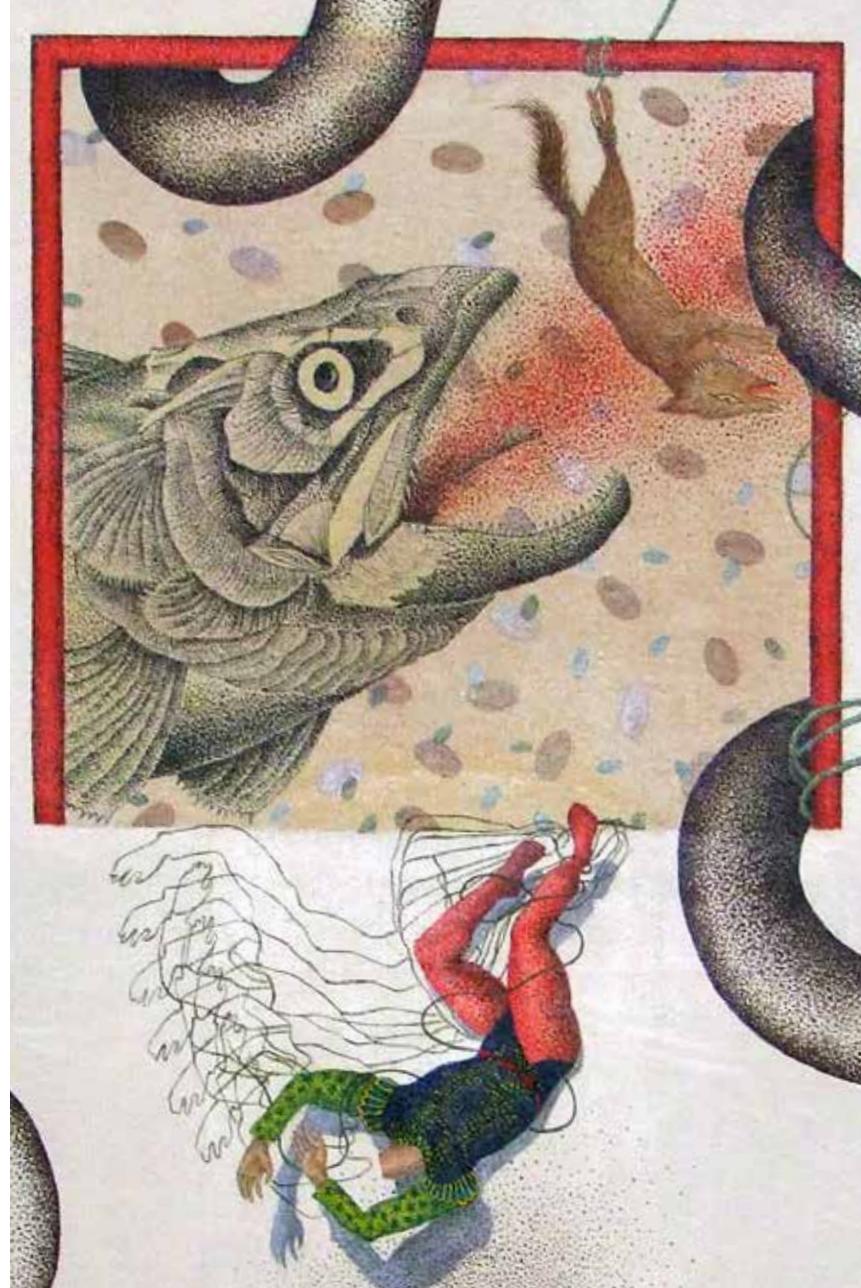


**Wonderland**  
2015  
30"40 inch  
Acrylic, and tea on canvas



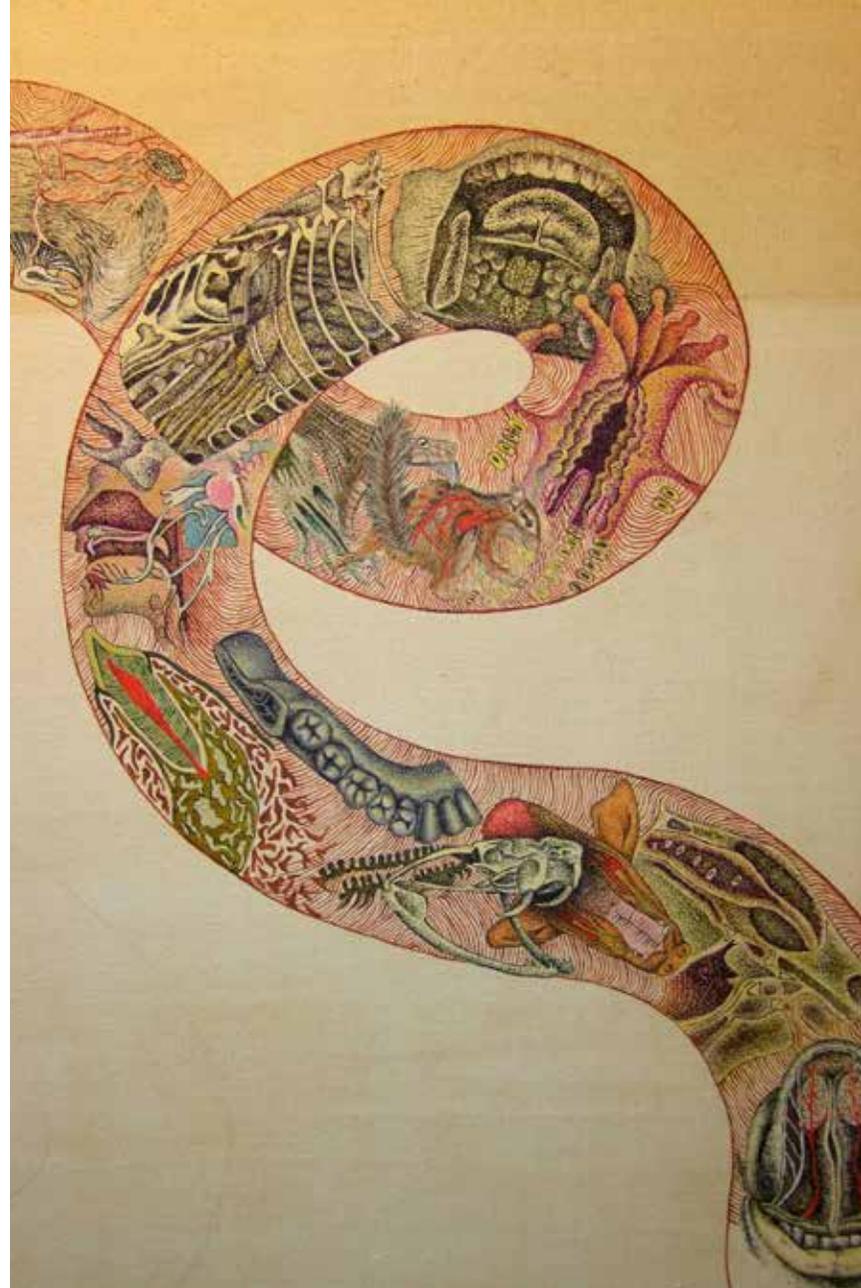
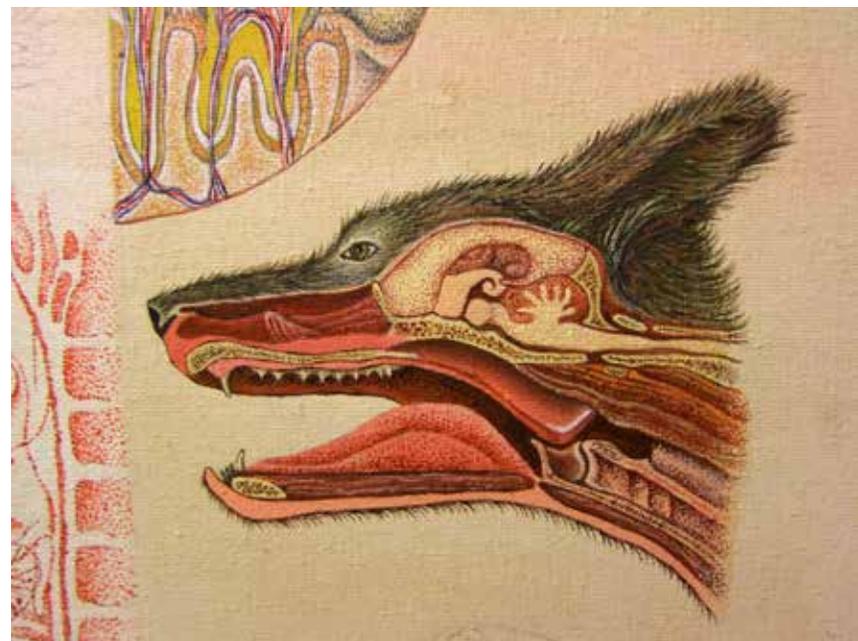


Medusa  
2014  
90\*125 cm/ 36\*50 inch  
Acrylic and tea on canvas



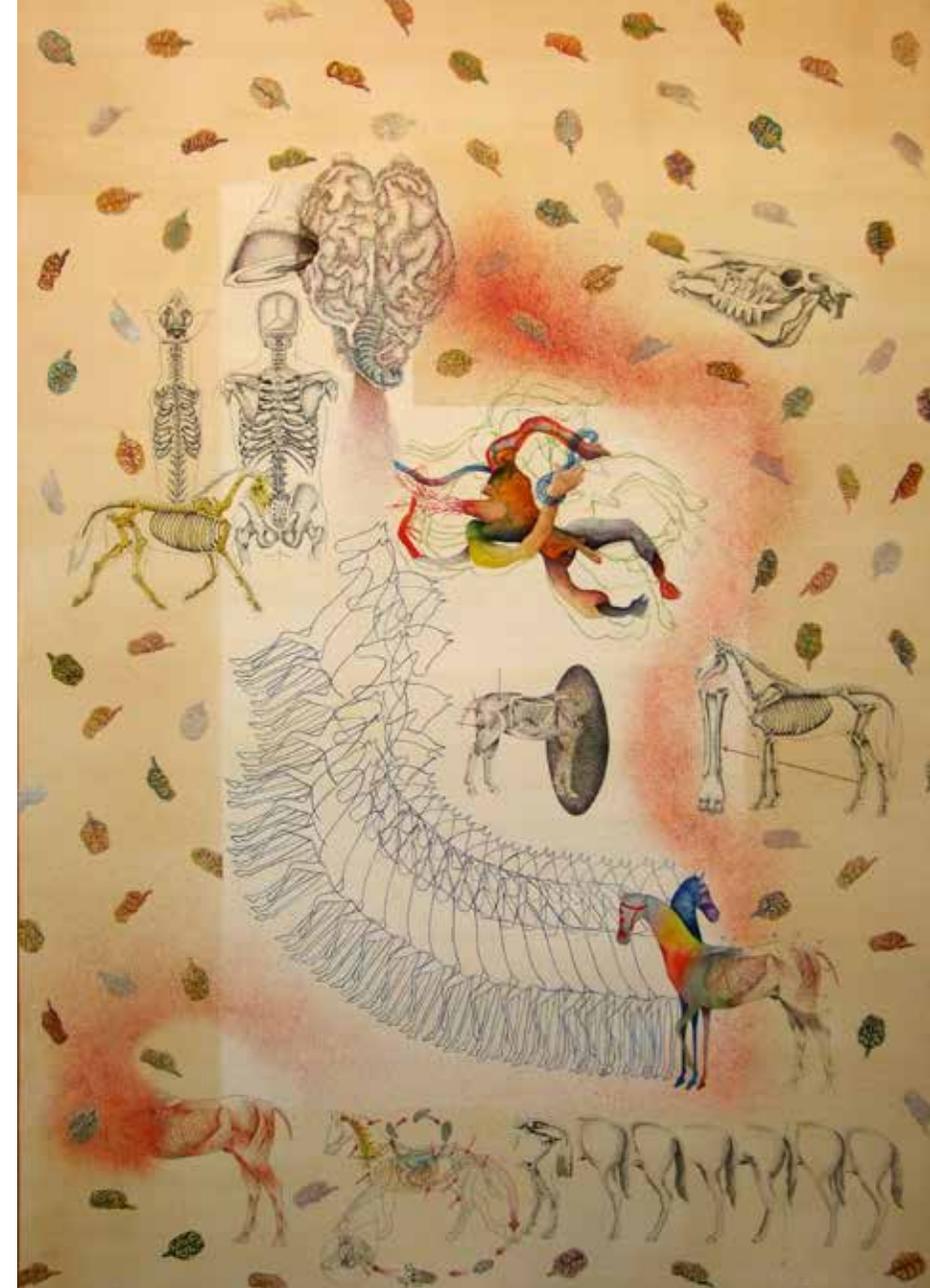


Snake and ladder  
2013  
90\*125 cm/ 36\*50 inch  
Acrylic and tea on canvas





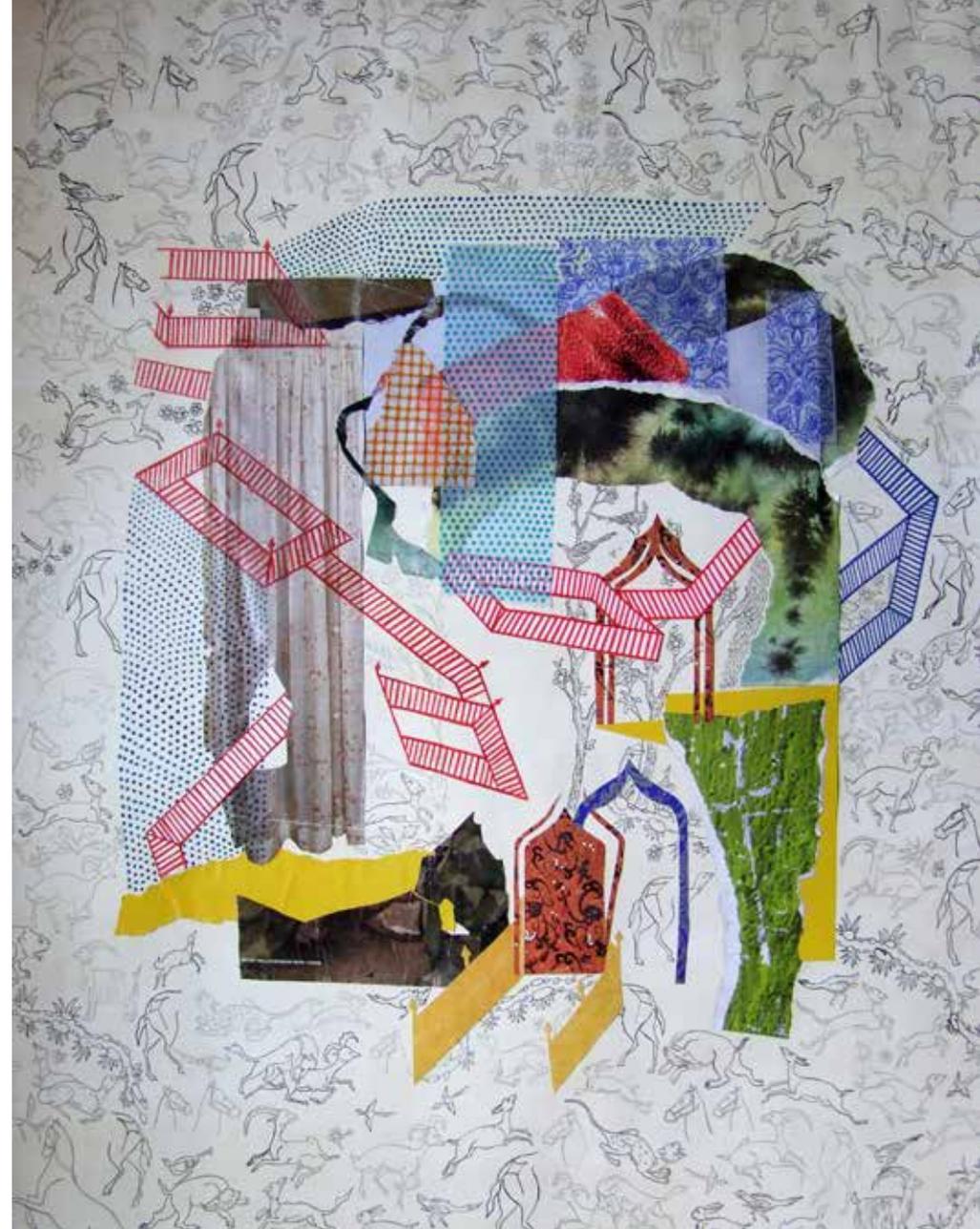
**Bringing Zahak to the mosque**  
2013  
100\*70 cm/ 40\*28 inch  
Ink, watercolour and tea on paper



**Bivar asp**  
2012  
100\*70 cm/ 40\*28 inch  
Ink, watercolour and tea on paper



**Technical problems**, from Zahak-Nameh series  
2012  
50\*70 cm/ 20\*28 inch  
Collage, watercolour, ink and tea on paper



**Technical problems**, from Zahak-Nameh series  
2012  
50\*70 cm/ 20\*28 inch  
Collage, watercolour, ink and tea on paper



Field trip  
2014  
90\*125 cm/ 36\*50 inch  
Acrylic and tea on canvas



**After Shirin's Bath**  
2017  
25 x 36" (Folded 11x12)  
Collage, ink, marker, acrylic, leather string, and dust on acetate sheet



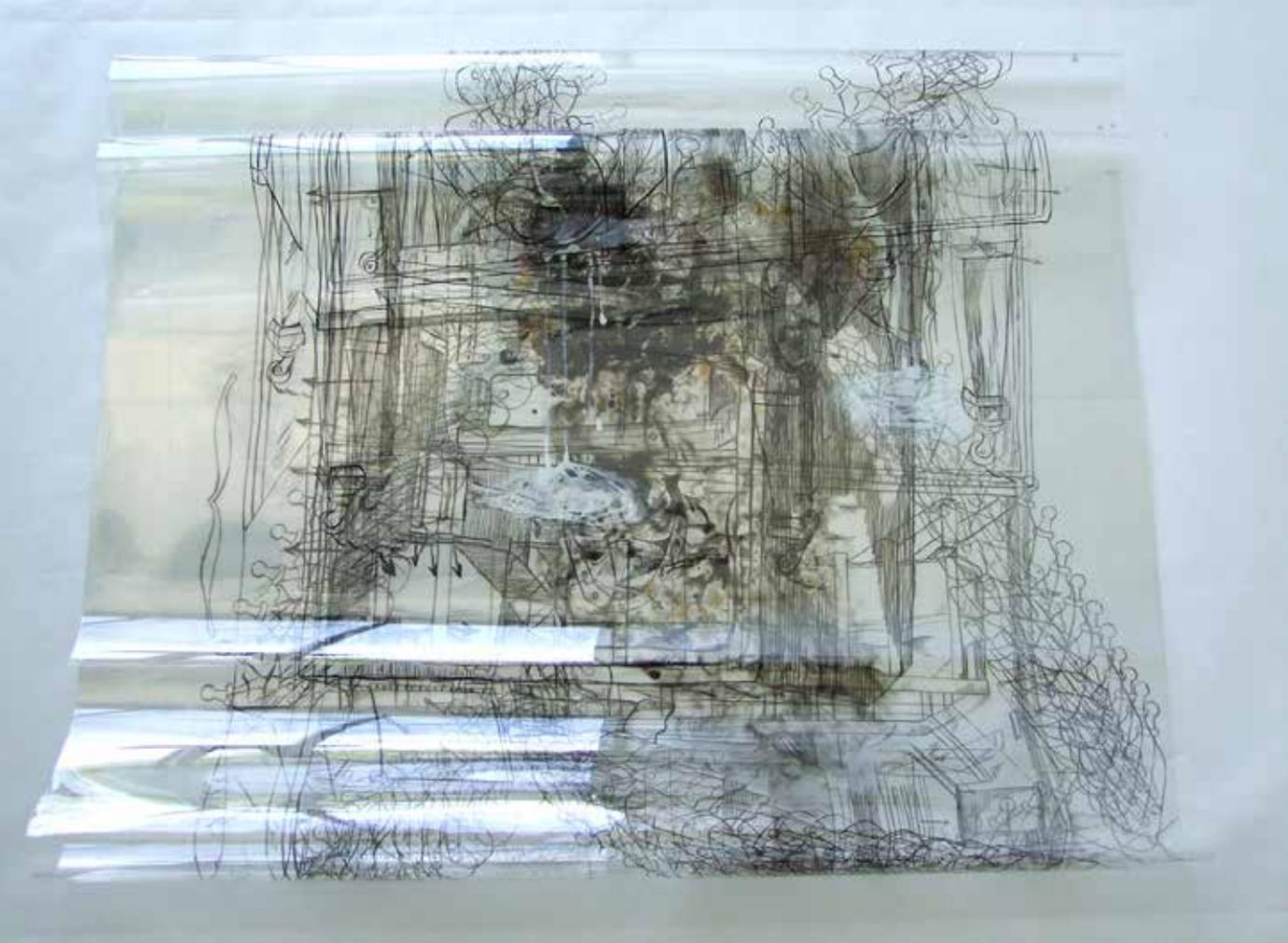
**Hunting Ground No.06**  
2017  
40 x 72" (Folded 22x20)  
Collage, ink, permanent marker, leather string, and dust on acetate sheet



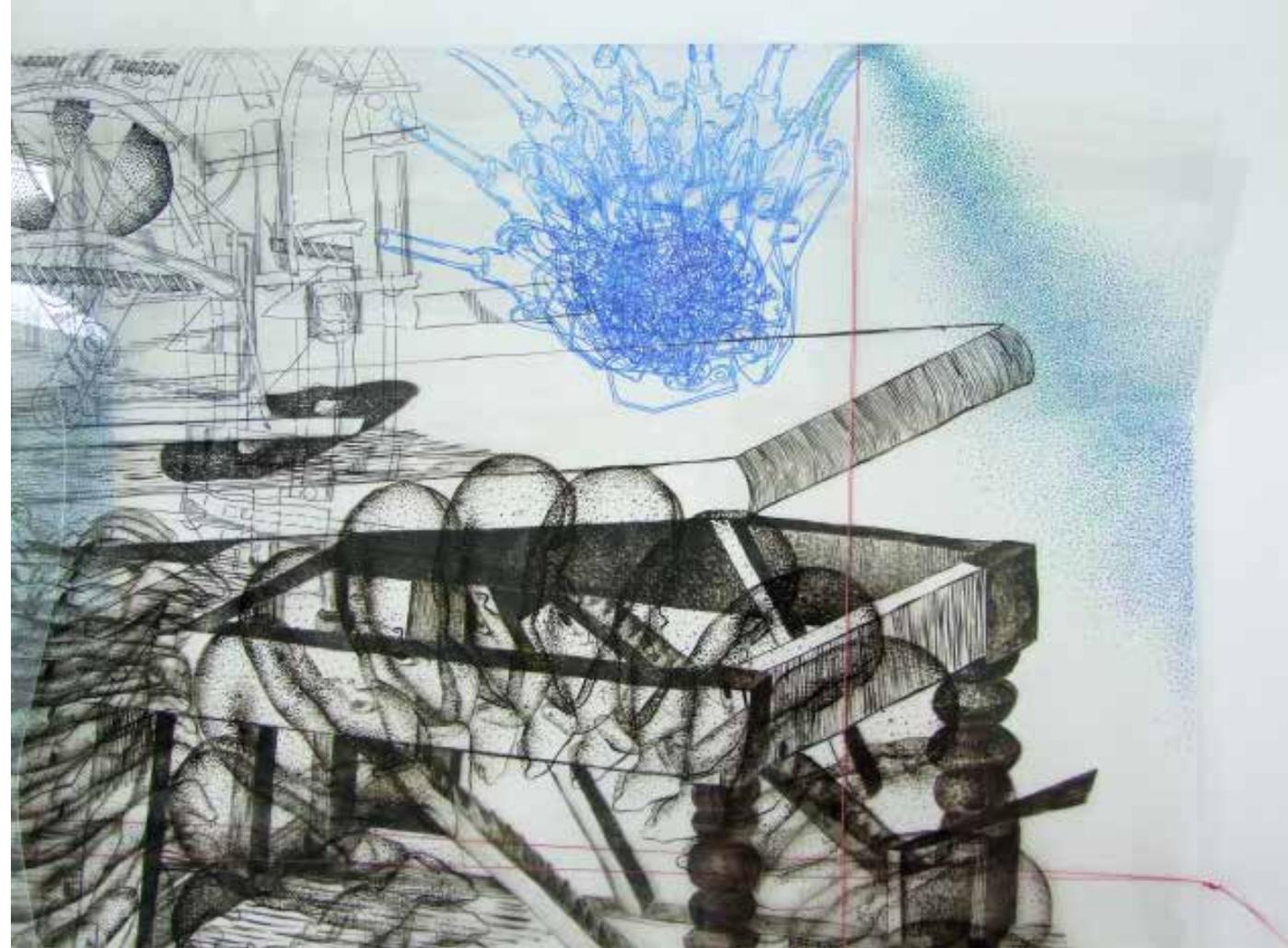
**Hunting Ground No.06**  
2017  
40 x 72"; (Folded 22x20)  
Collage, ink, permanent marker, leather string, and dust on acetate sheet



**Image Is Disturbance In The Pattern**  
2017  
Folded in 50x35  
Permanent marker, ink, acrylic, fishing line, and dust on duralar sheet.



**Bibox No.02**  
2017  
Folded in 50x35"  
Permanent marker, ink, acrylic, fishing line, and dust on acetate sheet



**Egg Breaker**  
2017  
Folded in 35x40"  
Permanent marker, Vitrail paint, fishing line and dust on duralar sheet.

