



Craft Contemporary

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POUYA AFSHAR **THE CHARM OF THE UNFAMILIAR**

OCTOBER 3, 2021 – JANUARY 9, 2022



Pouya Afshar, *Ellis I*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ADVOCARTSY.

LOS ANGELES — Craft Contemporary presents *The Charm of the Unfamiliar*, artist Pouya Afshar’s multi-media story of displacement, migration, and resiliency. Using historic portraiture and animation techniques, digital applications, and augmented reality, the exhibition follows the fictional narrative of a group of migrants that relocate to an abandoned city that had once been an amusement park. The displaced in this narrative are hybrid personas – human and animal, some real, some mythical – each physically transformed by their experiences of migration. These hybrid beings embody the toll of displacement and the adaptation and strength migration require and reflect the dehumanization and exoticizing of immigrants and refugees that continues to this day in the United States. Through this work, Afshar aims to open up dialogue about global refugee crises, U.S. immigration policy, and the realities immigrants face when they do make it to the land of the so-called “American Dream.”

“Artists are the ones recording the history,” says Afshar. “One has to live, breathe and feel the surroundings alongside the characters they create.” Essayists S.A. Bachman and Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond writing for the upcoming monograph, *In Character: Pouya Afshar Selected Works 2010 to 2020*, say of the series, “Art doesn’t open borders or cages, but what if viewers are prompted to fathom how it would be to inhabit the dehumanized forms of Afshar’s landscape, to grasp the lived experiences of beings treated as expendable, including homosapiens but also crows, pigs, donkeys, camels, horses, and sheep?”

The exhibition begins with the video projection, *Washed Ashore*, where the viewer sees smoke rising from the migrants’ homeland and their first steps into this new land. Visitors can then peer through the view finders of *Shahr-e Farang*, Afshar’s interpretation of a 19th Century peepshow box, to watch the short animation, *LA DOLCE VITA*, which chronicles the story of Hope, a character who decides to leave their war infested city to find a better life abroad. In a series of oil paintings, *Ellis I – X*, Afshar merges his characters with historic images of detainees at Ellis Island.



These highly staged, exoticized photographs were taken by Ellis Island clerk Augustus Sherman between 1905 and 1925. Sherman's series of photographs has become an iconic representation of the romanticized American immigrant experience and American "melting pot." In reality, the people pictured were being detained at Ellis Island, often for health or legal reasons. Since Sherman seldom included the names of his subjects, it is rarely known who among them were permitted into the U.S. or were deported back to their home countries. Afshar's images and video pieces offer windows into his characters' complex experiences that are largely absent from portrayals of immigrants in mainstream media and political discussions in the U.S.

Afshar also deploys digital technology to further enhance his characters' experiences. Small keepsakes brought by the migrants, such as a teddy bear, materialize via 3-D printing. Through augmented reality, Afshar's characters even break out of the two-dimensional plane to occupy space and move through the exhibition. Viewers are transformed from voyeur to participant, moving with the characters as they navigate their journey. At the conclusion of this journey, the characters and visitors pass through a constructed wall. Inside, Afshar presents animated interviews in which individuals who immigrated to the United States share their varied experiences.

Curator Holly Jerger notes, "The political rhetoric surrounding immigration and the world's refugee crises has grown increasingly enflamed in recent years. Afshar works against this dehumanizing discourse by illustrating the complex reasons people are forced to leave their homelands and the multiple challenges they face upon resettlement. With this exhibition, he asks us to walk with these characters and understand their experiences."

Born in 1984 during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Pouya Afshar left Iran with his family at sixteen and resettled in Los Angeles. Afshar's multidisciplinary practice investigates themes of diaspora, memory, violence, and loss. He is an alumnus of the California Institute of Arts and a graduate of University of California Los Angeles Graduate Department of Film and Television focusing on Animation and Digital Media. He has exhibited his work as a visual artist throughout the United States, Europe, and Middle East, including at the Getty Center, University of Southern California, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Santa Monica Art Studios, 18th Street Arts Center, Craft Contemporary, and numerous galleries and art fairs around the world. Pouya has presented his research at Stanford University, Harvard University, University of Southern California, The School of Museum of Fine Arts Boston, University of California, Los Angeles, and Residency Unlimited NY. He is the creator, character designer and producer of the animated series *Rostam in Wonderland* and the co-creator of *1PA2PA* comics and the creator of *Tehran* graphic novel. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Art and Design at University of Massachusetts, Lowell.



Top to bottom:

Pouya Afshar, *Shahr-e Farang*, 2021. Video, wood, 3-D printed objects, 40 x 24 x 35 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ADVOCARTSY.

Pouya Afshar, *Precious*, 2021. Resin, 7 x 3 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ADVOCARTSY.

Pouya Afshar, *Isolated and Displaced III*, 2020. Digital painting on acetate and charcoal on paper, 18 x 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ADVOCARTSY.



CREDITS:

The Charm of the Unfamiliar has been organized by Craft Contemporary Exhibitions Curator Holly Jerger. This exhibition is supported in part by the Antonia and Vladimir Kulaev Cultural Heritage Foundation, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, and a grant from the City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs.

PROGRAMS:

Opening Reception

The museum will host an exhibition preview day on Saturday. The artist will be present at the opening. October 2, 2021, from 1PM. to 5PM. General Admission | Free for members.

Responding to Humanitarian Crises via Immigration Support

October 7, 2021 | 5PM

Join a conversation introducing representatives of three major immigrants' rights organizations: Human Rights First, KIND (Kids in Need of Defense), and Equity First. Learn about current issues and how these organizations are assisting displaced persons.

RSVP: craftcontemporary.org/programs/ for virtual program link.

Virtual Exhibition Walkthrough with Pouya Afshar

Sunday, November 7, 2021 | 5PM

RSVP: craftcontemporary.org/programs/



Pouya Afshar, *Displaced I*, 2018. Soft pastel on paper, 33 x 65.5 inches. Collection of Mehrdad Ariani. Courtesy of the artist and ADVOCARTSY.

Located on Los Angeles' historic Miracle Mile since 1965, Craft Contemporary reveals the potential of craft to educate, captivate, provoke, and empower. With a focus on contemporary art made from craft media and processes, Craft Contemporary presents dynamic exhibitions by established and emerging artists and designers who are often underrepresented in larger art institutions. Through a robust roster of regular programs and events, Craft Contemporary offers creative opportunities for the public to participate in hands-on workshops led by professional artists. Craft Contemporary cultivates an environment for people in Los Angeles to deepen their relationship to art, creativity, and one another. For more information, visit www.craftcontemporary.org.

LOCATION: 5814 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036

ADMISSION: FREE every Sunday

REGULARLY: \$9 for adults; \$7 for students, teachers, seniors; free for Craft Contemporary members

HOURS: Tuesday - Sunday, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

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