

THOUGHTS OF JALEH TAVASSOLI

I've been asked to write something about my presence here in this artist residency, about my path as an artist and my experiences. And they're right to ask. I came here with a commitment, one I still haven't properly honored. Just a few days after I arrived, the ever-unpredictable situation in my occupied country plunged into yet another crisis, one neither we Iranians nor anyone else has seen anything quite like. For two or three days now I've been urging myself to write, and I can't. Write about what? About why I paint and how? About my current project on the female body that I wanted to extend here? About my encounter with Germany, or with this small, quiet, carefree village? What can I possibly write when the meaning of everything has shifted for me.

Throughout my life I've had several such turning points; moments that changed the very ground I stood on and the angle from which I saw the world, so that afterward literally everything took on new meaning. I'm in one of those moments again now. In a strangely disorienting condition, and in a situation so strange that's hard to digest. I hope that writing this, at least, might show me the coordinates of where I stand now.

My focus, the core of my work, has long been the body and lived bodily experience inside a dual, split society, and everything that duality and alienation breed and scatter.

Until three years ago it was mostly personal: my own experiences of observing, knowing, and looking deep in the body and its relation to the surrounding environment, a very particular outside world; a gender apartheid and the lived reality of women under it. Then came "Woman, Life, Liberty," and after the physical injuries I sustained in the streets, and the forced pause from painting that followed, I went through another turning point. That enforced stillness drove me deeper inside myself and confronted me with an entirely different level in my experience of the body; especially my injured right hand. When concepts shift on this scale for someone, it means they've entered another stage entirely: their goals, dreams, daily wants and needs all change completely. The very meaning of painting, of art, of creating, changed utterly for me too.

Since then my preoccupation has become something collective and multiple, a movement toward including the experiences of other women. The bodily harm, the searing pain, the unavoidable stillness, they gave me a fractal view of everything that exists: my skin, flesh, and fingers; my ideas and thoughts; the traumas and experiences stored in my mind and body; the history itself. That's how the project "Blossoming" gradually took shape, a project that is collective and replicable by nature, and one I worked on with help from many people. But "Blossoming" has not yet reached realization, and now I'm facing yet another turning point.

Though these days I'm far too agitated, confused, lost, sorrowful, desperate, and furious to understand what this new juncture is bringing me. "Woman, Life, Liberty" was—and is—the distillation of all the suffering and all the hope that I reach out to every moment. Now that a thickening, sticky blackness is covering everything, creeping inside me too, I cling to it fiercely. These days when they even try to drag the most progressive, inclusive, and beautiful slogan through the mud. These days when nothing feels right. Surrounded by lies, hypocrisy, power-grabbing, and the smell of blood and sound of screaming in my head; my days here pass badly. I don't want to lie and I can't. I'm in a small village; the nearest Iranian friend is hundreds of kilometers away. Around me there's almost no movement except the wind in the trees, almost no sound except birds and occasionally a passing train. The kind of loneliness I'm living through has already shifted every coordinate in my mind, and when I imagine the sheer volume of horror and grief injected into me with every hour's nightmarish news, I'm astonished that I'm still alive. Though even saying "alive" feels like an exaggeration. Most days I don't leave the bed. If my bladder didn't force me, I would stay there forever, scrolling, contracting into myself. Some days the obligation of work presses on

me—thankfully. I get up, swallow some Vyas, and go to war with myself: downstairs to the studio which light I'm supposed to keep on.

The materials I bought for working don't call to me. Material has always been a vivid part of my language. I can only work with things I already know, things that carry history and experience behind them. In the past two years I used cigarette packs, medicine boxes, bandages, medical plaster, and objects my own life extended into. Here, though, the shiny white canvases stare back at me. I've never been comfortable with a blank canvas. It feels too clean, too smooth, too luxurious for what I want to do. It claims to be zero and demands that I decisively take that zero toward one. A philosophy I fundamentally cannot accept. The effort a white canvas makes to convince you that zero exists is the very thing I've always opposed from the root. Look closely: even that canvas has its own history, though it tries so hard to hide it. So, I started collecting cardboard boxes and recycled cartons; material that gives me ease, that has no shame about revealing its journey from being a tree in a forest to standing in front of me now.

I started working on the cartons. The first few attempts failed. I was slipping back into old paths and it wasn't working. My mental state kept dragging me under the blanket, chasing horrific news and testimonies. But a few days ago I finally found a crack of light. Just a little, but enough to locate some small piece of myself in this space where everything feels unreal, enough to put at least one foot on the ground. I drew angry people. Women who are broken and at the end of their rope. Souls so full of pain, agony, and rage that silence was no longer possible. I drew women whose eyes said: "We will tear you to pieces."

I can't say I'm satisfied with what I'm making. Honestly, I'm not in a psychological state where I can even talk about satisfaction. The mere fact that I managed to paint and don't hate the result feels like an achievement to me. I don't know whether my presence here—an Iranian woman artist carrying all these layered, utterly different atmospheres—has added a new color to this residency or not. These days I feel like I'm moving through vapor, through thick fog that's swallowed both my inside and my outside. It comes with a deep shame and a painful emptiness. Shame at being alive and unharmed; emptiness born of absolute solitude when what I need most is to hold even one compatriot's hand. I am strong. I know that, because the past years taught me strength. But right now it feels as though I've forgotten how. And not only strong: everything I was seems gone, and I must become new and rebuilt myself. This radical re-definition of every concept and perception is happening inside me again. I have to search through this thick fog and build a fresh existence. Millions of burning threads are tied to my heart, millions of wounded, suffering, furious beings. The only thing that remains is this feeling of connection, from every cell of me, to my ancient land and my people. The only lasting point is this living fire inside. My connection to my bloodied roots. I am alive. And I will tell the story.