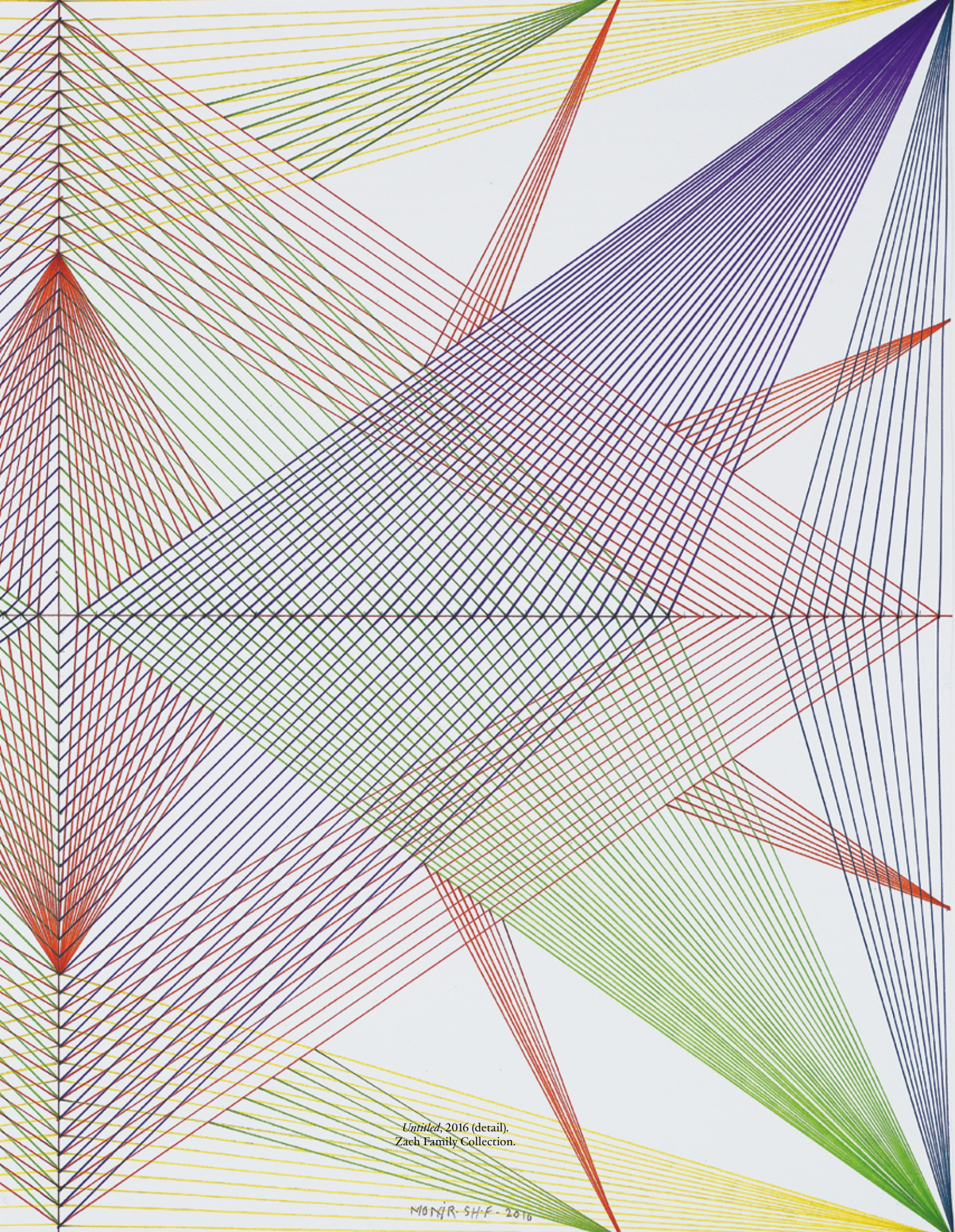


MONIR SHAHROUDY

FARMANFARMAIAN



Untitled, 2016 (detail).
Zach Family Collection.

MOTHR-SHF-2016

MONIR SHAHROUDY

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FARMANFARMAIAN





Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, 1970s.



FOREWORD

This publication accompanies a major survey of the work of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (b. 1922, Qazvin; d. 2019, Tehran), revealing the breadth and complexity of her artistic practice across more than four decades. Developed in collaboration between Moderna Museet, Museo Reina Sofía, and Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the exhibition brings together more than one hundred works dating from 1970 to 2015. Alongside her celebrated mirror mosaics, this retrospective reveals a broader, more experimental practice encompassing drawing, collage, sculpture, textiles, and collecting. It frames Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian as not only one of the most influential Iranian artists of the twentieth century, but as a foundational figure in the transnational histories of modern and contemporary art.

Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's exploration of abstraction, nature, and geometry unfolds through a logic of reflection and multiplicity, where forms, materials, and histories continually refract and illuminate one another. Her practice embodies the turbulent cultural and political forces that shaped the twentieth century. Rather than emerging from a single tradition, her visual language evolved through displacement across contexts marked by war, geopolitical rupture, and rapid global urbanization. These defining conditions of global modernisms forced countless artists to move across shifting borders. Reflecting this fractured reality, her work does not merely record these histories; it navigates the restless energies, formal frameworks, and political frictions of these global arenas, connecting the plural histories of modernism to many of the critical concerns that continue to shape contemporary artistic practice today.

After moving to New York to study in 1945, she immersed herself in a rapidly evolving, avant-garde art world. Returning to Tehran in 1957, she entered a cultural landscape of Iranian modernism evolving within and against the sharp contradictions of Pahlavi modernization—a state program that fostered international artistic exchange and biennials while simultaneously suppressing political opposition and subsuming Iran's diverse cultural histories into a singular, state-sanctioned national identity. In this complex environment, she grounded her practice in the living traditions and material methods of Iranian visual culture, Islamic art and architecture, and the craft traditions of Iran's many ethnic communities, seamlessly manifesting the key elements of her lived experience, the worlds she inhabited, collected, studied, and loved.

This universe was violently fractured by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Islamic Republic, geopolitical shifts that continue to shape our world today. For Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, this resulted in a two-decade exile in New York. The initial upheaval brought immediate, state-sanctioned trauma: the abrupt confiscation of her home, studio, and her vast collection of vernacular arts, crafts, and historical objects. When a period of openness in the early 2000s finally permitted her return to Tehran, her reconnection with surviving artisans transformed her late career into a radical act of artistic reconstruction. By translating decades of artistic inquiry into monumentally scaled structures of light and glass, this final,

highly prolific era demonstrates a profound resilience and testament to her sustained experimentation.

This retrospective exhibition is the result of years of research and collaboration and owes much to the generosity, knowledge, and dedication of many people. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the staff and colleagues across our museums, whose expertise, commitment, and collaborative spirit have made this exhibition and publication possible. At the heart of this project is curator Asrin Haidari (Moderna Museet), whose vision, research, and sustained commitment have guided it from inception to realization. We also wish to acknowledge the curatorial collaboration of Amanda de la Garza Mata (Museo Reina Sofía) and Yasmijn Jarram (Kunstmuseum Den Haag), whose insights and efforts have helped shape this exhibition across its partner institutions.

We are deeply grateful to the contributors to this volume, whose essays, conversations, and reflections have opened new perspectives on Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's remarkable life and work. Our warmest thanks go to Sussan Babaie, Nairy Baghramian, Reza Daftarian, Yasmijn Jarram, Azar Mahmoudian, and Sam Samiee for their generous and thoughtful texts. We are also very thankful to Sarah Martinon, whose sensitive and elegant design has given this publication its distinctive form and character.

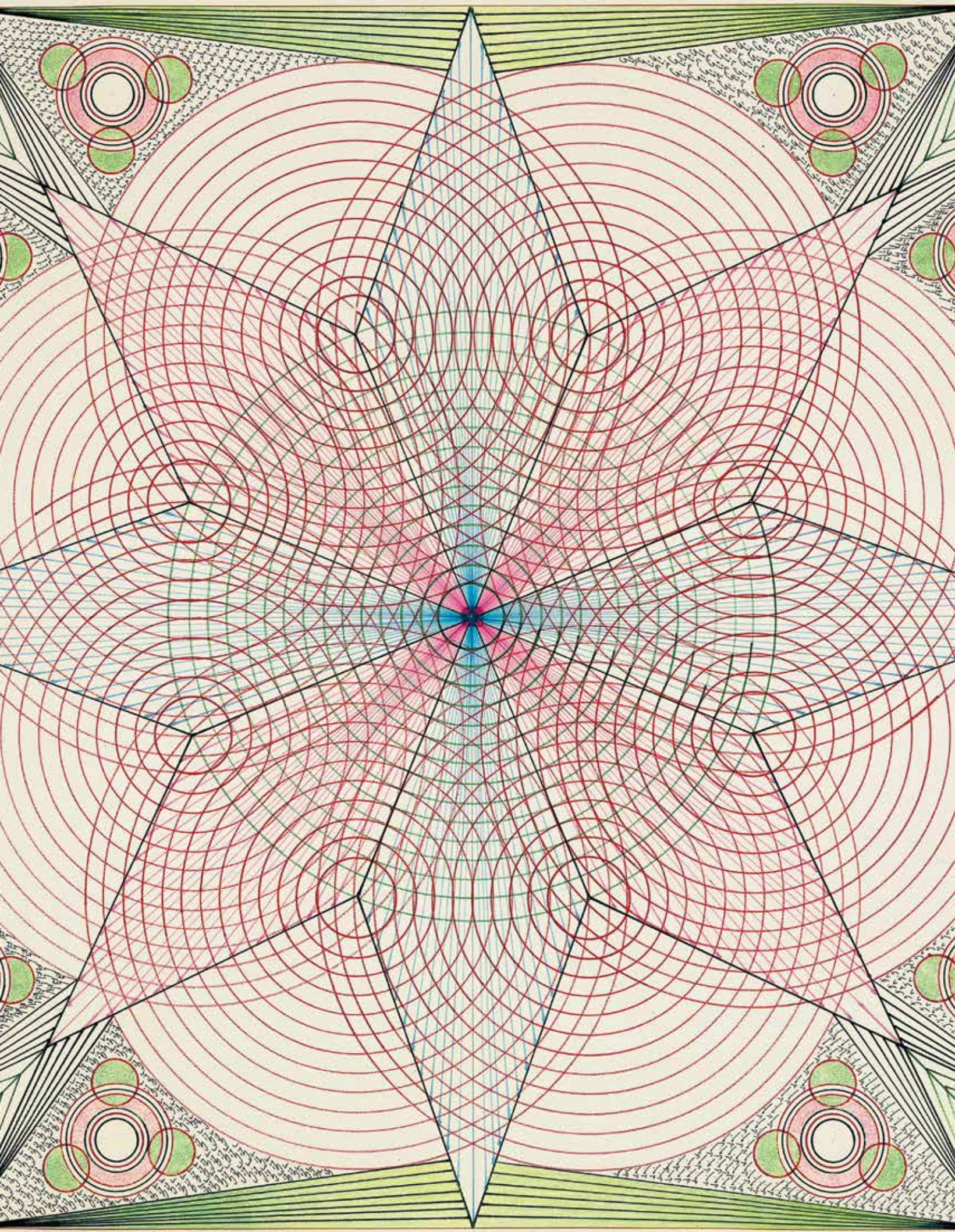
The trust of the Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian family has been invaluable throughout the development of this exhibition. We are equally indebted to the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, led by Darya Isham, and NORR COHAN Gallery, New York, especially Audrée Anid and David Norr, whose sustained engagement and unwavering dedication have been instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. We also extend our warmest thanks to The Third Line Dubai, especially Gabriella Moore and Sunny Rahbar, for their collaboration and assistance. It has been a privilege to work with all those who have preserved, shared, and championed Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's legacy over so many years.

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Director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Manuel Segade
Director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

Margriet Schavemaker
Director of the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague





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REFLECTIONS, RUPTURES, AND REPETITIONS: AN INTRODUCTION

Asrin Haidari

In late spring 2004, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian received an unexpected message from Alireza Sami-Azar, the director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. He made her an offer she had not thought possible: a retrospective exhibition in the museum's nine galleries, and a promise to attempt to trace her many works that had been confiscated by the Islamic Republic twenty-five years earlier. At the time she was eighty-two years old and had been living in exile in New York since 1978. "I was going home, and in the best of all possible ways," she writes in her memoir, *A Mirror Garden* (2007).¹

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian explored structures, relationships of balance, and the possibilities of repetition across more than seven decades of artistic practice. This ranged from delicate floral drawings to mirror mosaics, collage, assemblage, and abstract patterns in woven carpets. Her artistic practice was shaped by her life in Tehran and New York. She moved to New York in 1945, returned to Tehran in 1957, was exiled in New York from

1978, and finally returned in 2004 to Tehran, where she spent the remaining years of her life. Influences from traditional craftsmanship, Iranian pictorial tradition, Islamic art, and Sufi mysticism merged with formal and conceptual elements drawn from the art movements she encountered in the US.

This exhibition is one of the most comprehensive presentations of Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's work to date. Initiated by Moderna Museet in Stockholm and realized in collaboration with Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid and Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the exhibition brings together more than one hundred works produced between 1970 and 2015. It includes the mirror-works for which she is best known, alongside a wide selection of drawings, sculptural objects, and collages, as well as more experimental works in which improvisation meets autobiography. To illustrate the many and varied influences that have left their mark on her work, selected historical objects from the artist's collection are also on display: Turkmen jewelry with intricate patterns, richly ornamented Qur'anic manuscripts, and a botanical study dating from the mid-17th century.



Untitled, 1974.

a turning point in her artistic career, leading to a new direction in which she embraced geometry and mirror mosaic in her work.

For centuries, the mirror has served not only as a powerful metaphor for everything from vanity and self-awareness to illusion, but also as an interface between worlds in philosophy, religion, and the visual arts. In Persian architecture and Islamic aesthetics, mirrors are often used to reflect and refract light, a practice associated with ideas of the divine. Mirror-work, known as *ayeneh-kari*, were developed during the Safavid period. This technique is often said to have emerged as the result of imported Venetian glass damaged during transport and later repurposed as mosaics, although such accounts only partially explain the development of *ayeneh-kari* as a highly sophisticated architectural tradition, grounded in geometry, light, and spatial perception.⁹

In her work *Untitled* (1974), Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian combines *ayeneh-kari* with other elements of Iranian visual art. Long, narrow shards of mirror run across the surface, forming a clearly defined pattern. Between the mirrored fields, she inserted fragments from paintings on glass from her own collection, remnants of broken works: a nightingale, a few flower petals. In 1976, she moved toward more minimalist reliefs, focusing on pure geometric forms such as heptagons, and octagons, which were interwoven into a more open composition.

At the same time, the impressions from her travels across Iran continued to resurface in other areas of her work. In the second half of the 1970s, she created a series of collages and drawings that she called *Nomadic Tent* or *Chador* (p. 131). Here she combined triangles in various configurations, forms that evoke both the folds of a chador, a garment worn over the head and body, and the tent structures of the nomadic Qashqai people.¹⁰ Their rich craft tradition, in which bold colors and abstract patterns played a central role, and where tent interiors were adorned with patterned textiles and carpets, provided an important source of inspiration for these collages, while also evoking the shape of the chador.

As art historian Donna Stein has noted, Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's work demonstrates a genuine appreciation for Iran's cultural diversity and for the many ethnic groups that together comprise approximately forty percent of the country's population.¹¹ This must, of course, be understood in the context of a period when the state's centralization project under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sought to create a homogeneous national identity.

Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian had an ambivalent relationship with the Shah's authoritarian regime. In her memoir, she describes how she moved within circles close to the power elite and how family ties at times took her to private gatherings and official functions attended by the royal family. Reflecting on her past, she acknowledges a



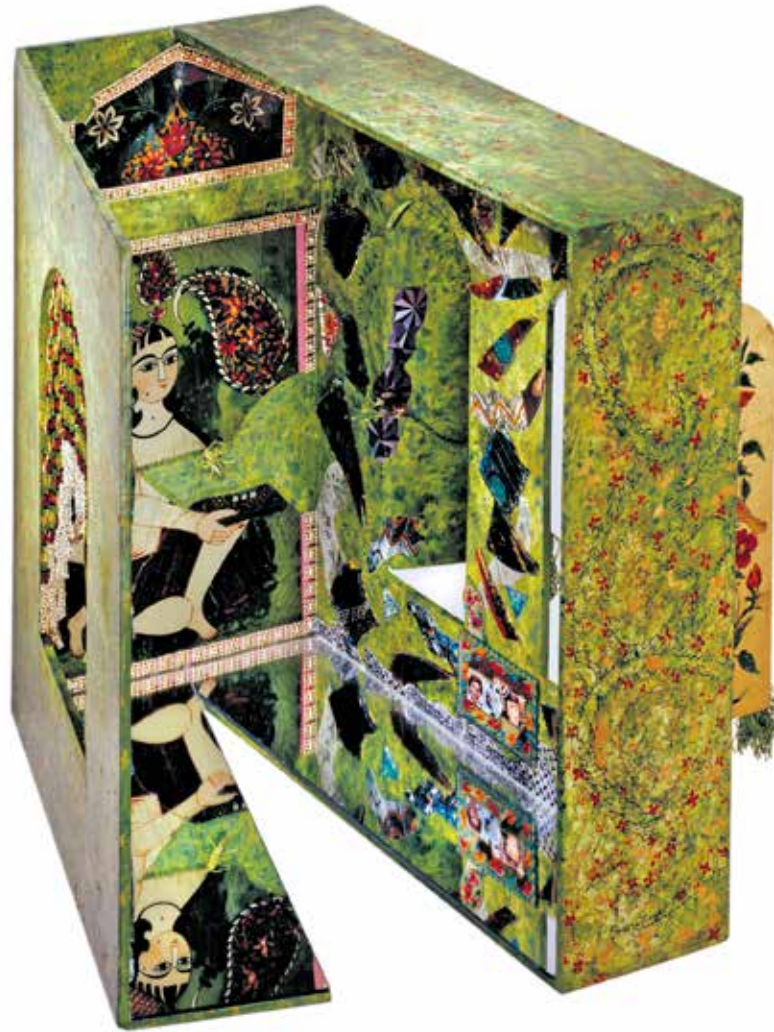
Above, a reverse-glass painting; below a coffeehouse painting (*qabveh-khaneh*), part of a popular Iranian painting tradition associated with oral storytelling. Both are from Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's collection.

p. 26: Columns decorated with antique mirror and hand-painted glass, created by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian for the Hotel InterContinental, Tehran, 1973.

p. 27: Glass window designed by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian for the Dag Hammarskjöld Tower, New York, commissioned in 1988.



Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian in front of mirror panels she designed for an apartment on Park Avenue in New York, 1981.



Heartache Box No. 16, c. 1992.

symmetrical geometric pattern that framed the city skyline outside.

In 1986, *The New York Times* published a feature on artists in exile in the city.¹⁸ Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was profiled alongside the Soviet-Jewish painter Albert Shvilly and the Cuban poet Jorge Valls, among others. The article described New York as a mecca for artists. For Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, however, this image was not entirely accurate. Behind the optimistic narrative lay several years of interrupted working processes, during which she had no gallery representation or invitations to exhibit her work.

In 1992, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was seventy years old. At her desk in her Upper West Side apartment, small boxes, photographs, and clippings lay gathered in piles. Weighed down by grief following the death of her husband in 1991, she assembled fragments from the past alongside available materials and

small objects of her present, and used scissors and glue to set them within small display cases. These assemblages are constructed from wood, cardboard, items of jewelry, photographs, newspaper clippings, and fabric. Cutout images of Heriz carpets, photographs from her travels across Iran's provinces, and miniature versions of her own geometric mirror-works—all carry autobiographical elements. She called this group of around thirty works *Heartache Boxes*. Spanning two years of mourning, they form a kind of memorial project and a period of reflection.

2004–19

The Return: A Late-Career Triumph
Takes Shape

Finally, after twenty-five years in exile, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian received that unexpected message from Iran. An invitation

Monir Shahrudy Farmanfarmaian in her apartment in New York, 2003.





WORKS



Untitled, 2003
Ink on paper
68.5 × 50.5 cm



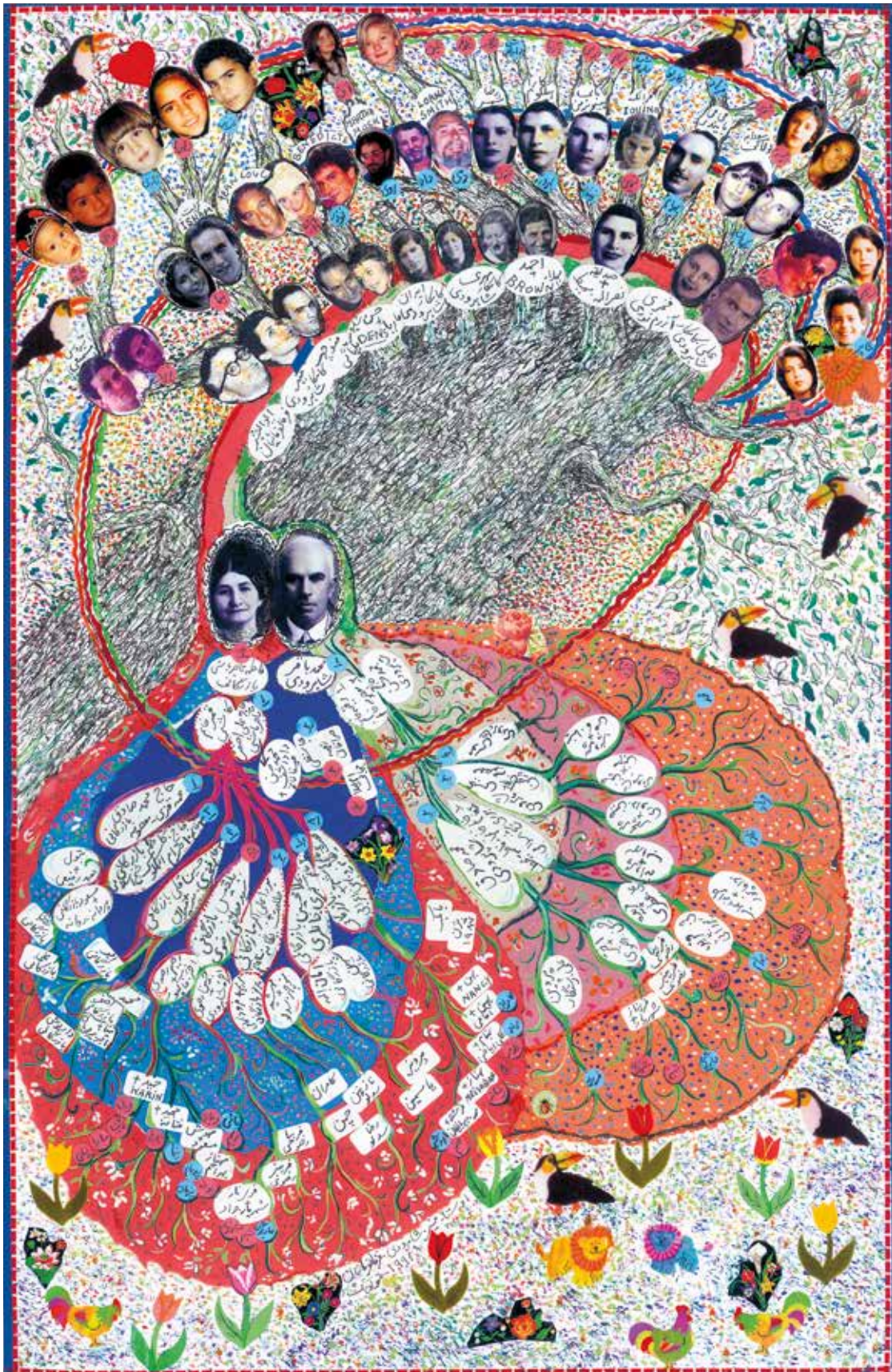
Untitled, 2003
Ink on paper
63 × 48 cm



My Family, Collage (CG21), 1983
Mixed media
76 × 52 cm



A Miniature, Rendition, Collage (CG22), 1983
Mixed media
76 × 52 cm



Untitled (Family Tree), 1991
 Pen, photos, and stickers on paper
 42.5 × 27.3 cm





Untitled, 1974
 Mirror mosaic, glass, reverse-glass painting, and plaster on wood
 64.8 × 76.2 × 7.6 cm

LIST

OF

WORKS

* Works exhibited only at Moderna Museet and Kunstmuseum Den Haag

** Work exhibited only at Moderna Museet and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

p. 61
Untitled, 1976
Spray paint, print, and stainless steel on five layers of plexiglass framed in stainless steel
87 × 87.4 × 13 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 62
Untitled, 2003
Ink on paper
68.5 × 50.5 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 63
Untitled, 2003
Ink on paper
63 × 48 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 64
Mirror Ball, 1974
Mirror, oil painting behind glass, and plaster sphere
19 × 19 × 19 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 65 (top)
Mirror Ball 03, 2012
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster on wood
22.9 × 22.9 × 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 65 (middle)
Mirror Ball, 1974
Mirror, oil painting behind glass, and plaster sphere
23 × 23 × 23 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 65 (bottom)
Mirror Ball, 2010
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster on wood
24.1 × 24.1 × 24.1 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 66 (left)
Third Family: Triangle, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
110 × 121 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 66 (middle)
Third Family: Square, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
100 × 100 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 66 (right)
Third Family: Pentagon, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
130 × 142.5 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 67 (left)
Third Family: Hexagon, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
122 × 122 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 67 (middle)
Third Family: Heptagon, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
115 × 121 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 67 (right)
Third Family: Octagon, 2011
Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster
111 × 111 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York

p. 68
My Family, Collage (CG21), 1983
Mixed media
76 × 52 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 69
A Miniature, Rendition, Collage (CG22), 1983
Mixed media
76 × 52 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 71
Untitled (Family Tree), 1991
Pen, photos, and stickers on paper
42.5 × 27.3 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 72
Collage (CG12), 1981
Mixed media
30 × 22.5 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 73
Collage (CG1), 1981
Mixed media collage
30 × 22.5 cm
Courtesy of the Family of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

p. 75
CG8, 1982*
Mixed media collage
136 × 136 × 4 cm
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

p. 77
Collage (CG16 B), 1981
Mixed media
23.5 × 31 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and NORR COHAN, New York



This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition

MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMAIAN

Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 3 October 2026–28 February 2027
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 13 April–30 August 2027
Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague, 2 October 2027–27 February 2028

Exhibition

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Graphic design:
Sarah Martinon

Typesetting:
Jef Cuypers

Picture editor:
Emma Whelan

Print:
Printer Trento
Italy

Publisher:
Gautier Platteau

Of this edition:
© 2026, Hannibal Books,
Moderna Museet, Museo Reina Sofia,
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Of the works:
© 2026, Monir Shahrudy
Farmanfarmaian

Other artists:
© 2026, Mohammad Ehsaei (p. 53, right);
Choreh Feyzjdjou (p. 55); Parastou Forouhar
(p. 55); Leyla Fakhr and Bahman Kiarostami
(p. 57); Parviz Tanavoli, p. 53 (left)

English edition:
Hannibal Books
ISBN 978 94 9353 123 9
D/2026/11922/73
NUR 642

Museo Reina Sofia
ISBN 978-84-8026-687-1
NIPO 194-26-016-6
D.L. M-17426-2026

Dutch edition:
Kunstmuseum Den Haag
Hannibal Books
ISBN 978 94 9353 126 0
D/2026/11922/60
NUR 642

Spanish edition:
Hannibal Books
ISBN 978 94 9353 125 3
D/2026/11922/59
NUR 642

Museo Reina Sofia
ISBN 978-84-8026-686-4
NIPO 194-26-015-0
D.L. M-17425-2026

Swedish edition:
Hannibal Books
ISBN 978 94 9353 124 6
D/2026/11922/58
NUR 642

Moderna Museet
ISBN 978-91-988135-3-1
Moderna Museet exhibition
catalogue no. 436

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Cover:
Untitled, 1974 (detail).

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The Metropolitan Museum

NORR COHAN Gallery, New York

Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

The Third Line, Dubai

Vaser Collection, Stockholm

Thanks also to those who prefer to remain anonymous.

Opposite: *Untitled*, 2016 (detail). Payal and Anurag Khanna Collection, India.

pp. 222–223: Detail of the panel designed by the artist for the InterContinental (Laleh) Hotel in Tehran, 1975.

