

Covered the Fingernails with Petals of Dahlia

Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian

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This is the story of a book that is not a book. Rather, a book that has ceased to live as a book, relinquishing its initial meaning to the conquering folds of a new work, which, in turn, spins a complex web of alternative meanings. If the original book told the tale of a journey—the historic journey of Barack Obama from law student to president of the United States—the artwork it has become tells the tale of our times, when globalized standards and hollow, repetitive imagery are the backdrop to journeys that, like time itself, are ceaselessly interrupted.

The book is at the fulcrum of the three views of Dubai-based Iranian artists Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian, and yet the resulting work seems to be the product of a sole hand. Testament to the singular collaborative method the trio has honed throughout their practice, *Covered the Fingernails with Petals of Dahlia* sits neatly within the legacy of their artistic production, while distinguishing itself as a new and somewhat unfamiliar aesthetic. The trio evoke Jean Genet's play *The Maids* (1947) to describe their collaborative dynamics, less in terms of power relations than how the characters fuse into one another: one artist may execute ideas articulated by the others, the three often blurring together, becoming composite.

The collective work began by the artists' tracing every page of the New York Times-published large format book *Obama: The Historic Journey* (2009). This was a process of limiting, of kinetically grasping and rendering each spread. Thus reduced and pinned down, the compositions began to be understood, and new meanings emerged. Silhouettes became somehow iconic: Obama is recognized simply by the contour of an ear, or the tilt of his head. Obama's journey, then, is no longer one of a man, but of a shape.

The 27 drawings displayed in Frieze New York show these traced spreads, which have been collaged with images taken from a wealth of mainstream business magazines sourced, the artists claim, "from everywhere." The onslaught of tropes sprung from globalized corporate visual culture drives home a point made by French philosopher Alain Badiou that standardization has sucked the risk-taking verve out of politicians, reducing them to mere managers. The overwhelming torrent of stock imagery culled from business magazines—comporting the signs and symbols of our dominant ideology, from patriarchy to humanized tech—questions if Obama really leads, or simply manages.

The final step—masking the original book pages with the scanned-printed-collaged tracing paper—brings to the fore a strategy of concealing and revealing. The masking covers the original page, which provides a timid

context for the overlapping swathes of imagery: the overlaid page is occasionally cut out, leaving an original image or scene to nudge into view. Hands and arms abound, bedecked with jewelry, watches and ornaments, as if even appendages have become display cases of wealth. In this post-Fordist world where much labor is virtual, the irony of this abundance of hands is sharp.

Oddly, it is through our hands, as much as with our eyes, that we make sense of *Covered the Fingernails with Petals of Dahlia*. Glossing over pages to feel the lip of the overlap, where the mask begins and the page ends, we are taken back to the artists' initial movements of tracing and delimiting the contours of images. The 27 drawings, too, speak of this process. They are like excerpted moments from the wider sequence, freeze-framed and contemplated—a glimpse of the curtain being lifted on a collaborative creation that remains largely unfathomable, and entirely new.

Kevin Jones