



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

1. Editor's Note
1. What's On in IST
1. Pop(Corn): Refik Anadol
1. Rapport: Istanbul
1. Independent Spaces in Istanbul: Sarp Özer on Operating AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are Witnessing History”: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam



“We Are Witnessing History”: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian On Their Retrospective Exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery

By Sophie Arni

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Ramin Haerizadeh (b.1975, Tehran), Rokni Haerizadeh (b.1978, Tehran) and Hesam Rahmanian (b.1980, Knoxville), known colloquially as RRH, together form an artist collective whose practices reflect on their home country of Iran and the multicultural nature of the UAE, a country they have called home for the past thirteen



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Su**
mmer 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

years. Dealing with the now and the living, their multimedia installations feel like landscapes – fluid, always in motion, with no beginning and no end, reflecting the collaborative nature of their work.

The following interview was conducted in Dubai following the opening of RRH’s retrospective exhibition at **NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery**, the first institutional exhibition of the artists’ works in the UAE. Almost a decade after their solo exhibition at Isabelle van den Eynde gallery in Dubai, *I Put It There, You Name It* (2012), this new exhibition is titled *Parthenogenesis*, a scientific term which can be understood as a beginning that has no cause. This retrospective is indeed an immersive all-in-one experience, a sensory exhibition for viewers to discover their works in-situ, grounded by a specially commissioned *O, You People* (2021-22) floor painting.

The exhibition catalogue mentioned the process of “mimesis” inherent RRH’s works. While anthropologist Michael Taussig introduced mimesis in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* as a process ‘othering’ and receiving, the artists define mimesis as reproducing, replicating, and transforming. I was taken aback by the poetic ways the artists transformed stories of displacements into baroque images of migration. Video documentation of their



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Su**
mmer 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

stunningly colorful villa bled into the massive floor painting and into the ceramic works displayed in the air, amounting to a mimetic cacophony of colors, textures, and lived-in political realities. I had the pleasure to sit down with the three artists and ask them about their collaborative artistic processes.

Top image: Installation view of *Parthenogenesis*: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian at The NYUAD Art Gallery. Work on view, with the participation of Mohammed Rahis Mollah in collaboration with Kiori Kawai: *Replication of Alluvium, Molecule Structure B* (Bemari), 2022. Photo: John Varghese. Courtesy of NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery.

Sophie Mayuko Arni: Thank you for this interview, I'm looking forward to knowing more about your respective careers and collaborative practice. First off, could you tell us about the start of your artistic practices, from Iran to the UAE?

Hesam Rahmanian: We grew up around the period of the Iran-Iraq war. After the Iranian Revolution, Iran went through a Cultural Revolution from 1980 to 1982. All cultural output needed to be aligned with the Islamic Republic ideology. As a result, many teachers, professors, and students left the school system. An ecosystem of self-taught underground courses started to emerge, and we were part of the generation that studied in those underground classes brought to existence



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer** 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

by those who experienced the Cultural Revolution. While the Islamic Republic mostly had control over public spaces, these underground courses were our safe havens. You had to find your own oasis to go to. We were amongst writers, philosophers, art historians, dancers, and artists.

I met Ramin and Rokni in the early 90s, and stayed friends. We would be pursuing our collective activities together in Iran already. When we came to the United Arab Emirates in 2009, it felt like a natural progression to think about living and working together as a common project.

Rokni Haerizadeh: The way we grew up meant that you had to find your underground communities in private spaces. If you had a question, you had to find the right channel, enter the right communities, find the right person, in order to receive your answer. It was truly like designing our own university.

During the war, an ongoing practice of collectiveness and togetherness was fostered. People were in bunkers and shelters for 48 hours at a time, or they would spend at least a few hours together, until they knew things were safe on the surface and come back up. This was the seed of our approach to art and our artistic practice.



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

S.A.: In Dubai, you have been actively practicing out of your stunning villa/studio space. A defining moment of your exhibition currently on view at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is the immersive experience of seeing your villa recorded by prominent figures and artists of the UAE scene – including Farah Al Qasimi and Lamyia Gargash. Their photographs offer a glimpse for audiences to see the collaborativeness of your practice, and imagine your work *in-situ*. Thinking of the lineage of UAE artists who have turned residential villas into artist studios, one can trace this practice back to Hassan Sharif. Could you tell us more about this choice, and the process of working from home?

R.H.: In Iran, we dedicated our family home to hosting artists friends, sculptors, musicians. We would program activities and work on projects collaboratively.

When we came to the UAE, we wanted to keep this feeling of togetherness. There was a clear difference between our practice in Tehran and Dubai however. When we came here, we wondered how this togetherness would evolve, as it was not based on wartime needs anymore. How can cohabitation sustain itself without depending on a need?



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E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer** 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

H.R.: The whole concept of fusing where you live and work has some echoes with the works we are showing in this exhibition. We like to think about the spectrum of public and private space, and think of blending the two as our home acts as a studio, and often a gathering space.

When we came to Dubai, we decided to redefine what “home” could mean. We started this process out of necessity perhaps. We were new in a city, and didn't know much about the surrounding culture. It is as if we put ourselves in a capsule, from which we could define the meaning of home and take inspiration from the city. Our home is like a cell, in contact with the outside veneer. In Iran, when artists built independent spaces, there was always tremendous activity happening inside, but also a constant relationship with the outside world. Similarly, in the UAE, you can think of the Flying House and Hassan Sharif.

You have to remember that this region does not have infrastructure built for artists like in the West. You need to rely on yourself, to have your own community, or



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independen
t Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Su
mmer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

your own cell. By observing these structures in Iran and the UAE, we discovered it’s always important to bring something from the outside in - like a functioning cell, defined by its outer membrane. You have a membrane, that acts like a limit, and allows privacy from the inside and a division with the outside world. But the two worlds are always in dialogue.

The works on view in this exhibition, just like our villa, are some sort of landscapes for us. We strive to build new relationships between objects and thoughts. We like to think that everything is in a stage of constant growth.

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R.H.: We actually refuse to use term “installation” to define our exhibitions, we want to showcase the living processes and intersecting relationships of creating art – which the term “landscape” encapsulates. The definition of landscape is that it has no beginning and no end. The exhibition at



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is also a landscape. You can start at any point of the exhibition and enjoy it.

The exhibition at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is also a landscape. You can start at any point of the exhibition and enjoy it.

S.A.: Zooming into your exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, entitled *Parthogenesis*, could you tell us what this institutional retrospective exhibition means to you, especially in the context of the UAE art scene?

R.H.: This exhibition at NYUAD is our first academic, institutional show here in the UAE. We have had similar solo exhibitions internationally, but it means a great deal to us to showcase our work in this context.

Compared to the West, there were less distractions to deal with in the conceptualization of the exhibitions. NYUAD is here in the UAE, the curatorial team is familiar with the culture. As artists, we didn't have to go through extra layers of explanations or introductions about this region. Everything was already clear.

S.A.: Could you tell us more about the



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

***Alluvium* series of mixed-media plates?**
The concept of mimesis is at the core of the making and the substance of the work. The anthropologist Michael Taussig is often quoted in your exhibition catalogue. I remember reading a beautiful line in his *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*: “the capacity to mime is the capacity to Other.” I think ceramic plates are especially well-suited for the process of mimesis, when thinking back about the history of export porcelain from Jingdezhen or Delftware, in constant imitation processes between Chinese and Dutch designs and symbols for example.

R.H.: I like this idea, we are truly highlighting a constant imitation dialogue. The *Alluvium* series plate sculptures started out from seeds planted in 2014. As I explained earlier, we are in constant dialogue with the outside world. When we were working on the *Alluvium* plates, we are casting our time, witnessing history and trying to reimagine our time.

H.R.: When something is happening in the world, whether in its art world or the scientific world, we take it as subject matter and place multiple perspectives on it, mapping that situation as a materialization of thoughts and perspectives. When a collage is drawn on



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Su**
mmer 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

a plate, the other one gets executed on a painting for example.

Like Rokni said, we are in the process of witnessing history. Our work is about historical witnessing, with images that are documented and collected from the media over time. We work together in a Field of Negotiation: either as a trio or with other collaborators, we draw different positions, and allow for multiple angles of thoughts into one surface in order to debate. Sometimes, one would give an idea and the other two or three would execute. Other times, others work on an idea and all members of the group take part in the execution. This generative field has become the core of our practice.

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R.H.: The dance element came in early in the process for example. When we started to work on the *Alluvium* series, we thought of the constant dance we operate in as artists practicing in the UAE. When we had



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

encounters with people such as carpenters or welders, we have no common language at first. So we decided to take that language barrier as a strategy for object-making. We make objects not based on language, but based on dance. We explain the object using hand gestures for example, like a dance.

H.R.: We made these *Alluvium* molecular structures with welder Rahis Mollah. Then, we asked ourselves if what would happen if we would invite a professional dancer. We asked Maya [Allison, NYUAD Art Gallery Chief Curator] who introduced us to Kiori Kawai. She choreographed a dance based on the sculpture, also considering the subject matters on the plates. We watched the dance with Rahis Mollah, and reached a new *Alluvium* sculpture based on Kiori's performance. Again, we highlight the process of imitating, not necessarily copying. Dance, especially folk dance, is in constant process of imitation. You can never fully replicate the dance, it will always be a little bit different. But the process of mimesis is an open invitation for collaborative process. We invite others, and sometimes they take the lead.

S.A.: Do you have any advice for upcoming artist trios or art collectives? Art collectives seem rare with the younger generation of UAE artists -



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Su**
mmer 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

curator collectives or art criticism collectives are plentiful, but artists tend to stick to their own practice, only perhaps coming together to share a studio space but still sticking to their own practice.

R.H.: Our strength comes from our first attempts at being a collective in Iran. For us, coming together was based on generosity, not based on need. Each one of us came together, cooked together, helped each other while keeping our individual practices. We contributed from the individual practices into the collective. When we are working on a painting for example, we never delete anything, we always try to work around the idea that the other person has put forward.

Perhaps the moments when somebody claims total authorship and ownership of ideas is linked with ego. A lot of art surrounds the concept of ego, and heroic acts. For us, being together is enough. When we sit down with writers and people from different walks of life, we rebuilt a new kind of relationship with collaboration. I think we need to redefine the terms “art” and “artist” for the 21st century. With our new bonds with nature, we need a new definition.

S.A.: Let’s end with a couple of fire-drill questions, if you don’t mind. Favorite



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor's
Note
What's On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer** 2022
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

city?

Ramin Haerizadeh: One of my favorite cities is Abu Dhabi. It's comfortable. The water, the islands, and the architecture all give a sense of balance and peace. It's a city that gives me hope, as it's putting forth a strong investment into culture. It is precious to see a city that sees the future in cultural developments.

R.H.: We also always wanted to visit Tokyo, or Shanghai.

S.A.: The UAE in one word?

Rokni: Nobility. The UAE carries nobility in the way it represents the worlds' cultures.

Ramin: Poetic. I think the UAE is a poetic country. During the summer months especially, you have pure moments of poetry with long shadows and extreme heat.

Hesam: For us, the UAE was a bridge. We met people from different cultures, and our practice started to carry an international component as a result of that.

S.A.: Finally, you are about to open an exhibition with OGR Torino during the Venice Biennale. Could you tell us more about it?



E-Issue 04
—**IST** Spring
2022

Editor’s
Note
What’s On
in IST
Pop(Corn):
Refik
Anadol
Rapport:
Istanbul
Independent
Spaces in
Istanbul:
Sarp Özer
on
Operating
AVTO



E-04++ **Spring/Summer 2022**
DXB “We Are
Witnessing
History”: Ramin
Haerizadeh,
Rokni Haerizadeh
and Hesam

H.R.: We are showing the same molecular structure, *Alluvium*, in Venice. The exhibition opened on April 20th, and we are continuing to explore dance as another language.

Parthenogenesis: Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian is open from March 1 - June 12, 2022 at NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, and admission is free of charge.

Visit the [NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery](#).

Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian are known for their immersive, surreal projects, performances, paintings, and animations. Originally from Iran, the artist trio formed their collaborative practice as early as 1999 in Tehran, and it continued to flourish in the UAE where the artists have been residing in self-imposed exile since 2009. The artists work individually and collectively and often incorporate friends and people from different walks of life into their practice. They often refer to their work as a landscape, where the complex nature of processing integrates in a nested system that forms the landscape of their shoes.

The artists have existed extensively around the world, including important solo exhibitions at The Schirn Kunsthalle (Frankfurt, 2020); the Frye Art Museum (Seattle, 2019); Officine Grandi Riparazioni (OGR) (Turin, 2018); the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) (2017); the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) (Boston, 2015); Kunsthall Zürich (2015); and Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art (Copenhagen, 2015). In 2022, along with their presentation at the NYU Abu Dhabi

[← Previous](#) [Next →](#)