



# When the end is the beginning

**Maryam Hoseini**  
speaks to Katrina  
Kufer about learning  
from the past to  
address the future, and  
the shifting definition  
of 'ruins' in a practice  
that intentionally  
remains open-ended

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Cerulean, dulled aqua, ochre and lavender grays jump out at the viewer when gazing upon the misleadingly flat figurative painting-drawings of New York-based Iranian artist Maryam Hoseini. An equally deceptive digital 80s graphicness belies the sensitivity of pencil markings within the acrylic, ink and pencil works on wood panel. "I continually revisit the surface of my paintings with pencil drawings to refuse the logic of drawing as primary or secondary," says Hoseini. "I am interested in pushing the boundaries between finished and unfinished." It is those very pencil marks lend the works a distinctly 'unfinished' quality, and much of Hoseini's practice revolves around the concept of incompleteness, musing, "What *is* finished or unfinished in painting or drawing?"

Hoseini's *oeuvre* simultaneously derives from and functions as a point of departure from which closed conversations are opened and remain in continued flux. "I think a lot about incompleteness as a state of being," she says. "On a formal level in painting or drawing there is always that question, but conceptually, this incompleteness of the human condition makes me think of ruins." Touching on topics from socio-politics and Google image searches to her use of colour, it seems Hoseini mentally meanders around topics that never really result in an "end" to the conversation, rather, leaving traces behind which she archives for later use. "Being from the Middle East, when you speak of ruins it automatically is connected to archaeology or architecture, and while that is a part of it, it's also how history changes people and creates ruins within their lives and spirits." By learning from the past to address the future, Hoseini endeavours to create a new space in which to rebuild these ruins collectively. "I'm making a new social space—physical or image-based. I want to make a new space for interactions."

But what does Hoseini mean by making a new social space, and what are these histories she debates? Referencing her relocation

from her home in Tehran to the US for her dual Masters programmes at Bard College and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Hoseini describes the politics of push-and-pull environments, memories and experiences that cause fractured senses of being. "It makes a new trauma," she says. There are also pieces left behind of her Persian heritage, of which she laments little historically remains, but reappears in her interpretation of Persian Miniature technique, or nod to Islamic tile work and historical artefacts that inform her hues. Then there is the social gender division common in the Arab world. "Interactions and bodily interactions put my focus on gender, which has a different reading depending on context," she explains. "I talk about same gender intimacy through governmental constructions and conventions. Stories, experiences and lives are shared through this enforced collective political and social space and no one questions it." But Hoseini doesn't lean on her history as a justification, rather, uses it as a launch platform. The diagrammatic contorted, simplified figures in Hoseini's works interact with each other in tandem with her recollections of pool parties and female family gatherings. But while her figures are entwined and can, from a certain angle, read as sexually intimate, Hoseini remarks that they stem from an environment that incorporates touching without questions of sexu-



Facing page: Installation view of *Women with long tails I & II*, 2018. Right: *Sequences of Women With Long Tails (4)*, 2018. Acrylic, ink and pencil on wood panel. 60.96x50.8cm.



Left: *Body Armor*. Installation view at MoMA PS1, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery. JSP Photography  
 Below: *Sequences of Women With Long Tails (3)*. 2018. Acrylic, ink and pencil on wood panel. 60.96x50.8cm  
 Facing page: *Princess and Princess in the Garden (Chapter 4)*. 2018. Acrylic, ink and pencil on wood panel. 60.96x45.7cm.

“I’M MAKING A NEW SOCIAL SPACE—PHYSICAL OR IMAGE-BASED. I WANT TO MAKE A NEW SPACE FOR INTERACTIONS”

ality. These series of embodied fractures are concrete explanations of her influences, but are simultaneously a starting point for her drive to create a new, socio-politically ambiguous collective space—a desire which came by chance.

“At one point I was struggling with different approaches to architecture—having out of control elements in my work trying out moods and approaches to painting, but the works from my *Of Strangers and Parrots* (2017) exhibition made something click in my mind,” she reveals. By extending the geometric forms from the edges of her paintings beyond the frame and onto the walls, Hoseini permitted her pieces to be read more in relation to the space and a complete body of works, rather than as a singular frame: “It opened up a new space of thinking connecting painting to the architecture of the space, relating it to the context in which it is displayed.” Already focused on the body and how it is affected inside and out by historical and political moments, the architectural approach sparked Hoseini’s method of rebuilding form and spirit, rather than just representing it. “Painting on the walls elevated the works from the floor up. It was so bodily, as though paintings were the heads and the paint on the walls were like wrapped bodies,” she says. “It made a collective space that holds these standing bodies, and it made me less interested in the individual. I like to address them as a group, with context, where the viewer is a participant.” Hoseini found a phenomenological strategy that saw the subjects within her works in collective space, in turn mirrored by a larger collective space activated by the viewers in front of them.

Hoseini’s choices and results are driven by instinct, whether using colour as an expression of feeling rather than a symbol, or the abstract surfacing of latent objects seen in museums or laptop screens. The solutions and answers may be held within the formal and conceptual layers of Hoseini’s paintings, thus bringing the conversations to a close with those collective social spaces in play, but really, it’s just beginning. ■



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