

Systema Naturae

Anahita Norouzi

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Uncanny Blooms

With a multidisciplinary practice anchored in her lived experience, Anahita Norouzi examines displacement, longing to homelands left behind, and alienation within new, often hostile, environments. But she does so through a proxy—the migrations of plant species—revealing how botanical explorations and scientific research have been entangled in the exploitation of non-Western geographies. By scrutinizing the disastrous legacies of colonialism globally, and especially in Southwest Asia (or the “Middle East”), the artist sheds light on the ways in which hegemonic powers have impacted humans and other species alike, altering entire cultural traditions, demographics, and ecologies.

In her new exhibition *Systema Naturae*, Norouzi focuses on irises. With a distinctive six-lobed flower, typically rising on long stems, the perennial iris plant is familiar throughout the world's temperate zones. Some varieties are native to Persia, a source of national pride in Iran, Norouzi's ancestral homeland—her project was instigated by official stamps celebrating four iris species. Widely cultivated in domestic and botanical gardens, both pure and hybrid breeds are prized by

horticulturalists worldwide, where the flower evokes a variety of symbolic associations. But Norouzi is primarily interested in the geopolitics encapsulated in, or perhaps eluded by, depictions of this species.

The work *Palimpsest of Unseen Pasts* (2022) consists of six prints on fabric, the size of which creates an anthropomorphic connection to the viewer's body. Using images of pressed Persian iris specimens held at Western herbariums, Norouzi digitally intervened to remove all the superimposed information, such as labels with taxonomic classifications, leaving only the anatomical contours of the plant. To further distance the iris from external assessments and motives, she created anotypes of the modified images, with a natural dye made from saffron—a precious spice derived from a plant synonymous with Iran, and from the same *Iridaceae* family. By embroidering colour swatches into each sheet, she also reintroduced the original polychromatic palette of the different species. But generating an uncontaminated form of the plant's image, in order to reclaim its representations, was not the only act of resistance: on top of the ghostly yellow prints, Norouzi replaced scientific projections with archival findings, adding a translucent fabric layer that carries evidence of Western interventions in each province where these species originated—a meddling that has forever changed the course of history in Iran, and many other countries.

The artist collides private recollections with external representations of her community, botanical framings of native iris flowers and the ways in which her country has been transfigured, through planning or extraction for example, by foreign powers. These juxtapositions feature in another work, *What It Is in a Name* (2022), where iris mutants—imagined by the artist, and assembled from a variety of species—are cast in black glass resembling congealed petroleum. The flowers stand on a wooden base, with ornate

labels conjuring the aesthetics of cabinets of curiosity, and carrying names that recall the wrath of empire. Against the breathtaking beauty of these fragile forms, Norouzi conjures the ugly truth of the world's insatiable appetite for fossil fuels, and how Iran's oil wealth has been both a blessing and a curse for its people (which she further interrogates in other works like *Drifting in the In-Between*). The exoticizing Orientalist gaze is conflated here with extractive industries, the race to control natural resources, and the ensuing spectacle of violence that often conceals the repercussions of reckless Western politics on the region's populations.

Colonialism, past and present, also harms immigrants and asylum seekers in the lands where they take refuge. *Policies of Belonging* (2022), a multi-channel video and digital installation, features four irises of different shades, from pale to a deep purple, blossoming slowly. Based on studies on the correlation between skin colour and the speed with which newcomers might become naturalized in North America—the darker the skin, the longer the process—the work speaks to systemic discrimination directed toward the displaced. While the paler irises bloom quickly, the darker ones take their time, growing so slowly that their development becomes almost imperceptible, even irrelevant. Once the lightest iris is at its full glory, the timers stop counting, in a commentary on how racialized immigrants get marginalized, and further alienated from new settings where their belonging is often conditional.

The word "iris" derives from the Greek original, denoting a rainbow, which is indicative of the wide range of colours for which this flower is renowned. But in Norouzi's work, one can reflect on how "iris" also designates the ring around the eye's pupil, controlling the amount of light—thus vision, or visibility—that we process. Irises are not just coloured differently, usually relevant to a person's skin colour, but they are apertures that determine how we see the world.

Norouzi's work evokes how our affinities, as well as blind spots, can be elucidated by paying closer attention to our optics, and the ways in which we view "others" might be constructed. Indeed, Norouzi, through the iris flower, hints at how constructions of modern subjectivity, including perceptions of alterity, translate into xenophobia and racism, which are integral to the experience of racialized immigrants in the West.

Norouzi also underlines, by probing the complexities and contradictions of mass movements, how the dynamics established during the modern period—the imperial adventures, and devastating Western interventions in other parts of the world—continue to haunt our lives today. Her work equally highlights how the global demand for energy, which regularly leads to catastrophic military campaigns or support of tyrannical regimes, creates unlivable conditions in the non-West, misery and dispossession, and subsequent displacement. And when people, and plant species, are uprooted and dislocated, invaluable local knowledge tends to be lost—or manipulated toward even more extraction from vulnerable communities and lands.

By making the familiar uncanny, Norouzi invites us to revisit narratives we take for granted. Jarring truths bloom within her work, in sharp contrast to the universal allure of the iris flowers, which she renders so meticulously, uncovering how colonialism is inextricably linked with the world's current reality, though often hiding in plain sight.

— Amin Alsaden