

**OPEN WATERS**  
MURTAZA VALI

Serendipity is the heart of Laleh Khorramian's art. Her laborious process begins with monotypes, made by applying oil paint onto a non-absorptive surface, usually glass, from which a unique paper print is made. While Khorramian has acquired a certain skill over the years, the results remain largely unpredictable; the paint's viscosity, the thickness with which it is painted on the glass, the kind of pressure applied and the duration before the print is peeled away all affect the final outcome. The results are densely textured and mottled surfaces filled with fractals, rivulets, gaps, and smears, abstractions with limitless signifying potential.

Surrealism embraced automatism and chance processes as necessary strategies for circumventing the strictures of conscious thought and intention, thereby allowing access to the subconscious. As fields of randomly generated patterns, Khorramian's monotypes function like giant Rorschach tests, with the artist as both psychoanalyst and analysand, working in tandem to extract meanings embedded in the accidental. Given Khorramian's preference for a murky, almost geological palette, the monotypes often resemble craggy, waterlogged, subterranean landscapes. This choice is not entirely arbitrary; the cave is, of course, a perfect metaphor for the buried recesses of the subconscious.

Like a speleologist, Khorramian mines the results, identifying and sampling small, suggestive passages of paint that might be reworked into collages or drawings, or serve as settings for stop motion films. Though Khorramian animates digitally, the jerkiness of her preferred animation technique ensures a low tech, retro feel that recalls the mechanical past of film, the division of continuous time into a series of sequential single frame images, twenty-four per second.<sup>i</sup> In these short films, Khorramian zooms into and pans through these minute landscapes, animating and manipulating figures and details to tell tales. Rich, unexpected macrocosms emerge from the microscopic details: fantastic landscapes of meandering rivulets, forests of bare trees, soft undulating mounds that resemble both waves and dunes, terrain that is epic and delicate, prehistoric and futuristic, primordial and lunar. The process of magnification distorts conventions of scale, unsettling our regular modes of perception and extending the threshold of imagination beneath and beyond the commonly visible.

The monotypes are a boundless resource and this infinitude influences Khorramian's overall process. Open-ended and recursive, her works remain ever in process deferring their status as finished. Past monotypes and drawings are reworked and reused, their new contexts creating new meanings and vice versa.

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Growing up in Orlando, Florida, Khorramian worked at MGM Studios (a part of Walt Disney World) crafting props for the theme park's many hyperreal attractions. For Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, postmodernist theorists of the hyperreal, Disneyland was the epitome of this particularly American phenomenon, an aggregation of perfect but wholly artificial bits of Americana, realer than the realities they represented.<sup>ii</sup> Pervading society, the hyperreal was the terminal symptom of capitalist alienation, a side effect of America's unrelenting pursuit of scientific and technological progress and rise to global dominance. In a hyperreal world, reality withdraws and everything becomes simulacra,

copies without originals. Khorramian's "travels in hyperreality" left her skeptical of this displaced status of the real in American culture and her artistic practice strives to deconstruct its strategies and reverse its effects. While Khorramian also stages her stories in fabricated worlds extracted from images, her films venture beyond veneers of reality and consciousness into the subconscious, seeking out the potential of fiction and poetry, of imagination and perversion, to access the withdrawn textures of human experience and history.

All stories (histories included) are journeys; they transport us to realms beyond ourselves. And most stories recount journeys of one sort or another. With a clear beginning and end, conventional narrative structures make the path of a particular journey seem inevitable, their compulsive logic propelling the protagonist hero from the former to the latter, its sheer force holding and directing our attention. The preferred structure is linear and teleological.

The protagonists of Khorramian's animations, mostly female and often pregnant, also journey, but her films explore the affective potential of alternative narrative structures, opening them up to the intuitive and absurd. And like her working process, start and finish remain unclear; the end is endlessly deferred, as each element remains always mutable and reusable. Non-linear in structure, her films follow Jean-Luc Godard's famous provocation that "a film should have a beginning, a middle, and an end but not necessarily in that order." Privileging disjuncture over continuity and fragmentation over cohesion, Khorramian's films unfold into poetic and emotional registers, clearing space within the narrative structure to register sensation and affect. Time does not structure journey, but rather, journey shapes the experience of time; time is felt and lived, unpredictable and recursive, calibrated by and to the body and its perceptions and emotions. The theme park thrill ride provides a useful model for Khorramian's distinct mode of narrative: though its path is fixed and anticipated, the stomach dropping plunges and bone rattling jolts always get the heart pumping and pulse racing. Similarly, in Khorramian's animations, shifting sensations trump the coherence of fixed trajectory; the tempo and texture of image and sound shift suddenly, abrupt silences and discordances interrupt the flow, and frames of retina searing orange jolt us into pure subjectivity.

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*In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.*

-Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"<sup>iii</sup>

Khorramian's interests are nothing if not epic; her latest film *Water Panics in the Sea* (2011) is the fourth in a cycle of animations inspired by the five elements of Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Ether. Much of the impact of her art stems from the incommensurability of such epic subject matter with the intimate scale and humble means she deploys. The film recounts a sea voyage. Its opening shot is romantic and melancholic, and typical of the genre: the sublime view of a distant horizon and vast ocean, seen from the deck of a ship rising and falling with the waves, captures the timeless thrill and awe of the open seas. Yet the film's title appears to cast the element water as its individualized

protagonist, at odds with the very body it constitutes. This subtle linguistic play suggests other readings: a meditation on water as vital natural resource, made scarcer by the deleterious effects of global warming, or an allegory of the human condition, increasingly estranged from the bonds of collectivity.

Khorramian's animations often unfold within the sorts of scrambled space-time configurations that Michel Foucault termed heterotopias, spaces that exist outside the conventions of time, space and history, where microcosm and macrocosm, particular and universal and virtual and real, overlap and blur. For Foucault, the ship is the exemplary heterotopia, "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea."<sup>iv</sup> Khorramian captures this overlapping interiority and exteriority, a sort of circumscribed boundlessness, in her vision of the ship. Its surface-skin consists of planks of independently moving strips of drawings, many of heads; Khorramian reanimates these salvaged scraps of past work into a living sheath of humanity that encloses a heaving body-machine. Its interior, a moving collage of organic forms, extracted from monotypes, resembles a rib cage, with a throbbing heart-piston at its core; the ship is a living organism, both industrious engine and sexual machine.

Foucault identifies the ship as a powerful catalyst for both the imagination and the economic development of Europe since the sixteenth century. He hints at the role of advanced naval technology in Europe's colonial expansion, its superior fleets facilitating the plunder and trade of valuable natural resources. One such resource was labor and in Khorramian's uncannily historical film, the ship could be a slave ship. Constructed from a multitude of human images the ship's form evokes the historical plans of slave ships, where black stick figures are schematically represented in long, neat rows, completely filling in the torpedo-like outline of a ship. In the film, shots of the shoreline show similar silhouetted figures hunched over, engaged in hard labor, or trudging back and forth in columns. At other points, entangled masses of human figures carved out of orange peels—the unlikely protagonists of Khorramian's *I Without End* (2008)—fall across the screen, plunging into the ocean, evoking the unthinkable inhuman, but common, practice of casting slaves overboard into the dark, cold waters. And near the end, a foreboding contraption, perched atop a dark ridge, creaks ominously as it rotates in the wind. Though wholly abstract, collaged from bits of monotypes, one cannot shake the sense that the hanging, fluttering forms are bodies, the "strange fruit" Billie Holliday famously mourned, charred remains strung up by murderous mobs as macabre trophies of racist intolerance.

However, multi-valence is the strength of Khorramian's art. Though figurative and narrative, its accidental, abstract foundations, coupled with the indeterminacy introduced by its open-ended, non-linear structure, keep signification and interpretation fluid. The quick, sketchy, and often smudged drawings that make up the ship's surfaces scroll by at varying speeds, suggesting both ever unfurling ancient codices and the sequential frames of film. Film is a haunted medium; the illusion of continuity of the moving image relies on ghosts, on afterimages that persist on our retinas long after their source has disappeared from view. Shifting and fleeting, the drawn figures are spooks and form a labile, spectral skin, and the ship is a phantasm, incessantly morphing and moving, refusing fixity by transcending specific form and meaning. It is a semiotic empty vessel on a relentless quest for meanings to moor to. And Khorramian's use of simplified

human forms—smudged heads, stick figures, bodies carved from orange peels—enables the film to recount other histories of oppression and exploitation: of indentured laborers working in faraway fields and factories; of mineworkers toiling away in caves and shafts; of refugees and migrants risking their lives in search of better futures; of anyone who has, willingly or not, for better or worse, set out on open waters.

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*Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.*

-T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”<sup>v</sup>

*Water Panics in the Sea* simultaneously references several distinct moments in the long history of maritime travel, without ever being anchored to any one. A sort of time machine flitting back and forth between discreet events, the ship becomes timeless, moored outside the linear flows of time and history; pasts, presents, and even possible futures coalesce in its filmic space.

The protagonists of Khorramian’s films are mythical but not archetypal beings, timeless but not typical. Endlessly reincarnated, they have lived many lives, memories of which are held within but not necessarily accessible. Personal and idiosyncratic, they have always been conduits, distinct but empty shells, filled in and shaped by their surroundings and the viewer’s imagination. Though the protagonist of *Sophie and Goya* (2004) has the appearance of a bounded individual her surface constantly morphs. The body of the eponymous heroine of *Chopperlady* (2005) is fused with her vessel, her figure a negative space carved out within its form. The dual meanings of vessel—a maritime vehicle and a receptacle or carrier, human or inanimate—finally converge in *Water Panics in the Sea*, where a profusion of moving human forms constitute the contours and surfaces of a ship.

Dubbed “Space-Ship Vessels” by the artist, the complex large-scale collages that accompany *Water Panics in the Sea* gesture towards the future, indicating the terrain of Khorramian’s next journey.<sup>vi</sup> In this series Khorramian focused on the outer edges of monotypes and introduced negative “spaces” using paper cutouts. The collages process and combine their sources distinctly from the film; suturing is spatial and time is registered through accumulation. Their forms range from the recognizable shape of a ship—made from strips of drawings, a possible artifact from the making of *Water Panics in the Sea*—to fantastic, futuristic hybrids that draw on studies of deep-sea creatures, whose marvelous, grotesque anatomies not only revolutionized sea-craft design but ignited fantasies of space travel. These vehicle-worlds track Khorramian’s process and transition as she adapts her vessel to the new element. The collages work through the shift from the pelagic to the cosmic, from the tangible fluidity of the ocean to the immaterial void of space, as Khorramian’s vessel crosses the distant horizon of open water into the infinity of deep space.

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<sup>i</sup> Jonathan T. D. Neil, "Laleh Khorramian: I Without End," *Art Review* 25 (September 2008): 138.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1-42, and Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality," in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 1-58.

<sup>iii</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 27.

<sup>iv</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 27.

<sup>v</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1971), 13.

<sup>vi</sup> Laleh Khorramian, Artist's Statement.