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Defying Definition: The Multi-Dimensional Art of HK Zamani

Meher McArthur | March 5, 2013



Day and Night by HK Zamani, 2006-7, diptych, oil on canvas. | Courtesy of the artist and CB1 Gallery.

*Asian Accents: This article is part of an ongoing series that explores the diverse range of artistic influences from Asia in the arts and culture of Southern California.*

An abstract painter who enjoys the solitude of his studio, a mixed-media artist who stretches nylons over coat hangers, a curator who nurtures the careers of emerging artists, and a performance artist who destroys the works of his fellow artists. This is not a list of applicants for an NEA grant or panelists at an LA Art Show event. They are all **HK Zamani**, an Iranian-American artist and curator based in Los Angeles, who has channeled his abundant artistic creativity in so many directions and dimensions that his work defies definition. By pushing himself and his art beyond traditional boundaries and inviting others to join him in his experimentation, Zamani has over the last two decades challenged the Los Angeles art world and beyond to reconsider how it creates, views and values art.

In both his curatorial and artistic endeavors, a compulsion to go beyond the expected and the accepted is what unites Zamani's diverse achievements. At his highly successful alternative art space **PØST** near Skid Row, which he directed and curated from 1995 to 2005 (and again from 2009 to the present), he organized 216 exhibitions ad 154 one-day "kamikaze" exhibition, helping to nourish the careers of many local artists. From its very first exhibition, **PØST** drew the attention and acclaim of the city's art critics and was no ordinary art venue. Zamani (then known as Habib Kheradyyar) allowed artists to curate their own group shows; he held regular \$100 shows making art collecting affordable; he curated two concurrent exhibitions called "Invisible and Empty," for which the two exhibition spaces were left empty -- without art to examine and judge, visitors were forced to examine and judge themselves instead. "When I created **PØST**, I didn't think it would be so visible or successful," he admits. "I was just looking for an excuse to be at my art studio, so decided to show other artists' work in the building too." **PØST** became a mainstay of the L.A. art scene, but its success left him with little time for his own work, so in 2005 he closed the space down. In 2006, to mark a new phase in his career and to acknowledge and honor the creativity of his grandfather Zamani, Habib Kheradyyar renamed himself HK Zamani. He recently re-opened **PØST** (changing the name from **POST** to **PØST**), reserving the site for a series of 31 one-day "kamikaze" exhibitions throughout July, in which artists have a single day to install, celebrate and de-install their show.



Installation view of Erased Exhibition at PØST by HK Zamani, 2009. | Courtesy of the artist and CB1 Gallery.

As both Habib Kheradyyar and HK Zamani, he has displayed innovation and provocation in his own artistic output, qualities he had already manifested as a child in Iran. "When I was seven, my father wanted to encourage my penmanship, so asked me to copy out pages of an abridged Koran and promised me a nickel for each page. I wrote out the pages, but for some reason he wasn't satisfied and wouldn't pay me. I was so angry, I tore up the pages. This was an early instance of rebellion art for me." (It was also his first work of erasure. Later in 2009, Zamani marked the re-opening of **PØST** with an exhibition called "Erased," in which he hung artworks created by fellow artists and, one by one, obliterated their details with white spray paint.)

Zamani's family left Iran in 1971 and moved to Los Angeles. Zamani pursued art at college, gaining an MFA in painting from Claremont Graduate University. His early paintings were rendered in oil, acrylic, tar and wax and featured Persian poems silkscreened on in reverse, mimicking the carelessly reproduced Persian texts he had found in Western books. In the 1990s, driven by a desire to re-invent painting, Zamani developed his fabric and armature paintings, initially shaping metal coat hangers over the canvas into graceful curves and bold lines and then wrapping the whole surface in nylons. As these works grew in size, he employed stainless steel rods and mesh fabric, and let the light became the painter, forming dazzling geometric patterns across the undulating sheen of the fabric.

Not content with merely the aesthetic potential of these sculptural works, Zamani pushed these works further. In 2000, for an installation at the Pierogi Gallery as part of the LA Art Court, he projected life-size photographs of well known art collectors onto the surface of several large fabric and armature paintings. In a similar work, he projected art dealers. When the projectors were turned off, the collectors and dealers disappeared, abandoning the art and leaving behind painful questions about the marketing and patronage of art.



"Impasse/In the Veil" by HK Zamani.

In many of the video and performances pieces that have taken him around the world, from Prague to Vietnam, Zamani has further explored fabric, translucency and questions of identity and value. In his provocative video work, "Impasse/In the Veil," made just one month after 9-11, the camera moves through billowing folds of red silk toward a distant shadow, which is revealed to be a fully veiled Moslem woman standing against a wall. We are viewing her from two simultaneous vantage points, from inside and outside at the veil. Here, Zamani implies the United States' growing fear of the unknown. He also uses it to critique of patriarchy -- the veiled figure is in fact Zamani himself. In a related work, Zamani again wears a full red burqa and a blue unitard and plays the "Star Spangled Banner" on an electric guitar á la Jimi Hendrix.

Zamani's veils soon expanded to cover entire rooms. From 2003, he began to create structures and drape them with cloth, most notably the geodesic dome, a form made iconic by Buckminster Fuller. In an examination of the transparency of space and the barriers presented by materials, he constructed domes large and small with frames of steel, wood and plastic, stretching diverse fabrics over the frame and then ultimately removing the cover and "disrobing" them. In painting, he studied the form painstakingly, similarly constructing and deconstructing it numerous ways on a flat surface. He went on to create a video piece in which the dome was animated, suggesting it could fly.

The dome form has a more subtle presence in a new body of abstract paintings that have occupied much of Zamani's energy for the last couple of years. These understated works with their strong outlines, sunny color palette and iconic forms suggest a magical, dreamlike landscape. The most intimate and soft-spoken of all his artistic explorations, these paintings challenge us to join Zamani on yet another journey. They invite us to leave behind our overly stimulated, overly complicated lives and join him in a meditative world of calm.



Untitled 10 by HK Zamani, 2011, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and CB1 Gallery., by [zmontano](#)

*HK Zamani's work can be seen at both [www.habibkheradyyar.com](http://www.habibkheradyyar.com) and [www.hkzamani.net](http://www.hkzamani.net). He is represented by [CB1 Gallery](#). He will be presenting a performance with a selection of his video pieces at [Groundspace Project](#) on Saturday March 23*

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Meher McArthur is an independent Asian art historian and is Academic Curator at Scripps College, Claremont. Previously she was Curator of East Asian Art at Pacific Asia Museum (now USC PAM) and now curates exhibitions for Southern California galleries, En Gallery at the Storrier Stearns Japanese Garden in Pasadena, and for the traveling exhibition company International Arts & Artists (IA&A), including *Above the Fold: New Expressions in Origami* (2015-2019) and her upcoming exhibition, *Washi Transformed: New Expressions in Japanese Paper* (from 2021).

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