

The Light Before Dawn: HK Zamani's Performance Works

Twin black shapes stretch, raise, dip, curve, and morph in continual motion in front of a concrete wall. Over the course of a nine-minute clip documenting a live performance of "Inadvertent Protagonists" (2021) by HK Zamani in collaboration with Emma Jürgensen, the shapes remain rooted in place but move with intentional but poetic repetition, as if two shadows independent of bodies seek kinship. Initially, the shapes are mysterious; matte black fabric obscures what lies beneath. Gradually, our eyes perceive evidence to draw the conclusion of these shapes as human, a mound for the head, elongations stretching into narrow tips where arms and fingers lie. Still, the scene remains firmly in the aqueous space between the real and the unreal. Zamani identifies as a painter and yet, to me, his abstract paintings form the conceptual and poetic face to the emotion and urgency of his performance works.

At the same time that I am delving more deeply into the sublime performance works of artist, curator, visionary, human, and friend, HK Zamani, across the world, men and women are falling to their deaths from the wheels of jets departing Afghanistan in a final desperate plea to leave their homeland in the wake of the Taliban retaking the nation. You don't have to be Afghan or Muslim to feel the horror of their choice and plight. Each of these people left behind a life, and work, and love, and favorite meals. Tragedy is both intensely specific and prosaically universal, a balance that is key to the baroque simplicity of Zamani's performance work. He seems to thrive on the collision of intense reality and existential mystery, probing our most pressing needs: love/embodiment, connection/conflict, and life/death in works propelled by surreal prompts and limited props.

Born and raised in Tehran, Zamani attended Islamic schools before immigrating to the United States in 1971 at 13, a pivotal age in the formation of self and identity. The twin pillars of vulnerability of power inherent in this time of life — an awkward intersection of childhood and adolescence — resonate in the double-consciousness of Zamani's performances. Though he is uniquely positioned to create work that comments on and critiques both American and Iranian cultures, and he does so fluently, what stands out profoundly through his performance work is a warm, rich, insistent sense of humanity, a kind of grappling inherent to being alive in a human body, regardless of home or culture.

"Invisible in Visible," 2013, is one of many collaborations with the Czech artist, Tomáš Ruller, with whom Zamani has collaborated since 1989. For this particular performance, and many others, Zamani explained, the two artists were in different countries and planning to perform at the same time with a simulcast, but on the specified day, the technology didn't line up and the performances were fractured in both space and time. The nearly nine-minute documentation video of Zamani's portion of the work begins with an amorphous pool of bright light in an otherwise murkily lit space. Zamani enters clad, as he often is, in all black but now also wearing a black mask that covers his face. The look is briefly jarring but as he walks across the space, pausing in front of the light, and removes the mask, mystery overtakes foreboding. Zamani pulls at a large roll of clear plastic wrap, walking away as he stretches it, moving in slow but deliberate circles back and forth across the space and wrapping his body in clear plastic. The wrap pressed against his form, flattening elbows and bracing arms, until he is gradually and intentionally engulfed in plastic.

As in most of his performances, the movements are clear and specific, but unhurried. The simple metaphor is as obtuse as it is suggestive: our life-giving oceans being destroyed by plastic; our finite existence on this plane; or perhaps, something more mundane, a sandwich lovingly made and wrapped for someone's lunch, later eaten. Once fully covered, Zamani begins to squirm and wriggle, struggling to free himself from the tightly wrapped cocoon.

With a final tug, it falls away. He wipes his brow and gazes momentarily at the camera before walking away. A black-and-white guitar and amp remain in the corner, untouched.

Zamani's mysterious quests are reminiscent of the otherworldly works of Bas Jan Ader while the prosaic but intentional actions owe a debt to early video work of artists, including the iconic Bruce Nauman — crawling through his studio, waking a taped maze — and Dennis Oppenheim — laying in the sun with a book to imprint his skin — and artists whose intensive focus on everyday actions unveiled the absurdity, surreality, and vitality of our lives. But a key influence was Chris Burden, whose audacious and seminal performance works pushed against edges, of comfort, of art, of divisions in East and West, and ignited Zamani's imagination when he was introduced to the work in the early 1980s.

Throughout many of Zamani's performances, bodies merge, or attempt to merge, into and with spaces around them. For the deeply moving "The Entire World is a Narrow Bridge" 2005, Zamani was invited to collaborate with Heidi Duckler Dance Company to design, create, and manage a monumental three-rope bridge covered with pliable golden fabric through which dancers curl and bend and stretch as if reemerging from a world that has swallowed them whole. In "Dotman," 1997, Graz, Austria, the artist is clad only in white briefs as his entire body is covered in tiny colorful stickers, simultaneously obliterating and calling attention to the self as object. In "Certain Traces," 2004, two figures face one another, dressed in white coveralls and black face masks, and fire paint toward one another using what look to be black machine guns producing silhouettes on the wall. As each one is covered in pink, green, and yellow paint, figure and ground begin to merge.

But some of his best-known and most culturally resonant performance works spotlight not movement but rather stillness. In "Fashion of the Veil," 2009, seven performers stand side-by-side on a concrete floor in front of a white wall. Each is covered head to toe in fabric resembling a burka in a bright rainbow of color from turquoise and purple to hot pink and lime green, only their eyes revealed. The two-and-a-half-minute documentation video begins with performers standing against the wall looking at an audience who is not seen but heard in a steady hubbub of background noise. First one, and then all the performers turn around to face the wall where they stand still, a row of colored shapes. After a time, they begin to move. Hands tug and reach and colored cloths are lifted over heads, revealing the individuals beneath. Each hangs the cloth on hooks on the wall and turns back around. The action is seemingly concluded and the audience can be heard clapping. But the performers do not leave, they stand steady, not smiling or showing any expression in particular. The audience quiets. Nervous laughter is heard. The viewers are unsure how to respond to those standing, looking back at them. After a moment, Zamani, in the center, rubs his face and takes a step. The others follow, dispersing, and seven colored cloths remain on the wall.

Zamani created another version of this piece for "Psychic Outlaws," an exhibition I co-organized with John Souza at the Luckman Art Gallery that was based on my novella of the same name. In the story, the main character embarks on a surreal journey to a healing sanctuary for women where the only treatment is stillness and inhabitants, whether patients or spirits or something else, have the ability to transform at will into animals. Zamani's response to the narrative was a rendition of the Veils work but with performers covered in white veils, in an echo of the shades of white worn by the women in the narrative. In, "The Meridian (White Fashion)," 2010, seven performers stand for two hours with only their eyes revealed, as gallery goers mill around, alternately pausing to gaze or completely ignoring the people standing still and covered. The effort is so intense that one falls faint.

These works critiques both American and Muslim values. The invisible but intense endurance of stillness might be imperceptible to American eyes, where speed and action are valued, multitasking is the norm, and even vacations are rare. But stillness and rest are

lauded in some cultures; take the practice of the siesta in Spain, or from another perspective, Hindu holy men, or sadhus, whose great feats of endurance include standing in one place for years, or millennia according to mystic legend. That the performers of the veil works include both men and women might be lost of many viewers but is an important statement from the Iranian-American artist, aligning himself with women who wear the veil, even though it is seen as wrong for a Muslim man to don one. Zamani has shared that he has a conflicted relationship to the practice of covering women's bodies; some of the women in his family choose to wear the veil and some do not. By wearing the veil, the body is both exaggerated, overly perceived, and also hidden, not seen, reflecting a struggle/insistence on being, on taking up space, while embodying or resisting social norms. These pieces do not preach or condone but invite introspection and dialogue, taking the surreal and existential foundation of Zamani's performance work into a social and political space.

"Edifice/Oedipus," 2003, is a rare link between Zamani's more prominent painting practice and his performances. In a video documentation of this performance, Zamani stands in a fabric dome constructed of triangular pieces, singing a song he learned from his father that tribesmen sang while working in the trenches during civil wars in Iran. Zamani shares that his first performance was singing Koranic verses in the sixth grade. It was his second year of Islamic school and he is unsure why he was chosen for this role and he is unsure why he was chosen for this role but shares that his father was a very good self-trained Classical Iranian singer and perhaps he had encouraged it. At the conclusion of the video, the fabric that created the temporary structure lies dormant on the ground, another space left behind, a remnant of being, evidence of life and work and creativity. The first paintings that I saw by Zamani depicted this same mysterious dome, painting the same image repeatedly on various colored grounds.

While Zamani's paintings are cerebral and abstract, the double-consciousness of his body of work as a performance artist seems to function in an opposite way, as a rebuke to the possibility of art outside of life experience. His performances address stone cold serious issues — life, death, love, religion, violence, loss — yet simultaneously offer solidarity — we are here together in this thing called life for an unspecified amount of time — and humor. The brief documentation video of "White on White, Even," 2008, shows the artist dressed all in white, attached to a white square on a white wall, his body suspended a few inches from the ground. He hangs, held still in space, a painting on the wall. It ends after he has departed. An empty shell remains in the space he occupied on the white square.

So, what is life and what is the stuff of art? In Zamani's performances, they bleed together, with resonant metaphors so apt that they at times feel more real than realism. Throughout, bodies — his and others — emerge and dissipate into the spaces and objects around them, seeming to murmur: We are born, we live, and we die. But what impact will we have?

—Annie Buckley, 2021