

## A Phantasmagoria of Owls: Shadows and Layers in HK Zamani's Artwork

By Staci Gem Scheiwiller

The artist HK Zamani stands next to his artwork *Inadvertent Protagonists V* (2022). Two black shapes emerge from the artwork, while the artist himself dressed in black with a mask appears as a third shape, with all three forms “shadowing” or mirroring one another. The three forms are strangely similar, rendering them somewhat indistinguishable, and all three are visually connected in an unsettling relationship. This interaction is much like that of Sadeq Hedayat's novella *The Blind Owl* (1937), in which two male protagonists, who at once seem as different subjectivities, become entwined and entangled, with both men (or the same man) confessing to their shadow that has turned into the shape of an owl. All three are one, but this merging only makes their ontological existences more unstable, unknowable, unclear, and surreal, hence the blindness that emerges.



In HK Zamani's exhibition *Edifice/Oedipus*, the oeuvre presents prominently these shadow-like figures, including the artist himself in the performance artwork *Blind Owl* (2022). Just like the shadowy figure of the owl in Hedayat's work is a reflection of the protagonist (or protagonists), the silhouettes in these artworks connect and dialogue with one another but then also become reflections of viewers, forcing them to come to terms with the forms. In addition, these silhouettes act as traces of the artist, as he reveals them through the layers of his work, but these revelations only lead to more opacity and obscurity, as if a “true” meaning could not be reached (and mostly it cannot). Moreover, one could tie these shadows to the artist's thoughts, memories, and traumas, but what is interior is manifested exteriorly, and thus, these shadows also transform into images of the viewers, who have all become indistinguishable in a time of late capitalism.

In the artist's performance of *Blind Owl* (2022), Zamani cuts into *Inadvertent Protagonists V*, creating two triangular shapes (redacted pyramids) over the figures with swift guerrilla-like actions. The image of the masked artist slashing his canvas appears menacing, disturbing, and violent. In the second part of the performance, Zamani emerges in front of the artwork and reads his own poem inspired by Hedayat's work: "This morning's kill came with ease./And fresh blood justified it./The second was sloppy and took three attempts at intervals./Clearly greed made the prey heavy and around for the final call." After reciting the poem, the artist dedicated the performance to the people of Iran, especially the women, and called for a future that is female.

As indicated by the artist, the *Inadvertent Protagonists* series elicits dialogue on the duality of sculpture and painting. Indeed, the forms shown in *Inadvertent Protagonists* emerge from a subtractive process, which is typically associated with sculpture. The two dominant silhouettes appear facing each other as if really engaged in continuing this dialogue of duality that the materials and processes have already demonstrated. Hence, in the act of cutting and subtracting from the canvas, the process becomes one, and the forms mirror each other, so much so that the finite boundaries between these media dissipate. Moreover, by the artist slashing and revealing the artwork, the work itself becomes more amorphous as divisions are exposed although not necessarily reconciled, because there is still space between the forms. As the title suggests, the media are placed in opposition, but not of their own accord.

The violence in Zamani's poem indexes the violence that took place in the artistic process, making the artwork itself the "fresh kill." In connecting the work back to the novella by Hedayat (1903-51), two women in the story are murdered, thus rendering the process of slashing the artwork as rather gendered. Yet, the *Blind Owl* performance in front of *Inadvertent Protagonists V* is dedicated especially to the women of Iran, calling for a future that is female. This allegorical act appears to operate on several levels. The labor of ripping through various layers—be they psychological layers, the layers of an artwork, or the political fabrics of society—requires violence to break through. The assumption is though that once one breaks onto the other side, a certain clarity, resolution, or enlightenment will take place when that is hardly ever the case. Oftentimes, circumstances only become muddier and perhaps even more absurd than they were previously. The liberation of women from violence is met with more brutal violence, and yet the initial state of the oppression of women lies in absurdity itself: "Clearly the greed made the prey heavy." The original novella was written in the 1930s during a time of dictatorship, and the book was initially banned. When one lives in a state of tyranny, truth and logic are dispensed with, and despair and madness take their place.

In the series *Fashion Erasures* (2022), what appear to be haute couture fashion advertisements, such as by Prada and Chanel, showcase more silhouetted, altered figures on a grid. In a rebellious act of *détournement*, the glamor and luxury of such advertisements and of the fashion they sell are mitigated by the shadow figures whose individuality and detail have been eliminated. Indeed, the figures appear ominous, even confrontational, especially ones that are in full-frontal poses. As images of subjects of late capitalism, they have lost their individual identities despite the promise of buying and consuming what one particularly desires. These consumers have become voids with only an ethereal, passing essence that does not have an

ontological substance in the world. The images are like vignettes of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which everyone and everything has turned into images to consume and be consumed. One no longer distinguishes between Self and Other (which are not strict dichotomies anyway); all exist in a phantasmagoria that is both terrifying and fleeting.



Some of these silhouetted models are transformed into larger works in the series *Edifice/Oedipus* (2022). The series title is interesting, as the word crossed out is “edifice,” but “Oedipus” remains. “Edifice” could be a building—even a home—but it also could be a whole system of beliefs. Both a home and a set of beliefs are constructed, while “Oedipus” signals something more primal and instinctual. Oedipus Rex was a mythic king of ancient Thebes, on whom Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) based his theory of the Oedipus Complex. Freud theorized that a boy is in competition with his father for his mother’s affections and thus latently wishes to kill his father or at least wants him dead and out of the picture. Although this theory is also a construct developed out of late nineteenth-century Viennese culture, the complex itself speaks of the connection between sexual desire and death in a collective consciousness that finds its worldly manifestation in various ways. The consumption of images and fashion in advanced capitalism deludes one into thinking that death is a far-off or unreal event, but the specter of death is always ever present.



In the series *Edifice/Oedipus* are shadow figures mirrored by the shapes that have been cutout, creating reflecting pools. They also look strangely similar to the silhouettes in the other series but not quite, such as the shapes in *Inadvertent Protagonists*, especially with the cut forms that drape down to reveal another layer beneath, thus uniting all the protagonists in the exhibition in one spooky phantasmagoria, in which all appear as projected ghostly shadows on the surfaces. The series *Edifice/Oedipus* is an attempt to shed light on the psyche of one lost to late capitalism, but once again, the viewer is confronted with opacity and obscurity instead of clarity. The layers themselves have been shaped and cut by socio-political forces that are not always possible to extricate. Much like the psychological complexes in one's mind, revealing one layer will certainly only lead to more. What might be in question is that the extent of depth might not be reachable, but there might not be much depth at all, since the shadow portends a sense of illusion and misperception. Probing deeper, one might find nothing at all—or one opens a valve of uncontrolled desire and violence.

All these artworks by Zamani in the exhibition portray the blind owl in some respect—as victims of traumas, of society, of dictatorship, and of late capitalism. But one must keep in mind that the blind owl is not simply a separate, foreign entity outside oneself but also the shadow and projection of oneself. On some level, one can be the victim of one's own self-created oppressions that can be just as difficult to break from than the ones created by others. As the artworks have shown, there is not always a single, clear solution, answer, or direction presented to secure one's liberation from both inside and outside forces. The image is always the interface between the viewer and the “real,” but as Zamani demonstrates, peeling back one layer does not expose the truth but only reveals yet another layer, another image to contend with.