

Subtle Time and Refusals: A Conversation with Nazafarin Lotfi

by Kantara Souffrant

I remember my first-time meeting and viewing Nazafarin Lotfi's artwork. In 2019 Lotfi held a Visiting Artist Residency at the Wonsook Kim School of Art at Illinois State University. Lotfi delivered an artist lecture as part of her residency. When I arrived for the talk, all I knew about Lotfi was what I had pieced together from others: she was a painter; an Iranian woman; a Muslim (maybe?); held an MFA from the School of the Art Institute; and was currently living in Tucson, Arizona. Lotfi shared images of her various works: architectural renderings of spaces done in colored pencils; graphite drawings of mountain ranges that were reminiscent of her homeland; photos documenting her engaging with strangers in public spaces with her moveable boulder sculptures. The more Lotfi shared of her work, the more frustrated I found myself—both with Lotfi and myself. Lotfi was not meeting *my* expectations of her work. I desired to see an *Iranian Muslim Woman's* art—presumably, art that would document *Iranian Muslim Women*. As I gazed upon Nazafarin, her work, and reflected on my frustrations, I realized a hard truth: I was projecting my demands on her body. In turn, Lotfi brilliantly and expectantly sidestepped these demands, her work questioning the very notion of what an Iranian Muslim Woman's art can and should be and do in the world.

Thus, lies the productive challenge of describing Nazafarin Lotfi's practice as an artist and a human being. Born in Mashhad, Iran, in 1984, Nazafarin Lotfi grew up in the northeastern Iranian city, which borders Afghanistan to the east and Turkmenistan to the north. Lotfi's art practice "combines drawing, painting, and sculpture to explore the spatial and temporal experience of bodies out of place."¹ Her work negotiates bodies, lands, space, and multiple geographies. The absence of a physical body in Lotfi's work allows us, the viewers, to suspend our notions of what the work *should* be and instead have a contemplative experience with art that can—if we let it—transform our expectations of art, of people, of nations. It is an ambitious directive and can be frustrating for the viewer because it demands much of us: a willingness to be uncomfortable; to resist tendencies to project our ideas of nationality, gender, and identity on an artist's body and their work; and to walk away with more questions than answers.

The following is a conversation between Nazafarin Lotfi and me held on March 30, 2020—only a few days into the COVID-19 quarantine. The conversation moves among art, gender, diaspora, representation, identity, and life after social-distancing. The discussion is personal and abstract. Specific and general. A pursuit of normalcy and contradictions. Ultimately this conversation is an opportunity to become better acquainted with Lotfi, her work, and a set of questions and life experiences that have embedded themselves in her art practice of refusal.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length. My thanks to Nazafarin Lotfi for her time and work. Additional thanks to Japeth Asiedu-Kwarteng, for his initial transcription of this interview.

¹ Nazafarin Lotfi, "About," Artist's Website, <http://www.nazafarinlotfi.com/about>.

Kantara: Did you always want to be an artist?

Nazafarin: I think so, yes, but more clearly in high school I had to make some more difficult decisions. But, I think I knew.

Kantara: In the U.S., art is part of formal schooling, but how much attention goes into your art training depends on one's class, wealth, school district, and available resources. Sometimes the school understands the importance of the arts and the humanities, and other times the school knows it's important but doesn't have the resources and cuts the arts. People are then sort of left to their own devices to figure out their creativity. Is that at all similar to how art training in Iran happens?

Nazafarin: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that it absolutely has to do with class and access to even go towards art in general. No, because we never had art classes. In elementary school, that was the first five years, we had two hours dedicated to art each week. After that, it was every other week. For me, in middle school every other week, we had painting class for one hour. The next week we would do calligraphy. We had the same teacher who would do the one hour of painting or drawing and the one hour of calligraphy.

Kantara: That's it?

Nazafarin: That's it! And I went to private school; I went to good schools. In high school, we had nothing; there was only one elective course in art because the whole focus [in school] was science. It was like, "No! You don't waste your time doing art." That was the mentality. I chose art because I wanted a different life. I wanted a different possibility of being. I liked art, and I thought well, I guess I've been doing this since I was eight or nine, so I guess this is it. In high school, there was an option to go to an art pre-college for the senior year, but the art high schools never had a good reputation. Anyhow, that's what I did, I transferred to an art high school, which was not a great experience, and I basically did remote studies. I studied at home for the tests.

Kantara: Were your parents supportive of you transferring to the art high school and becoming an artist?

Nazafarin: Yes, but with a little bit of worry. Iran is like the European system of education. You take an entrance exam for the university and, based on your score, you choose where to go to school. The whole education system is science-heavy and competitive because they are preparing the kids for the "big" test from age eight or nine.

I got very good test scores and got into the best university in Iran and that's how I left my hometown; I moved to Tehran. I got into the University of Tehran, and *that* helped my parents to feel everything was fine. Yeah, that was our sort of deal. [*sighs heavily*]

Kantara: Are you sighing heavily because you're having flashbacks? [*laughs*]

Nazafarin: No, [I'm sighing because] it is such a clichéd Iranian story. There are so many people that did the same strategy at age 16: "I'm going to suffer for a year, but then I'll be free."

Kantara: I ask these questions because writer-activist Edwidge Danticat, has this quote in her book *Create Dangerously*, published after the [January 2010] Haitian earthquake. She writes that after the earthquake, she thought, "I should have been a doctor, I should have been a lawyer." All of these "useful" professions. I feel like this is a common trope in the diasporic experience: a responsibility to be "productive" and able to financially support or uplift their family. And if we choose career paths that aren't "useful" there is a tremendous sense of guilt. Pursuing the arts often means unsteadiness, and we don't live in a world that necessarily values it; and the [profession] can't easily be monetized.

Nazafarin: Absolutely! Yeah! And, it's like a very shitty thing to say but looking back I think for some women probably in the class that I come from [the benefit of] getting a good degree and going to medical school was a good marriage. A successful marriage would lift you to a better class situation. I grew up in a lower middle-class family. My mom has a community college degree and she taught at a middle-school, and my dad didn't go to college and owned a business of medical supplies. We always had food and went to good schools, and I took art classes with a painter who lived on our block and took English classes at the university in town.

I was recently listening to an NPR story by Diaa Hadid, about two sisters from an elite class in Lahore, Pakistan, and they were talking about the pressure of going to the best colleges and ultimately having successful marriages as women in a conservative and traditional society, and I think that's when I realized some of the connections. I don't remember ever being asked or allowed to contemplate on what I wanted to do with my life or think about what I really liked. Unfortunately, I also feel in the world that I lived, I wasn't taken seriously as a person with potential. Although my parents were very supportive of my education, it never seemed they truly believed in me being able to have an independent life. My mom always worried too much. And as you said, definitely, the rhetoric of productivity (in terms of money-making) and uplifting the family was very present and I somewhat understand it given the economic instability of the country.

Kantara: Given these pressures, you went to the University of Tehran. What was your major?

Nazafarin: It was horrible! I did industrial design, and I struggled to transfer to painting, which I couldn't because the school policies were very complicated. It was the darkest time of my life; it was very depressing to be there for four years of college. The University of Tehran was an extremely political environment, which was *nice* for me to come into that, from a different city. It was very diverse in terms of ethnicity; the students were from all around the country and from all different classes and backgrounds.

The design department was more recent. But in a country that had no real industry or economy, it was funny to study design. I chose design because my family wasn't supportive of me majoring in painting or sculpture; so, I chose the most conservative field in art, industrial design. The university was a very conservative environment and politically oppressive; it was very difficult to

navigate in that environment. So, we had a lot of people who dropped out. By the end of the four years, a lot of my friends were no longer pursuing their degrees anymore; they were all smart kids from around the country. It was a sad situation. I was “auditing” drawing classes the whole time I was in design.

Kantara: Why the quotations?

Nazafarin: Because I made it up. It wasn't called “auditing.” I would show up and talk to the teacher in the background. I was not getting any credit or anything.

Kantara: You talk about this experience of pursuing art and auditing these art classes and pursuing a design major—a major as tangential to art as possible, but that will still make your parents happy. What is the thing that finally made you go “I am going to the U.S.; I'm going to do this art thing?”

Nazafarin: I suffered the most in design because I could not problem-solve other people's needs and make things to sell them; that popular aspect of design did not suit me at all. I wanted to make something for myself. I wanted to respond to my problems and solve my needs. That was what made me think, “I've been painting for so long maybe I should pursue painting.”

But America was a random choice. At the time, the U.S. was giving visas to Iranian students. That was 2007. I only knew that I wanted to go to an English-speaking country, and I was looking up universities, and I think whatever I researched pointed to education in the U.S.

Kantara: Is there a reason why you chose an English-speaking country?

Nazafarin: Because I had studied German and French a bit, and I did not excel at them. At all. So, I thought I can't live with that. [*Both laugh*]

Kantara: Yeah, that's fair.

Nazafarin: It was so random!

Kantara: No, I like how non-deliberate it is! It's just a series of events that have shaped your choices, but I feel there's agency there. You know your boundaries and what you're good at and maybe what you're going to sacrifice. [The spirit] of, “well, this was a door that was open.”

Nazafarin: I ended up at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] because it had a one-year program between undergrad and the graduate program and I was looking for that.

Kantara: How did you like it? What was your experience being in a formal art school?

Nazafarin: Intense! It was extremely intense. It was shocking to see how much art relied on language, like talking; that was a very American thing. With my first art history classes, I felt as

though I was in an English language class instead of an art history class! I was writing down words that I didn't know. It was very difficult; just the amount of work that went into every day was beyond my imagination.

Kantara: Can you expand on that a bit more, what you mean by "how much art in the U.S. depended on language"?

Nazafarin: For example, the [art] critiques; there is a lot of talking. That was interesting, overwhelming, and intimidating. A lot of my peers were so good at articulating their ideas, whereas I was in the stage where I was forming my ideas. I felt decades behind everyone else; they knew so much about artists, like name-dropping. They knew so much about other contemporary artists.

Oh! There was a funny question that [SAIC] asked in the interview: "who are the contemporary artists you are inspired by?" All the artists that I was thinking about were dead! [*laughs*] Time is fascinating when you come from [a place] like Iran. This is before everyone had Wi-Fi. I had a dial-up internet connection. Today, art students in Iran are well-informed about the contemporary art scene—the American contemporary art scene. Although [2007] was not that long ago, it was a completely different "contemporary" art time for me. That was funny.

Kantara: What you're saying makes me think about how I am Haitian-American, and my spouse is African-American. I often feel like I'm playing "catch-up" in American musical history or pop-culture references. There's so much that I feel I don't know, partly because I have a Haitian cultural point of reference. Partly because, sometimes, I think I'm still getting acculturated to both the U.S. and Haiti. I empathize with your discussion of time, dislocation, and witnessing people who are well-versed in an unfamiliar language.

Nazafarin: Yeah!

Kantara: On those notes, of time, diaspora, acculturation, and learning: if you could describe your practice today, what would you say your important questions are?

Nazafarin: I work a lot with questions about identity and place, and I think it has to do with my interest in landscape painting. By "identity," I mean a set of histories and genes that a person embodies and through which they navigate time and space. I'm very interested in dissecting that, looking at that in a nuanced way. So, I'm very interested in the interpretation of time and analysis of space from my point of view. I'm also interested in going back to the existential literature that I read in the formative years of my life [in Iran]. They are tapping into similar questions about the existence of the body and its sensibilities in time within space. However, it's often the existence of the "thinking" male body, the European white male body. I'm interested in similar questions, but through the lens that is not the European white male body. It is through my point of view and based on my history and experience.

Kantara: You talking about time, space, and representation in *your* way and not through the lens of the white male body makes me think of your collage *Fallen* (2018). There's a representation of a body, but no physical presence in [the] work. Is that deliberate?



Nazafarin Lotfi, *Fallen*, 2019. Papier-mâché, ink, acrylic, spray paint, and flashe paint on panel. 36 x 5 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago.

Nazafarin: It is! It is very deliberate and is very challenging because this is the part that I think a lot of people become less interested in, describing a condition of/for the body without depicting a body. Part of my lack of interest in representation of body is rooted in philosophical thinking, and part of it is informed by what I faced when I arrived in the U.S. in an academic setting and the responses that I received in critiques and conversations with people, which was a mixture of assumptions, expectations, orientalism, and other things. For example, I heard multiple times in grad school that my work was “not Iranian enough.” What does that even mean? Particularly when the person who makes such statements has never been in Iran and doesn’t know much about the culture. Similar power dynamics and hierarchy that we experience on the global scale also exist in arts. Who decides what is Iranian or not? But then there is not *one* experience of being Iranian; it is not a monolithic picture. It seemed to me then that I had to constantly deal with the American imagination of what Middle East or Iran looks like and should be—and that image is simply wrong. And that is where I find certain kinds of representations less interesting because they can perpetuate such fallacies, knowingly or unknowingly.

Anyhow, for the first few years, I felt a lot of expectations on me to represent a very particular identity that I would not and could not represent and I know most non-white and non-straight artists face similar dilemmas. First, I didn’t feel even eligible to represent a whole nation, and second, I felt increasingly annoyed by those who thought they could be the representative of a nation or all women, or women from the Middle East or Muslim women. How can an urban middle-class woman, a global citizen, with Muslim heritage represent a working-class rural Muslim woman? Does she even know *her*? Why should we participate in our own erasure as complicated beings? Why should we close our eyes on the complexities of our histories to fit in someone else’s narrow imagination? I guess I had an urge from the beginning to be the author of my own book and to widen that imagination my imagination too.

Kantara: Your sculpture *Learning to Hold* (2019) continues this representing a body without physically creating a body. When you consider the pressure to represent a *particular* body (woman, Muslim, Iranian, African, etc.), the choice not to represent a body is really about not capitalizing on it for the sake of other people's expectations. It is a similar story we hear from people of color artists and artists from colonial territories and legacies who work in predominately white spaces. These are artists who are persistently asked: Where is the African in your work? Where is the Muslim in your work? Where is the Iranian in your work?



Nazafarin Lotfi, *Learning to Hold*, 2019. Papier-mâché and paint. 17 x 42 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago.

Nazafarin: Absolutely! I think I wasted so much time in graduate school. First, explaining, second, being defensive. I wanted the work to resist expectations, and I felt a lot of people were too lazy to give the work the time. I intentionally wanted my work to be more complicated; become complicated, become more nuanced, become abstract, become more demanding of the viewer because I felt I was not given the time and attention that a lot of my peers got. But [others in school] wanted an easy answer from me, which was not my personality and interest. I don't have any problems with artists who make more legible work that is easier to understand, but I could not be happy making didactic work.

The other thing I learned was when you're not from this country, and you come here, it takes a while to read racism, it takes a while to read microaggression. I didn't "get" the loaded comments then. The racism and microaggression were in people being *ready* for my miseries; they were just ready to hear all about the sad, oppressed Iranian woman. I felt a lot of people didn't want to deal with complicated issues of existence and gender and politics, all of them together in a very different domain of thinking. There is more reception for our miseries and saddest stories and unfortunately, we have a lot of it. But that is not the only truth either. At the end, what's the point? Who are you making the work for, and what do you want to get from it?

Kantara: I'm connecting your experience with racism and microaggressions to Kimberlé William Crenshaw's "intersectionality." It is not one thing that your body is supposed to represent, correct? It's gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious background, and being someone who speaks

with an accent. It seems you take all of these intersectional concerns and translate them into your work. I love your *Portrait* (2017) for these reasons. You produce a rendering of yourself, but we don't get to see you. We never get a chance to project our ideas (racial, gendered, classed, religious, etc.) onto a body. Your reliance on abstraction forces us to do the work of being with the piece and getting comfortable with these ambiguities.



Nazafarin Lotfi, *Portrait*, 2017. Ink, acrylic, flashe paint, and collage on canvas. 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago.

Your question: "Who are you making the work for, and what do you want to get from it?" It makes me think of audience and reception. Who do you think is your audience? If someone just stumbled upon your website or into a gallery, how would you want them to hold your work?

Nazafarin: I often think about that, and I have no answer beyond: anyone who truly loves art, or, who is truly interested in a moment of reflection and reverie. Anyone who is eager to be quiet for five minutes and spend time with something they have no idea what it is and nothing more than that. I don't expect someone who is researching Middle Eastern art to choose me as their artist or put me in a biennial to represent Iranian artists or artists from the Middle East or Muslim women artists. I read a lot of literature on Iranian and Islamic mysticism and I'm very interested in my cultural heritage, but again, my work is not made for that kind of consumption, so I don't even expect anyone who comes to the work knowing what they want to see, to be interested. I think any person who is honestly interested in art and an art experience is my audience. Very generous!

Kantara: It sounds like you're not expecting to become famous from your art creations. [*Both laugh*]

Nazafarin: No! [*laughs*] I grew past that stage years ago. I learned very early on that fame is not the case at all for me. I'm in this for a long-term game. The kind of work I do is what female artists in their 60s get attention for, and I'm totally at peace with that. [*Laughs*]

Kantara: What's fascinating to me about that is it is not about ego. Your art becomes a place for thinking about a universal human experience, as seen in *your* everyday experience.

Nazafarin: Yeah! And that human experience is the experience *I* had. I talk about myself only because I want to get to the *lived experience* not an abstract notion of existence. My early years of life are probably not the most “normal” experience of growing up—I was born during the Iran-Iraq War and a few years after Iran’s 1979 revolution; my parents were young and they were just figuring out how to live in this country that was rapidly changing; there was so much violence and shortage of food and vital supplies during those years. Being raised in a patriarchal and oppressive culture and then moving to a different country in search of freedom and then facing similar issues, is what happened. And also getting stuck between two countries, two governments in a permanent state of hostility. And then navigating with *all of that* in pursuit of freedom and happiness and whatever the third [ideal] is.

Kantara: Is “diaspora” a term that you use to talk about yourself? If it is, how does it inform your movement through the world and maybe even your practice?

Nazafarin: That is an interesting question. I haven’t used the word ‘diaspora’ in relation to my work. Still, I think a lot about it because diaspora is this most contradictory non-existence world, and I think that is the kind of space I’m very interested in. People come together in diaspora from very different backgrounds, have very different experiences, and come from different places in their lives. Then you’re connected through this thing, called “diaspora.” It’s a very non-homogeneous space. For some people, “diaspora” is so full of contradictions and paradoxes that they’re incapable of applauding it. I like that about diaspora!

Kantara: Me too! [*both laugh*] I love diaspora because it gives me the contradictions. The concept frames the experience of coming [to a new country], hoping, and that hope shattering and then maybe...

Nazafarin: ...and dealing with all of that, right?! Time is also a very interesting thing in relation to diaspora. Someone who left [their homeland] five decades ago, their origin story, compared to someone who left five *days* ago. These two people are completely different kinds of people with different experiences, and the thread of “diaspora” binds them. It’s a very inclusive space.

Kantara: Let me go back to the audience and how you want people to take the time to respond to the aesthetic elements of your work. You also have a social practice and engagement aspect to your art, as seen in your *Boulders* series from 2015–16. How do those two fit together?



Nazafarin Lotfi, *Boulders*, 2015–16. Courtesy of the artist and Regards, Chicago.

Nazafarin: I grew up around a lot of people and our life was somewhat communal. As much as I need to be alone when I work in the studio, I also really enjoy being around people and engaging with them. I want to engage with people. I feel comfortable around those who are not artists. Although my work might not be readily accessible in some ways, I absolutely enjoy talking about it to non-artists, telling them why I do this, and letting them understand the work better and relate to me better.

I'm doing a similar project now here in Tucson on the trail close to my studio. I wanted to share that unexpected experience of encountering art in the public space. That wonder and curiosity that a work of art in a gallery can inspire, sharing that in a public space. Allowing people who don't go to galleries to experience wonder and joy, which is very inspiring to me as an artist.

Kantara: I would also use the term “inspiring” to think about creative practice and socially engaged art in this COVID-19 quarantine moment. Because it means there are all of these new ways of tapping into communities and networks, maintaining people, and getting to know people. From something as basic as Zoom happy hours to my in-laws just reading to my daughter—

Nazafarin: Aww, that's great!

Kantara: Yeah. I see people realizing their need for contact and trying whatever they can to maintain their humanity. I'm interested in what socially engaged art will look like after COVID.

Nazafarin: After this, yeah.

Kantara: Thinking about your *Boulders* piece or its new iteration, do you have an idea what this series might look like if the trails are empty? Or, post-social distancing, does this kind of socially engaged work help us to think about coming back? Getting close to and being unfearful of other bodies?

Nazafarin: The trails are often not crowded; I have run into a handful of people so far and it's fine. That is a great question to think about how to socially engage after months of social distancing and basically being a threat to other bodies and being threatened by them. I read an article the

other day by [Keith Lamar](#), who has survived 27 years in solitary confinement. I really enjoyed reading it, and in his last paragraph, he writes:

The root word of education is 'to educe,' to bring forth that which is already there. Education isn't really about what kind of career you're gonna get or how you're gonna make money. That's not why we were born, to make money for somebody else. To get a big house. To have a nice car. You're here to bring forth that which is already there. Hopefully young people being forced to stay home outside of the mainstream curriculum are able to get a glimpse of themselves and start pulling on that thread.²

I hope that's what's going to happen.

<update>

Nazafarin: When we first had this conversation, it was a couple of weeks into social distancing; everything was new, and we were still trying to figure out what was going on. I think I naively had this utopian idea at the beginning that now that everyone is somehow experiencing this pandemic—from isolation to loss of job—and the fact that the crisis is not somewhere far like Syria, Iraq, or Venezuela, people would develop more empathy towards each other, towards refugees, towards those who don't look like them. We've seen beautiful acts of kindness from some but also, we have seen numerous acts of racism towards Asian-Americans around the country and we have seen multiple murders of Black Americans during this short time. We know by now that people are not impacted by this crisis equally at all. Some are living their lives as usual, some are generating more wealth, and some lives are completely destroyed. We are not in this together. I still don't know what socially engaged projects would look like after social distancing, but I know this must be the beginning of an end of an era. Covid-19 has made clear a lot of existing disparities in our society. The numbers and statistics are revealing the histories of our cities and of different communities. How can we go back to the past as "normal"?

² Keith Lamar as told to Samantha Michaels, "I've Spent 27 Years in Solitary Confinement. Here Are Some Tips on Making the Best Use of Time Alone." *Mother Jones*, March 24, 2020. https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/03/social-distancing-keith-lamar-solitary-confinement-coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR1SxdYg1UsAXU8Xl39LZfNHHU3zxHcGCOuUqZ_9dUMag6GeBWibZxgpOnY#comment-container