



Nazanin Moghbeli



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November 7 – December 15, 2024
List Gallery, Swarthmore College



Nazanin Moghbeli:
***Sustaining tradition and
interconnection amid times of crises***

Andrea Packard
Director, Swarthmore College Art Collection
and Curator of the List Gallery

The List Gallery is pleased to present a selection of recent drawings, prints, and collages by American-Iranian artist Nazanin Moghbeli. The exhibition and this accompanying catalog reflect the artist's lifelong exploration of the way culture is transmitted across generations, the impact of autocratic oppression, and the liberating power of abstraction.

Moghbeli's artworks explore her rich cultural heritage as well as the loss and nostalgia familiar to immigrants from many war-torn countries. Born in 1974 in Baltimore, she moved with her family to Tehran, Iran at the age of three. Her family encouraged her to study calligraphy, miniature painting, and music, even as they endured a series of crises, including the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the ensuing Islamic Revolution, and the first three years of the Iran-Iraq War. In 1983, Moghbeli emigrated to the United States where she continued to explore art, literature, and poetry and developed a love of science. After graduating from Swarthmore College in 1996 with a double major in art and biology, she studied drawing at Maryland College Institute of Art and medicine at Johns Hopkins University, establishing the foundation for her wide-ranging and socially engaged artistic practice.

Moghbeli draws with traditional Iranian bamboo *ghalams* (quills) and integrates diverse calligraphic techniques into her creative process. Her artistic practice has been profoundly influenced by her mother, Manzar Moghbeli, a noted practitioner of *Nastaliq*, a calligraphic script that developed in the fourteenth century in Iran. However, in contrast to her mother's traditional *Nastaliq*, Moghbeli detaches her brushstrokes from their literary contexts and often interweaves them with atmospheric marks and tones drawn with graphite and charcoal.

Many works in Moghbeli's *Words from my mother* series, such as *Alef* (2023, page 3) and *Etude N* (2023, opposite), are closely based on the structure of letters in the Persian alphabet (Farsi). As she





draws and paints, Moghbeli considers how traditional calligraphic forms and techniques can be honored, lost, or reinvented over time. Several small works created with ink and graphite, such as *N*, *N2*, and *N3* (all 2023, pages 9–11), were improvised through varying and repeating the forms of the Farsi letter *nun*. Atmospheric backdrops, generous spacing, and curvilinear rhythms convey a gentle, deliberative, and iterative thought process, inviting closer study and reflection.

In *Dream 3*, (2021, page 15), the largest work in the *Words from my mother* series, Moghbeli uses calligraphic gestures and shapes, but frees them from the structure of an individual letter. As Moghbeli writes, “This series explores the complex relationship between mother and daughter. My mother has given me language (Farsi), given me the ability to express myself creatively, and sponsored hundreds of hours of calligraphy and painting lessons. And yet, what I speak is not exactly what she has taught.”¹

A selection of Moghbeli’s most recent prints and collages reflect even more explicit efforts to simultaneously honor and depart from her mother’s calligraphy and cultural traditions. For example, to create two mixed-media collages, *Unspoken* and *Words from my mother* (both 2023, pages 18–19), Moghbeli photographed some of her mother’s discarded calligraphy practice sheets and then collaborated with master printer Cindi R. Ettinger to reproduce the photographs using the photogravure process. Moghbeli then painted on top of the prints with her own bold strokes in black ink. In doing so, she echoed, transformed, and partially obscured her mother’s work with her own bolder and more expressive gestures. Collectively, her mother’s practice words and phrases animate the compositions and embody discipline, dynamism, and attentiveness to aesthetic traditions—qualities that also provide the foundation for Moghbeli’s more experimental practice.

Such complex and symbiotic visual dialogues express a wide array of sentiments, ranging from homage or admiration to defiance or even subversion. As Moghbeli observes, sometimes “communication is stymied, impossible, as if we are speaking different languages, and other times, the connection is so strong that there is no need for words.”²

Moghbeli’s ongoing series, titled *Ajax* (2023–2024, pages 22–33), places the creative dialogue between herself and her mother in the context of one of the most consequential political events of the

20th Century: the execution of Project Ajax, the U.S.- and British-instigated overthrow of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953.³ As some historians have argued, the CIA's intervention and support for the monarchical government of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi created conditions that led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the oppressive regime of Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini.⁴

Each work in the *Ajax* series begins with a photogravure print based on her mother's calligraphic practice sheets. In works such as *Steps to overthrowing government* (2024) and *Maximal use of Tehran Radio*, (2023, page 25), Moghbeli introduces fragments of text copied from CIA documents, now declassified, describing their secret operations. Some works in the *Ajax* series include Moghbeli's own inscriptions linking the continuing political oppression in Iran to the 1953 coup. In the work titled *For Freedom* (2023, page 33), she repeats the phrase calligraphically in Farsi, forming an line that undulates though the center of the composition. The words For Freedom echo the refrain of a protest anthem titled *Barayeh* (*For*), by Shervin Hajipour. Composed in response to the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests against the compulsory hijab—led by female protesters, including schoolchildren—Hajipour's song consists of protesters' answers to a question posted on Twitter: "Why are you risking your lives to protest?"⁵

Whereas works in the *Ajax* series address personal, cultural, and political interrelationships, other works, such as *Fragments (i)* and *Fragments (ix)* (both 2024, pages 12–13), reflect a more lyrical and open-ended aspect of her creative practice. In these two small works and related projects that are underway in her studio, Moghbeli first photographs fragments of calligraphy and prints them onto Mulberry paper; she then glues the printed paper onto panel and improvises with graphite, ink, or collage elements. The resulting lines variously curl, harmonize, tangle, unwind, leap free, or wander.

The seemingly irrepressible elasticity of line, both within Moghbeli's smallest works and throughout her oeuvre, reflects her underlying concern with the way visual forms and interrelationships can prompt a wide-ranging musical, emotional, and ontological associations. Whether exploring the poetic resonance of small gestures, or creating ambitious and thematically focused series, Moghbeli not only honors cherished traditions, but also the need to experiment and create freely.



Endnotes

1 Nazanin Moghbeli, artist's statement, 2024

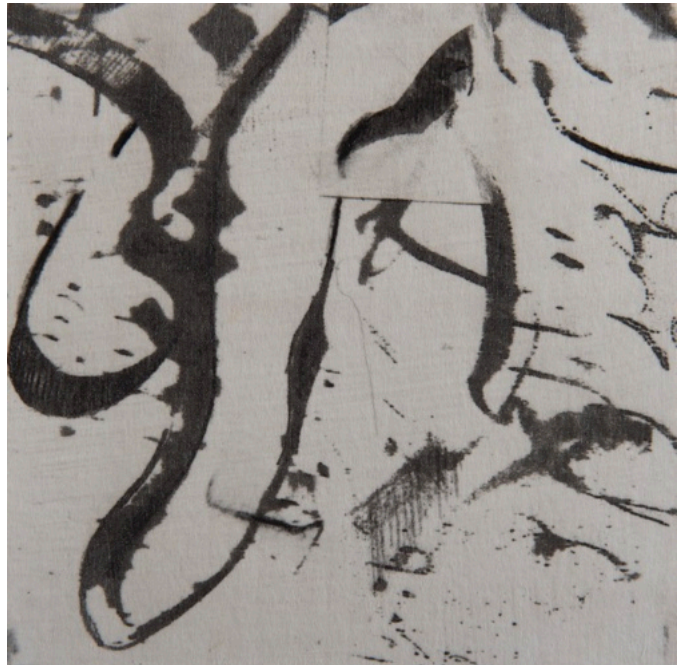
2 Ibid.

3 Information about Project Ajax was published on August 19, 2013 on the National Security Archive: https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/#_ftn4

4 Gasiorowski, M. J. and Mohammad, M. B. (eds.). (2004). *Mosaddegh and the 1953 Coup in Iran*. Syracuse University Press, May 2004. p. 125.

5 Hajipour was arrested for creating and posting *Barayeh*. At the 65th annual Grammy Awards in February 2023, the song won the inaugural special merit award, Best Song for Social Change. To listen to the song, visit: https://youtu.be/LY_U5QfeQQc?si=D79-dOpM0asAJZjy









16 *Etude M*, 2024, ink, graphite, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 26 x 22 inches

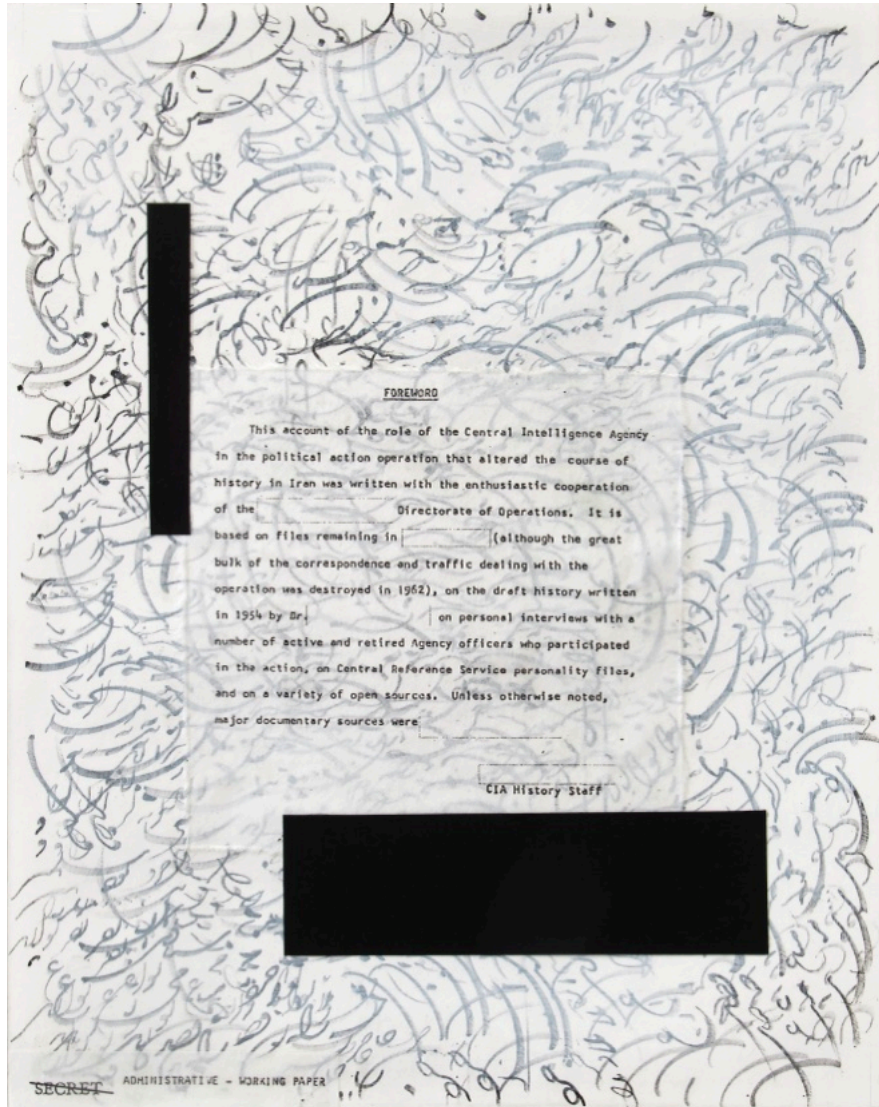


Etude M1, 2024, ink, graphite and charcoal on paper, 26 x 22 inches 17

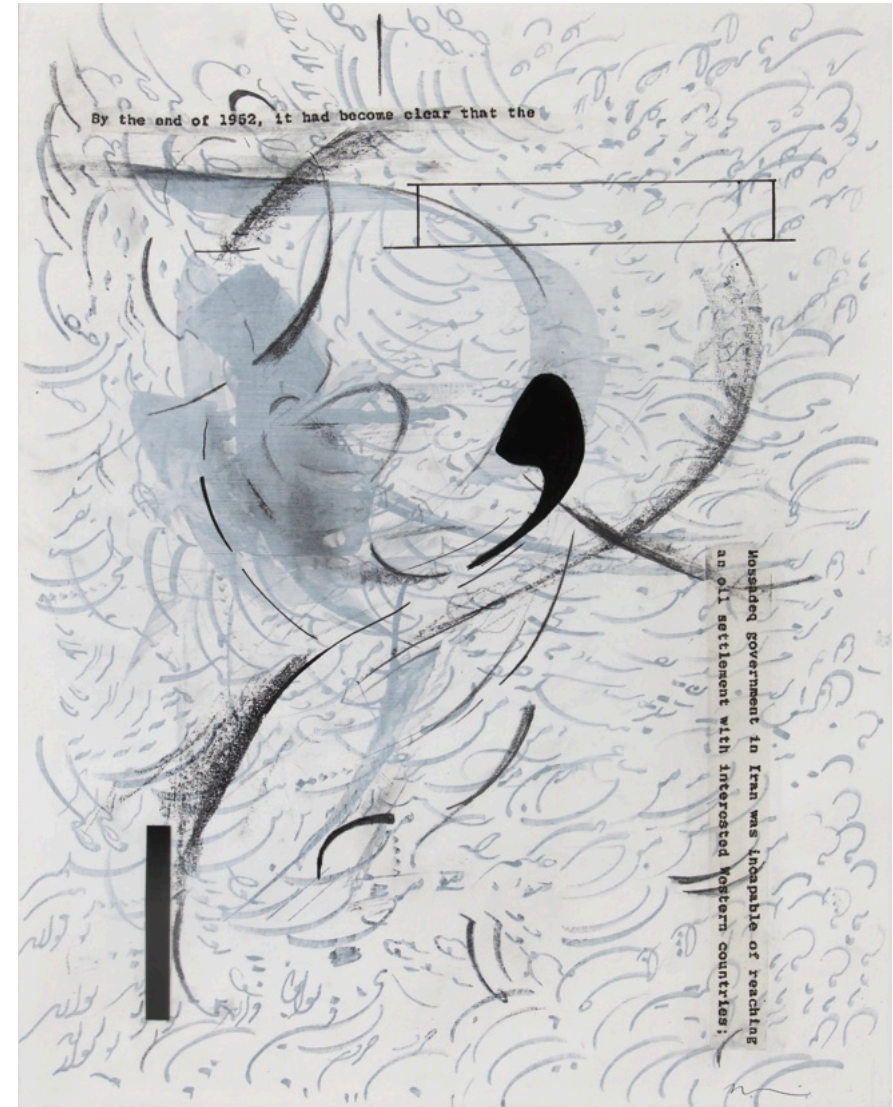




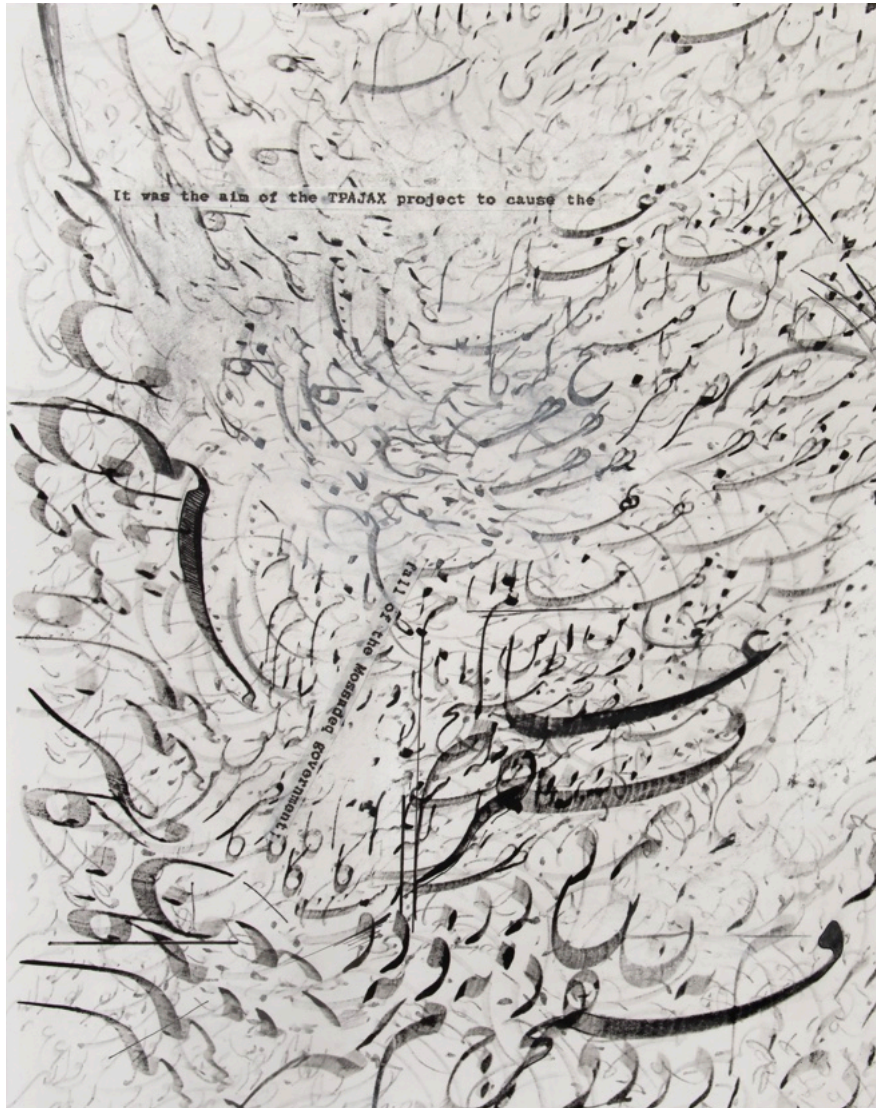
Operation Ajax Series



22 Forward, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches



Against Western interests, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches 23



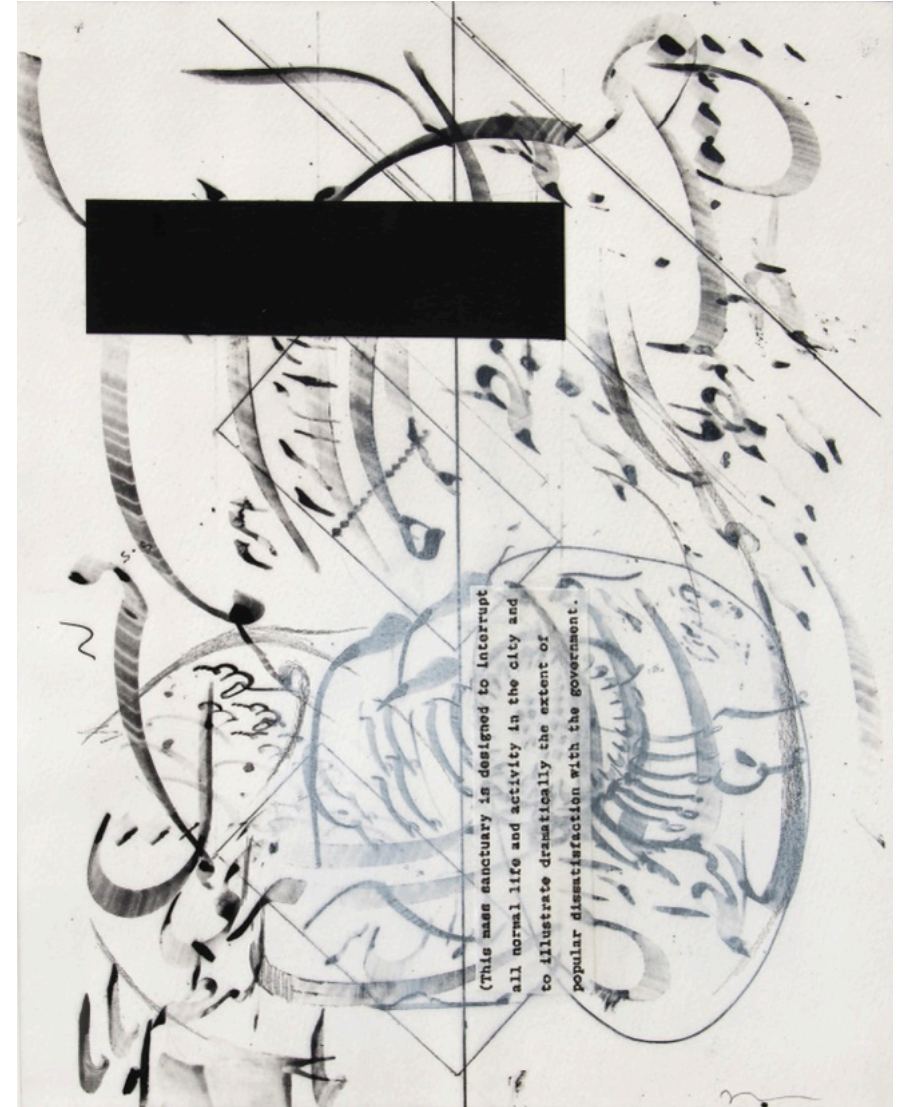
24 Aim of Operation Ajax, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches



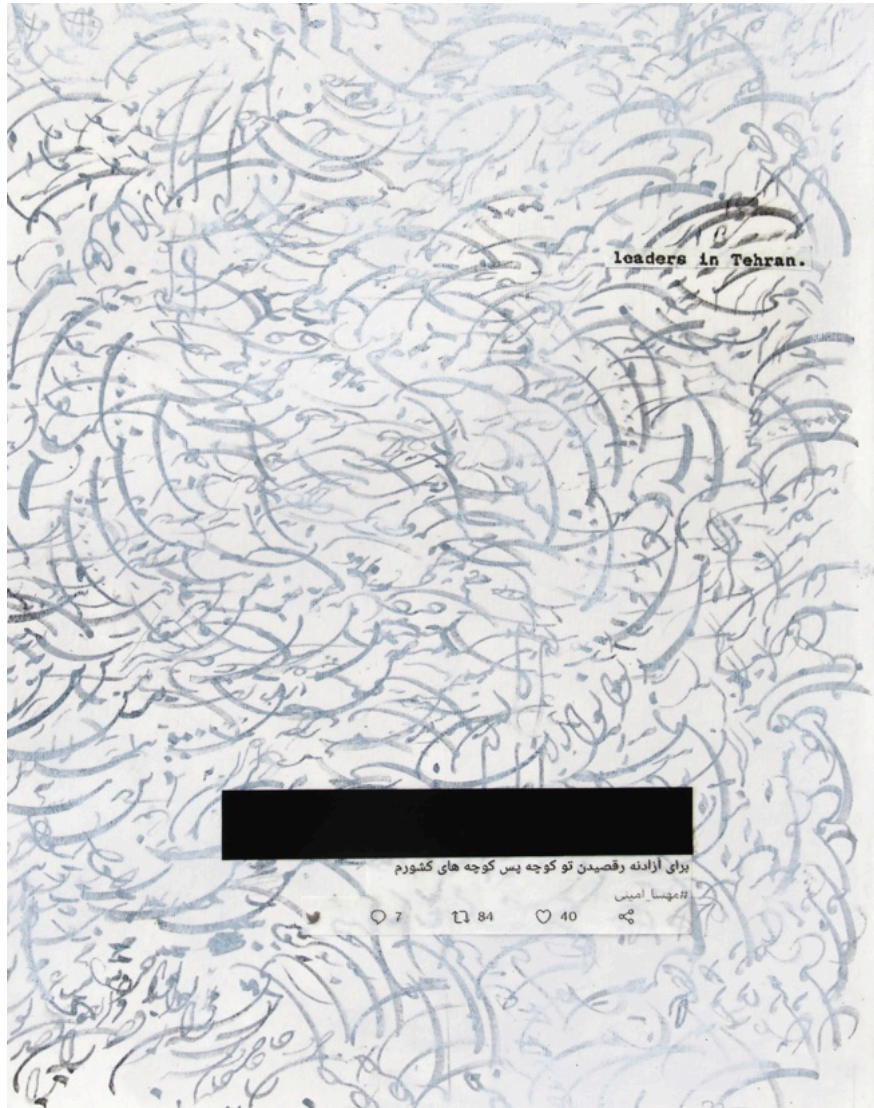
Maximal use of Tehran Radio, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches 25



26 Secret Agreement, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches



Staging dissatisfaction with government, 2024, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches 27





30 Secret, 2023, photogravure, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches



"The Shah is victorious," 2024, photogravure, ink and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches 31



Nazanin Moghbeli graduated from Swarthmore College with a double major in studio art and biology in 1996. She went on to complete a drawing certificate at Maryland Institute College of Art while earning an M.D. and a Master of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University. As an adult, she continued her study of Persian traditional music with prominent masters, including Hossein Omoumi, and developed a deep appreciation for the intricate *dastgah* system of music.

She has presented solo exhibitions of her work in Philadelphia at InLiquid Gallery (2023); Susanna Gold Gallery (2021); LGTripp Gallery (2015); and Burrison Gallery, University of Pennsylvania (2015). Her work has also been included in group exhibitions at diverse venues, including Commonweal Gallery, Bridgette Mayer Gallery, NoBA Artspaces, Fleisher Art Memorial, and Maryland Institute of Art. Her work has been collected by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Temple University School of Business, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as well as by diverse corporations and individuals. Recently, Moghbeli was awarded a month-long artist residency at the Vermont Studio Center (2022) and a year-long artist residency at Sidney Kimmel Medical College (2021–2022).





Acknowledgements

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—Andrea Packard
Director of the Swarthmore College Art Collection
and Curator of the List Gallery

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Front cover image: *Religious leaders* [detail], 2024, ink, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 20 x 14½ inches

Inside front cover image: *N* [detail], 2024, ink on paper, 4 x 4 inches



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