

The background is an abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. It features warm, earthy tones of ochre, sienna, and terracotta in the upper half, transitioning into cooler, more saturated blues and purples in the lower half. A prominent, thick, red, brush-stroke-like mark curves from the upper right towards the lower center, adding a dynamic element to the composition. The overall texture is rough and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and some darker, more saturated areas.

TAHA AFSHAR

REFLECTIONS
on BIRTH, BOUNTY, and JOY

BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2019

MUSA International Art Space
Palazzo Zenobio

Matt Price
Michele Robecchi
Foreword by Natalia Gryniuk

Reflections on Birth, Bounty, and Joy

Taha Afshar

Biennale di Venezia 2019

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Palazzo Zenobio



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FOREWORD

“How does artistic invention differ from useful invention? It differs as human sensibility differs from the rest of the universe. Artistic inventions alter the sensibility of mankind. They all emerge from and return to human perception, unlike useful inventions, which are keyed to the physical and biological environment. Useful inventions alter mankind only indirectly by altering his environment; aesthetic inventions enlarge human awareness directly with new ways of experiencing the universe, rather than with new objective interpretations. Psychological science is more concerned with human faculties as separate objects of study than as a single historically changing instrument of awareness. Aesthetic inventions are focused upon individual awareness: they have no therapeutic or explanatory purpose; they only expand the range of human perceptions by enlarging the channels of emotional discourse.”

– George Kluber “The Shape of time” (1972)

The english artist, in his research, he expresses and fully reveals the words of George Kluber. The artist through his emotions that come from different spheres of his life, makes us immerse in his world of reflection. His works are made in total peace on the shore of a lake, an experience of profound artistic meditation. He proposes to us the result of his deep research and his artistic invention which he titled “Birth, Bounty and Joy”.

Natalia Gryniuk

Curator

President of MUSA International Art Space

April 2019

TAHA AFSHAR—BIRTH AND THE UNIVERSE

by Matt Price

A recurring subject within the oeuvre of British-born and based artist, Taha Afshar is the landscape in Sweden. For each of the five series of Swedish landscapes made to date since 2011 he has always chosen to return to the same spot—a secluded cottage with a view out onto a lake near the town of Alingsås, where he paints *en plein air*. It is a location where he has the right conditions for his mind and body to connect to nature, to time and space, and it is from such a place, both physically and metaphorically, that his creative spirit awakens and the creative process begins.

The latest in this series, entitled ‘Swedish Lakescapes’, started early in 2019, traverses a spectrum of languages from the overtly figurative to pure abstraction. Works such as *Two Trees by a Lake in Sweden* and the pair of oil paintings titled *Four Trees by a Lake in Sweden* present us with views from behind a given number of deciduous trees, their leaves having been shed during the autumn and winter months to reveal bare branches. The lake water is blue-grey in each and occupies around half of each image; the land on the opposite bank of the lake comprises a thin, undulating horizontal band; and the sky occupies the remaining proportion of each canvas. These works quietly capture the subtle nuances in colour, light and form at different times of the day and in different weather conditions, from an icy breeze on an otherwise serene day to storm clouds gathering.

Indeed, Afshar’s ability to capture the myriad different moods, atmospheres and effects that can be experienced in the Nordic landscape is impressive, and as he moves towards abstraction, the works take a step closer to the sublime. An oil and oil pastel work such as *Sunrise, Sunset; Some Rise, Some Rest* evokes, through a haze of dappled rose and gold colours on the picture plane – as if showering our eyes directly – the majesty and radiance of the light that on some special mornings or evenings both fills the sky and bathes the earth. As Afshar’s palette becomes stronger, more forceful, as it does in *Just Go Outside and Look at This*, so his brush marks become more pronounced, the ripples in the water in

the foreground rendered with almost Impressionist zeal in dark verging on black, starkly contrasting to the sky and water, which glow with a powerful orange-umber light. In the sub-series of works titled 'Reflect, Revise, Revisit', the landscape almost dissolves into pure fields of colour that are rapturous if not apocalyptic—perhaps even other worldly. The series could be said to reach its apotheosis in a work such as *Pure Painting Right in Front of our Eyes*, which offers a riotous, delirious, glorious scene of total abstraction that is somehow—if only in our mind's eye—still evocative of sky, water, air and light.

That Afshar's paintings are intended to take us beyond the literal landscape becomes even more apparent in the 2019 series 'Birth, Bounty and Joy', which as with the 'Swedish Lakescapes' series, began with *plein air* painting, though also involved other, more unusual techniques and processes, including exposing the canvases to the elements over a period of four days, and setting aside brushes at certain stages in favour of more gestural marks made by fingers, hands and other parts of the body. Worked and reworked in the artist's studio in Hampshire, England, this series of works was inspired by the birth of Afshar and his wife's first child, connecting both physically and conceptually to the artist's more corporeal approach to making the works. 'Birth, Bounty and Joy' comprises two closely related yet discrete bodies of work, 'Rainbow' and 'Utopia'. In the former—each tall, portrait-format canvases – the abstract grounds, started in the open air, retain a sense of sky, sea and land, though where each begins and ends would be harder to assert. It could even be said that there is an almost metaphysical sense of air, water and earth becoming one, unified by light and the spectrum of colours it brings with it—something symbolised, of course, by a rainbow.

These abstract landscape grounds are suffused with subtle gradations of golden yellow light, inviting dialogue with the grand baroque surroundings of the Palazzo Zenobio, as well as with the wider history of both the Palazzo and of Venice itself. The Palazzo was constructed in 1690 by the Zenobio family, a wealthy family from Verona whose origins are believed to have been in the ancient city of Palmyra, in modern-day Syria. Venice was famously a significant link to the East, a gateway bringing Byzantine, Islamic and Jewish cultures and commodities to the Western world, from the golden Byzantine mosaics on the island of Torcello to the bronze, brass and silver metalwork created in the city by makers from

Levantine countries including Syria and Iran. It is interesting to note that Afshar's own family roots are in Iran—an aspect of his life and work that was explored alongside works by fellow Iranian artists Monir Farmanfarmaian and Y. Z. Kami in the exhibition *The Garden of Mystery* at Asia House Gallery in London at the end of 2017, inspired by the writings of Persian poet and Sufi mystic Mahmoud Shabistari. Looking at the 'Birth, Bounty and Joy' series, many of these different aspects—of East and West, of spirituality, of light, of the earth, water and sky, of human life—are brought together by the artist and made manifest by the arrival of his son.

In the 'Rainbow' works, over the abstract landscape grounds, can be found all manner of marks, suggestive of the building blocks of human life—blood and bodily fluids forming and growing from the moment of conception to the moment of birth and on to life beyond the womb. The birth of a child, Afshar's paintings suggest, is analogous to the birth of the universe, to life itself. Just as light entered the darkness, energy, waves and particles formed the physical universe that we experience through the spark of life, through consciousness. This elemental, primordial sense of life coming into being can also be found in the 'Utopia' works, each in a square format measuring 92 x 92 cm. Here the ground is flatter, closer, more intimate, more flesh-like, as if holding a baby in your arms. As Afshar states, 'they are called "Utopia" because that is the feeling holding him has...'. Over, or out of, these grounds, letters emerge, almost forming words, like a child learning language and yet also reminiscent of the concept of the divine word or 'logos'. Alongside these 'words' are passages in blue oil pastel, as if scribbled by a young child. As with the paintings of an artist, Afshar seems to propose in this series, the marks a child makes are the moment human creativity touches the creation of the universe itself.

Matt Price is a publisher, editor, curator and writer based near London. His writing has been published in Frieze, Art Monthly, ArtReview, Flash Art, Modern Painters and Art Quarterly. As an editor, he has worked for Hans Ulrich Obrist, as Managing Editor of Flash Art, Milan, as Deputy Editor at ArtReview, London, as publishing manager at Serpentine Galleries, London, and as a special projects editor at Frieze, London. He was project editor of Phaidon's flagship international anthologies of contemporary painting. In 2018 he authored his first publication, The Anomie Review of Contemporary British Painting, which went straight to the top of the Amazon UK charts for contemporary art titles.

Taha Afshar in conversation with Michele Robecchi

Michele Robecchi (MR): What is a painting for you?

Taha Afshar (TA): It is almost impossible to answer this question without starting a book. My relationship to painting and its purpose has changed over the past thirty years. Today for me, painting is a means to reflect as well as an outlet of expression. It is a medium, like many others, to seek catharsis. It is a portal to hidden truths, not only internally but also within nature. It often serves a similar role as it did for the likes of Mondrian, Kandinsky, as well as for Romantic painters of the past, as a means to explore universal truths.

In order to paint you need to stop whatever you are doing and reflect. That is the first moment of truth, which forces you to ask the very basic question of what it is you want to say and how do you want to say it. This pierces through your inner being and sometimes you might seek to answer that question through the prism of art history, and sometimes you might wish to be free of it. Whichever way you choose, for me the purpose of painting is to reach and achieve the sublime, not only in terms of the experience of being in front of the easel, but also in terms of what the end product can communicate to the viewer. My intention is to be able to share insight into my version of the sublime. Painting therefore acts as a kind of catalyst and key to open the door to an invisible world; the world of mystic truths, the world of physical and metaphysical light, the world of unity. Art needs to provide this portal; for me great art needs to elevate the spirit.

In this way, painting has almost become a process of meditation, or sometimes even as much as an act of prayer. It is a kind of wormhole to a sea of love and grace, to the aspirational space where divine dreams are created.

MR: You have said your relationship to painting has changed over the past thirty years. Do you remember the moment when you came to the realization that painting could be a process of meditation?

TA: The honest answer to this question is no. It has come about very gradually. Since the age of about seventeen painting has often been some kind of personally transformative process. However, thinking about it as a kind of enlightened meditation was the primary theme for a series entitled *Letting Light In* from 2017. I would say that even from an early age, when I was doing landscape paintings en plein air with writing on them, as soon as the words started entering, you could sense that the process was one of personal dialogue and resolve. At the same time, it is not always about meditation. I can often end up having a highly disruptive, frustrated and unmeditative interaction with the canvas, striving to find beauty and bliss, only to fail, repeatedly.

MR: I would be also interested to know if once you finish a painting you are ever surprised by the result.

TA: Yes, this very often happens, especially when I work quickly. Sometimes I am rather surprised and delighted by the result. Often I try to recreate works that turned out well, only to not be able to, and this is because the element of risk, accident and randomness in my favourite works is very high. When the physical landscape – such as rain – interacts with the canvas and paint unexpectedly, the result can be works that are very hard to replicate.

MR: You started painting in your late teens. What are your earliest memories of art? What was your relationship with painting when you started?

TA: Besides being an avid five-year old collage maker, my first major step towards art started aged thirteen when a family friend bought me my first A4 sketchbook and a pencil set. Each page of the book had a drawing that was accompanied by a page of text explaining the meaning of the sketch. There were portraits, landscapes and still lives in early sketches, many with symbols and layers of meaning. This led to my first painting aged fourteen, which was a portrait with an almost surreal

quality. My next memorable oil painting aged fifteen was influenced by a work of Turner's from Venice. This acted as a stepping-stone towards two decades of continuous homage to and influence from the modern master. In this process, the transition for me was made towards creating art as a spiritual experience in close collaboration with nature.

MR: So how did the series for this exhibition in Venice come about? Did you deliberately think of Sweden as a potential place where to work or did you get inspired once you set foot in Alingsås?

TA: Since 2012 I have made four painting trips to Sweden, each of which resulted in a cycle of works. Three of these trips were to the same spot near Alingsås. The cottage there is just made for painting. It is completely isolated with a large patio edging onto a panoramic view of a utopian lake. The sunsets are euphoric. Mark Twain said that 'Happiness is a Swedish sunset – it is there for all, but most of us look the other way and lose it.' For around five years I have been going there because it is a place with no distractions, a place where I can focus exclusively on my work, dream about my work, and wake up to it, undisturbed. It is a place where I can seek to connect to my version of Zen, and express my process of reflection, meditation and reconciliation through the canvas. Caspar David Friedrich said it best when he said 'I have to stay alone in order to fully contemplate and feel nature'.

However, the last trip was pivotal in my development because it was the first time I realised and felt that I did not need to be in that spot in order to be connected fully with my creative spirit. In fact, I realised that my source of inspiration had shifted from being the landscape and universal, to simply my newly born son. In this way, there are two cycles that are almost like portraits of him, and the joyous emotion of being with him. The landscape acts as scaffolding for this abstract expressionist dialogue of reflection on his existence. One of the three cycles, however, remains primarily inspired by the landscape.

MR: Cézanne famously spent years painting Mont Sainte-Victoire over and over again; Turner painted a large number of storms at sea. In your opinion, what is the ultimate appeal of trying to capture the fleeting nature of a landscape in painting?

TA: Life is just a series of fleeting moments. If you can capture one of those, then your work is being true to life, which I hope answers your question. However, the purpose behind my work was not specifically to capture fleeting nature in the landscape. The reason I revisited the same spot repeatedly was because it became a place where I could have space, physically and metaphorically, to paint. It was a place where the vast space allowed me to truly inhale, exhale and create work which was unerringly focussed on exploring the inner worlds and underlying forces of nature. With this agenda, my first trip resulted in a series of snapshots of different times of the day, when the landscape was totally transformed each time by the movement of clouds. So, it might look like I set out to capture the fleeting moments of nature. But actually, I was just there to paint, without a preconceived vision of how the works would turn out. My submission and devotion to painting the landscape resulted in a series capturing nature at different moments. The driving force behind the works was my mindset – an openness to external and internal stimuli.

People often ask me why I go there to paint. In one way it is because I feel I have no choice, as it is the one place I can go where I know that inspiration will find me ready, with brush in hand. But the main reason is because the location and landscape is set up for deep and long reflection. Just as the sky is reflected in the lake, my thoughts are reflected in the scenery. The result is a painting which merges internal and external worlds whilst trying to reveal, expose and purely relish higher truths.

MR: Some of the paintings from this new series, like 3PM or 4PM, present written text on the canvas. As far as I am aware, the first time you made this experiment was with Spring Green Tuscan (2000). What do you think written words add to the composition?

TA: Words on paintings are very divisive, people tend to either love or hate them. For me they serve several key functions. If they appear in a work it is because they were an unextractable by-product of my creative process. A picture says a thousand words but sometimes a word can contain a thousand pictures. In the same way that songwriters or poets express themselves best through language, my mind also blends the faculty of self-expression through language with expression in line and colour. The words come to me and I express them as I am trying to be honest to my creative instincts. The paintings are the artefacts of an event where my being is just trying to express itself with the tools in my hands, and sometimes that comes in the form of words. The origin of the words is from a series of automatic nocturnal drawings from the age of seventeen. Words have been part of my creative process since then.

To answer your question directly, words add layers of meaning and experience to the composition. They reference a trail of consciousness allowing the painting to bear with it a relic of my thought process, in writing. Sometimes, they form the foundation layer of the painting; sometimes they act as vehicles, like brush marks scattering additions of colour to the painting. On other occasions they can disrupt a painting altogether, or they can resolve the work, completing it.

MR: When you add text to the work, an interesting phenomenon seems to take place. The pictorial plane moves, and the relationship between text and background is reminiscent of graffiti. Is this intentional?

TA: Yes, I sometimes do find it elevates the work to a higher level. However, the work and words need to come from a genuine and authentic source for the work to be complete and ready to leave the studio. The work needs to serve a truly cathartic purpose, it needs to be able to elevate the viewer, and

like a good story it needs a conclusion, which bears a message worth sharing and contemplating. The disruption caused by the words needs to add value and take us on a higher plane; otherwise I rework the canvas. Sometimes this process of reworking can take months or even years. Knowing when a work is truly finished is sometimes very hard indeed

Michele Robecchi is an Italian writer and curator based in London. Former Managing Editor of Flash Art (2001-2004) and Senior Editor at Contemporary Magazine (2005-2007), he is currently a Visiting Lecturer at Christie's Education and an editor at Phaidon Press, where he edited monographs on Marina Abramovic, Francis Aljys, Jorge Pardo, Stephen Shore and Ai Weiwei. He also the Commissioning Editor of Phaidon's iconic Contemporary Artists Series.

BIRTH, BOUNTY AND JOY:

Rainbow



Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Red). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 125 x 165 cm



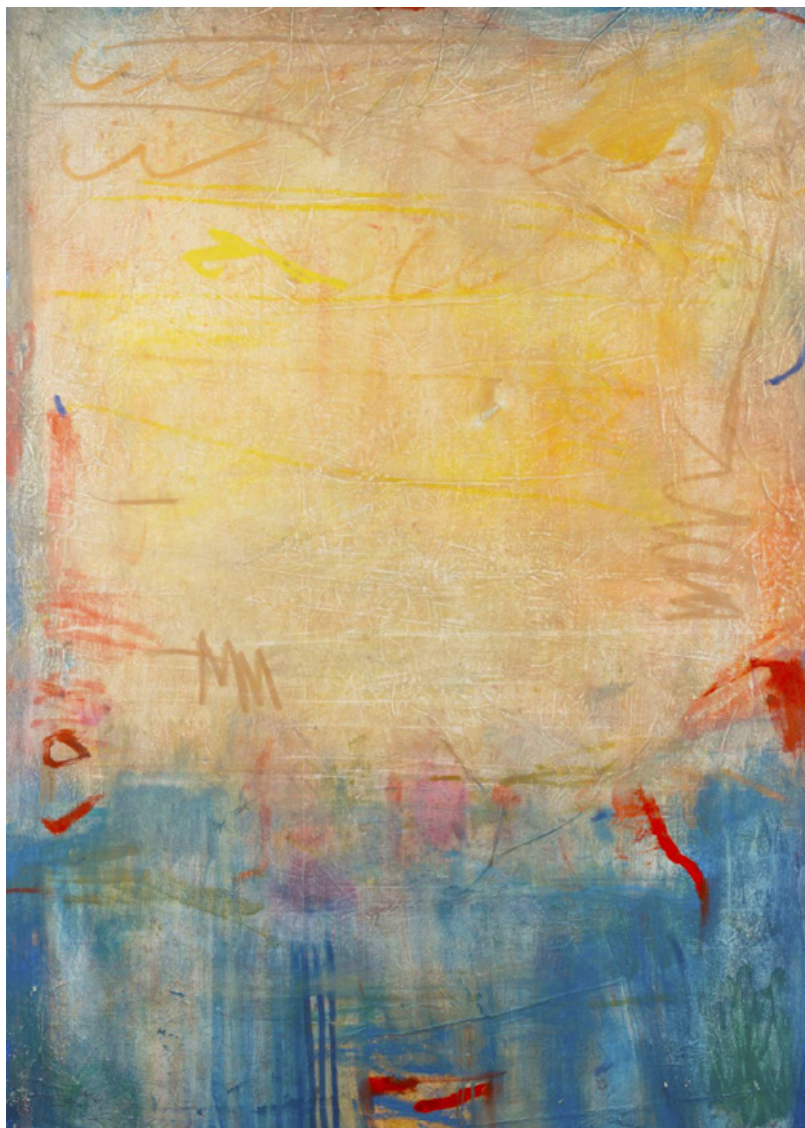
Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Orange). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 125 x 165 cm



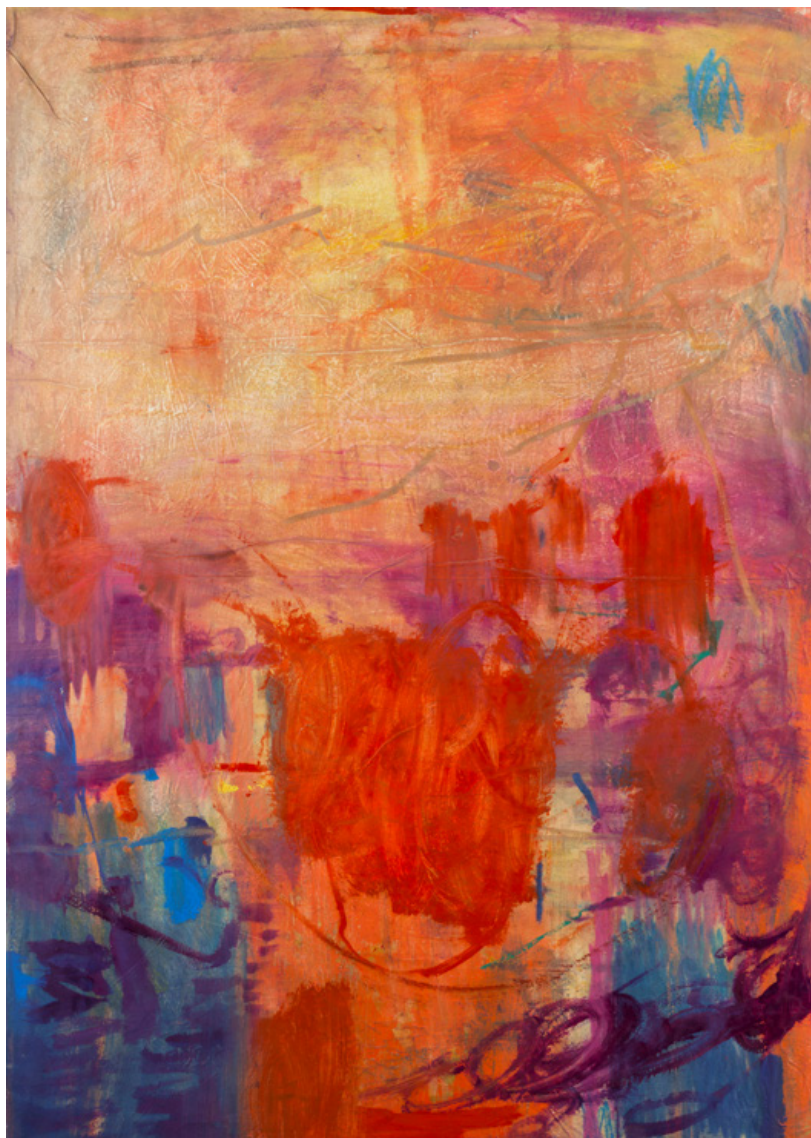
Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Yellow). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 114 x 162 cm



Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Green). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 114 x 162 cm



Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Blue). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 114 x 162 cm



Rainbow: Birth, Bounty and Joy (Purple). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 114 x 162 cm

Utopia



Utopia (1 of 5). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.



Utopia (2 of 5), 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.



Utopia (3 of 5), 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.



Utopia (4 of 5). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.



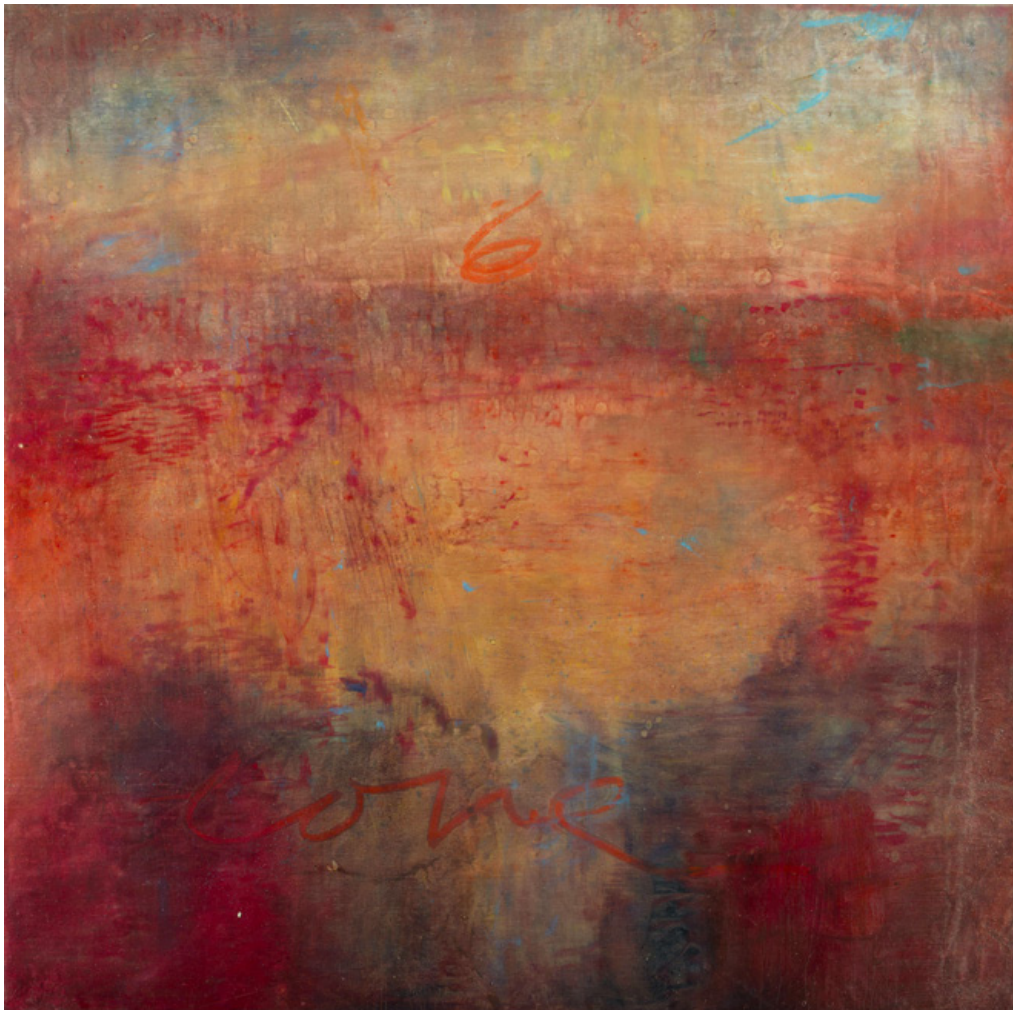
Utopia (5 of 5). 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.

SWEDISH LAKESCAPES:

Revisit, Revise, Reflect

“The world is out there doing what it’s been doing way before you came here, it’s firm and strong and it takes a lot to bring it down. So from time to time, just go outside and look at this spectacle. This is pure painting right in front of your eyes. No one created it. No one owns it. It doesn’t want anything. It doesn’t need to prove anything to anyone. It simply is.”

– Charlotte Eriksson, Author



It simply is. 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 110 x 110 cm.



Pure painting right in front of our eyes. 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 110 x 110 cm.



Sunrise, sunset; some rise, some rest. 2019. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 110 x 110 cm.



Just go outside and look at this. 2019. Oil on canvas and board. 62 x 62 cm.



Four trees by a lake in sweden (1 of 2). 2019. Oil on canvas and board. 62 x 62 cm.



Four trees by a lake in Sweden (2 of 2). 2019. Oil on canvas and board. 62 x 62 cm.

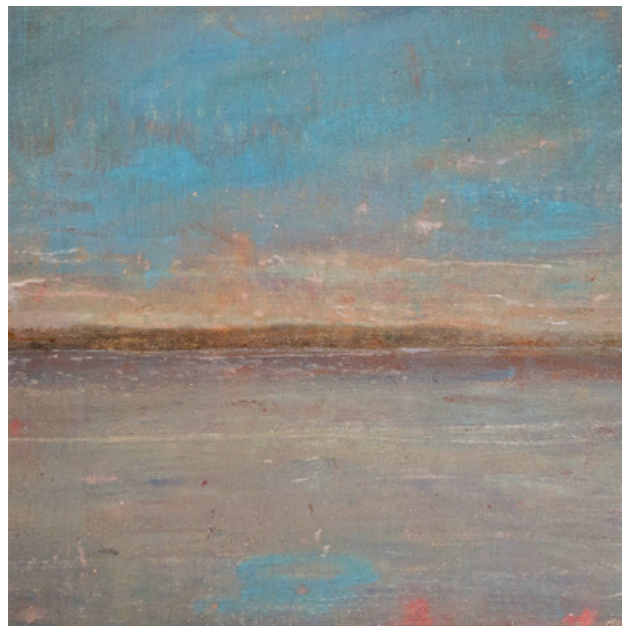


Two trees by a lake in Sweden. 2019. Oil on canvas and board. 62 x 62 cm.



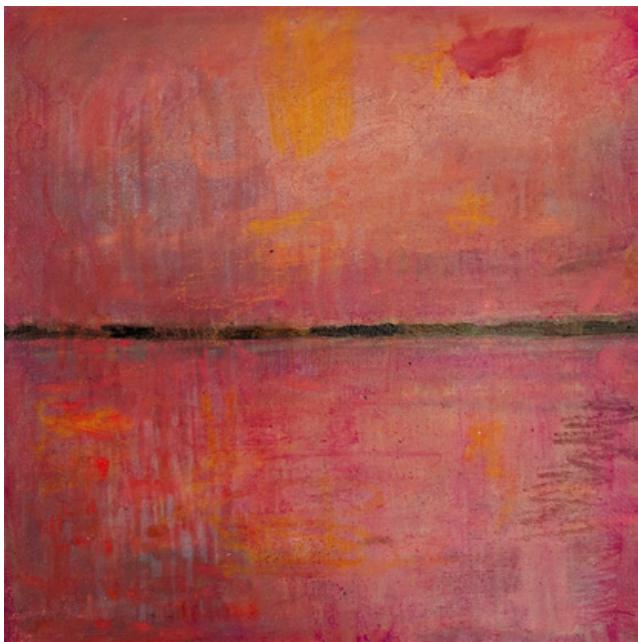
Reflect, Revise, Revisit (1 of 5). 2019.

Oil and oil pastel on canvas and board. 40 x 40 cm.



Reflect, Revise, Revisit (2 of 5). 2019.

Oil and oil pastel on canvas and board. 40 x 40 cm.



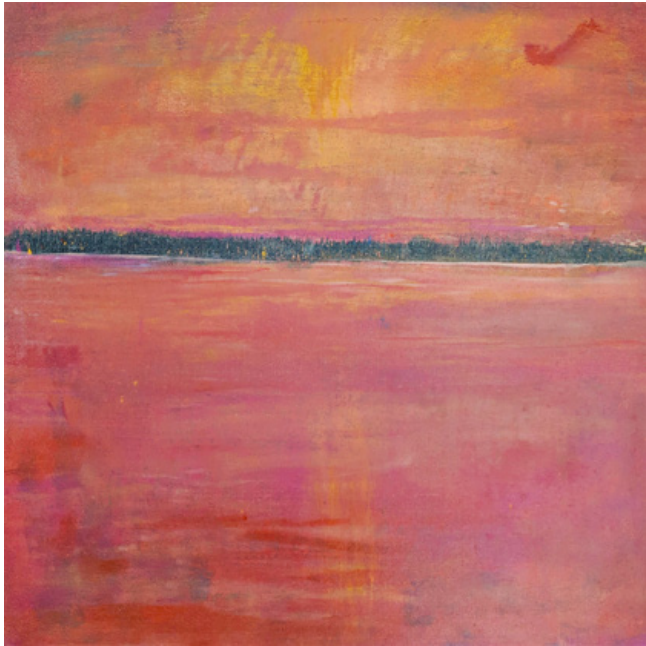
Reflect, Revise, Revisit (3 of 5). 2019.

Oil and oil pastel on canvas and board. 40 x 40 cm.



Reflect, Revise, Revisit (4 of 5). 2019.

Oil and oil pastel on canvas and board. 40 x 40 cm.



Reflect, Revise, Revisit (5 of 5). 2019.

Oil and oil pastel on canvas and board. 40 x 40 cm.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1983, Winchester, UK
Lives and works in Hampshire, UK

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 *Birth, Bounty and Joy*, Solo Exhibition, 58th Biennale di Venezia, inside of Official Pavilion at Palazzo Zenobio I, Venice, Italy.

2018 *Letting Light In*, The Minster Gallery, Winchester.

2017 *Letting Light In*, Asia House, London.

2002 *Tuscan Landscapes*, Angelus Gallery, Winchester.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019 *Malamegli Lab II*, Imagoars, Venice, Italy.

IHF Gala, Auction, London

Love Stories, The Old Biscuit Factory, London

2018 *Present, Perfect, Continuous*, Zverev Contemporary Art Centre, Moscow, Russia.

We Contemporary Art Show, Museum of Jobs Foundation, Palermo, Italy.

Singularity of Peace, Group show, Uthink Creative, London.

Artsdepot Open Exhibition, Artsdepot, London.

Fascination of World Art and Colour, “Kulturbunker”, Cultural Center Cologne-Mülheim, Cologne (March), Weißenthurm (April) and Koborn-Gondorf Town Halls (May), Germany.

2017 *Garden of Mystery: 700th Anniversary exhibition*. featuring works by Monir Farmanfarmaian and Y.Z. Kami. In collaboration with the Gagosian Gallery, The Third Line Gallery, and Rose Issa Projects, Asia House, London.

Swedish Landscapes, The Minster Gallery, Winchester.

2017 Gala Auction, Farhang Foundation, Los Angeles.

2016 Spring Show, Cadogan Contemporary, London.

New English Art Club Annual Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London.

Green and Pleasant Land, Jonathan Cooper Gallery, Park Walk, London.

Swedish Landscapes, Minster Gallery, Winchester.

2002 *Tuscan Landscapes*, Angelus Gallery, Winchester.

2001 *Autumn show*, Bell Fine Arts, Winchester.

2000 Maltby Art Gallery, Winchester.

PRIZES & AWARDS

- 2017 Nature Art Award, Special Recognition Artist, painting category.
Palm Art Award, Nominee.
- 2016 New English Art Club, Shortlisted.
- 2001 Awarded Drew Art Travel Scholarship, Winchester College.
- 2000 Maltby Young Artist prize, Winchester.

**SELECTED
PUBLICATIONS**

- 2019 *Swedish Lakescapes*. Featuring essays by Alexandra Reynolds.
- 2017 *Garden of Mystery: 700th anniversary*. Exhibition catalogue. Essays by Mariam Neza, Taha Afshar, Joobin Bekhrad. Published in association with Asia House.
Letting Light In. Essay by Alexandra Reynolds.
- 2015 Taha Afshar: Selected Works. Featuring essays by Alexandra Reynolds, James Bevan, and Josh Bradwell.
Swedish Landscapes, Taha Afshar, with essay by Alexandra Reynolds.

**SELECTED ARTISTS
TALKS**

- 2018 Talk and Q&A on *Letting Light In* solo exhibition. Minster Gallery, Winchester.
- 2017 Panel discussion on *The Garden of Mystery*, 700th anniversary and the influence of Sufism in contemporary visual arts.
Panelists: Dr Ladan Akbarnia, Curator, Islamic Collections, British Museum;
Dr Sussan Babaie, Andrew W. Mellon Reader in the Arts of Iran and Islam,
The Courtauld Institute of Art.

EDUCATION

- 2008-12 London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE),
MSc. (2005-6), and PhD., 2008-2012
- 2018 University College, London (UCL), BSc., 2002 - 2005.
- 1997- 02 Winchester College, Art, History of Art, 1997- 2002.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Hampshire County Council	The Pickwell Foundation
Contemporary Art Collection	David and Lucile Packard
Winchester College	Foundation
Monir Farmanfarmaian	Rockefeller Foundation
Ganjavian Foundation	John D. and Catherine T.
Ellen MacArthur Foundation	MacArthur Foundation
Leonardo Di Caprio Foundation	Rose Issa

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