

Fragile Frontiers – Visions on Iran’s (In)Visible Borders

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Iran’s frontiers, ever expanding or shrinking, have dictated modes of interaction with its neighbors, from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Contestations over land, language, and imperial legacy have left indelible scars on either side of its borders. In the Caucasus, Iranians came and went with ease for centuries before passports and customs offices prevented casual passages, but they were not alone. From Central Asia, Turkic populations found their way to these dominions and called it home. The Ottoman Empire, originating around 1300 CE in Anatolia, eventually vied with Russia and Iran for control of these frontier zones. The Caucasus, in both its historical and contemporary dimensions, stands out as a region of migration and resettlement. Tribes, merchants, pilgrims, pirates, slaves, or adventurers have moved in and about the countries we now associate with Azerbaijan, Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, and Russia. Such movement was possible because of the porous boundaries that had existed among these intermingling communities. Empires rose and fell, and each dynasty, through its engagement with different social groups and in distinct geographic settings, imposed territorial narratives that unraveled in the frontiers of their domains. One way in which frontier communities challenged imperial and national narratives was through breaching central authority in the borderlands. It is virtually impossible to tell the story of the Caucasus without a discussion of life in the borderlands – accounts preserved by indigenous or displaced peoples who found shelter on Baku’s Caspian port.

Like other popular passageways, Baku became a site of contestation. Battles over control of its valuable resources have wounded the city’s collective psyche. History has shown that here as elsewhere the most serious political conflicts which convulse its communities have resulted from territorial disputes, usually along volatile frontier lines. Even environmental, cultural, and social problems of different etiologies are bounded in some measure by the politics of frontiers. These conflicts have a strong historical precedent, particularly in the Caucasus and the Middle East, where people of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious origins have long shared cultural capital and environmental resources. The delineation of boundaries, whether cultural or political, has become

the cornerstone of contemporary politics and diplomacy, especially in a region plagued by frontier clashes.

YARAT's imaginative exhibition, "Fragile Frontiers – Visions on Iran's (In)Visible Borders," brings to life stories forgotten by the commotion that followed the delineation of the region's modern boundaries. Located on the edges of the Caspian Sea – a body of water shared among countries sometimes at odds – YARAT, and Baku, provide an idyllic setting for retelling this borderland history. In the modern era, the process of boundary formation upset local patterns of trade and commerce, tourism, and social contact, all of which had an enormous impact on the daily lives of ordinary women and men. The migration of peoples and goods showed how politics disrupted lives locally and encouraged the trespass of borders, sometimes with the tacit approval of colonial powers and imperial servants.

Known as a "harbour of refuge," Baku has long beguiled travelers.¹ These visitors included intellectuals, vendors, and migrant workers. The city's oil reserves, vaunted for ages, had kept Zoroastrian fire temples burning well after the retreat of its adherents. In 1913, a journal on petroleum engineering reflected on the labor conditions of Baku's oil workers. A period of "unrest" and turmoil was slowly dying down, as workers began demanding an equitable share of the profitable oil business.² Since the eighteenth century, Russia had eyed the oil fields of Baku, which had alternately attracted the interests of Iran. As control over Baku passed from Persian to Russian hands, attention to the potential of petroleum increased.³ By the late nineteenth century, even a significant investment of "English capital" was supporting the Baku petroleum industry, which had employed several thousand hands, "[a]lmost one-half" of whom "were Persians and Tartars." Other nationals involved in the oil industry included Russians and Armenians. These nameless laborers came from neighboring communities whose loosely policed borders enabled casual mingling and unobstructed passage in an era of growing ethnic and political dissent.⁴

¹ Charles Thomas Marvin, The Petroleum of the Future. Baku: The Petrolia of Europe (1883), 2: 5.

² "The Oil Age," Western Oil and Refining: Drilling, Production, Refining, Vol. 8, No. 8, September 12, 1913, p. 1.

³ Arthur Beeby-Thompson, The Oil Fields of Russia and the Russian Petroleum Industry: A Practical Handbook on the Exploration, Exploitation, and Management of Russian Oil Properties, Including Notes on the Origin of Petroleum in Russia (London: C. Lockwood and Son, 1904) pp. 3-5.

⁴ "The Oil Age," Western Oil and Refining: Drilling, Production, Refining, Vol. 8, No. 8, September 12, 1913, p. 1.

The art show, “Fragile Frontiers – Visions on Iran’s (In)Visible Borders,” opens with its poignant homage to these invisible working hands, whose discarded stained gloves carry with them forgotten personal stories of hardship and banishment in the oilfields. Entitled *Presence of Absence* (2019), Samira Hodaei’s magnificent display of intertwined gloves hangs along the exterior of YARAT’s building, which boldly confronts the Caspian Sea. With characteristic strength, the Caspian’s waters still refuse to absorb the oil seeping from nearby refineries into its brackish depths. This daunting installation gives contemporary meaning to the hidden labor of those individuals caught between national boundaries, both then and now. It creates a powerful collective identity for the thousands of unnamed workers who built an industrial complex that benefited a global economy.

This trellis of gloves dangles before YARAT’s outdoor mural, painted in soft hues of turquoise blue that mimic the undulating shades of the Caspian’s waves on a balmy afternoon. Once inside the exhibit hall, the show interprets the notion of “fragile frontiers” through multi-sensory encounters. The artists, whose personal journeys reflect these tenuous crossings, capture the experiences of Azerbaijani and Iranian communities once connected by geography, culture, and history, but today separated by rigid impositions of citizenship laws and political boundaries. Multimedia displays – from archival records to creative uses of photography, sound, and film – submit unique and contemporary understanding of boundaries as modes of division, separation, and distancing. At the same time, these aesthetic productions document the ways in which art and local resistance have tried to repel legal obstacles to frontier unity in an effort to build new bridges of understanding and amity.

The tour of the exhibit begins with Nazgol Ansarinia’s video, *Demolishing Building, Buying Waste*, in two fragments that continuously replay the process of demolition, either as an act in itself or as preparation for new construction. Ansarinia interprets the fragile boundary between construction and destruction, as a bricklayer uses his tools to tear down a wall. Yet the ambiguity of the scene begs the question: Is the contractor building something or destroying it? This uncertainty also probes the viewer’s notion of waste – what objects are being valued and for what purpose. These instruments of construction deteriorate into hopeless detritus – or do they? Waste itself wavers uneasily on the boundary of usefulness and uselessness.

The duality of construction and destruction inspires different concepts in the photographs of Dadbeh Bassiri. The construction craze that has overtaken Tehran, Iran’s capital city, has given

rise to an environmental crisis. The birth of concrete structures simultaneously signals environmental collapse. There is little escape from urban pollution. Cradled by the Alborz mountains to the north, Tehran is enveloped by smog in the south. Dadbeh Bassir's progression of images, *Untitled (Tehran Series)*, 2005-2014, encapsulates this paradox. His photographs rely on the use of a mirror laid against his camera lens that reflects the pristine clouds overhead looking down on Tehran's congested urban topography.

Across from these works, we encounter another example of video art, *Treadmill* (2017). Samira Eskandarfar juxtaposes scenes of domestic violence with tableaux of serenity capturing conjugal bliss. She explores a woman's joy in her role as homemaker even as she shuns her domestic abuse. The scenes reverberate over and over as this homemaker, free spirit, and victim is condemned to her dual existence and pushes the concurrent boundaries of marital fulfillment and exploitation.

Navid Nuur, in his batch of badges, reminds us that, despite the seemingly unyielding boundaries set up to divide and tear apart societies, we face the perennial challenge, randomness, and impossibility of avoiding shared natural resources like air. The badges, "We Share Air," (2019), left casually in an unobtrusive pile upon a pedestal, reminds viewers of the artificial nature of border walls. With their simple message that "we share air," these badges epitomize our mutual bonds and basic needs. They emphasize our connectedness and the impossibility of regulating common natural elements through contrived man-made separations.

Composition becomes art as Ghazaleh Hedayat explores the boundaries of private and public through the written word. In *Bygones* (2014-2015) Hedayat has displayed personal letters from friends, family, and other close contacts without fully divulging the intimate substance of those missives. She preserves the private even as she exposes the existence of these personal letters to a foreign public.

In an act mimicking the task of boundary negotiators, Nazgol Ansarinia takes apart a classic icon of Persian homes – the carpet – and restores it along a knitted line. The attempt to cut the carpet in half along a flat slope and then to "mend" it symbolizes the act of cutting through territories and dividing them by constructing linear boundaries. Here, the rug comes from Tabriz, the capital of Iranian Azerbaijan, *Mendings (Tabriz Carpet, 2010)*, and the stitches, although sown in such a way to preserve the careful symmetry of images that define the carpet, nonetheless question

the act of cleaving. In doing so, this piece contemplates the territorial separation of Azerbaijan. The reconstruction of the rug signifies efforts to mend a society bruised by the inexorable forces of politics. Once connected by bonds of geography and culture, Azerbaijanis have experienced many rifts. This image epitomizes their forced division, with which both Azerbaijan and Iran grapple today. It also illustrates the manner in which the national icons of one country can easily be adapted to the patriotic symbols of another and accentuate the ways in which these two societies express their mutual attachment.

In an innovative interpretation of yet another “fragile frontier,” Leila Pazooki *Untitled (Room #3)*, 2019 transports us to the universe of sound. When viewers enter “Room #3,” they confront the boundaries of dissonance and consonance, silence and sound. Pazooki offers reverence for the history of imprisonment that remains buried and silenced within the sturdy walls of YARAT’s home. The artist equates human existence with motion and sound. Every step evokes an industrial hum that signals breathing, action, and protest. Bold primary colors represent the buzzing sounds that every step elicits and symbolize personal attempts to defy the sound detectors that monitor an individual’s every movement.

Kamrooz Aram’s sequence of works – (*Elegy for blue Architecture*, 2019; *Ornamental Composition in Lapis Lazuli and Cobalt*, 2018; and *Ornamental Composition in Titanium, Cobalt and Lapis Lazuli*, 2018) – are connected by the artist’s careful use of *lapis lazuli* as a pigment and color. The artistic decision to make *lapis lazuli* the unifying element of his works hearken back to the history of art and architecture in Persianate communities, broadly conceived, from modern Afghanistan to East Asia. His incorporation of geometric elements and domed edifices gains inspiration from classical monuments of design in the Islamic world, in which ideas transformed themselves and reappeared in new guise and in distinct dynastic settings. The deep shades of blue carefully painted to show a subtle progression of color and light reflect the rich history of blue pigmentation and its use in Persianate and Islamic art.

The meaning of compliant and changing identities becomes touchingly symbolized in the life of the artist, Mirza Qadim Irevani, who experienced the tumultuous impact of the Russo-Persian wars (1804-1813 & 1826-1828) of the early nineteenth century. Having been born in Yerevan when it was a part of Qajar Iran, Irevani subsequently saw his society transform under the weight of Russian imperialism after Iran’s defeat in 1828. His artwork, *Portrait of a Sitting Woman*,

depicts the comforts of Qajar high culture as it displays the quiet femininity of Irevani's subject. The portrait provides a rare glimpse of life in a forbidden space separated by gender.

From the nineteenth century, the exhibit moves through time, bringing viewers to the contemporary challenges and realities of border crossings. Artist Nazgol Ansarinia considers the new boundaries mounted in America to regulate immigration. These laws created a new lexicon intended to legitimate the tightening of borders, a reality that emerged in the aftermath of the heartbreaking disaster of 9/11. This tragedy promptly put the Muslim world and the United States at odds. Although none of the hijackers who killed Americans in this catastrophe came from Iran, nonetheless Iran was shortly identified as an "Axis of Evil" to be resisted and contained. Ansarinia explores this "othering" of Iranians and Iranian-Americans through her creative reading and display of the contents of *NSS Books Series*, 2008. She highlights the subtle patterns articulated through the repetition of words such as "Iran" in different contexts and creates political art through her selective arrangement of this printed medium.

Gelare Khoshgozaran investigates this process of alterity through the tribulations of the unseen and at times hopeless asylum seeker. The artist's asylum I-589 application is reproduced using "blind impressions" to emphasize the nebulous and uncertain existence of the exiled and the stateless. The absence of ink conjures up the simple conditions and basic subsistence of refugees, who commingle uneasily in interstitial spaces and are forced to traverse restlessly the borders of statehood and statelessness. *Eye five eight nine: Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal* (2016) weighs the artist's deeply personal experiences of these realities. In a clever use of everyday language on the Internet Khoshgozaran further probes public understanding of politicized concepts. She creates political art from a Google search using the term, "why" – for example, "Why America?"; "Why Iran?"; "Why Saudi Arabia?" – simple questions that yield interesting hits and betray public perceptions of these countries.

In a series of evocative displays of power, which alternatively stand out as tools of violence, Sara Rahbar considers the ways in which border security is maintained. These instruments of control, or inversely of protection, and selfhood include shackles, but also representations of nationality such as flags. Through her arrangements Rahbar interrogates the connotations of home and of belonging. These works – *Take me home War series*, 2013; *You are safe here with me Flag series*, 2008; *Those silent and snowy days. I watched it all melt and melt away War series*, 2010 – speak to a desire to

locate a place called “home,” a space intended as safe and welcoming, yet elusive and unavailable at the same time. Through these icons of restraint, Rahbar watches her desires “melt away” as she appraises the antagonism between America and Iran. Home becomes an unfulfilled wish for immigrants caught between hostile worlds – an experience lived by the artist herself.

Perhaps no work best exemplifies the physical sense of enclosure felt by the construction of frontiers than Navid Nuur’s creation, *Stride*, 2017-2019. This stunning and tight space bounded by concrete walls produces at once a sense of captivity and interment even as it purports to secure a “safe haven.” It forces visitors to challenge the often dehumanizing and exclusionary rhetoric of “border walls” and boundary lines that lead to policies of exclusion and discrimination in political contexts. At the same time it recognizes the sanctity – and paucity – of safe and private spaces. The search for safety and privacy in its most extreme can lead to a dead-end, like this walled-in space itself. Nuur’s use of marbled paint on the concrete blocks, whose random designs appear shiny from one perspective but matte from another, plays with the notion of light. The far end of this cloistered space remains shrouded in darkness, while the entrance beckons light and escape. The feeling of enclosure becomes magnified by the mirror reflection above, a mirage that fools. The speckled paint continually reinforces the arbitrariness of these delineations.

Moving from literal representations of frontiers, the exhibition explores uncommon dimensions of bordering. Navid Nuur’s *Hitherto*, 2003-2019 experiments with the boundary of the accidental and the staged. In this imaginative display of a deliberately overturned car whose headlights stay lit, Nuur plays with our sense of reality, which transports us to a different universe – an experience embodied inside the car through a subtle spectacle of lights that gradually illuminates the dark interior space of the overturned automobile.

The circular shape of the earth inspires other aesthetic interpretations of frontiers, or an absence of frontiers. Navid Nuur’s *The Nightbowls* (*Antarctica, Australia, Eurasia, Africa, North and South America*), “The Formation of Earth – 2018,” showcases an arrangement of bowls, each of which defies the angular points of separation connoted by boundary lines. The roundness of the bowls signals an unbroken unity. That these bowls encompass different regions only stresses the interconnectedness of the continents and serves as a reminder that the earth provides a unitary concept for its distinct geographic zones.

Timo Nasseri's, *It's always night, or we wouldn't need light*, 2019, features an exquisite and meticulous rendition of the astronomical calculations and theories of Galileo Galilei during the seventeenth century, during which he challenged the geocentric view of the universe and instead supported the heliocentric concept of a spherical earth orbiting the sun. This awe-inspiring display, reconstructed from fine grains of sand, mimics the mathematical precision within which the universe operates, even as Nasseri chases the mysteries of the stars and celestial planets beyond our galaxy. Outer space itself becomes a luminous frontier to navigate and to pursue, but also a frontier that resists linear demarcations.

The exhibition comes full circle with two interesting displays that interpret the natural and cultural boundaries between Azerbaijan and Iran. The physical borders between these countries undergird the work of Jaleh Nesari. *A study in sound intensity in water*, 2019 considers two natural divides that have detached these communities – the Aras River and the Caspian Sea. In the nineteenth century, when the geopolitics of the Caucasus changed significantly, the negotiation of new borders created harsh realities for people who lived in these frontier zones. Nesari recalls the impact of such transformations through her video recreation of the sounds that animate these maritime boundaries. To emphasize the cultural ties between Iran and Azerbaijan – societies so unceremoniously shorn apart by imperial politics – Nesari placidly recites verses from the classic poem, “Leili and Majnun,” composed by the beloved poet, Nezami, who is claimed simultaneously by both countries. The gentle voice of the artist travels freely through these shared waters, binding together families in search of one another.

In a variety of multi-sensory representations, *Le corps fluide / The fluid body* (2019), Neda Razavipour deploys sound, memory, and touch to recreate the innocent experiences of a dip or stroll along the shores of the Caspian Sea. The mounds of sand amassed to reconstruct an infinitesimal corner of the harbor invite visitors to explore the textures of the coast and to summon the lost stories and memories that remain buried in their depths. At the same time, video images broadcast the personal histories of individuals who once frequented the Caspian coast for family outings, emphasizing the borderless essence of water and of spatial reminiscences that cross boundaries.

YARAT's “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit, located on Baku's main thoroughfare, delivers an array of thoughtful interpretations of boundaries conceived in personal, public, and political contexts.

These multifarious works broadcast exquisite stories in which the lives of everyday audiences also resonate. It compels visitors to take a moment to reflect on the struggles of migrants, exiles, and refugees. The enduring bonds of community and humanity, as depicted in these often personal and epic works of art, overpower and resist the unnatural and cowardly impulses of banishment, eviction, and deportation.

These collective works gather narratives of alienation and estrangement, even as they punctuate them with moments of familiarity and friendship. The exhibition explains why borders fascinate artists and scholars alike as zones of contact and conflict. Since the medieval era, geographers, cartographers, and travelers have preserved accounts of the local populations and societies encountered in different moments. These writings, pictorial depictions, and maps – sometimes used and abused by nationalists of all creeds – have become the basis of arguments for determining the rights of migrants, and in recent decades the rights of refugees and stateless peoples. The rise of Western colonialism, and the outbreak of wars between Russia and other powers in two global conflicts especially, resulted in the displacement of many individuals whose accounts remain untold, but which have been explored through the innovative creations of artists interpreting the notion of “Fragile Frontiers.”

Together, the works speak to the impact of boundary-making, going back to the nineteenth century, when local governments excitedly engaged in map-making and the drawing of boundary lines. These sometimes arbitrary divisions served the imperial interests of the powers with the authority to forge new territorial realities. The effect of these decisions and changes have now been imagined and explored in the lives of oil workers, ordinary families, and intellectuals. New borders inexorably altered the nature of trade, cultural production, and power. In the Caucasus and the Middle East, these boundaries became susceptible to trespassing. The “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit exposes the reasons why such identities exist in a state of flux, constantly crossing the boundaries of place and time. They also show the fragility, or delicate nature, and transience of modern identities, as well as the fragility of human nature. Laws intended to ban or to banish can easily overpower overtures in pursuit of harmony and humanity.

In the borderlands of Azerbaijan and Iran the process of boundary formation involved the increased use of passports and the designation of national citizenship among peoples that ostensibly viewed themselves as subjects of multiple states. These individuals shared social customs and

traditions on either side of a borderland. Boundary negotiators, largely Western diplomats with scant knowledge of local societies and languages, did not often address the ambiguity in locating the identities of frontier populations, who often conversed in multiple languages.

At the same time, it would be unrealistic to think that people on the ground, whether in the pre-modern or modern eras, did not adhere to some basic group identity, either sectarian, ethnic, or otherwise. With the advent of nationalism, and the emergence of new legal definitions intended to establish the sanctity of international borders and to set territorial sovereignty, the communities of the Caucasus and the Middle East have been forced to confront anew the thorny issues of citizenship and belonging. Embedded in these debates is a questioning of how and why do some migratory groups and tribes acquire states, while others do not. How do some crises receive the support and attention of the international community, while others do not? Finally, how do definitions of citizenship include and exclude people with long-standing roots in certain territorially defined communities?

Unlike pre-modern empires, modern nationalisms did not always script ideologies that accommodated diverse populations within their newly established states. Thus, the process of boundary formation in these regions was accompanied at times by simplistic ethnic demarcations that have not represented the reality of the multi-lingual and heterogeneous communities on the ground. These rigid divisions forced many minorities to flee their homes. Refugees left their native communities and struggled to find support wherever they could. YARAT's "Fragile Frontiers" exhibit, while showing the impact of the separation that has stirred the peoples of Azerbaijan and Iran, strives for increased understanding and contact. In light of the growing refugee crises in nearby countries, scholars and artists feel compelled once again to ask difficult questions about the nature of sovereignty, territorial claims, and national rights, as well as fundamental human rights, throughout these regions.

Much of the displacement experienced by Azerbaijanis and Iranians is enforced through boundary lines that divide and distance individuals in search of common cultural bonds. The history of Azerbaijani–Iranian borderlands serves as a classic example of two societies caught between the ambitions of neighboring powers – states that strove to expand their hegemony at the expense of others. The struggle for independence was hard-fought and remains complicated. These borderlands reflect a mixed cultural legacy and grapple with the politics of inclusion and exclusion at their

fringes. For many immigrants and refugees, these identities become especially malleable and fluid to ensure survival. Most refugees seek safety and survival, above all else, yet these two requisite conditions of human existence often elude them. Through its remembrance of refugees as stateless populations, the “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit scrutinizes the cracks between states that sometimes accommodate stateless individuals. In this way, it traverses the boundary of humanity and inhumanity.

The works commissioned for YARAT’s “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit evince the challenges confronting compromised populations in the borderlands of Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia. In these discussions, however, a distinction should be drawn between borderlands and frontiers. While frontiers often set linear limits on territories, borderlands refer to the interstitial spaces that become caught in frontier demarcation efforts. Large swaths of populations and territories come to define borderlands – unbounded zones of contact between states – whose delimitation grew problematic, because of political interventions and exigencies.

As governments worldwide find new ways of enforcing rigid borders, communities on the ground resist these impositions. The carefully crafted pieces showcased at YARAT’s “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit have broken through such barriers. The borderland peoples of Azerbaijan and Iran continually demonstrate how closely bound their cultural and historical roots remain. By featuring the works of artists whose complicated lives are entwined with their creations, this show emerges as a testament to their yearning for belonging and connecting – a longing that stifles the dehumanizing impulses to ban and to exclude. YARAT’s “Fragile Frontiers” concept, as portrayed by illustrators, photographers, painters, and sculptors who are trapped between worlds, shows the steadfastness with which these individuals search for a common humanity. Their identities, like the frontiers that attempt to separate them, remain “fragile.” With that fragility comes the recognition that citizens of different countries share many features, from foods, music, art, and stories – all aspects that unite as neighbors, not divide as enemies.

These artistic representations suggest that frontiers matter more than just because of their role in defining the territorial limits and the size of a state. They affect economic livelihood, commerce, culture, immigration, disease control, and pilgrimage. In other words, the very social fabric of communities impinges on the definition and supervision of state borders. While frontiers have become the mainstay of modern nations, they have at times inflicted dehumanizing and hateful

policies that refuse to recognize the rich and mixed cultural heritage of communities caught between the borders. As the perceptive writer, Abd al-Rahim Talibov Tabrizi, who is claimed by both Azerbaijan and Iran, observed in his Ketab-e Ahmad, “Ta’lim-e lisan-e Turki va Rusi keh mojavere vatan ma hastand ayb nadarad [“teaching the Russian and Turkish languages, which are [spoken] adjacent to us, is not an issue].”⁵ Talibov Tabrizi acknowledged the changing landscape of the Caucasus and the impossibility of denying the mixed linguistic heritage and shared cultural legacy of Azerbaijanis, Turks, Russians and Iranians alike. His life reflected this *mélange*, to which YARAT’s “Fragile Frontiers” exhibit pays a lasting tribute.

⁵ Abd al-Rahim, Talibov Tabrizi, Ketab-e Ahmad ya safinah-e Talebi, 2nd edition, (Tehran: Intesharat-e Shabgir, 2536), pp. 93-94.