

*Pardeh*, is not only the Persian word for curtain, but also a theatre tradition. It involves a narrator recounting a religious or mythological story, while pointing out each scene on large painted textile, hanging behind him. Upon concluding his performance, the narrator takes the textile down, carefully folds it, before carrying it to the next town, where he will repeat the same tale to a different audience. The canvases presented at Brigade were drawn or embroidered by hand on linen in Ghazaal Nasiri's studio in Oslo. Then they were taken down, folded, and shipped to Copenhagen, where they were stretched onto frames.

Most of the works in the exhibition are drawings made in pen, directly on unprimed linen. Craggy mountains are rendered in a dense and diagonal crosshatching technique in either blue or black. Hundreds of male figures, nude and bald, are drawn in bare contour, almost merging with the landscape. Where Nasiri's hand has paused, the canvas is blotted by ink, indicating a moment where she has stopped to contemplate. In one canvas men are held inside a mountain, between peaks that fill the whole surface, coming through a fold in the rock in a long diagonal. Above them, a large blot of blue ink has been allowed to bleed into the weave: a soft-edged sun that returns in several works, slightly changing shape.

In many of the old stories that the artist references, the number seven holds special significance. This is the case in *Shahnameh*, the Persian book of kings, written down by Ferdowsi around a thousand years ago. Its hero Rostam rides out to free his captured and blinded king and has to pass seven trials on the way, including a lion, a desert with no water and a dragon. In the fourth he meets a beautiful woman beside a spring who offers him food and wine, and only when he speaks a blessing over it does she reveal her true demonic form. In the final trial, Rostam encounters a demon in a cave. Its blood is what restores the king's sight.

The story feels familiar to me, someone who has never read Ferdowsi. It sounds like the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus spends ten years trying to get home and is held up by a one-eyed giant, by a witch who turns his men into pigs, by a nymph who keeps him on her island for seven years. It also sounds like Herakles, who is set twelve labours and finishes them by going down into the underworld and dragging out the dog that guards it, which has three heads. Mostly it sounds like the version I grew up with: the exile of the Pandavas, in the Hindu epic *Mahabharatam*. Five brothers lose their kingdom in a rigged game of dice and are sentenced to thirteen years in exile – twelve wandering in the forest, and a thirteenth spent in disguise, during which they must not be recognised by anyone, or the whole thing starts again. What they are being tested on is not strength. It is whether they can survive not being anybody.

Nasiri's figures are not anyone in particular, and they are stripped of the markers that would fix them to a time or a place. While her inspiration comes from epic poems about kings and heroic individuals, her own drawings depict the travels and trials of large groups of people without discernable features. The works latch onto displacement as a condition. When the *pardeh* is packed up and carried away, when migrating across countries, stories are things are folded, brought along and retold in ever-new variations.

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