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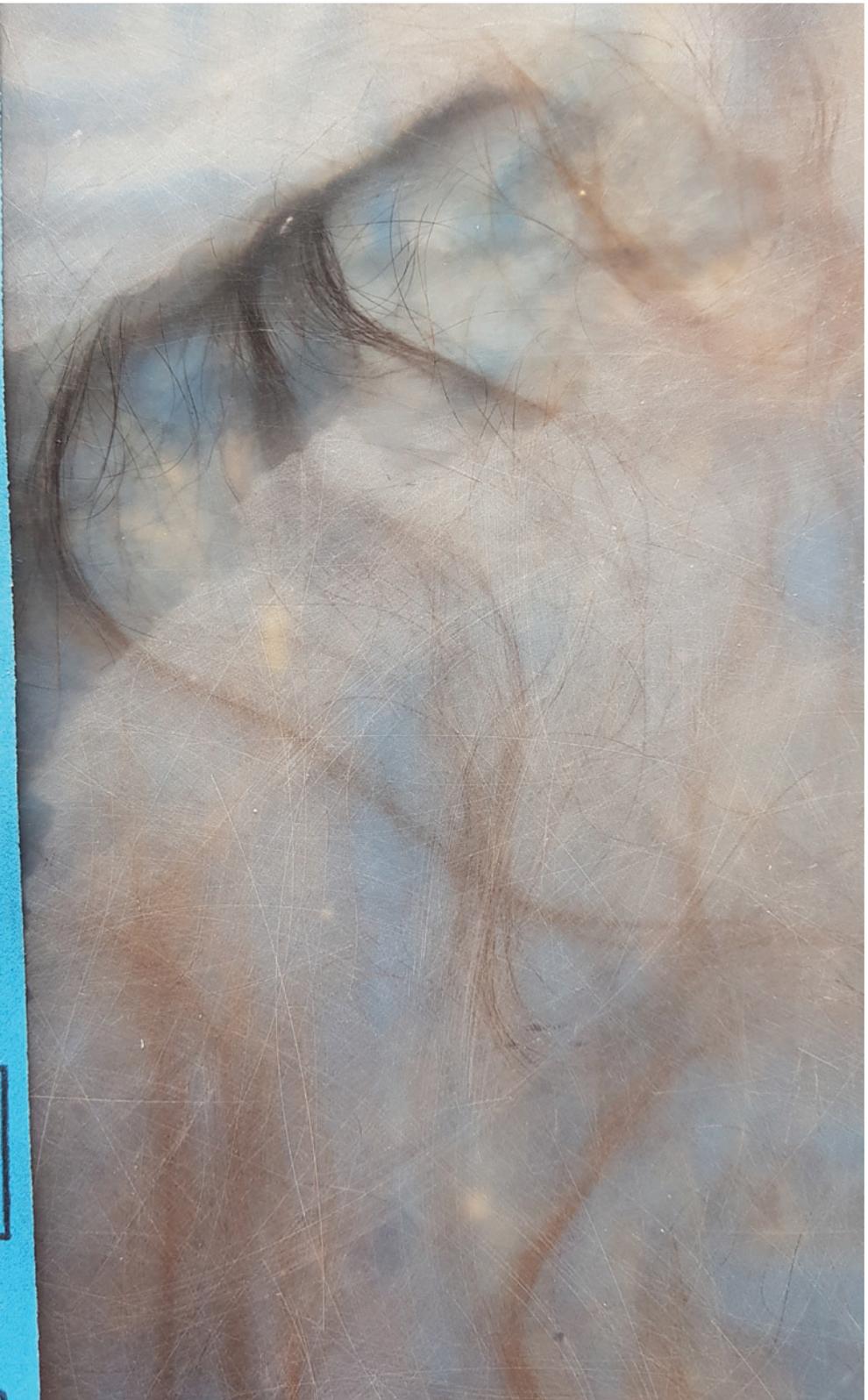
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IN THE CUTS

By Azadeh Hamzeii

2 - 18 Dec 2021

In the Cuts, Azadeh Hamzeii

Written by Madeline Brewer

As viewers of contemporary art we have an innate desire to 'get it': to prescribe meaning, unwrap experiences, and dive into the context of an artwork. This is of course paved with assumptions and projections about how an artist's perception has translated into the physical objects on display.

It is impossible to understand the concepts behind an artwork in the same way as the artist-creator. Their practice is bound by their inherently layered and complex experiences: their age and personal history, the chemicals in their brain, their body's appetites and lingering pain. Likewise, our understanding is restricted by the glorious and unavoidable fact that the differences between us as viewers will always condition the way we consume art.

Azadeh Hamzeii's *In the Cuts* is a confluence of collated and conflated events emerging from her childhood in Iran. Imparting fragments of her life as shaped by domestic spaces, Hamzeii has created a richly layered installation that deconstructs the relationships we have with commonplace objects. It is challenging to unravel every association and memory Hamzeii has tied to her work, as *In the Cuts* entangles narratives, symbols and analogies of the artist's home.

For example, the single bed and mattress uses a story told by Hamzeii's mother as a foundation. The artist tells me:

She once told me of how, when the last Iranian King was in power, she helped a persecuted girl seek refuge within the storage compartment of an old bed.

Building upon this, Hamzeii has overlapped the story imparted by her mother with sibling troublemaking. She says:

My brother and I wanted to test my mother's story. We tried it ourselves, with my brother crawling into a tight compartment inside an old bed frame. He became stuck inside, with minimal air and was unable to move for hours.

Suffocation, urgency and death are at the fore. Eventually, Hamzeii was able to free her brother. However, she describes the event and the dramatic shift from playful to life-threatening as unforgettable. The bed conveys feelings of home, security and comfort while contrasting with the ever-looming possibility of nightmares, illness and death. The emanating smell of

camphor likewise reinforces these alternating and paradoxical feelings of safety/danger, with the substance used internationally as an accessible domestic cleaning product and more locally as a traditional means of washing and sanitising corpses in Iran.

Hamzeii's brother's confinement collides with another encounter, this time of her own near drowning. She recalls:

When I was little, maybe two and a half years old, I almost drowned in a pool... the water above my head was green and I remember feeling calm.

The bed is bathed in green light and features slabs of resin cast with locks of the artist's hair. Symbolizing Hamzeii's first encounter with mortality, the physical manifestations of her distorted memories depict cyclic and universal experiences of impermanence. The pool railings complement this as a threshold; a liminal object that both enables and prevents death.

These feelings of transience are similarly reiterated by the toppled and crumpled wardrobe. While this object and its kitsch floral material may appear innocuous, the collection of items that lies beneath its conventional surface again represents portentous moments from the artist's life. For this artwork, Hamzeii describes a fabric wardrobe collapsing on herself and her brother, burying them in clothing, as a result of childhood mischief.

Like the bed, Hamzeii has used the event as a prompt to look internally. This titular wardrobe beckons the viewer to bend down and peer inside the cut oculus, an act that makes hidden elements visible: an unstable rotisserie, 'home delivery' wooden box and a pointed object resembling a minaret, a tower from which the faithful are called to prayer in Islamic religious architecture. Where the bed conjures experiences of death and mortality, this wardrobe symbolises revolution and upheaval.

These grand ideas of art and life — death, revolution, liberty — are often depicted through visually overwhelming and monumentally scaled artworks. However, *In the Cuts* returns these incomprehensible feelings to a domestic stature. In this way, the sublime and surreal aspects of the artist's work are made approachable and familiar for the viewer. The act of looking into the collapsed wardrobe, being immersed in the green light, or crouching to smell camphor, create moments of intimate exchange between the work, the viewer and the artist. All containers of memory, it is impossible to understand or relate to the narratives of each in their entirety. As viewers we may visually liken Hamzeii's encounters with temporality and suppression to that of our own experience. However, as demonstrated by *In the Cuts*, their significance will always be relative to our surroundings.

Note: All quotes from Azadeh Hamzeii in conversation with Madeline Brewer, 2021.

Image: Azadeh Hamzeii, In the Cuts, 2021.

The exhibition incorporates components of jewellery made by Alanna Bingham.

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



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