

Dances with the Mystic  
By Dr. jill moniz

HK Zamani's *Inadvertent Protagonists*, a series of paintings, sculptures and performances that began in 2018, are dances with the mystic. These works are invitations through and beyond the surface of the painting to explore inward dimensions and external realities of the intersections of form and memory.

Zamani is a master of an aesthetic interplay with experience and activation. Artifacts in his survey exhibition attest to both his expertise and willingness to push the boundaries and exercise the tensions in how we make, interpret and ultimately live with and in his imaginings. Part playful, part wistful, Zamani's engagement with materials and meanings allows for multiple sensory connections and entry points into *Inadvertent Protagonists* where we all play a part.

These large-scale paintings are titled *Inadvertent Protagonists* to reveal the inherently narrative quality of the work. Zamani is steeped in art history from his multiple degrees in studio arts to his cultural roots in Iran, one of the most important sites of prolific aesthetic heritage, and he draws on both these wellsprings to conjure imagery that speaks of remembering, forgetting, as well as human conflict and pleasure.

Driven to articulate a geometry that abstracts shape and ideation, Zamani foregrounds deep textural black forms in human scale contrasted against rich color fields. Landscape plays an illusionary role in these paintings that suggest place but also the suspension of it, and instead proffer something expressive yet self-referential, resembling fiery sunsets, the gloaming and the twilight hues. These transitional periods stretch time and space, allude to change, mystery and offer cover for the supernatural.

To deepen the sense of the internal dimensionality and sculptural experience of the works, Zamani fashions cardboard cutouts finished with house paint that are hung several feet from the paintings – protagonists facing off as themselves in reflection, not as shadow but flipped to force a conversation about contour and memory of ourselves but different. This three dimensional inverted mirroring allows the viewer to enter into Zamani's world, slightly askew, bookended black to black as ghosts from his imagination that can commune with our need to see our own otherworldly phenomena – upright, whole, unencumbered from our humanness, yet enriched by our presence.

The revelation found in this interior is at once nonmaterial and performative as well as architectural and ephemeral. Using house paint on the cutouts is allegorical and cheeky, paper pulp masquerading as durable structure, highlighting the adaptation of itself vis-a-vis the paintings reveals the transcendental relation to liminality. In between the painted surface and corporeal lies the rapture – the mystical experience of the divine. Zamani's pursuit of the cosmic connection of memory and prophetic sacred space reveals his awareness of such accidental, yet exceptional encounters in which he and the viewer are as inadvertent as characters as the works themselves. Participation is not required, but the viewer is made better for it.

Although Zamani relies on the media to communicate his message, he works intuitively, leaning into the mystical and poetic chemistry between storytelling and visual language, seeking the trance state to find his ghosts and his geometry. The success of this practice is due to Zamani's adherence to the personal as the lens for his making. His father was a mathematics teacher and an architect who took his children to historic sites steeped in ritual. In places including Isfahan where geometry is poetry, young Zamani experienced transformative art and the nexus of the hallowed and the human. And because his experiences as an immigrant and a Muslim, as a son, brother and father, and as an artist who is committed to rupturing aesthetics with the cultural realities these multiple perspectives engender, his work is always political.

Engagement through refusal and activation via complexity requires an expert hand. Zamani has for years used his art practice to critique the public sphere as well as the denigration of art through greed, exclusion and consumption without understanding. His latest *Inadvertent Protagonists* continue his art making as a subversive act whereby the sublime color, form and magnitude belie his intention to innovate his abstractions with an expression of negative space.

In these works, the past echoes the personal and political in monumental atmospheric paintings that transport the viewer into new and old environments. Unlike the earlier *Protagonist* series, these paintings are in the act of exorcism, as Zamani excises black forms from the canvas to reveal ethereal residue, while he coats the canvas's cutouts in rich deep black, keeping them attached at the base of the painting, laying protagonists at the feet of their own interiors.

Zamani examines the metaphor of loss in the hard edge of the redaction in his own longing for sacred space. These cutouts purposely resemble the Gate of All Nations at Persepolis, huge, haunting limestone columns erected in the 5th century BCE at the basin of the Mountain of Mercy, Iran. This UNESCO protected city is thought to have been the seat of the Achaemenid Empire where festivals and tributes took place. The majestic columns, topped with ornate capitals including two bulls kneeling bulls rest tail to tail, are power symbols and unparalleled architectural marvels of the time.

Zamani abstracts these historic towers while at the same time adding layers of meaning to the double entendre of the vernacular. He transforms the monument into his personal language, makes it intangible and ephemeral in the conceptual structure of the canvas, then memorializes the gap in the now foundational black object on the floor. Form is weight and the release at once.

The immersive experience of these environments is fixed by the expansive color fields from which the canvas is cut, that are encounters with Zamani's painterly hand. His early works excavating texture and form rejected the medium, feeling too superficial to signify the allegories of his work. Here the paintings collide with the narrative and sculpture architecture, transfigured to environment rooted in the past and made whole through the absence and the climatic feeling of space – the sky, the soil, the polluted horizon of progress, forgetting and longing.

Through the canvas and its loss, Zamani questions the system of valuation. Is the painting marred or more accessible with the portals into the matter and meaning occupying center

stage? Which knowledge is power? The willingness to engage as participants in Zamani's exegeses of what is sacred or the profane act of disassociation and consumption of the abject?

Always political, Zamani refuses to offer any clues to these questions. What he does do is expand his oeuvre on exposing the body through its relationship to material. Our proximity to our own humanity and the possibility of what awaits our spirits if we activate the work with our own bodies is part of Zamani's expectation and excitement about the work as the viewer activates the early Protagonist series, so we must with these works to experience the works in their entirety.

Characteristically, Zamani adds to the performance of his codex by inhabiting the static cutouts to literally bringing his body into the pieces, and by doing so animates the language of his longing. Elevating and articulating the form off the ground and into the ether of imagined space and the physicality of the painting encourages us to stitch together disparate parts of our ourselves. Zamani is performing, but not performative in the sense of language, his is occupying time and space to slow and expand his own body hidden, he becomes column, the painting, the feeling, the history of his land and his people and the global heritage of us all. His willingness to do with work is what makes him the valuable progenitor of stories and form our communities vitally right now.

The irony of UNESCO's protection of Persepolis is that it views the site through the same Western systems Zamani challenges, a system that reduces this heritage to its simplest iteration, ignoring the complexities of the people and places built around these sites. Zamani dives into that complexity, into the layers of lived experience that the viewer can see in the redacted paint and form, but equally as important, feel in work. Regardless of whether or not someone knows the ancient sites that Zamani has painted since his graduate school, the resonance of sacred place and our interior remembrances of it reverberate through the canvas as a call and response with our bodies and our spirits.

Zamani is unapologetic and unafraid to address these meaningful, but often ignored and labeled fanciful, considerations as tangible language that requires our attention in a time of isolation, fear and violence – manmade and natural reordering. We need his narratives as guideposts back to ourselves, to reclaim the memories of standing at the foot of a non-Western monument and feeling seen, heard, and known. That Zamani locates these encounters in California, the site of his own intersectionality of identities is a gift and a reminder that we are all ephemeral, all transitory corporeal forms inhabiting the landscape. Standing on the horizon of his work in the morning light, the sun's noontime zenith or the evening haze, we are here and everywhere our spirits allow us to go.