

Dancing with darkness and light

By [Kathleen Lourde](#)

• Iranian-born NWOSU Artist-in-Residence Saba Farhoudnia faces the world's darkness in her art, but extends hope in hard times

April 24, 2022



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[Saba Farhoudnia pauses for a photo in her studio on the Northwestern campus.](#)

Northwestern Oklahoma State University artist-in-residence Saba Farhoudnia softly reads aloud a poem she has written. The poem is about her painting – and her father's passing; it is dark, and yet holds out a hope.

"The world is in pain," she says. And later: "A man has gone / And the world lost its balance / The pain is visible / (...) / Like gestural lines/ Throughout the composition."

And later again, "I dance on the canvas / Dance with sorrow / Breaking the edges / Like life and death."

The poem emphasizes the balance of light and dark.

"I said in the poem, if there is no night, there are no stars," said Faroudnia. "My ideology as an artist is you have to have both in life. You cannot have happiness all the time. If you have it all the time, you are not appreciating it. As Ernest Hemingway said: "We are all broken. That's how the light gets in." Darkness and sorrows are part of our lives so then you can celebrate the rainbow and the green after a bad storm."

"So many people ask me, why don't you just make a beautiful landscape. I can't do that." Farhoudnia says if she were simply painting a landscape, "I'm sure that landscape is not going to be a happy landscape, because, while I am walking in nature I am still thinking of the battlefields that we are living, and I cannot stop thinking about discrimination, climate change and those humans and animals who are affected, so my movements (as she paints) are expressing these feelings.

"Painting is not a place where you fake it until you make it," she said. "I believe in painting. Like a child, it tells the truth."

Born Amid War



Farhoudnia was born in Iran in the midst of its eight-year war with Iraq.

During the war, her pregnant mother would go down into a basement during Iraqi attacks. "I am always thinking I am a survivor. People tell me I am a strong person, and I am thinking, now, look at Ukraine. When I see the Ukrainians and the war on the news, I ask myself, was I one of those kids, you know? It's so surreal for me. I'm like, Oh, my God – was I born and survived in a similar situation?"

"I grew up in a post-war society. In my country, when I was going to school, most of the street names were the names of the soldiers that lost their lives during the war. Watching war movies, martyrs and their portraits in murals in my hometown was part of my visual experience."

"So I cannot just be happy and make it all light. I cannot really omit the dark and dark humor in my work. It's not in my control; it's part of my experience and part of my sympathetic nature."

We look at her most recently completed painting, called "The Wind Saba." It was painted during the pandemic when social justice issues dominated the headlines. She found she wasn't getting her planned work done, "so I just blank my mind and I work on just some landscape."

But the energy of her brushstrokes made "just some landscape" an eerie, uneasy place, dark and strewn with storm debris that threatens to block out a compelling moon and its golden reflection on the greenish waters below.

"I was challenging myself," she said – how, without using clear figures, could she "represent this kind of darkness to the viewer just by landscape?"

She didn't name the painting after the darkness, however.

"Saba" is both the artist's first name, and also a word used by the poet and mystic Hafez, considered to represent the pinnacle of Persian literature. Hafez used the word to mean "a gentle breeze," or perhaps a cool breeze from the north on a hot day. It's the kind of wind that brings messages between lovers, she said.

In the painting, the moon's message is not dark.

"There is a hope coming. There's a light coming," she said. "I was thinking about light and darkness."

A New Project for Northwestern Residency

That triggered a different train of thought, and she led the way to a long table, on which lay stacks of thin mirrors – actually, a mirror-like coating applied to paper or a similar surface. The mirrors are perhaps 5 by 7 inches.



"I'm trying to make a landscape on mirrors." She holds up an initial study. "It's such a sensitive surface, because it reflects light."

But the goal is ambitious.

"I'm trying to make the viewer part of my work," she said. "You will see your own face between my brushstrokes."

"The idea came when I was in quarantine, and the only (unmasked) human face I was seeing was me, in front of a mirror or in front of my dark computer screen." She started going to Zoom meetings, and people in the groups would sometimes joke that everybody was only looking at themselves, instead of the other people in the meeting.

"So then it came to my mind, how can I represent this in my work?" How could she represent the relationship between herself and her own image, and others faced by their images, and how could it fit within her own practice and body of work?

Mirrors. Of course.

Farhoudnia indicates a mirror strewn with lines of purple acrylic. "This is just a study," she said. "If you are careful, you can see yourself." She held it up, and sure enough, everything was reflected within or behind or among the purple landscape study she'd created.

"The whole idea is that you will be part of it. And the work doesn't have a set identity; it changes part of its identity depending on its context and its environment, in the day or in the night."

She explained, "When you are an immigrant you go to a new country, and you don't lose your identity – you are still the mirror – but your life, the way you have to survive as an immigrant, is not the same."

The project involving mirrors is "very complicated, but I am just trying to figure it out. How can it work with my work? How can I bring the viewer into my stories? I will study this during my residency here. Then I will hopefully try it on a bigger scale. I am thinking deeply and searching."

Calligraphy and Change

Farhoudnia's family sent her to formal calligraphy classes when she was 9 years old. Those were her first art classes, but she'd been one of those kids born with a pencil in their hands, doodling until they fall asleep at night. "I wanted a pen instead of a doll," she said, laughing.

"The first professional class that I entered was when my parents sent me to calligraphy class. So the line was the first thing that I get to create. Later, these lines come to my brushstroke."



She enjoyed the calligraphy, but beyond the calligraphy she was exploring language and life, and after a while she found that the calligraphy wasn't enough. "I get to a position that I am just producing something," she said. "I was avoiding even going to studio, because the process made me tired."

As she transitioned to painting – she received an MFA in Iran – the calligraphy remained.

"If you see my old work, I was writing calligraphy on the background of my painting – that is Farsi in the background."

The process of writing the calligraphy onto the painting gave Farhoudnia joy in an unexpected sort of way. "We write from right to left, and so when I wrote a circular composition on the painting, I had to turn the canvas. I had to see that I wanted to start at one point, and to end (over) at the other point, so I had to turn the canvas (repeatedly). I kind of like it; the canvas moves and dances with me!"

An example of this is her painting "Ebb," featuring a seated woman in the foreground against a vivid blue background. In faint white calligraphy circling her body is a poem by Hafiz. It begins "My breast is brimful of pain" and ends "What do Hafez's tears weigh beside the abundance of Love? since in this sea, the Seven Seas appear as but a little night-dew."

'Souvenir' vs. 'Universal' Art

A few years ago, Farhoudnia moved from Iran to the Dominican Republic and then to the United States. The experience of being an immigrant affected her deeply.

"A year after my homesick time passed," Farhoudnia said, "I was thinking 'How can I, as an immigrant, make it (a painting) work that it doesn't really clearly show to the viewer where I am and where I'm from,'" in the sense of not relying on the symbols or elements of Iranian art. My mission (became) how can I make universal images as a painter, you know?"

Farhoudnia immersed herself in studying other immigrant artists' work, such as that by Tala Madani, an Iranian-American artist. "She came as a teenager to this country," said Farhoudnia. From her, Farhoudnia said, she got the idea that she didn't need to create art that was a souvenir of her country, but rather art that was universal.

"The whole idea made me go to grad school again," she said, smiling. "I thought, okay, to achieve this (goal), I need to go back to The Academy" with a focus of making universal paintings.

"It is very personal," she said. "I appreciate other artists' work when they are representing their background in their imagery, but me – we are in a time that we are becoming borderless," she said, referring more to technology than national borders. "Twenty years ago, you, as an American citizen, or a German citizen, or me as an Iranian, we didn't have a platform to go into



the bazaars or markets of Iran or Wall Street in New York. But now we have YouTube. By just a quick search, you can walk inside a mosque in Iran or be in Times Square.

"So I was deeply thinking, do I want my paintings to be a souvenir, or do I want to be a painter with a specific point of view and ideology, and make imagery that is still representing who I am – but underneath, hidden under paint and brushstrokes – and so the identity of my work is not going to (be) missed if you mention I am from Iran or not.

"I was thinking more about the work than myself. I don't want to present myself through my art except for my point of view and narrative; I just want to make something independent in itself. I give it its whole identity. I make the cake, I ice it and then I put a little cherry on top – and my personal background in my work is that cherry. If you pick off that cherry, that cake is still a cake, it is still yummy."

But a viewer may also see the cherry – the heart and vision of Farhoudnia, present in those long brushstrokes and those yellows. Hints of her can be found in the whispers of calligraphy that show up in her brushstrokes, tapping into that remembered graceful movement of line. The Persian tradition of storytelling is also indelibly linked to her art.

The Process of Creating Art

Farhoudnia begins with a sketchbook. "I want to achieve a process in my studio that I be easy and have fun as my sketchbook time."

She doesn't plan in advance; she lets the art develop as it will. "Sometimes it's not easy. The process that I have, the work tells me where I go, what's my next move.

"For example, yesterday I do a brush stroke and I am thinking maybe I do a tree, but the brushstroke tells me, no, I'm not right for a tree, you have to go in this (other) direction. So I have conversations, the way that you have a pet at home and you talk and entertain yourself, my process is the same and my paintings talk with me and they tell me what is the next.

"That's the challenge: that the material, the plasticity, the accidents happening are telling me what is happening, one by one, and I get surprised by the end. You have to be mindful in the studio as an image maker. Which is really great for me, because it motivates me to wake up and paint. And that's all I need for the rest of my life, is to just wake up and go to the studio and my happiness and joy that is happening in my process. Even the challenge and hardness of that, it still gives me motivation."

Many of her paintings tell a story. "I grew up with stories, writing poems and literature in my calligraphy class. It's part of my culture. I cannot omit it, you know," she said, laughing.



These storytelling aspects of her painting hark back to the tradition of Persian miniatures, she said. (A Persian miniature is a small painting on paper, similar to the art in illuminated manuscripts in Europe in the Middle Ages.)

A Persian miniature also tells a story, she said. One might depict "a king having a ceremony and his worker is serving him, and in the corner you can see his lover with his dear, or sending a message to someone downstairs who is her fiance – you get the idea?"

Some of her paintings tell harrowing stories. One features vague forms of men around the figure of a woman. "I was talking about honor killings happening in different countries that represent gender discrimination." She paused.

"At the same time, I was thinking about race/color discrimination here in the U.S."

She created a painting of slaves on canvas that is a form of burned cotton, and another about slaves cutting sugar cane.

Farhoudnia's painting "Dallol" is a meditation on the hottest place on earth: Dallol, Ethiopia. Dallol reportedly has held the record for the hottest average temperature in an inhabited location on earth (94 degrees F) since the 1960s. The area has an active volcano, with numerous springs, fumaroles and terraces. Camel caravans travel to the area for salt. Barely any rain ever falls – a few days a year. It's been considered a ghost town since 2005, and little climate data has been collected since then, according to online sources. Things are unlikely to have improved.

Other towns, still inhabited, cling to existence nearby.

"It is a yellow land, an acid land," Farhoudnia said. She used a special sort of yellow pigment for "Dallol."

"It's a very transparent yellow: Azo. Yellow as a color is very difficult to deal with. I was thinking about the land and the yellow paint, and these figures," she said, indicating the painting. "That is a child, and they are washing themselves in acid. And this figure is just trying to go out. Surviving and being stuck in a situation – fragments of them are in my work. You can see them in all my work."

The struggles she often tells visual stories about are just reflections of the world around us, she said, nothing more.

"I am not judging. I am just representing the reality of our world today. I am just telling real stories. Whether it's someone who passed away or was killed by his or her brother, or some animals or humans escaping from some situation; I am painting about the deceased victims and the survivors. I let the viewer judge the situation for themselves. One person could be angry,

one person might not be angry. The viewers can relate the story to themselves. I want my painting to be a mirror that the viewer finds part of themselves in."

"I don't want to dictate and push my own point of view in the imagery, I just do the work and then the thinking is the work of the viewer, because all I want to do is provoke my viewer to think."



"The Wind Saba," by Saba Farhoudnia.

<https://www.alvareviewcourier.com/story/2022/04/24/local/dancing-with-darkness-and-light/77604.html>