

## reaping the harvest:

### review of anahita norouzi's *planting displacement* at the art gallery of guelph



Figure 1: View of *Planting Displacement*. Left to right: Anahita Norouzi, “Constellational Diasporas”, 2022; “Hiding in Plain Sight”, 2022; “Remains”, 2021.

Anahita Norouzi employs the migration of plant species as the vehicle for exploring the experience of displacement. Norouzi confronts the parallel application of labels such as ‘exotic’, ‘invasive’ in regard to humans and flora.

Alsaden's curated exhibition of Norouzi's work, *Planting Displacement*, expands on this idea in a visual display employing *Heracleum persicum* (Persian hogweed) as the central motif of the relationship. The plant had been imported by Europeans into Canada from Southwest Asia, initially for its allure as an 'exotic' species. The plant is prevalent in Norouzi's ancestral homeland of Iran, and so it is known in a different context than those familiar with the specie of hogweed in Canada. There are contrasting perceptions: it is natural of the land versus it being a harm to the native flora and fauna occupying the environment. This is not just a negative regard of the plant; people are campaigning to ban its cultivation and eradicate it altogether. While it was a source of pride and admiration, now it is perceived as something to thwart in order to let others thrive.

Each of the works in the exhibition focus on hogweed, taking on various aspects of its existence and displaying it in different media, including archival documents, photographs, cyanotypes, sculptures, and videos. The work immediately encountered at the entrance to the exhibition is *what we put in. what we leave out* (2022). The work features two microscopic images, the first being a shot

of the seed of *Heracleum persicum*, and the second of the giant hogweed present in Canada. The images take on a micro perspective of the origin of the plant through its physical beginning as a reproductive pod. The work establishes how the plants are alive, how they grow



Figure 2: Anahita Norouzi, "Untitled", 2021.



and remind us that they are living beings.

Immediately following this work is a collection of glass bottles, *Untitled* (2021) (figure 2). Within the vessels are salt, pepper, and *golpar* (the seeds of *Heracleum persicum*). Ground *golpar* is an essential ingredient within Iran and Norouzi's work recognizes how the plant has been used to nourish and heal. *Untitled* also acknowledges how maintaining culinary connection fortifies diasporic communities. This is reality for many people, as culinary connections to the community is integral for maintaining memories, nostalgia, and survival. The indispensable nature is communicated by having *golpar* alongside fundamental spices such as salt and pepper, elevating the seeds to 'essential' status.

The next piece witnessed is a historical portrait. Within the image is a woman standing next to a giant hogweed plant, full of pride and small in comparison to its size (figure 3). This is one example in which the shift in perceptions is evident given that people were once proud of this species and willing to document that pride alongside the plant. The documentation of pride can be read as a spectacle of sorts. The nature of documenting for the sake of exotic spectacle also runs parallel to the orientalist regard of South Asia, such as the mythologized works of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Further along in the space is an array of dry specimens archived in frames, *Arid Florilegium* (2022). Their leaves, stalks, and flowers are visible in their preserved state. There is a second page paired with the specimen of each frame, featuring information regarding classifications omitted in order to witness simply the botanical elements. *Arid Florilegium* encourages people to witness the plant for what it is rather than attaching value through the scientific classifications and ways of understanding.

The exhibition continues with *Remains* (2021), plaster reliefs made from pieces of giant hogweed. The



Figure 3: Portrait of woman standing with hogweed plant.

fallen plant marks its place and leaves traces within the form. If the species is wiped out, these remnants will serve as records of its existence. Sharing the space is *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2022), suspended light silk fabric displaying giant hogweed in a manner reminiscent of a spectre (visible in figure 1). Illuminated from above, the celestial energy is reinforced, further emphasized through the large scale of the plant. *Remains* and *Hiding in Plain Sight* work in tandem to record the fine details of the plant in addition to giving the illusion that it is alive in the space. The animation of the plant is taken further in *Reaping What Has Been Sown* (2021), a video of the plant in a field towering above the surrounding flora. Its flowers offer a canopy though it comes with the reminder that these plants are different— they belong to elsewhere. The plant proceeds to be cut down with a scythe in an effort to eradicate the species.



Figure 4: Anahita Norouzi, “Constellational Diasporas”, 2022.

The gallery also hosts a mesmerizing display of orbs suspended from the ceiling, *Constellational Diasporas* (2022) (figure 4). They are translucent in



appearance, in gradient hues of as azure and cerulean. The spheres appear before the deep indigo of the gallery walls, further contrasted by the white ceilings and the light wood of the flooring. They appear to be floating in the space, with visitors drawn towards them as they glimmer. Within each of the orbs, one can examine the bubbles that are encased, tiny pockets of air preserved alongside the fragments of a specimen. The orbs hold light, air, and the plant itself (segmented hogweed), almost like its own ecosystem independent of the labels: ‘exotic’, ‘native’, ‘invasive’. Instead, it exists independently of an outer world, in a universe containing varying versions of itself.

The rhetoric employed in relation to hogweed is also applied to people in the same manner. Persian people once held the connotations of ‘mysterious’ and ‘alluring’ when in the context of being an appealing foreign party. Now there are perceptions with an identity that is cheap, tainted, and a burden on the systems in Western culture. Having a singular idea of a culture — or in the case of hogweed, a species— will result in a one-dimensional understanding that is without nuance, and often full of negative bias. We internalize language, as the ones directing the words and as the target of those words.

It is also critical to bring attention to 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini’s death in the custody of Iranian morality police. Her death was the result of not complying to enforced hijab rules. The subsequent protests are demanding justice for Mahsa, a movement against repression and brutality. While many people are in support of the people fighting for change and their

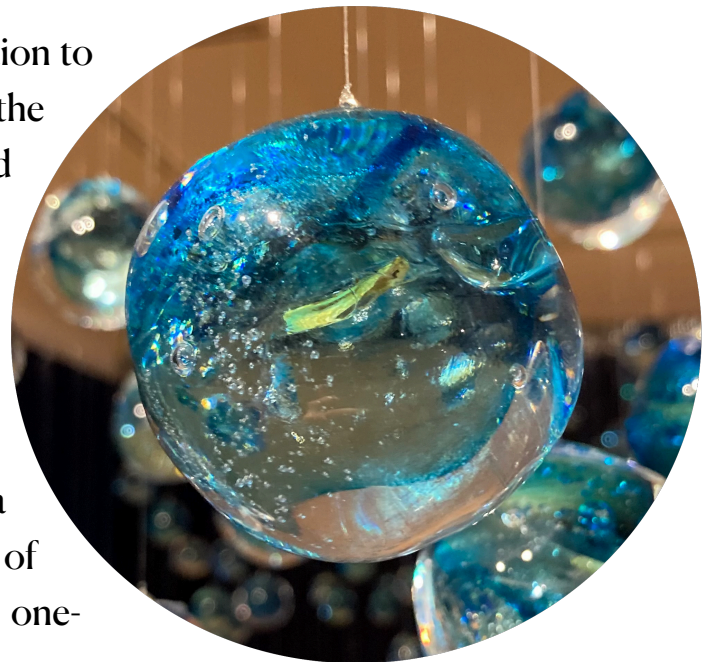


Figure 5: Detail view of Anahita Norouzi, “Constellational Diasporas”, 2022.

demonstration of solidarity, people are still taking an opportunity to take a jab at Islam. It is necessary to consider at the language we are using in response to the communities affected in order to offer support in a mindful way. That is, recognizing those that are protesting are working together to change life under the Iranian regime. It is also critical to remember in our daily lives to not use language that is alienating, dehumanizing, or hateful. While there are efforts being made to handle invasive species in the natural world, we cannot apply those methods to other people, especially since these situations are not the same. There are solutions beyond eradication.

***Planting Displacement***

**Anahita Norouzi**

**Curated by Amin Alsaden**

**Art Gallery of Guelph**

**Guelph, ON.**

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