The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Contrasts*, an exhibition by artists Sogand Tabatabaei and Mariah Vargas, at the Western Nevada College Bristlecone Gallery from May 16 – September 15, 2022. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artists, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.*

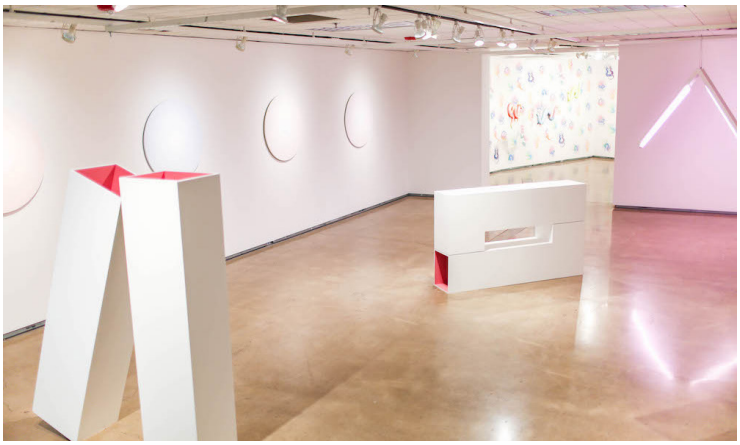
CONTRASTS

Two women walk into a gallery. One places several large, minimalist sculptures in the center of the room and the other hangs the wall with detailed collages. They call it good, and the gallery calls the exhibition "Contrasts." I'm being flippant because the curator is, too – winking at us about the gesture of showcasing two female artists side-by-side (they are both women!) and nudging at the flatness of first impressions (their work is so different!).

It's a good way to get someone to visit an exhibition. But once you're in, you realize that the real trick of "Contrasts" is the shaky pretense that these two artists – Sogand Tabatabaei and Mariah Vargas – are most compelling when in direct opposition to one another, a conceit that very quickly gives way to the more oblique (and interesting) ways that their bodies of work interact, each coming into new ways of being upon contact with the other.

That's not to say that they don't square off at all. Although being at aesthetic odds isn't the ultimate draw of Vargas' and Tabatabaei's pairing, it's the most natural place to start because the differences are so in-your-face.

Large and vaguely architectural, Vargas' white-painted-MDF rectilinear sculptures are all sharp angles, stark surfaces, and simplified form with pops of shocking pink that recall both construction beams as well as the warm interiors of bodies. Arranged into couples, the sculptures recline, stack, and butt up against one another, evoking various sex acts as well as the intimate posture of one person's head leaning against another person's shoulder. In addition to the freestanding sculptures, two thin white discs - each three feet in diameter - hang on the wall, almost passing for part of the building.



Installation View

Surrounding Vargas' work are Tabatabaei's small 14"x11" collages. Two dozen hang on the wall of the gallery, inviting scale and content comparisons with Vargas' much larger, stylistically simpler work.

Up close, the collages reveal carefully assembled domestic scenes - cut-out sofas, dining room sets, windows - all copied and pasted from magazines and catalogs onto the angled planes of floors and walls, half-rooms, and set pieces floating in space. Persian rugs and Persian rug-like patterns decorate the fake floors and textiles of the paper canvases, adding beauty to perfectly mundane foregrounds and dissonance to the bombed-out gray and gold backgrounds where mushroom clouds curl around the floating rooms like mist.

If this were not a two-person show, I would want to know which collages are based on which political conflicts in Iran (Tabatabaei's native country) and how these pieces fit into the artist's recurring themes of surveillance, pattern understanding, and memory. I would want to know how much Vargas' sculptures are an homage to her love of fabrication and how much they are an homage to her wife, who stands exactly as tall as the boxy pieces at five-feet-four-inches.



Restful, collage, 2022 - 11"x14", 2022.

But if you suffer from the disease where you have to follow the rules of the exhibition (like I do), then the point has to be the points of contact and divergence between art pieces; the handful of nodes and fault-lines along which the pieces diffract to reveal something true.

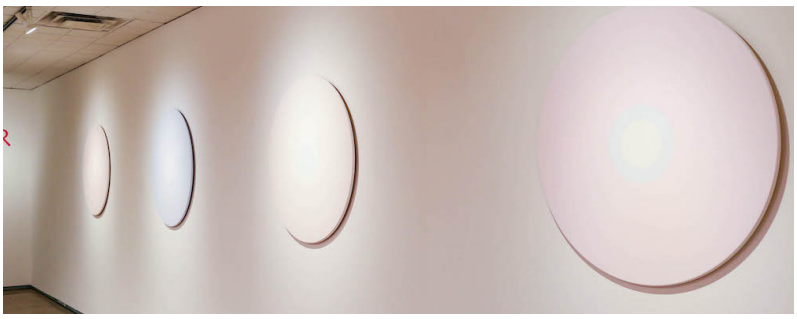
This is best seen sideways. While direct staring brings broad strokes into focus (big and small, stark and detailed, masculine and feminine), an oblique glance directs you towards patterns of interference that each art object casts into the other's space - ultimately redefining the boundaries of the work from two separate theses (Vargas' "LOVER" and Tabatabaei's "Char Diwari") to one ("Contrasts").

So, what can we say about this new body of work? Does it have an essence all its own?

Yes, it does. It is a moment of stillness that arrives in the wake of Vargas' and Tabatabaei's overlapping work and - specifically - out of the overlapping but separate traumas that they depict.

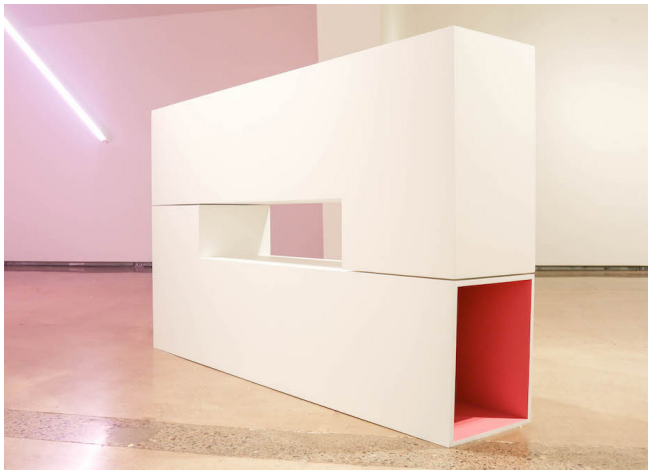
Though both artists are concerned with the self-splitting effects of traumatic ideologies and politics, each is distinct in her own brand of anxiety (which is not coincidentally female but is not exclusively female either).

Vargas' angst is twofold. By adopting the hypermasculine veneer of 1960's Minimalism, Vargas addresses the fragmenting effect that patriarchy has on identity, as well as the anxiety of influence that looks to challenge the postwar male sculptors who put form to this idea. The latter seems secondary to the main purpose of Vargas' work as it grapples with a legacy that has been taking hits for sixty years without significant damage to its original icons, even as Minimalism's dialectic moment has passed. Safe distance aside, there is no denying that clean lines and reduced geometry can provoke visceral unease that feels oppressive in whatever decade you happen to be in.


Bodies (Circles), MDF, Acrylic Paint, 36".

Vargas' two wall works are good examples of this aesthetic. Flat and circular, each almost-white MDF sculpture is affixed to the wall with the smallest amount of relief and the slightest amount of color but displaying enough hue variation to break the seriality of her precursors (Vargas originally exhibited a row of four of these pieces).

By recasting Minimalism's stark forms, Vargas questions whether her sculptures' self-assured appearances are actually hiding deep insecurities. Without surface features to parse, meaning can be projected inward – turning her larger, three-dimensional shapes into figures with inner lives. Vargas goes a step further by evoking bodies with painted pink interiors that call to mind both blood and girlishness, queering the sterility of the white surface and collapsing female suffering and male bravado into one big bundle of nerves.



Bodies (Squares) MDF, acrylic paint 64"x 15" x 14".

In a piece titled "Bodies 3," one sculpture-figure leans on her counterpart in a gesture of comfort, (possibly a hug or a head leaning on a shoulder), while two other sculpture-figures –"Bodies 1" and "Bodies 2" - break the tension with playful, suggestive posing. I think they are positioned in 69-and doggy style-intercourse, but it is tough to tell with rectangles.

On the walls of the gallery, Tabatabaei's collages also imply figures where there are none, sinking hints of human presence into open-walled living rooms, dining rooms, and bedrooms. Outside each house, cloud-like explosions push into the corners of each canvas, alluding to unrest in the Middle East and conflict in general. The neutral-colored blasts also recall photographs of eerie, black-and-white hydrogen bombs that serve as cautionary tales. They seem to say: even if you're not atomized by literal bombs, you're metaphorically there, living in atomized isolation.



Nuclear Family, collage, 11"x14", 2022.

One work, titled "Nuclear Family," portrays a pink-tiled kitchen with cut-and-pasted dining table and chairs: a former gathering space. An abandoned suitcase sits idly across from a window with a blue-sky view. Behind the room, a series of explosions grow like gray-colored flowers, up and over the walls but never spilling into the house — a stand-in for self that has either been heroically or tragically compartmentalized from the damage.

In another piece, "Enchanting," a sofa sits in a mostly empty living room atop an intricate, Persian rug that appears to lay on the same plane as the floor. Next to the sofa, five other equally intricate rugs spread out on impossible spatial planes, betraying the implied order of foregrounds and backgrounds and the presumed safety of home interiors. Outside, another bomb has gone off with no apparent effect, aside from perhaps destroying everything we can't see in frame.

Even collages that are missing explosions – such as a bedroom piece titled "Souvenir #2" – are strangely

quiet and noticeably absent of people, regardless of rumpled bedcovers and modern light fixtures that look like they belong in the middle of the gallery alongside Vargas' sculptures.

It's disorienting, going back and forth between the collages and sculptures, between the harshness of Vargas' shapes and false shelter of Tabatabaei's pieces. And despite the realization that neither world is contained or secure, there is a certain motionlessness that happens when both works combine, creating a trouble that rushes in and forms waves whose crests hang in midair. It's a moment of silence that happens when trauma - mine, yours, the artists' - enters a surface that is alive like bodies or artworks are alive. Other bodies (that are numb to their own feelings) or other images (that have become cliche and meaningless) do not prompt stillness or pause because there is no provocation, no break in the flow of language.

Being triggered is not necessarily what we look for in an exhibition, but why not? I hear women artists are really good at emotional displays.



Souvenir 2, collage, 11"x14", 2018.

Josie Glassberg

Reno, Nevada

May 2022



Sogand Tabatabaei



Mariah Vargas

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