



# External Space



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Elham Fatapour

**soil, sand, salt**

January 11th - February 26th, 2022

Before I began writing this exhibition essay I wrote down some words after my first viewing of Elham Fatapour's video *soil, sand, salt*. They are as follows:

Symbolism

Ritual

Abandonment

Concealment

Connection

Disconnect

Solitude

Ephemeral

Escape

Struggle

Marking

Unearthing

Symmetry

Balance

Temporary

As you read this exhibition essay, consider that the writer has connected with this artwork through his own lens; that of a Palestinian artist living in Canada. There is a deeper understanding of the works *soil*, *sand* and *salt*, that I connect with immediately.

The three videos (*soil*, *sand* and *salt*) were made by Elham Fatapour during her visit to Iran in 2019, and have been compiled here in a single channel video. In each video we are presented with a vast, open and barren landscape. We see the artist as the only figure. The lens is never stationary throughout the works, and thus the viewer may assume this lens to be their own, for each of us viewing this work will inevitably project our own biases through our own lens.

The artwork starts off with *soil* (2019), in which we see the artist in a desert landscape, an area that was once a part of the Tethys ocean millions of years ago. The artist is drawing in the sand, a theme that we will see throughout the three videos. Upon completion the artist is out of view of the camera, searching for the next location. Elham has brought a satellite dish with her, as a symbolic gesture to communication. As she settles on a small single room earthen structure, chunks of mud and clay are broken off from the walls and mixed with water. This mixture is then used to cover the entire satellite dish, camouflaging it, and installing it on the roof of the same earthen structure. The concealment of the dish may be a metaphor for the difficulties of communicating or perhaps a form of self-censorship, as well a direct reference to the regime's TV signal jamming that have occurred in the past in Iran. The way I read this is to recall that although the artist is back in place of origin, she may no longer feel like she belongs there anymore, nor does she feel like she belongs in her current place of residency (Canada). Like the satellite dish, she may not fit in her surroundings, therefore she will attempt to blend in.

In *sand* (2019) we continue in a similar landscape, the artist is the only figure we see. The performance we witness is the act of drawing in the sand, a temporary creation that evokes feelings of melancholia. My first instinct is to consider the briefness of our time in life. My other instinct is the traces that we leave behind for others to find, and whether or not those traces will last long enough to be found. A desert beetle is seen struggling to make its path through the sand, and for a moment its uphill journey seems impossible. Yet the beetle perseveres, giving us hope in our own journeys.

In *salt* (2019) the artist is now in an area known as salt lake, located east of the city of Qom. The lake is a remnant of the Paratethys sea, which started to dry from the Pleistocene epoch, leaving Lake Urmia and the Caspian Sea and other bodies of water. Similarly to the performance in 'Sand,' the artist creates a drawing in the salted earth, knowing it will eventually be reclaimed by nature and will cease to exist. Although salt is used to preserve and prolong, we know this drawing will not last. The drawing itself has characteristics of islamic design, seen especially in architecture. During the Abbasid Period (circa 750 - 1258 CE), Islamic artists moved toward unique imagery and developed a complex form known as the arabesque. This style of decoration is characterized by intertwining plants and abstract curvilinear motifs. The circular center in the design may allude to the satellite dish seen in 'soil' as well as the circular dome seen in mosques.

In *soil, sand, salt*, Elham's performance is layered with references to the connection with the land, physically and metaphorically. Fatapour uses the land as a canvas, medium and a stage. The artist is able to reach the viewer in a surreal manner, perhaps giving them a glimpse into her identity and lived experiences.

As mentioned earlier, I can resonate with this artwork as I'm sure many viewers who are part of a diaspora may also connect with it. It has made me imagine how I would connect with the land if given the opportunity to visit Palestine. How would I visually convey and express my thoughts to a viewer that has a different lens than mine? We witness lightning in the distance at the end of the final chapter in Elham's work, an unexpected act of nature when we consider a desert climate. This visual conclusion appears as a reminder of the serendipitous moments we encounter on our journeys.

-Ibrahim Abusitta