

Environmental art in Iran, cycle of life and death

Mahmoud Maktabi

It seems easy to write about Iranian environmental art from one point of view and difficult from another. It could be difficult to talk about recent arts though it is modern and rising; it could be easy cause of limited number of the artists and availability of their artworks. These will have been meaningful when we accept this field of art as an art movement in Iran. In this article, I will try to treat the nature and meaning of these artworks instead of classifying and dating them. Maybe I have considered culture, background and the ideas which formed these artworks. These artworks are based on relation between human and nature just like all over the world, which should be considered and cared again. Cause of this, I have chosen "death and life" as main subject for this essay so I can discuss the cycling relation between human and nature.

Introduction

We could consider two aspects of environmental art in, first the artists own ideas and concerns and second the cultural context which forms their idea. There could be seen concerns with nature and environment and some political and social attitude. Iranian artists deal the ecological issues as other artists in the world, so they face too many ecological problems such as dries of lakes and swamps, extinction of local animals, cities pollution, ignorance to consistent development and etc. These problems are usually caused by government inattention, overconsumption of natural resources, changing the ecosystem and etc. These issues are serious concerns of artists which sometimes they mix with social and political attitudes.

Nevertheless in most of cases these artworks could not do anything for these issues and they usually just act as an alarm buzz which reminds us the problems, so there is a huge difference between them and ecological art specially the American version. The probable question is that is it the weak point of these artworks or a special feature of that? The answer should be found in the cultural context and the artists' worldview. These topics are not separated for sure and this is not a feature of Iranian environmental art but it is a character of all the Iranians. It could be said that Iranians are really influenced by their cultural background which is compounded with poetry and literature.

The Iranian philosophy, art and culture is always compounded with poetry especially the classic ones. You cannot find an Iranian who has not memorized a poem or a house without Sa'di, Hafez, Molana and Ferdowsi's (the Iranian classic poets) book, despite the fact it has been 700 years since the death of the last classical Iranian poet. Nikos Kazantzakis's wife in her memories said: "I had seen nowhere in the world that a poet's tomb could be a shrine for the people! You may be the only nation who has such a spiritual relation with your poets and they have a desire to live with you in your everyday life." (Shayegan, 1393, P.2)

Such a relation has both positive and negative aspects; the positive aspect is to have a strong context based on these old patterns which could prepare the inquired samples just like a permanent treasure.

And the negative part is that this relation would barricade the artist's mind to act independent. This dependence to the myths and ancient beliefs caused a huge difference between Iranian artists and American and European ones. Actually this feature is not just limited to Iran and it could be seen in Asia and some other Eastern countries.

This interest in myths and olden pattern could be even dangerous, as Jalal Satari says: "because in this circumstance myths think for and pro us, it would prevent us from thinking." (Satari, 1388, P8) actually the myths and patterns decide for "us" and make us thinking; although they might discuss a human fact, there is still no "ego", as we could see in rituals they usually believe in powers beyond humanity. So the individual and initiative thinking has less value, In this case thinking would be replaced by "anamnesis", and if there was no chance to negotiate in such societies the consequence would be nothing but frustration and undeveloped, cause the culture is somewhere to negotiate based on historical wisdom and consciousness since and artists play an important role here. So most of the Iranian artists challenge with these issues; on one hand, they have myths and the olden patterns in mind and on the other hand, they face with modern culture, technology, and wide communications with other societies and of course concerns of their own.

Reflection of death in Iranian environmental art and myths

A point that should be mentioned here is the relation between "death" and "anamnesis" and remembrance. Plato believed we should be reminded world of the Ideas for understanding the beauty and truth our spirit drinks from the "Lethe" river at the beginning of the life, so the spirit will forget the immediate observation of Ideas; this amnesia would be activated only by anamnesis and philosophical consideration, so death is a return to initiate and perfect condition. (Eliade, 1963, p.128, 129). Cause of that, amnesia does not mean just forgetting our ancient and mythological history but it means forgetting the world of Ideas and Paradigms which inherited us by myths and traditions.

Anamnesis caused the awareness which could awake our amnesia and lead us to the real truth. In this condition death is a kind of awareness and a path through this world to the other world that we forgot by coming to this world. So it's the reason that death is recognized as the other born by the ancient societies. The topic that Mircea Eliade mentions it this way: "in the entire traditional world, death is a reborn and the beginning of a new spiritual life, but this new life in opposite of the last one is not a natural life and it means that this life does not refer to come but it refers to create." (Eliade, 1976-1393, p.100)

Shahrokh Meskoob, an Iranologist, has analyzed the "Death of Siavash" (an Iranian myth) which helps us to understand the cited subject. Meskoob said that "Death of Siavash" and the other stories of Shahnameh have a main idea: "one can live whom can die" (Bahar, 1390, p.365) actually the ability of admission has the main role in these heroes' character and behaviors. Meskoob divides the humans approach to death into three categories: sunset, night and sunrise. Sunset is the death of ones who has not chosen death and death is obligatory for them, so they have no other way and they are forced to accept that. As he said this category of humans are perfect/imperfect ones. They are imperfect because

they are imperfect in the world and its condition. The night category is the ones who can't accept death so they are suffering from night and darkness and they can't match Being. But the sunrise is death of humans who choose death optionally; these men are the heroes they choose death so there is no death for them, there is just a leave. Of course according to the Iranians believe a divine confirmation is needed for this kind of a death. For example "Kay-Khosrow" (the Iranian king) has this confirmation in Shahnameh. As you see, death could be beautiful despite its passion because it has the ability to carry us to our original place and our reality. Let me discuss this subject in the artist artwork. First artwork that I want to analyze is "Death of nature, death of human" (Pic. No 1) by "Raheleh Zomorodinia". This work consisted of a bandaged person just like a mummy among nature; this image and its title indeed remind us death. Her ecological view could be easily seen in her artwork but the beauty of the image is somehow bolder than her vision.



Pic-No.1-Raheleh-Zomorodinia-Destruction-of-Nature, Destruction-of-Human-Being

Although she notices death of nature and death of human as a consequence, her images are not horrifying at all; this imagery is related to Iranian beliefs which I discussed before. I want to compare this artwork with an Old Iranian painting. "Death of Shirin" (Pic. No 2) is an Iranian adorable painting with gorgeous colors despite it is about death and it shows Shirin (Armenian princess) as she had committed suicide and the crowd of courtiers and servants are surrounding her.

This painting is based on a poem and the story of "Khosrow and Shirin"; as Shirin committed suicide because her beloved "Khosrow" is murdered. Her death is not supposed to be so passionate because it seems they are going to reach each other again, that means here passing is pleasant.



Pic-No.2-Death of Shirin

Maybe it is an Iranian mood that always we try to alter real events to ultra-real and mythic one. Kevorkian in his book *“Les Jardins du desir”* writes: “it’s not denied surprising that Iranian painter has concentrated his imagery on “other thing” instead of the revealed subjects. The palace we make visible, soldiers who fight, does not belong to this world. Painter always tries to make colorful jewelry-like images and calmly interesting imagery, he can simulate paradise on the earth in this way.” (Kevorkian, 1983, p17)

In both observed pictures death is the basic theme but both artists are trying to show and interpret it in a different way. This is the point which consideration will replace by reminding. Why do these artists show death so pleasant? However, I emphasize death is not the same in these artworks but the artists have a close idea. I could not be said absolutely, I just explore the origins that impact on Iranian artists’ mind through the ages.

Next artworks I want to analyze with death theme are created by Ahmad Nadalian. The life and artworks of Ahmad Nadalian have been considered by several critics. His boldest feature is use of mythical symbols and motifs and presenting them via contemporary art. In addition, His operation and execution arise of ancient origins cause of using myths. He sculpts reliefs among the mountains as the Iranian mythic hero “Farhad” did it for his beloved. He does this work alone and doesn’t care whether there be

audiences or not. He explores nature under rain for some hours to find the appropriate stone which is a feature differs him from others. His exclusive respect for nature and his art and his behavior is mostly a ritual behavior than the common relation between contemporary man and nature.

Now the question is that the lovely fishes (Pic. No 3) which carved by him and leaved through the mountains and rivers all over the world are the alternative to what? Again he reminds us the death of fishes and nature falling into decline. Nevertheless death is such beautified here that we can't see the presence of it at the first sight. He told John k. Grande in an interview: "I want my work to emphasize both the obsolescence and decay of nature, and a utopian ideal that speaks of its renewal. I wanted to return to good health, to a paradise. In this polluted world, untouched nature can be a paradise. But it turned out that the paradise of my childhood was, and still is, rapidly disappearing. There were no more rushing rivers. The dwindling streams were full of plastic bags and trash, which had replaced the fish. No one prayed for rain anymore. The sky had turned away from us. People no longer believed in the divinity of water, of the elements. I wanted to visualize that lost paradise for myself. The fish that I carve are alive for me." (Grande, 2006, p 34)



Pic-No.3- Ahmad-Nadalian-Fish- Haraz River-2000

It's not a common approach for all the artists, indeed. For instance, Atefeh Khas shows the real face of nature in her artwork collection "Reflection of me" (Pic. No 4). She doesn't make any changes in nature indeed; she just makes the audiences aware of realistic situation. Nooshin Naficy is other artist who considered death and decay of nature. "Zayanderud birds" (Pic. No 5) is the title of one of her artworks she operate it as a reaction to drying of "Zayanderud" river in Esfahan. Naficy mostly cares about Iranian goddess in her artworks but here in "Zayanderud birds" she used "Alam" which is a staff for Ashuraritual in Iran, it means she is mourning in a symbolic way for Zayanderud birds. The abstract white birds on these "Alam"s remind us the birds they were dye or immigrate from Zayanderud after it dries.

Fereshteh Alamshah is another artist who draws attention to nature decay. She has worked on the topic “death” in her artwork collection “spirit of tree” (Pic. No 6) and “Jonah fishes”. However comparing to Nadalian fishes we can see death here more clearly but her artworks still just remind us the issue and not judge about anything. She is trying to use mythical and ancient stories like “Jonah the profit” to express her modern concerns.



Pic-No.4-- Atefeh Khas- Reflection of me- Photo by Shahrnaz Zarkesh- Bishe Waterfall -2014



Pic-No.5- Nooshin Naficy- Requiem of the Zaindeh Rood's birds- 2011 - Photo by Faraz Okhowat



Pic-No.6-Fereshteh-Alamshah-sprit-of-tree

As it seems there is no attempt to save nature and develop the country in Iran and we can't anticipate the politicians, scientists and etc. to do anything for that. Despite the serious concerns of artists for the environment they have never done some projects such as "Wheatfield" (Pic. No 7) by Agnes dense, "time landscape" by Alan Sonfist and "lawn in the desert" in By Kathryn miller. Therefore the artists are became just the mourner after the catastropheswhich imposed on the environment.

But this mourning can be considered as a ritual movement rather than a solution for the environment because the drought is an old issue in Iran. Lots of stories about the humans and drought and all of them have somehow a same plot: the god of rain goes to fight with the evil of drought and he will fail fist time so next time all the humans and gods and goddesses will pray for him and he can conquer the evil this time and finally there will be rain. This story happens at first day of creation and it will repeat as a cycle every year. There is a god in Mesopotamia civilization named "Dumuzi" who is the god of blessing, he dies every year at beginning of summer and he will come back from the world of the death after an interval and everything will be refreshed again.



Pic-No.7- Agnes dense- Wheatfield- USA

This story has been transformed to the story of “Siavash” in Iran. Siavash dies and he will reborn but people mourn for him in a ritual ceremony. The word “Siavash” means a man with a black face which mentions that he would return from the world of death. Women should mourn in front of the others in ritual ceremony of mourning for Siavash this way, they can release the magic of water and the goddess of water will cry with them which means rain. (Bahar, 1390, p.264, 287) Mourning for Siavash had become so common in Iran and gradually transformed to religious mourning as we saw that in Nooshin Naficy artworks.

So all the artworks related to death have a ritual basic in their background which ask God a kind of bless. This ancient thinking is expressed in a modern way in the artist’s works but the base is usually the same.

Another way people used to motivate nature to bless them is to do some acts and ceremonies which prove that the humans and nature are unified and sometimes people try to characterize nature elements in these ceremonies. For example in Tirgan ceremony people pour water on each other to motivate nature to rain. Actually these ritual ceremonies are looking for conjure nature as the painting on the clays and buildings in ancient ages have the same role. The weird creations that were a combination of human and animals had the same role too and used to power humans and nature.



Pic-No.8 -Tara-Goodarzy-Fairy

This ritual behavior can be seen frequently in most of Iranian artists work such as Tara Goodarzy, Raheleh Zomorodinia, Mahmoud Maktabi, Nooshin Naficy, Parisa Rajabian, Fereshteh Alamshah, Ahmad Nadalian, Atefeh Khas, Shahnaz Zarkesh, open 5 group and.... Tara Goodarzy in several artworks such as “fairy” (Pic. No 8), “the stone” “hair” and ... experienced the unifying with nature. In one of her artwork “the Offering” (Pic. No 9) she performed this kind of magic and unifying with nature. She is standing toward pouring water in a white dress which is coloring every time with dust, mud, and coal and...



Pic-No.9- Tara-Goodarzy-Offering

In some performances water is replacing with fire and ash. This pouring of water may not have a relation with “Tirgan” ceremony or the others but this artist call the nature element to her and put her body against them. This being infected has lots of meaning in myths especially when the performer is a woman. Gender is a frequent theme in most of female Iranian artists, for example it can be noticed to Nooshin Naficy’s artwork related to water and earth. Water is female in ancient Iranian beliefs and every fountain has its own goddess, so it is the reason that bringing water from sources was the women duty in ancient Iran and did it by a man was count as a rape. Therefore Nooshin Naficy and Tara Goodarzy’s artworks such as “mothers of earth” or “playing with water” can have a special meaning because of their sex.



Pic-No.10-Nooshin-Naficy-My Nanas- Polour- photo by Signe Muoler- 2008

Naficy herself says about her artwork collection “mothers of earth” (Pic.10) Hormoz Island are in praise of water and the female spirit of water who knows as “Anahita” the goddess. The word Anahita means pure water; she is the guardian goddess of pure water... I noticed two important topics in my artworks, the topics that I inspired Iranian myths: first, primitive human considered himself as a harmonic energy with nature, they was part of universe themselves. His position was not to defeat nature but it was to be alongside nature elements and keep balance between humane and nature and create peaceful and mutual life for them. The second one is that primitive human respect the female spirit of nature and admire it. They praised several goddesses such as the goddess of fertility, blessing, agriculture, love, moon, Water, earth that shows they respect the direct relation between women and nature. So I create my own goddess of water for praising and respecting nature and have a maternal relation with them, they appeared for a single moment and joined water again and became a part of that after a short while. (Nooshin Naficy’s website)

Even weeping in mourning ceremonies was women’s duty because it’s a symbol of fertility rain and death could always remove by crying, as dead seed would come out of soil when rain touch it. (Bahar, 1390, p.299)



Pic-No.11- Mahmoud-Maktabi-Mazda Afarideh- 2014

Other artwork with such a feature is “Mazda Afarideh” (Pic. No 11) by Mahmoud Maktabi. He faces us to a wired face with a thorn attached on it, this face gained power of tree in one hand and it looks for power a dead tree in other hand, dead tree which needs human power to stand again. Hamid Nourabadi is another artist who uses the combination of his body and nature. He covers his body with mud and tries to simulate his body as the natural textures. (Pic. No 12) however, these performances don’t have a relation with the recent social and philosophical events and mostly have the ritual theme I discussed before.

The holiness and importance of nature may not be considered by people these days and lots of myths are forgotten or changed but the fact is people still have a strong relation with their roots and backgrounds

even if they are aware of that anymore. But what is the definition of these suffered people of life? The people who lived in dried area and cried for rain all times. Whatever I said about death in Iranian myths could be said more about life. However death and life are the cycles that complete each others. As we saw death could be nice when it means a new life.



Pic-No.12-Hamid-Nourabadi

The lost Paradise, life in environmental art and Iranian myths

Geographic variation is an effective point on Iranian environmental art. However a wide area in Iran is desert but access to the entire climate in for season prepares a unique condition for Iranian artists. In spite of these differences all people in this country have a common feature and it is being idealist. Richard Ettinghausen said about Iranian art: “the main point in Iranian exhibition may notice the audience at first sight is artist has a completely different goal and idea. The Iranian artist is not tried to make a huge painting or figurative statue but he is dedicated himself to create and beautify objects which has a use in everyday life instead.” (Ettinghausen, 1979, p 10, 11) This point is very accurate; Iranians are usually brought paradise to their tiny houses instead of looking for it in other places. It is the reason that beauty can be seen in their everyday life and objects such as dishes and carpets and etc. Royal sample of this act are Iranian gardens which are paradises on the earth. (Pic. No 13).

Paradise originally means “the best place”, Zoroastrian imaged the paradise with a big tree shadows the entire world it likens “tuba tree” in Islamic thought. There was some garden in Iran at Achaemenian era named “pairidaeza” (the sealed castle) which was equal to the paradise. This word transmitted to Europe and changed to some words all of them means paradise. (Greek: paradeisos, paradisi: French, paradise: English, paradies: German)” (Yahaqi, 1388, p. 229, 230)



Pic-No.13-Persian-Garden-Shazdeh

These gardens which also called “pleasure garden” are place in the geographical location of desert which is extremely wide with no trees or rivers therefore these gardens literally means the paradisemade by human beings. (Masoudi, 1388, p. 21) Ettinghausen mentions all the Iranian interest in garden and carpet and reminds the dry climate of Iran and says: “best way in this boring and unattractive world was the pleasure that was presented by a garden. Therefore the adorable Iranian carpets were created as the symbol of the gardens. (Pic. No 14)

Because the carpets were fresh all the times and accessible for those who were not so rich, they were suitable alternative for Paradise on the earth.” (Ettinghausen, 1979, p 10, 14)



Pic-No.14-Persian-Carpet

Such an idealist thought exists in Iranian literature, philosophy and art. Some of the conventional critics in Iran consider the Iranian garden as first simple of environmental art but this approach doesn't mean anything and it seems to be somehow a fake characterizing. The most thing actually exists in Iranian environmental art is the view which remains from the way of making a garden and the people's lifestyle. Ahmad Nadalian about his works and their relation with nature and Iranian gardens says: "Ancient Persian culture and gardens have been a significant influence on my work. But I consider my strongest influences to be first, nomadic lifestyle of my ancestors and their closeness to nature, and second, bas-reliefs dating back to the earliest Iranian civilizations. Buried deep in heart of the Iranian hillsides, nature serve these carvings as a setting for art. I wish to return to nature I call my own, to be a part of it. My life surrounded by nature, and the harmony I have found there have led to formation of a language in which both material and content are derived from nature. I didn't choose to work with nature; it chose me, it mesmerized me and taught me how to re-present what seemed irretrievably lost. The choices may have been instinctual; maybe I was seeking my lost paradise, the paradise of my childhood memories, a longing for the ways of my ancestors. In this polluted world, untouched nature can be a paradise. I want to ensure the continued flow of life. I feel that my work maintains a symbolic layer of stories, eternal legends and endangered symbols." (Grande, 2006, p 33)

The goddess and symbols such as embryo, moon, animals and planets which are the signs of fertility in Nadalian works show that he appreciates life as well as death. His print (Pic. No 15) on the sands are all including motifs of animals and planet which are symbol of life again.



Pic-No.15-Ahmad-Nadalian -Sand-Print

Another artist who has her little paradise is "Farzaneh Najafi" she uses in her several artworks the symbols such as pomegranate, cedar (Pic. No 16) and birds and her "fish garden" (Pic. No 17) shows her interest in nature and have a little paradise at home. She uses the traditional motifs in her artwork such as Paisley and cedar which is an evergreen tree. Using the herbal and animal motifs is not just dedicated to environmental art and it could be seen so earlier in Iranian painting and architecture. Using these

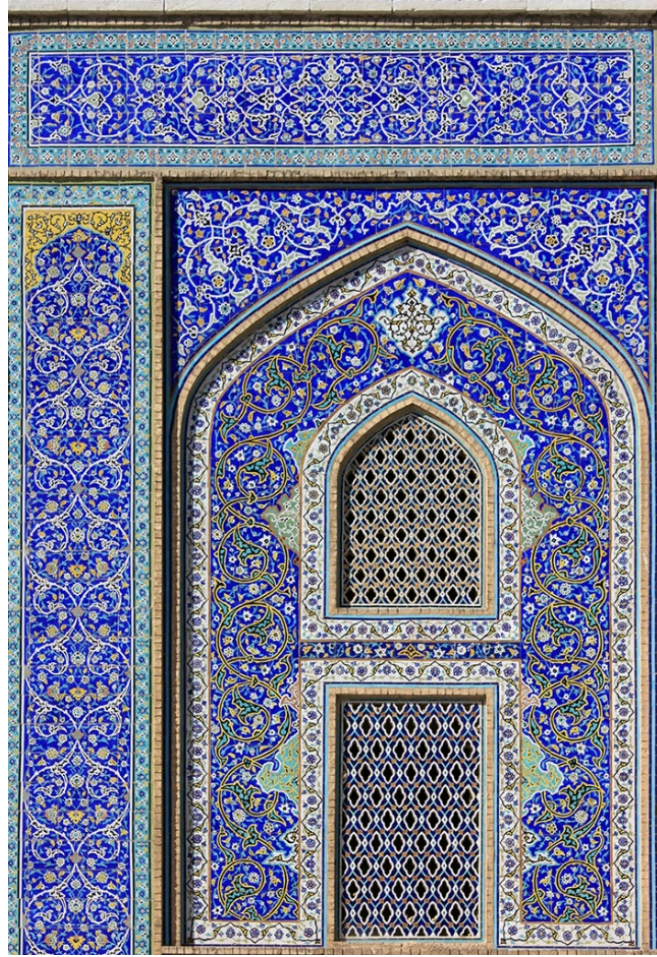
motifs is not necessarily the result of prohibition of painting the human figure. The nature motifs has a base in people approach to nature then this approach combined with the religious beliefs and can be seen with a new style in Islamic art.



Pic-No.16-Farzaneh-Najafi



Pic-No.17- Farzaneh Najafi- Circle project, Farm Fish- Babolsar- Iran



Pic-No.18-Shah-Mosque-Iranian-Tiles-herbal and animal motifs

“Islamic art is a kind of art that has nothing to do with material it just save the elements which can be admired ever.” So the herbal and animal motifs (Pic. No 18) are not the alternative for human icon but also they are looking for something inverted. “Decorating a surface with a texture of lights and colors prevents the audience mind to concentrate on the means of “me” as an image is saying “me” (Burckhardt, 1987, p. 229)

“Seventy thousand curtains” (Pic. No 19) by “Open5 group” is a represent of religious story of Ascension of Mohammad and the Seventy thousand angels who welcomes him and coming to see him. In this artwork Nature is the background here and it been avoided to show the participating girls faces. So all details are telling us a religious story, any person, motif or color is not emphasized here. This feeling of immortality is the same as we saw in “the Death of Shirin” and there is entirely exist in Iranian painting, architecture and carpet. There is empty space in it the entire picture is the positive space as it’s raised up from the paradise and immortal life.



Pic-No.19-Open5 group- Seventy-thousand curtains

The last artist I want to feature his art works is “Karim Alakhani”. He made impressive artworks that all of them are based on ancient but creative thinking. One of them is the artwork “Water, Desert and Us” (Pic. No 20). He has installed more than 900 vases and 900 clay of water in 2500 m² in Lut desert of Iran. This artwork is absolutely about asking bless from nature and of course here the artist has built a big garden and temporary paradise with a mythological point of view. In his other work named “resistance” (Pic. No 21). He has put the cedar saplings in sand and rose water blocks and after the final installation the cedar saplings came out of the blocks in the seven hours process. In this process audiences smell the aroma of rose water which used to make the blocks instead of water. Cedar as the evergreen tree is the symbol of liberality and freedom in Iran “it smells nice when burning and because of that it always been cared and supposed as an immortal tree... according to the Iranian stories, Zoroaster brought this tree from paradise and plant it in front of the temple” (Yahaqi, 1388, p. 459, 460) coming out from the blocks is a symbol of this immortality in this artwork.



Pic-No.20-Karim Alakhani-Water-Desert-and-us



Pic-No.21-Karim Alahkhani-Resistance

Conclusion

It was a short review on the works of Iranian environmental artists who always have to main concerns. The first one is to create a new movement in Iranian contemporary art and join the global movements of art and nature. The second one is to have unique style for themselves as the Iranian artist, the artist who feces the adorable background on his history and culture in one hand and the modern concern in the other hand. It is quite clear that artists experience this process all around the world but Iranian special feature is their attachment to the ancient patterns and beliefs. So as we saw this feature can bold their artworks but the problem is that their artworks have not any effect on the issues such as nature decay and etc., and they just remind us some problem.

However in developing countries usually no one seriously takes care about nature and ecology and it's not a challenge only for artists so these kinds of artworks can be a start to build a new culture. The cycle of life and death in nature, art and thinking and the artworks sometimes remind us the forgotten stories to live again in a new way and express new ideas that will replace with the old beliefs and patterns.

Reference:

- 1- Shayegan, Dariush, *PanjEghlimeHozour*, FarhangMoaser publication, Tehran, 1393
- 2- Satari, Jalal, *OstouregivaFarhikhtegi*, Sales Publication, Tehran, 1388
- 3- Eliade, Mircea, *Aspects du mythe*, Gallimand, nrf, (Collection idees), 1976
- 4- Eliade, Mircea, *Occultisme, sorcellerie, et mode culturelle*, Gallimand, 1976
- 5- Bahar, Mehrdad, *AzOstoureh ta Tarikh*, Cheshmeh Publication, Tehran, 7th edition, 1390
- 6- Kevorkian. A.M/ Siere, J.P, *Les jardins du desir: Sept siecles de peinturepersane* (French Edition), Phebus, 1983
- 7- Grande, John.K, Nadalian: River art, (Interview with Ahmad Nadalian), *Espace: Art actuel*, n^o 76, 2006, p 32-34 (<http://www.erudit.org/culture/espace1041666/espace1050096/8869ac.pdf>)
- 8- Ettinghausen, Richard, Yarshater, Ehsan, *Highlights of Persian art*, westviwe press, inc., Colorado, 1979
- 9- Yahaghi, Mohammad Jafar, *Farhange astir vadastanvarehadaradabiatefarsi*, FargangeMoaser publication, 2th edition, Tehran, 1388
- 10- Masoudi, Abbas, *Bazshenasi-e- bagheirani- bagheshazde*, Faza publication, Tehran, 1388
11. http://www.webart.com/riverart/notes/john_Grande/persian/index.htm
12. <http://www.nooshinnaficy.com/>