

On how to connect with your artistic intuition



Artist Nasim Hantehzadeh discusses how to learn to trust yourself, experimenting every day, and the importance of community

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As told to Paasha Motamedi, 2961 words.

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Your work is highly exuberant and full of life. Yes, there's confrontation, there's intimidation, but I'm curious if you could unpack where joy is an act of resistance in your work, either in the finished paintings or anywhere in your process.

I tend to be very playful, and really allow that childish part of me to come out and experiment, and be free, and do what intuitively comes out. I try to get to that point, and that's when the best results come.

When I feel like I can't get to that place of being childish and playful, and making decisions from there, then it's time to get out of the studio. That means it's not time to make art, so I have to go do something else—go on a hike, or something like that.

In your creative process, when you do get to that sort of impasse—when you're not in that beginner-mind, zen-mind, childlike way of thinking—is the day gone, or can you find your way back into it? If so, what's something that's helpful to you?

It's just a matter of timing. It's not, "How much art do you make every day?" It's literally time. If there are no deadlines, it's not like, "Oh, every day I make this much art," because time doesn't really exist. I just make art when I make art, and it happens to be every day, but it really depends.

It really depends how long I stay in that state. I don't know, it might be an hour or 30 minutes, and then I come back to it. I might have just been hungry, and then I come back and make art again. Or it might be, "Oh, I need to empty my mind," and I need to go to nature and sit by myself and, I don't know, watch the river or something. Or go to the gym, do some physical activity, exercise, get out of my head, and then I'll come back again and I'll be good.



Nasim Hantehzadeh, *Suction Helps Breathing Air*, 2025, oil paint, oil stick, and acrylic on line, 78 3/4 x 98 3/8 inch

If we go back to written art history, it's mostly written through the lens of a straight white man. That doesn't help me, because I cannot relate. I can feel so many things that are censored—not to go too deeply into what censorship is—but things literally are not written because they're not understood, or it just wasn't a conversation, or it wasn't something institutions were interested in educating people on.

Art history is written under a patriarchal society. It's been patriarchal for so long that I don't remember many resources that are, let's say, gender-fluid. A lot of them have been removed, and are not being practiced, and you have to look for so long to see if you can find a sign, like the book that I showed you, and it's random to find them.

I was reading... Paasha, have you read *The Book of Kings*? That's a mythology from before Iran was invaded by Islam, and it's basically about Zoroastrian kings and so on. It's also very patriarchal, but then I was trying to think, maybe it's only been interpreted in a patriarchal way. Because when I read the book, to me there are so many queer signs. There are so many—like, a group of men in nature, in the desert, in the middle of the battlefield for months. Tell me if that's not queer. What is it, then?

Yeah, it reminds me of the Barbara Kruger work, "You construct intricate rituals to touch the skin of other men," and how the only times that men are really available to each other physically is bullying, war, and sports. Those are the only times we're allowed to touch one another.

Caravaggio's paintings are all about that. The violence and the touch.

On this topic, I'm curious what rules you've learned to break as an artist, as a painter, as someone who's non-binary. I'm curious what rules you've learned to break, and maybe if there's something recently where you were like, "I don't actually need to do that anymore, it doesn't serve me," and what that transition was like—stepping outside of the old playbook into Nasim's playbook.

I ask questions, and only if a rule does not make sense, then I modify it in a way that makes sense for me, and I follow that. I don't know if that's called breaking rules.



Nasim Hantehzadeh, *Snowflakes Falling into the Ocean of Poppies*, 2025, acrylic on linen, 31 1/2 x 53 1/4 inches

Rewriting a rule could be interpreted as breaking the rule. As artists, it's important to manage what you let in and what you keep out. There's so much talk about what's right, what's the thing to do, what's correct—and you have to find what's right for you.

Yeah, and it's interesting in terms of art. Recently, in the past nine months or a year and a half or so, I started to play with material that helps me have more fluid mark-making. When you put language around those kinds of marks, they go under the category of abstraction. But to me, the way I was using it, I was trying to literally portray the sensation of a fluid—a mark-making that shows that kind of thing. In this new body of work from the

past nine months, I've used that kind of mark-making in a very representational way.

The common sense might be, "These are more abstract forms," but how they're being used is very important. To me, they might actually be more representational. For example, I have this painting that is literally about my childhood memory of going under the water and looking up—looking at the reflection of light on the surface of the water with my goggles, from under the water. I tried to show that in the painting, and there are so many fluid marks in that painting, and it's a small painting. The sensation you get is like, "Okay, yeah, it makes sense because they're fluid and water is fluid," or like if you look at a fountain.

The sensation I was looking for as a kid was to feel calm, because there was so much tension when I was becoming a teenager and my body was changing. My understanding was that I'm supposed to have more and more freedom because I'm becoming an adult, but it was like that childish freedom was shrinking more and more. For me, the way my body was becoming objectified—I'd put it under the category of violence.



Nasim Hantehzadeh, *Dancing Together in the Belly*, 2025, oil pastel, soft pastel, color pencil, and graphite on paper, 74 x 52 inches

And it was coming from inside the house. Inside the house was similar to outside of the house, under Islamic laws. That objectification of the body was coming from following Islamic laws, which are very patriarchal, and repress women's bodies in order to control them. So my coping mechanism was to go under the water and look up so I would calm down. And when you look at the painting, it does have the same sensation.

But then, when you look at the same mark-making in other paintings—for example, one where I'm trying to show this fluid coming out of a figurative form. A figurative form doesn't necessarily need to look like a human form, but there's a figurative form, and it's like, "Who is this trying to get out?" When you can't really rely on what you've been told—for example, you've been told you can live in a country with peace and all of this, and then there's war, your house is getting bombed, and the hospital is bombed—only people can help people. That fluid coming out also uses those so-called "abstract" forms, but it's being shown representationally.

So that's kind of my way of pushing the boundaries, or reintroducing different ways that you can use abstraction or representation.

I'm curious what—not necessarily which specific pockets of community in Los Angeles—but what community looks like to you as an artist, which can often be a very isolating occupation, passion, and love. What does community look like to you? What does people helping people look like to you as an artist who may spend a large part of their day in the studio?

I do spend time in my studio, and then I spend time out of the studio. I have my artist friends, I have my family—who don't live in LA—but I have other friends who are not artists, but they understand artists. A lot of times, indirectly, what I paint is usually coming from interactions that I've had with my friends, honestly. Or they introduce me to resources I didn't know, like, "Have you heard of this movie? Have you heard of this song?"

Most of the time, with music, I'm like... I came to the United States not listening to many Western songs, so I think I've missed a section of what people had when they were teenagers and younger—in their early twenties, late teens. There's a section that I'm missing, and it's true that every time they're vibing with the music and I'm like, "What is this?" they're like, "What? You don't know? You don't know about this?"

I'm like, "Yeah, tell me," and then I'm vibing with it in the studio for a few days, and then I get over it because I've listened to it too much. So I relate to my friends and my community in different ways.

I introduce them to many other resources they didn't know about, too. By community, I mean: who is going to be there for you, and who is not going to answer your texts when you need help. For that, I would say I have a few artist friends who are really there. I've known them since the first few years that I moved to LA, and we help each other grow. Some grow and drift off to their own way because we are so different now, and that's okay too.



Nasim Hantehzadeh, *Swinging Left*, 2025, oil paint, oil stick, and acrylic on canvas, 64 x 72 inches

Yeah. I'm curious, because you're talking about these different media that were new to you but very well known to other people. I'm thinking of Frank O'Hara, the great American New York poet who had a deep relationship with painters. He was an associate curator at MoMA for a few years. Poetry and painting have always made sense to me together. Is there another form of art that you connect with on a deep level, and maybe even have personal relationships that started from that admiration?

Yeah. I love writers and creative writers, short-story writers, novel writers. I think they're so smart, because what I can't talk or write—and I do that in my paintings—they can elaborate on and write about, and describe in a way that people can understand.

Visual communication is important, but the most impactful way of communicating is what writers can do, which I can't. They can even communicate about my paintings to other people. I feel like they have so much power, and that power is very important—that verbal power, that ability to... I'm just mesmerized by it. I just have so many writer crushes. They're so good.

I'm actually reading one of the novels that one of my friends wrote, and they worked on it partly when they were

at Yaddo. We were both at Yaddo. It's an artist residency in upstate New York, and they come visit LA sometimes when they have tours and stuff, and we hang out.

Got you. I'm curious: what is one creative habit that you always have to fight against, and how do you fight against it? As a writer, I seem to only write two kinds of poems: angry "fuck you, America" poems, and breakup poems. Those are easy wheelhouses for me to stick within. I can always write one on the spot, no problem. But I don't always want my oeuvre to be about that. Are there things that creep into your work where you're like, "Okay, that's enough"?

That's a hard question because I don't know if I let it get there, because I always try to make something new happen every single time I make a painting. That habit, I think, has put me in a zone where I'm always trying new things.

For example, I don't decide, "Let's make a painting about moving to the United States." I don't decide that. I make a painting first, and then I become the viewer of my painting. Or halfway through, it kind of comes to me what it is about. Or maybe I have an experience while I'm making the painting, and I'm like, "Oh, wait, this is what the painting can be," and then it becomes that. But it's always coming from the inside—from a sense of narrative. Coming from the inside means I don't target politics directly when I make art. I come from the experience, from the memory, from what it is to be an individual here now, and what I feel. I try to be aware of what that feeling is linked to.

That's how whatever is coming from the inside becomes public and more common; the experience becomes more shared, and I can share it with other people through painting. I don't know if that makes sense.

How or when did you realize that you wanted to paint? What was that process like for you? And, in your more professional life, what was your arrival like when you got there?

I kind of always knew I wanted to paint. I always knew I wanted to paint. It was a matter of how to convince the people around me that this is what I want to do, this is what I'm doing with my life.



Nasim Hantehzadeh, *Getting the Knots Out*, 2025, oil paint and oil stick on linen, 71 x 63 inches

I think it was the people around me who had a problem understanding or accepting that this is what I'm doing. Maybe... let's say my mom has understood that I'm a painter in the past year—it's not even one year. To her, I am an artist. It's been one year that she finally accepted that I'm an artist. But I always knew I wanted to be one. From childhood I wanted to be an artist.

I was always consistent and good at making paintings. I've tried other mediums, like sculpture and ceramics, and I would go back and forth, but my approach is always painterly, and I don't last long in those mediums. I always come back to painting.

That makes sense. I guess on that journey of trying out different things and arriving—or re-arriving—at this place where it's like, "No, it's painting," what surprised you on that journey?

It was surprising to realize that you always have to trust yourself and your gut, and you are right, even though the whole planet is telling you you're not right. You are right.

That's surprising to realize during the process, because sometimes it's hard to stay centered and grounded. For example, there are times when I need new tools to cope, re-center, and ground myself because something has happened that has made my sense of trust go away, or has made my emotions not be in balance with my mind. So my mind is saying something, and my emotions are feeling the opposite, and they can't meet in the center.

For those times, I need to find new tools to feel grounded again and to re-center. Those are the times when, once I become grounded again, I've usually learned something really special—and that special thing makes me feel surprised.

You mentioned the word "grounding." With such visceral work, so many of the paintings include what look like different organs of the body. I'm curious what role the body plays both in your process of physically painting, and then, more theoretically, in the work itself.

I think it's very interesting, because it literally is about the body, and it's hard to say what role it plays. Good question.

Generally speaking, there are so many organs in the paintings—human organs and genitalia, or non-human forms that I play with. The figurative forms that I introduce to the viewer are playful, and sometimes hard to swallow, because those parts of the body that were supposed to be in a specific place are not there. They're being used in ways they're not "supposed" to be, and that's weird.

So those parts of the body that are supposed to be on a human body are not used in that sense. That playfulness or fluidity is not to assign a specific sex, gender, or social identity. It is there to innovate and cancel that binary—to suggest gender fluidity, or just that they're "things." They're not as important as you think. That binary of female and male is not as important as you think.

Nasim Hantehzadeh recommends

[Poor Things](#) directed by Yorgos Lanthimos

[The Devil's Backbone](#) directed by Guillermo Del Toro

[The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington](#)

[Artist Pippa Garner](#)

[Ash Reshteh](#)

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