

AARON YASSIN

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## Painting EPITAPHIOS and Performing SYSTEMS

By Aaron Yassin



Raha Raissnia,  
"0111",  
Oil on Canvas,  
79 x 77 inches, 2004.  
Courtesy of:  
Thomas Erben Gallery

Aaron Yassin interviews Raha Raissnia

Raha Raissnia (born 1968 in Teheran, Iran) is a painter of intense abstract images. Her first solo exhibition at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York featured five monumental canvases. Operating as reductions, her canvases evidence essential binary oppositions, black versus white, figure versus ground, and light versus dark. These opposing forces create a feeling of constant struggle within the shallow pictorial space Raissnia employs. This is immediately apparent in the visceral surfaces built in many layers through the use of scraping and sanding.

As an extension of Raissnia activity as a painter she has been performing collaboratively with the electronic music composer Briggan Krauss. She manipulates hand painted acetate strips that are projected through a vintage projector while Krauss manipulates sound through two laptop computers. Both performers embrace their respective medium while responding to each other through improvisation. As a result they achieve a unique seamless combination of the analog and digital worlds.

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**NY Arts:** Can you tell me a little about yourself, you were born in Iran?

**Raissnia:** Yes, I was born in Tehran. I grew up in an apartment in the heart of the city, in a very urban environment. Tehran at the time was a very westernized, secular and modern city. For the most part I had a very comfortable happy childhood. Beginning in first grade I went to an old French Catholic school in the oldest part of the city, which was run by French nuns. I have very strong memories from that place that I now notice have influenced me.

**NY Arts:** Do you remember the revolution? What effect did it have on your life?

**Raissnia:** Everything changed around 1980 with the revolution. The American Embassy, where the hostages were taken, was right behind our house. Schools were shut down for more than a year and the French nuns were sent back to France. The new government changed everything. They even rewrote all school texts starting from first grade. They had to go back and put veils on every illustration of any females. The long war with Iraq began and three years into it we left.

**NY Arts:** What was it like coming from Iran to Texas?

**Raissnia:** It was bizarre, so different, a real culture shock. But the greatest thing was that my brother was there and I got to be with him. Unfortunately, my father stayed back in Iran and after about three years passed away unexpectedly. It was very tragic.

**NY Arts:** Did your interest in art start after you moved to Texas?

**Raissnia:** No, It happened because of my father. He was an artist in spirit, and was particularly interested in literature. Yet, it was my Mother who made it possible for me to study painting privately at an early age with a distinguished painter in Iran. I continued studying art when we moved to the States, all through High School and later in art schools.

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**NY Arts:** Let's talk about the work in the show. There are six black and white oil paintings. Five are large canvases, measuring 77 x 79 inches. Can you talk a little about the process of making these paintings?

**Raissnia:** It starts with an idea or a thought. I see it first, although later that initial vision gets completely lost. My process is visceral and the paintings go through a lot of transformation. I change the paintings through means of erasures, sanding and scraping to make reformations. This way I avoid losing the image. I like the process to retain its flow on the same surface, so I feel more connected to it and can be more in control and can go through it without any interruption.

**NY Arts:** Why have you chosen to work only in black and white?

**Raissnia:** I did a series of drawings in graphite on white paper this last summer in Iran where I worked continuously through a vigorous uninterrupted flow. When I came back to New York I immediately wanted to transfer the same intensity into painting. I thought color could get in the way. Later the idea of black and white gave certain implications that were interesting to me. So I stayed with it.

**NY Arts:** The forms in the images develop an interesting syntax. They suggest figurative elements, other-worldly or sci-fi forms, yet there is also a haunting quality of natural light. How have you arrived at this combination?

**Raissnia:** With these new works I have returned to my earlier interest in the figure and architecture. I had previously dealt with these two things and always through abstraction. But more recently I concentrated on emptying my work. Consequently I arrived at images that resembled some sort of writing. They kind of resembled Chinese calligraphy. Recently I felt that I exhausted the process of emptying out and now I'm putting the two back in. I have arrived now at a different order that is less chaotic and more specific and that is what you see in these new works.

**NY Arts:** The images have tremendous tension as a result of a number of oppositional forces: light and dark, figure and ground, black and white, near versus far. How do you think about these things as you're working on a painting, and how do you know when you have arrived at the right balance?

**Raissnia:** Each mark and form is suggestive and as they suggest they require transformation. So in a sense the forms come and go and change until they arrive at a right shape and place. The whole drama takes place within the frame and is specific to itself. Each image has it's own past and is unique. Once all the drama takes place and ends I stop working on it and I considered it complete. The nature in these oppositional forces that you see perhaps is reflective of my psyche, of something within my nature.

**NY Arts:** There is a kind of apocalyptic feeling in the images as a result of the forms and the tension. They're really intense images. Can you talk about this, why this quality, what does it mean for you?

**Raissnia:** Maybe because intensity is more prominent in life and I am drawn to it. I see a lot of absurdity and contradictions in living. I also see a lot of people suffering. I know somewhere in me I feel hopeful in my despair and I get excited about living and my work.

**NY Arts:** You have titled the show, "Epitaphios." This suggests a certain relationship with death, but also memory and inscription.

**Raissnia:** The title came from an image that had an intriguing formal quality. It is of a Greek Medieval tapestry, an image of Christ lying in the middle of composition on a long horizontal line. This was the idea with which I started every one of the paintings, a long simple box, similar to the shape of a casket. That shape helped me divide the space up in each painting and suggested different forms and events. I pushed myself to let forms shape through change until it would arrive at a certain strength and tension. That's where memory comes into my work. Memory as processed fact. My mind has a photographic mechanism that registers all facts seen, heard and felt. That's how I see my dreams. In dreaming also I have a certain keen consciousness. Memory feeds and forms my actions but not entirely, what happens in the moment is always unexpected . . . the past and the present, life and death, then the moment in between. It contains both the black and the white.

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**NY Arts:** As an extension of your painting and drawing, you have been doing performances where you manipulate hand painted acetate strips in an old slide projector. This is done in collaboration with the electronic composer Briggan Krauss as well as other musicians. How long have you been doing these performances?

**Raissnia:** We began in the fall of 2003. We named the project SYSTEMS because of our interest in developing different systems of working simultaneously that would change and lead to other systems through time. It is a very open-ended collaboration.

**NY Arts:** To what degree is it improvisational?

**Raissnia:** During a performance as I manipulate the painted acetate strips I can only change its movement in space through the use of my hands in controlling and affecting the light and focus, which I do as an act of improvisation in response to the sound that Briggan is making. His musical process is more open. He has sounds from objects that he has previously created and sampled into the computer, and he can also make new ones and rearrange them in the moment of the performance.

**NY Arts:** How do you think about the relationship between the moving images and the oil paintings?

**Raissnia:** The paintings are more complex. The ink painting I do on the strips is done more free handedly. I allow the chemistry of the inks to create affects that once magnified and manipulated create very exciting optical movements, something I could never do with the paintings on canvas. Also, music is something I don't have with the paintings, which is a very powerful and effective addition to the kind of imagery I am involved with. I had been thinking a lot about seeing sounds and hearing shapes and that is what SYSTEMS is involved with. It is why Briggan and I got together. It's something we are both interested in.

**NY Arts:** You have a show coming up in Iran at the Contemporary Museum in Isfahan. How do you feel about going back to Iran to show your work, particularly to Isfahan where there is such a remarkable history of art and architecture?

**Raissnia:** I am very excited and interested in bringing Briggan's work there even more than my own. I had noticed that everything new and foreign seems to get displayed in the museums and galleries in Tehran. People see Isfahan primarily belonging to the past and they attach only the old traditions to it. The artists living in Isfahan always have to travel to Tehran to see shows involved with new art. The museum of contemporary art in Isfahan is fairly new. It will be so interesting to bring work of an American that is mainly involved in the New York downtown scene to that city, particularly one who works with the latest technology in electronics and computers. I want to see how the old can vitalize the new and vice versa. This is even apparent in SYSTEMS where the simple use of a light source and a lens is in great contrast to the laptop, analog against digital.

**NY Arts:** There are many very serious events happening in the world right now and much of the focus of this is on the Muslim world and the Middle East. How do you feel about what is going on having come from that part of the world, and do these things effect your art?

**Raissnia:** I will do whatever I can to help reveal the two cultures to one another, although personally I feel a bit misplaced and can't say what culture I belong to more than the other. I think that having grown up with this duality has its evident trace in my work and it will continue to be there. I think the word Muslim is something we should avoid, since these cultures are ancient and existed long before Islam. It will be very interesting to see how this political, social, and cultural change in the middle east will influence the arts both there and in the west a couple of hundred years from now.