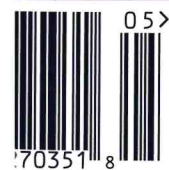


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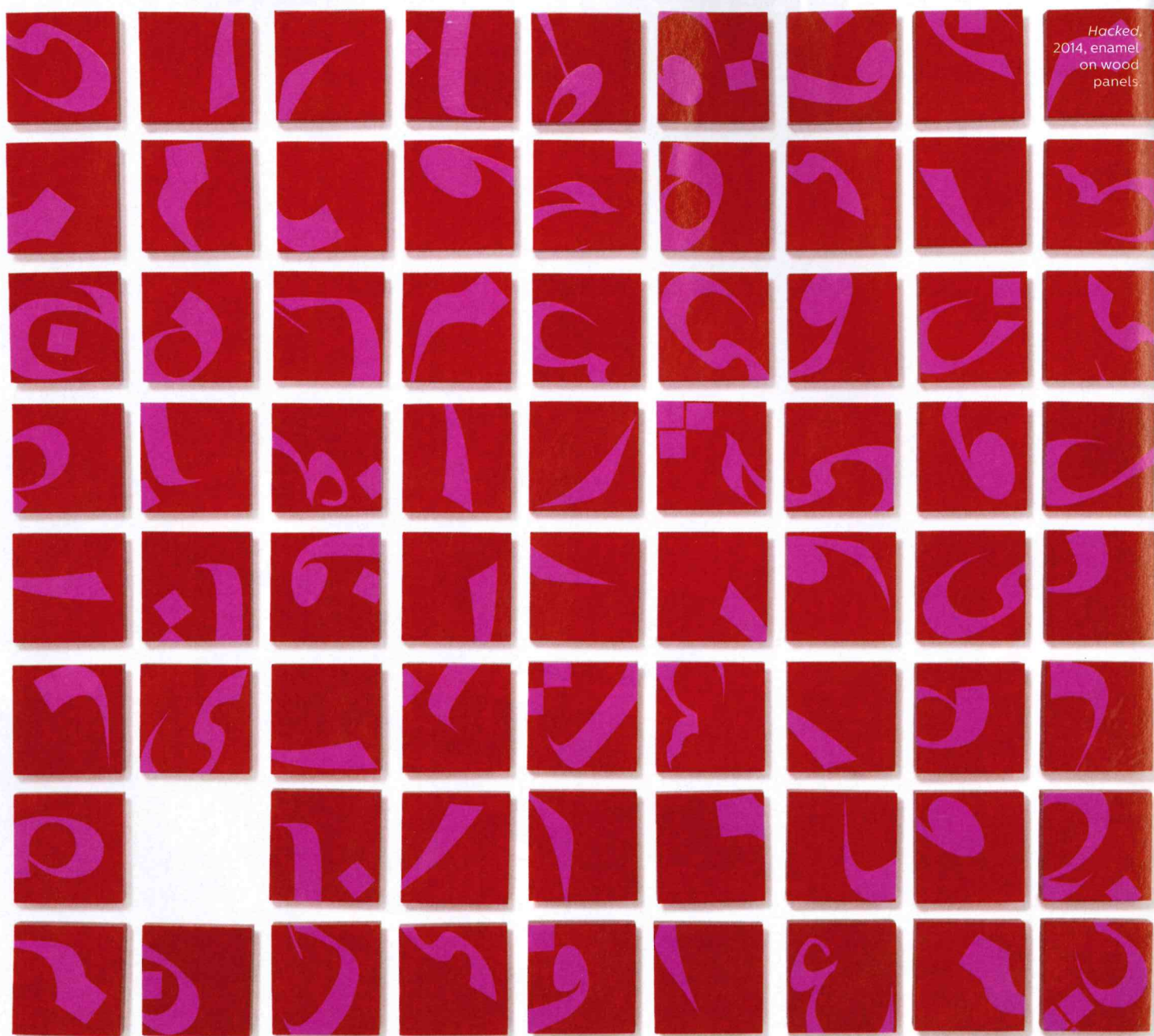
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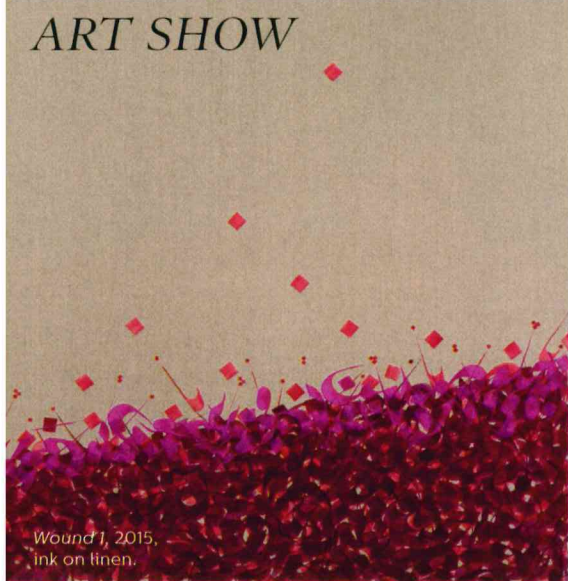
POURAN JINCHI

This Brooklyn-based artist looks to the ancient traditions and texts of her native Iran to create bold, beautiful works that incorporate subtle allusions to political strife and personal pain. BY VICKY LOWRY

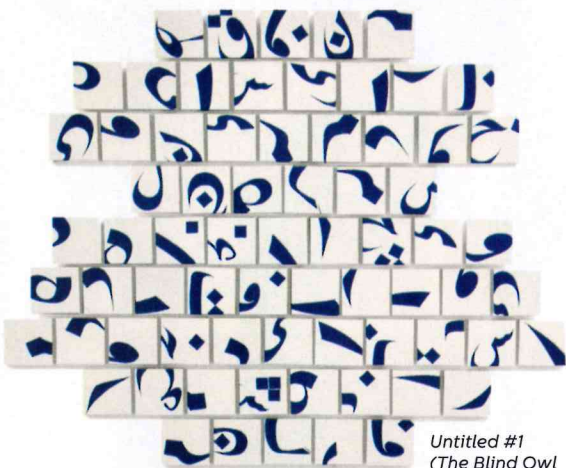
A century ago, when Marcel Duchamp slyly displayed a urinal off the wall and called it art, his point was to reject works that are made to please the eye. Beauty, pretty much ever since, has had a complicated relationship with the art world.

The lyrical, abstract paintings and sculptures by Pouran Jinchi, an Iran-born, Brooklyn-based artist, rely on the kind of visual allure that Duchamp and the Dada artists might have deplored. But look closely,

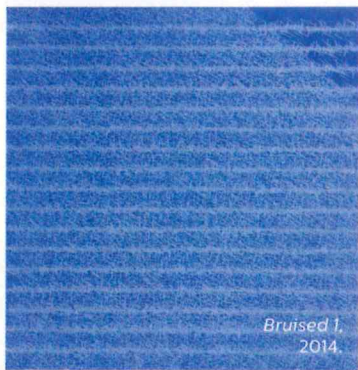
and you'll feel their pain. Delicate, hand-cut curls of copper, like twirling golden earrings, end in tips as sharp as a scimitar. Vibrant pinks, violets, and blues, made from inks that Jinchi painstakingly mixes, start to resemble the shades of a very bad bruise only after you read the titles of the paintings—*Wound*, *Hacked*, *Sores*—in her recent exhibition at the Leila Heller Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. "At first it appears design-related and very beautiful, ▽



Wound 1, 2015, ink on linen.



Untitled #1 (The Blind Owl Series), 2013, enamel on wood.



Bruised 1, 2014.



Hanged series, 2015, copper, paint, and safety pins.

which draws people in,” Jinchi says. “Then you peel away to get to other layers of meaning in the work. It’s almost like trickery.”

How did this slender, soft-spoken, supremely elegant woman come to create artworks with such a pointed edge? Circuitously, it turns out. As a child growing up in Mashhad, in northeastern Iran, Jinchi studied calligraphy. Amid political upheaval in Iran, she came to the United States to attend George Washington University, in Washington, D.C., earning a “safe, secure” degree in engineering. She promptly abandoned the sciences when she followed her first husband to San Francisco and was hired as a window dresser for Saks Fifth Avenue. The imaginative fashion vignettes she conjured were, in a sense, her first installations.

Jinchi moved to New York City in the early 1990s and combined her mathematical training and drafting skills with her gift for calligraphy to launch into art. While her Middle Eastern culture suffuses her work, she has never returned to her homeland. “I left Iran in a miniskirt,” she recalls, “but if I went back, I’d have to cover my hair.”

Texts are her starting point, “whether it’s poetry, a quotation, an old book, or alphabets,” Jinchi says. A recent source, *The Blind Owl*, a Persian novel by Sadegh Hedayat, was banned in Iran when Jinchi was a teen. “Even if you could get your hands on it, you had to hide it from your parents; there was a rumor that if you let your teenagers read this book, they would commit suicide.” Fragments of letters from the despairing book pirouette across canvas, paper, or enamel-painted wood panels. *Bruised 1*, from 2014, calls to mind an electrocardiogram or the interwoven fibers of handmade paper (or scar tissue), the result of Jinchi scraping pigmentation off the paper as she writes down texts from the novel. The 71 paper segments that form *Stitched*, also from 2014, feature

Forough 4, 2008.



the calligraphic swoops of a beloved quote. Jinchi used copper wire to sew it together. For her, the malleable, reflective metal is “like skin. It has a life of its own and changes color as it lives on,” she explains.

“Pouran’s work evokes the liquid flow of poetry,” says Lisa Fischman, director of the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, in Massachusetts, who included Jinchi in a 2015 symposium on contemporary Middle Eastern art. “The way she uses language is to reduce its legibility. You respond to the beautiful layers of abstraction. The reliance on Iranian tradition in her literary inspiration and her aesthetic transformation of calligraphic language into abstraction come together perfectly—it’s kismet.”

Jinchi’s newest project, for the Frieze Art Fair in New York this month, focuses on an entirely different set of letters: Morse code and military alphabets (think *F* as in *Fox-trot*). Her palette, spray-painted in enamel on six-inch-square wood panels, is the primary colors of flags and medals. But don’t expect to get this all right off the bat. “It does take scratching beneath the surface to understand her works fully,” says Sunny Rahbar, an early champion of Jinchi as director of the Third Line, a Dubai gallery. “But she has also pushed her medium so far that it is no longer necessarily about the text.”

Beauty, in other words, is far more than only skin deep. ■