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# **No Longer a Witness**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis captures the life of Shaghayegh Cyrous, a digital artist, curator, and activist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Originally from Tehran, she fled her home with her partner in 2011 to escape political unrest caused by the Iranian Green Movement in 2009.

Her artwork in the U.S. documents her life as an Iranian refugee, and explores themes of family, space and time, imprisonment, and migration. She often delves into the way cross-cultural relationships between immigrants and their families are forced to shift from the physical to digital realms through the use of online platforms like Skype.

This is a profile of Cyrous's transformation from a curious creative into a globally featured artist and curator, and impassioned activist. But her most pressing goal remains: To no longer be a witness to political wrongdoings in Iran. She is determined to speak out, undeterred by the repercussions.

## **No Longer a Witness** | *The trials of being an artist, curator and activist in post-Trump America*

**By Ashvini Malshe**

The way Shaghayegh Cyrus speaks about imprisonment makes it seem commonplace, an unfair fact of life. Originally from Tehran, the capital city of Iran, the San Francisco-based digital curator, artist and activist fled her home with her partner in 2011, due to political upheaval caused by the Iranian Green Movement in 2009. The activists she's known in Iran — who include some of her loved ones — have been punished for being vocal. So, prison has remained a persistent worry; she fears that her work here will affect those back home and that they'll be punished for it. But lately, her penchant for outspokenness outweighs the silence of fear.

Today, Cyrus's work aims to explore the cross-cultural relationships and estrangement between refugees and their families, using online platforms they're most reliant on, like Skype, to illustrate how these relationships exist only in digital spaces.

In recent years, her work has been featured around the world, including the Asian Art Museum, the Tehran Museum of Modern Art, the Anchorage Museum and the British Museum in London. She serves as a steering board member of the Clarion Alley Mural Project in the Mission District of San Francisco, and has curated and painted two infamous murals there, one of which went viral in Iran. She's also served as a Youth Art Coordinator of Civic Engagement at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

When I met her at the Faultline Artspace, an artist-run gallery and workspace in the Fruitvale district of East Oakland, Cyrus greeted me outside the huge industrial space in front of a set of bright red doors flanking the building. The place had been hard to find, sandwiched among an identical row of anonymous concrete buildings, but once we were inside, the hallways were colorful: vibrant with murals and flyers from other creatives.

Cyrus rents out studio space here — a quarter of a room, where she can both spend time working on her laptop and creating parts of her digital installations, from materials shelved around every inch of her studio-office. She explains that this is her portion of the studio room, which she shares with a few other artists. Gesturing around, she points out the stacks of plastic bins forming three columns beside her desk, the individual drawers labeled with tags written in Farsi.

A used Trader Joe's brown bag filled with paper towel tubes sits near an indigo suitcase wearing a tan fedora. Old paint cans and a few tools rest underneath her desk, among other miscellaneous items. Across the studio, a shelf holds parts of previous installations, including a tall white projector and bundles of multicolored cloth; heaps of old paintings and drawings surround it on the floor. On all sides, she's enveloped by her craft.

The idea of working on digital projects came to Cyrus during her M.F.A. program at California College of the Arts, which she began a few years after leaving Iran. Originally a painter, she switched mediums after realizing how much immigrants and refugees like herself depend on

online social networks like Skype to maintain relationships with loved ones. “For so many immigrants and exiles, that’s the only way of connection to their home country,” she explained.

A few months after Cyrus arrived in San Francisco, she found out that her mother had to be taken to the hospital: the stress of Cyrus’s departure had taken a toll on her health. At a moment like that, a medium like Skype can only keep you so connected.

During her last year at CCA, President Trump signed an Executive Order banning foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries. Cyrus vividly remembers President Trump’s election, which, to her, felt uncannily similar to the rise of the conservative hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in Iran. She said, “For me, it looked like the Green Movement was coming back, that that era is coming back. I was in school, too, back then.” Though Cyrus couldn’t vote because of her refugee status, she remembers pleading with her classmates, “Go vote, go vote — you have no idea what will happen.”

In the wake of Trump’s order, Cyrus said, she wanted to try and express the tempest of emotions she felt being an exile, unable to see her parents and trapped in an impossible limbo. (Cyrus still hasn’t since her family in person since 2011, when she emigrated.)

For her master’s thesis, Cyrus chose to curate and create a digital installation to accompany a small book of her poetic writings. The book contained poems about “how society and politics can affect peoples’ lives,” Cyrus explains. It was about the experience of “living in war,” as she did while growing up in Iran.

Cyrus unearths the book from the stacks of papers on her desk, and flips through. The pages are transparent, and, when laid on top of one another, extremely hard to decipher. This is no mistake. She wanted this transparency — she wanted it to be hard to read for people who may flip through, to have them experience the confusion and disillusionment she feels in the U.S. as a refugee and non-native English speaker.

One of the poems in her book is called, “The Closest I Could Get to the Sun.” It describes her journey from Tehran to San Francisco, on the day she had to leave and saw her friends and family, in person, for the last time. The feeling of being close to the sun is a metaphor for having to leave her home by plane.

This is often how Cyrus operates while working through the kinks of her creative process, in curation and in artmaking. She’ll have the idea to incorporate a specific object into an installation, like a swing set, and reverse engineer a concept, a story to tell through this object.

The exhibition she eventually created and installed, inspired by the poem, was featured at the Royal Nonesuch Gallery in Oakland. It was a stark white room, with floors covered in white vinyl. To enter, attendees had to wear shoe covers similar to those medical professionals would wear. People could come in pairs, where they would sit down on a canopy swing set and face a wall-sized projection of a compressed Skype video. It was the first conversation Cyrus had recorded with her mom, after news of the travel ban broke, shocking her family. She said her

mom had taken her through their family garden, to show her everything that reminded her of home. Her mom reassured her, speaking in Farsi, “Don’t worry — you can come back.”

The swing set was meant to represent the one in their garden back home. Cyrus had bought it from Home Depot and painted it herself. The sunshade of the swing set was covered in a white cloth, that Cyrus had laser-cut to create a filter for the projection light, resting high above. The pattern was similar to a Persian miniature design, those that Cyrus was influenced by while growing up in Tehran. It looked like translucent cut-outs of the sun, clustered together, appearing almost as fragile as stained glass. She said this piece took several months to craft.

Attached to the swing set were two sets of headphones — if you wore them, you could hear a pre-recorded narration of Cyrus detailing the day she left home and flew to San Francisco. Shadows slowly moved across the projection of the Skype call. This represented the lapse in time due to the nine-hour time difference between both locations, like the sun setting and rising.

Within the wall-sized projection was a smaller one, like an oversized iPhone. The phone was a metaphor for technology as the only way of connection for Cyrus and her family now. It was meant to mimic what it’s like when she talks to them in the U.S. “You’re in the swing, in my imaginary space, and this is the, kind of like, elements of it,” she says.

There was also a mirror nestled underneath the projection, so audience members could see themselves while sitting in the swing, almost like they could embed themselves within this memory. And a potted jasmine flower sat on the floor — an echo of the one in her garden at home, with its heady floral scent. The entire project took about two months to construct, from idea to execution.

When I spoke with Susanne Cockrell, who was one of Cyrus’s main thesis advisors, she praised her former student’s work, saying, “I feel like her work has a beautiful aesthetic — it’s poetic.”

Describing “The Closest I Could Get to the Sun” she says, “It was really attempting to transport you, to take you inside a private experience but also to transport you to another place.” She explains that the focal point of the installation, the family garden, is meaningful in Iranian culture, as is the feeling of dislocation common to exiles (and in Cyrus’ case, also her relationship with her mother, whom she misses deeply).

She remembers Cyrus confiding that “there were times when she couldn’t talk to her mom, or her mom couldn’t talk to her, because it was too painful, because they haven’t seen each other in so long.” To Cockrell, it seemed that this project was a way of untangling this truth. She adds, “It felt very much like a window or a portal that was both a memory, and almost I would say the garden is a kind of sanctuary — it’s a place to return to for her. It was a place of joy; it was a place she grew up, and so being able to return there brings her a sense of profound hope and joy and longing.”

The process of working on this project wasn’t painless either, Cockrell recalls. “There was a lot of tears, there was a lot of sadness,” she says. When creating a piece like this, so tied to one of

the most harrowing parts of her identity, it's almost inevitable. "Making art is hard that way," Cockrell says. "There's a lot that she was very courageous to include, I think."

Several weeks after Trump's election, Cyrus tried therapy, but had a bad experience and left soon after starting. The travel ban only made things worse.

Before the ban, Cyrus had hoped that her parents would visit her for her graduation from CCA. But afterward, it became clear that that wasn't possible. Around the same time, Cyrus remembers, she also faced a growing number of questions from classmates about her identity, and her background as someone from a majority Muslim country – despite the fact that Cyrus herself is agnostic. She was also once harassed on BART for speaking Farsi with a friend.

She remembers falling apart on campus one day, and crying uncontrollably, after seeing the news that the Trump administration had bombed Afghanistan.

She was "really fucked up back then," she says. "I haven't seen my parents for nine years — it's a long time. But back then, it was still new, and I was getting crazy with not seeing them. I had issues with my partner. I was questioning why I'm here, like, why we're going through this. Now, Trump is there. It's like a time where, you're in grad school — it's like a thousand pressures from everywhere."

This mental burnout, however jarring for Cyrus, was not uncommon for artist-activists in the Bay Area after the 2016 election. Many experienced creative burnout from the artistic demands and troubling societal realities the election revealed in their Bay Area communities – in some cases so intensely that they left the artworld entirely.

For Cyrus, at least, this mental burnout didn't hinder her creativity. "I was super productive," she says honestly. "I'm a person who, when I have a lot of issues in my life, I work a lot. I make things, a lot, to kind of escape from that part."

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Cyrus was born in 1987 in Tehran, during the midst of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Her father was a property lawyer and activist, and her mother, a homemaker.

As a child, Cyrus was curious by nature, and introverted. She spent her free time playing scientist. She loved research, carrying along a notebook with her wherever she explored. "I loved science, so I always had a notebook and a microscope," she recalls. "And we had a big yard then, so I was always researching, I don't know, what the worms eat, for example."

The yard is one of her most vivid memories from her childhood home. It's where she hung out with her many pets. It's where she wrote some of her first poems. It's also where she would address the supreme leader of Iran, sitting on a big white swing similar to the one in her thesis project, calling him out for his obvious mistakes and giving him solutions on how to improve his leadership.

She adds, “It was like very casual, like you know, as a kid, like a little girl talking to the supreme leader. Even I was putting my doll next to me — I was like practicing with her.”

She thinks she was influenced by watching her father prepare for his court cases, and the unstable political environment she was raised in. “Even though we didn’t really understand what’s going on, but no matter what, you get influenced by your environment, basically. I really don’t know exactly why I was doing that, but I spent a lot on time on the swing,” Cyrus says.

It was her aunt who introduced her to the visual arts, as they often painted together when she was young. In kindergarten, her art teacher discovered her natural talent, and met with her parents. “My parents thought that, I don’t know, I messed up something,” she says. But he told them to put her in private art classes, or art school, which they did. Even as a kid, she would answer open calls and began winning awards for her art.

Her parents were always encouraging of her and her passions, she says, but worried about the consequences. “My mom always says that whatever I want to do, I will do it no matter what.”

The end of the war, when Cyrus was 10, brought unexpected change. In a political shift, Mohammad Khatami won the presidency in 1997, for the first time challenging the elite conservatives that had previously held power. During his time as Minister of Culture, Khatami was known for his liberal ideologies, which he implemented during his time as president.

The reformists were in power for eight years, but it was a fraught time. Their supporters, mainly youth and women, became disillusioned by their unfulfilled promises. At the same time, they were dealing with backlash from the conservative elites, who made it their mission to counteract their political efforts.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — a staunch conservative — came to power, and quickly tried to push back against many of the reform movements put into place by his predecessor.

Not long after, Cyrus started high school, and realized that she had to make a choice between her interests. High school in Iran is four years long — the first three years are spent studying a specific subject, and the fourth is spent studying for a college entrance exam, called Konkur. If you pass, you get to specialize in the subject of your choice at university.

Choosing art seemed instinctive for Cyrus, but more challenging. At that time, in Iran, art wasn’t socially accepted as a profession, especially for women, though it was considered acceptable to be a doctor or engineer. So, she settled on pursuing science, and studied hard for three years.

Then, the summer before her fourth year, Cyrus abruptly woke up to her own interests, and decided to study art, cramming all of the school’s three-year curriculum into her final year. She still can’t figure out what compelled her to do something so radical, just that she knew she really wanted to do it.

After Cyrus graduated, she hoped to continue studying art in college, but worried that her parents would disapprove. Instead, a friend offered her some advice. She remembers them saying that if she studied industrial engineering or industrial design, then her parents would be OK with her pursuit of art. Cyrus did exactly that: she first studied graphic design at the University of Science and Culture in Tehran, before eventually transitioning to visual art. Laughing, she confesses, “I think I fooled my parents for a while.”

Not long after, Cyrus’s work began to get noticed. While still in university, she started applying for exhibitions: one of her works was chosen for the International Poster Biennial in Mexico in 2008, and another was shown at the British Museum in London, in 2010. She started displaying her works in shows around Iran — at school, at coffee houses and at art festivals. Then came the media attention.

She distinctly recalls being interviewed at a popular art and culture radio show, called Farhang Radio. They sent a limo to her parents’ house to pick her up — her dad was in disbelief, even asking the driver for confirmation that the car was really for his daughter.

Then, in 2009 Ahmadinejad was re-elected – possibly in a rigged election – over two opposition leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Mousavi and Karroubi’s supporters took to the streets, wearing Mousavi’s campaign color, green. At first it was peaceful, but then authorities began making arrests. Cyrus remembers this as a hopeless time, with people crying in the streets after Ahmadinejad’s election. “It was horrible. It looked like the time Trump got elected,” she says. “It was exactly the same.”

Her partner, a graffiti artist, was arrested multiple times between 2010 and 2011 for his murals and was put on watch by local authorities. Eventually, Cyrus realized that leaving Tehran was inevitable, for both her and her partner’s safety, and the two immigrated during that “little window” where the President — at the time, President Obama — was still welcoming to those from Iran. They flew from Tehran to San Francisco International Airport, with no close family or friends to receive them.

Cyrus remembers sitting at an airport terminal with her partner, his laptop perched between them, as they searched for places to stay. They ended up settling on a Motel 6 in the Tenderloin, in the city. Taking a taxi there, the motel and surrounding area were quite a culture shock. “Back then, it was a very shocking thing to see like people are having heroin. It was super crazy to see that.” She continues, “We were there for like four days, I guess, or five days. And every day, I was like, I wanna go back. This is crazy.”

But things started to settle after a while. They connected with a distant friend whom Cyrus had met once in Iran, who was living in Pleasanton at the time. He gave them a place to stay and helped them get off their feet, even connecting them to other friends and family who had also experienced the heartbreak of leaving home. “None of them knew us, but all of them were saying that they went through this once, and they wanted to help another person,” she shares.

Cyrus still felt lost, aimless, but also determined to understand her new country of residence. “I wanted to connect to people, but I didn’t know how,” she told me. “And I was like, OK, there are

so many cultural differences...” She began working on an art project — her first in the U.S. — using a carpet that she made from painting designs on a stretch of burlap, similar to a prayer rug. “I was putting the carpet everywhere. In streets, in weird places, in a gallery,” she recounts.

Almost as if it were in a traveling art installation, Cyrus would use the rug as a talking point. She would put the carpet down in these locations, connecting with people who happened to pass by and became interested in what they saw. Through speaking with various people of different ethnic backgrounds, she was able to talk about western misconceptions about Iran, and help people better understand the actual state of the country. And the people she talked to were able to do the same for her about the U.S.

Soon, the project evolved. “I got to know everyone through that,” Cyrus recalls. “And that carpet traveled around the world with different people.” Scrolling through her iPhone, Cyrus describes a few of the 5,000 photos she has of people who took the carpet with them to iconic places in over 16 countries, from 2012 to 2015. This collective effort is now known as the [“Lost Rug Project.”](#) She’s still trying to process what it means to her, but she hopes to compile the pictures into a book.

The rug made an impression on Cockrell as well, before Cyrus even started at CCA. “I was just really taken by this idea that she was building a certain conversation, right, around moving across borders, right, and moving through time, and using performance as a way to address this idea of time,” she says. “Also, what are the things you take with you when you leave, or when you’re traveling? I think these are other things that are embedded in people who need to leave their homeland.”

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In the U.S., Cyrus is known mainly for her digital art installations, but in Iran, she’s still known as a muralist. It seems to be a medium that’s better understood by an Iranian audience. She explains that during the Green Movement, political messages were mainly spread through “wall writing.”

One of Cyrus’s projects was a mural painted by her and her partner in 2015 in Clarion Alley, called [“In Memory Of,”](#) illustrating three Iranian activists and literary figures — Forough Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani and Simin Daneshvar. The mural went viral on Instagram in Iran, and is still widely shared, though many people have no idea it’s Cyrus’s work.

Recently, Cyrus and her partner painted another mural called [“In Honor Of,”](#) depicting seven Iranian female activists who are currently imprisoned, two of whom Cyrus calls family. One of them is [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), a human rights activist, who is currently imprisoned for defending women who publicly removed their hijabs. Cyrus speaks of her fondly.

This mural got heavy press attention as well, by outlets like BBC Persian, but Cyrus feared its mass circulation on social media. She was scared that the press attention may implicate her parents back home and that they would suffer the consequences. She was so scared, in fact, that

she didn't talk to them online for weeks. Finally, she received a message from her mother telling her not to worry, and that they were fine.

Cyrous has similarly been warned by Iranians in the Bay Area about being too vocal about the Iranian government, and its involvement with the U.S. and President Trump. She says they fear Trump will lash out and start a war.

Cyrous doesn't put stock in this fear. She thinks her work is vital — she believes that calling attention to the injustices of the Iranian government is necessary. “Even Iranians who are here, they don't know how many people are in prison,” she explains.

She later adds, “If you think Trump is horrible, it doesn't mean the Islam Republic is right.” But she's also gotten a lot of positive reception from Iranian individuals, who have cried at her shows, as her art triggered memories of their own stories of war and immigration.

For now, Cyrous has one clear intent: To no longer be a witness. Whether she wants to speak out about political turmoil in Iran or the U.S., she wants to be vocal about it, and not fear the repercussions. If her friends are in prison, she wants to “talk about it.” She doesn't want to “be afraid of saying anything.”

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