



Making the Known Unknown

John D. Caputo wrote of Derrida that “he is the philosopher of the flux par excellence.”¹ And in a similar vein, Mohammad Ghazali is truly the artist of the flux par excellence. Ghazali’s art is, in the main, the very act of undoing the stability of metaphysical structures while ascertaining the play of the world and the unexpected becoming of all things. Strategically, his genius lies in making images that are simple but turn so complex that they evoke the interminable, both metaphorically and metonymically. In fact, one may readily conclude that Ghazali’s representations are intended only to reexamine and restructure our habitual perception of reality, that is, to subvert accepted norms and even the most mundane of daily presences. He has a way of revealing secondary meanings about all that is mundane, hardly acknowledged, or accepted as metaphysically stable.

His uncanny ability to subtly turn the ordinary and daily toward the elusive and perplexing is evident in the “Taking Notes” series, “Red Ribbon” series, and “Where the Heads of the Renowned Rest” series. In these works, he challenges metaphysical precepts and forces us to reexamine what we have considered unworthy, quotidian, and readily present. He throws us headlong into the strangeness of the mundane and reveals the mysterious flux of the real. This real, in each and every work, appears in the guise of multiple strata and is, therefore, structurally and philosophically polysemic. For example, in the Red Ribbon series, Ghazali introduces a red zip or a line of red color on a portion of the photograph. Similarly, in the Taking Notes series, he colors a part of the mundane photographic image, such as in “Estakhr Ab” (Swimming Pool, plate 3). Through this seemingly minor intrusion, he mystifies known spaces and forces us to see them with a different eye. These colors are a way of uncamouflaging the known and his call to induce us to reexamine and rediscover what we have always taken for granted.



Plate 1. Mohammad Ghazali, *The Red Ribbon #07* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, gelatin silver print overlaid with acrylic paint, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm.

The hermeneutics of his colorings are varied and highly suggestive. Let us consider the red zip in the “Red Ribbon” series (plates 1-2) or the “Estakhr Ab” (plate 3) and the “Divare Ajori” (Brick Wall) of the “Taking Notes” series (plate 4). Here, let us assume that the coloring is the urge of an innocent eye toward metamorphosis; let us interpret it as an innate urge to change the world and its drabness, impelled by some inexplicable dream. But we know that the real world when taken for granted becomes a materialist

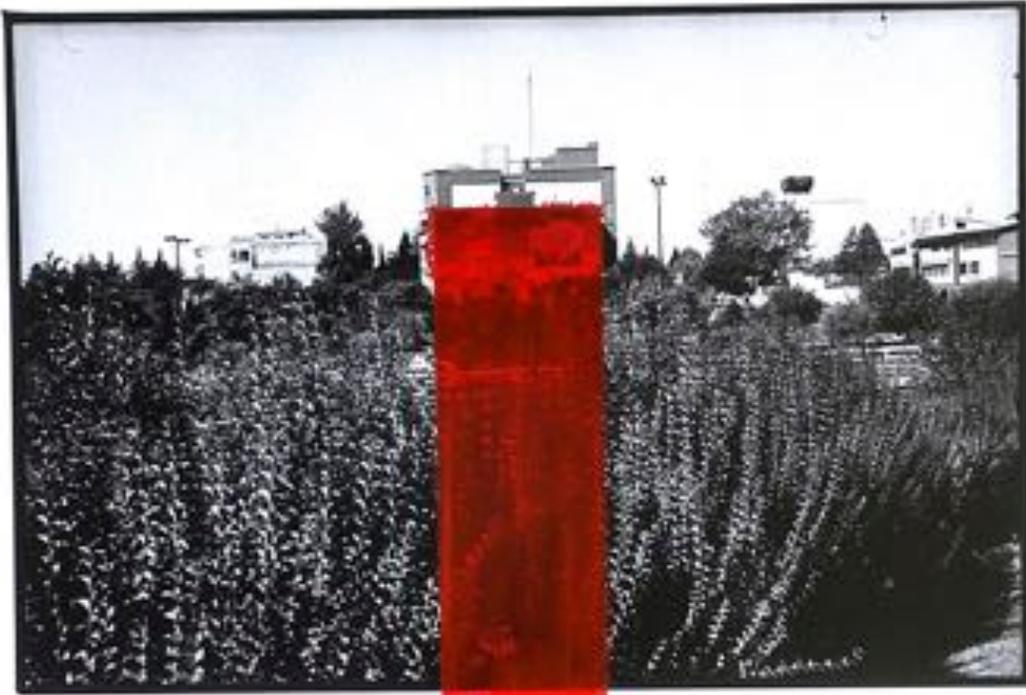


Plate 2. Mohammad Ghazali,
The Red Ribbon #02 from the
Red Ribbon series, 2008, analog
photography, gelatin silver print
overlaid with acrylic paint,
edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm.

metaphysical presence, hardly questioned and accepted as seemingly constant. The colorings impel our consciousness to view them as temporal appearances and unique phenomena of a given space and time. These colorings are a way of turning what is established and familiar (and also ignored) into a zone of mystery and exploration. By making the familiar abstract, Ghazali has also made it mysterious, and nothing invests these images with the energy of the materialist flux more than this intrusion.



Plate 3. Mohammad Ghazali, *Pool of Water* from the *Taking Notes* series, 2006, analog photography, gelatin silver print overlaid with ink, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 30 x 45 cm.



Plate 4. Mohammad Ghazali, *Brick Pilaster* from the *Taking Notes* series, 2006, analog photography, gelatin silver print overlaid with ink, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 20 x 30 cm.

More so, these colorings are acts of appropriation as the artist restructures and reinvents the world in terms of his own vision and subjective music. He thus affirms the plurality of readings in every image and the existence of infinite worlds through appropriations that make for flowing, changing, and shifting phenomena. This is a characteristic that he shares with Ghazaleh Hedayat. However, Ghazali, by abstracting the most mundane of images, leads us down a dialectical path, a path of synthetic change. Above all, he subverts the stability of all appearances by forcing them into the choppy waters of flux. We may say that the outcome, the telos, of this imagery is not as essential as the process, for this process is a dance rather than a fixed stance.

The photographs of “Where the Heads of the Renowned Rest” (plates 5-6) are outstanding examples of his anti-metaphysical stance and of his desire to assert the flux of the world rather than the stable and mummified notions of truth. He photographs the city from the eyes of the civic monuments, from the perspective of the idols and the heroes and the deities. In these works, he reverses the hierarchy of the viewer and the viewed, the sentient and nonsentient. Now those

who look at his civic monuments and idolize them are themselves viewed by the civic monuments.² It is imperative to note that were it not for the title, these works would have remained quotidian views of Iranian urban spaces. His labels are key to the reading of the images. This fact alone sets up the metaphysical condition par excellence in these works, for as Emmanuel Levinas has put it, “...the movement of metaphysics is thus also the transcendence of hearing in relation to seeing.”³ The privileging of hearing over seeing is quite appropriate because these idols and heroes are byproducts of language games and socio-political constructs. Thus, we may conclude that the heads of the renowned, the nonsentient sculptures, are codes or signs through which the notion of a culture’s desired essence and doxa are communicated. As we look up at them, we are clearly to be moved and elevated by the apollonian and ideal structures of the presented signs. Our views of the civic monuments are the majestic and heroic imagination, the enchanted landscape of a higher plateau of life and being. Their poetry, though ambiguous, is of dreams that are often codified in epic narratives.



سید حسن مٹرس، میدانہ طارق و روہانی شاہی ۱۳ و ۱۴، ریاض.

Plate 9, Mohammed Ghazali, *Sajid Hussein Alkhalaf*, 79° Centroid East and Polaris from *When the Beach of the River and the Sea* series, 2009-2011, analog photography, cross process, Lambda print in Diasoc, 134.4 x 112 cm.



محمد شمس بن عبدالله مشهور به سعدی شیرازی، شاعر و نویسنده سده ۸ هجری.

FIG. 6. Mohammad Chazali, *The Akhbar of Hafez the Akhbar Lessons Small Shamsi*, 13th century Persian and
Wazir from *White the Heads of the Revived Men* series, 2009-2011, analog photography, cross process, lambda
print in Duseq, 154.4 x 117 cm.

And yet, the view from the heads of the renowned is the most prosaic and quotidian of perspectives possible. From their high perch of idealism, the heads offer a view of mundane and daily life. From their metaphysical—heroic, cultural, and mythic stance, they access the banality of real life. How we see Abu Sa‘id Abul Khayr, Sheikh Farid ad-din ‘Attar, and Sa‘adi and Khayyam is radically different from how they see us. The contrast from the viewpoint of metaphysics (and not physics) is pitifully mundane and even hopeless. Ghazali has shown how we, through these ideals, have so brutally placed ourselves outside of the real. These works also reveal that the real unrelentingly persists beneath the masks of our dreams.

But there is another element, one of profound significance in these works, namely that our views of the heads of the renowned, our metaphysical perspectives, our notions of the so-called ever-present Truth (the metaphysics of presence), are regressive and dragged out from the memory of a culture, then reconfigured for optimum use by cultural and political forces. But, the view from the cold and objective angle of the nonsentient monuments is of contemporaneous life. While the metaphysical visions remain static and immutable, the physical reality is in a state of flux and change. Clearly, as Nietzsche asserted, the constancy of metaphysics is possible through the mummification of ideas, or as a reification of ideas in the nonsentient state—in fact, here as sculptural forms. The physical world and its ever-changing face make the metaphysical appear as a deluding narrative or construct, and yet, we must admit, an indispensable one. Now, we who have created nonsentient idols to rise above ourselves are forced through this reversal of hierarchy to recognize the limits of our world as defined only by the physical. Ghazali’s works have shown that within the very folds of the ideal lies the key to its subversion and theoretical collapse. The view from the heads of the renowned undermines the surface logic of the ideal symbol for the sake of the mundane sign, the metaphor of truth for the sake of the shifting metonym. Here, the distance between the ideal and real, the origin and derivative, the past and present, the truth and flux is reduced to such a degree that the first term in the binary, namely the primary condition, is by praxis, re-inscribed as nonessential or functions as pure decoration. In fact, Ghazali’s *tableau vivant* of the city, in this frame of reference, becomes the quintessential sign of the failure of human ideals. In these series, he foregrounds

physical reality and subverts metaphysical ideals as fully textual and philosophical assumptions. Let me say that what he accomplishes is to communicate effectively that the heterocosm of fiction (e.g., metaphysics, spiritualism, idealism, etc.) wholly contrasts with reality (physics). He also shows how physics undermines metaphysics. In Ghazali's works, I dare to say, the dead seem to see better than the living. For him, the eyes of the blind are better suited to see the real as they bear no prejudice or bias.

Mohammad Ghazali's appropriately "Untitled Self-Portrait" (plate 52 in the chapter on Seismic Shifts...) alludes, as does its title, more to the unknown than the known. This is in one sense his way of measuring the immeasurable and making the known unknown. "Self-Portrait" offers a kind of decentering of the physical by stretching it out into the abyss of psychological ineffability. The piece, presented and awarded first place at the 9th Tehran Photography Biennial consists of a series of 16 panels produced in two formats (flush and nonflush arranged panels) and is made in the two sizes (200 x 200 cm and 120 x 120 cm). The upper four panels are portraits of Ghazali's face; though seemingly replicas, they are in fact slight variants of one another. Below on the second register are three more figurative panels, one of a Spanish-style building façade, a curtain, and a panel of an undecipherable script. At the center of the second panel is a red square with four more below it, topping four panels of black-colored squares. The four, slightly varied, representations of his face with eyes closed are in some distant manner reminiscent of Mu Chi's (Mu Qi) "Six Persimmons" (13th century). They allude to how a concept embodies infinite variations within the same frame of time and space. These variations affirm the uniqueness of each presence and render identification and knowledge as ephemeral and paradoxical. Ghazali in most of his works relates the concept of the infinite as his images show shifting and changing moments.

To put it differently, the repetitions, to some extent, become dialectic for they address a dichotomy and a conflict between recognizable and abstract spaces; between the known and the unknown. Here the idea of a portrait as a recognizable form of a person's face is expanded to include so many other undecipherable factors. The recognizable, though simple, seems to mask ineffable structures. Moreover, Ghazali's "Self-Portrait" may be read as a diachronic autobiography for it traverses from his image to primordial abstraction and other mysterious textual presences.

Ghazali has a way of pitting order against entropy, the known against unknown, existence against essence, the apollonian against dionysian. This trait runs through most of his works, where the abstract alludes to the mysteries that undermine our sense of knowledge or comfort within the visual world. But sometimes it is hard to discern the unknown from the known. Example are the “Defender” and the “Untitled” series (plates 7-8), where images of physical earth and the metaphysical sky assume either lower or higher positions. In these works the physics of the earth is as mysterious as the metaphysics of man. The finite and the infinite are one as the abstract and the temporal are one. This dialectical process, be it with or without resolution, throughout many of his works has opened vistas for new choices and understandings.



قصه ۵ ردیف ۱ ، شماره ۱۵



Plate 7, Mohammad Ghazali, *Defender No. 15-1-5* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print overlaid with gouache and Letraset on cardboard, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm.



Plate 8, Mohammad Ghazali, *Untitled II* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm.

NOTES

¹ *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 116.

² Ghazali in an interview mentions that the project was a byproduct of his idealization of these figures. See, <http://vimeo.com/24270944>.

³ The quote is from Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, p. 100. See also, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburg, Duquene University Press, 2007, pp. 33ff.



Plate 9, Mohammad Ghazali, *Defender No. 16-122-52* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print overlaid with gouache and .Letraset on cardboard, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm



Plate 10, Mohammad Ghazali, *Defender No. 2-95-26* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print overlaid with gouache and .Letraset on cardboard, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm



Plate 11, Mohammad Ghazali, *Defender No. 43-65-21* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print overlaid with gouache and .Letraset on cardboard, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm



Plate 12, Mohammad Ghazali, *Defender No. - 19-10* from the *Red Ribbon* series, 2008, analog photography, Lambda print overlaid with gouache and .Letraset on cardboard, edition of 7 + 1 AP, 50 x 50 cm