

## The Hazy Chronicles of a CIA-backed Coup

by Seph Rodney on June 24, 2016



Historical exhibitions tend to consistently draw large audiences — the curious, scholars, or just those who like a cracking good story. The study of past events is one of the enduring humanistic themes that show up in many art endeavors, like “memory” or “loss.” It’s so significant because we think that the past informs who we are now and how we behave; that is, as is often said, the past is prologue. It’s the relationship of the past to our definitions of ourselves that’s delicate to balance. What if we really just create stories about the past to justify who we believe ourselves to be?

This is where things get contentious. Think of the Enola Gay debacle. In arguing for a certain historical account, an understanding of the reasons for bombing the city of Hiroshima, we argue for a version of ourselves as patriots eager to end the

utterly destructive war, or criminals who used human subjects to experiment with the power of atomic bombs.

Bahar Behbahani with her exhibition at Thomas Erben gallery, *Garden Coup*, isn’t trying to teach any lessons or correct an account. Instead, she gives us the stories and half-truths that tie together a series of events into a neat package that could be called a history of the 1953 coup that deposed the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. The show focuses on the odd circumstance of Donald Wilber, a well-regarded American scholar of Middle Eastern architecture who wrote well-received texts on Persian gardens, and nevertheless was a CIA agent who helped to orchestrate the coup. The events are represented in document form through a report submitted by Wilber to his superiors, “Clandestine Service History: Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran.” The report is laid out in parts on a low, wooden table set in the middle of the gallery. It is a good story. It has exciting plot developments: the transfer of monies to fund propaganda campaigns, agents inciting protesters to burn down offices, papers being flown overnight to be signed by the incoming Shah. All this is the stuff of spy craft that makes us think of big budget movies that ratchet up the tension until we find release in something blowing up or someone dying.

But the record is shown to be unclear. Some of the papers are displayed beneath onionskin that obscure one’s vision, and many have names redacted. There are also blueprints, but it is not clear what they represent. These presentation choices make the point that what happened is fuzzy, refracted through a particular lens of one man’s experience, and even further mediated by government censors.

The paintings parallel this conceit. They are layered and full of hazy washes over figures, letters, and symbols that are partially obscured. They are murky palimpsests; for example, the painting “Report to London” (2015–2016) gives me the sense of layers of ciphers organized sequentially, until they become a message that is almost more noise than signal. They are enticing to look at, but resist interpretation. I’m told there are site plans of gardens hidden within them, and floral patterns of 19th-century illuminated books, and architectural motifs. I suppose I have to believe the gallery, because I can’t see them exactly. Some of the paintings also reiterate the blackout bars used to redact information in the displayed reports — a skillful device that makes them visually resonant with the texts.

There’s a stark truth here: Wilber helped to overthrow the Iranian government at the behest of the US (and UK) government, who sought to prevent the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry which was bound to happen under Mosaddegh. This country’s government deliberately and purposefully worked to overthrow the democratically elected prime minister of a sovereign nation. But what is smart about this show is that it doesn’t get bogged down in judgment of the ramifications of *realpolitik*, but instead raises the question of how we come to stable historical accounts in the first place.

Behbahani’s work might be taken to represent an argument of lazy moral relativism, the kind that leads one to adopt the pose of supercilious cynicism and silly words like “sheeple.” I don’t take that from this exhibition. Rather, I see our historical accounts as they really are: contingent, shifting under the weight of scrutiny, a patchwork of sense we want to create and hold onto so we can say with certainty who we are.

*Garden Coup continues at the Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 25.*