

Abstract Paintings that Evoke Persian Gardens and a Bloody Coup

by [Bansie Vasvani](#) on June 20, 2016



Bahar Behbahani's incendiary photograph "Proceeding" (2007), of a woman suspended upside-down before a burning pyre, is ingrained in my memory. Known for her conceptual art that references memory and loss, Behbahani's sepia-toned Joan of Arc-like figure bolstered women's struggle for power and inclusion in her native Iran. In her recent solo exhibition [Garden Coup](#) at the Thomas Erben Gallery, the Iranian-born, New York-based artist's work is directly inspired by her research on Donald Wilbur, a scholar on Persian gardens and the CIA operative in Iran who instigated the American and British coup of 1953 that ousted democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. Installed on wooden tables at the center of the gallery, visible through stacks of paper and architectural drawings, are pages from Wilbur's 1986 autobiography, which implicated the CIA in the coup, as well as the government's 2013 publication of Wilbur's declassified and redacted report titled "Clandestine Service History, November 1952 – August 1953."

The installation is surrounded by a series of Behbahani's mostly colorful abstract paintings, named after chapter headings in Wilbur's report and referencing his scholarship and furtive activities. These are quite subdued compared to the strident tone of her earlier photographs.

In "Preliminary Steps" (2015–16), an aquamarine-tinted canvas, layers of oil and acrylic paint create a watery effect, like undulating currents in the ocean. Green algae and water creatures seem to float about, and a large, muddy centripetal force with intricate concentric circles drawn in markers, crayons, pencil, and ink suggests a whirlwind of activity. Like the focal water fountains in Persian gardens that connect the surrounding trees and flora, the painting's concentric circles and surrounding greenery evoke a calming beauty, as well as Wilbur's knowledge of these architectural garden features. In "Report to London" (2015–16), multiple layers of smudges and smears are evident through wide swaths of translucent brown and pink paint, appearing to cover a hidden green landscape beneath. But despite the impenetrable, illusory quality of the paintings, one doesn't immediately associate them with covert operations, skullduggery, and violence. Quite the opposite, in fact — one is drawn to the contemplative aspect of the works.

"Garden of the Envy of Paradise" (2015–16) and "Consolidating the Plan" (2015–16) both feature black rectangular forms that resemble the markings on redacted text. Jarring and impossible to ignore, these dark shapes remind the viewer of Wilbur's hidden activities. But Behbahani's remarkable ability to blend different shades of blue, green, and lilac paint over paisley designs in "Garden of the Envy of Paradise," and diaphanous layers of pink, yellow, and lavender that resemble floating veils intermingled with elaborate patterns of latticework from Islamic architecture in "Consolidating the Plan," transcend the marring effect of the black shapes, lending an underlying tranquility to both works. Even the broad brushstrokes of sky blue and white paint woven with intricate designs in "The Shah Is Victorious" (2015–16) emanate a sense of joy. It is only from the large black square in "Apparent Failure" (2015–16), which might also refer to Wilbur's own misgivings as an amateur painter, that one gets some sense of foreboding and danger.

Unlike the forthrightness of her earlier photograph, the paintings in *Garden Coup* run counter to expectations: Instead of any indication of calamity and the suppression of democracy, they are a celebration of ancient Iranian culture. In that sense, the works are less successful as indicators of the Iranian coup of 1953, but they certainly attest to Behbahani's imaginative allusions to the Abstract Paintings that Evoke Persian Gardens and a Bloody Coup beauty of Persian gardens.

[Garden Coup](#) continues at the Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until June 25.