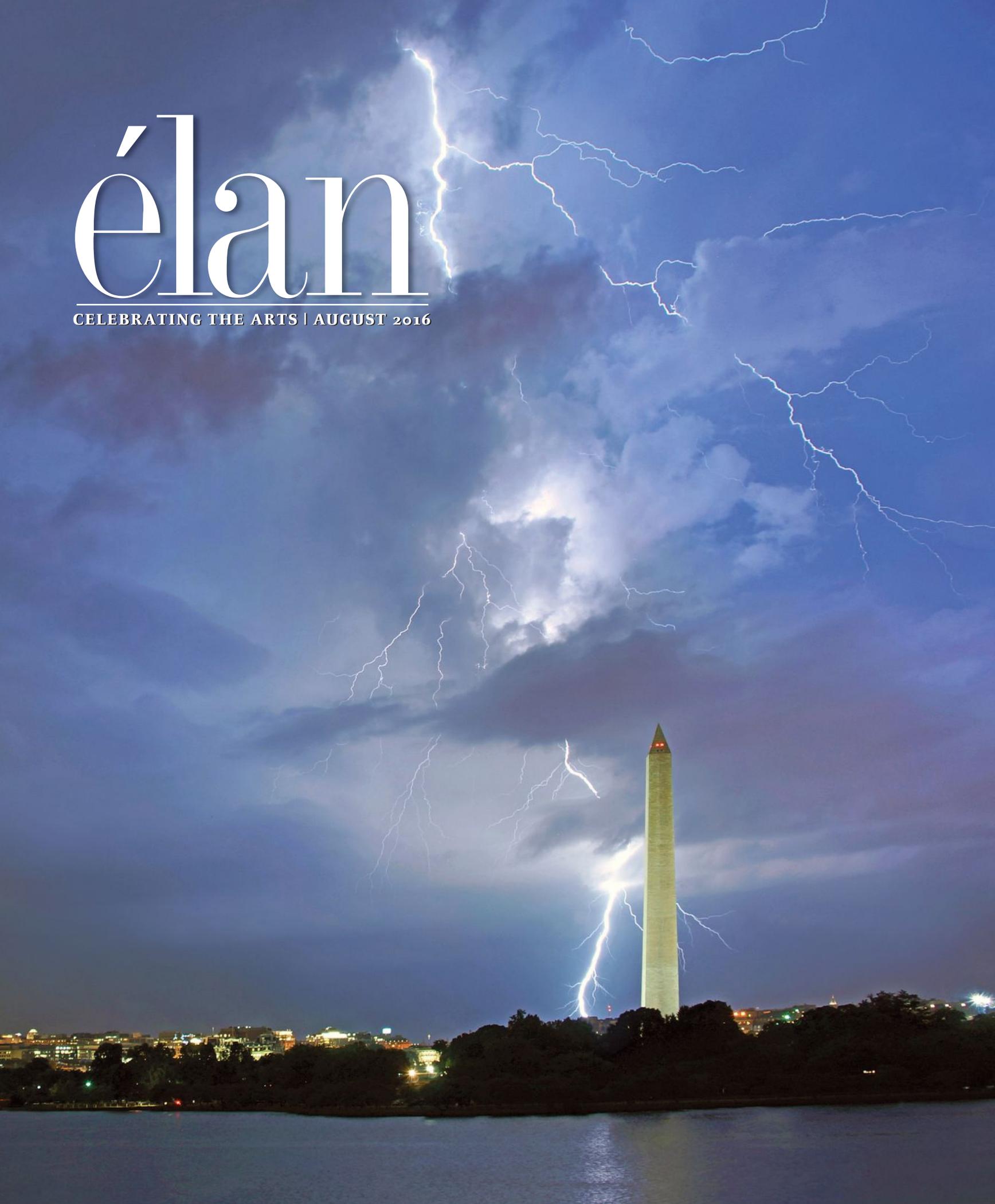


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CELEBRATING THE ARTS | AUGUST 2016



ARTIST NASRIN KHAZAEI

Between East and West

“EVERYTHING INFLUENCES ME.” | BY CRAIG GRALLEY



“I paint when I feel it welling up inside of me. I have to feel something before I start and then I have to do it in that moment.”

—Nasrin Khazaei

Artist Nasrin Khazaei may live in Great Falls, but her heart is still in Iran.

We're in her kitchen talking about the artwork she has on display, when the conversation shifts seamlessly to her life story and the years before the conservative clerics gained power in Iran. In a voice soft and low, she says that before the 1979 revolution, “People of the major religions—Christians, Muslims and Jews—sat at the same table; they respected each other.” Then, she looks down and away. “Now it's different. The door is closed.”

During those tumultuous years, Nasrin was in Tehran University, earning a Ph.D. in literature and building a reputation as an expert in Persian culture. She was also showing her art, winning awards, receiving recognition and acclaim. But life grew more difficult. Nasrin was a professor of Persian literature at Damavand College outside of Tehran when the government began severely restricting academic freedom by telling teachers how to educate their students. Soon thereafter, Nasrin traveled to the United States to join her daughter in Great Falls.

It was hard for Nasrin to leave the land where she had built a life as a highly respected artist and poet, and perhaps it was more difficult to be separated from the very art and culture she loved. “Everything was there,” Nasrin says.

Nasrin's journey as an artist began early in life. At age 16 she was walking through a gallery in Tehran when she examined a painting that she said was lifeless and without a soul. “I can do better than that,” she told herself. Soon she was taking private classes with one of Iran's leading artists, learning to paint in miniature, scenes of life in a traditional, stylized form. Her “Garden of Eden” with its highly detailed brushwork and vivid colors, also has elegant



writing as an element of the painting itself. The work is illustrative of a time-honored style, similar to that found in Persia's *Shahnama*—a highly revered epic poem written more than a thousand years ago.

As Nasrin leads me downstairs to view more paintings, she tells me the act of creation has been a



"Wings of Joy," gouache on paper,
15" x 19"

great release for her. Looking around me, I see Nasrin has turned the sting of separation from her homeland into an impressive body of work. Dozens of pieces are on display: portraits, miniatures, scenes of nature; a range of subjects that mirrors her expansive vision. The work also reflects a balance of media, too: pencil,

acrylic and watercolor. It is a collection with a variety of topics and modes of expression that makes a statement about Nasrin as an artist. She says it best when she comments: "Everything influences me."

It's clear that Nasrin works diligently to capture the essence of what she sees and uses it in her art.



For example, close-up and well-rendered studies like “Guarded Beauty” demonstrate both a love of nature and an interest in fostering techniques that embody textures of the natural world. Similarly, “Fool’s Paradise” is a personal commentary on the nature of wealth, using graceful and subtle strokes in shades of blue.

But perhaps “The Wings of Joy” tells us most about Nasrin herself. The painting has a dream-like quality, and the bird at the center is called a Simorgh—a mythical creature similar to a Phoenix, used in Persian culture as a metaphor for God. It is a painting, too, that reflects Nasrin’s own belief in mysticism. “The more you know yourself,” Nasrin says, “the more you know that God is within you.”

Her belief in mysticism finds its way into Nasrin’s life and work practices—especially her intuitive approach to painting. “I paint when I feel it welling up inside of me,” Nasrin says. “I have to feel something before I start and then I have to do it in that moment.” That moment can happen at any hour of the day or night, and to accommodate her artistic impulses she moved her canvas and easel into her bedroom where she can, during the day, take advantage of an abundance



Above: “Swan Lake,” gouache on paper, 20” x 30”; and “Revealed,” oil on canvas, 19” x 23”

Opposite, top: “Guarded Beauty,” gouache on paper, 14” x 18”; and “Bird of Paradise 3,” oil on canvas, 11” x 14”

Photograph courtesy Moosenchick.com



of natural light. But painting in her bedroom poses challenges. Because the paint and canvas are so available, she feels compelled to make constant changes to her work. Nasrin says her daughter Layla often has to take paintings out of the room or else Nazrin wouldn't move on to new projects.

The interview already has gone close to two hours, and it's time to depart. As I make my way to the door, Nasrin concludes by telling me a story which reflects the core of mystical belief in her native Persia: "A flock of birds of the world gathered to decide who would be their king. The wisest of them suggested they should find and make the Simorgh their ruler. (The word Simorgh means "30 birds"). The birds flew off and began what proved to be a difficult journey. One-by-one they dropped by the wayside because of hunger, thirst and weariness. By the time they arrived at their destination, only 15 birds were left. Yet when they looked into the pond, they saw in their reflection another 15 birds; so 30 birds were present. They realized, together, they were Simorgh. The ruler was within them." é

Nasrin Khazaei | www.nasrinkh.com



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