

FARIMA FOOLADI

The Fever

John M. O'Quinn Gallery

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Farima Fooladi's paintings look as easy and effortless as breathing, but hide a complex intertwining of influence. Since the late 19th century, *manavvarolfekran*—the social strata of Iranian learning—has created a culture that pointed outside itself, synthesizing Russian intelligentsia and the French intellectual tradition (as noted by historian Homa Katouzian). This makes any assumptions orientaling Iranians—including Fooladi—absurd. Fooladi remembers being perplexed by people asking why she does not do calligraphy; she remembers being wary of people who would "happily put me in a box of Middle Eastern culture." Her first notable insight into what art means—and what it can do—in the West was after seeing paintings by leading Post War German artist Anselm Kiefer. Fooladi, of course, handles paint very differently, shifting between fleshing out earth and stone with thick impasto, using brush as a drawing tool for her many architectural elements, and creating fields of tender color that signify daylight and landscape.

Meanwhile, her heritage is evident in the ways she constructs space. Persian court paintings treat built environments and figures as a rhythmic geometry of planes, sometimes joined at acute angles; Fooladi often constructs a similar montage of perspectives. Swimming pools lead to thick forests, while tennis courts dramatically fall towards the bottom of the painting, stopped by regular snowdrifts. Iran has snow, too, but the abundance of white in these paintings was influenced by Fooladi's MacDowell residency in New Hampshire (where she created this series).

Pools and tennis courts are motifs in Fooladi's paintings; it might be hard to think of them as ruins, yet, in these works, they are exactly that. Similar to abandoned shopping malls that puncture the sides of American highways, the vacant pools and tennis courts—once filled with laughter and adrenaline—become ruins of human contact. However, unlike abandoned shopping malls, Fooladi's ruins are gendered. Growing up after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when Marxists and Islamists came together to overthrow the regime of a Westernized shah, the artist saw how female presence slowly but surely dissipated from the public sphere of what was a rapidly-secularizing country. Before being segregated and surrounded by walls, swimming pools were open to all and tennis courts saw games. A trio of women, naked or scantily clad, who appear in several of Fooladi's paintings, might be ghosts of the lively female presence that was banished by religious discipline.

There are ruins in a more classical sense in Fooladi's paintings, too. Architectural remnants of the ancient past are abundant in a country that counts millennia of history. The artist credits her father with her interest in ancient buildings: he took the kids to notable sites, not playgrounds. A painting for her is a return to the melancholic vistas of her childhood years, and some of her work reminds one, albeit passingly, of the final scenes in Andrey Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1984). Tarkovsky was an early influence, along with many other filmmakers and artists from all over the globe. With this in mind, the haunting memories in Fooladi's paintings arrive through transitory stages, enriching and transforming sensations gathered in impressionable states.

An essay by [Valentin Diaconov](#)

















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Images and catalogue design by Tamirah Collins.

Farima Fooladi was born in Tehran, Iran, and is based in Houston, TX. Before relocating to Houston, she received an MFA and taught at Penn State University. Fooladi has received the 2023-2024 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Lawndale's 2024 award for *The Big Show* juried by Dr. Laura Augusta, and the 2024-2025 MacDowell Fellowship. Fooladi was a 2023 Artists on Site resident at the Asia Society Texas Center, where she explored themes of identity, migration, and space in more depth.

Valentin Diaconov (b. 1980) is a critic and curator. He is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary art at the Whitworth, University of Manchester. Previously, he researched the history and semiotics of the shaped canvas at the Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Before that, he was a curator at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, organizing shows by Rasheed Araeen, Sophia Al-Maria, Juergen Teller, and co-curating *The Fabric of Felicity* (2018), *A Beautiful Night for All the People* (2020), and other group exhibits.

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