

Alienation by Jonathon Keats

Arriving in Silicon Valley in 2013, Sameh Khalatbari was greeted by a torrent of social media. She was friended and liked by people she'd never met. Even those she got to know were more inclined to interact online than to pick up the phone and say *hello*. As an immigrant from Iran, Khalatbari was not surprised to find faster internet connections and superior technology in Northern California. What shocked her was the way people used these technical advantages to thwart their humanity.

Khalatbari was trained in Persian miniature painting before studying contemporary art. The tradition, which often includes depictions of nonhuman animals in relation to people, contrasted dramatically with the egocentric culture of the selfie. The more that she experienced life in Silicon Valley, the more that she perceived degrees of alienation, first from the natural world, then from fellow humans, and finally, for each pixelated individual, from the soul within. “In the virtual sphere,” she says, “our digital selves transcend reality, concealed behind layers of deceit and masks that obscure our true essence.”

Modernism is pleased to present *Alienation*, Khalatbari’s stirring response to a decade spent in a place that becomes more virtual every day. Each of the dozen paintings in her new series depicts a woman like herself, portrayed in shades of gray, donning a colorful mask. The masks evoke the faces of animals such as foxes and roosters and rabbits. The colors make them far livelier than the women who wear them, but they’re rendered with origami folds that betray their artifice.

Evocative of the Surrealist paradoxes rendered by artists such as René Magritte, the juxtaposition is deeply ironic. “Unlike us, animals require no masks,” Khalatbari explains. “They act in alignment with their primal needs—hunting, eating, sleeping, and surviving. In stark contrast, humanity, driven by desires, often adorns masks, sometimes cloaking their actions under the guise of animalistic norms. As the world marches forward, it is humans who seem to behave strangely, while the animal kingdom remains steadfast.”

Nonetheless, Khalatbari is unsatisfied with blunt contrasts and societal critiques that leave no space for redemption. Conditions in Silicon Valley are not inevitable, nor are they immutable. To signify the realm beyond social media – and beyond simplistic animal symbolism – Khalatbari outlines wings behind some of her figures, suggesting that real metamorphosis is possible. Anybody can become more than the zero sum total of her social media selfie, if only she shows some imagination.

Encouragement comes from an unexpected place. One painting in the series includes a realistic depiction of a multicolored bird. Perched on the origami antlers worn by a grayscale woman, the bird serves as “a reminder that other creatures observe our enigmatic transformation”.

Whether we are able to learn from nonhuman creatures remains to be seen. However, Khalatbari’s paintings provide a powerful reminder of their presence – and perhaps their capacity to renew our humanity – even in Silicon Valley.