Tomkins, Calvin, "The Raucous Assault of Tala Madani's Art," *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2023, pp. 42-49

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PROFILES

A RAUCOUS ASSAULT

How the Iranian American artist Tala Madani sees men—and women.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

For the first eight years of her life as an artist, Tala Madani, who was born in Tehran, painted only men, and not to their credit. "Caked," in 2005, shows a brawny, nearly featureless oaf in a black undershirt smashing a cake in another oaf's face. Next came a series of small paintings of men with plants growing out of their crotch—one of them tends to his foliage with a watering can. In 2011, she painted several men whose testicles hung from their chin, and a man in spirited conversation with his vital organs, which have been removed and placed in a comfortable chair. A series of 2015 paintings present men whose colossal, firehose penises take on lives of their own. None of these images suggest animosity toward the male species. The harmless dopes in Madani's early work gave way to middle-aged, potbellied, bearded losers, whose weird plights make us laugh. Madani is that rarity in art, a wildly imaginative innovator with a gift for caricature and visual satire, and her first great subject was the absurdity of machismo. "I do think machismo is healthy and alive everywhere, and I was having fun upending it," she told me last summer, when we began a number of conversations. "You know, you want it to grow bigger, so why not water it?"

Madani, who turned forty-one in December, left Iran with her mother and moved to this country in 1994, when she was twelve, and she now lives with her husband and their two children in Los Angeles, where her first major museum show in the United States is on view (until February 19th), at the Museum of Contemporary Art. I went through the show with her in October, enjoying her candid, funny, and often self-deprecating comments on individual works and on the exhibition itself. "I wanted all these images, but I kept wondering whether the works would look better if there were fewer of them," she said. "It's supposed to be this great event, to show your work, but what does that mean? Looking is the thing, not showing." Her doubts had largely subsided by the time I arrived, and her high-spirited, ebullient personality was in full flower. She radiated energy—talking rapidly, laughing often, and using both hands to rake back her abundant, shoulder-length dark hair. I asked her about the show's title, "Biscuits," which appears, in her cursive handwriting, on the catalogue's cover and on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition. "My kids were around one day when we were installing, and they were saying 'biscuits' over and over," she said. (Her daughter, Imra, is seven; Imra's brother, Roshan, is four.) "The show's title is non-threatening in the way I want the paintings to be, and, you know—it's biscuits, everything is O.K. I'm really happy with it."

Madani is acutely aware that her exhibition coincides with the political crisis in Iran, which erupted in September when a twenty-two-year-old woman named Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested for wearing her head scarf improperly. Madani's feelings for the country of her birth are heartfelt and complex. "The disappointment and pain that I feel for the failures of the Iran government to simply do what is needed to serve the population of Iran is too deep," she told me. She follows the situation in Iran closely via the Internet, news outlets, Telegram, and the comments of Iranians on the street who are calling for change. She also posts information every day on her own Instagram account, which has more than twenty-one thousand followers. Privately, she longs to connect more directly with the people there.

The two curators who installed "Biscuits," Rebecca Lowery, an associate curator at MOCA, and Ali Subotnick, an independent curator who has seen Madani's career develop from the outset, both told me that Madani had been a fiercely active collaborator. "She was very hands-on," Lowery said. "Maybe a little more so than other artists. We had disagreements at times, which were healthy and productive and sometimes frustrating." "Everything was a negotiation," Subotnick recalled. "She's tenacious, persistent, and so, so curious." The exhibition opens with "The New Landscape," a fifteen-foot-wide image of a nude male figure lying face down, with his legs splayed out on both sides. The man's testicles are where they're supposed to be, and are clearly visible to us and to the five much smaller people whom Madani has placed in the foreground, holding up offerings as though to a deity. In spite of the testicles, she said, some viewers read the image as feminine—maybe because of all the Mother Nature references in art—and this makes her wonder if she should do it over. Madani often repaints an image, with changes. The first version of this painting, in 2017, was several feet wider. Its owner did not respond to MOCA's requests to borrow it, so Madani painted another, which she made slightly smaller, to fit the space.

There are a hundred and thirty-six works in the show. Some are small, less than two feet square; these tend to be lushly painted, with thick impasto and bravura brushwork. The larger ones are more thinly painted, and more abstract. Since 2007, Madani has made brief, stop-motion animations, and many of them are also on view, a few on monitors in galleries of paintings and the rest in a room of their own. The exhibition is not hung chronologically—a wise decision, because Madani's work is not sequential. What interests her, she told an interviewer, is "art that excavates from the psyche,

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"I think coming to America was what made me an artist," Madani says. "I didn't have any friends, I was bored."

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY HARRITY

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not the frontal lobe, not the intellectual, not the speakable, but the unspeakable." I was reminded of this comment in a gallery where several of her "Pussy" paintings were on view. "Abstract Pussy" (2013) shows a prepubescent girl in a striped skirt, sitting on the ground with her knees pulled up and her legs apart, and four minuscule, presumably male figures who have crawled in for a closer look at her exposed vagina. (She is not wearing underpants.) Why is this image funny? I'm not sure, but it is. The girl is guileless, and the tiny men are clueless—for them, this appears to be an educational experience, not a sexual one.

The "Pussy" paintings were Madani's reaction to hearing herself referred to as "the one who paints men." "When people think they know what you do, they don't look anymore," she said. She had tried to address the problem in 2013 with her Peter and Jane paintings. As a child in Iran, Madani had learned rudimentary English from the immensely popular Peter and Jane books, published in England since the nineteen-sixties, in which two atrociously well-behaved siblings are shown engaging in instructive activities. (In the United States, a similar series was devoted to Dick and Jane.) Madani's idea was to use Peter and Jane as models for a group of paintings, but she "could not make my brush do this thing," as she recalled. She eventually paid several art students to paint Peter and Jane figures for her. That led to her making silk-screen prints of the pair, copied from the books, and using these, with alterations and different backgrounds, for paintings of her own. Several of her Peter and Jane paintings are in the MOCA show. In one, the siblings trim a Christmas tree with doll-size versions of Madani's bearded, potbellied men. In another, Peter pushes a demonic-looking figure on a swing.

Madani's "Pussy" series began with a rough sketch that Madani says she also based on Jane. There is something disturbing about this child, who displays her private parts so freely. Does she know what she's doing? Her smile is playful, and somewhat mischievous. Madani had her original sketch transferred to a silk screen, and variations of the vagina-flaunting charmer appeared in a dozen or more of her paintings during the next few years. One of these, "Prism Pussy" (2019), which is in the MOCA show, is larger scale, and rendered in Madani's lush, Abstract Expressionist manner. A similarly posed girl also stars in a 2017 Madani animation called "Sex Ed by God." The plot here is simple. A pair of pink lips in a moving cloud of light (the Almighty, we assume) give whispered instructions on cunnilingus to a man and a young boy. ("Not too fast . . . Be present . . . Find her clit and never let it go.") Pussy appears, larger than the man or the boy. She reaches out, takes man, boy, and moving lips in one hand, and tucks them away in her vagina. The End.

Other characters weave their way in and out of the MOCA exhibition. The icon known as Smiley made its first appearance in a 2008 semi-abstract painting of seven men, each of whom holds up to his face a copy of the familiar yellow circle bearing two dots for eyes and a half-circle mouth. In other evocations, the Smiley image is projected onto people's faces or hovers above them, or descends on them in the form of yellow-gold urine ("Piss Smiley"). "The fact that Smiley has no nose was interesting to me," Madani explained. "He can't smell anything. He can't hear anything. He can just smile."

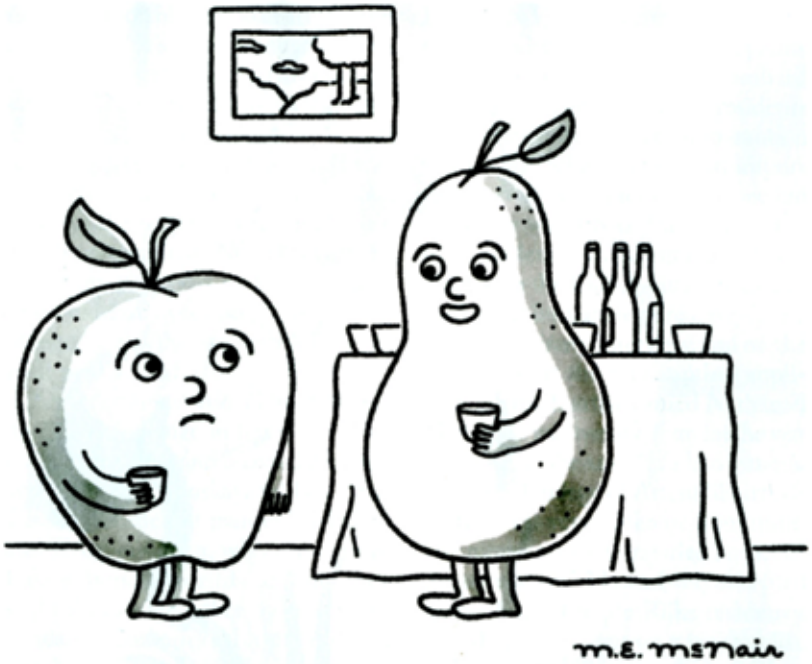
Another gallery in the exhibition is devoted mainly to Madani's penis paintings, in which the male organ functions as a giant protagonist. One

of them fills the open doorway to a dark room in a painting called "The Guest." In "Son Down," a man-child gazes in wonder at his enormous member, which occupies the space in front of him and rises to form an arch above his head. "O" shows one of Madani's bald, black-bearded men hugging his tumescent penis as it spills copious quantities of white paint on the floor beside him. "He's kind of loving his very big dick," Madani observed. "And I'm giving him the space to enjoy it."

Madani didn't really solve the problem of painting women until 2019, when her "Shit Mom" paintings arrived. "Abstract Pussy" was a silk-screened image transferred to canvas, but Shit Mom is all Madani, and I can't imagine anyone else inventing her. She figures prominently in "Biscuits." The shit in her case is not a figure of speech; she is composed of what looks like dark-brown, soft, dripping excrement. She first appeared eight months after the birth of Roshan. Madani had given herself wholly to motherhood during those months, and when she came back to the studio she had no idea what to do. "I thought, I'll paint a mother and child, just to get it out of my system," she told me. She did a painting of a mother and two small children, and had planned to hang it in her bathroom. "But it was so awful, so cliché and kitsch, that I couldn't stand it even there," she said. "So I started wiping it off, smearing the mother away. The children were still pristine, but the mother became quite shitty-looking, and I thought, Wait a second, where did that come from? It's Shit Mom!" Madani firmly denies that Roshan's birth had anything to do with the "Shit Mom" paintings, but I find this hard to believe. She has also said that when she started them she was "thinking about my own phobias of failing as a parent."

There are more than forty paintings of this strange, tragicomic figure, eight of which are in the MOCA show. We see Shit Mom in many different guises: tenderly washing the blond hair of a baby girl who looks very much like Imra; standing thigh-deep in blue water; lying on the ground while four babies touch her and eat pieces of her. Why this is not revolting, or even disagreeable, is beyond me. The beauty of the brushwork and the virtuoso modulation of color and surface must have something to do with it. Whatever the reason, I don't know of anyone who has been seriously offended by Shit Mom—not publicly, anyway. "There was really not much criticism," Madani said. "I wish there had been more."

We had been in the museum for two hours. Before leaving, I wanted to take another look at the video about Shit Mom that Madani had made in 2020. It's just under eight minutes, longer than most of her animations. The setting is the interior of a lavishly furnished house that Madani had seen in a book and rephotographed. Shit Mom, who is naked and alone, goes from room to room, touching things and sitting briefly on chairs or sofas, and everything she touches receives a dark-brown stain. There is a soundtrack of birdsong. In the formal dining room, her hand leaves a wide, continuous smear on all four walls. She sits on a couch and tries to masturbate, but fails—her body is too insubstantial. She beats her head against a marble tabletop. In another room, she finds a white cloth and uses it to wipe away the stains, but it makes them worse. At this point I felt, for the second time that day, a rather puzzling sense of sadness. When I told Madani about this, she said, "Yes, the sympathy thing. You can feel sorry for her. I don't." And then, moments later, "Sometimes I don't really understand my own practice."



"I auditioned for a part in a veggie medley, and I've got a really good feeling about it."

Tala Madani was born in 1981, two years after the revolution that ended the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Hopes for a liberal democratic government in Iran were crushed when the Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and imposed a harsh Shi'ite regime, but Madani, an only child in a well-to-do, secular family, remembers her early years as being happy. She lived with her parents in a Tehran building that her paternal grandfather, a successful entrepreneur, had constructed for his four children and himself, with separate apartments for each of them. "My grandfather was extremely influential for me," she said. "He was like the Godfather, the center." According to Madani, the year she was born a paper company that her grandfather owned was confiscated by the regime, after publishing an advertisement that showed a nude woman covered almost entirely by paper napkins. He spent six months in jail for that offense, but quickly regained his Godfather standing afterward.

His son Alireza, Madani's father, worked for his father's company. He married an upper-middle-class Iranian woman named Mojgan. After Tala's parents divorced (she was eight at the time), the court decreed that she would live with her father—the usual procedure in Iran, with its patriarchal traditions—and Mojgan moved out. For the next four years, Tala lived with her father and spent the Iranian one-day weekends, Friday, with her mother. "Fortunately, I loved school, and reading was a big part of my life, especially history and Runi mythology," she told me. "My mom, who was very smart and good at mathematics, immediately got a job in the national oil industry. I was really happy when she and my dad divorced, because I knew the marriage wasn't working." There were all-night parties at her father's apartment, which Tala was allowed to stay up for and observe. On her birthday, there were strobe lights and a hanging disco ball and her dad as the d.j.

Her mother decided to move to the United States. An uncle of hers taught in the business school at Western Oregon University, and Mojgan enrolled there as a graduate student, working toward a master's degree in computer-science education. Early in 1994, she returned to Tehran and, with Alireza's consent, took Tala to live with her in Oregon. Alireza planned to follow them as soon as he could get a visa, but that proved to be more difficult than he expected: Iranian students could obtain approval to study abroad, but, for an adult male, permission to go to the Great Satan was a different story: it took Alireza nineteen years to get his exit visa. (He could not be reached for comment.)

For Tala, the move from a city of six million people to Monmouth, Oregon, a town of six thousand, where the university is situated, was not as disruptive as it might have been. She had grown up watching American movies and absorbing American pop culture. But in Oregon, where people shopped at megastores like Home Depot, she was homesick for Iran. "I never felt more Iranian than when I came to America," she told me. She missed her father, her grandparents, and her extended family. Madani was

Madani's "Bouquet" (2006). Her first great subject was the absurdity of machismo.

in the eighth grade in public school, and she didn't know enough English to keep up. One of her teachers, seeing how intelligent she was, gave her English lessons after school. But what really got her through those first years in Oregon was drawing. Her mother had taken her to private art classes in Tehran, and Tala had decided very early that this was what she wanted to do. "But I think coming to America was what made me an artist," Madani told me. "I didn't have any friends, I was bored, and I just drew and drew and drew. I kept on doing it all the way through high school, even after my English was fine. My mom really encouraged it. We lived above a teriyaki restaurant, in an apartment with just one bedroom, and we survived on her part-time teaching salary."

At Oregon State University, in Corvallis, which Madani entered in 1999 on a full scholarship, she double-majored in art and political science. Her interest in political science was fuelled by thoughts of returning to Iran, where the government's hard-line policies had brought increasing economic and social misery. She knew that many Iranians were suffering and dreamed of going there somehow. A fellow-student at Oregon State, whom she had a tremendous crush on, urged her to forget political science and concentrate on painting, but Madani couldn't do that. She was convinced that art, much as she loved it, would never provide the independent life that she wanted for herself. For a long time, she told me, she had one foot in art and the other in Iran.

Her painting teacher at Oregon State, Shelley Jordon, thought she was born to paint. "I could see immediately how smart she was, how capable, and how ambitious," Jordon told me last fall. "She came into the class not knowing how to paint, but she learned very quickly. There was never a question about her being the real thing." Jordon, who grew up in New York, had studied painting there with Philip Pearlstein, and she kept in touch with the New York art scene. When Madani and a few of her student friends visited New York annually on Thanksgiving weekends, Jordon gave her lists of galleries and museum shows that she should see. "I hadn't met anybody who took painting that seriously, and her severity was very exciting," Madani remembers. When I asked Madani to describe her own painting in those years, she was scathing: "The backs of people who had been lashed, to talk about what was happening in Iran." She also painted several portraits of Donald Rumsfeld, as well as thumbnails of Iranians with hangman's nooses over them—"cliché reactions to the politics in Iran. They weren't caricatures yet. It was just basically bad painting. I had a studio mate, a Belgian painter, who would come in and say, 'Tala, this is awful. These are so bad. These are not art.'"

Madani graduated from Oregon State in 2004, after spending her senior year in Berlin. Her studies in political science had led to an internship at the German Council on Foreign Affairs, where she did research on issues of immigration and integration. "The work we did seemed lengthy and ineffective," she said. It didn't keep her from visiting most of the important museums in Western Europe, though, travelling by train with a former classmate she had known at Oregon State, and who was living in Spain at the time. They went to Florence, Venice, and Rome, absorbing "all the art history we had been studying and sticking to the classics." She also visited Tehran, for the first time since she and her mother moved to Oregon. The city seemed bigger and busier than she remembered. She spent time with her father and her grandparents, "but I felt very insecure there," she said. "In Germany, where I barely spoke

the language, I felt secure biking at 3 A.M. in dark neighborhoods, but not in Tehran."

Before leaving Oregon, Madani had applied to ten graduate art schools. About half of them accepted her, including Yale, her first choice. "Yale changed everything," she said. "I recognized what painting can do and can't do, and how humor can come in to do magic for things that are just coarse." The artist Peter Halley, who was the director of graduate studies in painting at Yale then, remembers Madani as the best example of the learning curves that he looks for in a student. "I wasn't blown away by her paintings when she arrived, but she kept getting better," he told me. "Very quickly, she developed this incredible hand, a kind of calligraphic brushstroke, which in conjunction with her controversial or elusive subject matter really appealed to me." To Madani, having Halley, and the painters Catherine Murphy, Kurt Kauper, Mel Bochner, and Nicole Eisenman, see and respond to her work was a revelation.

Her breakthrough came in 2005, in the summer after her first year at Yale. Students were allowed to use the studios during vacations, and Madani found a very large canvas that another student had discarded. She cleaned it off, re-stretched it, and, without any clear idea in mind, rapidly filled it with more than twenty seated figures in red clothing. A few of them had faces, but the majority did not. The semi-abstract forms, all facing the same way, suggested acolytes at a religious service. This painting, called "The House," was a turning point. "After that, I just let go of anything that I had learned academically," Madani told me. "I understood the difference between making an image of something and trying to embody something—that was the key. My paintings became much looser, without add-ons. I also became very interested in humor. It really hadn't occurred to me before—I hadn't understood humor at all." She didn't know about Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy or other American artists who dealt with the absurd, and she had never heard of Martin Kippenberger, the German iconoclast who influenced an entire generation of European artists. She continued, "It's odd, because in Iran the way you deal with reality is through humor. There was this weekly magazine in Iran called *Gol Agha*, which my uncle used to bring home. It was all political satire and caricature, and that was the only way you could criticize the government." Nobody was making funny paintings at Yale, but that summer Madani painted "Caked," and plunged gleefully into her raucous assault on machismo.

Other students and all her teachers noticed the change in her work. "Her humor was crude and unavoidable," the artist Ella Kruglyanskaya told me. "She was like a different painter." (Madani and Kruglyanskaya, who grew up in Latvia, bonded for life at Yale; they still talk to each other by telephone regularly.) Catherine Murphy said, "To watch her find a language was miraculous. There was a knife in each bit of humor, and not many people have managed to do that." (Daumier, Hogarth, George Cruikshank, and the other great caricaturists of art history were all men.) In 2006, the year Madani graduated from Yale, her cake paintings were shown at Oregon State, her alma mater. A year later, she had a solo show (of cake men and crotch plants) at Lombard Freid Projects, in New York, and the *Times* critic Roberta Smith gave it a glowing review: "Her works assert that the political is not only personal, painterly and painful but also deeply, affectingly comical. . . . This terrific show stirs optimism about the future of painting."

Madani painted all the time, morning and night, but she still balked at committing herself to a career in art. "Tala always downplayed the artist thing," Kruglyanskaya said. "She kept it at a distance—if painting didn't work out, she would go into politics." "I'm never honest with myself about my relationship to art," Madani confessed, in one of our conversations. "I almost feel that, if I admit to painting that I love it, it will leave me. Somehow this distance is very important to the kind of work I'm making."

After Yale, feeling that she needed more time to figure things out, Madani applied for two artist residencies and got both of them. The first was at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, on Cape Cod. She did the paintings for her next show at Lombard Freid there, and one of the residents taught her how to make stop-motion animations, which became an important part of her practice. The second residency was a two-year stint at the Rijksakademie, in Amsterdam. Candidates for the Rijks, which is famously hard to get into, are required to go there for a preliminary interview, and on the day she went she met another applicant, a British artist named Nathaniel Mellors. "I was twenty-four and he was thirty-one," she said. "He had gone to the Royal College of Art, so his art education was very different from mine, and more focussed on video and contemporary art." Madani was accepted immediately for the Rijks residency, but Mellors was put on a waiting list.

Madani made a second trip back to Iran at this time. She sat in on a large family conference that her paternal grandfather had organized, to help members of the extended family with any business problems they might have. The family's elder statesman and Godfather, now in his eighties, was still active and dominant, a bon vivant whom no one could suppress. For Madani, though, family issues were not the problem. What weighed on her mind was the treatment of women in Iran. "Women are second-class citizens there, in terms of inheritance laws, divorce laws, and not being counted as equal to men when testifying in court," she said to me. "The Islamic Republic has defined itself in opposition to Western values, and much of its identity is based on controlling women."

When Mellors learned that he'd been put on the waiting list at the Rijksakademie, he asked if "the Iranian girl" had got in. A few weeks later, his application was accepted. He looked up Madani, and they quickly became friends. "During introductions, when all the residents were showing their work to one another, I remember him laughing out loud when I showed my things," Madani said. "He found my paintings really funny. His work was fresh, beyond the scope of my experience, so to me he was the future. He still is. Nathaniel's work is not media-specific. It defies definition. He plays

with sculpture and music and film, and with standup comedy." When they met, Mellors was in a relationship with a woman in London, but he and Madani fell in love. During their second year at the Rijksakademie, Mellors broke up with his London girlfriend, and he and Madani moved in together.

They stayed in Amsterdam for a few months after finishing the residency. Madani found a studio in a former morgue, where the atmosphere was so dismal that she couldn't paint. She developed a thyroid disease, and went back to Oregon for medical treatment. While there, she applied for American citizenship, but after she showed excitement over the election of Barack Obama, she recalls noticing a change in the person processing her case. Her citizenship application was denied and her green card, which had made it possible for her to travel and to reside in the United States, was placed under review. "I called Nathaniel and said, 'Honey, I'm having green-card problems and I'm stuck in Oregon for a while.' We had been together for a year and a half, and it could have fizzled out at that point, but instead he moved to Oregon. We rented a house on the beach in Newport, and I painted and he wrote film scripts and made sculptures and ran on the beach, and at night we watched films on Netflix—Nathaniel knew a lot about cinema and film theory, so it was an education for me." On their first date, they watched Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom."

After nine months on the Oregon coast, Madani got her green card back (she became a citizen soon afterward), and she and Mellors returned to Amsterdam. They had a lot of friends there, but they decided that Holland was not the right place for them. Madani's work was appearing in important museum shows in New York and elsewhere. She was in the New Museum's 2009 triennial exhibition, "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" ("Her small, yet powerfully ribald paintings stood out amid a surplus of chilly conceptualism," the Los Angeles *Times* reported), and in 2013 her breakthrough work, "The House," was in a solo show at the Moderna Museet, in Sweden. Her third show at Lombard Freid that year, called "Pictograms," featured alphabet pictures with people's bodies forming the letters, and some new, disturbing animations. (In "Hospital," a baby crawls up onto a hospital bed and beats its tiny hands on the sheet-covered patient until the sheet is saturated with blood.) Madani and Mellors thought seriously of moving to New York, but they were put off by the soaring cost of living in the city. Los Angeles was considerably cheaper then, and they moved there in 2010.

Although Madani and Mellors had been engaged for three years, they were still unmarried. They knew that they wanted children, though, and in 2015, when Madani found that she was pregnant, they discussed getting married. The plan was to do it in Turkey, where Mellors was researching Neanderthal history at an excavation site called Gobekli Tepe. (His short, comic film "The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview" premièred at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, in 2014.) Political tensions at the border between Turkey and Syria made travel difficult, however, so she and Mellors were married in a secular service at a church near Los Angeles. Tala's mother came, and so did her father, who had finally been able to leave Iran the year before, and was living in Palos Verdes, an hour south of L.A. He and Tala see each other once or twice a month. Many of Madani's and Mellors's family members attended the wedding, as did a host of art-world friends (including Ali Subotnick) from Amsterdam and London and New York and Los Angeles. Imra was born four months later.

"When I eat out, I like to order something I would never make at home."

Los Angeles suits Madani and Mellors. They live a few miles north of the city, in a three-bedroom house that they renovated and moved into three years ago. The house is surrounded by lush gardens full of exotic plants and uninvited wild peacocks,

which perch on the roof and strut around like landlords. (The species is not native to the area; someone must have brought a pair and turned them loose.) Five or six of the birds were in evidence when I came for lunch after the "Biscuits" show. Madani showed me an iPhone video of a black bear and its cub, also uninvited, that came in through their fence recently and stayed for a while. California can be more feral than you think. Lunch was abundant: two very good cheeses, fresh bread, and a tasty Iranian soup called Ash-e-anar, which Madani's mother, who lives nearby with her second husband, an Oregon-born financial expert whom she married twenty years ago, had made and left to simmer on the stove. Mojgan often picks up the children at school and takes care of them until Madani and Mellors return from work—they have adjoining studios in a building they own in Montecito Heights, twenty minutes from home.

I stayed on after lunch, and met Mojgan and the children. Mojgan is quieter than Tala. She has warmth and grace, and a calm but unmistakable authority. The children are friendly and talkative; they both have blond hair, which Tala says they got from their father. Nathaniel arrived a little later, and we all sat in the garden and had peppermint tea and more of the cheese and fresh fruit. Tala and Nathaniel clearly enjoy parenting. "Nathaniel is the more fun parent," Tala said. "I'm tied to a schedule." I asked Nathaniel about his family. "I was born in Doncaster, in Yorkshire," he said. "My parents were from working-class families—my dad had been a professional footballer, a goalkeeper, and my mom was a teacher. When I was fourteen, I started improvising music. I knew I wanted to make art and music." Mellors, whose multi-discipline installations have been shown at the New Museum, in New York, the 2017 Venice Biennale, the Hammer Museum, and elsewhere, uses electronic technology in much of his work.

The next morning, Madani picked me up in her Tesla (she and Nathaniel each have one) and drove to her studio. We talked about the ongoing crisis in Iran. A month had passed since the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini. The nationwide protests, far from abating, were growing in strength and numbers. Young women throughout the country burned their hijabs in public, and went without them on the streets. More than two hundred protesters had been killed by the police, and thousands more had been arrested. There were daily warnings of harsher reactions by the hard-line regime, but so far the threat of mass killings had not materialized. (In subsequent months, hundreds more protesters have been killed, and four people have been executed by the state.)

"What's happening now has been incredible to watch," Madani said. "There's a new generation that's much less fearful, and it's fitting that a regime whose identity is based on controlling women's actions should be brought down by women. This has been an awakening, and it's gone beyond the point of no return." In a later conversation, she turned again to the subject. "I'm against sanctions on Iran, because they harm the people more than the government," she told me. "Sanctions just create black markets. There are more effective things to do, such as freezing individual assets and organizing strikes. But there is no underground network in Iran for this movement. Iranians have a lot of passion, but they don't have a lot of talent for organization. But I'm hopeful. I don't think Iran can go back to government as usual, because this government has lost its standing with the different structures that run the country, and with the population. There are now so many in revolt, and the numbers offer a sort of protection. It's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. It seems now that there is a total commitment to seeing this through. The reformist movement in the last decade failed, and now it's a real revolution."

The studio was larger than I expected—a single-story building with twenty-foot ceilings, nine thousand square feet of space, and a fenced-in parking lot. Madani had brought croissants, chocolate and plain, and we ate them in her part of the studio, with peppermint tea. (Iranians do like to feed you.) Several of her "Cloud Mommy" paintings, a new series she had started nine months earlier, were on the walls. There were seven in the MOCA exhibition, large paintings of blue sky with wisps or patches of white clouds in which you could make out female figures. This was a new direction for Madani. "I don't know how a cloud could come into my practice," she said. "My paintings are not about space, they're about performance. But I can't do something arbitrarily, there has to be a reason, so I guess they came from wondering how to introduce landscape into the work. And I found the female again, in the cloud." She paused, then added, "I'm in the middle of it now, sketching stuff for the next series of Cloud Mommies."

In an earlier conversation, Madani had described a group of her small paintings as "comfortable," and I asked her now what that meant. "The comfortable thing is when"—she broke off and started again. "The brush never lies, right? The brush shows you when the painter is being careful and oh so precise, kind of belaboring it, and when they're relaxed. They're holding their breath when they paint, or they're breathing. You can make an amazing painting either way. Medieval painting, and usually folk art, are the holding-the-breath kind. Salvador Dali didn't breathe at all when he painted. Dali's paintings are tight as a fist. But you could say that Matisse and Picasso are breathing through their paintings. They're very relaxed. They're comfortable."

I suggested that the cloud paintings looked pretty comfortable, and Madani agreed. Would she say the same about her life? She laughed, and threw up her hands. "I find my life quite ordinary," she said. "I *need* the ordinary at this point. It's almost like my life growing up was so extremely rich that I'm still processing it. I need the calm in order to process the strangeness. I'll tell you something else," she added. "When this revolution comes to fruition, the weight of history, of the problems present at my birth, would be lifted, and I could truly be happy just being an artist." ♦