

Zel, 2018

Stone is dominant and present but not in the way we have come to expect, as hard and definite. We encounter stone in a phase of transformation, as broken and fragmented, and this requires from us a new attitude of repair and restoration.

In his works, Mojtaba Amini has developed a language of design that emerges from the properties of the materials he uses. On the one hand, the materials in his works draw attention to themselves, as they are; on the other, the materials act in his works, determining and shaping form and thereby attaining meaningful levels of authorship. For example, the artist uses dried animal skin to address death or violence. In this setting, the material aligns directly with the content; it is almost the content itself. Much of the material he uses is identifiable as unique to the artist's home region and thus also speaks of this region's culture and history. For example, turquoise is mined extensively in the city of Neyshabur and is thus representative of the city's historical importance and economic value. Upon examining Amini's work, we further see that stone is depicted in its fragmentary and plural form, and out of the old meanings of stone a new set of connotations begin to surface.

According to the artist, two significant art projects marked his first period of work. Both works are characterized by their use of fragmented stones as the central material. The first project, "تهران ۸۸" (Tehran 88), came into being in 2011/2012. This work is a room-adaptive floor installation consisting of around seven hundred small stones found in Tehran. These are stones that street protesters had, at the time, used to defend themselves. Some seven years later, the second project, «ظل» (Zel: Arabic word for shadow), was created, one in which around five hundred unprocessed pieces of mineral turquoise are employed. It is this work that is the focus of the current exhibition, *Dear Fractured Stones*.

Complex in form and in its overall realization, ظل (Zel) has the subtitle *He who stood in the dark so that he could see those in the light more clearly*. In its essence, this project addresses the disintegration of bodies, both human and material. The work is divided into nine sections, each of which has a separate title, and tells the story of a turquoise miner from Neyshabur who lives and works in darkness all his life, and who, nevertheless, cannot reach anything but the most basic standard of living. According to the artist, the work recalls the real-life story of his great-uncle.

The first five sections of the work consist of a mixture of photos, paintings, installations, and written text, all of which provide the viewer with a glimpse into the miner's life: an up-close view of this "hidden world." The texts retell stories from the miner's everyday life and positions his life within the context of domestic politics including specific references to ecological and geographical themes in the surrounding area, e.g., we learn that the miner is not allowed to plough his fields due to the ongoing artificial reclamation of deserts in the area and thus we also learn why the subject became a miner and what kinds of concerns he has when it rains

and when it doesn't. In the sixth section of the work, titled ید (Yad: Arabic word for hand, figuratively denoting power), the artist changes his narrative method and creates a space for experiencing. ید (Yad) consists of five hundred unprocessed juxtaposed lumps of turquoise on a black pedestal. A metallic jewelry ring is placed upon each of these raw pieces of turquoise, and we immediately note the disproportionate size-to-weight ratio between the ring and the stone. Behind the pedestal, Amini shows a series of photos created by the artist Azin Haghighi. These photos show miners trying to clean their bodies of the residual black dust following a day of toil and work. In addition, the work ظل (Zel) depicts, in the eighth section, the examination of the body of a worker in radiographic form, and in the final ninth section, we see the artist confronting his own death as he experiments with casts of his own face made from hardened soap. We note here that the seemingly solid soap will, with time, shrink and consequently the face will too. Amini complements these casts with further photos by Azin Haghighi, in which the miners use their headlamps to find their way in the dark.

In ظل (Zel), Amini selects turquoise stone, which, as a material, is directly related to the physical work of the miner and thus both determines and encompasses the miner's existence and approach to life. Stone is central. Although the artist chooses to begin with his family history, this is undeniably a history that exemplifies the history of many mine workers – not only in Iran but also worldwide – and thus depicts a collective history. We are confronted with collections of stones and collective histories. Stone can be understood as a metaphor for the body, whereby every specific stone represents another human body. In this way, the bodies of the miners and the pieces of stone are connected.

Stone is often associated with hardness and resistance; however, in these works stone is presented as broken and fragmented and can thus no longer offer its impenetrable resistance and permanence. This characteristic forms a connection point between the two projects – Tehran 88 and Zel – in which broken stones are shown in large numbers. Indeed, the large number of stones can also be understood as an artistic-archival approach, in which the archiving of things of a similar kind aims at re-establishing and rebuilding lost connections. The act behind this process can be identified as a reparative attitude, one that seeks to reimagine connections and thus restore the whole.