

## ***Number of Monuments, 2020/2021***

Mitra Soltani explores female identity from within the context of hierarchical structures and patriarchal societies. Her work focuses on aspects of tribal culture and the interplay between power, archive, and memory. In one of her most recent projects, the artist works with the biographies of those she labels *nameless*. *Nameless*, in this context, refers to an outcome of forgetting that occurs when individuals are neglected by the structures controlling, shaping, and ultimately determining public memory, for instance, the media. The media, with its ever-increasing addiction to speed of coverage, provides fewer and fewer opportunities for either the life, or the death, of the *nameless* to be recognized. The *nameless* therefore have no existence in public memory. Soltani, however, having grown up in the city of Shahrekord – located to north of the Zagros Mountains – is acutely aware of how the erection of monuments and stones establishes public memory and resists oblivion. For instance, in a cultural tradition typical of the region, a gravestone in the form of a lion is erected to symbolize the qualities of bravery, courage, and other valuable skills such hunting and shooting, which characterized the life of the departed individual. For the nomadic people of this region, stones function to cement collective memory; however, this practice is reserved only for tribal men.

It is from this background that the artist examines newspapers and takes photographs of places with the aim of identifying traces of forgetting, and it is in these places of forgetting that she places and erects a found quarry stone. In this way, Soltani creates numerous temporary installations, which consist of a combination of quarry stones and newspapers, as well as other textual and pictorial materials, the result of which can then be seen in public as well as exhibition spaces. A characteristic of these installations is a collision between hardness and softness, between the stone and the materials with which the stones are covered. These small quarry stones, because of their number, attain a powerful presence and thus demonstrate the unique power of the powerless and the *nameless*. An organic development of the theme can also be observed in Soltani's works, whereby the objects from the main project wander (nomadically) into other projects, and often form new project themselves. In a sense, the objects attain ongoing existences.

For the project *A Number of Monuments* – a project emerging from a previous work of the artist, *Showing Transparency* – the artist presents a collection of stories detailing the various forms of violence and death experienced by fifteen women and girls from urban and rural areas. These biographies are represented in the form of fifteen hand-sized quarry stones that the artist dedicates to these women as memorial markers. Each stone bears the name and surname of one of the fifteen as its title. The stones are partially covered in netted fabrics and nylon tights, either colored or black, and the stones are also partially decorated with plastic beads,

broken mirrors, and artificial hair. Many of these decorative materials – such as dresses, veils, or masks – conceal and at the same time reproduce the stone contours. The colors themselves also allude to the age of the person to whom the memorial marker is dedicated. While the act of covering can be understood as a protective strategy, parallels can also be drawn to the everyday life of the tribal women, in which they cover and decorate commonplace objects and things with fabrics. For example, stones or wooden branches are often covered with colorful fabrics to make toys for children, to make decorations, or to create a type of amulet. Soltani suggests that this behavior by tribal women reflects a far deeper motivation, as the practice allows them to slowly take control of their existing reality as – bit by bit – they record their presence on the objects surrounding them. Soltani then continues this practice for them.