

Untitled, 2017/2020

With their use of natural elements, Vooria Aria's artworks explore conceptual and material relationships to the artist's home, Sanandaj, in western Iran. A central characteristic of this exploration is a simultaneous process of defamiliarization, which emerges as a central motif throughout his works. Form and material are represented as physical processes of fragmentation and segmentation, whereby the natural materials used – pieces of slate split off from the local mountains and then ground to powder, as well as hemp rope made from local materials – are either emptied of their old meanings, thus taking on new connotations, or newer meanings emerge layer by layer in addition to the older ones. For example, heirlooms inherited from his father and grandmother – namely the traditional rugs and fabric, Jajim and Mooj, from his native Sanandaj – which were originally intended as places of invitation to sit and to live, but in the context of Aria's works these become more reminiscent of the shapes of birds or fighter planes. Aria's interests revolve around material structures that carry a sense of connection and familiarity but that therefore also inherently carry a potential for defamiliarization and loss. Migration and society and Aria's own childhood memories are recurring themes in his work, which thrives on and lives from the inherent processes of contrast and defamiliarization he identifies.

A central material appearing in Aria's art is fragmented slate – a type of stone, dark grey in color, and typical of the mountainous region of his home, Sanandaj. As the mountains naturally erode, slate material breaks away as a stone slice or layer. In this context, the pieces of slate appear as fragments or as components split off from a larger unit. Slate, unlike other types of stone, is characterized by a tendency to easily split and to fracture into thin, horizontal, plate-like pieces. Indeed, with any "movement", the stone may split and shatter into even smaller pieces – a process of ongoing reduction. In Aria's home, this characteristic has accorded slate a special application in Kurdish-Sunni funerary culture, where it is used to cover individual graves. After the dark-grey slate pieces are collected and sorted by hand according to their length and size, they are then, according to the artist, applied in an aesthetic patterned design to cover the grave. Slate pieces of the same size are placed next to each other, row upon row, and out of a loose connection of pieces a structure forms that is reminiscent of a crowd of people. If we compare this use of stone to that of a tombstone, in which the hardness and resoluteness of the stone references notions of a human-like eternal vigil, we find in the use of slate something more transient, yet collective, and thus still human-like. The nature of slate suggests that as it moves further from its source in the mountains, it is exposed to ongoing processes of change.

In the work *Untitled*, Aria makes use of slate stones that have been transported from Sanandaj to Europe – a clear indication of movement and migration – but this time in the form of a self-crushed slate powder. *Untitled* is a floor work consisting of a white rectangular marked space, half framed in black, such that a sense of shift or

displacement emerges. Using this as a background, the artist then creates a three-dimensional cone of slate powder, upon which he places a pane of glass, blunting the tip of the cone. Looking at the work from above, a pictorial approach can be seen, one which is emphasized by the framing of the cone powder with the black and white passepartout, and the placement of a glass pane atop the cone.

If we consider the origin story of the slate itself, the slate powder can be understood as an extreme form of slate's transformation. According to the science of mineralogy, all types of slate break and split into layers; however, the thinner the slice of slate formed, the more noble or fine is the structure of the stone itself. From this perspective and considering the slate's transformation from mountain structure to fragment to powder, Aria's work, *Untitled*, opens a horizon of associations in which slate becomes a symbol of a corpus – a corpus that reaches its maximum development through its transformation to powder. Memories, migration, and movement thus come together in a physical process of defamiliarization and transformation.

_ Baharak Omidfard