

## THE DANGEROUS BOOK

by Danna Lorch

Hadieh Shafie tells *Selections* the story that lies behind her secretive sculptures

Hadieh Shafie rolls her words and wishes up in tightly bound cocoons of painted paper that form a hybrid of ancient scroll, art book and contemporary sculpture. Her work, which can be found in the collections of institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum, documents an ongoing negotiation between spontaneity and restraint.

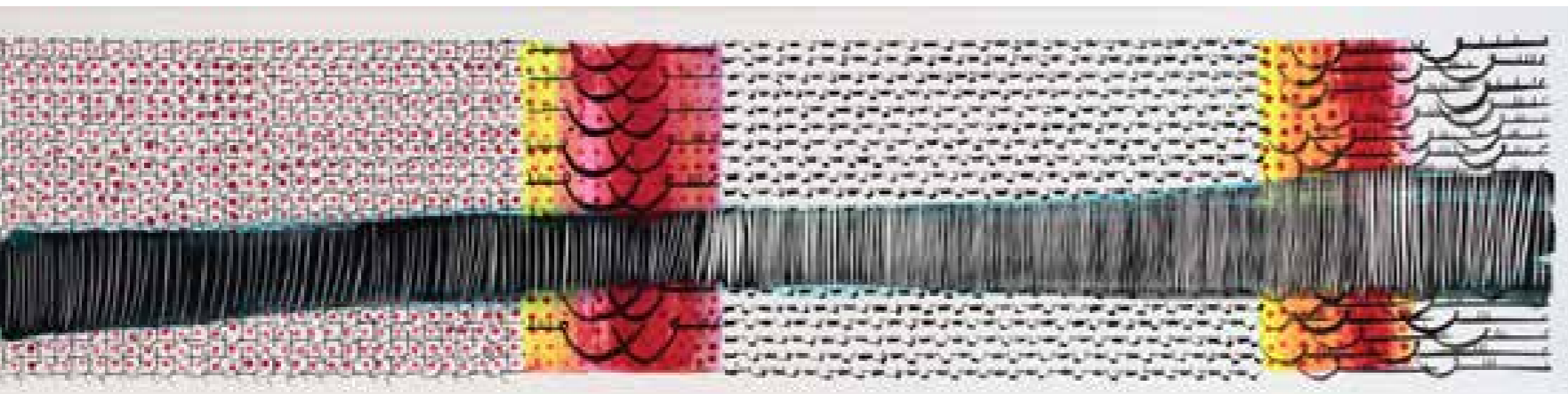
When Shafie was a teenager struggling to preserve her Iranian roots while fitting into her adopted country of America, her local public library was a haven. She used to thumb through old books and notice where previous readers had dog-eared corners of pages or left inscriptions and questions in beige margins. Not coincidentally, the foundations of Shafie's artistic practice are also hidden between sheets of handwritten text. She is attached to the intimate quality of handwriting, and inscribes words in Farsi across thousands of guillotined, painted strips of paper, then rolls her story up as though concealing her true wishes, arranging the scrolls in abstract patterns that often form peaks like mountainous topography.

The origins of this ritual have to do with a children's book entitled *The Little Black Fish*, which was written by Samad Behrangi and was banned both before and after the Iranian Revolution. Before she immigrated to the U.S. at 14, Shafie recalls her mother cautioning, "Don't tell anyone you have this book." She retells the story in her own words: A little black fish wants to leave his area of the pond and explore the ocean. He starts talking to all the other creatures about his desire to go and see the world, and each of them tells him that this is a very dangerous dream.

**opposite page :**  
*Ghalb 7*, 2014, ink,  
acrylic, and paper  
with printed and  
handwritten Farsi text  
*Eshgh* ("Love/Passion"),  
81.3 × 47 × 8.9 cm

**opposite page  
background:**  
*Ten Colors*, 2015, ink,  
acrylic and paper  
with printed and  
handwritten Farsi text  
*Eshgh* ("Love/Passion"),  
152.4 × 101.6 × 15.2 cm



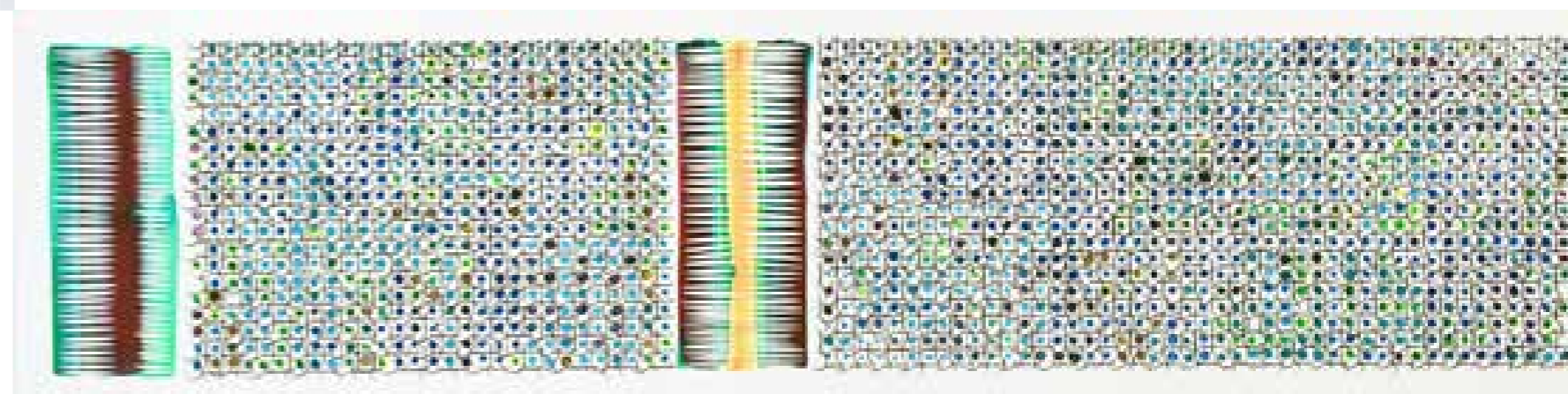
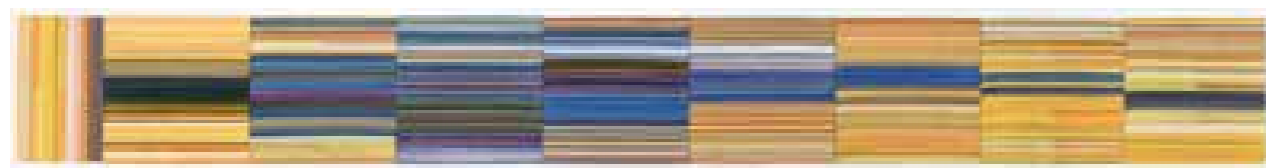


**above:** *Grid/Cut 7*, 2015,  
ink and acrylic on mat  
board, 61×244 cm

Beginning more than 15 years ago as an artist with cat eyes and heavy silver bangles, who refused to listen to advice that she become a Sunday painter, Shafie reread the story, Xeroxing passages, highlighting episodes in which the little black fish expressed his dream and underlining discouraging advice he was given for why he should never leave. In an anonymous performance, she tucked these pieces of paper into the pages of library books for strangers to discover. “Maybe this was symbolically about thinking of myself as an artist,” she speculates, “and having to choose the artist’s way of life that goes against the grain of society.”

For centuries, practitioners of graphology have claimed that analysis of handwriting can reveal character traits. Shafie resists stylising her script. “I decided that my own handwriting would be changed forever if I studied calligraphy,” she says. “It would be like erasing my own fingerprint.” She has tucked stacks of paper lacy with her grandmother’s handwriting in a corner of her studio to make a future piece. “I can’t let her handwriting go,” she admits. “I won’t be able to see it anymore at that point because it will be hidden within the work, but that won’t matter.”

**below:** *Stripe 2*, 2014,  
ink, acrylic, and paper  
with printed and  
handwritten Farsi text  
*Eshgh* (“Love/Passion”),  
31×243.8×11.4 cm



*Grid/Cut 6*, 2015, ink  
and acrylic on mat  
board, 61×244 cm

Shafie’s voice takes on a pinched wistfulness as she describes her connection to the late Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. “I came to discover Farrokhzad through *The House is Black*, a film she made of a leper colony in Iran, which shook me to the core,” Shafie says. “Her poetry was shocking to me as a young girl because she was talking about love and loss and having cigarettes after lovemaking. They’re such brutally open, brutally painful, emotional poems.” Shafie’s current work, an ongoing series that offers a visual response to frequently recited verses from Farrokhzad’s *Another Birth* and Sohrab Sepehri’s *In The Garden*, marks an unprecedented openness that parallels Farrokhzad’s candour. For the first time, a panel of colour palettes and words are broken apart and exposed in diptych form for viewers to examine, side by side with her signature paper scrolls.

While her previous pieces glued shut the writing and colour patterns, her latest works, such as the planet-like *Transition 4*, are what she terms “controlled deconstruction.” The palette and text is cracked open and displayed clearly as part of the work, as though Shafie is inviting us to at last read an entire poem that she long ago scribbled into the margins of a secret anthology. ■