

On any drive through Tehran, you will inevitably be confronted by an urban feature that is particular to this metropolis: numerous large-scale murals on the sides of buildings. Whether you travel on one of the many flyovers or take a smaller street, there they are. And given the city's heavy-duty traffic jams, you'll end up spending a significant amount of time looking at them; that is, when you are not distracted by the striking landscape or trying to catch a glimpse of the postcard-pretty snow-covered mountains to the north. More particularly, the murals are much more intriguing than any commercial billboard – of which there are plenty here too.

The first murals I spot are enormous realistic portraits: either martyrs from the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, surrounded by exploding tanks, helicopters or occasionally cute fluffy clouds, or religious leaders with solemn faces. The second type of mural is a bit more peculiar: trompe-l'oeil paintings of big holes cut into the facades to reveal scenes of life inside, of flying cars, children holding bundles of balloons and floating through the air, and people biking up the sides of buildings. Most common are imaginary idealised landscapes filled with sunshine and beautiful green vistas. Architectural fantasies are also prevalent, referencing historical buildings built in traditional Persian styles. During one of my studio visits in the Iranian capital I encounter a version of this kind of mural: the one that adds a building to already existing buildings.

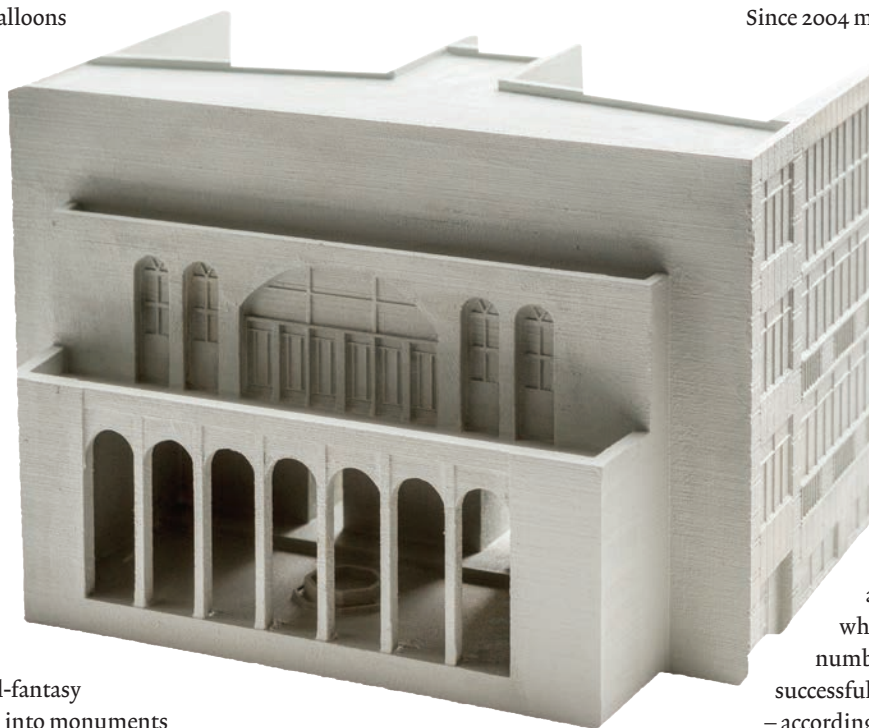
Nazgol Ansarinia's series of small sculptures *Fabrications* (2013; in collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Aza) explores the architectural-fantasy murals in space, turning them into monuments in miniature, with an architecturally accurate side and an imaginary side. Depending on how you approach the 3D-printed plaster-and-resin sculptures, you come into contact with one of the two types of buildings, one of which is a vision of what the buildings in the wall paintings would look like if they were indeed realised. If traditional monuments typically represent supposedly enduring values and phenomena, Ansarinia's maquettes memorialise ordinary houses with temporary applied visual effects, embodying the schizophrenic situation of the current era for many people in the country. Whereas on the surface there is the illusion of openness, of airy vistas and clear skies, everyday life is one of restriction,

NAZGOL ANSARINIA

Riffing off a vernacular mural tradition, one artist captures the CONTRASTS and CONTRADICTIONS of life in contemporary Tehran,

by

Maria Lind



Nazgol Ansarinia, *Residential building / Shah-neshin and veranda on Satarkhan highway*, *Fabrications*, 2013, in collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar, plaster, resin and paint, 14 × 21 × 16 cm. Courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai

constraint, rapid commercial expansion and heavily polluted air – this last to the point of frequent respiratory problems among its citizens and some days when those snow-covered mountains are completely obscured from view.

As the artist has noted, the shift to imaginary landscapes in the city's murals began in the early 2000s, as urban redevelopment accelerated and intense construction began to significantly shrink public space. Even today the number of construction cranes is impressive (shopping malls appear to be especially popular among planners and builders). In other words, the illusion of access to open landscapes and clean air in Tehran emerged at a moment when the opportunities to experience precisely those things were decreasing rapidly. This was also the time when daily existence in general became harsher and more restricted due to the international sanctions imposed on Iran for its refusal to suspend a uranium-enrichment programme.

Since 2004 more than 800 murals have been

commissioned by Tehran's Bureau of Beautification, a scale of production that can be compared with Russia's immediately after the revolution. But Tehran's wall paintings have been around much longer than that, with the iconography of different regimes colonising blank facades over the last 50 years, at the beginning the lower parts of houses, and subsequently, after the Islamic revolution, climbing upwards. This

attempt to beautify a city whose metropolitan population numbers 16 million has been rather successful among the inhabitants – according to a recent survey, only 5 percent now approve of the still-prevalent propaganda murals, instead favouring the increasing amount of imaginary landscapes.

Ansarinia might well comment that the beautiful imaginary landscapes and nostalgic buildings are as ideological, if not more so, than the blatant propaganda of military and religious figures. Michel Foucault reminded us that real power always disguises itself, making the seemingly neutral and 'normal' rule. *Fabrications* insist on actualising the encounter between the existing and the virtual, looking like eerie colourless toys, breaking the slick surface of normality and embodying the stark contrasts and abundant contradictions so palpable in Tehran today.