

Ala Ebtekar: Emergence

Richmond Art Center
West Gallery
January 24-March 18, 2006

Ala Ebtekar addresses identity and memory through the lens of vernacular visual culture. Drawing on his dual Iranian and American upbringing, he makes visual connections between the contemporary mythologies of both places. The working-class heroes of Iran are traditional wrestlers whose physical power and discipline are displayed in photographs hung in coffeehouses throughout Tehran. Ebtekar sees their influence repeated in the imagery of early hip-hop, when rappers dressed in sportswear and paid homage to the basketball court in their lyrics and styles. These are the legends of working men—disenfranchised and impoverished, but still inspired by these icons of strength and dignity to imagine something greater than their own circumstances.

Ebtekar uses projections of found photographs as the starting point for his drawings, which are rendered larger-than-life in ink and whitewash on the gallery walls. The figures of the wrestlers and those of the rappers overlap and blend together. Their features are absent, though intricately detailed patterns emerge here and there. Ebtekar proposes that memory is itself a whitewash, reducing experiences and thoughts to mere sketches which run together indiscriminately. This imperfect memory is at the core of his practice as a hybrid culture-mixer, sampling and cross-fading imagery as a DJ does with music.

Ebtekar's installation also incorporates colors and forms from the surrounding gallery architecture. A tower of whitewashed speakers becomes the structural focus of the exhibition. The mute speakers suggest a Tower of Babel, suggesting the inability of the two cultures represented to find a common parlance. The tower is a Minimalist construction made of found objects, physically synthesizing parallel threads of recent art history. Trends of politics and culture flow through the work, emerging and receding and getting mixed up. Ebtekar demonstrates how one can inhabit a range of cultural spaces without internal conflict. This is an essential lesson for us all, if we are ever to understand one another.

Ala Ebtekar was born in Berkeley, CA, in 1978. He holds an MFA from Stanford University, Stanford, CA (2006). As a teenager, he worked with Tim Rollins' seminal group Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) on public art installations and exhibitions around the Bay Area. He studied traditional Persian painting in Tehran, Iran in the late 1990s, prior to completing his BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2001. Previous exhibitions include the solo *Elemental*, Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2004), and group exhibitions *Do'Ka*, La Condition Publique, Roubaix, France (2005), *Ala Ebtekar and Jeong-Im Yi*, Lisa Dent Gallery, San Francisco, CA (2005), *The Wild Bunch 2*, The ANNEX, New York, NY (2004), and *Global Elegies: Art and Ofrendas for the Dead*, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA (2003). His solo exhibition *Emergence: Elements* was installed at Gallery Paule Anglim in February 2006. Ebtekar will be featured in *One Way or Another: Asian-American Art Now*, on view at the Asia Society, New York, NY, from September 8-December 10, 2006.

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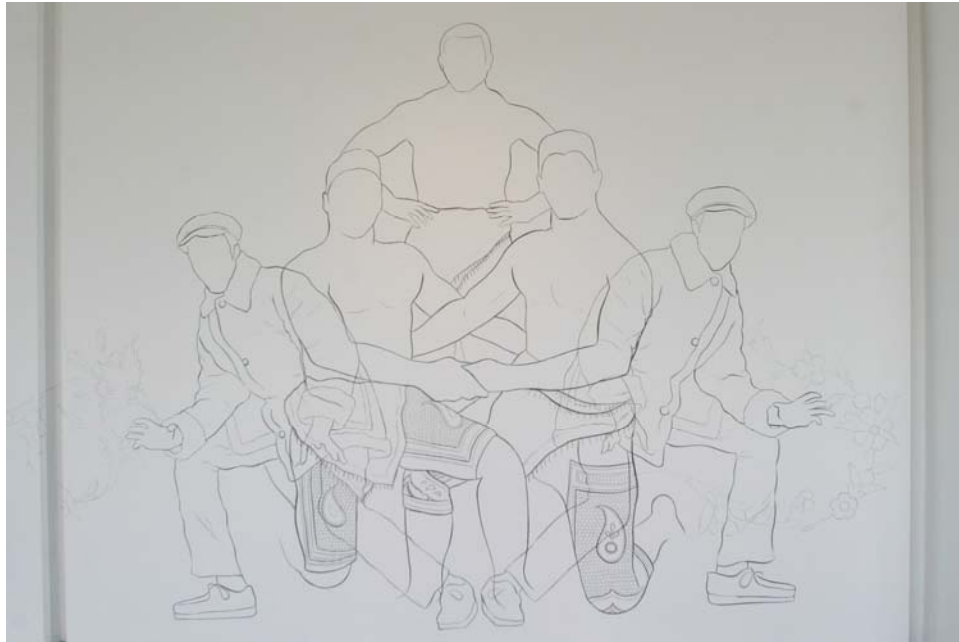


Installation view



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