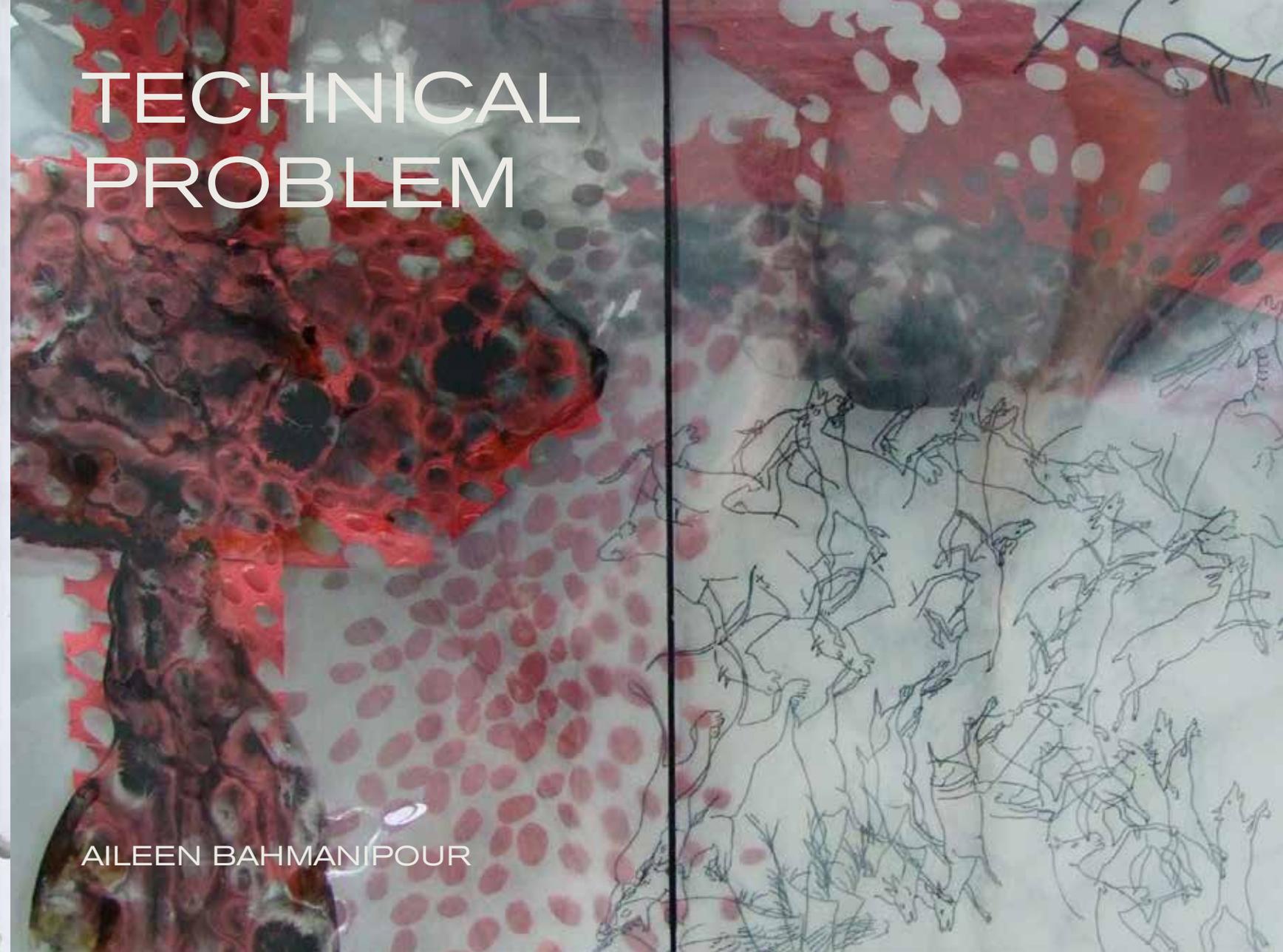
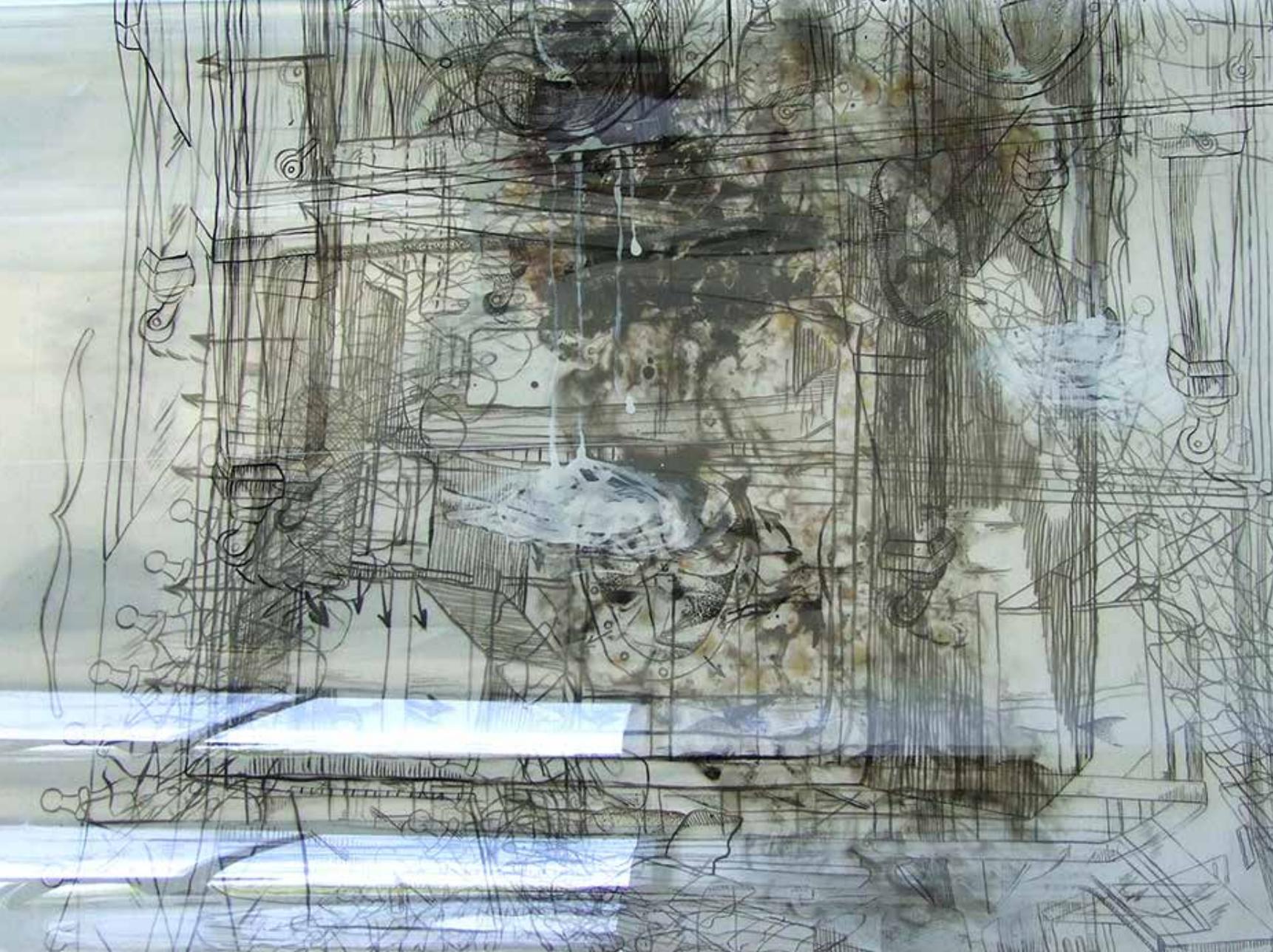




TECHNICAL PROBLEM

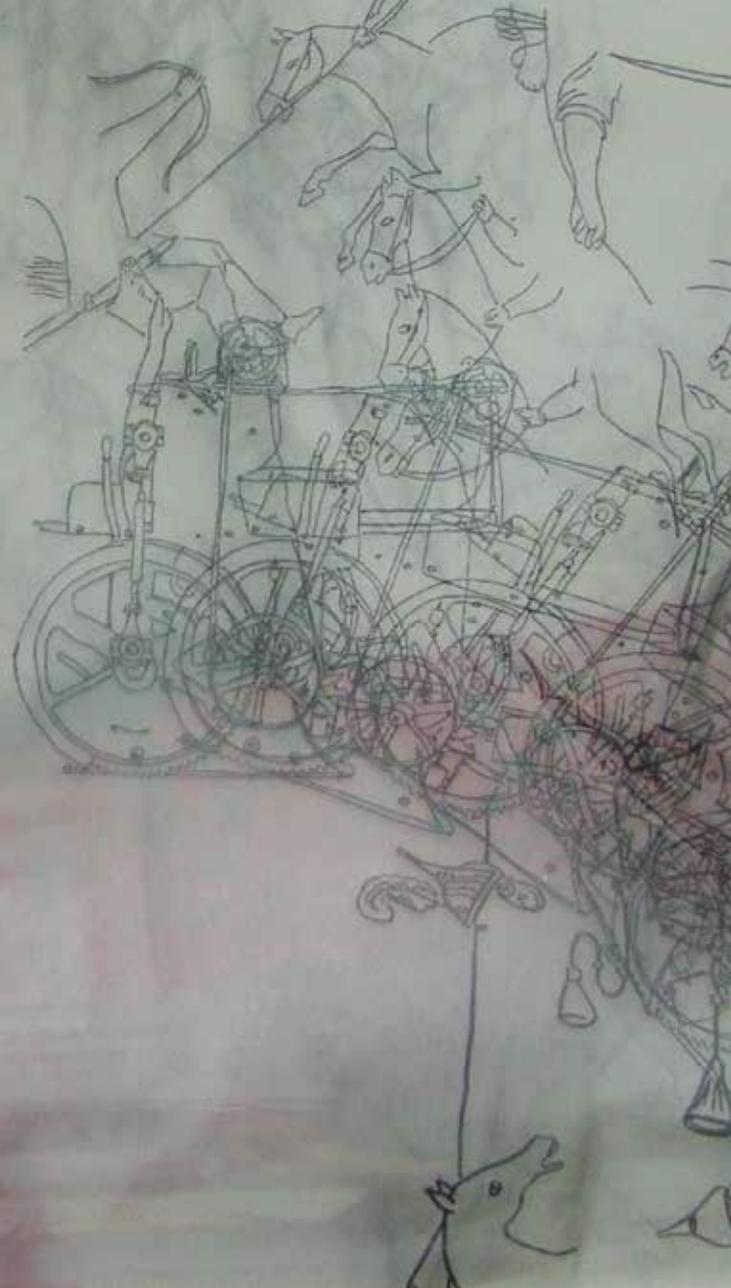


AILEEN BAHMANIPOUR



TITLE PLEASE

by Jaleh Mansoor



What the Figure Affords Her: Some Notes on The Capacity of Drawing in Aileen Bahmanipour's Art of Middle Passage

What does immigration look like, precisely? How does it enter the field of vision? Through representation? And if so, of what order: political or *aesthetic*? How can it be specified? And in an era qualified only as distinct for the total saturation of real, which is to say capitalist, abstraction on a global scale, what forms or genres might be summoned to contain the phenomenology—the experience—of transition, transformation, and agency across languages, cultures, territories, and nation states? The humanities, itself a vexed entity in the corporate universities of the neoliberal present, have posed the problem forcefully in the arena of letters and poetics.¹ World literature and the global turn have both been offered as provisional categories as a way to buttress the present, to insist that accounts and narratives gain timeliness and traction through fidelity to the real movement of history. But again, what does this question—how to contain and articulate meaning and plural experience, what and how experience and identity differ at a level beyond the capacity of denotation—LOOK like?

The following brief text will explore the affordances of linear figuration in two of the eight works by Aileen Bahmanipour on view at grunt gallery, Vancouver, from September 7 through October 14, 2017. It asks after what this particular form of containment—figuration—allows the artist to convey at this particular time and place, but also what it occludes. Further, it asks how the artist at once takes advantage of what the form makes possible while distorting it to update its assumptions in the face of the contingencies of the present. This short essay will focus on three works that are particularly striking for the way they configure Bahmanipour's trajectory and the way in which they crystallize the knot of contradiction her work presents: *Sucking my Tears* (2014), *Technical Problem* (2012), and finally *The Image is the Disturbance in the Pattern* (2017). All three beg the question of figurative drawing, or more precisely, the question of what it can do to push back against its supposed obsolescence in a new era of global

migration. In other words, what does it afford, and for whom, now? And I use the term “afford” or “affordance” as defined by Caroline Levine in “Introduction: The Affordances of Form,” in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* to query what a practice can do, “what is a walled enclosure or a rhymed couplet *capable* of doing?”² This notion bypasses intention and authorship to emphasize capacity and the mobilization of the collective effort aggregated over time in any given medium or practice, a formalist summoning of history: “To be sure, a specific form can be put to use in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form's affordances. Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms do, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent – thought not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements.”(reference number?) Formalism, meet historicity in the work of Aileen Bahmanipour.

In the first, *Sucking my Tears* (2014), figure and ground interweave, braiding in a virtuosic show of both mastery and deferral of the capacity for spatial dimension afforded by line. The way in which the white marks dispersed over the entire pictorial field appear to issue from the flayed breast at the left is an ironic reminder of Clement Greenberg's insight that the first mark on a surface will cleave it into figure and ground, into shape and atmosphere, but with the cautionary caveat that the artist resist this bullying by basic phenomenological coordinates. It also summons, again, with no small irony given the geopolitical and historical circumstances that finally *motivate* Aileen's line, Greenberg's dismissal of the latent and distorted figure in painting in the Fifties as “homeless representation.” Why does contour, however metaphorically, summon the problem of home, of origin, of the mythologies of rootedness at the very moment of its historical obsolescence? The twentieth century was that of two twin formations: displacement and abstraction. What inherits its legacy if not its forms, in ruin and intact?

In this sense, figuration may share, albeit in a kind of parallel track, aspects of the novel, or at least its historical duration after so many instances of being declared obsolete, and after so many deaths, but

perhaps also in the sense that it (the figure and the novel) becomes a vehicle for negotiating displacement from “home.” Gyorgy Lukacs has noted, in *The Theory of the Novel*,³ that homelessness, displacement, and migration are often the primary motivation for this form of narration organized around figures described by an omniscient viewer. “The old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form giving subject and the world of created forms has been destroyed, and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless.”⁴ Returning then to figuration by way of analogy to the kind of narrative structural to the novel, it emerges that the figure becomes a kind of affordance, a container for the scattered elements of history and historical rupture to which the “subject” finds herself at once transparent and contingent, and yet in provisional possession only through rearrangement and re/composition.

The “personal” experiences of the artist—displacement, relocation, migration, assimilation—come to be mimetically inscribed in the formal devices selected from among any number of choices in a cultural desert operating under the rubric of “multi” (as in multi media) and “post” (as in post modern, or, more absurdly, post-political).

The latter work, *Technical Problem*, trades contour for the literal cut determined by collage. Both panels, separate and together, could be read cursorily as academic rehearsals of Cubism’s slide into the return of figuration, to all the tricks of the [academic] trade, and then distorted into the turning facets of figure and ground recovered to offer an explicit psychological landscape à la Dali. But other much more interesting relationships emerge. Complicating this knot of represented figures that press questions of representation, violence, and identity, is the “ground,” which is structured ironically by a pattern of figures. Behind the interlocking forms of *Technical Problem*, lighter and interlocking, are numerous depicted animals. The gazelles, leopards, horses, birds, goats, the typical menagerie of the Persian carpet or the Persian miniature, cross the field. Figures on figures, en abyme, the concatenation and aggregate of historical passage: formal and personal. To summon this archive, sketched under the

interlocking cut forms of the central collage is to “mash up” and pervert both the image regime of cultural tradition and the abstract order of primary colors and bordering-on-geometric forms.

When Bahmanipour moves to a transparent ground, the assumptions subtending “the ground” of the figure in both cultures (Western and Eastern) fall away, a mediation further abstracting the already delicate spatial relationships determined by the figure. Other work in the show elaborates on the transparent “ground” notable in *Technical Problem*.

The Image is the Disturbance in the Pattern (2017) maps the surface in a meticulous linear idiom. But now, line is balanced between figuration and the diagram, pushing contour as a function of containing a solid against space toward a kind of cognitive mapping. A dizzying fall determined by both the shift in line and its realization over the acetate surface, line plummets into “space” (that behind representation) through layer and layer of mediation, both figurative and because of the transparent ground. This in/coherence is always recuperated by the figure, even as it begins to open onto the diagram, suggesting the capacity of its affordance under new [world] conditions for new times.

¹ Tom Eyers. *Speculative Formalism: Literature, Theory, and the Critical Present*. Chicago: Northwestern UP, Pp. 189-200.

² Caroline Levine. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015. P. 6.

³ Gyorgy Lukacs. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971. P. 40-1.

⁴ Ibid.