Detroit, MI, January 2, 2020 – The Elaine L. Jacob Gallery and University Art Collection, Wayne State University are pleased to present Labyrinths, a solo exhibition by Iranian American artist Shiva Ahmadi, January 16 through March 20, 2020. The opening reception will be held on Thursday, January 16, 5:30-8:30PM, with a lecture at 6PM. The reception and lecture are free and open to the general public. In collaboration with Haines Gallery, the exhibition and programming are made possible through support from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Kresge Foundation, and Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation.

Working across a variety of media that includes painting, digital animation, and sculpture, Ahmadi addresses the machinations of despotic regimes, the horrors of war, and their effects on innocent lives—using beauty to seduce the viewer into her exquisitely crafted scenes. The vibrant fantasy realms in Ahmadi’s works are, upon closer inspection, macabre theaters of conflict. The artist appropriates and subverts imagery derived from Persian and Indian miniature paintings, which traditionally depict courtly scenes, mythological epics, and the heroic feats of rulers. By contrast, in Ahmadi’s works, figures are faceless, bloodied, and enchained, linked together in endless cycles of violence. Headless horses drag chariots of fire and rubble. Overlaying washes of atmospheric watercolor with precisely applied inks and acrylic paint, Ahmadi conjures a world where fortified walls open to reveal not palaces, but oil refineries and nuclear power plants—allusions to modern seats of power.

Since 2015, Ahmadi has been concerned with the escalating refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe and, more recently, the plight of detainees at the US-Mexico Border. Having come to the US from Iran in 1998, the immigrant experience is one that she is keenly aware of and sympathetic to. In a nod to the perpetual state of uncertainty
that so many people are now experiencing, her new works sees a growing tendency towards abstraction, with figures and scenes that are suggestive rather than descriptive. In works such as *Hurdle* (2019) and *Burning Car* (2019), tightly controlled tableaux are increasingly destabilized, with floating masses of rubble and viscera that suggest the aftermath of an explosion, the scattered pieces of what was once whole. Throughout the exhibition, Ahmadi’s paintings speak to the anxiety of dislocation and the insecurities that arise when crossing into unfamiliar (and sometimes unwelcoming) lands.

The exhibition also includes Ahmadi’s animated videos: *Lotus* (2014) and *Ascend* (2017). *Ascend* is inspired in part by the now famous photograph of the Kurdish-Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, who tragically drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as his family sought to escape the Syrian Civil War. In the seven-minute work, an idyllic and tranquil scene of playful monkeys descends into darkness, with floating bubbles and balloons morphing into bombs—familiar motifs in Ahmadi’s work, akin to the candy-colored confetti that appears in several of her new paintings, which the artist describes as a device for “sugarcoating” ugly truths.

These works are exhibited in dialogue with new sculptures from Ahmadi’s *Pressure Cooker* series, first begun in 2016. These striking works have been meticulously decorated; every inch of their rounded surfaces hand-inscribed with delicate intaglio etchings. The works are created from Afghan pressure cookers, sourced from markets in Iran—a reference to real-world tools of violence, and more generally to the domesticity of terror. As with the rest of Ahmadi’s works in *Labyrinths*, the potency of these sculptures lie in the tension between ornamentation and destruction.

Shiva Ahmadi received her BFA from Azad University (Tehran), and MFAs from Wayne State University and Cranbrook Academy of Arts. In addition to solo exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Asia Society Museum in New York, she has been included in important group shows at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University; Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada; Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY; Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar; and Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Her work is collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Detroit Institute of Arts; and the Farjam Collection, Dubai, among others. In 2016, Ahmadi was awarded the Anonymous Was A Woman Award and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. *Shiva Ahmadi*, a hardbound monograph of her work, was published in 2017 by Skira.

The James Pearson Duffy Department of Art and Art History is a division of Wayne State’s College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts, educating the next generation of visual artists, designers and art historians. Wayne State University, located in the heart of Detroit’s midtown cultural center, is a premier urban research university offering more than 350 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to more than 28,000 students.
Shiva Ahmadi, *Hurdle*, 2019
Acrylic and Watercolor on Aquaboard, 30 x 22 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Shiva Ahmadi, *Ascend*, 2017
Animation, 6 minutes 48 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco

Shiva Ahmadi, *Pressure Cooker #10*, 2018
Intaglio hand-etching on metal pressure cooker from Afghanistan
Courtesy of the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco
Photo: Chris Woodcock