

A first ever interview with Mirza Hamid, by Maura Rosner

1. How do you select/ decide on your locations? Are they based on a sudden urge or impulse? Or do you map it out and consider your locations with more intention/ purpose/significance?

Mirza Hamid: I walk, and as I look around the path I'm taking, I see noble walls that are not the subject of any dispute. No one is competing for them to paint on. Those are the best walls. It's sometimes a wall on a ruin, sometimes a wall on a busy street, and sometimes on a government building. I feel that a new story begins for the wall after I paint. For example there's the one on the wall of the city water department. I painted three murals on the walls of that building, all 3 were painted over the next day. The interesting thing was, that day I received a message on Instagram that said this: "This is the security guard at the water department, I just wanted to say I did everything I could but was not able to convince my colleagues not to cover your paintings, I'm sorry." This event was so beautiful to me.

2. Unlike other street artists, you use a mud like pigment and paint in monochrome rather than using spray paint and colors. Why did you choose to paint/ communicate with this material? Why monochrome? The materials and mostly red color used are naturally occurring. Are they representative of Iran and your homeland?

Mirza Hamid: I don't remember ever making a decision to work with this pigment. But after a few years this pigment made all other colors fade away in my eye. Red earth is the first pigments humans used, we can see many examples of it in the art of the primitive humans. We also see it in ancient persian pottery, and of course not just in Iran, this exact pigment also appears in the paintings found in the Grand Canyon, and even on Egyptian Mummies, where it symbolizes life after death. To me this color is the color of humanity. All of humanity, with all it's complications, is grappling with the same red hued sense of estrangement and exile.

3. When creating street art, you are changing the urban landscape. Are you doing this for aesthetic reasons or are your paintings a communication with the public/ world? Are your paintings a conversation with us?

Mirza Hamid: I like to paint everywhere. I see myself as if I'm at a train station where everyone is waiting to board a train, and I want to spend all the time I'm at the station painting, and nothing else.

The act of painting is more important to me than what I'm painting. More than on walls or a canvas, I paint in my mind. Often when I come to a wall I don't even take out my sketch book, I paint it once in my mind then take my brush and begin working on the wall.

4. Have you ever been commissioned to paint a wall? If so, did you feel any change to/ in your process? Does the element of no consent and technically illegal activity when painting street art feed your inspiration/ compulsion?

Mirza Hamid: I do not receive any money for my street murals. Yes what I'm doing is illegal. I'll tell you a short story, a fable that I think illustrates this situation. A villager comes to the city for sight seeing, strolling with his walking stick, he comes upon an open door to a glorious house, he walks in and finds himself in the middle of the king's feast. The villager gets so nervous that he immediately cuts a few holes in his walking stick with his teeth and fashions a flute of sorts that he immediately starts playing. The king is so pleased that he invites the villager to come sit with him. When the king asks the man to create more instruments for him, the man answers: "I swear I don't know how to make musical instruments, I was so stressed out I have no idea how I did it." The anxiety I experience on the streets is useful to me, I create work that I cannot duplicate later in the studio. Basically being under duress with all it's negative aspects, brings out a person's hidden talents.

5. Is Mirza Hamid a pseudonym?

Mirza Hamid: Yes it is.

6. What are your artistic goals? People recognize your paintings and tag, so you've acquired a certain amount of legitimacy, but what more would you

like to establish as an artist? Do you want to maintain street credibility and continue working in a subversive manner, or are you in pursuit of mainstream success?

Mirza Hamid: In the same way that the past is outside of me, the future is also outside of myself. Imagine an ant that gets on your shirt in the country, and without either one of you realizing it, the ant gets in the car with you and rides to the city. How does that ant feel? Endeavoring to decide the future is as useless for us as is for the ant. Now if that ant were to be a painter who loves their work, that ant has to fend off anything that is outside of him, and continue his painting in the city in his new situation.

For certain right now my choice is persistent presence on the streets. These days when I spend time in the studio, it's with the hopeful knowledge that I'll be back on the street. There's no fussing on the street, you have to reach where you're satisfied with what you've done very quickly. The ability to be easily satisfied is one of the treasures of the street.

7. How does it feel when your paintings are changed/altered/ painted over?

Mirza Hamid: You see, I feel that paintings in galleries have protection, but a painting on the street is defenseless, and the only shield it has is its own beauty. But is this beauty always enough protection? For sure not. In a very real environment, if a painting lasts ten years it would be something akin to a miracle. For example five years ago I painted in the city of Yazd. The walls are made of a mud with hay in it, the dust on that material never dries and if you run your hand over it, it comes off in a powder. To this day, no one has run their hand over any of the several murals I painted, and they all remain intact. But some of my paintings get covered quickly. I'll tell you one of the secrets of red earth. I have street paintings in Tehran that were painted over by the city. After two years of being rained on, the new paint washed off and the red earth came out shining through, as fresh as its first day. All these happenings are beautiful to me and I welcome them.

8. Who are some of your favorite artists?

Mirza Hamid: I could mention many names but I only want to bring up one. "Darvish Khan" the creator of the Stone Garden in the city of Kerman. I like him because everything about him is unknown. An man of already advanced age, who lost his farmland, and that day began to build the stone garden. You can find his masterpiece with a simple search online.

He would uproot dead trees and plant them in his own garden, he would carry large stones long distances without any machinery, and attach them to the dead trees as fruit. His work, because of being unknown, produces astonishment. The sense of astonishment is rare in our time. The applied sciences recognize and explain things to us in one sentence, that understanding makes us lose our wonder. But in an encounter with the stone garden no one can claim they understand it.

9. Are you familiar with the cave paintings at Altamira, Spain, Gwion Gwion rock art paintings, or the Lascaux Caves in France? Are they sources of inspiration to you? Some of these locations were painted 40,000-45,000 years ago (Maros-Pangkep caves in Indonesia) and your painting style seems to carry the torch for this form of storytelling through pictures. Is this an accurate assessment? If so, what about this form of storytelling appeals to you?

Mirza Hamid: Those paintings are inspiring to everyone. The age of the paintings is amazing. I think why the first people created these works is best left unanswered, in general the theories about ancient times are not important to me. When a person should answer "I don't know", it's mistake to say "I know". "I don't know" opens a path, but "I know" can make things wasted and diminished. There is an inspiring energy [in cave paintings] that remains fresh even after all the years of art history deriving from it. Picasso and Matisse took their most masterful inspirations from primitive humans. I love and admire the work of Jean Michel Basquiat, because he is also on that path. The main thing is to be the continuation, to have the eye of the first humans, to see the way they saw, something Van Gogh was the master of. He shows us the trees and the stars in a way that after seeing them, his way of seeing the trees and stars becomes an accompaniment to our own way of seeing, and we want to go along with him on his discovery.