



# COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: MUSA CONNECTS OUR COMMON NARRATIVE

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**by Elizabeth Michelman**

This July, "Collective Punishment," works by 10 international artists curated by Roya Amigh, an Iranian artist now living in Boston, will be on view at the Musa Collective Gallery in Allston, Massachusetts.

Perhaps only an Iranian artist poised between these two cultures and educated in both could maintain as powerful an emphasis on positive themes of global interconnectedness and collective identity. Having only experienced life in Iran under economic sanctions, Amigh seeks to counteract the depersonalization and biases so prominent in the media. She questions what it means to normalize such an existence as

well as the ultimate value of intensified punitive American action toward Iran.

Amigh broadens the range of imagery and perspectives by including American, Haitian, South Korean and Swiss artists as well as Iranian artists creating work here and in Tehran. Meditating on the question “Who ‘belongs’?” she draws on the words of American politicians John F. Kennedy, George McGovern and Hillary Clinton, abolitionist Harriet Tubman and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. — writing them in colored thread and stringing them overhead.

Niloufar Keyhani’s sculpture “Bloody Red,” a white box hanging on the wall and pierced by two large holes at chest height, presents personal pain even more fraught in an age of trade restrictions. Visible through each hole is a single breast drawn in black ink and charcoal. The box, which also has two hands drawn protectively over its surface, is at once body and garment obscuring the fuller torso. A scarlet tube, the color of Doxil, a standard chemotherapy treatment, passes from the outside to the inside. Functioning like a surgical drape or a veil, the box’s windows dramatize the bilateral physical signifiers of womanhood while at the same time minimizing the patient’s own individuality. For an Iranian woman, the ordeal of losing a breast to cancer is nearly eclipsed by the personal terror experienced in the virtual absence of pharmaceuticals essential to healing.

A group of paper dresses complete with hijab, sculpted by the Iranian-born Swiss artist Artemis Akchoti Shahbazi, exemplifies the garment as a site of cultural inscription.

The three figures of “Wearing Our Collective Punishment” are embellished with bold and colorful childlike drawings. They are further clothed in the regalia of President Donald J. Trump’s authoritative signature and collaged texts from his executive orders imposing travel bans and sanctions. Each personage embodies a legacy of Persian myth, history and culture: Mitra, the ancient goddess of light whose masculine incarnation the Romans worshipped as a major cult; Avicenna, the 11th century Persian philosopher-physician whose writings informed Western medicine into recent times; and Omar Khayyam, whose well-known verse “a jug of wine, a loaf of bread — and thou,” still rouses us to cast aside our fears and live fully in the present moment.

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