

[Categorized](#) | [Reviews, Top Stories](#)

## Monir Farmanfarmaian & Camille Utterback @ Haines

Posted on 10 May 2019.

by [Mikko Lautamo](#)



Monir Farmanfarmaian, *Firs Family – Square*, 2010, mirror and plaster on acrylic and wood,  
33.5 x 33.5 x 5 inches

In Islamic art, the figure of the prophet (and other living things) is always omitted in favor of geometric patterns and script. This aniconic tradition was the ground on which Monir Farmanfarmaian (pronounced far-mahn-far-MY-ahn) created her intricate mirror-and-painted glass works, originally inspired by the aineh-kari mosaics that adorn the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz, Iran. The artist died April 20<sup>th</sup> at the age of 97, leaving behind a legacy that places her among Iran's most prominent artists from the 1950s to today.

*Kaleidoscope Eyes*, on view at Haines Gallery, pairs Farmanfarmaian's mirror mosaics with interactive digital projections by Camille Utterback. Farmanfarmaian's work, mostly from 2009-2016, shows the artist in peak form. In 2004, after 25 years of exile in New York following the Iranian Revolution, she reestablished her glass studio in Tehran and began right where she left off, with geometric abstraction informed by her friendships and encounters with luminaries like Frank Stella, Louise Nevelson and many others. In a similar vein, the work on view by Utterback traces a line through her generative/interactive work of the last decade, beginning with *Untitled 6* (2005) and ending with her recent projection for the National Portrait Gallery,

*Precarious* (2018), a work that seeks to bring the warmth of hand-drawn and painted forms to the algorithmic space of generative and computer-vision-based interactive imagery. Formally speaking, both artists use the interactive character of their respective media to respond to the gesturalism characteristic of Abstract Expressionism: Farmanfarmaian by reflecting and distorting the viewer in kaleidoscopically arrayed mirrors; Utterback by observing and reshaping the motions of viewers captured by digital cameras.



Untitled (Square), 2011, Mirror, reverse painted glass, and

Utterback's *Precarious*, originally created for an exhibition called *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, is a good example. Walk before an infrared camera suspended from the ceiling and computer vision software scans for your body to define its edges. Those edges are represented onscreen as a light-colored outline, which is further defined by a thin black line, executed as if someone had traced them with pencil. As you move, the line spirals, creating an imperfect representation of your shape. Over time, small watercolor-like cut outs appear, lightening and expanding as if "drying" on paper. As you (and others) move around the space, these cutout shapes are pushed and recolored, creating a layered record of everyone who appears within view of the camera. It is a subtle way of using random and intentional human movement to model the body-based, gestural brush strokes characteristic of AbEx painting in the 1950s. The underlying software is designed to smudge and color the shapes in dynamic and pleasing ways, and the soft, watercolor-like elements that Utterback has programmed into her work give the imagery an appealing natural-media look. *Precarious* is a clear deepening and enhancing of the explorations shown earlier, in the *External Measures Series*, of which *Untitled 6* (also on view) is a prominent example.



Mirror Balls, 2010-2014, mirror, reverse painted glass, and plaster on wood. From left: 8.5 x 8.5 x 8.5 inches; 7 x 7 x 7 inches; and 11 x 11 x 11 inches

The wide range of Farmanfarmaian's approaches to mirrored mosaic make it difficult to locate a cohesive theme, and perhaps that is the idea: to show the diversity of her practice. Two examples from her *Convertible Series*, *Khordad* (2011) and *Untitled* (2016), are clear standouts; they show an elegant use of curvilinear cuts and expansive mirrored patterns set within plaster and painted glass. When standing before these objects, your reflection is cut and distorted, a near-total obliteration can be traced to the artist's response to the nonobjective painting that surrounded her in New York during the 1950s. Even though the artist viewed her work as secular, it remains rooted in the sublime geometry of Islamic tradition, replete with spiritually significant numbers, like the 6s formed with hexagonal cuts, used to create symbolic meaning. Likewise, *First Family* (Square), *Fifth Family* (Heptagon) and *Nonagon & Decagon* each use numerology to build and express mathematical relationships found in nature.

Utterback's *Floating World*, a purely generative and algorithmic work, also touches on the mathematical construction of the natural world by creating an orderly and non-repeating procession of images. They were originally created in response to the Hudson River shore near the Mercedes House in New York, a ziggurat-shaped luxury apartment building that overlooks the river at W. 54<sup>th</sup> Street. Unfortunately, this work has been radically scaled down from its original dimensions and does not have the immersive punch it should. Similarly, Farmanfarmaian's *Mirror Balls* are captivating objects, like a cross between a Faberge Egg and a disco ball, but being displayed in a gallery mutes their potential for reflection and interaction. (Farmanfarmaian, it should be noted, never worried about her work being viewed as kitsch.)



Camille Utterback, *Precarious*, 2018, interactive installation, 7 x 11 feet projection and corresponding interaction area

Andy Warhol, who famously had a similar piece on his desk, no doubt availed himself of the opportunity to move and rotate his friend's mirrored sphere, and thus get the most from it. Like mirrored surfaces in a mosque that must catch and magnify natural light to reach their full grandeur, Farmanfarmaian's works are most alive when crowds and changing light animate their complex surfaces.

*Kaleidoscope Eyes* is simultaneously a very broad and narrow show: it surveys work from the last decade by two accomplished artists, but it doesn't stray far from either artists' bread-and-butter practices. The three pieces by Utterback showcase her generative/interactive abstraction at its best. Similarly, Farmanfarmaian's medium-sized wall mosaics are well represented, and give a strong sense of her various approaches to mirror as a medium. If you are unfamiliar with either or both artists' oeuvres, this is a good place to start.

# # #

*Monir Farmanfarmaian & Camille Utterback: Kaleidoscope Eyes @ [Haines Gallery](#) through June 1, 2019.*

#### **About the Author:**

**Mikko Lautamo** is an artist and educator from Sacramento. His work uses computer code to create interactive and never-repeating installations centering on blended biological, social, and economic systems. He teaches Electronic Art at Sac State and has exhibited work in the United States, Europe, Australia and online. His work can be viewed on Vimeo.