

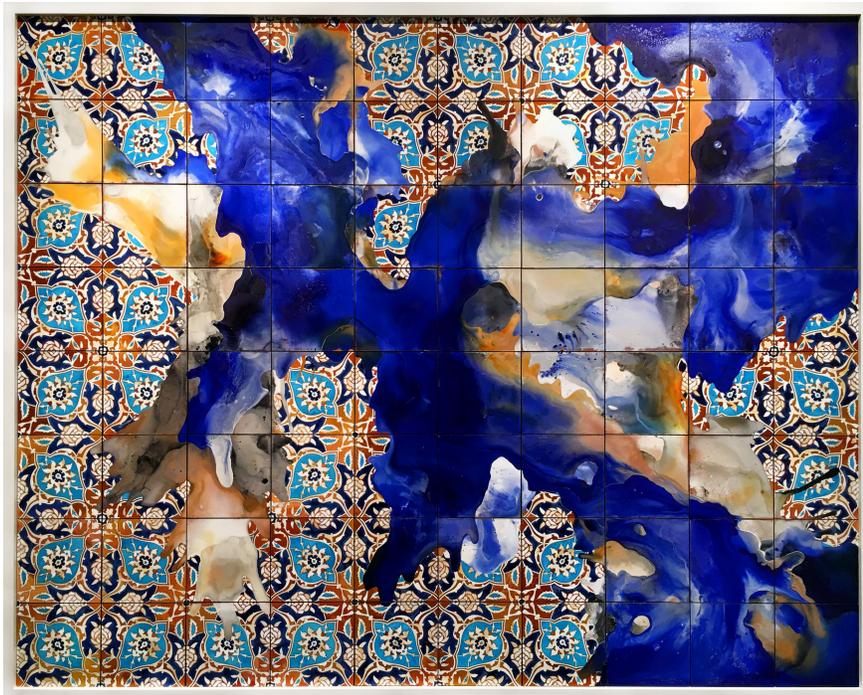
## Ebb and Flow

Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi's radiant art transcends boundaries

*By Tina Coplan*

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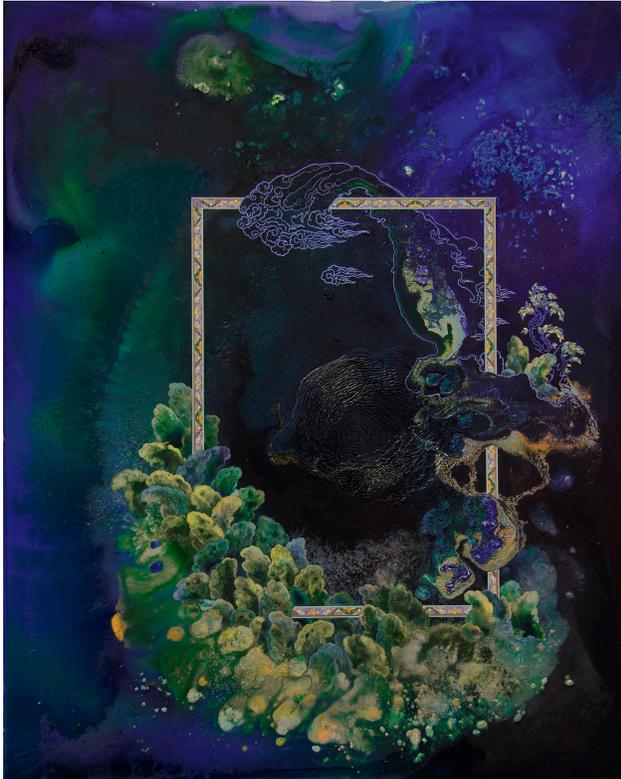
A spellbinding universe of majesty and wonder unfolds in the luminous paintings of Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi. As if viewed from the stars, fluid bodies interlace with exquisitely detailed patterns. Jewel-hued currents ebb and flow. Yet in these richly atmospheric works, another dimension emerges—all parts do not coexist in celestial harmony. Turbulence flares as sinuous forms collide. Lightning flashes erupt. Black holes appear.



Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi, *Of time past and time future*, 2019  
acrylic on panel, framed, 49" x 67"

It is an overarching perspective that is also deeply personal, a metaphor for the Persian-American artist's own existence. Born in Tehran 38 years ago, Ilchi has resided half her life in Montgomery County. "My work is about bridging my two identities," explains the artist. "I'm kind of split between the two cultures, pulling from their different traditions and techniques."

From Persian painting and the art of Islamic illumination, Ilchi derives precise patterns and architectural elements. These intricate designs merge with the broad gestures of Western abstraction, particularly the pouring-paint technique associated with Jackson Pollock. "I like mixing those different systems together and creating a new hybrid," she says.



Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi, *In the deepest*, 2019  
acrylic and watercolor on panel, 30" x 24"

Ilchi favors Persian art's ornate borders—elaborately framing abstract imagery—or doorways that mysteriously float on the surface. "Looking at examples in Persian painting and Islamic illumination, there's always that doorway or border present," Ilchi notes. "It has a decorative purpose, but it also centers some kind of narrative, beautifying poetry or a sacred text."

Earlier in her career, Ilchi followed that storytelling tradition, placing figures of her family and friends in the doorways and archways, which now stand empty. "I want them to be liminal spaces, almost like you're between two worlds, in an uncertain place," the artist observes. "The figure isn't there, but it is actually there, because you become the figure. You become the world that those figures existed in." The ambiguous doorways atop multiple strata conjure a pathway to dreamlike memory as well.

Seated at the work table in her Kensington studio, Ilchi points to motifs from Persian and Islamic art illustrated in oversized books, beside a volume of T.S. Eliot poems. The painter's love of poetry echoes in the multiple layers of her art and in the titles of her works. A phrase she wrote, "I surrender to you, ashen lands and blue skies," was the name of her recent exhibition at Washington's Hemphill gallery.

Although Ilchi attended an art high school in Iran, she knew little about Western art when arriving in the U.S. in 1999 at the age of 18 to join her fiancé. To learn English, she enrolled at Montgomery College, also taking art classes with the goal of becoming a graphic designer—an idea that vanished once she discovered painting. Entering a new culture, she recalls, "was very difficult. With painting, I found a language to express myself and find a footing." After completing a bachelor's in fine arts at the Corcoran, she went on to receive a master's degree in studio art from American University.

During her last undergraduate year, Ilchi first experienced pouring paint onto the slick surface of Mylar. "I really liked what was happening—allowing chance to take over," she recalls.

As she continued to reimagine that unpredictable process using a similar nonporous, matte-drafting film, she began to see the abstract pours suddenly shift toward realism. "They turn out to look like extraterrestrial images—almost like topographical, aerial views of the Earth, or like photos of galaxies," she says. To enhance those impressions, the artist studies NASA satellite imagery for inspiration and focuses on colors that resemble landmasses or bodies of water.

Each painting progresses organically. Ilchi may decide to repeat the pours, perhaps spraying on water to let the acrylic paint spread, or lifting the wood or aluminum panels she also uses as her canvas while moving the paint around. At another moment, the artist may choose among Persian patterns she then transfers and paints by hand. Later, she'll determine which imagery to highlight and which parts to cover with transparent or opaque glazes for balance or added depth. "I'm fascinated by the process—not knowing what the painting will be at the beginning," she says.

In the end, all steps converge in an overall sense of cosmic beauty. "I want it to feel precious," Ilchi acknowledges, tracing that value to her early years surrounded by Iranian handcrafts, "from carpet weaving to miniature painting to woodworking," she remembers. "I grew up with that aesthetic of beauty and attention to craftsmanship."

Beauty, the artist believes, sparks a seductive entry for viewers who she hopes will remain to contemplate more deeply. "I'm interested in changing the viewpoint, looking at a broader image of our world," she continues. "These painted patterns are beautiful, but there's a tension between the very different techniques.

It's about two cultures coming together and having some beauty, some peace. I'm hopeful good comes out of the chaos."



Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi, *Bloodflood #3*, 2019  
acrylic and watercolor on panel, 16" x 16"

*Hedieh Javanshir Ilchi is represented by Hemphill; [hemphillfinearts.com](http://hemphillfinearts.com).  
[hediehilchi.com](http://hediehilchi.com).*