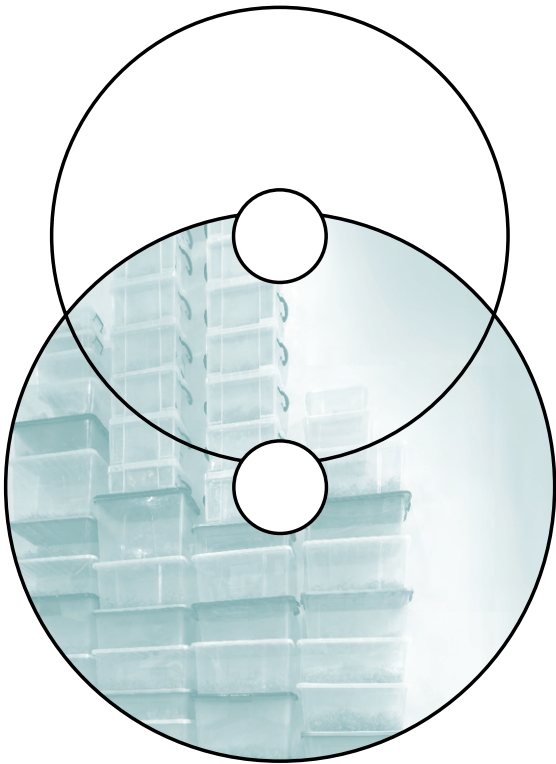


#3 Open



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**CASTLEFIELD
GALLERY**

Table

A short publication to mark the third in a series of Open Table events at Castlefield Gallery; evenings of conversation that explore selected exhibitions from the 2022–2024 programme.

Katy Shahandeh was invited to develop a text-based response to the solo exhibition by **Omid Asadi** (15 October 2023–21 January 2024), and the two were in-conversation for the third Open Table event at the gallery on 16 January 2024.

Castlefield Gallery presented the first major UK solo exhibition by Omid Asadi. The exhibition featured new large scale sculptural work by Asadi exploring loss, memory and belonging. *Resonance and Remnants* (2023) was built in situ in the gallery space using reclaimed bricks from demolished houses, found objects and dandelion seeds. These broken but resilient found materials were set in contrast with the delicate seeds and their connotations of childhood hopes and dreams. The work is informed by Asadi's experiences of revisiting the locations of destroyed family homes, lost to either war or so-called development. Despite the personal inspiration behind the work, it was intended to resonate with the diverse range of memories, histories and knowledge that visitors brought to the exhibition. Contrast ran through both the materials and the thinking in Asadi's work. Throughout the exhibition, gentle and harsh materials were brought together. Like fragments of the past that linger in our minds, solid, stable and enduring objects mixed with ephemeral matter, resembling the fragile nature of recollection. Asadi commented that he hoped the exhibition would be **'... a testament to the power of human resilience, creativity, and the everlasting longing to reclaim a sense of belonging even when the physical spaces have disappeared'** **Asadi (2023)**.

The Open Table events are curated by James Mathews-Hiskett and texts published as pdfs in collaboration with Corridor8, marking the start of a two-year collaboration. Commissions and publications are supported as part of a collaborative bursary programme.



Omid Asadi
Resonance and Remnants, 2023
Castlefield Gallery

Seeds of Hope: Omid Asadi's Ethereal Allegories

Katy Shahandeh

Transporting viewers on a poetic journey through memory, dreams, and the complexities of belonging, Omid Asadi unveils his first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester. Running from 15 October 2023 through 21 January 2024, this transportive exhibition provides a rare opportunity to experience the poignant beauty of Asadi's artistry first-hand.

Acting as conduits for emotional and philosophical contemplation, these works invite patrons into a conceptual realm where themes of nostalgia, loss, and the tapestries of remembrance intertwine. Asadi's incorporation of diverse materials and influences deftly marries aesthetics with symbolism, creating multi-sensory environments that encapsulate the nuanced emotions tied to the universal experiences of the human condition.

Born in 1979, in the tumultuous wake of the Iranian Revolution (1978–79), a year that bore witness to seismic societal shifts and profound historical change, Asadi's very name, '**Omid**' meaning '**hope**' in Persian, poignantly encapsulates the contrasting facets of this epoch, marked by both optimism and loss. As a child of this transformative era, Asadi's life narrative becomes an allegory, encapsulating the spirit of an entire generation navigating through the fervour and turbulence of a revolution that ignited both aspirations for a brighter future and the pangs of sacrifice and transformation.

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors encounter the first installation, titled *Storage Dreams* — a tableau of clear storage boxes filled to various levels with delicate dandelion seeds, stacked atop one another. For Asadi, these seeds hold special meaning, taking him back to childhood days spent gathering and then storing thousands of them. Known as ‘ghasedak’ or ‘little messengers’ in Iran, dandelion seeds carry symbolic weight. Young children catch the downy tufts when they float by, secretly making wishes before sending the seeds skyward with messages for faraway loved ones.

Omid Asadi
Storage Dreams, 2023
Castlefield Gallery



Asadi explains that the initial inspiration for this installation emerged through conversations with friends and acquaintances. Over time, he discovered how many harboured long-held dreams they had needed to put on hold for one reason or another. These deferred hopes and aspirations, though still quietly tended, had yet to be given the chance to fully blossom. Asadi saw echoes of his own journey in their eyes — the small boy chasing dandelion seeds, grasping at possibilities before circumstances required he shelter his own creative spark. It struck him that across his generation, though individual paths diverged, many shared this common terrain of delayed promise and dormant longing. Here these thousands of suspended seeds represent those deferred hopes and ambitions, stored away until the right conditions arise for them to once again take flight. Fragile yet resilient, this living installation resonates with the unspoken longings of multitudes who, like the seeds, wait expectantly for their chance to blossom into reality.

By giving symbolic form to these aspirations, Asadi creates a poignant tribute — one that celebrates the enduring hope central to the human spirit, even in the face of challenge or delay. His dandelion seed vessels encapsulate the shared vulnerability and optimism that often dwells within unfulfilled promise.

In the second installation, *Resonance and Remnants*, Asadi attempts to recreate his ‘home’ from the building blocks of his memory. In conversation Asadi recalls how following his father’s passing he returned to Iran to pay his respects. In a nostalgic pilgrimage to his childhood, he sought out his family’s former home in Isfahan, a place laden with memories but sold off years prior. There, amidst the familiar surroundings, he found solace in simply sitting outside, allowing the flood of memories to wash over him. A year later, word came that his mother had also passed. Longing for the comfort of this touchstone, Asadi journeyed back, only to find the physical house now gone, demolished to make way for a new development. This erasure of place mirrored the destruction of their very first home, in Abadan, decades earlier, razed by the brutal upheavals of war. And thus, the cycle of loss became complete. For Asadi, the house had become far more than just bricks and mortar — its meaning rooted in the very foundations of self, family, and nostalgic longing for all that home represents. Thus, the loss of ‘home’, here symbolic of a sense of self, becomes a central theme in *Resonance and Remnants*.

Omid Asadi
Resonance and Remnants, 2023
Castlefield Gallery





This installation took shape collaboratively within Castlefield Gallery, as Asadi worked alongside friends and volunteers to collectively resurrect an impressionistic sanctuary from the fragments of his Iranian childhood. Together, they infused ephemeral materials with resonance — brick, seed and story becoming vessels to carry an imprint of Asadi’s formative memories into being. Asadi emphasises that his intention was never to construct a mere building, but rather to rebuild the heart and soul of ‘home’ itself. The resulting artwork resides in a liminal state between construction and gentle teardown — frozen in time; incomplete. The floor of the house is carpeted completely with dandelion seeds, which sprout and embed themselves in the bricks and elements of the installation. Other items are lovingly positioned to recreate the space of Asadi’s memories: the Persian carpet found in all Iranian households, whether in Iran or its diaspora, several ceramic pomegranates, the symbolic fruit of Iran and again a staple in most households, especially around the winter solstice. Another item found in Iranian homes particularly at the time of Asadi’s childhood is the small paraffin heater, often the only source of heat during the War (1980–1988). When fuel was scarce these were used for heat and cooking at the same time.

Other items are more personal to Asadi himself, namely the books he brought with him from Iran, those he read as a teenager and young man which helped him formulate his ideologies, as well as a cassette player playing tapes that he associates with that time, such as one with poetry by Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000). Additional relics, including a dial-up telephone and a Singer sewing machine akin to the one used by Asadi's mother during his childhood, are carefully displayed on brick-made pedestals, each item elevated in homage. In addition to this engagement with sight and sound, saffron incense burns in the background, immersing the audience in an experience that intends to take them back to the scent of home. Each detail has been lovingly placed in an arrangement aiming to echo the space where his earliest memories reside.

The materiality of memory is palpable in the cherished objects that we see in this exhibition. These meaningful items are not merely reminders but fundamental components of the memories themselves. They serve as vessels for the recollection of moments gone by, encapsulating the essence of the experiences. In this way, Asadi's/our connection to the past is not solely an intellectual exercise but a sensory and visceral engagement with the tangible artifacts that embody Asadi's/our personal histories. These objects, laden with sentimental value, contribute to the richness of our recollections. They become more than inanimate possessions; they metamorphose into conduits that transport us across the continuum of time, allowing us to relive, reflect, and, in a sense, rewrite our own narratives. In acknowledging the materiality of memory, we gain a profound understanding of the symbiotic relationship between our tangible surroundings and the intangible realm of recollection. It reinforces the idea that memory is not a distant, ephemeral concept but an integral part of our lived experience, interwoven with the very fabric of our existence. As we navigate the intricate tapestry of our memories, we find that the objects we hold dear are not just witnesses to our past but active participants in the ongoing narrative of our lives.

In his attention to detail, Asadi shows deep awareness of the fact that sensory triggers, encompassing specific sights, smells, and sounds, possess the unique ability to transport us back in time, summoning forth long-buried memories. Proust's renowned account of the childhood memories evoked by the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in tea exemplifies this phenomenon, wherein recollections surface spontaneously and involuntarily. Moreover, the fusion of emotion with the senses intertwines deeply within our memory. Visual, olfactory, or gustatory stimuli not only trigger intellectual recollection but also resurrect the emotions and subjective experiences inherent within a moment in time.

These sensory cues grant us immersive glimpses into moments 'lost in time', enabling the rediscovery of buried facets of ourselves from the past. However, despite the intensity of these Proustian sensory recalls, memories retain an elusive, ephemeral nature, akin to a dream just beyond our grasp. The subjective nature of the past remains enigmatic and elusive, no matter the depth of sensory immersion. Ultimately, Proust's insights illuminate the extraordinary ability of the senses to transcend linear time, reviving poignant emotional fragments of memory in what seems like involuntary and vivid ways, underscoring memory's paradoxical blend of tangibility and elusiveness.

Our personal histories and the memories we hold also serve as the bedrock upon which our identities are built. The centrality of memory in constructing identity becomes especially pronounced in moments of upheaval or when identity faces existential threats. For those, like Asadi and the vast numbers of Iranians compelled to leave their homeland, safeguarding their collective and personal histories became a necessary means of preserving their sense of self in the face of displacement and uncertainty. In these circumstances, memories are not just nostalgic reflections; they are essential elements in the reconstruction and preservation of identity. They provide a thread of continuity amidst chaos, offering a sense of belonging and grounding individuals in their past experiences, which in turn shape their present understanding of themselves.

Thus, the experience of migration shapes the contours of memory, elevating it beyond a mere recollection of events. This metamorphosis of memory into an embodiment of one's ideological essence becomes notably pronounced for individuals navigating the realm of exile. While the act of departing from the past is an inherent part of the human journey, the magnitude of significance is amplified for those displaced from their origins. The displacement from one's geographic origins, compounded by immersion in a new cultural landscape, instigates an amplified urgency to preserve and cherish the past. This 'past' encapsulates an idyllic, distinct geography — a repository of familiarities that fosters a sense of home. It is a terrain marked by nostalgic imprints and the resonance of identity — a landscape where the exile finds solace and a semblance of belonging. The distance between this cherished past and the unfolding present is more than a spatial rift; it symbolises a metaphorical chasm — a realm where the process of 'identification' unfolds, bridging the realms of memory and present existence.

Ultimately, this exhibition offers more than a mere window into Asadi's world — it is an open portal we step through, entering realms built on the gossamer threads of memory, spun with remnants collected across the miles between Isfahan and Manchester. Asadi gifts patrons a still frame culled from the ever-shifting movie reel conjured from his youth; yet one infused with motion — flickering images reflected in the glint of seeds — precise moments held static yet left intentionally incomplete. Half-formed structures that welcome our imagination to wander through afterimages, halls shuddering with both celebration and farewell's lament. Within these liminal gallery rooms, the faint light that passes through seems to carry the shadows of an entire generation navigating the ruptures of revolution — caught perpetually in that instant just before seeds will take once more to the air, transforming whispers of longing to flight. A people poised eternally in the slipstream of Asadi's youth where hopes loft upon unrest's hot gusts, not yet scattered or crushed under authoritarianism's gathering storm. This is the epoch the artist suspends for us, at once transient and eternally affecting.

Through visceral artifacts enshrining a homeland now dissipated, Asadi's creation stands as a living monument to the resilience of simple, fragile dreams handed down through generations to become wombs sheltering hope's flame through the long winter of oppression. **'Let sacred dreams take flight as dandelion seeds upon the wind'**, echo still within these living chambers, where resilience and hope persist beyond all darkness.

Katy Shahandeh is a British-Iranian academic and researcher affiliated with SOAS, University of London. Her scholarly focus centres on contemporary Iranian women artists and the complexities of gender and identity in their works. Her academic interests cover non-Western art, notably Iran, and include feminist art histories, gender, and postcolonial studies. She has presented papers at various national and international conferences and universities, and has organised conferences at Cambridge University and SOAS, University of London. She has been published in a volume on *Feminist Curating, Curating as Feminist Organizing* (Routledge), as well as online publications, and has been interviewed in print and television.



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