



AMIR AGHAREB

The Sky is [Still] Mine

GALLERY GUIDE

with exhibition essay by:
Dr. Jordan Amirkhani



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

“No matter where I am, the sky is [still] mine.”—Sohrâb Sepehrî

PROPOSITION #1:

Over nine years, from 1922 to 1931, American photographer and New York gallery director Alfred Stieglitz took over four hundred pictures of the sky and clouds. Experimenting with his beloved Graflex single-lens camera, he made small, carefully crafted images of segments of the skies above. Stieglitz’s investments in the foundational chords of early twentieth-century American modernism appear in the abstract fields of lightness and darkness created in these black-and-white images and his belief in the possibilities inherent in photography to create a modern art capable of engaging abstraction, not just illusionism. He called the earliest of these works *Music* and later *Songs of the Sky*, but soon came to prefer the term *Equivalent*s as a title for this famous series.

While scholars have interpreted the *Equivalent*s series in a myriad of ways—as icons of objectivity or personal symbolism, as manifestations of technological innovation or the absurdity of art—I am struck by Stieglitz’s description of these works as “the best I could do to render my subjective feelings through a presentation of the objective world...something already taking form within me.” As is clear from the artist’s statement, these photographs were not random or unconstructed (as many critics of his era suggested they were), but carefully crafted accounts of a specific place and time, each captured from the perspective of the artist-author and his equipment. Devoid of the traditional markers that specify place and location, these images are nevertheless exacting markers of the artist’s temporal and emotional reality, which were at times known only to them: abstraction as reference.

The specificity of these images as personal accounts of the mysterious internal workings of an artist—of a person—points to the complexities at work in the artmaking process. Whether Stieglitz hoped these works would act as a metaphysical portal for personal expression, as a tool for thinking, or as a metaphor for the mysterious, dynamic act of making art itself, the *Equivalent*s support each framing simultaneously, synching and separating each interpretive logic sympathetically.

“No matter where I am, the sky is [still] mine.”

PROPOSITION #2:

A founding member of the Russian Formalist group in Moscow in 1915, linguistic critic and professor Roman Jakobson proposed a theory of linguistics that worked to shift the work of interpretation from mimesis and its emphasis on resemblances. For Jakobson, the function of literature, poetry, and some art, was not to reflect reality but estrange it, thus forcing viewers or readers to unlock from their habitual processes of engaging with a work of art and renew their practices of attention—a process they called “defamiliarization.”

Whether through metonymy or metaphor—skies as metaphors for spirituality or the heavens, “the great beyond” or the artist’s tempestuous emotional life, a perceptual shift or disorientation takes form, engaging the cognitive and emotional effects of the artwork.

“No matter where I am, the sky is [still] mine.”

**[still theirs]*

**[still ours]*

PROPOSITION #3:

My own Iranian identity has been an experience of hiding in plain sight, perpetually hidden in the interstices of my “habitus” just as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might recall. The first time my long-ensconced identity was thrust upon me was when my mother took me to the hospital during Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana—a horrific time for those of us in need of resources and healthcare, I watched as armed National Guards stood on guard in the waiting room and as the receptionist asked for multiple forms of state and national identification. Since I am a dual citizen of the US and Iran, my mother brought both of my passports. The receptionist yelled at my mother and me: “you should seek services in your own country.” I cannot remember how this story ended, but I know my mother was in tears.

“Your own country” yelled at my mother in English awakened in me a long-felt sense of un-belonging to a particular world—to one home or another—and the mixed feelings of knowing home is “between worlds,” to borrow the term from Edward Said whose own experiences as a life-long immigrant in the United States shaped his mind, work, dictated his choices, and determined his worldview just as it did mine and so many others. Flanked between two homelands, two languages, two cultures, identity can be hard to outline, difficult to articulate, but impossible to ignore for those living in the diaspora.

Said points to the necessity to deconstruct and read the world contrapuntally, like music, and to reify the gap between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, past and present, what is assimilated and what is indigenous. That gap of “between-ness” can be teased in the gap between a figure and its ground, in the distance between one sky and another.

“No matter where I am, the sky is [still] mine.”

--Jordan Amirkhani, Curator, Rivers Institute for Art & Thought, 11/01/2022



Dr. Jordan Amirkhani is Curator of Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought—a non-profit institute for research, publishing, and exhibitions of contemporary art based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Prior to taking on this role, Amirkhani was a Professorial Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at American University in Washington, DC from 2018-2021. Amirkhani has published scholarship on the Dada painter and polemicist Francis Picabia, the British conceptual art collective Art & Language, Crow artist Wendy Red Star, and the Nashville-based photographer Vesna Pavlović. Recent curatorial projects include Troy Montes-Michie: Rock of Eye for the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, co-curated with Andrea Andersson and Taylor Renee Aldridge, Yto Barrada: Ways to Baffle the Wind at MASS MoCA co-curated with Andrea

Andersson, and the 2021 Atlanta Biennial: Of Care and Destruction for the Atlanta Contemporary. Amirkhani’s art criticism and writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Baltimore Arts*, *X-Tra*, and *Burnaway.org*. Her emphasis on contextualizing contemporary art and artists working in the American South garnered her a prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation “Short-Form” Writing Grant in 2017 and three nominations for *The Rabkin Prize in Arts Journalism* in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Essay endnotes

ⁱ This quote is reproduced in F. Richard Thomas's text *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ Roman Jakobson was a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) and "OPOJAZ" — translated as "The Society for the Study of Poetic Language" (1916). As a result of attacks on Russian Formalism by the Soviet government, Jakobson migrated to Czechoslovakia where he helped to found the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926). He promoted his version of literary Formalism as a professor at Masaryk University in Brno from 1933 until 1939, when Nazism forced him to flee Czechoslovakia. After a brief period in Scandinavia, Jakobson symbolic content as well as its objective and literal content." See F. Richard Thomas, *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 9. Literary modernists often used the concept of equivalency when describing images (sometimes called "objective correlatives") that produce similar subjective experiences. Jakobson immigrated to the United States where he was an important influence on the movement of American literary Formalism, known as "new criticism." He was a professor at Harvard from 1949 to 1956 and at MIT beginning in 1957 until his retirement. Characteristic of many European intellectuals, Jakobson's ideas were initially disseminated through his teaching lectures and in the discussion groups cited above before they reached formal publication. A presentation to the Prague Circle in 1928 defined the basic principles of his aesthetic theory of polarities and equivalence in what has come to be called in linguistic studies the "Jakobson/Tynyanov thesis." An account of Jakobson's notion of equivalency for the non-linguist is discussed in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, pp. 76–82. For an account of Russian Formalism, see Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, New York: Methuen and Co., 1979, pp. 18–25.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

^{iv} See Edward Said's "Between Worlds," in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 20, No. 9, 1998, pp. 31-39.

Artist Bio:

Amir is a photographer, educator, and lifetime learner who grew up in Isfahan, Iran. He earned his MFA in Art with a concentration in Photography from Pennsylvania State University, after having explored Architectural Engineering and Materials Engineering. Amir has exhibited his photos nationally and internationally and has received numerous awards. His fine art and commercial architectural photos have been widely published. He has received photographic distinctions from international organizations, including the Royal Photographic Society (England), the International Federation of Photographic Art (Belgium), the Global Photographic Union, and the Photographic Society of America. He is the Professor of Photography in the Department of Art and Design at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee.

Amir enjoys taking carefully composed 2D conventional photographs as well as non-conventional work that pushes the usual definition of the medium. Illuminated encapsulated photographs in translucent cubic frames, laser-etched tea-toned cyanotypes of photographs taken by cellphone, heavily composited photographs that question the trustworthiness of a photograph, and works that occupy the space rather than just a part of the wall are examples of his work.

Amir's recent work is about physical spaces; he explores the similarities and differences one is exposed to when being relocated. The work is also about finding peace, where one can extend their imagination and place themselves wherever they desire. It is about looking high above when surrounded by unfamiliarity. As the Persian poet Sohrâb Sepehrî said: "No matter where I am, the sky is [still] mine".

Associated Events:

Artist Lecture:

Nov. 16, 6 p.m., AD120

Reception/Gallery Talk:

Nov. 17, noon-1:30 p.m., AD120

First Thursday Art Walk:

Nov. 3, 5-7:30 p.m. (preview)

Dec. 1, 5-7:30 p.m.

Curator/Gallery Director: Michael Dickins

Gallery Assistants: Katie Boyer, Rheanne Bouchard, Sarah Roach

Gallery Intern: Jordyn Jones