

***In the Details is a new column from The Downtown Devil education editor and staff reporter Caleb Manning that takes a deeper look at the exhibitions and galleries that mark downtown Phoenix.***

“Turtles Cry When They Fly” hides itself in the best possible way, depicting a view of war not about battles and horror, but about how we as viewers of war hide the truth.

The installation is by Azi Amiri, an artist with a background split between New York and Tehran, Iran. It was brought to Phoenix by curator Ellee Bokharachi, working with the Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art through the organization’s Emerging Curator Initiative. “Turtles Cry When They Fly” displayed at the March First Friday exhibition at the phICA Shipping Containers, located in the lot between the Eye Lounge and Modified Arts buildings.

The installation itself is simple in its objective presence. Set in a darkened shipping container, “Turtles Cry When They Fly” consists of a projector shining through a sugar sculpture, which is slowly being melted by dripping water and body heat from observers.

The projector plays a slowed-down clip from “Turtles Can Fly,” a film by Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi about children in Iraq coping during a time of impending American invasion. It is backed by Hossein Alizadeh’s “Cradle,” part of the film’s original score.

The sculpture is like a vase in shape, with a long, slender neck and wide base. The artist describes it as her representation of the Ashk-Don, or “Tear Receptacle” in Farsi, a traditional glass container used by women to collect their tears while men were gone to war.

The film was projected through the slowly melting sugar sculpture. The picture was initially obscured to the point of being an indecipherable set of fractured colors splayed out on the back wall of the container. As the sculpture melted, the film was revealed piece by piece, and over the course of the hours it took for the sculpture to fully dissolve, the characters and actions were brought into focus.

The metaphor in this process is clear. The Ashk-Don was a literal product of conflict between society and grief — an object representing a socially enforced avenue to channel away the pain of war. However, in the action of subduing and stowing away the feelings of grief, the horror of war was obscured. The human impact of war is constrained and hidden away within society’s construct of what grief can be.

However, in Amiri’s portrayal, this obfuscation cannot last. As the drops of water — here representing the tears of those affected by war — fall on the sculpture, the fragility of that societal construct is revealed. It melts away to reveal the true impact of war — the truth revealed in the heart-rending “Turtles Can Fly.”

Here, Amiri says that the force of human grief (the drops of water) and empathy (that given by the viewers of the work through their body heat) cannot be sustainably contained. Any system of society which tries to withhold that grief will collapse under its own weight — just as the Ashk-Don dissolves.

This is, in itself, a well-executed and poignant metaphor, but it is the way this is conveyed to the audience which made “Turtles Cry When They Fly” something to be remembered.

The execution of this concept was the key in making these points intelligible to the audience.

When I first entered the container, I took a step into a truly foreign environment in every sense of the word. The container was tightly packed and utterly dark except for the light of the projector. A haunting Kurdish song filled the air.

The instillation itself was floating in negative space. The projector and sculpture were in the center of the room, hovering in their fragility, giving an unspoken command to the viewers: "Do not pass this point."

Here, I as a viewer was being even further distanced from the already-obscured film, held back by an unspoken social boundary. It showed that even in the reduced and intimate scale of an instillation such as this that the forces it addressed shape the way we as observers act and perceive.

The thing closest to us was the sculpture, beautiful in its warped simplicity. As the drops fell, I could envision them as the tears of a grieving mother, desperately trying to hold back her pain.

Overall, the space was an emotive experience, drawing me out and truly making me feel, as well as see, the idea of withheld grief and obscured pain.

The next, and possibly most laudable aspect of the instillation, was the complexity seen in the scope of the work.

On one hand the piece was ephemeral. The sculpture melted over the course of the exhibit, and then the show was done. On the other it spoke to a permanence, as the clip played again and again throughout the evening. One can even imagine it continuing on, even after the exhibit has closed. In this way it spoke to the lasting impact of war, which far outstrips that of any attempt to hide it.

However, another consideration of the showing seems to contradict any portrayed ephemerality, as the installation emphasizes that viewers cannot grasp the true scope of war and its pain. The exhibit began hours before I arrived and I left hours before it was done. In that way we as viewers of an exhibit are acting out our roles as perceivers of war. We are tiny compared to it — we see it in snapshots through the news and in photographs. We are never quite aware of the thing's entirety: a point reinforced by the use of only a clip from "Turtles Can Fly."

This deliberate confounding elevates the work, as it shows Amiri trying not to reduce a complex and lengthy process into a glib one-off piece, but rather make its audience aware of the work's own — and their own — limitations.

The work is said and done, but holds more value to me now that it's over. It left me more cognizant of my own thought process when I hear the latest report of a U.S. drone strike or ISIS execution. It reminded me that while most can recognize the evils of war, we live in a world which tries, and often succeeds, in making us accept it.