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Havah . . . to breathe, air, life, 2023

Artist Statement

The image of justice as a woman has been present for centuries, but women gained juridical voice only in the last one. Despite years of women's struggle for legal, socioeconomic and political equality, gender bias continues to create barriers for many women, whether in health and education rights, equal economic opportunities, or matters of gender-based violence or race or class discrimination.

The essential role of visual representations of justice and ethics in judiciary spaces is one of many aspects in the relationship between art and the law, or how the image and law relate to each other. In particular, many authors have explored the blindness of justice, the development of the blindfolded allegorical figure with which we are all familiar, and the visualizations that depart from this well-known type. The intertwined concepts of law, art, and identity are explored in books such as *Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law*, edited by Costas Dounizas and Lynda Nead, and *Representing Justice: Invention, Controversy, and Rights in City-States and Democratic Courtrooms*, the comprehensive survey of representations of justice from the Renaissance to the present, by Judith Resnik and Dennis Curtis.

I define my practice as that of a thinker. I think through my hand. Thinking collectively with the mind and hand creates an armature of research, clarifies ideas, and connects thought to gesture, to action, to practice. Critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are the three tenets on which I have built my entire understanding of being an artist. How culture, society, and economy intersect, and how communities coalesce: these play a role in how art functions in overlapping spaces. I like to believe that the function of art is to allow multiple meanings and possibilities, to open up space for a more just world. How we experience art, how we respond to it, and how we interpret it is an open-ended premise. My intent as an artist is to create something wondrous and with many possible associations—something that can generate thought and produce difference.

I have always had an affinity for the anti-monument in my practice. My work engages the past without glorifying it, and doesn't lay claim to grandiosity. It is often ephemeral. My works on paper, murals, installations, and animations are rarely seen through the lens of the anti-monument. To remedy that, I thought, "All I need to do is make the drawing into a sculpture." Drawing implies movement in time and across formats and mediums. It is a means of imagining and bringing forms to life. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction—all essential elements inherent in the process of drawing—become active in different ways through thought and action, through animation, music, and sculpture.

In 2017, I was on the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers in New York. Being exposed to tense situations around public monuments, their complicated histories, historical reckoning, and conflicts among competing visions of history was informative. These discussions spoke to me, as my work had a similar ethos, engaging with colonial and orientalist histories and their often reductive representations of the other.

This project is one of the most profound and meaningful opportunities I have had. I have lived in New York City since 1997, and I am inspired daily by its multifaceted histories and communities. It is with much heart and gratitude that I engage in this partnership with Madison Square Park Conservancy.

My artistic process starts with reading and research, engagement with community, and careful listening. Working across genres, fields, and media, I often cull stories that center women: What is women's sense of self versus someone else's idea of us?

In the course of my research, I came across the figurative sculptures at the Appellate Division Courthouse in Manhattan. When the Conservancy invited me to submit a proposal, I thought immediately of the courthouse's proximity to the park and began sketching ideas about a possible relationship between the two locations.

The body is a powerful tool that carries its social construction. It can also function as a site of resistance. The feminine is at the center of the two sculptures, *NOW* and *Witness*. The form of the figure is stylized and enigmatic. It is female and fluid. Part of the body loops out and into itself, in place of arms and feet, offering a non-fixed idea to the notion of the body—something amorphous, like the self. It refuses to be fixed, grounded, or stereotyped. The self-rooted body represents the resilience of women, who can carry their roots wherever they go, suggesting the paradox of rootedness, questioning the fallacy of assimilation versus foreignness. The sculptures are temporary and not a fixed point in the landscape, nor are they symbolic of any fixed ideas or of a specific community. No one person or human occupant on a plinth can represent multiple histories, ideologies, or experiences.

The sculpture *Witness*, at eighteen feet high, rises in Madison Square Park near the entrance at 25th street and Fifth Avenue. It takes inspiration from the spectacular stained-glass ceiling dome of the Appellate courtroom, in its translucency and defined architectural properties. I thought of reimagining the dome as house, a space demarcating a site of renewal. The inverted dome transformed into the metal frame (hoopskirt) of *Witness*, surrounding the body and functioning as its armor and support. The longitudinal and latitudinal lines of the ceiling dome are echoed in the armature of the skirt. Mapped on the surface of this metal structure is the word "havah" which means "air," "atmosphere," or "to breathe." It also translates to the name Eve. The designed letters are made with ungrouted glass tesserae. In *Witness*, the feminine form is buoyant, supported by the skirt at the waist, its presence a critical part of the natural environment of Madison Square Park.

NOW, an eight-foot sculpture on the roof of the courthouse, uses the same feminine form as in *Witness*, but instead of the skirt raising the body, the body emerges out of the seat of a lotus. The lotus, with its plethora of meanings and associated abstract ideas, symbolizes a deeper truth beyond its form, alluding to perception as illusion. Popular in the imagery of many cultures, it also expresses intangible ideas of humility, awakening, and clarity. The invisible roots of the lotus that lie below the surface of the water are echoed in the roots of the feminine figure. The form of the lotus, a circular bloom, with its petals-within-petals configuration, refers to the microcosm and macrocosm in its arabesque form and iconographical weight. The figure's hair is braided into spiraling "horns," which mimic the movement of the arms and express the figure's sovereignty and autonomy. Women in my work are always complex, proactive, confident, and intelligent. In their playful stances they are connected to the past in imaginative ways without being tied to a heteronormative lineage or conventional representations of diaspora and nation.

Femininity to me is the tension between women and power: how society perceives such a dynamic and how erasure is enacted by the social forces that shape women's lives. Throughout literature, the notion of the female has been in conversation with the visible/invisible divide, the feminine as the monstrous, the abject, the fecund, the immense, and the vulnerable. Intimacy, selfhood, valor, resistance, and femininity's intersections with race and war are markers of the fear that lurks when boundaries melt.

The recent focus on reproductive rights in the United States after the Supreme Court overturned the landmark 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed the constitutional right to abortion, comes to the forefront. In the process, is the dismissal, too, of the indefatigable spirit of women who have been collectively fighting for their right to their own bodies over generations. However, the enduring power lies with the people who step into and remain in the fight for equality. That spirit and grit is what I want to capture in both the sculptures.

In recent surveys, much of the public regards the court as partisan and political in the way it exerts power. The luminous figure is a nod to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, as seen in the detail adorning her collar. With Ginsburg's death and the reversal of *Roe*, there was a setback to women's constitutional progress.

On the roof of the courthouse are nine statues of ancient male lawgivers, representing the world's great legal or philosophical systems: Confucius (Chinese law), Moses (Hebraic law), Zoroaster (Persian law), Alfred the Great (Anglo-Saxon law), Lycurgus (Spartan law), Solon (Athenian law), King Louis IX of France, Manu (the mythical author of Hindu laws, with an image of Brahma on his right forearm), and Justinian (Roman law). Each statue is by a different artist.

Originally, a statue of Muhammad representing Islamic law stood on the westernmost point of the roof facing 25th street, where Zoroaster is now positioned. In 1955, at the request of the governments of Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, the statue was removed and destroyed, since images of Muhammad are prohibited under Muslim law. The statues that previously had stood to his left were each moved over one place, leaving an empty pedestal on the easternmost point.

NOW and *Witness* demand a reimagining of the feminine not simply as Lady Justice with her scale, but of the female as an active agency, a thinker, a participant as well as a witness to the patriarchal history of art and law. Lady Justice as a mural in the courthouse is flanked by her female aides Peace and Plenty. Wisdom is attended by Learning, Experience, Humility, and Love, and by Faith, Patience, Doubt, and Inspiration—all women. Equity is a woman with an evenly balanced scale; Tradition, a woman with an endless chain; State, a red-cloaked woman holding a book of statutes, Force and Liberty flanking her. Truth is a kneeling woman with a mirror; Knowledge holds a torch and a book; and Prudence, throned, holds a compass.

In the triangular pediment on the façade of the courthouse is a sculpted group known as "The Triumph of Law." The central figure is a woman seated with two tablets, one inscribed "Lex scripta" (written or statutory law) and the other "Lex tradita" (related or common law). In the back are a ram (authority) and an owl perched on a crescent moon (wisdom and enlightenment).

Many of the symbols and images in the courthouse carry iconographies from historical times, visually reproduced in juridical contexts; some continue to shape ideas and arguments. The blindfold, ubiquitous to images and concepts of justice, may seem paradoxical against the abundance of these visual iconographies.

Art and juridical norms are constantly being reevaluated and interpreted in the world. Both embody a dynamic that is alive and tethered to its present moment. Such a dance opens the animation *Reckoning*, where two forms mimicking warriors are entangled in joust. The animation alludes to the interstices, the transitory space between the migrant and the citizen, and women and power and all who are caught between worlds, artistic vocabularies, cultures, practices, and histories.

Art lives, survives, inspires. It is messy, it is complicated, it is very much like life. For me, it is about knowledge construction: how we reckon with our otherness in a shifting world, how we approximate, reproduce, and reenact our culture and history. Whatever we make, consume, and give back has resonance and consequence beyond our immediate lives. History itself is effectively an account of the movement of objects and bodies. Trade, slavery, migration, colonial occupation—these are underlying currents of modernity. How history is told, as well as who gets to tell it, exposes the hierarchies of power in our world. I am interested in history, in politics, and equally in the dynamism of form: form as something alive and in conversation with its time, space, and language.