Student research assistant Connor Bartholomew, left, and research lead Ankita Mahapatra conduct a fire prevention experiment on the grounds of the Arboretum on Nov. 75.

PHOTO BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAHTAB MOHAMMAD!

An artist unleashed: Her paintings reflect painful memories of Iran

Maltab Mohammadi earns grant, prizes

Contributing writer

It’s been a landmark year for Maltab Mohammadi.

The Iranian American artist, an MFA student in painting who also teaches beginning painting and drawing classes at CSUF, celebrates her 10th anniversary of immigrating to the United States.

She left her home country in her early 40s, a transition she said was financially, culturally, and emotionally challenging.

But she’s flourished here as an artist.

In her colorful works, Persian, Western, and pop culture images reflect her letter memories of the discrimination, war, and violence against women and gender minorities she experienced and witnessed in Tehran.

The Houston-Brooklyn-raised woman Mohammadi was 20. Her father, who was in the military, was rarely around. Her mother, Riharovar, a strong and independent-thinking nurse, raised her and her two older brothers alone.

“I use patterns of Persian gardens, rugs and tiles in all of my paintings to create in audiences the expectation of scenes of joy, but I incorporate symbols of mortality and grief and sadness to reflect what has gone on in Iran in the past and what is happening now to challenge such expectations,” said Mohammadi.

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Mohammadi, a married mother of two grown children who lives in Irvine, has had the opportunity to come here and take my art to the next level," she said.

In February, Mohammadi won a $5,000 grant from the award-winning MHAIC, Philadelphia, which also included $10,000 from her "Untitled," as well as "Persian Venus" in a group exhibition. She also received from MOZAIC the first-ever Future Student Art Prize for the 2021 Future Art Awards Ecosystem X.

In summer, Mohammadi received a second-place award from a juried show at the Lancaster Museum of Art, which published in 2008. She was allowed to do in Iran.

"My paintings are retainers for memory. This piece is functional in that way, it is yet more like a memory that was chosen because the rest of them were too painful," she tearfully recalls. It feels like if the scene moved to the left or right, we would not be able to go to that place where she was allowed to do in Iran.

"To study the male form, Mohammadi learned about anatomy and proportion (as in "Untitel"), her nude male figure is based on Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpieces sculpture, "David.

"He (Michelangelo) was brave enough to show his passion for the male body when homosexuality was an unforgivable sin," she wrote in describing the symbolism in "Untitel.

"Such freedom of expression in Mohammadi's painting proved revolutionary to her. She tearfully recalls a female high school student in Iran who suddenly disappeared from class, never to be heard from again, in reference to her sexual orientation. She explored the themes of some of her female friends' faces.

At CSUF, which Mohammadi entered in 2018 after earning an undergraduate degree in fine arts at UC Irvine, she painted a series of works whose theme was the trauma she experienced; in her paintings, the body is "from the inside," she said.

Surviving, thriving

Drawing and painting professor and MOZAIC Philanthropy founder Juror Eric Jensen writes of Mohammadi's work: "Many paintings are retainers for memory. This piece is functional in that way, it is yet more like a memory that was chosen because the rest of them were too painful," she tearfully recalls. It feels like if the scene moved to the left or right, we would not be able to go to that place where she was allowed to do in Iran.

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Mohammadi asks: "Why should minority groups suffer and be rejected in traditional religious societies? Their lives and their state of being are in serious danger.

It's a sentiment that is reflected, in some ways, in all her paintings — as an artist she feels privileged to continue to explore.

"Painting has changed my life," she said. "It's something I deeply love and something I'm deeply committed to continue.

Follow Mohammadi and her work on Instagram at @mahmadi-painting.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAHTAB MOHAMMADI

"From the Inside," a painting by Mahommadi Mohammadi

PHOTOS BY DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MAHTAB MOHAMMADI

Dixie Complex Fire July 2021 burned more than 900,000 acres and destroyed 2,200 structures, and the Mendocino Complex Fire in July 2018 wiped out 450,000 acres and 280 structures. There have been dozens more.

The cities of Brea, Fullerton and Yorba Linda are pressed up against the wild- land-urban interface, making fire detection entral to the area, said Dave Paredes, fire prevention consultant with the Fullerton Fire Department, who was at the Arboretum for the project. "I was intrigued when I saw the scope of testing that was going on," Paredes said. "From what I've seen in my experience, this is an important type of study. The quicker we can get on them, the smaller we can keep them. Structure protection is a lot easier that way."

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The Arboretum director Greg Serstuen suggested they use the 26-acre botanical garden grounds, because the city fire department had allowed them to conduct a fire prevention experiment with research lead Anitca Robledo on the grounds of the Arboretum.

Robledo prepares to light firewood during a fire prevention experiment.