HADIEH SHAFIE

Beautiful Words

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Hadieh Shafie, an internationally recognized Iranian American artist, has spent over fifteen years investigating the physicality of writing and the traces it leaves behind. In a world saturated by text, Shafie redirects attention to its overlooked physical presence — employing repetition, concealment, and transformation. Her practice challenges conventional notions of what writing looks like and how language moves.

The roots of Shafie's systematic exploration of text stretch back to ancient times and the origins of alphabets. The artist readily acknowledges a debt to the long and rich tradition of calligraphy (from the Greek word for "beautiful writing"), especially examples from the Islamic world. Accumulations of rolled paper, like *Saayeha 6* (fig. 3), are the work for which Shafie is best known. These objects bring to mind literal spools and scrolls as well as figurative archives and libraries.

This project — the artist's first solo show in the United States and her first one-person museum exhibition — presents a recent evolution in Shafie's practice, what she calls "vertical books." The artist's signature sculptural spirals have grown larger. And they now inhabit space dynamically — hanging in clusters from the ceiling, appearing on shelves, or emerging upward from the floor. Their varying silhouettes, ranging from wide to narrow, create rhythm and tension.

All of the carefully constructed objects on view imply potential relationships: language arises from the desire to communicate; libraries exist for future readers. *Beautiful Words* invites viewers to experience books in unexpected ways, where, according to the artist, "words are an energetic charge, color is emotion, and repetition is a kind of spiritual practice."

Ovissi FOUNDATION

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Cover: Hadieh Shafie, installation view of ***Beautiful Words*** at The Columbus Museum, 2025–2026

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The installation of my work at the Columbus Museum is the culmination of a conversation that began years earlier between myself and Jonathan Frederick Walz, Director of Curatorial Affairs & Curator of American Art. From the very first discussions, there was an understanding that my practice and the museum's mission could meet in a meaningful way. Those early dialogues created a foundation of trust and mutual vision.

That moment was delayed more than once—first by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, then by the museum's extensive renovation. What might have felt like setbacks instead deepened the project, giving me time to reflect, to refine, and to reconsider what it might mean to bring my work into that space. Then, just a month before I was due to travel for the installation, I experienced an epiphany. I realized that I had bound myself to a conversation from years past—a vision that no longer fully reflected my growth as an artist or the world as it now stood. In that instant, I knew the installation had to be reimagined. It was a daunting decision, a risk at the very last moment, but one I could not ignore.

Jonathan and Mathew Swindell, Exhibition Designer, placed extraordinary trust in my vision, supporting this late pivot and allowing me to reshape the exhibition. That trust transformed the installation. Instead of a static realization of an old plan, the show became a living response – fresh, immediate, and resonant with the present moment.

Finally, with the installation complete, the space feels more like a conversation. I invite you not only to see the works but to move slowly, pause, and reflect on what it means to evolve alongside time itself so that what emerges is not just the realization of a long-anticipated exhibition, but the embodiment of trust in the process of making and transformation.

Hadieh Shafie
October 2, 2025
New York

Figure 1: The artist calls each individual roll of paper a ***ketâb***, the Farsi word for "book."

Figure 2: A handful of miniature ***ketâb-hâ*** (books).

Figure 3: Hadieh Shafie, ***Saayeha 6***, 2016, ink, acrylic and paper with handwritten and printed Farsi text *eshgh*, The Sarah T. Butler and Clarence Butler Fund, The Columbus Museum G.2018.30

Photo: Hadieh Shafie

AN INTERVIEW WITH HADIEH SHAFIE

By Jonathan Frederick Walz , Ph.D

Jonathan Frederick Walz: For several years now, your overall project has been to push on the materiality of texts. Most of us take words on a page or screen for granted these days. But there is always a materiality behind text, whether it's pigment and plant fibers or pixels and microchips. Can you tell us how your interest in this subject began and developed?

Hadieh Shafie: Early on, I found myself drawn to the way words live not only in meaning but in form — how a letter's curve or the density of ink on paper could be as expressive as the sentence itself. Growing up, I was surrounded by languages — visual and verbal — and I became fascinated by how script could function as both vessel and surface.

Over time, I realized that text is never truly immaterial. A page is not just a transparent carrier of meaning; it's a physical object with weight, texture, fragility, and endurance. My work has been about drawing that material presence forward — making it impossible to ignore. By rolling, layering, and embedding text in physical form, I invite viewers to confront language as matter, to sense its mass, its density, and its potential to hold and conceal meaning.

For me, the journey has been about moving from reading words to touching them — shifting from the symbolic to the tangible — and exploring how that shift changes the way we experience language.

Figure 4: A view of the artist's worktable.

JFW: The Columbus Museum is proud to have acquired your rolled paper work *Saayeha 6* (fig. 3) in 2018. For a long time, you incorporated the Farsi word *eshgh*, which equates to the English "love" or "passion," into works like *Saayeha 6*. But at a certain point, you moved away from that practice. What changed?

HS: For many years, *eshgh* felt like an inexhaustible

well—a single word that could hold multiple layers of meaning: love, passion, devotion, longing. It was both deeply personal and culturally resonant, a point of connection between my own history and a broader poetic tradition. In works like *Saayeha 6*, the repetition of that word became almost like a mantra, a way of meditating on the endurance of emotion and the physicality of language.

Over time, though, I began to feel that *eshgh* had given me all it could in that form. My relationship to the word shifted; it no longer carried the same urgency to be repeated or physically inscribed. I became more interested in expanding the vocabulary — literally and conceptually — so that the work could hold other ideas, textures, and histories. It isn't a rejection of *eshgh*, but a recognition that I needed to let it rest in order to push the work into a new territory. Still from time to time I go back to it making drawings on paper with the repetition its form allows.

JFW: Curators, critics, and art historians sometimes discuss your output in the context of the Iranian Diaspora. The concept of diaspora may not be familiar to many in the Museum's audience. Could you tell us what you think it means and how your work does or doesn't fit into that framework?

HS: When we talk about "diaspora," we're really talking about communities that live away from their place of origin, often carrying with them a layered sense of belonging — both to the homeland and to the new place they inhabit. The experience is rarely static; it's shaped by memory, distance, translation, and adaptation.

I was born in Iran and have lived most of my life in the United States, so that duality is naturally part of my perspective. In some ways, my work reflects a diasporic sensibility: it moves between languages, between cultural references, and between material traditions from both contexts. But I don't see it as illustrating the "Iranian diaspora" directly. Instead, I use the lens of my own experience to explore broader questions — how meaning survives across distance, how language transforms when it is carried in the body rather than the everyday environment, and how objects can act as vessels for memory and identity.

So, while the framework of diaspora can be a useful way to enter my work, I hope it also speaks to anyone who has ever navigated multiple worlds, whether across continents or simply across the boundaries of their own life.

JFW: I know your business partner is also an artist. Do you ever feel competitive with each other? Do you discuss each other's work? Have you ever made art as a team?

HS: Teaming up with another artist means you're in conversation with someone who understands, from the inside, the strange rhythms and demands of making work — the long silences, the obsessions, the frustrations, the sudden bursts of energy at odd hours. That shared understanding is a gift.

We do talk about each other's work, though often in a way that's more about listening than critiquing. Sometimes it's just a passing comment in the studio, sometimes it's a deeper conversation about ideas or process. We're not especially competitive; our practices are quite different, so there's room for each of us to have our own creative space.

As for making art together — so far, Jason has taken the role of creating all of the woodworking required in making the forms that hold the books, technical problem solving, and the documentation. He supports me by helping me see the possibilities I might have missed, and creating the conditions where I can do my best work. To date, he has kept his practice to himself and is not an exhibiting artist. I am hopeful that will change for him when he decides to share his creative outputs.

JFW: Do you listen to music or podcasts or other programming in the studio? What's on your playlist?

HS: In the studio, the soundtrack shifts with the stage of the work. Early on, when I'm generating ideas or sketching, I gravitate toward podcasts — art history, documentary series, science — to keep my mind nimble but not too locked in. Once I'm in the repetitive or meditative part of making, I switch to music. My playlist swings wildly from Iranian classical music to alternative/punk rock, with detours into Nina Simone and Glenn Gould. The through-line is rhythm — it helps me enter that timeless flow state.

JFW: Was there a particular book and/or exhibition when you were in grad school that really changed your thinking?

HS: I can't remember where but soon after I had arrived for graduate school at Pratt in Brooklyn, I came across a work by Brice Marden from his *Black Mountain* paintings. Just as Marden's layered lines and washes transform minimalist forms into meditative gestures, my rolled papers use repeated text to create rhythm and texture. In both cases, the act of making — the layering, the rolling, the subtle shifts — becomes central to the work, an invitation to slow down and experience the depth within restraint. While Marden draws from Western abstraction and Eastern calligraphy, my work introduces a diasporic, cross-cultural layer, expanding

this dialogue between form, gesture, and meaning. Seeing how Marden took liberty in exploring Eastern calligraphy encouraged me to look at calligraphic practices in Iranian art and draw from that.

JFW: We have found that our visitors are often curious about process. Could you explain how you generate so many rolls of paper?

HS: I roll strips of paper by hand. I also have a tool that Jason developed for me that helps me start each roll and get it to a 1-inch diameter. This has saved my hands and reduces the time in making each roll; still there are no short cuts to the process. Over time, I have just gotten faster with the process and really enjoy the repetition in the work. So, to make the circular books I paint or make marks with ink and brush on the strips before I roll them, so that color and pattern emerge only from the layering. Each roll is then wound and glued to hold its shape, then set aside to dry before I begin the next. The process is repetitive but never mechanical — every roll is slightly different, carrying the memory of my hands in its form. Over time, hundreds or thousands of these small, deliberate acts accumulate into a single work.

JFW: You consider each roll of paper a "book"; in previous statements, you've even used the English and Farsi words for book interchangeably to describe these rolls. Please unpack this for us.

HS: When I call each roll of paper a "book," I'm pointing to both its physical reality and its conceptual weight. Physically, the rolls contain a multitude of strips of paper inscribed with text — sometimes visible, sometimes hidden — just as a book contains words within its bound pages. But unlike a conventional book, the narrative here is sealed in a spiral, inaccessible in a linear way. You can't simply open to page one and read to the end; the story is compressed, layered, and concealed.

In Farsi, the word *ketāb* carries not only the sense of a bound volume, but also a cultural reverence for knowledge, poetry, and history — things that, for me, are deeply tied to memory and identity. By using *ketāb* and "book" interchangeably, I'm collapsing two languages and two cultural frames into one form, much as the rolls themselves collapse time, meaning, and gesture.

So, each "book" becomes both an object and an idea: a vessel for text, a repository of memory, and a physical manifestation of something that might never be read in the usual way but can still be experienced, felt, and imagined.

JFW: Do you have a sense of what's next? Is there a medium or process you've always wanted to explore?

HS: I try not to lock myself into a single "next step," because so much of my work emerges from unexpected encounters — materials I stumble across, a shift in light, a fragment of text that stays with me. That said, I've been drawn lately to processes that push my work off the wall and further into space — perhaps more sculptural forms or immersive installations. I'm also curious about incorporating sound or movement into the pieces, finding ways for them to change over time rather than remain fixed. For me, the excitement is in not fully knowing, but following that pull toward what feels both unfamiliar and inevitable.

JFW: What advice would you give to students in Columbus and elsewhere who are considering pursuing a career in the visual arts?

HS: First, remember that pursuing a career in the visual arts is both a creative calling and a long game. You'll need persistence just as much as talent. Whatever is happening around you — school deadlines, part-time jobs, life challenges — keep showing up to your practice. The discipline of making is what will sustain you.

Seek out exhibitions, artist talks, and open studios wherever you are. Art grows from looking as much as from making. Build relationships with peers, mentors, and other creative thinkers. A supportive community will push you, challenge you, and open doors you didn't even know existed. Learn how to talk about your work; this is as important as making work. Rejection and uncertainty are part of this path; think of them as opportunities to refine your vision and keep going. Above all, protect your sense of wonder. I too am still working on all of this, so think about your art practice with all of these components.

Figure 5: Two ***ketâb-hâ*** showing variations in form and coloring.