Raheleh Filsoofi Q&A



Raheleh Filsoofi is an itinerant artist, feminist curator and community advocate whose work explores movement, immigration and social activism. Using clay and sound as her main media, she creates multimedia installations and performances that challenge borders and promote inclusivity. A recipient of several major awards, including the 2023 Joan Mitchell Fellowship, Filsoofi is an assistant professor of ceramics at Vanderbilt University. She holds an MFA from Florida Atlantic University and a BFA from Al-Zahra University in Tehran, Iran.

In *Last Artist Standing*, you discuss resilience. How has your personal experience of migration shaped your understanding of persistence as an artist?

Migration reshaped my understanding of resilience, from something internal to something deeply relational. At some point, it stopped being just about enduring hardship and became about recognizing how transformative those experiences were. This mirrors my relationship with clay: I found clay in/with limitation, and it, in turn, gave me refuge. Becoming an artist was not a linear path. It was shaped by years of immigration uncertainty. During that time, clay became both my safe place and my voice, allowing me to persist, especially when language and legality failed me.

What compelled you to contribute your story to *Last Artist Standing*, and how did you approach writing your piece?

I contributed because I wanted to honour the presence and invisible labour of women artists in small villages whose stories are often left out of dominant art narratives. Writing this piece felt like opening a vessel: to document, to reveal, and to offer. It gave me the chance to return to memories with these women and to reconnect with the values they embodied for me – community, honesty, persistence and simplicity.

How do you define success and sustainability as an artist?

Success, to me, means being able to keep making work that feels necessary, especially in the face of emotional, political or financial instability. It's about creating from a place of honesty and from a sense of moral responsibility. Sustainability isn't about institutional validation; it's about building a life practice that centres care – care for myself, for my community, for the land and for the materials I use. Both success and sustainability mean remembering why I started
making in the first place, what moved me and continuing to return to that source, even in moments of despair.

In your contribution, you reflect on community. How important is building a community for sustaining a long-term art practice?

Community is not optional to me, it's rather essential. Without the clay community that welcomed me when I was a newcomer, without the Iranian women potters who taught me simplicity and dignity, and without the voices of women resisting in Iran today, I would not be the artist I am. Community has sustained me, the work I make and the spirit behind it.

How do the struggles and strategies you describe in *Last Artist Standing* reflect larger patterns faced by Iranian women artists, both inside and outside of Iran?

Iranian women artists navigate multiple pressures. Inside Iran, they face restrictions that limit their freedom of expression and how their work can be shown. Outside of Iran, they often struggle with invisibility. Systemic barriers exist in both contexts. What I've come to develop observing these women is that strategies like seeking refuge in materials, building informal support systems and sharing knowledge are not just acts of survival but they're ways of insisting on presence, of saying: I contribute, I exist.

How has participating in a collective publication with artists from diverse backgrounds influenced your view of your own artistic trajectory?

It reminded me that even though our origins and contexts are different, the act of making and making under constraint is globally shared. Seeing other artists share their resilience stories affirms the value of my path. That I am not an exception, but I am part of a collective resistance and a global network of persistence.

Do you see writing and publishing as another form of art-making or activism for you?

Absolutely. For me, writing, just like working with clay, carries the trace of the body and lived experience. Publishing creates space for the invisible labour behind our work to be seen and to be felt. English is my second language and using it to express my thoughts (accent and all) feels like a quiet form of resistance. It allows me to reach people who may never get to experience my performances or installations. Writing gives me more time to think and reshape what I want to express. It feels like a safer space, not a space to dominate language, but to move through it, to push beyond it, and to tell my story in my own time and on my own terms.

What advice would you give artists who are navigating cultural hybridity and systemic barriers at the start of their careers?

Know that hybridity is a strength, and in many ways, a privilege. You have the gift of experiencing various ways of knowing and being. Hold onto that. Look for advocates, communities and mentors who see you and support you. And if you're part of an institution, don't wait for it to recognize you; often, they won't. Instead, create your own values. Trust your voice. Work hard, be patient. The world needs time to hear it and respond to it.

Has your relationship to resilience changed as you've moved through different stages of your career?

Yes. In the beginning, resilience felt like survival. Now, it feels more like knowing who I am, holding onto my values, creating my own space, and giving back. I no longer feel the need to explain myself to anyone. I've learned to love who I am and what I've built, even with all the challenges along the way. This is resilience to me.

What's next for you in terms of merging writing, community engagement, and interdisciplinary art?

I'm working on my dust poems which blend poetry, clay printing, performance and community storytelling. In collaboration with my partner Reza Filsoofi, an interdisciplinary musician, we have built a platform for immigrant and refugee artists through the NIRMA project in Nashville and we are currently planning the upcoming events. All of it is an attempt to trace the movement of my own body, and the bodies around me through earth, word and sound.