

Graduating MFA student bridges art, memory and political discourse

By Sarah Marie Brazeal, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Mehrdad Mirzaie, a photographer whose work often reflects on his native Iran, is graduating from Arizona State University School of Art's MFA program this spring.

Mirzaie's artistic contributions have received wide national and international recognition, with a prolific exhibition record — including solo exhibitions and participation in numerous group shows across 15 U.S. states and internationally.

His recent inclusion in an exhibition at the prestigious Arsenale in Venice further affirms his role in fostering cross-cultural artistic dialogue. Notable honors include the 2023 LensCulture Emerging Talent Award and third place in the 2024 Lenscratch Student Prize.

He also has received the School of Art Thesis Grant, the K. Herberger/Art Scholarship, Creative Constellation and Design and Arts Corps Grants from the Herberger Institute, an ASU Special Talent Award, multiple GPSA Research Grants, an Arizona Artist Guide scholarship, Master Class Scholarship from Anderson Ranch Art Center, Artist Opportunity Grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts, Carmody Foundation Art for Good Grant and more.

In the studio, Mirzaie is known for his intensive and exploratory approach into materials. He develops unique techniques that blend archival research with photographic processes, resulting in work that is both aesthetically striking and intellectually rich.

"My research project, 'Tasvir Archive,' is a community-based digital archive that focuses on preserving and recontextualizing image-based art from Iran," he said. "The 'Tasvir Archive' is an independent initiative focused on studying the history of Iranian image-based art and the archiving of photographic practices in Iran. Its main objective is to collect and archive critical information and resources related to Iranian photographers, image-based artists, scholarly articles and critical analyses. The project seeks to offer a comprehensive resource base for researchers, critics, writers, students and anyone keen on exploring the diverse landscape of Iranian photography."

Drawing on social media and other digital platforms, Mirzaie compiles an archive of portraits depicting Iranian civilians who lost their lives under government persecution. He then transfers these images onto glass and sands them away during performance-based installations, a process

that embodies the tension between remembrance and disappearance. The resulting work interrogates the fragility of memory and the persistence of resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Beyond his studio practice, Mirzaie's scholarly and curatorial work extends his impact across academic and public spheres.

"Working as a teaching assistant and assistant curator at Northlight Gallery was one of the most transformative parts of my time at ASU," he said. "It gave me hands-on experience in curating, archiving and working directly with artists and collections. These experiences helped me dive deeper into the field, expand my research and connect my practice with institutional and community-based work."

His commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and reframing dominant narratives challenges the conventional boundaries of the gallery system. As he moves forward with plans for doctoral research in art history, Mirzaie is poised to further elevate image-based artists whose perspectives are often silenced or overlooked.

His work can be found via his website, mehrdadmiraie.com, and his Instagram account [@mrdadmiraie](https://www.instagram.com/mrdadmiraie).

Question: Do you have an interesting story, moment or highlight from your time at ASU that you believe speaks to your work, thesis, or growth as an artist?

Answer: My artistic practice and research are rooted in the community and the people I care deeply about. One of the most meaningful parts of my time at ASU has been the strong connection I built with my cohort and faculty in the School of Art. I believe my growth as an artist happened within this community — every step forward was made possible by the support, dialogue and collaboration with my peers, professors and friends. This shared space shaped not only my work but who I've become as an artist and thinker.

Q: What was your "aha" moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

A: After earning my BA in photography from the University of Art in Tehran, I realized I wanted to build a long-term career in this field. That moment came with the understanding that in order to truly dedicate myself to this path, I needed to continue my education and immerse myself in a broader global context. That realization led me to the U.S., where I could fully invest my time, energy and vision into my practice and research.

Q: What's something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: Taking art history and museum studies courses profoundly shaped my way of thinking. Professors like Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Meredith Hoy challenged me with their critical perspectives on art, politics and historiography. Their classes helped me develop a deeper understanding of contemporary art and its historical contexts, shifting how I approach both theory and practice in my work.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: The faculties in the photography program were a major reason I chose ASU. I knew I wanted to work with professors who had both strong conceptual frameworks and a critical understanding of visual culture.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: Working with my advisor, Professor Liz Cohen, has had a lasting impact on me. She helped me understand how to think long-term about my artistic career and challenged me to refine my approach to contemporary art. Her mentorship was key in shaping both my practice and my confidence as an artist.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: Be open to experimentation and allow your work to evolve. Stay connected with your peers — community and collaboration are as important as the work itself.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus?

A: Grant Street Studios. That's where my studio has been for all three years, and it became my second home. I spent countless hours there — day and night — fully focused on my work. That space gave me the clarity and continuity I needed.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: I plan to pursue a PhD with a focus on art history and curatorial studies. I want to continue building on my research and deepen my understanding of how archives, memory and visual culture intersect.

Q: What will you do after you leave ASU?

A: Beyond applying to PhD programs, I plan to continue working as an educator, engage with academia and pursue my research as both a curator and an artist.

Q: Anything else you would like to add about your work, thesis or time at ASU?

A: Working as a teaching assistant and assistant curator at Northlight Gallery was one of the most transformative parts of my time at ASU. It gave me hands-on experience in curating, archiving and working directly with artists and collections. These experiences helped me dive deeper into the field, expand my research and connect my practice with institutional and community-based work.

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