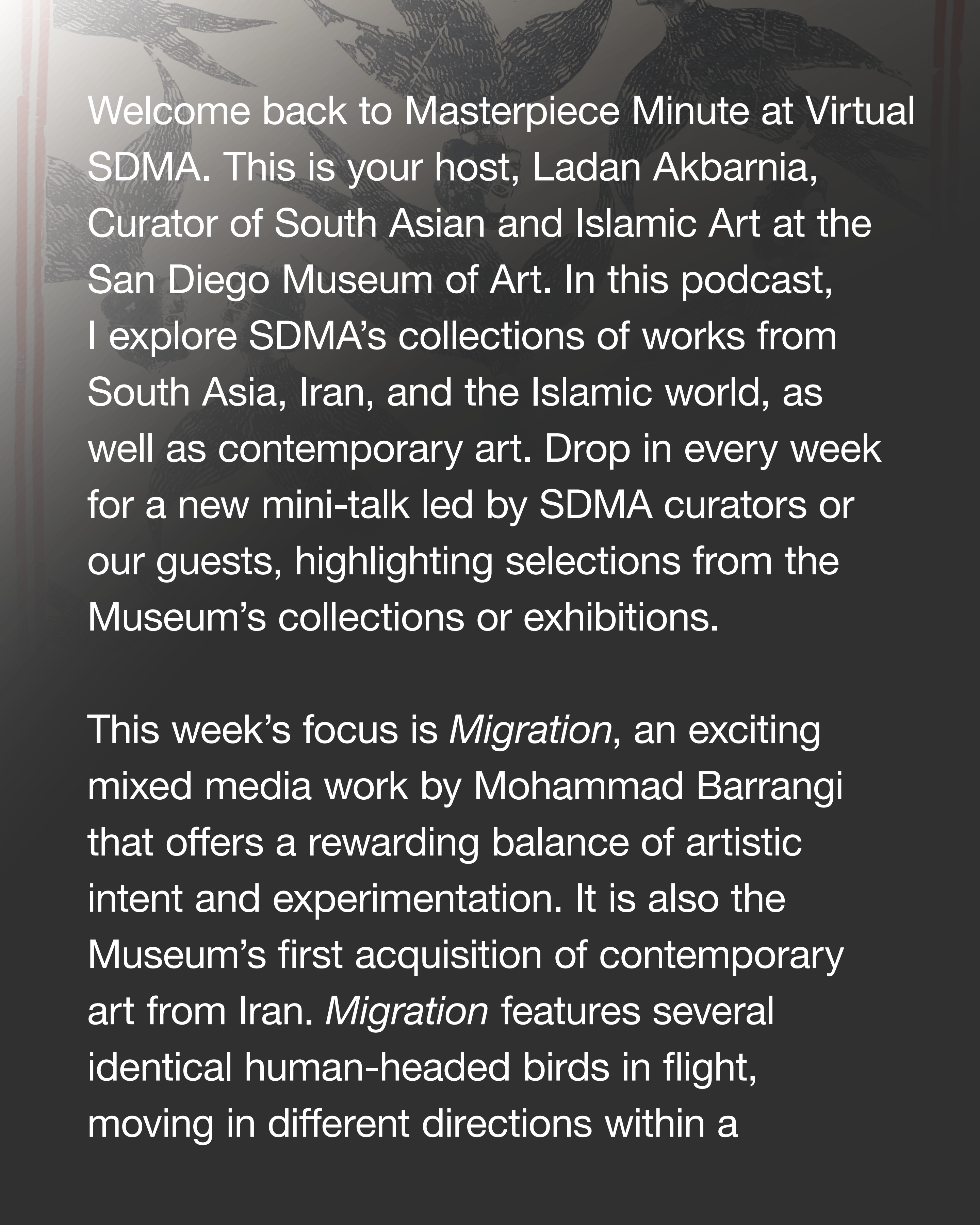


MASTERPIECE

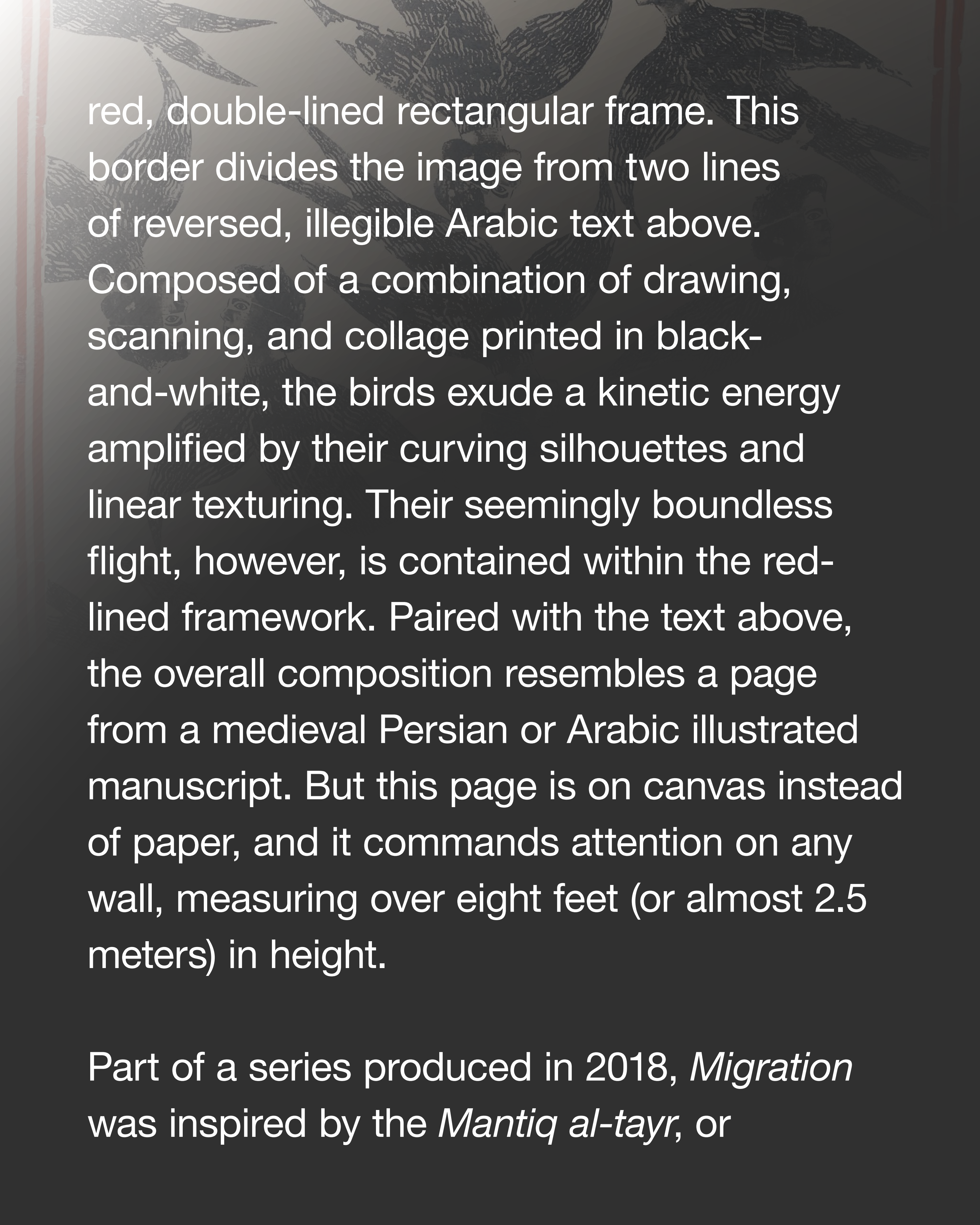
MASTERPIECE
MINUTE





Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I explore SDMA's collections of works from South Asia, Iran, and the Islamic world, as well as contemporary art. Drop in every week for a new mini-talk led by SDMA curators or our guests, highlighting selections from the Museum's collections or exhibitions.

This week's focus is *Migration*, an exciting mixed media work by Mohammad Barrangi that offers a rewarding balance of artistic intent and experimentation. It is also the Museum's first acquisition of contemporary art from Iran. *Migration* features several identical human-headed birds in flight, moving in different directions within a

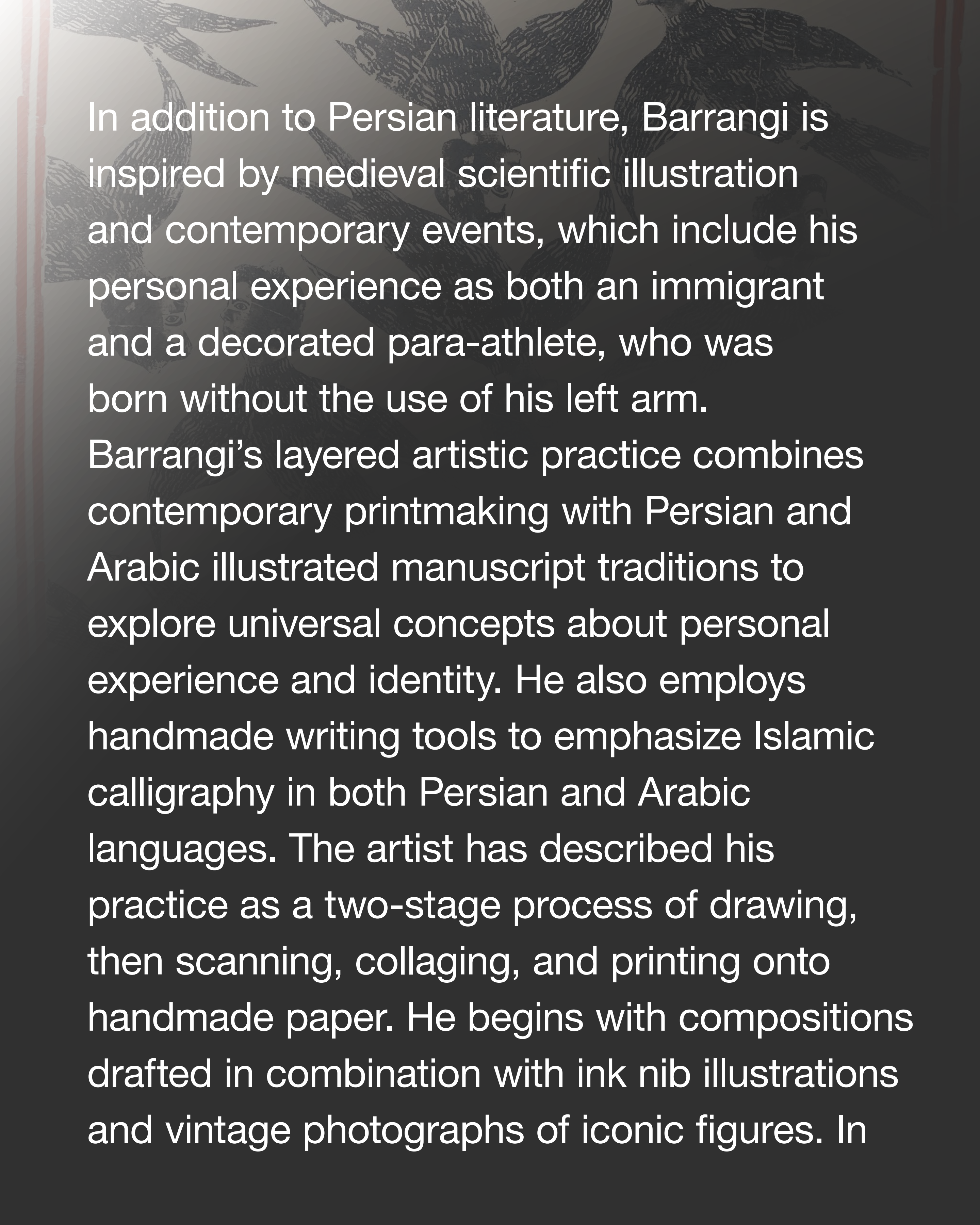


red, double-lined rectangular frame. This border divides the image from two lines of reversed, illegible Arabic text above. Composed of a combination of drawing, scanning, and collage printed in black-and-white, the birds exude a kinetic energy amplified by their curving silhouettes and linear texturing. Their seemingly boundless flight, however, is contained within the red-lined framework. Paired with the text above, the overall composition resembles a page from a medieval Persian or Arabic illustrated manuscript. But this page is on canvas instead of paper, and it commands attention on any wall, measuring over eight feet (or almost 2.5 meters) in height.

Part of a series produced in 2018, *Migration* was inspired by the *Mantiq al-tayr*, or


The background features a dark, textured illustration. At the top, a large bird with spread wings is visible. Below it, a human figure is depicted in a contemplative or prayerful pose, with arms raised. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Persian or Islamic art, with intricate patterns and a muted color palette of greys, blacks, and browns.

Conference of the Birds, a twelfth-century allegorical poem attributed to the Persian Sufi poet Farid al-Din Attar. It contains a series of tales and anecdotes within a broader narrative about a group of birds, representing Sufi pilgrims, seeking the mythical bird king Simurgh, who lives at the end of the world and represents God, or the Truth. Thirty birds survive the difficult journey, only to discover that they are collectively the Simurgh, a play on the Persian two-word composite, *si-murgh*, or “thirty birds.” A metaphor for the mystical path of the Sufi, or Muslim mystic, toward enlightenment, the work also touches upon the artist’s own history, having immigrated from Iran to the United Kingdom in 2016 to study and work in London, and his personal path of assimilation into a new country and the diaspora.

The background features a dark, textured illustration. On the left, a large bird, possibly a phoenix or a similar mythical creature, is depicted with its wings spread, perched on a branch. To the right, a person is shown in profile, looking upwards. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Persian or Islamic art, with intricate line work and a muted color palette.

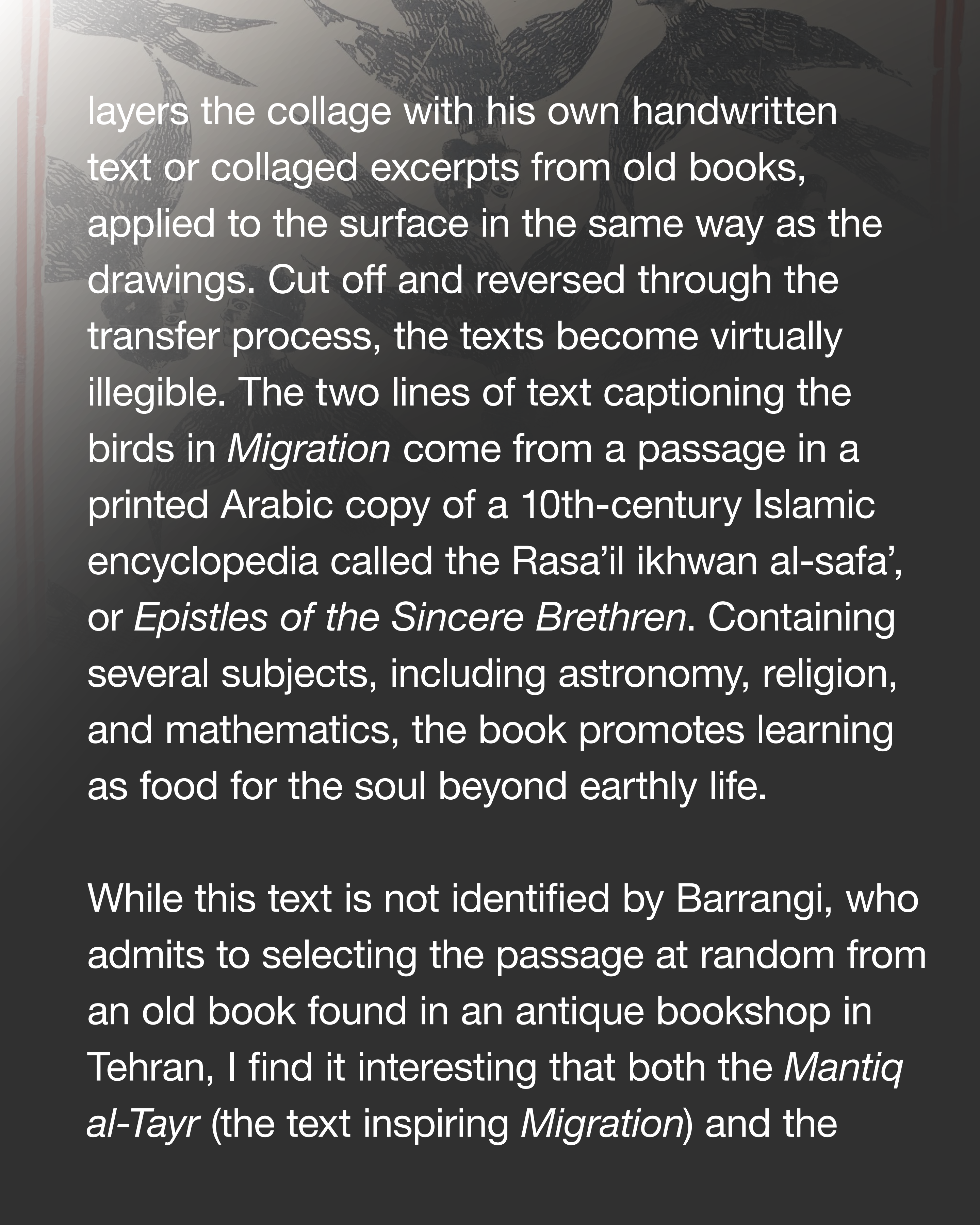
In addition to Persian literature, Barrangi is inspired by medieval scientific illustration and contemporary events, which include his personal experience as both an immigrant and a decorated para-athlete, who was born without the use of his left arm.

Barrangi's layered artistic practice combines contemporary printmaking with Persian and Arabic illustrated manuscript traditions to explore universal concepts about personal experience and identity. He also employs handmade writing tools to emphasize Islamic calligraphy in both Persian and Arabic languages. The artist has described his practice as a two-stage process of drawing, then scanning, collaging, and printing onto handmade paper. He begins with compositions drafted in combination with ink nib illustrations and vintage photographs of iconic figures. In



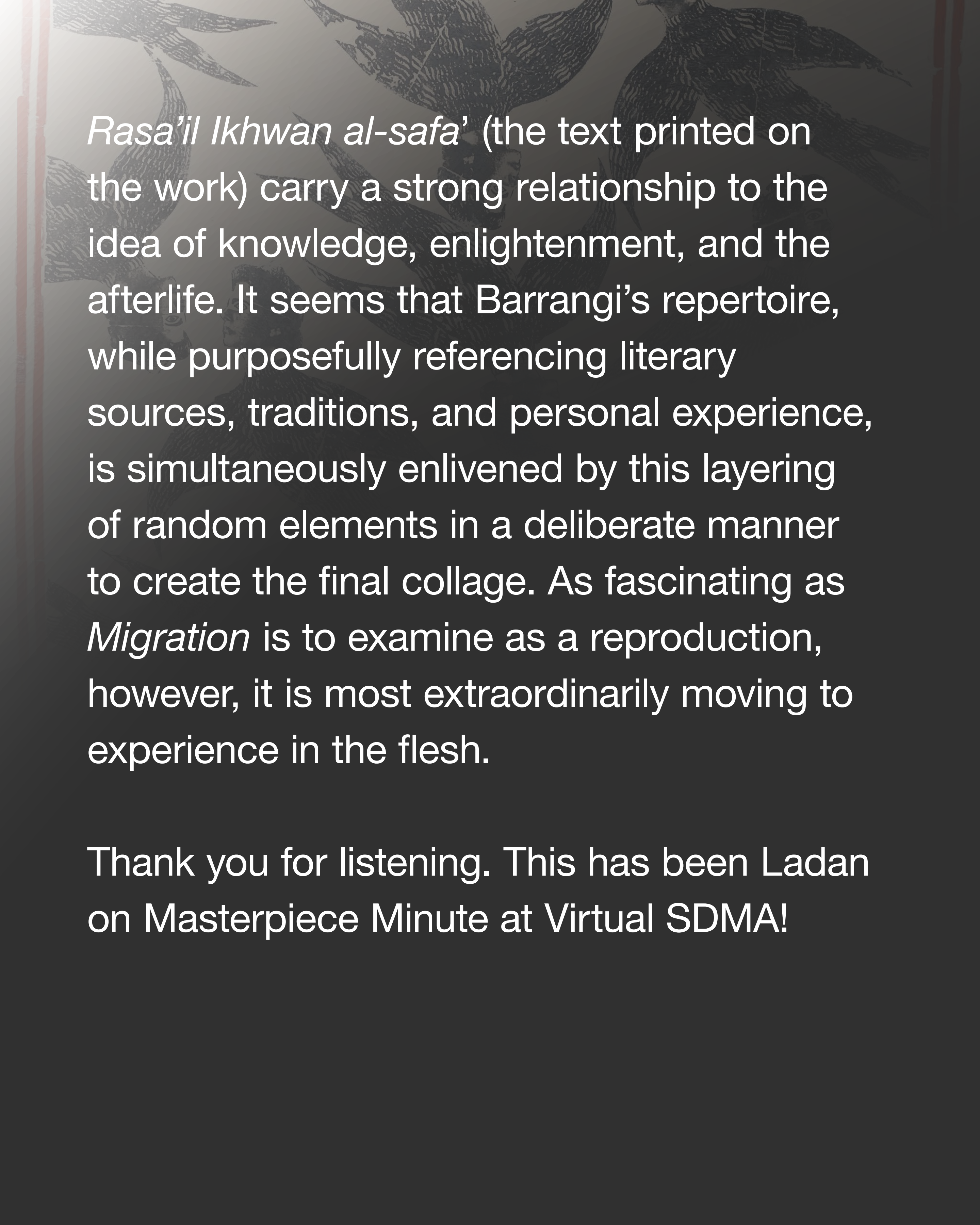
Migration, the head of each bird comes from an old photograph of Iranian Empress Soraya Pahlavi, the second wife of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled as Iran's last king until he was overthrown in 1979, when the country became an Islamic republic. Barrangi often combines images of his mother, exiled Iranian queens, or close friends with animals or mythical creatures featured in stories about metaphorical journeys, which may resonate on a personal level.

Once the compositions are drafted, Barrangi transfers them using cellulose thinners onto a new, book-size sheet of paper treated with an Iranian wood stain. Sometimes, as in this instance, he transfers them onto a larger canvas surface. Once dried, the artist



layers the collage with his own handwritten text or collaged excerpts from old books, applied to the surface in the same way as the drawings. Cut off and reversed through the transfer process, the texts become virtually illegible. The two lines of text captioning the birds in *Migration* come from a passage in a printed Arabic copy of a 10th-century Islamic encyclopedia called the *Rasa'il ikhwan al-safa'*, or *Epistles of the Sincere Brethren*. Containing several subjects, including astronomy, religion, and mathematics, the book promotes learning as food for the soul beyond earthly life.

While this text is not identified by Barrangi, who admits to selecting the passage at random from an old book found in an antique bookshop in Tehran, I find it interesting that both the *Mantiq al-Tayr* (the text inspiring *Migration*) and the



Rasa'il Ikhwan al-safa' (the text printed on the work) carry a strong relationship to the idea of knowledge, enlightenment, and the afterlife. It seems that Barrangi's repertoire, while purposefully referencing literary sources, traditions, and personal experience, is simultaneously enlivened by this layering of random elements in a deliberate manner to create the final collage. As fascinating as *Migration* is to examine as a reproduction, however, it is most extraordinarily moving to experience in the flesh.

Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

Featured: Mohammad
Barrangi (Iranian,
b. 1988). *Migration*,
2018. Reverse transfer
printmaking on raw
canvas. Purchased
with funds provided by
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Barrangi

