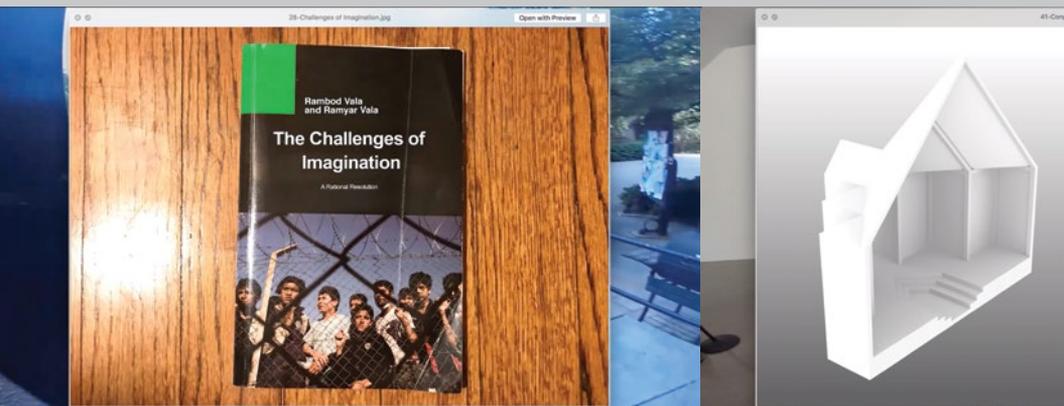


RĀMBOD AND RAMYAR VĀLĀ

CHALLENGES OF IMAGINATION

August 18 – October 4, 2020, Foyer Gallery





The Challenges of Imagination

by Marco Aquino

In “The Challenges of Imagination,” brothers Rāmbod and Ramyar Vālā present a humorous yet candid take on the many challenges artists face when trying to apply for an O-1 artist visa. The short film is a direct response to the Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker who proposed that immigrants pay a \$50,000 entrance fee in his 2011 paper “The Challenge of Immigration: A Radical Solution.” Rāmbod and Ramyar acknowledge their identity as Iranian-born artists but stray from the common tropes associated with migrant artists. Rather, the Vala brothers shine a spotlight on the immigration process and seemingly arbitrary metrics of success in the fine arts world. “The Challenges of Imagination” is as much a critique of staunch U.S. immigration policies as it is of the fine arts world. More importantly, the film attempts to disrupt a narrative that expects certain foreign artists to continually produce highly political artwork. Although taking on heavy subject matter, the film retains a playful, satirical approach.

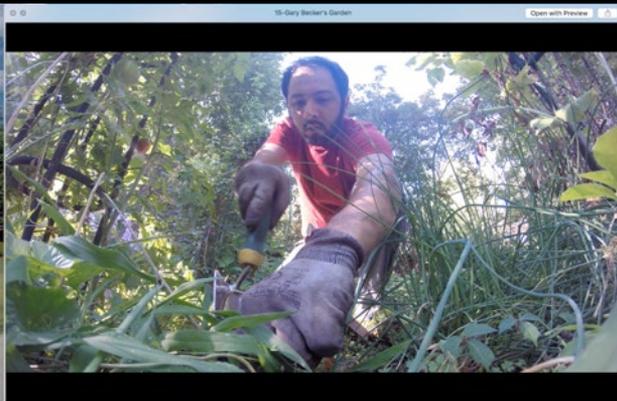
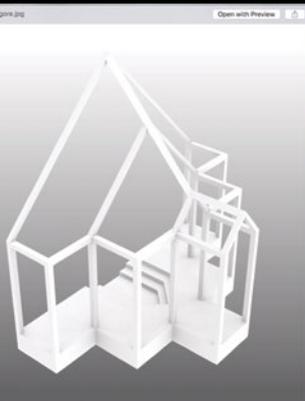
Gathering photographs, video clips and personal anecdotes, the brothers express their yearning to find success as artists outside of Iran, a country where contemporary artists can face extraordinary challenges. “The population moves with desires and ideas,” Rāmbod and Ramyar

explain in the film. “In general, the population moves imagining, daydreaming... of an alternative future,” they add. In contrast to Becker’s idea of immigrants as people who do “unpopular jobs” the brothers paint a portrait of immigrants as people who see themselves “outside of the margins.”¹

Interestingly, both Rāmbod and Ramyar once lived in Becker’s basement apartment while in the U.S. on student visas. Ramyar earned an MFA from the University of Chicago and Rāmbod earned an MFA from Northwestern University. In “The Challenges of Imagination,” we see Ramyar and Rāmbod as they try to obtain O-1 artist visas so they can continue living and working in the U.S.

Applying for an O-1 artist visa can be a daunting experience since it is intended for individuals who have demonstrated “extraordinary ability” in their chosen fields. In the film, Ramyar reveals how he was explicitly told by U.S. immigration officials that he was “not as famous as Jeff Koons” and also “not at the top” of his field. Eventually, however, Ramyar obtains the coveted O-1 visa after a lengthy process. Rāmbod’s application, on the other hand, is rejected and he must return to his home country of Iran where he “sinks in thoughts of the top” and considers the future of his career.

¹ Becker, Gary, “The Challenge of Immigration: A Radical Solution.” The 19th Annual Hayek Memorial Lecture, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 2011.



“But, what is this top?” Rāmbod pointedly asks in the film. “Where is it? Who defines it? And what are the requirements to reach it?”

According to the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Service’s (USCIS) website, an applicant must demonstrate national or international acclaim and provide several letters of recommendation and critical reviews of their work from trade journals and other publications.¹ For those in the performing arts, the site lists a Grammy, Emmy or Academy award as evidence of an applicant’s “extraordinary ability.” The site also suggests that an applicant should have “a high salary or other substantial remuneration for services in relation to others in the field.” While the USCIS list of criteria for obtaining an O-1 visa might seem quite specific, it begins to feel a bit hollow considering its emphasis on awards, media recognition and financial success.

Perhaps Rāmbod and Ramyar would find more commercial success if they created highly politicized works that strictly dealt with their identity as Iranian artists. Yet, they express a certain disdain for the act of neatly “packaging their wounds as a form of art” in order to reach the top. Through their multidisciplinary practice, including graphic design, fabrication and video

installation, Rāmbod and Ramyar aim to expand what it means to be Iranian artists.

In October of 2019, “The Challenges of Imagination” was exhibited in “The Extraordinary” at Hunter East Harlem Gallery. The group exhibition comprised artists who either held O-1 visas or were in the process of obtaining them. The premise of the exhibition was to bring awareness of the visa-seeking process while also calling into question the USCIS’s idea of a “renown” or successful artist. An article in the New York Times referred to “The Challenges of Imagination” as the “distinct highlight” of the exhibition.²

Although humorous, “The Challenges of Imagination” does an exquisite job of pointing to the subjective nature and manner in which the art world and our institutions value certain artists over others. In the final scene of the film, Rāmbod sits in his bathtub, wiggles his toes and sings along to Lou Reed’s “Perfect Day.” The scene plays like the grand finale of a musical or comedy. Much like a lover who has been rejected, Rāmbod drowns his sorrows with a pint of Haagen-Dazs ice cream — an appropriate ending to a journey filled with highs and lows.

¹ “O-1 Visa: Individuals with Extraordinary Ability or Achievement.” USCIS, accessed February 10, 2020, www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/temporary-workers/o-1-visa-individuals-extraordinary-ability-or-achievement.

² Henrich, Will, “What to See Right Now in New York Galleries.” The New York Times, January 29, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/01/29/arts/design/art-galleries-new-york-city.html.

The Freedman Gallery at Albright College, named after former Albright trustee and alumna **Doris Chanin Freedman**, is located on the ground floor of the Center for the Arts. Since its inception, the gallery focuses primarily on contemporary, living, American artists and hosts approximately 12 exhibitions each year rotating in the Main Gallery, Project Space, and Foyer Gallery. Freedman Gallery is located at 13th & Bern Streets, Reading, PA 19612. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 1-4 p.m. The gallery is closed on Mondays, holidays, breaks and summer. (See Albright.edu/calendar). During the COVID-19 pandemic, please call (610) 921-7541 or (610) 921-7715 to confirm gallery hours of operation.

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Follow the CFA and artist Rāmbod Vālā on Instagram.



"Rāmbod and Ramyar Vālā: Challenges of Imagination"
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Installation curated by Alana J. Coates. Essay written by Marco Aquino.
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Texas at San Antonio and is an arts and culture writer based in Texas.

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