

# Turning waste to art: Experiences of Bita Mokhtar Masoumi

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While the 21st century has brought mind-blowing advances in technology and communications, it has also brought the terrifying reality of environmental destruction and devastating climate change. Our resources are depleting at an alarming rate, and it is clear that the systems and behaviours that have brought us to this moment are no longer serving the greater good, and are simply not sustainable. Now is the time to think outside of the box, and truly consider the impact that we have.



*Photo by Alireza Teymouri*

One of the biggest contributors to this environmental damage is the food industry. It is estimated that 1,3 billion tonnes of edible food waste are produced every year ([FAO](#)). Of course, it's not just the food itself that is wasteful, the packaging and containers also have a huge environmental impact. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency ([EPA](#)), food and food packaging materials make up almost half of all municipal solid waste. We must ask ourselves: Is there another way?

Thankfully, Iranian visual designer and contemporary artist Bita Mokhtar Masoumi has done just that and has developed a unique way to turn what was once destined for the landfill into beautiful pieces of art. Over the past couple of years, she has been working intensely to highlight the impact that our waste has had on the environment. A graphic designer by profession, Masoumi has exhibited widely in Iran, United States and around the world at institutions and galleries such as Las Laguna Art Gallery and Behzad Gallery. She also published her first book about Iranian graphic design, which became a bestseller in Iran.

Masoumi first fell in love with painting in her grandfather's studio when she was a child. Her parents noticed her talent at a young age and sent nine-year-old Masoumi to art classes to refine her skills. However, some aspects of Masoumi's childhood were very challenging, growing up in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war. Her Iranian community experienced great loss and struggle. She grew up with minimal resources and even after the war had finished, extravagance was greatly frowned upon.

It was during her time in college that her unique voice and medium started to really emerge. Masoumi was accepted to study graphic design in one of the top universities in her home country. This is when she decided to use visual arts as the emotional outlet and the way to express her feelings. In moments where her thoughts would take her deep into her emotions, she would find something – anything – to release the creative response. Her canvas was often the quickest thing that she could find to bring pen or paint to paper, in raw expression. Simultaneously, Masoumi was struggling to make ends meet financially, and spending her money on art supplies was a luxury that she could not afford. As a graphic design student, it was common to collect samples of boxes, catalogues, etc. This is when she founded the concept of recycled painting, which she describes in her manifesto as “painting on any discarded (or garbage) materials such as paper packaging”.

By utilising scrap food packages for her art, Masoumi’s work has no limitations. She is not confined by the standard concepts of beauty, nor categorised by any specific style or tradition. Her method is so outside of the box, that she has found complete freedom to express herself authentically, drawing her inspiration directly from her heart. She has a nearly endless supply of resources and allows each piece of scrap material to guide her vision, honouring its unique features. She relishes the opportunity to show people that art does not have to come from expensive materials and tools. She aims to prove that a painting is not just an item of beauty to be hung on a museum wall, but that it in fact can help to influence society. Masoumi truly believes that art has the power to create change and that art can give a face or voice to those who are unseen and unheard.

Growing up in war-torn Iran brought the serious issues of food waste and food access into Masoumi’s awareness at a very young age. When she later moved to the US, she was heartbroken to see the dichotomy of extreme food waste from businesses and restaurants, with the scene of homeless people outside of these venues so desperate for a bite just to stay alive. The Western lifestyle of overconsumption and extravagance, especially in food, was in huge contrast with all that she had experienced and learned from her own family and culture.

Instead of becoming overwhelmed and debilitated by this problem, Masoumi is directing her incredible talent at creating awareness about the issue and, in her own words, shares that “painting on food garbage packages became [her] silent protest against food waste.” It would have been easy for the pain and suffering of her youth to leave Masoumi feeling victimised. However, she claims that she has never felt like a victim, and that this simply awoke her need to be responsible and to take action when others are suffering.

Finally, when asked what message she would like the world to take away from her art, Masoumi expresses that she strives to spark reflection in her audience. She recognises that not everyone will immediately reevaluate the amount of waste that they produce when they experience her work, but holds hope that at the very least it will start a conversation that may have a long-term impact.

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