

# SHAHRYAR NASHAT

Text by: Blake Oetting  
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For visitors to the Art Institute of Chicago, particularly those approaching the modern wing on East Monroe Street, engagement with its current suite of exhibitions begins before entry. Stretched across the hatched crosswalk leading to the museum lies a rectangular hot-pink impression, quickly identifiable as a patch of light refracted through a series of colored windows bordering the rooftop terrace above. With the facade of the building transformed into an architecturally scaled lens or optical instrument, Shahryar Nashat's installation *Raw Is the Red*, 2022, turns the Art Institute into a producer rather than a packager of aesthetic experience, one coordinated with natural cycles of sun and shade.

Dan Flavin also employed rosy light to manipulate museum design, installing his 1963 sculpture *pink out of a corner* (to Jasper Johns) along the vertical seam of a gallery, destroying the corner, in the words of the artist, through "glare and doubled shadow." Whereas Flavin, like other Minimalists, refers first and foremost to the gallery interior, Nashat's lighting apparatus moves beyond the scope of walls, intersections, doorways, and interior volumes to incorporate purportedly nonartistic terrain into its analytic purview, marking the institution's ongoing enmeshment in the production of urban space outside. As a result, both pedestrians and art viewers are interpolated by Nashat's work; the distinctions between the two audiences become increasingly blurred.

After entering the museum and accessing the rooftop in question, one encounters the second element of Nashat's installation. On a raised section of floor made out of Marmoleum stands an upright vitrine inset with a UV print of raw sternal flesh on powder-coated stainless steel smeared with a lard-like layer of acrylic gel. This "meat object," in the words of the artist, is stationed in front of a stone sculpture, tapered so as to suggest the general contours of a head, shoulders, and legs placed slightly apart. Indeed, the latter recalls Auguste Rodin's 1898 portrait of Honoré de Balzac, if that earlier work's voluminous anti-figural cloak had been drawn up above the writer's head like a body bag.

The abstracting mechanisms that push Nashat's sculpture to the hazy edge of bodily representation, however, are betrayed by the somatic display case positioned in front of it. Because of how Nashat arranged these elements, the perimeter of the vitrine roughly aligns with the contours of the "figure" just behind it, resembling a makeshift X-ray of its would-be chest. As he does with the windows lining the building's exterior, then, Nashat configures physical elements of the museum and museological practice as aesthetic conduits inherent to his installation's conceptual circuitry, rescripting this rooftop vitrine as a medical instrument primed for laparoscopic vision. Pressurizing such supposedly neutral elements of the institution to operate otherwise, Nashat identifies its programmed grammar of detachment by undermining it, vivifying architectural and visual infrastructures that sustain fantasies of disembodied perception and unmotivated display.

Behind his sculptural vignette, the buoyant, blushing membrane animating the museum's windows acts on one hand as a theatricalized backdrop and on the other as a monochrome filter for the Chicago skyline, towering over Millennium Park. With the transparency of the windows negated by Nashat's

intervention, the Art Institute is once again emphasized as a screen, a complex mediation of the world outside—a decidedly affective one, given the artist’s exuberant choice of color. This oddly unsettling outlook onto the city, rose colored yet framed by Nashat as an externally manipulated mirage, reinforces the way in which the artist’s critical ambition maintains an orientation outward despite its string of site-specific displacements and distortions. Within Nashat’s installation, the space outside the museum, as much as the presentational devices within, always remains in view as a component piece of the artist’s tactical counter-staging.

<https://www.artforum.com/events/shahryar-nashat-5-251179/>