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Original Research Article

Identifying Instances of the Reflection of Political Action in the Visual Works of Contemporary Artists of Gilan Based on Goffman's Perspective

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Abstract

Problem statement: Considering the recent social, cultural, and political developments and the emergence of socially engaged art, contemporary art can be seen as a form of social and political action within society. This research aims to recognize and analyze selected works by artists from Gilan that in some way reflect political approaches, seeking to answer the question: Based on Goffman's perspective, what political approaches are reflected in the works of contemporary Gilanian artists?

Research objective: The goal of this study is to identify examples of the reflection of political approaches as a form of social action in the works of artists from Gilan. The significance of this research lies in the fact that studying the actions of contemporary local artists can generate knowledge about how they interact and engage with their society.

Research method: This research is fundamental in terms of its objective and qualitative in nature, using qualitative content analysis as the main method. Data was collected through a combination of library and field research. To identify instances of Goffman's political patterns, approximately 266 artworks were selected and examined from among the total works of 13 artists whose work demonstrated political tendencies.

Conclusion: Findings indicate that contemporary artists from Gilan have long played the role of political actors through their works, expressing their own and their audience's concerns as a reaction to the political conditions of their time. Among the selected works, in addition to reflections on political themes and various individual and collective experiences, elements such as hero-making and the depiction of national figures like Mirza Kuchak Khan Jangali are observed. Most of the contemporary Gilan artists studied have acted as artist-citizens, reflecting the political circumstances of Gilan's historical periods through reciprocal engagement.

Keywords: *Political Approach, Contemporary Artists of Gilan, Theory of Reflection, Erving Goffman, Sociology of Art.*

Introduction and Problem Statement

Studies of contemporary art within the fields of media and various approaches in understanding the culture, identity, and political orientations of different

societies, especially through the works of artists play a significant role. This is because societies, and particularly artists, reflect various aspects and expressions of the political and social life of their communities in their works. Accordingly, artistic

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creations are not closed or independent entities; rather, they are the result of specific historical, social, and political actions that reflect the identity of particular social groups within specific conditions.

It appears that the reflection of political approaches in the works of Gilanian artists involves specific social frameworks and patterns that depend on how the individual and the artist define their own position. Based on Goffman's perspective, a work of art is essentially a form of social action, and the artist plays the role of a social actor.

This study, which serves as a window into the identification of the works of contemporary Gilanian artists, enables us to analyze and decode the dimensions of their art and the perspectives of these local artists. In this context, it can be argued that the accepted customs and traditions of a society, whether consciously or unconsciously, are embedded in the artist and, intentionally or unintentionally, become reflected in their works in connection with the environmental, cultural, political, and social conditions of their living space. This process allows us to uncover the artist's mental content, especially regarding social and political matters.

The purpose of this study is to identify instances of the reflection of political approaches in the works of artists from Gilan. The political stance in the artists' works represents an action wherein the artist, as an active agent and participant, presents their views, concerns, and most importantly their identity through an artistic medium in response to various societal tendencies. With a focus on the selected works of contemporary Gilanian artists, this study seeks to answer the question: According to Goffman's perspective, what are the specific instances of political approaches reflected in the works of contemporary artists from Gilan?

In this regard, a deep and reflective understanding of the prevailing culture and the interactions between society, individuals, and socially engaged art with a political approach underlines the necessity of this study.

Research Methodology

This study is fundamental in terms of its objective

and employs a qualitative content analysis approach. To identify social orientations, such as political approaches, in the works of contemporary artists was essential to analyze their content using a scientific method.

Sampling in this study was purposive. For this purpose, prominent Gilanian artists active in the field of contemporary art were purposively selected. In line with the qualitative approach, the sample size was not predetermined; rather, sampling continued during the research process until data saturation was achieved.

Following an initial review of the works of Gilanian artists who displayed political orientations in their visual art, 13 artists were identified. From among their works, only those that clearly represented examples aligned with Erving Goffman's theory of the reflection of political action were selected and presented in this paper (Table 1).

Research Background

Although no independent study has been conducted specifically on the topic of this research, several studies with similar social and political orientations can be referenced.

Khosh Naghsh & Marasy (2025), in their article titled "Identifying instances of visual patterns of gender representations in plastic artworks of Gilani contemporary artists", identified examples of the reflection of feminist approaches as a form of social orientation in the works of Gilanian artists. Their findings show that various patterns such as ritualized submission, relative size, hierarchical positioning, symbolic space, and more are recognizable in the studied works.

Pahlevan Noudeh & Taghavi (2020), in their article titled "Missing discourses in the Green Remembrance collection of Ghasem Hajizadeh by emphasizing on the analytical approach of Fairclough", demonstrated that artistic works function as a language, systems of concepts and thoughts inspired by society, discourse, and prevailing ideology. Using Norman Fairclough's critical approach, they analyzed the prominent lexical relationships in the visual works of Hajizadeh's "Green Memory" collection.

Table 1. Names of selected contemporary Gilanian artists in the study.
Source: Authors.

	Selected Gilanian Artists	Number of Works
1	Bahman Mohasse	61 works
2	Ghasem Haji Zadeh	42 works
3	Parviz Habibpour	20 works
4	Samad Hassani	11 works
5	Siavash Zolfaghari Pour	15 works
6	Mohammadreza Barzehgar	10 works
7	Mahnaz Pasikhani	55 works
8	Sepideh Faramarzi	8 works
9	Shahin Arvin	5 works
10	Alireza Tayari	17 works
11	Sedigheh Ashna	6 works
12	Nasibe Sadeghnejad	9 works
13	Amina Kafi	7 works
	Total number of works examined by selected artists with a political approach	266 works

Mohajeri (2016), in his thesis “The Impact of Social and Cultural Events on Contemporary Iranian Painting (90s-2000s) Practical Project: my existence in society”, adopted a reflection-based approach to investigate the social and political contexts, artistic relations, and the painters’ reactions. He concluded that the main content of the artworks includes a wide range of themes, from political and social issues to personal, cultural, and identity experiences.

Ravadarad & Heiranpo (2013), in their article “The changes of the reflections on the Iranian war cinema”, illustrated how the representation of war in cinema evolved from showcasing the bravery of fighters during the 1980s to later periods. The study examined war cinema across three time frames: 1981–1988, 1988–2000, and the 2000s.

Alavi (2020), in his thesis titled “The Social and Political Approach in Ashura Poetry of the Jabal ‘Amel Region”, studied the Jabal Amil region in southern Lebanon, home to prominent poets of Ashura poetry. He showed how the poets of this region linked the events of Karbala and Ashura with the challenges and issues of the Islamic world and Lebanon.

The review of international literature revealed that although there is extensive written work on the sociology of art and political theories for interpreting and reflecting on the works of local artists in various countries, due to the localized nature of this research, no directly related international studies were found.

From reviewing domestic literature related to the current study, it is evident that most research has dealt with broad, impactful components of political approaches. However, the present study provides a novel window into understanding the works of contemporary Gilanian artists specifically through the lens of Erving Goffman’s theory. Through this lens, the study identifies political approaches and symbolic rituals of social justice, such as themes of war, peace, and prevailing sociopolitical climates, as represented in the works of both male and female artists from Gilan. This perspective allows for a deeper qualitative examination of the structure, aspects, and hidden layers of local artists’ perspectives and socially

engaged art. Ultimately, this contributes to expanding scholarly resources in the fields of contemporary art analysis, social thought, foresight, artistic practice, and understanding the contextual and methodological factors shaping the works of local artists.

Theoretical Foundations

• Contemporary art

The contemporary artist is essentially an agent who oscillates between intense emotional actions, detachment, and shifting sentiments. Therefore, in the current era, an artist can participate in various forms of social action and chaos, demonstrate sensitivity towards them, and engage in artistic practice. The creativity and identity of a contemporary artist are influenced by and intertwined with socio-historical and political conditions. In Iran, following 1991 (1370 SH), a new generation of young artists emerged, leading to a sudden and widespread inclination toward traditional and indigenous expressions. The fifth generation of Iranian artists, in particular, has exhibited a strong interest in cultural, traditional, and local identities, consistently producing artworks with distinct social and critical characteristics. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that a significant portion of contemporary Iranian artists still belong to the neutralist art movement (Kashmirshkan, 2009, 28).

Contemporary art is concerned with creating works that can engage with a broader audience. This concern is expressed in various ways, by linking personal and private lives to artistic processes and eventually blending traditional concerns with contemporary interpretations (Esmaili & Hassanvand, 2018, 22). This study aims to identify and explore the social sensitivities of contemporary artists from Gilan Province by examining their social approaches. These are artists who have reflected the concerns of contemporary art in their work and have created pieces that, using modern media tools, can reach wider audiences. Due to the social and political concerns embedded in their artworks—which align with Erving Goffman’s theory of political performance and reflection—these artists have been chosen as the focal point of this study.

• Social approaches in artistic works

Different social relationships and approaches are closely tied to the artistic output of a society. Utilizing the perspective of Erving Goffman¹, a Canadian sociologist, one can identify the actions of local individuals as they appear on the “social stage” and thereby gain access to human social capital. Goffman explored how society compels individuals to present specific images of themselves. This is particularly relevant for artists, who are often forced to navigate and oscillate among multiple complex roles, rendering them, at times, unreliable, contradictory, and even socially vulnerable (Ritzer, 2008, 95). Symbols play a vital role in social and political approaches because social life is interpreted through these symbols. Goffman’s approach emphasizes the nature of the individual in society and the relationships between individual perception, collective action, and society (Annells, 1996). According to Goffman’s framework, meaningful social action emerges from face-to-face interactions. Based on this sociological view, artists sometimes are compelled to enter particular social environments and must strive to thrive within them. The characters or identities depicted in artistic works, especially within social and political frameworks, sometimes lose control on the social stage, revealing their fractured identities.

Ultimately, it can be understood that the set of accepted behaviors within a society becomes imprinted in the artist’s mind and, either intentionally or unintentionally, is reflected in their work. This study specifically explores themes related to political approaches as a subset of the broader category of social approaches.

• Political action and approach in artistic production

Political action, at its core, refers to the conscious and strategic involvement of a political subject or entity in a specific or unique political situation (Haffman, 2007, 150). In other words, political action, whether in support of or in resistance to a political issue or reality, has a purposeful nature. It manifests as a reflection of political reality and truth. Political action also involves “patterns” and “strategies” aimed

either at supporting or opposing a specific political situation or change (Fig. 1). Addressing human beings and their interpersonal relationships marks the emergence of political theories and approaches. Before focusing on the nature of governance or the dynamics between the state and society, political approaches are fundamentally concerned with the human being, their status, and dignity within the political community (Barker, 1918, 60–62).

The reflection of a political approach emerges as the outcome of an individual’s political agency within the context of political reality and truth. Through political action, the subject actively intervenes in and transforms political reality. This transformation, in turn, becomes the basis for the emergence of a political approach. Political action is, therefore, inherently the product of political subjectivity. In other words, the political subject engages in political action to either stabilize or transform political reality and to shape or reinterpret the discourses that define and organize that reality.

In the case of contemporary artists, the focus here is on their more explicit forms of social engagement. Since art, by its nature, is embedded within the social fabric, it inherently assumes a social role. Regardless of the artist’s intentions, art functions as a social element, constantly interacting with other societal components. From this perspective, the political subject refers to agents and actors, namely, those contemporary artists, who, influenced by their social conditions, produce critical, social, and political works. Through their

creations, these artists traverse the realm of politics and actively engage with social, traditional, and local issues.

It is worth noting that in this study, the selected works of Gilanian artists have been considered based on their engagement with political and social themes, and have been chosen relatively according to their relevance.

• **The reflection approach in the sociology of art**

The reflection approach is founded on the idea that art reflects social realities and can deepen our understanding of society. As one of the dominant methods in the sociology of art, this perspective regards artistic and literary works as social documents that reveal the conditions, ideas, and structures of a given society. Within this framework, art not only presents an image of society but is also influenced by a variety of social factors, which affect the process of production and creation, whether directly impacting the content or not (Wolff, 1988, 54; Alexander, 2013, 55).

• **Political Action in the Sociology of Art from Goffman’s Perspective**

Erving Goffman (1922–1982), a Canadian sociologist, explored identity management in social interactions through his theory of symbolic interactionism. He argued that individuals adopt specific roles in different social contexts in order to present a certain image of themselves. These social performances help individuals establish a defined position in society and manage their interactions (Ritzer, 2008). Goffman is particularly renowned for his theories

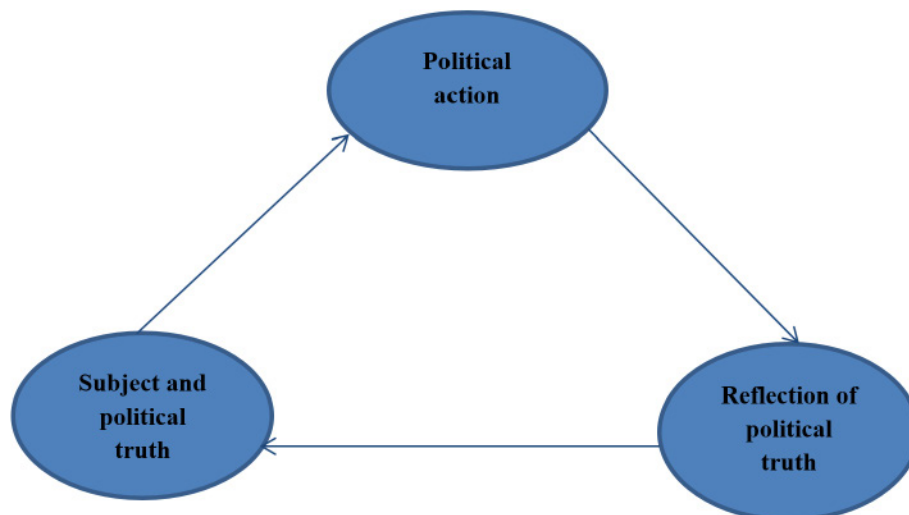


Fig. 1. Diagram of the interrelationship between the reflection of political truth and political action. Source: Authors.

on social interaction and performance. Regarding political action in the sociology of art, he analyzed how identities and roles are performed within social spaces. His focus lies more on the symbolic and indirect dimensions of social action, using the concepts of “performance” and “social scripts” to analyze both politics and art. In Goffman’s analysis of “social performance,” he emphasized that people play roles in everyday interactions and that these performances are shaped by the social, political, and cultural structures of the time. From this perspective, art becomes a symbolic and cultural space through which these roles and identities are expressed and displayed. According to Goffman, political action can be symbolically and indirectly portrayed through art. Artists, as “performers” in society, use their creative works to critique or reflect upon structures of power, social identities, and public policies. Artistic works can serve as tools of resistance or protest against dominant policies, and social inequalities, or even as expressions of power and influence. Political action in art may emerge in four main patterns:

1. The construction and representation of political identities;
2. Social control and impact management;
3. Power and inequality in both the front stage and backstage of social life;
4. The representation of personal and collective experiences through artistic expression.

Research Findings

Based on the conducted analyses, the findings of this study indicate that the works of contemporary artists from Gilan can be identified and classified according to Goffman’s fourfold model of political action. In this section of the research, selected works by contemporary Gilanian artists are recognized as instances of political agency and are organized into separate tables based on Goffman’s four categories of political action.

• Analysis of the political actions of Gilanian artists based on Goffman’s perspective

- The pattern of constructing and performing political identities

Wars serve as arenas for the performance of political and

national identities. According to Goffman’s perspective, one can analyze how governments and various political groups utilize art (e.g., films, paintings, poems) to construct and solidify national and political identities. Politicians, in an effort to garner public support and shape their political identity, engage in social role-playing—through speeches, media appearances, and symbolic behavior. These performances enable them to project favorable images of themselves and establish a defined social position (Goffman, 2012, 6–9). In times of war or crisis, states and political entities employ art and media to construct heroes and mythologize figures that reinforce national identity. As illustrated in Table 1, selected works by contemporary Gilanian artists often depict Mirza Kuchak Khan Jangali as a local hero and mythic symbol of political and national identity across different decades (Table 2).

- The pattern of social control and impression management




Goffman introduces the concept of “impression management,” which refers to how individuals control others’ perceptions of them. He further explores how, during times of war, individuals and groups use artistic performances to influence or reinforce public opinion. Art becomes a tool of resistance against wars and unjust political regimes. In particular, during wartime, artistic expressions serve as platforms for protesting against violence, authoritarianism, and the abuse of power. In political contexts, this form of impression management manifests in efforts by politicians to control public opinion and portray themselves positively. In authoritarian regimes, this management is more pronounced, with political and social tools employed to restrict individual freedoms, suppress dissent, and manipulate the identities of oppressed groups (Goffman, 1959, 22–25). As shown in Table 2, selected works by contemporary Gilanian artists function as acts of protest and resistance, reflecting social dissatisfaction and giving voice to marginalized groups during times of war (Table 3).




- The pattern of power and inequality on the front stage and back stage

A key concept in Goffman’s theory is the distinction

Table 2. Instances of the reflection of political and national identity construction and display patterns in the works of contemporary Gilanian artists. Source: Authors.

Rest of Table 2.

Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
1 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Samad Hassani, Mirza Kuchak Khan, Mixed Media, 2016. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
2 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Nasibe Sadeghnejad, Portrait of Mirza, Acrylic on Canvas, 2018. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
3 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Shahin Arvin, Portrait of Mirza Kuchak Khan, Watercolor on Cardboard, 2016. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
4 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Amina Kafi, Mirza Kuchak Khan, Mixed Media, 2019. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
5 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Ghasem Hajizadeh, Mirza Kuchak and Companions, Gouache and Acrylic, 1979. Source: «Yad-e Sabz» Collection, 1992.</p>
6 Hero-Making and Legendary Figures of Gilan	 <p>Mohammadreza Barzehgar, Beheaded Mirza Resembling Christ, Acrylic, 2018. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

between the front stage, where social and political performances are publicly enacted, and the backstage, the private space where preparations for these performances occur. From this viewpoint, one can analyze how power relations are staged during wars: how powerful entities present themselves through art and media, and how the affected and marginalized groups may respond through artistic expression.

In the political realm, this distinction also explains the contrast between the public personas of politicians and their behind-the-scenes activities. Governments and dominant political groups use media and art to project authority and influence, while marginalized groups use these same tools to express protest, expose social inequalities, and resist oppression (*ibid.*, 25–30).

As illustrated in Table 3, selected works by contemporary Gilanian artists act as channels of resistance against tyranny, reflecting injustice and socio-political inequality (Table 4).

- Art as a reflection of personal and collective experiences

Goffman emphasizes the importance of both individual and collective experiences in shaping social performances and identities. Art is capable of depicting emotions and social experiences—particularly political ones such as war, post-war crises, suppression, fear, and hope. During war, artists may portray themes of suffering, fear, loss, and the longing for life through their creations.

From Goffman's perspective, political actions in the sociology of art—especially in wartime—can be interpreted symbolically through visual and performative arts. Art not only serves as a medium for resistance, critique, and protest, but also as a tool for displaying power relations, collective identities, and even propaganda within societies under pressure (Goffman, 2016, 11–20).

As shown in Table 4, selected works by contemporary Gilanian artists not only reflect socio-political conditions but also function as mechanisms for expressing power relations and shaping political and social identities (Table 5).

Conclusion

Political action encompasses a wide range of activities aimed at influencing social, economic, or governmental policies. These actions can take place individually or collectively, peacefully or violently, and at various levels (local, national, or international). They utilize tools such as elections, protests, diplomacy, political criticism, and the defense of human rights to achieve their objectives. According to Erving Goffman's perspective, previously mentioned, the works created by artists, acting as active agents influenced by societal conditions, are considered a form of social action. In this context, it can be explained that the selected contemporary Gilanian artists in this research have engaged with society as active agents, creating works with a political approach under the influence of existing social actions. It can thus be concluded that contemporary Gilanian artists have long played the role of a political actor in many of their works, addressing their concerns and those of their audience during each historical period, as a reaction and protest against the political conditions of their time. This serves as a form of symbolic interaction. For identifying instances of Goffman's political patterns, a total of 266 works were identified from the works of 13 selected artists with a political approach, which were analyzed in the present study. The selected artistic works reflect political themes and collective and individual unifying experiences such as citizenship, virtue and ethics, politics and political matters, political subjectivity, justice-seeking, the fight against poverty and social inequality, worker solidarity, the conflict between social responsibility and individual rights, resistance to tyranny and injustice, the image of the alienated self in consumer society, the fight against oppression, Western antagonism, war themes, sacrifice and martyrdom, political propaganda and games, political prisoners, revolutionary and political action, prolonged struggles for religious and justice-driven ideals, warfare and the pursuit of power, ideological images, injustice and violation of rights, fear, displacement, helplessness, victimization and the innocence of marginalized groups, and other forms of individual, social, and global violence, all of

Table 3. Instances of the reflection of the social control and impact management pattern in the works of contemporary Gilanian artists. Source: Authors.

Rest of Table 3.

Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
1 Innocence and Oppression	 <p>Alireza Tayari, No to War, Mixed Media, 2022. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
2 Oppression and Displacement of the Vulnerable	 <p>Mahnaz Pasikhani, Arab Spring, Acrylic on Canvas, 2011. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
3 Innocence and Oppression	 <p>Mohammadreza Barzegar, Child of Gaza, Acrylic, 2017. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>







Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
4 Displacement and Lack of Support for the Vulnerable	 <p>Siavash Zolfagharpour, No to Child Abandonment, Mixed Media, 2019. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
5 Displacement and Orphanhood	 <p>Sedigheh Ashna, Displaced Children, Mixed Media, 2015. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
6 Resistance Against Oppressive Policies	 <p>Parviz Habibpour, Parade, Oil on Canvas, 2016. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

Table 4. Instances of the reflection of the power and inequality pattern in the works of contemporary Gilanian artists. Source: Authors.

Rest of Table 4.

Row	Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
1	Political Propaganda	 <p>Sepideh Faramarzi, Expired, Mixed Media, 2020. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
2	War and Peace	 <p>Sepideh Faramarzi, War and Peace, Mixed Media, 2020. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
3	Militarism and Suppression	 <p>Siavash Zolfagharpour, Power Seeking, Mixed Media, 2022. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>





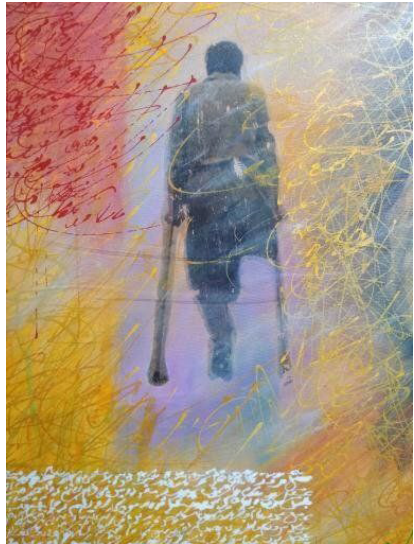

Row	Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
4	Militarism and Power Seeking	 <p>Parviz Habibpour, Generals and Their Shields, Gouache on Cardboard, 1999. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
5	Militarism and Suppression/ Fear	 <p>Bahman Mohasses, Wounded Minotaur, Oil on Canvas, 1996. Source: Artist's personal archive</p>
6	War and Peace	 <p>Ghasem Hajizadeh, Agreement, Mixed Media on Cardboard, 1996. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

Table 5. Instances of the reflection of the individual and collective experience patterns in the works of contemporary Gilanian artists. Source: Authors.

Rest of Table 5.

Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
1 Sacrifice and Selflessness	 <p>Sediqeh Ashna, Soldier of the Homeland and Waiting, Oil Painting, 2015. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
2 Martyrdom and Sacrifice	 <p>Siavash Zolfagharpour, When the Curtain Falls, Acrylic and Printmaking, 2020. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
3 Political Prisoner	 <p>Mohammadreza Barzegari, Guantanamo, Acrylic on Canvas, 2020. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

Row Index	Works of Contemporary Gilanian Artists
4 Injustice and Oppression	 <p>Parviz Habibpour, Orphan Supporters, Marker on Cardboard, 2007. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
5 Fear and Helplessness	 <p>Mahnaz Pasikhani, Arab Spring, Acrylic on Canvas, 2011. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>
6 Injustice and Fear	 <p>Alireza Tayari, No to War, Mixed Media, 2022. Source: Artist's personal archive.</p>

which emphasize the outcomes of post-war conditions. Finally, hero worship and legendary figures such as Mirza Kuchak Khan Jangali appear in the majority of the works created by contemporary Gilanian artists, representing the artist-citizen, reflecting the reactions and protests to the political conditions of their time.

Suggestions For Future Research

Attention to comparative studies between the artworks of artists from different regions, focusing on the political approach of each area based on the reflectionist approach, could be an important direction for future art research.

Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

Endnotes

1. Erving Goffman is a rationalist sociologist and a renowned scholar of the Chicago School.

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