

ART

Farhad Ahrarnia Fuses High And Low Art At Lawrie Shabibi



Farhad Ahrarnia. *Something For the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You*, No.17. 2015. Work on cardboard

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The Iranian artist's exhibition mixes his ongoing Khatam series with a new series that elevates the humble cardboard box with gilded illuminations

Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You, Farhad Ahrarnia's second solo exhibition at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai, takes its playful name from the poem of the non-conformist Charles Bukowski.

This is an exhibition of two apparently contrasting halves. First, the refined *Khatam* with their intricate patterns formed of precious materials and then Ahrarnia's new series of reused cardboard boxes, stamped with Made in Iran logos. Yet, on closer inspection, these apparently worthless pieces of cardboard, which once contained everyday, locally-manufactured products such as kerosene lamps and hair spray, are embellished with delicate passages of *Tazhib* or gilding, a traditional technique of drawing patterns. Through such contrasting detail, Ahrarnia intends to "raise their significance and cultural value, turning them into critical and self-referential art."



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of 'Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You' . Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

They are a commentary on the contrasts of contemporary Iran; a modern industrial society that still clings steadfastly to its rich cultural history. Through these pieces, Ahrarnia puts his own spin on Bukowski's Dickensian way of exploring the "We have everything and we have nothing" paradox, a comment on the societal chasm that exists in Iranian society. Imbued with literary and artistic subtext, this series also takes a cue from the cardboard-based 1970s works of US artist Robert Rauschenberg.

Seemingly in contrast, yet sharing many of the same traditional Iranian motifs, are new pieces from Ahrarnia's ongoing *Khatam* series. For these creations, Ahrarnia explores the more lavish, "high art" side of Iran's cultural history, employing the micro-mosaic technique of *Khatam*, using materials such as ivory, camel bone, wood, copper, silver and brass to create jewel-like, geometric patterns.



Farhad Ahrarnia, The Tomb of Charles Baudelaire [After Max Bill]. 2016. Khatam (Persian micro-mosaic). Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

Although Ahrarnia is now largely based in the UK city of Sheffield, he remains strongly influenced by the traditions of his hometown Shiraz. Craft is the heart of Ahrarnia's creations and both collections here use age-old Iranian techniques, fused with more modern geometric and abstract elements. Some particularly bear the influence of early 20th century Russian Constructivist art, reflecting the artist's admiration of the Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich in the strong geometry of their composition.

Through these works, Ahrarnia seems to say that, despite industrialisation, tradition still provides the unifying force behind Iranian society.

Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You runs until 2 March at Lawrie Shabibi. For more information, visit Lawrieshabibi.com