



Artists offer alternative views of Iranian culture in a new group exhibition

By Rhiannon Russell, CNN

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COURTESY: SHIRIN ALIABADI/SHIRIN FOUNDATION

Photos: Artists offer alternative views of Iran

"Miss Hybrid 3" (2008) by Shirin Aliabadi – Tehran-based artist Shirin Aliabadi "Miss Hybrid" series features scarved women with colored contacts, peroxide wigs and bandaged noses (a hint at recent plastic surgery) is a commentary on the globalization of beauty standards and the ruthless quest for female perfection.

Toronto, Canada (CNN) One piece shows a woman wearing a loosely tied hijab, her peroxide-blond hair hanging in front. She has blue contact lenses and blows a large pink bubble with her gum. Another features 32 stacked Persian carpets, each with a cutout in the shape of a fighter jet.

Both works -- along with 25 others -- are on display at Toronto's Aga Khan Museum as part of ["Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians,"](#) a new exhibition of Iranian art.

Each piece is distinctive, crafted using a range of media, from video to paint to photography. Some are political, some aren't. This diversity is the beauty of how the exhibition was curated, says Mohammed Afkhami, the Iranian financier and philanthropist who provided the works from his private collection of more than 300 pieces of post-revolution Iranian art.

"It's hard not to find a work that either resonates with you or, at least at the very minimum, you aesthetically like," he says. "There's something there for everybody."

The exhibition is meant to offer an alternative to what's typically shown in news coverage of Iran and the Middle East as a whole.

"When you turn on the news, it's like, from Syria to Iraq to Libya, those places are all in turmoil," he says. "So that's what people think of the whole region ... When people say, 'Oh, Iranians make art?' it means (Iranians are) compassionate people; they're people who have sensitivity, feelings, a sense of perspective. That's something that you don't see that much because, unfortunately, the media does not show that positive narrative."

Divided by politics

Given the current political climate, it seems especially poignant that this collection is touring internationally. Yet the timing is purely coincidental. Afkhami was in talks with the Aga Khan Museum long before President Donald Trump was elected, and long before Trump signed his [executive order](#) banning citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, from entering the US.

(This summer, the exhibition will travel to a "major, major US institution," Afkhami says.)

Afkhami believes the collection will help to confront and change the stereotypes North Americans hold about Iranian people.

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"I think this kind of divisive, hateful temperament that exists in the world today really needs an opposite narrative," he says.

"I don't think that anything will be achieved by creating division between people. When you're in a world like we are today, where everything is being turned upside down, you have to look for positive commonalities rather than negative differences. My hope is that when people see this show, regardless of their creed or their background, they relate to the art on a human level."

An artist's perspective

One featured artist, New York-based Shahpour Pouyan, did not make the show's opening on Feb. 4. He was concerned that, because of Trump's order, he wouldn't be able to return to the United States afterward.

"It wasn't a new feeling for me," he says. "When you have an Iranian passport, it's the toughest thing to travel around the world."

He estimates that he's missed about 70% of his international shows throughout his career because he's had difficulty getting a visa.

"I've always had a problem with going somewhere, because I wasn't sure if I could get to that country," says Pouyan. "This time, it's different because now I live here, but my problem now is coming back here."

Pouyan has two works on display in "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet." One, entitled "Unthinkable Thought" (2014), is a series of ceramic domes modeled on various

architectural structures in Europe -- such as the Pantheon in Rome -- and the Middle East -- like Iran's Shah Mosque.

"I use the dome as a symbol of the way that we celebrate our power," he says. "As we see, it is practiced everywhere in the world."

Pouyan's second piece is an iron-and-steel sculpture titled "Projectile 11," which is part of a larger series. He worked with traditional metalsmiths and craftsmen, incorporating antique-style helmets and armor to form modern projectile missiles.

In his eyes, if a work of art makes you think, or makes you feel uncomfortable or confused, that's a good thing.

"The only thing that I really hope is that people are listening and trying to just make a connection, and (aren't) afraid of something that they don't understand, because art is hard to understand," he says of the collection. "The best thing is to just be open."

["Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians"](#) is on at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto until June 4, 2017. The [accompanying book](#), published by Black Dog Published, is out now.