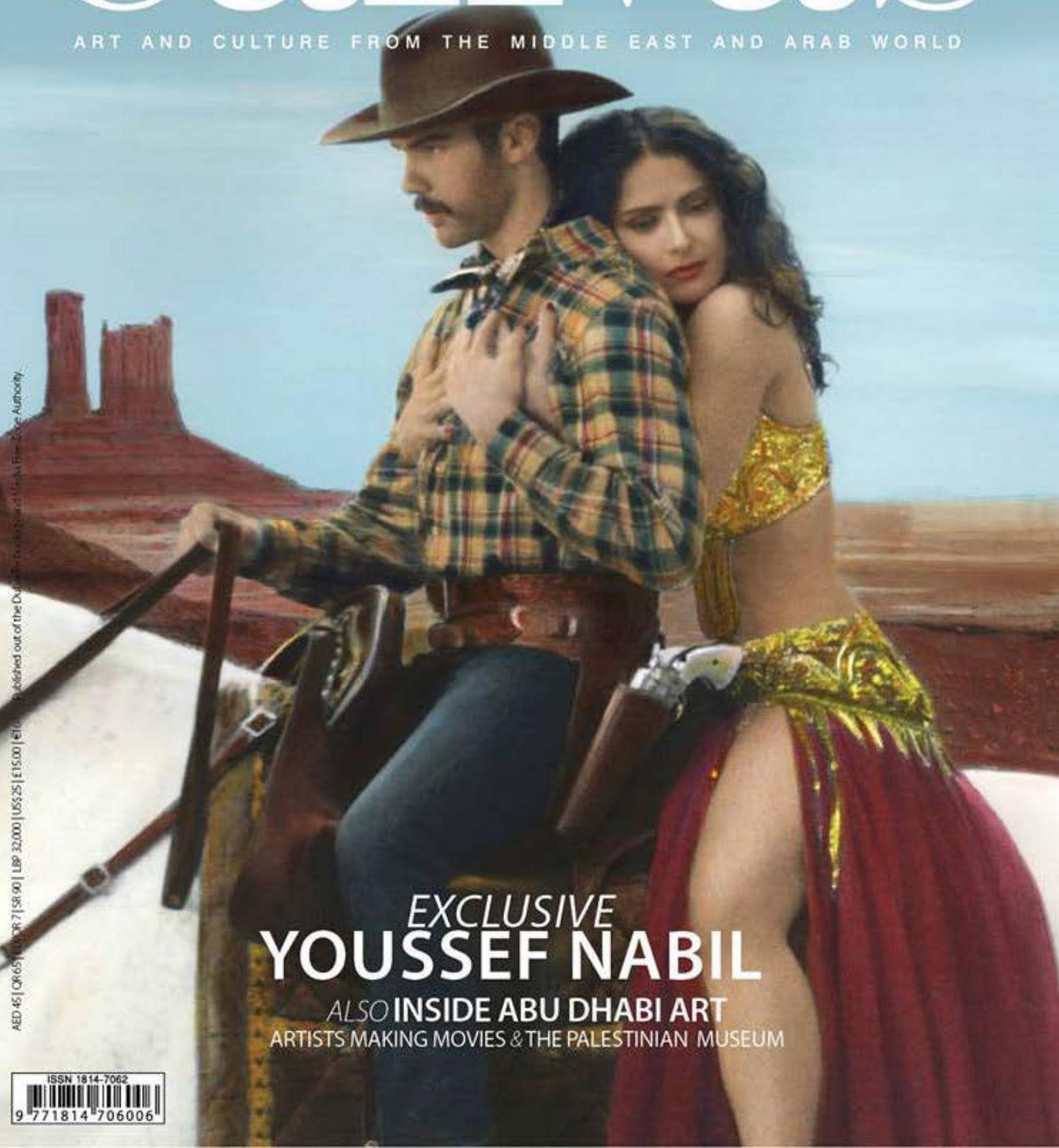


Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



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ARTISTS MAKING MOVIES & THE PALESTINIAN MUSEUM

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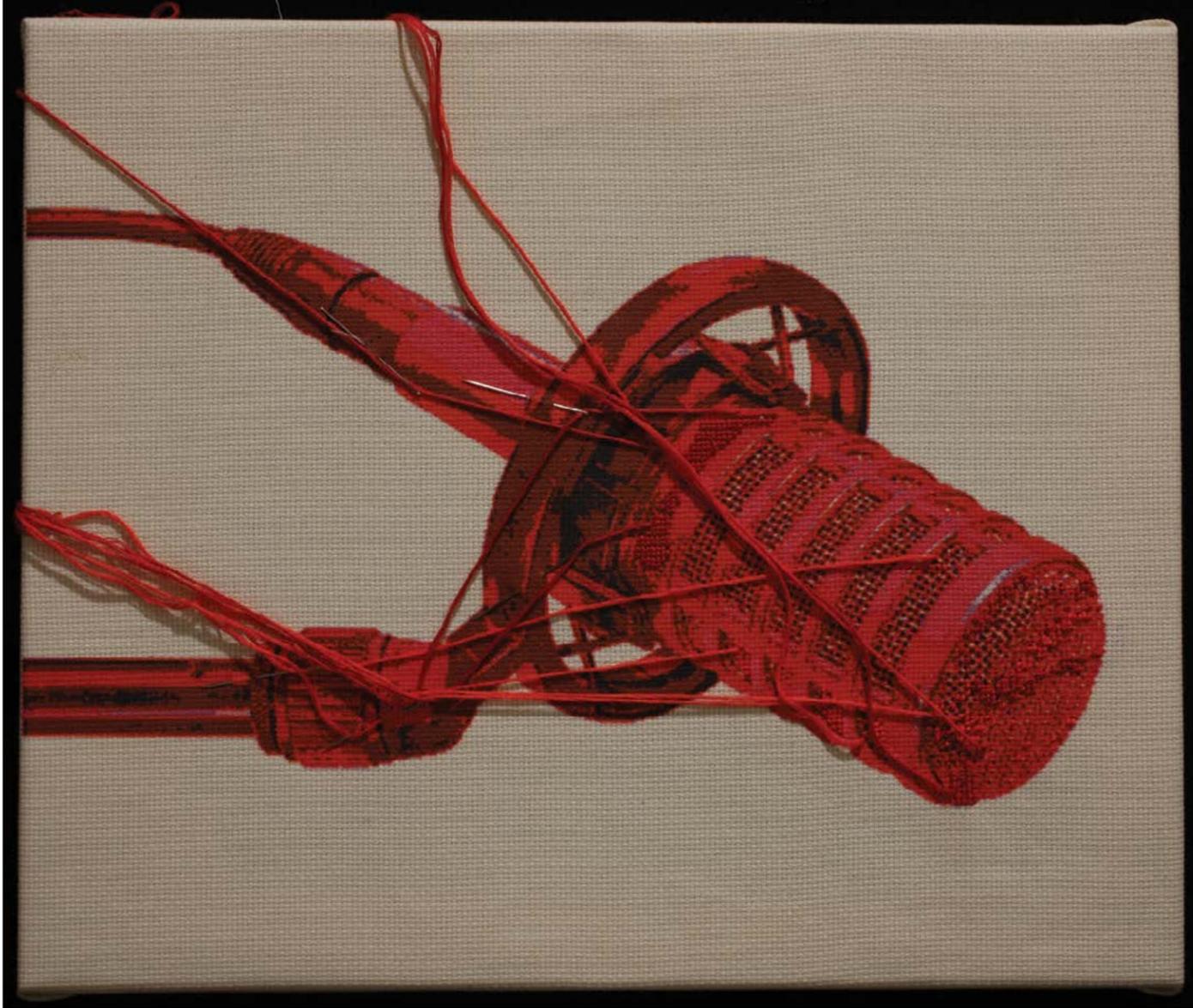


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SHIRAZ
THE MUSE

FARHAD AHRARNIA



“With photography there is room for contemplation. Time slows down, and then with embroidery, it slows down again.”

Ahrarnia, sent away to safety, alone, to a school in the UK at the age of 14. Young sensibilities already attuned to the invisible seams of history were made aware of seams of geography: Ahrarnia is an artist with an acute sense of the boundaries present in both his personal life and the world that surrounds him. He has decided to break through these invisible – yet ever present – lines with a needle and some thread.

In the 1990s Ahrarnia studied filmmaking in Sheffield, a once industrial town in the north of England where he now lives for half of the year. He has made four short films, but he sees his medium elsewhere, in an intriguing combination

of photography and embroidery. “I found photography more engaging; the way you can lose yourself in a single frame. Film falls into the trap of telling a narrative story. With photography there is room for contemplation. Time slows down, and then with embroidery, it slows down again.” Indeed, single frames constitute the core of his practice, especially in portraits, where he embroiders simple stitches over the images.

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A PUN

Ahrarnia's first series was a response to the riots in the city of Bradford in 2001, where British ultra-nationalist groups clashed with the city's large

I Farhad Ahrarnia weaves politics and history together; inverting the gaze to make us question what it is we think we know about any one person or event. He does all this both metaphorically, and very literally – with needle and thread. **Haleh Anvari** speaks with the artist in his childhood home in Shiraz.

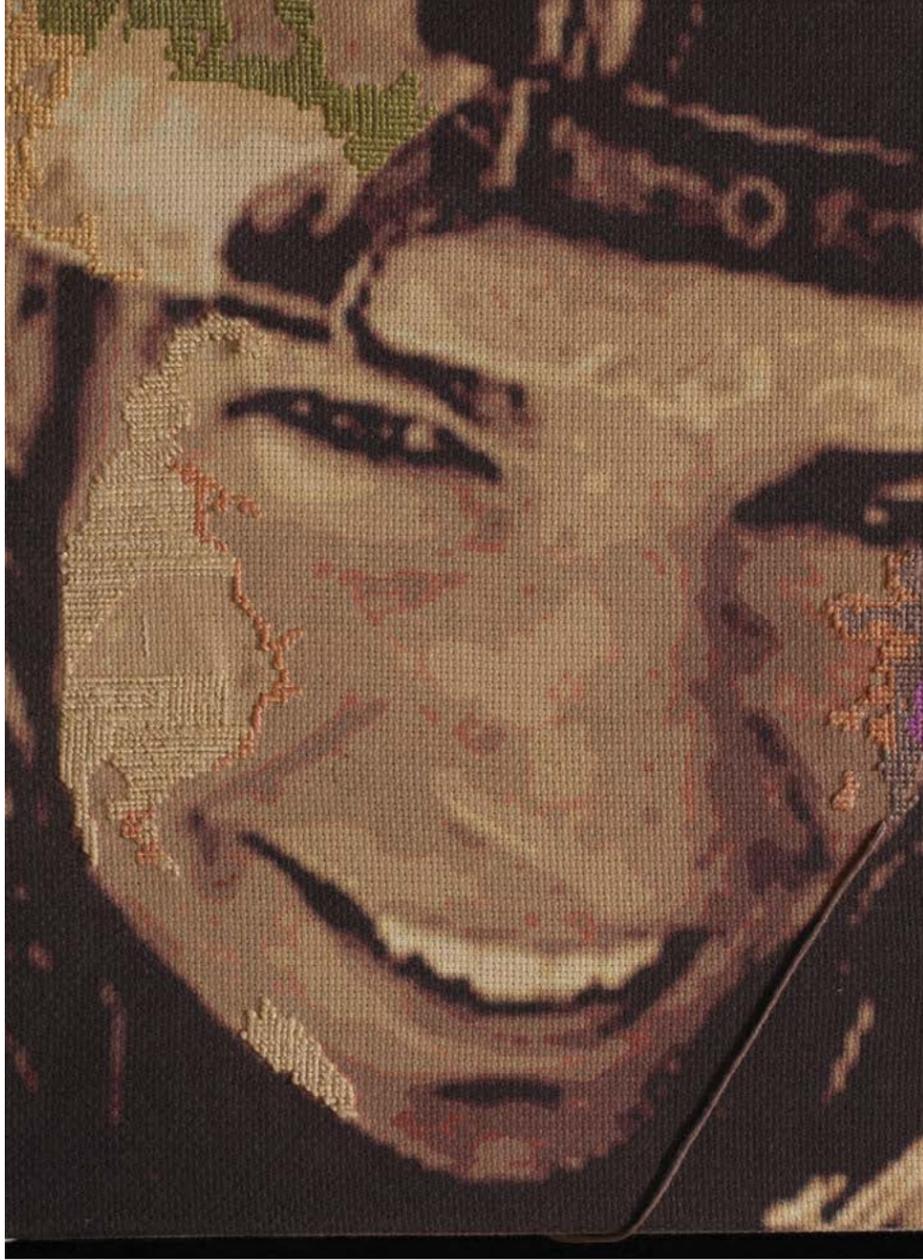
find Farhad Ahrarnia in a garden shaded from the heat of late summer by a plethora of fruit trees and overhanging vines. The house where he spent his childhood is on the edge of Shiraz, a historically and culturally significant city in the southwest of Iran. Here, two contradictory spirits of Iran meet. On the one hand are the nearby ruins of the palace of Persepolis, the symbolic seat of the Persian Empire with its temporal preoccupations, and on the other, the tombs of Hafez and Saadi, the two poets who have provided the spiritual and moral compass for generations of Iranians.

In the contemporary era the city was also the site of one of the country's boldest experiments with Modernism before the Islamic Revolution. In 1971, the year of Ahrarnia's birth, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was at the height of his power and his programmes of modernisation seemed unstoppable. His wife, Farah Diba, was the patron of the Shiraz Art Festival, an ambitious annual event without precedent in the region, which turned the city into a stage for the world's cutting-edge artists. Maurice Béjart famously created and performed a special ballet against the backdrop of the ruins of Persepolis. However, before Ahrarnia had reached his teens the revolution would shake the country to its core, and the avant-garde Shiraz Festival would be used as a major point for recanting the rule of the Shah as decadent. A war would then begin with neighbouring Iraq that would seal the fate of the young

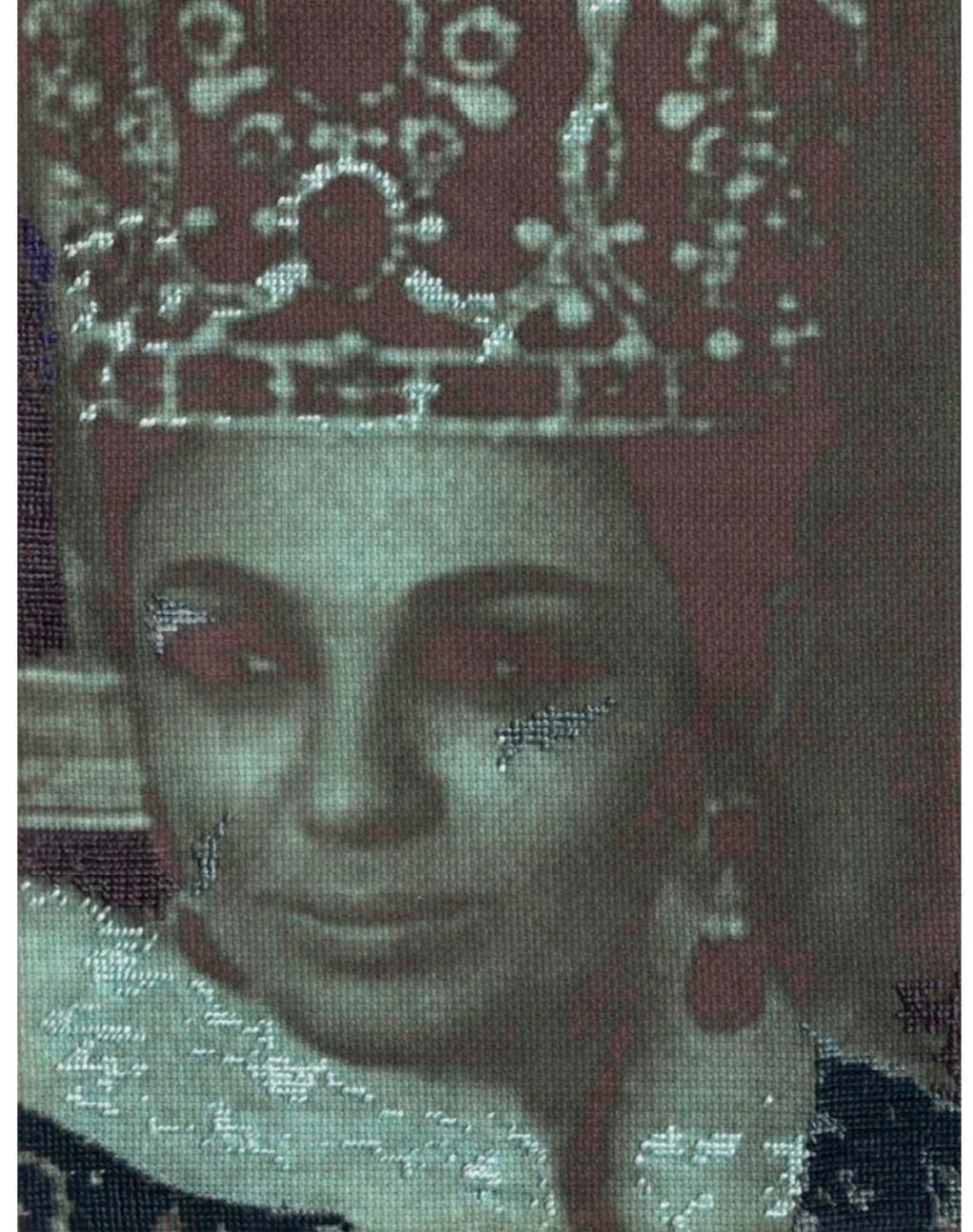
Opening pages: *Beautiful is the Silence of Ruins No 4*. 2011. Embroidery and needles on canvas. 99 x 132 cm.

Facing page: *Microphone, The Roots of A Scream*. 2008. Hand embroidery, digital print on cotton aida, thread and needles. 36 x 30 cm.

Above: (Left) *Silver Dustpan - Composition I*. 2010. Silver-plated copper. 36 x 23 x 3 cm; (Right) *The Dig - Composition V*. 2011. Silver-plated copper. 42 x 27 x 3 cm.



“I like the small truths that artists can unearth by taking ideas and situations out of their accepted context.”



Asian community. The ensuing surveillance camera images of the ‘wanted’ rioters – issued by the local police – were predominantly of young Asian men. Ahrarnia was drawn to their marginal fate. “They were disenfranchised and stuck between the white power structure of Britain and their own conservative parental culture and its controls,” he says.

He printed these CCTV images onto cotton aida, an open weave fabric used for cross-stitched embroidery, and began stitching onto the printed faces. He admits that he was spurred on by an obvious pun in English where being ‘stitched up’ means being wrongfully convicted. He created a stir with an accompanying video of a policeman in uniform, whose hand stitched the embroidery over the faces of the young men. Ahrarnia felt that by printing surveillance images on fabric and then embroidering them, he could separate the

subjects from the dominating power structure and bring them into the domestic sphere.

Ahrarnia had already been collecting fabric and embroidery around Sheffield for years. He traces back his interest in the craft to his early teens and the Iran–Iraq war in 1980. His family was not big on TV; listening to the radio instead, his mother and aunt would busy themselves with embroidery. But it was in Britain, sitting behind a woman embroidering on a long train journey, that he became mesmerised by the movement of the needle and thread and its impact on the fabric itself. The mixture of violence and tenderness, and the focused and laborious way in which embroidery can contain emotion and frustration, enthralled him.

Fallen American soldiers in dress uniform were next in *US Soldiers* (2006–8). This was followed by a series in 2008 concentrating on

Iranian women whose lives and iconic status were ‘interrupted’, from the dethroned Her Majesty Farah Pahlavi to Googoosh the darling diva and Forough the sensual and controversial poetess. All bore the pinpricks of Ahrarnia’s needles in order to fulfill his mission to make subjects made invisible to the eye once again visible through the sense of touch.

UNAPOLOGETICALLY MODERNIST

Ahrarnia is reluctant to call his work political and prefers for the work to be judged on the merits of its form and the choice of medium. “I like the small truths that artists can unearth by taking ideas and situations out of their accepted context,” he says. He is a modernist at heart and cites amongst his influences that master of cinematic montage Sergei Eisenstein, and the founder of the Suprematist movement Kazimir Malevich. Influences of both conflate in his later pieces, where randomly shaped stitching becomes geometric, with brightly coloured thread running across two images that are unconnected.

This is evident in his 2010 series *Beautiful Is The Silence of the Ruins*, in which Hollywood stars who died young are juxtaposed with ancient architectural ruins of Iran. The stitches are no longer localised but are long taut threads connecting the two worlds like routes on a map. For Ahrarnia, these two worlds are as connected as their obvious protests to the contrary. More importantly, both are equally fragile and perishable: he is deliberately creating a seam so he can thread through a perceived disconnect.

Facing page: *US Soldier VI*, 2008. Photography on cotton aida and embroidery. 30 x 23 cm.

Above: *The Becoming*, 2007. Hand embroidery, digital print on cotton aida. 22 x 28 cm.



Above: Installation view of *Zendegi: Twelve Contemporary Iranian Artists* at the Beirut Exhibition Center. 2011.

Facing page: (Left) *The delirium of becoming: a moment caught between myth and history no. 1*. Digital print on cotton, silk, metallic and cotton thread, needles. 2015; (Right) *Double Dutch*. 2015. Digital print on polyester fabric, cotton, silk and metallic thread, needles. 37.5 x 27 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

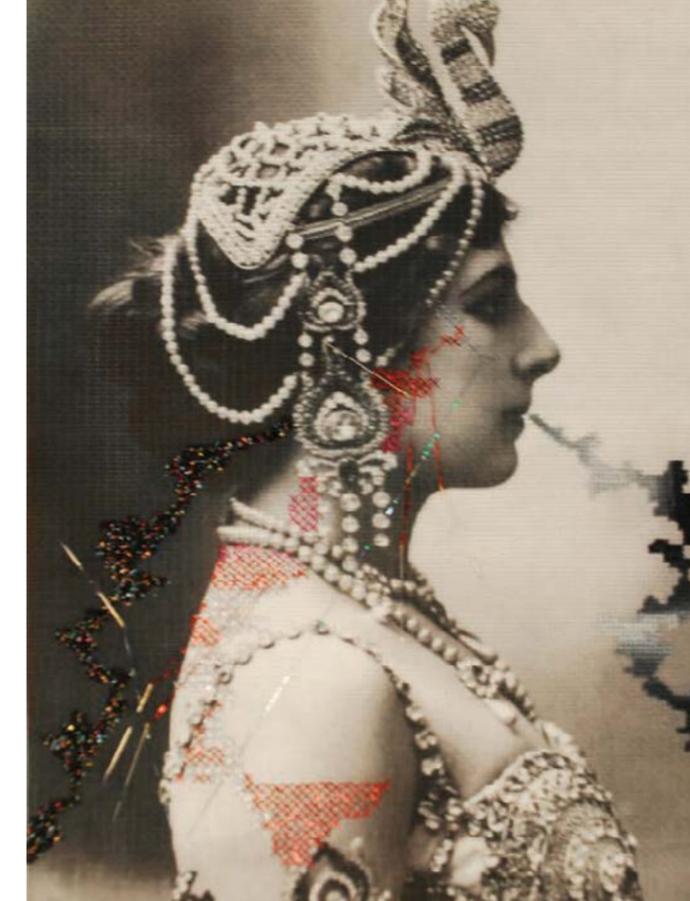
All images courtesy the artist and Rose Issa Projects, London unless otherwise specified.

THE DUSTPAN AND THE SHOVELS

The concern for the perishable and the discardable continues as a theme in Ahrarnia's dustpans and shovels. The lowly appliances are painstakingly embossed with icons from Ancient Iran and Mesopotamia before being treated with a coat of silver. He is playing again with words and phrases; 'dustbin of history' comes easily to mind. Yet he explains accidental and instinctual impulses that are far from the literal aspect of earlier works. "My father was always digging in the garden," he says. "There were always a number of shovels resting against the wall." The shovel, then, is a connection to heritage and the chance for discovery. And the dustpan? "Someone left a dustpan resting against a small window in the house. For a long time I walked past it, framed as it was, looking at the composition and the colours. Then it struck me that the pan itself could be a frame," he muses. The domestic crosses over into the monumental. The shovel as a beginning, the pan on the other hand, a warning against a demise.

RE-ORIENTED ORIENTALISM

In his studio in Shiraz, Ahrarnia is getting ready for his first solo exhibition in Dubai, with Lawrie Shabibi in November (he has had previous solo shows in London with Rose Issa). Balls of colourful thread are piled in different corners. Two large pieces are hanging from the wall, with two dancers frozen in exaggerated poses, both dressed in exotic costume. In another corner of the room, wooden artworks made of the traditional *khatam* work of Shiraz, a Persian technique of miniature marquetry, are looking anything but traditional. The intricate placing of tiny pieces of wood and bone next to each other creates geometric shapes, closely resembling the stitching in embroidery. But the old classical patterns have been disrupted to accommodate large empty squares and circles. Elsewhere the straight lines have been broken to make space for unexpected curved lines. Ahrarnia has decided to introduce this Persian craft (dating back to the Achaemenids) to his beloved Malevich; a counter-intuitive combination that brings to mind the sound of freestyle jazz, where one expects to hear the mathematical precision of a Persian classical *radif*.



Modernism and its impulses are at the centre of this show. The main body of the exhibition is inspired by Egyptomania, an Orientalist trend that gripped Europe and the USA in the 19th century and continued into the early part of the 20th. The topic has provided Ahrarnia with the perfect opportunity to bring together all that interests him, namely performance, especially dance and ballet, and the stardust of Hollywood. Add the seam of East and West and bingo, he is in his element. This is the terrain of Orientalism, but Ahrarnia is responding to it from a different angle. "Europeans used the idea of the Orient to delve further into their exploration of the principles of Modernism. The East represented a place freer in its instincts, so they referred to it in order to shake up the conservative Victorian attitudes that were the norm in the West." Ahrarnia looks for what connects not what separates and insists that "we need to overcome this 'Us' and 'Them' narrative."

On the table, a series of publicity shots from various films made about Egypt's last Pharaoh, Cleopatra, incarnated by several Hollywood stars, are treated to subtle stitching with glitter. These hark back to his portraits, but there amongst the luscious Cleos are a couple of surprise guest appearances: a young Agatha Christie, who was married to prominent archaeologist Max Mallowan, whom she joined for excavations in

Egypt. And a man, clearly European, but in Arab headdress, imitating Lawrence of Arabia. Not many people know Donald Wilber, but he was one of the main architects of the 1953 CIA coup that toppled the premiership of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, after his nationalisation of Iranian oil.

Ahrarnia's inspirations, the connections, the infatuations, the effects of us on them and them on us, move and criss-cross from one side to another of his dual sensibilities, like the underside of his own embroidered pieces. Pippa Oldfield (who curated Ahrarnia's work at the Impressions gallery in the UK in 2010) invokes the Persian phrase for looking intently to describe Ahrarnia's work, *cheshm dookhtan*, meaning literally to sew your eyes on something. He continues to create work that makes you look intently, but his inspirations are becoming less literal, and more instinctive. He has grown out of the single pun and is responding to more fluid and intuitive motivations, challenging us to unpick through the layers in order to grasp what is often politically informed, if not necessarily politically motivated. 📍

Farhad Ahrarnia's exhibition, *A Dish Fit for the Gods*, will run at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai from 16 November–14 January 2016. For more information, visit www.lawrieshabibi.com

"We need to overcome this 'Us' and 'Them' narrative."