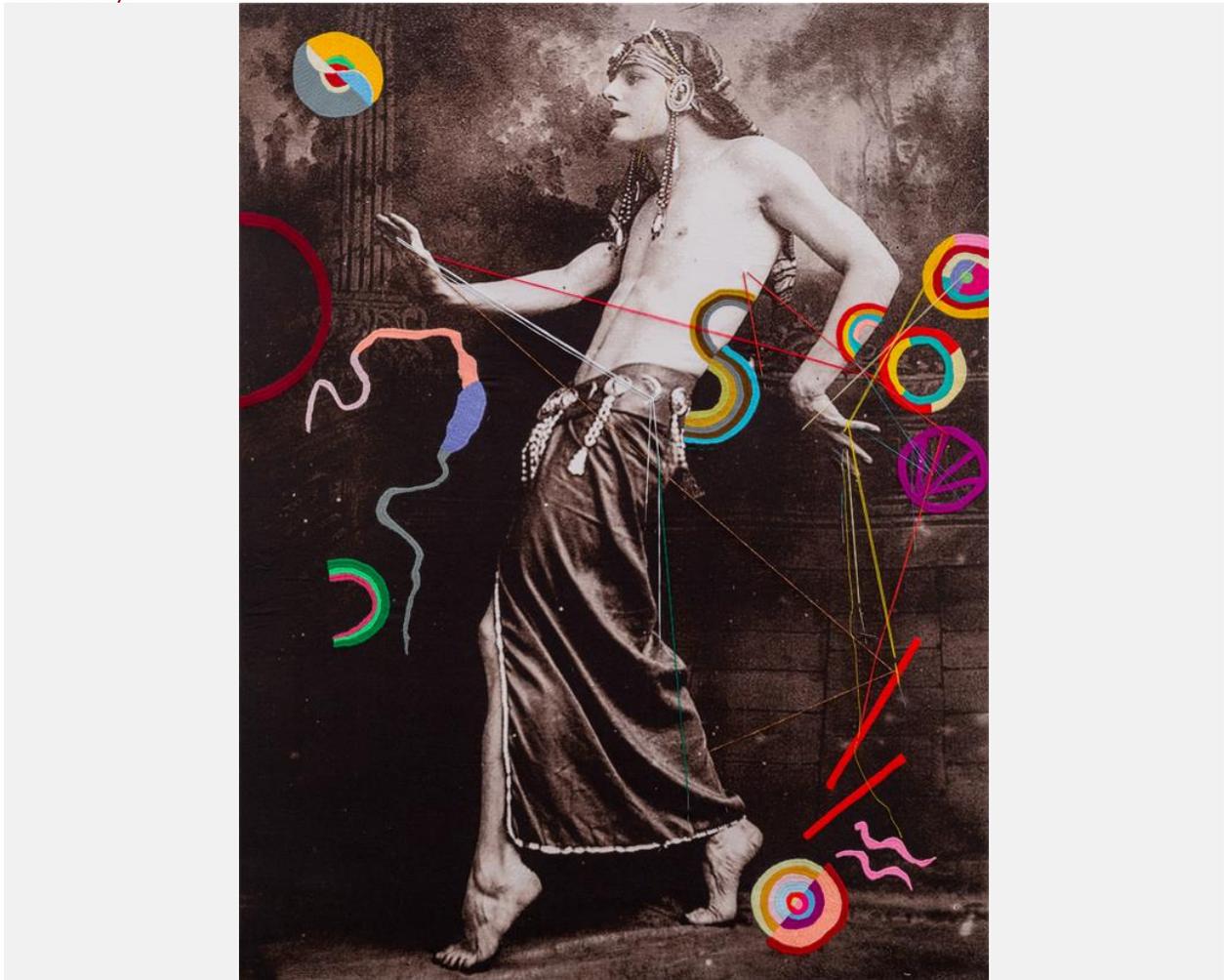


Egyptomania, orientalism and modernism: Farhad Ahrarnia at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai

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Lawrie Shabibi presents the first solo exhibition by the Iranian artist in the Middle East.

Running until 14 January 2016, "A Dish Fit for the Gods" features Farhad Ahrarnia's unique works expressing the ambivalent engagement between West and East through a combination of sculpture, painting, photography and embroidery.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Delirium of Becoming, a Moment Caught Between Myth and History, No. 1', 2015, digital print dyed onto cotton fabric, hand embroidered using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 147.5 x 113 x 2 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

"A Dish Fit For the Gods" at **Lawrie Shabibi** in Dubai marks the first time Iranian-born, UK-based artist **Farhad Ahrarnia** exhibits in the Middle Eastern region.

Ahrarnia's diverse work typically draws from his upbringing in Iran and engages with inter-cultural cross-pollination and influences, media manipulation of reality and the constant power play between tradition and modernity.

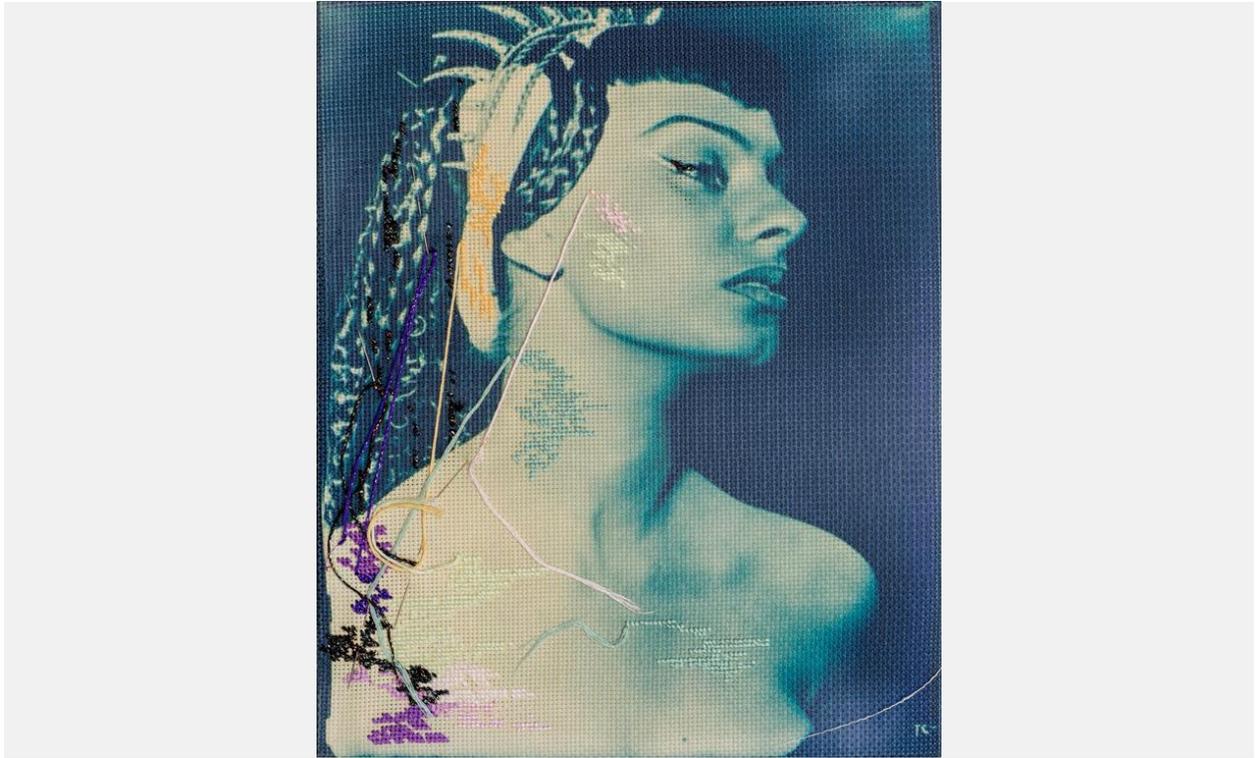
His hometown Shiraz, where he was born in 1971, provides a constant reference and source of inspiration for his artistic practice, which utilises local, traditional techniques and crafts such as embroidery, metalwork and mosaic in combination with contemporary ones such as photography and digital printing on canvas.



Farhad Ahrarnia, "A Dish Fit for the Gods", 15 November 2015 – 14 January 2016, installation view at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

On the opposite spectrum lies another major source of inspiration: western modernism. **Kazimir Malevich**, a key figure of Suprematism, is one of the artist's major influences, while the modernist architecture that coexist with ancient ruins and historic buildings in Shiraz provide Ahrarnia with a heightened receptivity to and aesthetic sensibility combining East and West, tradition and modernity.

From the West, celebrity icons and images, Hollywood posters, beauty pageants, Time magazine covers or heroic war photography also contributed to animate Ahrarnia's imaginative work, which juxtaposed such imagery with references to his cultural heritage and that of other areas of the Middle East.

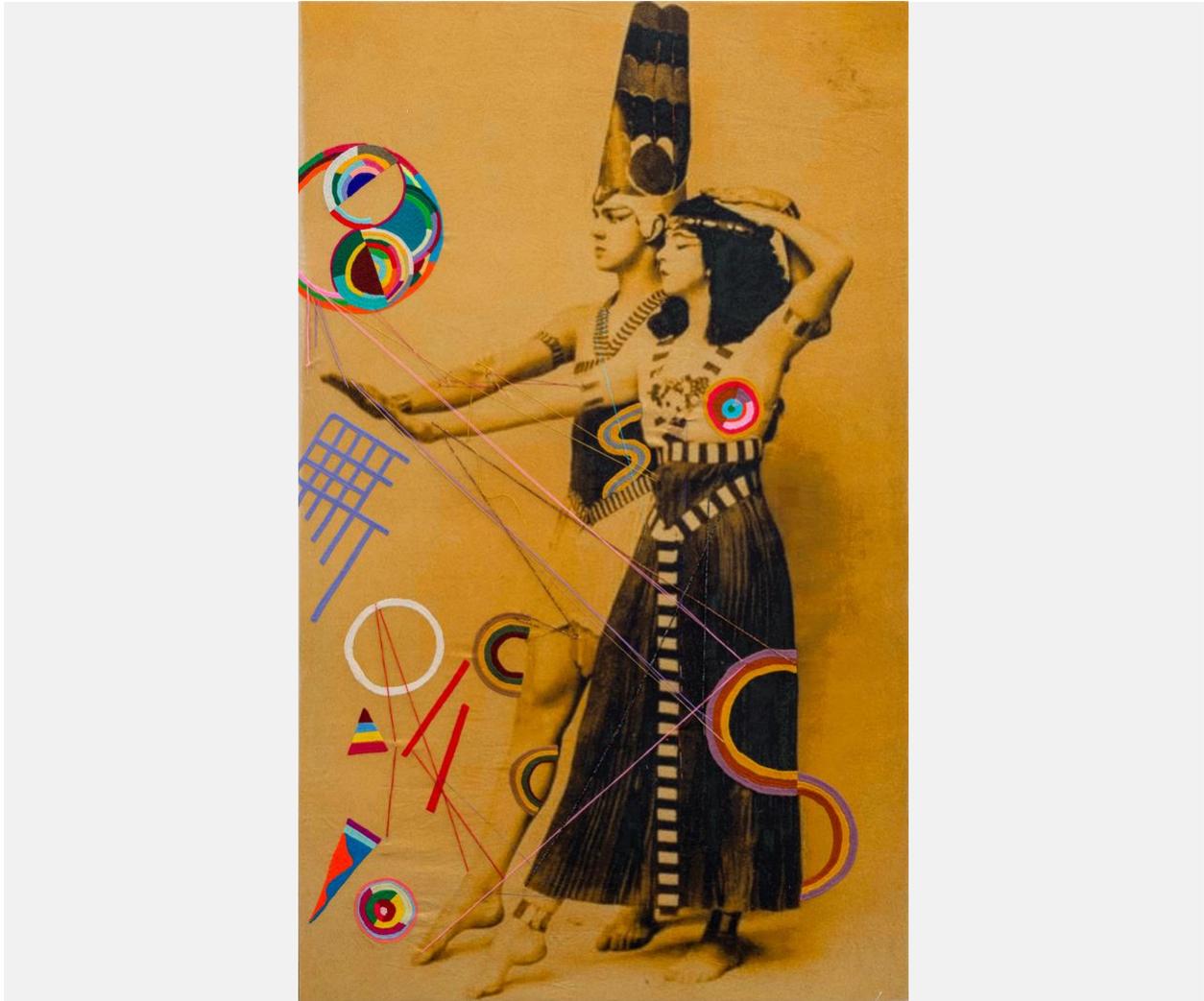


Farhad Ahrarnia, 'A Dish Fit for the Gods', 2014-2015, digital print heat transferred onto polyester aida, hand stitched using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles 32.5 x 27 x 1.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Orientalism and the fever of Egypt

Ahrarnia explores "parallel sensibilities" where "high modernism converges and entangles with the ancient, mythical and the exotic in order to spiritually articulate itself." Lawrie Shabibi writes in the press release about the show:

"A Dish Fit for the Gods" juxtaposes ancient imagery, Twentieth-century modernism, hand-embroidered textiles depicting archival images of actors, spies and authors, metalwork and Khatam (Persian micro-mosaic), while touching on complex themes, from modern dance to archeology, espionage to Egyptomania, with a passing nod to sexuality, identity, and the fluid values of orientalism.

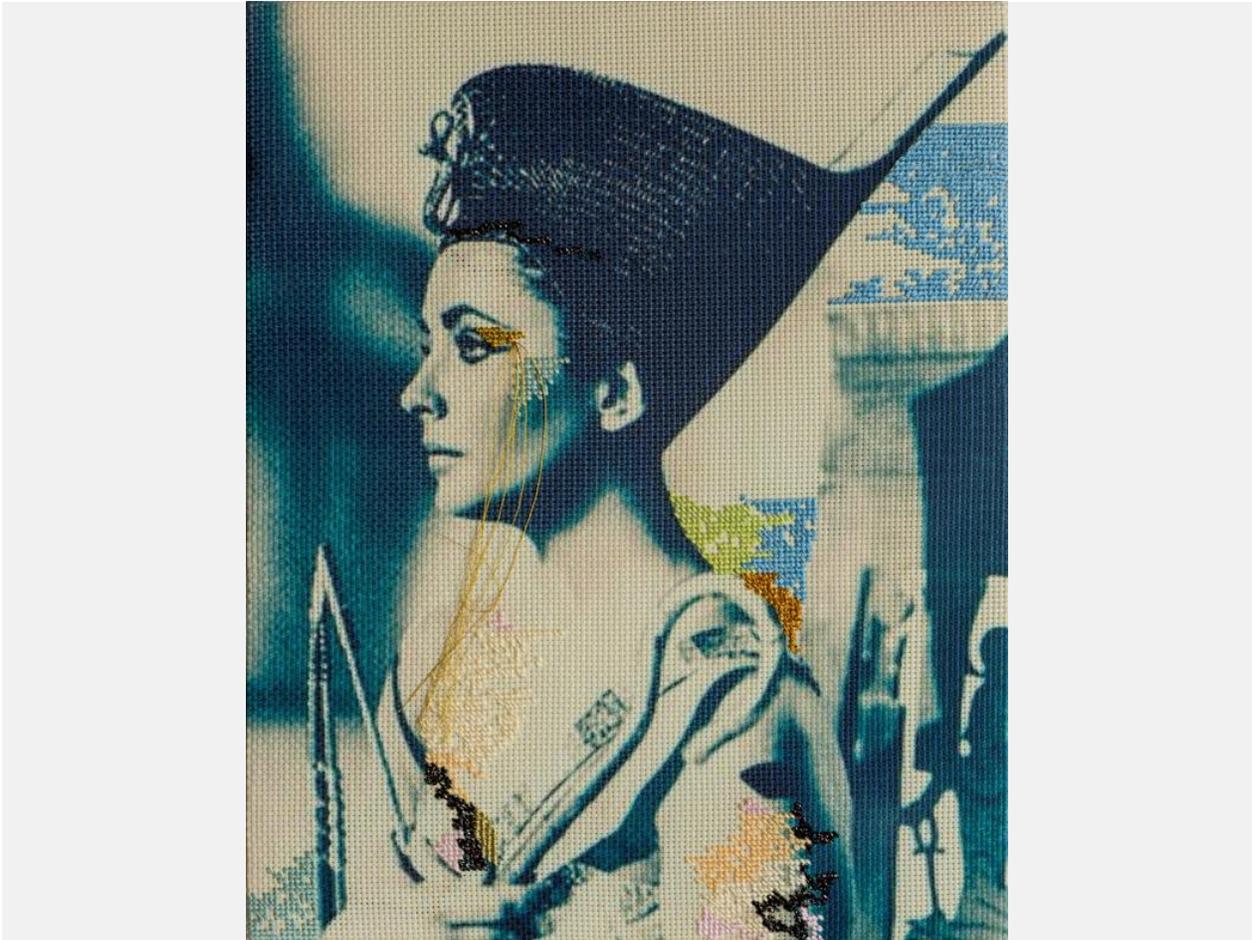


Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Delirium of Becoming, a Moment Caught Between Myth and History, No. 3', 2015, digital print dyed onto cotton fabric, hand embroidered using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 156 x 95 x 2 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

The title of the exhibition "A Dish Fit for the Gods" comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, from a line uttered by Brutus before killing Caesar:

"Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius. . . . And, gentle friends, Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods" – *Julius Caesar Act 2, scene 1, 166,171-173*

A prequel to *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the play presents the symbolic figure of Cleopatra, as does the sequel. The 'Queen of Egypt' appears in Ahrarnia's oeuvre, which "attempts to unpick the politics and the language used to construct her mythology".



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'Her Body, Her Nation', 2014-2015, digital print heat transferred onto polyester aida, hand stitched using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 33.3 x 27 x 1.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

The exhibition addresses notions of exoticism and orientalism, as developed since millennia from the Hellenistic empire's control of Egypt. It also engages with ideas about human interaction as set in Shakespeare's oeuvre, such as betrayal, seduction, conspiracy and exotica.

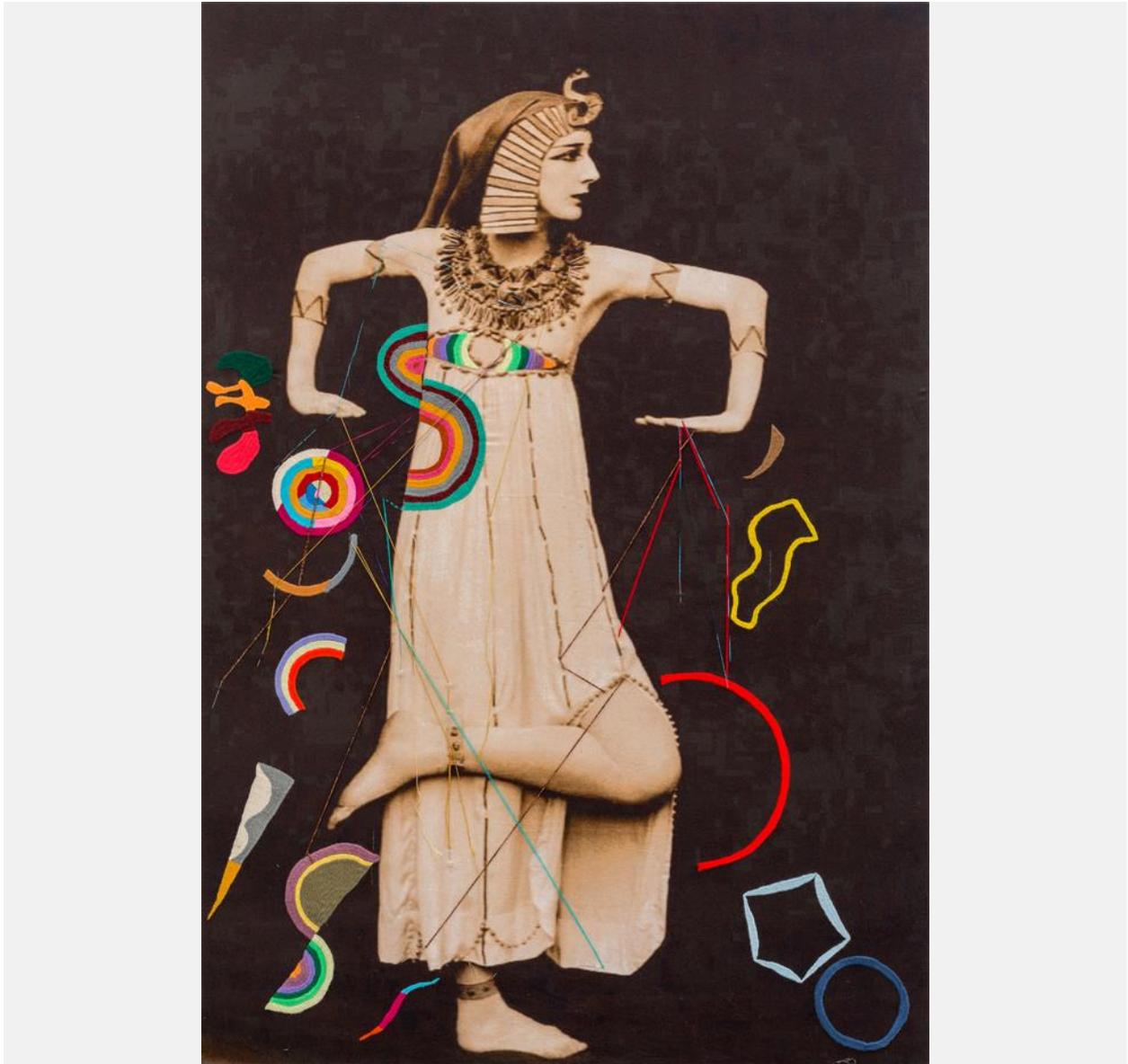
The pictorial works on display are both large-scale and intimate portraits. The large ones include images of dancers from the 1920s and 1930s dressed in Egyptian style, as inspired by the 1922 discovery of Tutankamun's tomb, and embroidered with patterns reminiscent of the textile designs of Ukrainian-born, French artist **Sonia Delaunay** (1885 – 1979), who used strong colours and geometric shapes.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'Stony Silence of an Archaeologist', 2014-2015, digital print heat transferred onto polyester aida, hand stitched using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 36 x 27 x 1.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Among the more intimate portraits, there are famous individuals from the 1910s-1950s, such as Theda Bara, a silent movie star, and the exotic dancer, courtesan and double agent Mata Hari as well as Hollywood actresses like Claudette Colbert, Elizabeth Taylor, Vivien Leigh and Sophia Loren.

Amongst the plethora of female icons there is only one male figure, Donald Wilber, the area expert and CIA agent with a penchant for Persian rugs who masterminded the overthrow of Iranian prime minister Mossadegh in 1953.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Delirium of Becoming, a Moment Caught Between Myth and History, No. 2', 2015, digital print dyed onto cotton fabric, hand embroidered using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 155 x 106 x 2 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Little Lonely God', 2014-2015, digital print heat transferred onto polyester aida, hand stitched using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles, 33.5 x 27 x 1.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

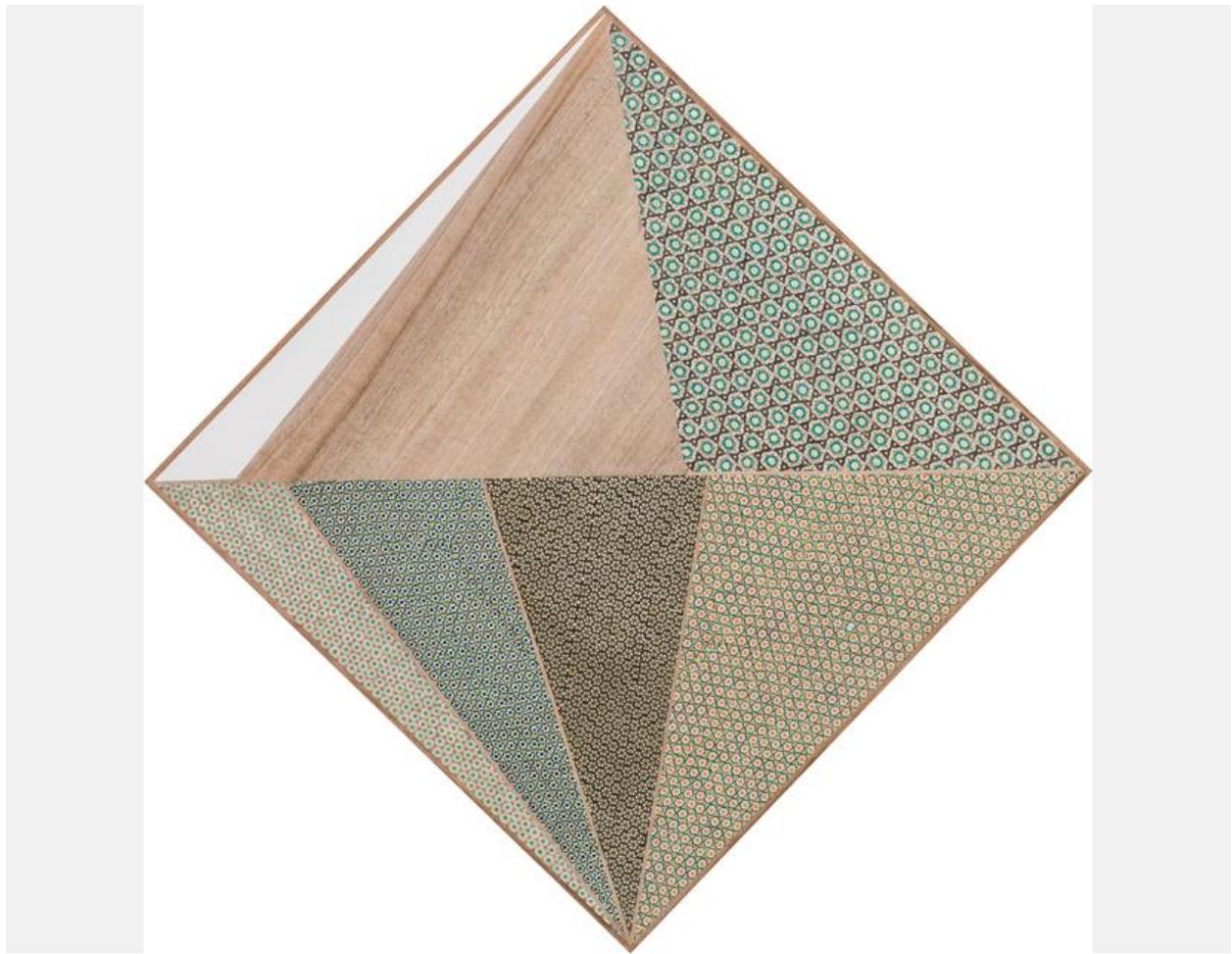
The art of mystery

Author and sometimes archaeologist Agatha Christie has a prominent role among Ahrarnia's characters. She herself interwove East and West in her literary work, such as in *Death on the Nile*, *A House in Shiraz* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, which were all set in the Middle East. As Christie deftly wove a web of stories connecting different cultural milieus and locales, Ahrarnia uses the same skill and sensibility to translate the writer's language of espionage and mystery into his own visual idiom, by embroidering 'codes' in the portraits. All of his subjects thus are characterised by a double identity, shining with an aura of mystery and leading a duplicitous life.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Dig, Nimrud Series, No. 4', 2015, silver-plated copper, 41.5 x 22.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

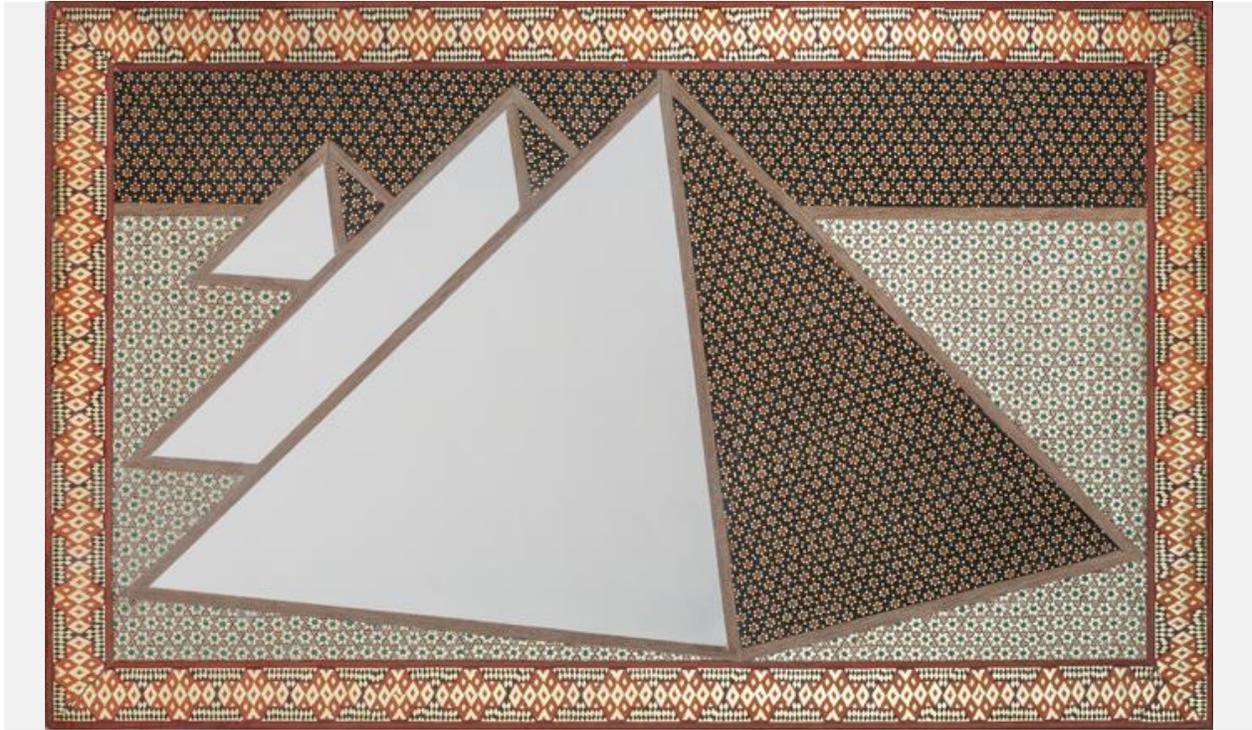
A nod to Christie's artistic genius is also apparent in the two silver-plated metal shovels from *The Dig, Nimrud Series*. Christie was stationed on archaeological digs in Iraq with her husband Max Mallowan in Nimrud, where she famously used her limited supplies of face lotion to clean the Nimrud ivories, now in the [British Museum](#) in London. Ahrarnia uses the motifs on the ivories influenced by contemporary Egyptian artistic trends, thus testifying to the historical influence of Egyptian art on a vast region. The shovels are not only carriers of these emblems, but also become ritualistic objects – with the potential of being buried and re-discovered in the future.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'Khufu', 2015, Khatam (brass, bone and wood), 41.5 x 42 x 3 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Re-interpreting Persian mosaic art

The exhibition also features works that re-interpret the Persian micro-mosaic art called *Khatam*, tied to the artist's Iranian, and specifically Shirazi, origins. *Khatam* is a Persian version of marquetry, the art and craft of decorating the surface of wooden objects with delicate pieces of wood, bone and metal in precisely-cut geometrical shapes. The commonly used materials for the Persian inlays are gold, silver, brass, aluminium and twisted wire, the works range from windows and doors, mirror frames, Quran boxes, inlaid boxes and pen and penholders, to lanterns and inlaid ornamented shrines. Inlaid works can be found in mosques, palaces and ancient buildings in Iran, and the art is still practiced today in Isfahan, Shiraz and Tehran, where it flourished in the Safavid era (1501-1736) – often considered the beginning of modern Persian history.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'Variations on a Theme, No. 2 [after Liechtenstein]', 2015, Khatam (Brass, bone & wood), 29 x 47.2 x 3 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

The geometric and constructivist nature of the traditional medium, which according to Ahrarnia is mathematically generated, parallels the Russian avant-garde that influenced Iran's modernist art and architecture of the mid-20th century. The *Khatam* series weaves Egyptian themes into re-interpretations of European and American modernist works, such as Max Bill's triangular compositions and Roy Lichtenstein's *Great Pyramid*. As the press release reads, *Ahrarnia thereby reverses the familiar flow of orientalism, emphasizing the engagement of the modern with the traditional, the decorative with the scientific, and the interflow between East and West.*

C. A. Xuan Mai Ardia

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