

# A Dish Fit for the Gods: An ambivalent exchange

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British-Iranian artist Farhad Ahrarnia's show focuses on Egyptian influences in the arts, design, literature, films and other Modernist projects of the 20th century



Image Credit: Lawrie Shabibi and Farhad Ahrarnia; ©Musthafa Aboobacker

British-Iranian artist Farhad Ahrarnia is interested in exploring the ambivalent engagement between West and East over the ages. In his first solo exhibition in the Middle East, “A Dish Fit for the Gods”, he has focused on Egyptian influences in the arts, theatre, dance, architecture, design, literature, films and other Modernist projects of the 20th century.

His layered works and complex narratives feature archival images of Western icons who have engaged with oriental themes to express their modernity, motifs from 20th-century Modernism, hand-embroidered textiles and the ancient micro-mosaic craft of Khatam from his hometown Shiraz. They highlight the convergence of high modernism with ancient, mythical and exotic elements at different moments in history, and examine the fluidity of ideas about the values of orientalism.

“You can see many influences from African, Asian, Arabian and other cultures in modern art, dance, design and architecture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, perhaps because Modernism needed the spirituality of these cultures. Egyptian motifs were particularly popular during this period because of the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922. The archival pictures I found indicate that being modern at that time also equated to being in touch with older cultures. It was considered subversive and avant garde because these ancient cultures embodied a sense of liberation from 19th century Victorian values. It is interesting that in those days the East was viewed as being liberal and uninhibited, yet 50 years later it is seen as conservative, rigid and fanatical. I want to explore this alternative dynamics between East and West where myth mingles with history and attitudes change with the politics of the time,” the artist says.



The Delirium of Becoming, a Moment Caught Between Myth and History, No 1, 2015

One of the most visible examples of Egyptian influence on Modernism is in dance. Ahrarnia is showing a series of works featuring Western dancers in costumes and poses inspired by ancient Egypt. These include Russian ballet dancers from the 1920s and 1930s, silent movie star Theda Bara and exotic dancer and spy Mata Hari.

The found images have been dyed or heat transferred on to cotton and polyester fabric, and on the sepia-toned images he has added embroidered motifs and gestural marks done with silk, cotton and metallic threads. He often leaves loose threads and his needles on the work as a trace of his touch and his tools, and a reference to the stitching together of Eastern and Western ideas.

The motifs, which add another layer to the artworks, come from various sources, such as the abstract paintings of Kandinsky and Malevich, and the circular motifs of French textile designer Sonia Delauney, who designed costumes for the Russian Ballet company.

“My fascination with fabric and embroidery goes back to my memories of accompanying my mother to the textile bazaar in Shiraz and to the embroiderers and tailors who transformed the fabrics into beautiful garments. The threads in these works represent a restricted movement that suggests manipulation. And the circularity of Delauney’s motifs refers to the perpetuation of a cycle,” the artist says.





### Her Body, Her Nation 2014-15

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In another series of pictorial works, Ahrarnia looks at the depiction of Cleopatra by various Hollywood actresses such as Claudette Colbert, Elizabeth Taylor, Vivien Leigh and Sophia Loren. The titles of the works are inspired by quotes from Shakespeare's plays.

"The idea of Cleopatra is fascinating because it is imbued with political, racial and misogynistic overtones. Through these images I wanted to explore the politics and the language used to construct her mythology. Shakespeare's plays such as 'Julius Caesar' and 'Anthony and Cleopatra' have strongly influenced the way she is perceived in the modern era. The playwright was ambivalent about her. He celebrated her, but with overtones of sexism. And over the years different studios and filmmakers have presented interpretations of her that range from risqué, wild, or comic to sexy, strong or intelligent. These reflect the spirit of the times, the political agendas of the filmmakers and the changing role of women in society," he says.

Once again, the embroidered motifs on the images subtly underline the deconstruction, reconstruction and manipulation of historical characters and events.

British author Agatha Christie also features in the pictorial works. Her connection with the East came through her archaeologist husband Max Mallowan. She travelled with him to archaeological digs across the Middle East, and many of her books are set in the region. The cross-stitch patterns on her image symbolise the intrigues and mystery in her novels.

She is also linked with the two silver-plated metal shovels from Ahrarnia's "The Dig, Nimrud Series" exhibited in this show. The motifs he has engraved on the shovels are taken from the Nimrud Ivories, excavated in Nimrud, Iraq, by her husband and now displayed in the British Museum.

"These Egypto-Assyrian motifs taken from the Nimrud ivories indicate that the influence of Egyptian art crossed beyond its boundaries as far back as 700BC. The shovels convey the sense of constructing and uncovering things, just like the needles in my embroidered works. I like the fact that metal is a medium that will sustain over the passage of time. Hence these shovels could themselves be buried and rediscovered as archaeological objects in the future, thus completing the circle of self-referentiality, which I believe is a key aspect of Modernism," the artist says.

Finally, Ahrarnia's beautiful Khatam-based works weave together his Iranian and Shirazi origins with his exploration of Egyptology and Modernism through the inherently constructivist and geometrically structured properties of the medium.

The artist has used the Khatam technique to create artworks based on Max Bill's triangular compositions and Roy Lichtenstein's pyramid-inspired work. This is a reference to the fact that the individual filaments of wood, bone and metal used in this micro-mosaic technique are all triangular in cross-section, and also arranged to form triangular symmetrical patterns.

"I juxtaposed this ancient medium on modern 20th century design, by expanding the triangular constitution of the Khatam itself in a manner that is self-referential and modern. My aim was to break the strict symmetry of the ancient craft form, linking modern with traditional, decorative with scientific, and European and American modernist works with Egyptian themes to reverse the familiar flow of orientalism," he says.

The title of the show is taken from words uttered by Brutus in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar", just before the assassination of Caesar, where he tells his fellow conspirators to approach the act like a sacrificial offering by carving Caesar as "a dish fit for the gods".

"His words powerfully express the manipulation of motive behind a destructive act. All the works in my show have that underlying sense of motives or ideas that are open to being manipulated politically or psychologically," the artist says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"A Dish Fit for the Gods" will run at Lawrie Shabibi gallery, Al Quoz, until January 14, 2016.