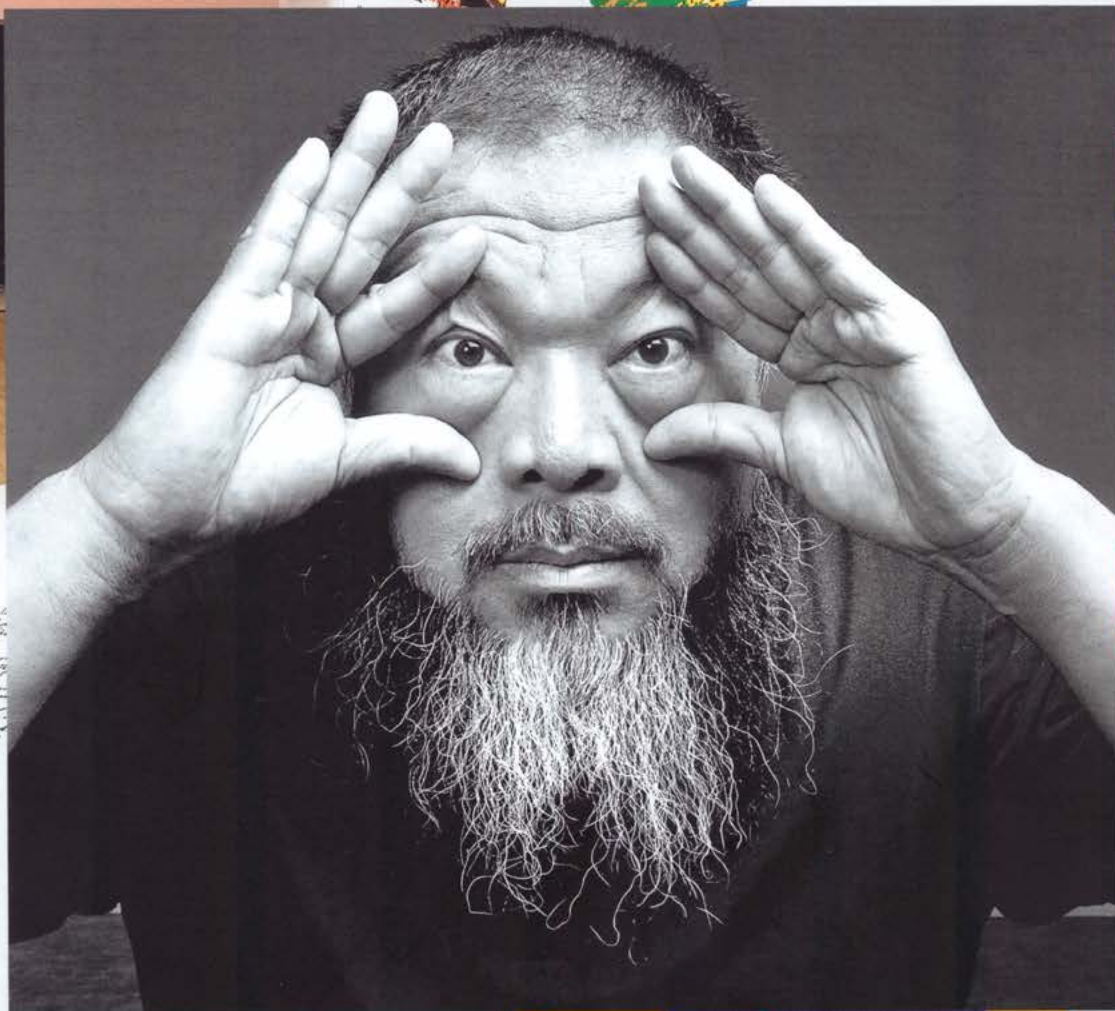


# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

- Rosie Batty



• IN CONVERSATION WITH AI WEWEL • ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS • A WEEK IN IRAN •

• ROLEX: CHAMPIONING CREATIVE COLLABORATION

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THE INTERVENTIONS ISSUE

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DUBAI

## Orientalism, Egyptomania and Embroidery

Farhad Ahrarnia's latest solo show at Lawrie Shabibi combined art historical references, literary anecdotes, celebrity mythologies and political undertones

by Laura Egerton

In 2008, Farhad Ahrarnia held an exhibition in Leighton House, London, showing images from the Bradford riots and of the U.S. soldiers who had died in Baghdad. His first solo show in the Middle East, *A Dish Fit for the Gods* at Lawrie Shabibi, investigated subjects that would have been a better historical fit with Leighton: Orientalism, Egyptomania and working with early experimental photography. Materials such as silver-plated metal shovels and beautiful examples of Khatam (Persian micro-mosaic) would have sat comfortably in Leighton's Arab Hall.

The intertwined narratives at play in this complex and fascinating show, which ran from November 16 to January 14, would have suited Victorian dinner conversations, too. One sepia portrait of a young girl pertained to be Agatha Christie, party to the discovery of the ivories in Nimrud, as she accompanied her husband, prominent archaeologist Max Mallowan, on excavations in Iraq. Others could have been characters in Christie's thrillers. Mata Hari, the original femme fatale, an exotic dancer accused of espionage and executed by the French, was shown in profile adorned in jewels and Asian ornaments. Donald Wilber, the cultured CIA agent who orchestrated a plot to overthrow the Iranian Prime Minister, donned a keffiyeh in the style of Lawrence of Arabia, his face in shadow. Five Hollywood beauties demonstrated the cult of Cleopatra, girl power at its peak.

The glittering textures of Ahrarnia's needlework embellishments crossed this way and that over the digital images printed onto canvas — each line and knot meticulously calculated. Western dancers took sphinx-like poses or formed pyramids, the initial

background photograph often highly pixilated. A captivating addition was thicker yarn making large circular, half-moon or triangular shapes in many vivid colours, giving the images an extra kinetic force and visual dynamism. A nod to modernist design, they were closest to the embroidery of Sonia Delaunay and also inspired by the Russian Suprematism of Malevich and El Lissitzky — Russia does, of course, border Iran.

The complexity of the art historical references, literary anecdotes, celebrity mythologies and political undertones was counter-balanced by the clarity of the Ahrarnia's choices. His method is intentionally slow, giving us time to connect the dots or unpick the threads. ♦

Farhad Ahrarnia, *The Delirium of Becoming, a Moment Caught Between Myth and History*

