

“Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You”: Iranian artist Farhad Ahrarnia at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Iranian-born artist Farhad Ahrarnia explores urban spaces and the effects of modernisation in his recent solo exhibition at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai.

Art Radar had a quick chat with the artist about the themes of materiality in his work.



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of “Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You” at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

From 8 February to 2 March 2017 Dubai-based gallery **Lawrie Shabibi** presents **“Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You”**, a solo exhibition by Farhad Ahrarnia. Ahrarnia was born in Shiraz, Iran and now lives between Shiraz and Sheffield in the United Kingdom. His work explores aspects of national identity and intercultural exchange through a diverse range of meticulously crafted works.



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Iranian architecture and western modernism

Farhad Ahrarnia's practice is simultaneously influenced by his hometown, particularly the mix of modern and historic architecture found there, and western modernism. A major influence in his work is **Kazimir Malevich**, an artist of Suprematism, a movement that focused on basic geometric forms. In **an essay for the Tate**, Ahrarnia explains how the complex structures of Shiraz were built organically among ruins of ancient architecture and were influenced by modernism. He explained how this town of his youth, during the 1970s and 1980s, along with discovering Malevich's artwork, fed into his practice:

As I perceive Shiraz through a Malevichian lens, I see the intermingling of these spatially and temporally varied spaces functioning as a prism, with the effect of creating a fractured, punctuated, yet dynamic and animated twentieth-century city. In parts this is reminiscent of Malevich's architectural models, where protruding cubic shapes flow outwardly with different rhythms and in opposite, irregular directions.



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Ahrarnia adopts craft-making techniques such as embroidery, engraving and marquetry into his practice, exploring the nexus between art and engineering. As he developed an interest in Malevich's work, he began to look at this practice as an act of construction, producing, in his words, "a kinetic impact on a static surface". He goes on to explain in the Tate essay:

Malevich creates movement most effectively through his compositions, choice of colours and forms. I therefore continuously refer to his work as a blueprint for my embroideries and marquetry to suggest displacement, movement and collision.



Farhad Ahrarnia. "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Materiality of urban spaces

Ahrarnia has taken the title of this exhibition from a poem by German-born American poet, novelist and short story writer Charles Bukowski. Bukowski was well known for writing about his surroundings as well as about the impact of industrialisation on the working classes. In the exhibition Ahrarnia uses this title as a starting point to explore the urban spaces of Shiraz, Esfahan and Tehran through compositions involving discarded packaging boxes that he found. He uses these works to explore manufacturing and consumption in the Iranian context and the legacy of modern mass-production.



Farhad Ahrarnia. "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Ahrarnia explains to *Art Radar* that he has long been interested in the materiality of cardboard boxes: *Perhaps my interest in cardboard, specifically in the shape of a box, goes way back to my early childhood days living in Shiraz, where I would be spending hours exploring and playing in my grandmothers house. A grand old house which was partially disused, with abandoned rooms turned into storage, filled with cardboard boxes containing objects belonging to different members of my extended family accumulated over various decades. I was amused and fascinated by what these boxes might contain. Their appearance spoke of an indefinable potentiality for containment of certain desires in form of objects. Resembling second skins, these boxes hid what rested beneath. As such, the box would function as a fetish, referring to a missing or perhaps indefinable or unclear object of desire, simply remaining open ended! Waiting to appease or otherwise!*

As I learnt to read the surface of these boxes, each one would turn into a testimony of it's own making and history, communicating a trajectory and possibilities for consumption and subscription to various necessities, sensibilities or life styles! Eventually I was hooked on the signifying power and the understated aura of cardboard boxes in general.



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Ahrarnia deliberately selected boxes marked with "Made in Iran" texts, symbols and fonts that have their origin in 20th century advertising graphics and Russian avant-garde influences. He also selected them for their prior contents, such as kerosene lamps and hair spray, calling back to a past era. Though the boxes are taken apart, they retain the residue of these past uses.



Farhad Ahrarnia. Installation view of "Something for the Touts, the Grocery Clerks and You" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 8 February to 2 March 2017. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi.

Ahrarnia then incorporates these boxes into formal and cubic compositions reflecting his Modernism and Constructivism influences. In this stage he alters the material through adding decorative concentric patterns that are traditionally applied on important devotional texts. Through this process Ahrarnia is changing the tone and import of the discarded, everyday material. In the exhibition text he **explains that** *By collecting and appropriating the modern cubic structure of these boxes and their worn-out surfaces I intend to raise their significance and cultural value, turning them into critical and self referential art.*



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'The Tomb of Charles Baudelaire [After Max Bill]', 2016, Khatam (Persian micro-mosaic), 40 x 40 x 2.4 cm. Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

Seeing objects from a new perspective

Ahrarnia often uses ancient techniques in his work while exploring contemporary realities, mixing the traditional with the modern. In some of the pieces he uses an Iranian micro-mosaic technique dating back 600 years, which was used to decorate everyday objects. On the one hand he utilises high art ornamentation and on the other he challenges the status of mundane objects like a cardboard box through decoration. His interest in materiality and process lie at the heart of this combined practice.

Talking to *Art Radar*, Ahrarnia expanded on his thoughts about materiality, emphasising the possibility of everyday objects through manipulation and transformation:

For me the materiality of any given object or entity conveys and embodies a set of possibilities and histories which can be explored and manipulated in order to create an alternative set of contexts for new readings and alternative considerations. I'm interested in playing with codes and conventions which are already attached to a particular medium or entity. There are qualities of strength and resilience but also the contradictory factors of vulnerability and impermanence. All the above qualities simultaneously carry their own poetics and metaphysical connotation, I'm interested in all the above when it comes to considering the materiality of any given entity that I select to explore, dissect, reassemble or treat.



Farhad Ahrarnia, 'Album Leaf [After Max Bill]', 2016, Khatam (Persian micro-mosaic), 37.5 x 37.5 x 2.7 cm.
Image courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist.

As consumers of culture and goods we can all decide to reconsider the significance of objects and experiences, which we are surrounded by, through a certain amount of shift in our perception, or in our collective and individually applied value systems in operation.

A chipped teapot or vase can gain kudos if we chose to lend it that extra set of significance, as some Japanese do! An aesthetic sensibility for appreciation of damaged surfaces called 'wabi saabi'. A simple gathering of friends over afternoon tea can be reconsidered as a 'happening' and be read as a cultural commentary on the value of time spent on simple human interactions as opposed to time spent on individual activities which are motivated by self-orientated gains and benefits.

Claire Wilson