

Exhibition opens window on contemporary Iran

Show reflects a nation exploring gender, politics and religion

By Molly Glentzer

July 14, 2017



Photo: Molly Glentzer

IMAGE 7 OF 12

A view of the front gallery of the exhibition "Rebel Jester Mystic Poet" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, including, from foreground, Shahpour Pouyan's "Projectile II," Timo Nasseri's "Parsec #15" and ... more

A recent visitor to the "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians" exhibition didn't seem to be joking when he snarked, "Waste of a good rug."

But maybe he thought he was being funny since he promptly photographed Farhad Moshiri's "Flying Carpet," a stack of 32 Persian rugs whose centers are cut out to create a hole in the shape of a jet fighter. Then the man pointed his camera at Shiva Ahmadi's highly decorative "Oil Barrel #13" and Alireza Dayani's monumental ink drawing of a fantastical undersea world.

The show's entry gallery is as alluring as they get, dominated by Ali Banisadr's tense and gorgeous monumental painting "We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet," Timo Nasseri's glittering geometric sculpture "Parsec #15" and Shahpour Pouyan's ominous "Projectile II," which looks simultaneously like a hanging woman in a burka and a fancy missile, ornately etched with Arabic calligraphy and intricate swirls.

Stepping in any direction from there invites viewers into a magnetic vortex full of other enticements. The "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet" title refers to four thematic drifts within the 27 works, to underscore how gender, politics, religion and spirituality figure into contemporary Iranian identity. It also reflects the attitude of a collector on a mission to change perceptions about his native country.

Financier Mohammed Afkhami belongs to a prominent family that fled Iran in 1978, just ahead of the 1979 Revolution, when he was four. The new government confiscated his grandparents' huge collection of historical art, some of which appeared at international auctions in the 1980s.

Afkhami began collecting contemporary art when he started revisiting family in Iran in the early 2000s, discovering new galleries and a scene that at the time was relatively unknown. He bought his first painting there for about \$500. Today, about a dozen Iranian artists have broken through the six-figure barrier. Collectors like Afkhami have helped drive the market. Works he bought a decade ago for \$2,000 or \$3,000 are now worth a hundred times that.

Afkhami is not in it for the money, or to be political. He sees himself as a cultural ambassador. "It's more important for people to focus on art than on things they'll never agree on," he said.

Curated by Fereshteh Daftari for the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, the show includes a good mix of men and women, established and emerging artists, people whose families left Iran during the diaspora and full-time residents of Tehran.

The artists also represent three generations, from the esteemed nonagenarian Monir Farmanfarmaian, famous for her mirror mosaics (the MFAH also owns one), to the visionary Dayani, who is in his mid-30s. All show a stunning affinity for detail. Whether it manifests as intricate imagery, refined construction or minimalist purity, one thing is clear: These Iranians embrace beauty.

Sometimes the boldness wows, but there's equal power in works of extreme subtlety.

One case in point is an untitled photograph of a snowy landscape with ghostly, barely-there trees by the late Palme d'Or-winning filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. It seems almost out of place in a room washed by red neon light, but it's also a kind of antidote - a peaceful contemplation of nature that could be seen as a political position in a highly conflicted society.

Afruz Amighi's woven polyethylene "Angels in Combat I" evokes a traditional paradise motif, but its angels point machine guns at a tree of life whose trunk holds the "Rod of Asclepius," the hippocratic oath symbol. Amighi, a U.S. citizen, is concerned about universal health care.

Works by the master calligrapher Mohammad Ehsai and sculptor Parviz Tanavoli get their charge from Arabic words. Ehsai's "Mohabbat" layers the word for kindness and compassion over itself four times. Tanavoli's painted fiberglass piece "Blue Heech" depicts the word "nothing" in nasta'liq-style calligraphy. Shirazeh Houshiary's painting "Memory," with just one fat band of soft blue on a white field, looks from a distance like it could have been made by Agnes Martin. It's more related, however, to the thinking of the 13th-century mystic Rumi. Close up, one can see how the blue marks skim the surface of the canvas and fade like fog into the whiteness. Houshiary made them by repeatedly drawing two Arabic words until they were illegible, to achieve an infinity effect.

Parastou Forouhar's "Friday," a powerful photograph printed across four large aluminum panels, bristles with subversive humor. A black swath of fabric reminiscent of a chador fills the image, with a focal point that offers just a peek of a small hand, clenching the fabric at an angle so sensually charged it looks like a far more "forbidden" female body part.

Such delicious audacity!

Hamed Sahihi's three-minute video "Sundown" captivates with its eerily silent imagery of silhouetted people playing on a beach, oblivious to a ghostly, hanging figure that rises into the sky near the end. I first thought "nyeh" when I approached Morteza Ahmadvand's video installation "Becoming," which is contained in a small, walled-off space where three screens hang above a large, black fiberglass sphere. The screens held images of spheres, too.

But I looked away for a minute, and when I looked again I realized I had seen the end of a loop. When it begins, each screen contains a different religious emblem: the Jewish Star of David, the Christian cross and the Islamic Kaaba. Through digital video trickery, they all morph slowly into spheres.

Ahmadvand's installation is a profound plea for unity.

It seemed a stellar ending moment, but I stopped again at Banisadr's canvas on the way out.

Banisadr has said his chaotic and prismatic compositions are driven by sound, and he's especially haunted by the sound of exploding bombs he heard as a young boy in Iran.

"We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet" borrows its title from a comment Willem de Kooning made after the first lunar landing, suggesting the not-so-giant steps of continuous and epic conflict.

Banisadr's painting has the agitated intensity of works by the Chilean surrealist Roberto Matta, which also convey internal battlefields, although Banisadr's art generally offers more sky, which makes it seem slightly more hopeful. His crudely formed figures could exist in any place, at any time. The painting's fluttering white bits brought to mind all the paper that fluttered through New York skies in the aftermath of the twin-tower bombings.

Great art provokes thought. If any one of these works just gets people talking constructively as well as snapping pictures, the show has succeeded.



Molly Glentzer

Senior Writer and Critic, Arts & Culture

<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/arts-theater/article/Exhibition-opens-window-on-contemporary-iran-11290114.php#photo-13246886>