

My Place is the Placeless: Shahpour Pouyan at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

The exhibition 'My Place is the Placeless' questions notions of heritage, identity and heredity



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Never were the results of a genetic test more poetically described. Rather than percentages, pie charts, maps and a list of population types - Balkan, Middle Eastern, Mongolian, Oceanian - the New York-based Iranian artist Shahpour Pouyan has chosen to describe his ancestry in images, ceramics, sculpture and poetry, all of which are currently on display in the artist's third solo exhibition at Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai.

The poetry comes in the form of the show's title, *My Place is the Placeless*, a fragment of a line from *Only Breath*, a 13th century poem by the Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi that complements the artist's nuanced take on issues of identity, nationality, history and heritage.

"What is to be done, O Moslems? For I do not recognize myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem.

I am not of the East, nor of the West....

I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsın;

I am not of the kingdom of Irāqain, nor of the country of Khorāsān.

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell;

I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwān.

My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless".

In Pouyan's case, genetic testing revealed a DNA ancestry traceable to 33 modern countries spread across Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Caucasus Mountains, Northern Europe and the British Isles, a result the artist uses to question contemporary notions of national identity and ethnicity.

In an age of growing nationalism and sectarian tensions, what sense does it make to consider oneself American or British, Russian or Iranian – or to be labelled as such - when so much of our ancestry is hybrid and shared?

Housed inside an open steel cube that dominates the Alserkal Avenue gallery like one of the display cases at the new Louvre Abu Dhabi, Pouyan's various genetic identities are expressed in a series of exquisitely executed ceramics that represent monumental architectural forms, such as domes.

"Based on the result, I looked for heritage or monumental forms from each of the 33 countries. I tried to select and choose the domes that somehow represent a specific country and that was

important to that country but at the same time I had the problem that many of the domes came from the same place,” the artist explains from his home in New York.

“Many of the countries have important and monumental mosques, so instead of using identical-looking domes, for example, I used very unfamiliar examples that are not famous at all because it helps to convey the idea.”

The contrast between the delicate ceramics and the Platonic form is profound and is designed to contrast what the artist sees as the purging, purifying and often violent impulse that defined certain strands of Modernism and modernity with the vernacular, which is often intensely local and universal at the same time.

“The concept of purifying everything, which is quite modern and reached a peak at the beginning of the 20th century, extended to everything including anthropology as ideas of Minimalism and Purism in art history,” explains Pouyan, who studied Neoplatonic philosophy before he gained MFAs from New York’s Pratt Institute and the Tehran University of Art.

By including the cube, the artist insists he is trying to question notions of cleansing and purification – ethnic, aesthetic, philosophical and otherwise – as well as forms of categorisation that are based on any notion of origins.

“I’ve tried to create a contrast between the Modernist practice of architecture, anthropology and art and what we have today, which is access to DNA and genetic science and post-modern art and architecture,” Pouyan explains, describing his combination of DNA analysis and heritage as a form of “personal archaeology”.

“At a time when people are talking about identity in terms of the fathers, mothers and grandparents, I am trying to take another approach and take it all the way back, thousands of years,” he says.

“It’s very difficult to make borders between identities and that is what I am trying to question. Suggesting that you are from a specific country just doesn’t make sense because so many of those countries were created relatively recently.”

Around the sides of the gallery, Pouyan has arranged three shelves of historical images that feature paintings, coins, sculptures and archaeological artefacts that relate to the locations associated with his ancestry, each of which have been subtly altered to include the artist’s features.

The selection includes images of the 3rd century CE Roman Emperor, Philip the Arab, who was born in a province that maps on to modern day Syria, as well as a photograph of the celebrated Syrian archaeologist, Khaled al Asaad, who was beheaded in 2015 by ISIS in the ancient city of Palmyra’s amphitheatre.

But rather than manipulating the features of the main protagonist in each image, Pouyan chooses to depict his features on the figures who he sees as the Darwinian winners in life’s lottery, the figures in the past who succeeded by managing to survive.

“We are all the product of survivors and sinners, of people who killed, raped and looted,” the artist insists.

In interrogating the stuff of museums and history from a Foucauldian perspective, Pouyan presents complex notions of power, belonging and success.

But by combining historical and biological notions of heritage, spheres in which we share far more than divides us, the artist’s analysis also illuminates another lesson from genetics and history, that the very smallest variations can result in the most profound differences and potentially devastating and long-lasting effects.

As an exiled artist living in New York whose ability to travel is restricted by the vagaries of contemporary geopolitics, Shahpour Pouyan knows all about this dichotomy, which is one of the factors, sadly, that makes this quiet and at times violent exhibition such a success.



My Place is the Placeless runs at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai until January 2018. For details visit www.lawrieshabibi.com