

**Press Release**  
**Lawrie Shabibi presents**  
**Farhad Ahrarnia and Shahpour Pouyan at**  
**Art Basel Hong Kong, 2016 - Insights Sector**  
**Booth 3D29**  
**Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Centre**



Lawrie Shabibi is pleased to announce our first participation in Art Basel Hong Kong, the leading art fair in Asia, with a two-person presentation of works by Farhad Ahrarnia and Shahpour Pouyan, entitled *Recentring Modernism*, for the *Insights* sector of the March 2016 edition.

*Recentring Modernism* pairs new works by Ahrarnia and Pouyan, two artists of Iranian origin living and working in Shiraz and New York respectively. Both artists draw parallels between their chosen subjects and early Modernists, whose perceptions of the East were in stark contrast to the pejorative Eurocentric view. Looking for abstract, non-figurative modes of expression, Modernists were drawn towards African and West Asian visual culture. In *Recentring Modernism* we present new works by Ahrarnia from his ongoing wall-based 'Khatam' series in conjunction with a new project by Pouyan comprising drawings and ceramic sculptures. Ahrarnia's and Pouyan's responses, although seemingly in reverse to the Modernists, closely parallels the transformations of motifs, techniques and ideas across borders and cultures, a process that has long been endemic to Western Asia.

Farhad Ahrarnia's Khatam-based series stems from the inherently constructivist and geometrically structured properties of the medium. Khatam is an Iranian micro-mosaic used decoratively to embellish domestic objects. It was originally imported from China 700 years ago during period of Mongol rule, but improved upon by Persian craftsmen. Individual strings of long thin filaments made from organic materials such as ivory, camel bone, wood, copper, silver and brass are methodically grouped together, then cut at the cross section to reveal strips of complex geometric compositions. As in his previous pictorial series, Ahrarnia references such qualities of the Russian Avant-Garde who greatly influenced the art and architecture of mid 20th century Iran, a cultural extension of the 19th century "Great Game". Ahrarnia's interest in exploring the Khatam marquetry as a mark-making medium combines an

aesthetic tradition and applies it to seminal 20th century Modernist works. Ahrarnia considers the Khatam a mathematically generated self-referential process, in line with 20th century Modernist notions. Applying traditional materials and craftsmanship he uses Modernist and Constructivist paintings as a blueprint from which to lay out his Khatam mosaics, emphasizing the engagement of the modern with the traditional, the decorative with the scientific, and embedding this entanglement of various cultural sensibilities into one radiant surface. He presents five khatam works based on the sparse compositions of Malevich.

Pouyan's presentation on the other hand symbiotically explores ideas of human preservation and perception of images. Pouyan was fascinated by the extraordinary shape of the tomb of the 11th century Muqarnas dome of Sharaf ad-Dawla, a Shi'ite mausoleum near Mosul, Iraq recently destroyed by ISIS, with a structure that resembles a colossal Cubist sculpture, yet predates European modernism by almost a thousand years. Muqarnas- geometric ornamental motifs suspended from the interiors of domes and underside of corniches- have become ubiquitous throughout Islamic architecture resulting from the precise geometric subdivision of squinches. With a flamboyant exterior that mirrored the extravagantly vaulted interior, the Muqarnas dome was almost unique to Iraq, which now has four or fewer surviving examples. Most were destroyed during the 13th century Mongol invasion, the remainder currently being targeted by the present occupier. Prior to its destruction in October 2014 Pouyan had kept an image of it pinned to his studio wall, hoping that he would one day visit it. Devastated by the news of its destruction and the realization that he would never see a monument of this type, he devised a way to preserve the image. Each week he would make a drawing of the tomb from memory, emphasizing the details of the Muqarnas structure, form and ornamentation, with no recourse to the original image or his previous drawings. As his memories developed the drawings became a personal documentation of the human mind's inability to accurately document.

Presented alongside the drawings will be two installations of Pouyan's ceramic sculptures – "Still Life" and "Failed Objects". In each series he closely matches the clay and the techniques to those used in medieval Iranian pottery. "Still Life" recreates a precisely composed display of German artillery shells documented in a hand-coloured photograph taken by a French army officer during the First World War. The distribution of objects on the tabletop is clearly intentional and precisely thought out. The composition combined with muted colours and soft focus make it reminiscent of a Purist still life, of the type made by the twentieth century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi. Pouyan painstakingly recreates this grouping of objects in ceramics translating a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional composition back into a three-dimensional installation. He emphasizes small details such as the grooves and bands at the bottom of the shells, notches or tabs on their pointed ends, rendering them almost decorative. The shapes of the shells are subtly modified – made more bulbous and dome-like than the originals. The new material, more brittle and vulnerable than the metal of the original shells, also exaggerates many of the aesthetic transformations initiated by the soft patina of the vintage photograph. On one hand, the object composition becomes less a display of trophies from or remnants of a devastating war than a formal study of the relationship between objects – their scales, shapes, and tones. On the other, the still life as *vanitas* or *memento mori*, as a visual meditation on the transience of all things earthly and the inevitability of death, is supplanted by the somewhat more sinister domestication, through aestheticized mode of display, of instruments of death.

Finally; the six "Failed objects;" failed, possibly, because their use remains uncertain. This ambiguity imbues each of them with the aura of an archaeological artifact, with the limitless semantic potential of things recently excavated from the ground whose precise function and meaning is yet to be established. One resembles a terracotta jet engine, others resemble shells, but both the natural and war-like varieties. Polysexual and hybrid these objects are less definitively gendered blurring the line between masculine and feminine, organic and inorganic, body and machine. In this regard symbolically they recall the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, whose part-objects, according to Kleinian psychoanalysis, resemble those body parts important in the psychic development of the infant, whilst formally they are closer to Constantin Brancusi.

Just as geometric patterns and techniques spread historically throughout the Islamic world, adapting to local taste and materials, Ahrarnia and Pouyan explore the limitations of such traditional practices by transforming them within contemporary contexts and exploring the potential of one's craft - a rare survival in a world progressively more reliant on the accuracy of digital media and mechanized processes.

### **About Farhad Ahrarnia**

Farhad Ahrarnia (b. 1971, Shiraz) holds a degree in Experimental and Documentary Film Theory and Practice from the Northern Media School, Sheffield Hallam University, England. Since 1992, he lives and works in Sheffield.

Ahrarnia has had several solo shows such as 'A Dish Fit for the Gods', Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, 2015; 'Stage on Fire', Rose Issa Projects, London, 2014; 'Canary in a Coal Mine', Rose Issa Projects, London, 2014; 'Stitched', Leighton House Museum in collaboration with Rose IssaProjects, London, 2008 and 'Home', Bessie Sertees House, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead, 2004-2005. Recent group shows include 'Open Your Eyes', Rose Issa Projects, London, 2014; 'Embroideremania', Hinterland Kunzt Art for Vienna Art Week, 2013; 'Bringing the War Home', Winchester School of Art, 2013; 'The Beginning of Thinking is Geometric', Maraya Art centre-Barjeel foundation, Sharjah, 2013; 'Aks: pictorial representations from Iran', Roselssa Projects, London, 2012; 'Cometogther', Edge of Arabia, London, 2012; 'Migrasophia', at the Maraya Contemporary Art Centre in Sharjah, UAE, 2012; 'Zendegi: Twelve Contemporary Iranian Artists', Rose Issa Projects at the Beirut Exhibition Center, 2011; the touring exhibition 'Bringing the War Home', Impressions Gallery, Bradford, 2010-12; 'Balla Drama', Paradise Row Gallery, 2009; 'A Picture of Us', Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, 2009; 'Magic of Persia', Royal College of Art, London, 2009; 'Connect' at the Cartwright Hall Gallery, Bradford, 2007; 'Prelude', at the Cartwright Hall Gallery, Bradford, 2006; and 'Palace & Mosque: Islamic Arts from the Victoria & Albert Museum' at the Millennium Galleries, Sheffield (2006).

Ahrarnia has previously participated in 'The Great Game', Iranian Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2015; the 6th Tashkent Biennale of Contemporary Art, 2011; the Sheffield Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007 and Documenta XII, Kassel, Germany, 2007. His work is in the public collections of the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford; Harewood House, Leeds; and the British Museum.

### **About Shahpour Pouyan**

Born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1979, Shahpour Pouyan currently lives and works in New York. He has an MFA in Integrated Practices and New Forms at Pratt Institute, New York, and has an MFA in Painting from the Tehran University of Art. He previously studied Neoplatonic Philosophy at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy and received a diploma in Math and Physics from Elmieh School, Tehran. Between 2007 and 2009 he taught art history and the history of Persian Architecture at Science and Culture University, Tehran. Pouyan has had numerous solo gallery shows including XVA Gallery, Dubai (2009), Sixty Six Art Gallery, Tehran (2010), Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai (2011 and 2014) and Copperfield gallery, London (2015). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions and art fairs around the world, most recently in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India (2014), UNTITLED Art Fair, Miami Beach, Florida (2014), the Mykonos Biennale, Greece (2013) and Art 13 London, UK (2013). His work has also been included in publications produced both in and out of Iran and is part of many prominent private collections and of the permanent collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. He has participated in several international residencies including International Cite Des Arts, Paris, the Pegasus Art Foundation, Hyderabad, India, and the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, in March 2014.

### **About Lawrie Shabibi**

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery supports the long-term development of the careers of young international contemporary artists with a focus on those from the Middle East and North Africa. The gallery also organizes art historical exhibitions working with an older generation of artists from the region. Liaising with curators, institutions, museums and collectors the gallery has successfully introduced international artists to the region whilst at the same time presented Middle Eastern artists to the international contemporary arts community. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks,

publishing catalogues and participating in international art fairs, Lawrie Shabibi has in the space of five years been a forerunner in the development of the contemporary art scene in Dubai.

The gallery represents Hamra Abbas, Adel Abidin, Maliheh Afnan, Farhad Ahrarnia, Wafaa Bilal, Asad Faulwell, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Taus Makhacheva, Nabil Nahas, Driss Ouadahi, Shahpour Pouyan, Nathaniel Rackowe, Marwan Sahmarani, Larissa Sansour and Mona Saudi.

For information on Lawrie Shabibi please visit: [www.lawrieshabibi.com](http://www.lawrieshabibi.com)

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