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IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Myriad international shows, in galleries and museums alike, attest to the unexpected emergence of progressive Iranian art.

BY BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

THIS JUNE, Mahmoud Ahmadi-nejad was reelected president of Iran amid of voting irregularities and accusations of fraud by the supporters of the opposition candidate, Mir Hussein Mousavi. Ahmadinejad's victory reflects a harsh reality for Iranians: the entrenchment of a hard-line, conservative, religion-based regime presided over by the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader and real authority in Iran's opaque political-clerical structure. But an important truth has also emerged from the country's postelection demonstrations and turmoil: Iran is a nation deeply divided between, on the one hand, powerful anti-Western isolationists bent on the preservation of an Islamic theocracy and, on the other, a rising tide of liberal-minded, youthful (65 percent of the nation's population is under 35) and largely secular internationalists who no longer want their country to stand apart from the forces of economic and politi-

Shirin Neshat: *Untitled (Hands)*, 2005, inkjet print, 17½ by 11¾ inches. Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

An 18-artist group show, "The Promise of Loss: A Contemporary Index of Iran," at the Brot Kunststhal, Vienna, Oct. 9-Nov. 30. Y.Z. Kami's retrospective "Beyond Silence" at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, Oct. 22, 2009-Jan. 10, 2010.



THE ARRIVAL OF IRANIAN
ART ON THE GLOBAL SCENE
BEGAN IN THE MIDDLE
EAST AROUND 2004-05
AND SOON SPREAD TO
GALLERIES AND AUCTION
HOUSES IN LONDON, PARIS
AND NEW YORK.

cal globalization. They want a new identity for Iran.

In some ways, the Iranian art world provides an inspiring hint of what this new identity might look like. Yet Western observers have been so caught up in tracking the rise of India, China, Russia and other new art powers that they almost missed the sudden arrival of Iranian work on the international scene. That arrival began in commercial galleries in the Middle East around 2004-05 and soon spread to galleries in London, Paris and New York, cities where many Iranians fled after the monarchy was toppled in the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by radical cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. These expatriate communities provided a ready audience and market for the art.

So far, regional and international interest in Iranian art has been primarily driven by the market, not museums. Commercial venues like the Dubai-based galleries The Third Line and B21 took the lead in responding to a growing interest in Iranian art, followed by the international auction houses Christie's and Bonhams, which sought to establish a foothold in the burgeoning Middle Eastern market. More recently, the trend has inspired shows at galleries such as Karin Sachs in Munich, Xerxes in London, Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, and Thomas Erben and Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller in New York.

The auction houses have been an especially galvanizing force. In May 2006, Christie's in Dubai held its inaugural International Modern and Contemporary Art sale, garnering a modest \$2.2 million from Arab and Iranian works. The fourth auction, in April 2008, yielded over \$18 million from Arab and Iranian art, including a tall, rectangular hieroglyphic-covered bronze sculpture, *The*



Opposite top, Farhad Moshiri: *Eshgh* (Love), 2007, crystals, diamonds, glitter and acrylic on canvas on board, 61 by 69¼ inches. Courtesy The Third Line, Dubai.

Opposite bottom, Parviz Tanavoli: *The Wall* (Oh, Persepolis), 1975, bronze, 71¼ by 40 by 9 inches. Courtesy Christie's Images Ltd.

Below, Y.Z. Kami: *Untitled* (Maryam), 2007, oil on canvas, 116 by 66 inches. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.



Wall (Oh, Persepolis), 1975, by the then 71-year-old Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli. His piece alone fetched more than \$2.8 million, a world auction record for a Middle Eastern artist and the highest price paid for a work of art at auction in Dubai. A month earlier in Dubai, 45-year-old Iranian Farhad Moshiri's crystal-studded

painting *Eshgh* (Love), 2007, went for just over \$1 million at Bonhams inaugural Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian, Indian and Pakistani Art sale, making Moshiri the first Middle Eastern artist to break that price barrier at auction.

MORE RECENTLY, Iranian art has begun to trickle into Western museums via temporary exhibitions and, to a much lesser extent, acquisitions.¹ In May through July of this year, I visited half a dozen institutional shows in New York, Venice and London, finding the work to be full of vitality, humor and pathos. Politics was paramount in my conversations with artists, critics, curators and dealers—even though, for viewers without intimate knowledge of the Iranian context, that theme is not readily apparent in the art. In a country where art is supposed to be completely divorced from social or governmental issues, any whiff of critique can bring an artist into direct conflict with officialdom, testing the limits of tolerance and free speech in the 30-year-old republic. Somewhat unexpectedly, women are well represented in the Iranian contemporary art world (both inside and outside Iran), though the reasons for this are not entirely clear. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that today 60 percent of the university students in Iran are female;² many Iranian universities have studio art departments.

Unfortunately, the current crop of museum exhibitions comes nowhere near to integrating Iran into the international art world in a nuanced fashion. Missing at present is truly discerning curatorial support, which so far few influential museums have stepped up to provide. Too many bad or simply mediocre works overwhelmed the considerably fewer really good ones in "Iran Inside Out," a well-intended survey of over 50 Iranian artists offered this summer at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York. In other instances, mixing Iranian artists with peers from other Middle Eastern countries, however interesting the cultural dynamic, has resulted in a lack of focus. That was certainly the case with "Tarjama/Translation," a group show covering Iran, the Middle East and Central Asia at New York's Queens Museum of Art, and the well-publicized "Unveiled: New Art

IRAN HAS A MODERN ART MOVEMENT DATING BACK TO THE 1940s, AND WHILE THE 1979 REVOLUTION AND THE EIGHT-YEAR WAR WITH IRAQ CREATED HAVOC, THE LOCAL SCENE MANAGED TO SURVIVE AND EVEN TO THRIVE.

from the Middle East" at the Saatchi Gallery in London. The same problem hampered "East-West Divan," a sampler of work from Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan at the Scuola Grande della Misericordia in Venice during this year's 53rd Biennale. Iran had an official pavilion at Venice this year as well, with three lackluster representatives riffing on calligraphy and traditional Islamic motifs. It's no surprise to discover that the show was partly funded by the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Iran's first presence at the Biennale in the postrevolutionary period was in 2003, after an absence of almost 40 years.

But these shows, coupled with group exhibitions at commercial galleries in London, Paris and New York [see sidebar], affirmed the increasing depth and sophistication of contemporary Iranian art. They also revealed that the Iranian scene is considerably larger, more pluralistic and globally attuned than some press reports have previously suggested. In addition to the more obvious names—including artists such as Siah Armajani, Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, Seifollah Samadian, Farhad Moshiri, Mitra Tabrizian, Shirazeh Houshiary, Reza Derakshani and Y.Z. Kami, all of whom have received international museum attention, and older blue-chip artists like Parviz Tanavoli and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, who were founders in the 1960s of the Saqqakhaneh School, Iran's first contemporary art movement—the country has produced a substantial number of young artists whose work stands out. Many are living in New York and several in London, but quite a few are in Iran.

Before turning to artists in the country, it is worth mentioning that many of the big-name artists are still expatriates. Neshat (b. 1957), a



New York-based photographer and filmmaker, is probably the most celebrated representative of new Iranian art. Her films, combining poetry and politics, are a forum for the contestation of social arrangements based on gender in Islamic countries [see *A.i.A.*, June/July 2009]. In September, she won the Silver Lion for Director at the Venice Film Festival for her feature-length debut, *Women Without Men*.

Long resident in New York, Kami (b. 1956), who studied philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley,

and at the Sorbonne in Paris, makes monumental, contemplative portraits as well as calligraphic collages that combine segments of Persian, Arabic and Hebrew texts. His pieces clearly draw their formal inspiration from classical Persian mosaics, tiles and brickwork. He has participated in many international exhibitions, including the Venice and Istanbul biennials.

IRAN HAS long and storied traditions of painting; poetry, music, calligraphy, textiles, ceramics and architecture, as well as a modern art move-

ment dating back to the 1940s. While the 1979 revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88) created havoc and upheaval, cutting off Iranians from the rest of the world, the local art scene managed to survive and more recently even thrive, particularly under the liberal reformist government of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Traditional art instruction continues, with students dutifully emulating the work of past masters, but there are also some relatively progressive art schools. The Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University, for example, has turned out numerous promising graduates, including Rokni Haerizadeh (b. 1978), whose socially minded, pop-inspired paintings have been widely exhibited both in Iran and abroad. Tehran even has a lively gallery scene, with the Silk Road Gal-



Left, Farhad Moshiri: *Untitled* (*My heart is your love's play toy*), 2004, oil on canvas, 57 by 44 inches. Courtesy LTMH Gallery.

Opposite, Ramin Haerizadeh: *Theatre Group* (3), 2008, C-print, 39¾ by 27½ inches. Courtesy LTMH Gallery.

Below, Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi: *Intifada Laundry Liquid*, from the "Operation Supermarket" series, 2005, inkjet print, 39¾ by 29½ inches. Private collection. Courtesy The Third Line.



lery, among others, promoting a new generation of artists. And lately some notable expatriates, such as Derakshani and Moshiri, have returned to Tehran.

Moshiri (b. 1963), who was born in Iran but studied fine art and filmmaking at the California Institute of the Arts, is one of today's most widely discussed and sought-after Iranian artists. He has a pop-satirical sensibility, manifest not only in his widely known crystal-studded paintings and calligraphy but also in installations that feature gilded machine guns and grenades, as well as paintings of Persian pots and jars decorated with colloquial Iranian sayings, and, most recently, a series of supermarket commodities and related advertising posters that he made in collaboration with Shirin Aliabadi (b. 1973). These pseudo-products—e.g., Tolerating Intolerance chocolate bars, Hijab Barbie dolls (referencing the headscarf worn by Islamic women) and Intifada Laundry Liquid—parody stereotypes the Western media associate with the Middle East. For *Flying Carpet* (2007), a work shown at Art Basel in 2007, Moshiri stacked together Persian carpets from which he cut the shape of a generic fighter jet, implying foreign dominance or perhaps Iranian hawkishness. The meaning is ambiguous.



Above, Shirin Aliabadi: *Hybrid Girl 6*, 2008, digital C-print, 59 by 43 3/4 inches. Courtesy The Third Line.

Right, Khosrow Hassanzadeh: *Pahlavan II, Ready to Order*, 2008, mixed mediums, 76 by 52 by 10 inches. Private collection. Courtesy B21 Gallery, Dubai.

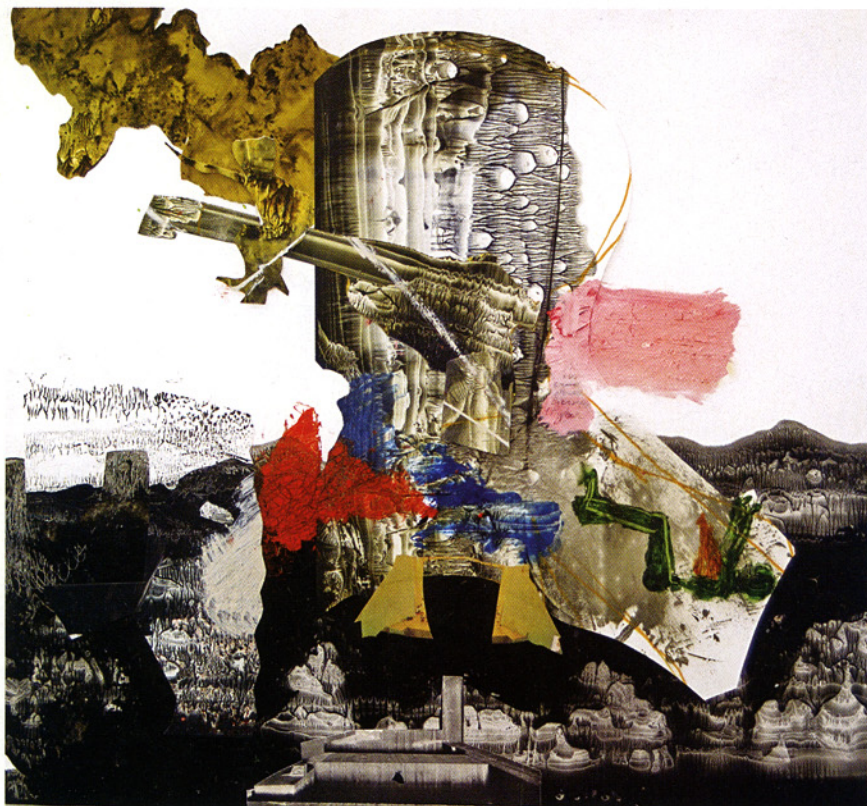
These days, given the Internet and the increasing possibility for international travel by artists living in Iran, one can make fewer formal distinctions between the work of artists who reside abroad and those who have stayed in Iran. Of course, given the very real threat of imprisonment, artists living in Iran need to be more circumspect in their reactions to political repression, oil politics and other issues affecting the Iranian people. Nudity, too, remains a taboo. But, while more oblique, the work of these artists is no less politically or socially engaged than that of the expatriates. In collages and digitally manipulated photographs, Tehran-based Ramin Haerizadeh (b. 1975, Rokni's brother) playfully appropriates imagery from Persian miniatures, architecture, carpets, and theatrical costumes and sets to make split-faced, androgynous self-portraits that mirror what Layla Diba, adjunct professor at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, calls the "sexual and political schizophrenia of contemporary Iranian life."³ In color photographs, Shirin Aliabadi, also Tehran-based, documents Iran's urban youth, especial-

ly young women who have begun to express themselves through makeup, clothes and plastic surgery, despite rigid laws governing the comportment of Islamic women.

SEVERAL ARTISTS (some residing in Iran, some outside) draw on immediately recognizable cultural elements, including miniature painting, popular culture, nationalist kitsch, street murals, and historical and religious artifacts. Shiva Ahmadi (b. 1975),

who now lives in Detroit, decorates oil barrels with designs taken from classical Persian miniatures and from Islamic art of various historical periods. Photo artist Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974), based in Tehran, explores gender roles in Iranian society through black-and-white portraits of modern women dressed up in traditional Qajar period (1781-1925) costumes and posed against backgrounds inspired by 19th-century Iranian studio photography. Khosrow





Top, Laleh Khorramian:
Green Lungs, 2008, oil,
crayon and collage on
polypropylene, 26 by 28 inches.
Courtesy The Third Line.

Above, Vahid Sharifian:
Untitled, from the series "Queen
of the Jungle (If I Had a Gun),"
2007-08, digital print on metallic
paper, 9 by 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.
Courtesy Khastoo Gallery,
Los Angeles.

Hassanzadeh (b. 1963), also Tehran-based, makes boxlike reliquaries filled with vernacular kitsch. The works, which pay tribute to contemporary Iranian icons such as wrestlers and pop singers, are modeled loosely on the popular shrines found at the birthplace of imams and the tombs of martyrs.

Laleh Khorramian (b. 1974), Kamrooz Aram (b. 1978) and Vahid

THESE DAYS, GIVEN THE INTERNET AND INCREASING POSSIBILITIES FOR TRAVEL, ONE CAN MAKE FEWER FORMAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE WORK OF IRANIANS WHO RESIDE ABROAD AND THOSE WHO HAVE STAYED IN IRAN.

Sharifian (b. 1982) are three promising artists who address politics or social issues only indirectly, if at all. Khorramian, who lives in New York and has shown at Salon 94, is a printmaker working with the expressive potential of stains and marks. She does not use a press, but creates monotypes by applying ink and paint to the paper with the weight of a large piece of glass. Chance determines the end result, along with an intuitive feel for negative or empty space. Aram [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '09], a painter also based in New York, draws inspiration from the decorative properties of classical Persian ornamentation—although, having lived in the U.S. since the age of eight, he melds these influences with many others from both East and West. Sharifian, Tehran-based and little known outside of the country, makes both sculptural tableaux with everyday objects and digital photographs in an ironic pop style worthy of Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach. His assertive, occasionally astonishing 2007-08 photographic series "Queen of the Jungle (If I Had a Gun)" features the artist in his underpants, doing things like boxing with a horse, battling an eagle and fornicating with a lion.

The new interest in Iranian art has opened up opportunities for senior artists as well. Monir Shahrودي Farmanfarmaian (b. 1924), who has had a long, quite active career, is now receiving renewed international attention. She creates glass mosaics that blend Iranian culture and Western modernism, chiefly abstraction. The fusion reflects her life story: after growing up in Tehran, Farmanfarmaian studied at the Parsons School of Art and Design in New York, where she witnessed the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Returning to Iran, she began to create modernist geometric sculptures covered with shim-

IRAN GOES INTERNATIONAL— SOME RECENT GROUP SHOWS

GALLERIES

Raad o Bargh [Thunder and Lightning]:

17 Artists from Iran

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris

Feb. 19-Mar. 27, 2009

Ghazel, Ramin Haerizadeh, Shirin Aliabadi, Bitā Fayyazi, Laleh Khorramian et al.

Looped and Layered: A Selection of Contemporary Art from Tehran

Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

May 14-July 10, 2009

12 artists

Mohsen Ahmadvand, Ala Dehghan, Shahab Fouchi, Barbad Golshiri, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Sadegh Tirafkan, Ramin Haerizadeh et al.

Guns and Roses: Contemporary Iranian Art

Eleven Howland Gallery, London

May 22-Aug. 15, 2009

12 artists

Shahriar Ahmadi, Farhad Moshiri, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Pooya Aryanpour, Samira Alikhanzadeh, Afshin Pirhashemi, Reza Derakhshani et al.

Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art

Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York

May 27-Sept. 10, 2009

40 artists

Shoja Azari, Shahram Karimi, Shiva Ahmadi, Poursan Jinchī, Negar Ahkami, Y.Z. Kami, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Shirin Neshat et al.

MUSEUMS AND ART CENTERS

Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East

Saatchi Gallery, London

Jan. 30-May 9, 2009

21 artists from various Middle Eastern countries

Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Shirin Fakhim et al.

Tarjama/Translation

Queens Museum of Art, New York

May 10-Sept. 27, 2009

Curated by Leeza Ahmady and Iftikhar Dadi

27 artists from various countries in the Middle East and Central Asia

Nazgol Ansarinia, Poursan Jinchī, Farhad Moshiri, Solmaz Shahbazi, Mitra Tabrizian et al.

East-West Divan

Scuola Grande della Misericordia

at the 53rd Venice Biennale

June 7-Oct. 4, 2009

Curated by Jemima Montagu

10 artists from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Bahman Jalali et al.

Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of 56 Contemporary Iranian Artists

Chelsea Art Museum, New York

June 26-Sept. 5, 2009

Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath

Artists: Vahid Sharifian, Barbad Golshiri, Farideh Lashai, Jinoos Taghizadeh, Shirin Neshat, Shahram Entekhabi, Mitra Tabrizian, Shoja Azari et al.

mering mirror bits. Her repertoire of traditional craft techniques—many of the sort once employed to decorate temples, shrines and palaces—includes reverse glass painting and inlaid marquetry. *Maquette for Zahra's Image* (2009), a multifaceted, visually disorienting mirror mosaic included in the "East-West Divan" show in Venice, is a preparatory work for a large-scale, site-specific installation commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane for the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial, opening Dec. 5.

GIVEN THE CURRENT proliferation of Iranian exhibitions and sales, it is tempting to see an analogy between the country's art world today and the scene in China a decade ago, when the PRC benefited from a large pool of talented artists, a diaspora of successful and influential individuals (artists, intellectuals, businesspeople), an emerging global market and sporadic Western museum shows. But Iran is still a long way from joining China as an art-world power. The chief difference, aside from an enor-





Above, Shiva Ahmadi:
Oil Barrel #5, 2009,
oil on steel, 34½ inches tall.
Courtesy LTMH Gallery.

Opposite, Monir Shahroudy
Farmanfarmaian: *Maquette
for Zahra's Image*, 2009,
mirror, reverse glass painting,
plaster, 9¾ by 6½ feet.
Courtesy The Third Line.

mous disparity in size and a radically changed global economic context, is that the market—and most of the audience—for contemporary Iranian art remains confined to a core community of culturally patriotic Iranians at home and abroad. By contrast, the major supporters of Chinese contemporary art were (and to some extent still are) Westerners, a number of them living in the People's Republic. In this sense, the Iranian art world today is probably more like

the Indian art world was some five years ago, when a newly prosperous group of resident and nonresident Indians began to reinvest in their own visual culture.

What will become of this brash new art from Iran? The fact that Iranians are chosen with increasing frequency for international fairs, biennials and museum shows is an encouraging sign, as is the nascent market for their work. Meanwhile, the art scene inside Iran continues to grow and evolve. Yet politically the nation, accused of illegally developing nuclear weapons, remains something of an outcast from the international community. Iran and the U.S. have failed to normalize relations (something that China and the U.S. did in 1972, despite ideological differences), while official Iranian suspicion of an abstract "West" and hatred of Israel remain deeply ingrained. None of this bodes well for continuing art-world outreach, especially while cumbersome international sanctions remain in place. But there is optimism, particularly among the young, who are convinced a new historical chapter is beginning. They believe change is coming. As artist Shirin Aliabadi observes in an interview recently published in the catalogue for the "Raad o Bargh" show in Paris, "the atmosphere in Iranian contemporary art over these last two years has been euphoric. I hope it was for the right reasons." ○

1 Among the handful of museum exhibitions mounted before the current wave of enthusiasm were "Iranian Contemporary Art" at the Barbican Center, London, 2001, and "After the Revolution: Contemporary Artists from Iran" at the Koldo Mitxelena, San Sebastián, Spain, 2005, which later traveled to the Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen. **2** See Roger Cohen, "Iran: The Tragedy and the Future," *New York Review of Books*, Aug. 13, 2009, p. 8. **3** Layla Diba, Introduction, *Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art*, New York, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, 2009, p. 7.

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