



سنگ

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تقریباً یک سال است
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کلاه کلاه - ۱۸ دلار
شماره جوتو قرمزی - ۱۳ دلار که برنده دیگر کلان - ۲۰ دلار
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TEHRAN BAZAAR

Contemporary Art in the Time of the Ayatollahs

By Joobin Bekhrad

In discourses revolving around Iran's tumultuous history, particularly that of the last thousand years, a comparison has often been made between Iranian culture and the mythical phoenix. Following the decay and decline of the Sassanian Empire—heir to the legacy of the Achaemenids and Parthians, whose influence not only reached the far-flung corners of the then-known world politically, but culturally as well—Iran was plunged into a dark era that would radically alter the course of its culture, history, and identity for centuries to come. The arrival of the Umayyads and Abbasids saw not only the eradication of Zoroastrianism, the indigenous Iranian religion dominant at the time, but also the widespread suppression of the Persian language and Iranian culture, which culminated in what is now referred to as the dreaded “two centuries of silence.” And, just when the newly humbled Iranians—who had only a short while back given the Romans a run for their money—thought they had seen the worst, the Mongols, following the course of their Seljuk brethren who had recently swept through Iran and laid the foundations for modern-day Turkey, razed the land of the noble to the ground, laying once-proud Persia to waste.

Of many of the countless peoples and places Herodotus documented in his colossal *Histories*, only names and vestiges remain. Despite having been in the epicenter of a region continuously subject to invasion, bloodshed, intercultural tensions, and religious strife (to name a few malaises), Iranian culture has always managed, somehow or other, not only to survive, but to proudly flourish, despite various changes in its outward appearance and form. From the ashes of the remnants of the House of Sassan, and from the depths of the two centuries of silence emerged the voices of Rudaki, the first major poet to write in modern-day Persian (i.e., the Dari variant), and Ferdowsi, who, in a labor of love composed the triumphant *Shahnameh*, Iran's

◁ *Untitled, 2009 (Rostam II Series), by Siamak Filizadeh. Courtesy of Aaran Gallery Tehran*

national epic celebrating pre-Islamic Iranian mythology and lore. Later, though Iran found itself yet again under foreign occupation—this time by Turco-Mongol dynasties from the East—Iranian art and architecture flourished and adapted itself to its new surroundings. Iran later enjoyed a lavish renaissance at the hands of the first indigenous rulers of Iran since the Sassanians, the Safavids. Despite their religious zealotry and fervent promotion of Shi'ism (by sometimes questionable means), they ushered in a golden age of Iranian art and culture still looked upon with reverence and longing today by Iranians and non-Iranians alike.

Fast-forward some three hundred years, beyond the lost glory of Esfahan and the languid glances, dark tresses, and swarthy, curved eyebrows of the belles of the Qajar epoch, and on the eve of yet another cultural revolution, Iran's art and culture was again being molded anew by its proud sons and daughters. Alongside the introduction of modern architecture and radical developments in literature (particularly the *Sher-e No* movement of modern poetry), the foundations of what would later be defined as contemporary Iranian art were being laid by the artists of the *Saqqakhaneh* (Waterhouse) school. Drawing inspiration from popular Iranian Shi'a visuals and iconography, artists such as Parviz Tanavoli, Faramarz Pilaram, and Hossein Zenderoudi, among others—encouraged by the culturally in-tune Empress Farah Diba—explored new vistas and boundaries in Iranian art, and were at the forefront of a new generation of artists and intellectuals finding a place for themselves and their ideas in an era of cultural reform and modernization. After a brief period of blossoming in the 1960s and 1970s, Iran was shaken to its core, first by the revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, and shortly afterwards by a devastating war (1980–88) with Iraq's Saddam Hussein and his then-allies in the West.

Though Iran, a foundling republic barely given enough time to stand on its feet, emerged the unlikely champion in the bloody conflict with Iraq, it was a Pyrrhic victory at best. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's efforts to usher in an era of modernization and Western ideals were brought to a halt, and in their stead came the ideals of Shi'a Islam, the values of an Islamic Republic, and the guiding vision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In addition, the celebration of pre-Islamic Iran and indigenous Iranian culture was almost reversed, as the fervent revolutionaries promoted an identity that was not only Islamic, but that primarily revolved around certain personalities and episodes in the history of Shi'a Islam. While Imam Ali took the crown from Cyrus the Great, Imam Hossein, the 'King of Martyrs,' proudly sat on Darius' throne, surrounded by the tulips sprouted from the pure blood of Iran's newly fallen heroes.

For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, Iran remained a country more or less isolated from the rest of the world, with an economy in shambles, a history trying to

rewrite itself, and a culture trying to redefine itself; it was difficult to buy bananas, let alone art. For years, those artists who chose not to leave the country found themselves either subdued or silenced, and the contemporary art scene accordingly all but withered away. Withered is perhaps the key word, here, though; for, just as the Persian language was revived, and Iranian art and culture at times lay dormant only to rise and flourish against the odds, the seeds planted by the pioneers of the country's contemporary art scene once again bore fruit. During the President Mohammed Khatami era (1997–2005), social and cultural reforms were implemented, much to the benefit of artists as well as the country's sizeable youth population, the offspring of war and revolution. Greater freedoms were granted to the press, restrictions were eased with respect to licenses for musical and cultural output, and increased social liberties were afforded to Iranian youth. During this period, still regarded as one of brief respite, the grounds were made fertile for a new generation of artists and intellectuals to—against tired narratives of sacrifice, outside aggression, and the “enemy”—find hope, and make their voices heard.

Bokhor and Bekbar

Iran's domestic contemporary art market has begun to flourish again. Many observers posit that it has been in the past ten years that the market has truly become active. The reasons for this, as I discovered through a series of discussions with local artists, gallery owners, and dealers on a trip I made to Tehran in May, are varied. For one, the end of the Iran-Iraq War saw a gradual improvement in Iran's economy, and, together with the cultural reforms brought about by President Khatami, substantial improvements in social conditions and daily life. Furthermore, though Iran as a country may still remain relatively isolated, the new generation of artists is not. With access to the Internet, social media, and satellite television (though these are accessed by circumventing various filters and bans), such artists are up-to-date with and abreast of developments in the outside world, and with increasing numbers of solo and group exhibitions being held outside the country, are regularly traveling and establishing connections with foreign institutions and artists. In addition, though it may seem obvious, constantly being in world news headlines and the subject of negative press and controversy has, according to many here, helped fuel interest in all things Iranian, art included. And, although sanctions have had disastrous consequences for the local economy and Iranians' purchasing power, some have noted that they have, in a way, provided a boost to the domestic art market. With international art being less affordable, and traditional assets such as foreign currency, gold, oil, and real estate generating lower returns these days, many are looking towards the local art market not only to satisfy their cultural cravings, but also as a source of investment.

Despite the attention contemporary Iranian art has been receiving on an international level, and the growing number of institutions promoting contemporary Iranian art outside the country (for example, Magic of Persia in London, and the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai), it is a mistake to dismiss the domestic market as a backwater or as being less active than those of the Gulf region or Europe. In addition to having its own auction—the Tehran Art Auction, which recently sold in the realm of millions of U.S. dollars in its third edition last May—and a contemporary art museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran alone now boasts over two hundred contemporary art galleries. Some claim that a new art space is opening in the capital every two months. Of course, the number of more serious and successful galleries is much fewer (one artist cited only ten as being worthy); nonetheless, the sheer amount and growth rate of contemporary galleries are cause for wonderment.

With modern, luxurious spaces both in the heart of Tehran as well as in its suburbs, leading galleries such as Aaran, Assar, Aun, Shirin, Etemad, and Khak (the latter three having opened branches in New York and Dubai, respectively) regularly display works by local artists of all calibers—emerging, established, and master artists—in packed openings of group and solo exhibitions that usually take place on Fridays, the weekly day of rest. “It’s amazing,” commented a friend from the United States who happened to be in town at the time. “I feel like I’m in New York!” Aside from the preponderance of loosely tied headscarves and the absence of chardonnay, one certainly does get the feeling of being in a hyperactive art capital admiring world-class art alongside members of a chic, cultured elite. However—as is often the case—the number of socialites and gallery-hoppers often outnumber the serious collectors. “There are two types of people who come to our exhibitions,” remarked Shirin Partovi of Shirin Gallery, as she puffed away on a cigarette overlooking the Alborz mountains from the terrace of her gallery, “*bokhor* and *bekhar* [eaters and buyers]!”

Comments such as these, quite naturally, lead one to wonder about the makeup of the domestic market. Who are these *bekhars*, and what are they buying? According to Shirin Jelveh, a local art dealer who has been active for the past ten years, there are three major categories of buyers in the domestic market: art lovers, professional collectors, and dealers. While those in the first group primarily buy art for art’s sake (and within lower budgets), those in the other two look at things somewhat differently. The more serious collectors, many of whom are friends and acquaintances of gallery owners, tend to be more concerned about the monetary appreciation of the pieces in their collection and the acquisition of works by better-known artists, or at least those they think will become established names in the near future. However, according to Amirhossein Zanjani, a local artist whose works were recently exhibited at the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai, there are only around ten collectors in this group who are

actually interested in the works they are buying, and who are knowledgeable about contemporary art; the rest, he argued, only look at works as investments. The dealers, it can be said, are driven by purely financial concerns (although their interest in art may have spurred their decision to deal in it), and typically hold on to pieces for six months before selling them in the hopes of deriving returns. All this being said, though, as Jelveh was quick to note, when it comes to the buyers of such pieces, one is talking about a niche in society—particularly, a wealthy (not necessarily intellectual) elite, based primarily in Tehran—meaning that art may have quite a way to go before it truly rivals other sources of investment.

As glitzy and bustling as the scene may appear at first, though, like any other market, the domestic art market in Tehran is not without its problems. Although its contemporary art scene has seen a substantial surge in activity and interest in the past ten years as well as the establishment of a new market, it is important to note that it is being supported first and foremost by private individuals and institutions; in other words, many confidently state, it is receiving zero support from the government, both in a cultural and economic sense. Although President Hassan Rowhani has softened the official tone somewhat, and has made remarks regarding his wish to devote more attention to arts and culture, tangible results remain to be seen. “Don’t look at us and generalize,” one art dealer told me. “It’s as if we’re living in a bubble. We’re a minority here.”

Despite an almost total lack of support from the public sector, however, in addition to an influx of galleries and collectors, artist-run initiatives have also sprouted in response to a greater need for support and exposure. The Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art—which takes its name from the nearby Department of Water—is perhaps a prime example. Initiated and managed by Sohrab Kashani, a local artist and curator in his mid-20s, Sazmanab is a nonprofit space in Tehran that has been supporting artists working in a variety of mediums—both Iranian and international—through holding exhibitions, providing residencies, producing publications, collaborating with international institutions, and holding talks and workshops since 2009. Similarly, Parkingallery, founded and run by Amirali Ghasemi, another young local artist and curator, has been providing an outlet for younger artists in Tehran, as well as organizing exhibitions since 1998, and is also known for its extensive archives of video art, a medium less frequently seen and appreciated in Tehran. “They [Sohrab and Amirali] are driven by their passions, not any selfish or purely monetary interests,” remarked Nazila Noebashari, director of Tehran’s Aaran Gallery, as we enjoyed Armenian-style sandwiches in the gallery’s leafy backyard after I was awed by the works of Siamak Filizadeh that were on display.

Censorship and Creativity

When discussing any form of art produced in Iran in the past thirty-five years, the issue of censorship almost always arises. Despite having to obtain licenses to release films, and being under heavy scrutiny by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Iranian filmmakers, for instance, have still been able to produce critically acclaimed and award-winning films for decades, and the case is hardly different when it comes to visual art. As with film, Iranian artists have effectively been finding new and innovative ways to express themselves, often producing art that is much more complex and subversive in the process. “Censorship has helped fuel creativity,” noted Jelveh, further pointing out that when many Iranian artists—be they filmmakers, photographers, or writers—leave, they lose much of their impetus and inspiration. Indeed, one may wonder if what is commonly viewed by locals and outsiders alike as a major obstacle has actually helped build today’s generation of Iranian artists. One exhibition I attended, for example, featured historical figures from Iran’s past, though the messages were starkly contemporary, while an artist I visited in his studio showed me a selection of works that brilliantly tackled domestic issues using foreign subjects and themes.

However much they have found ways around the issue (and become much bolder), censorship still is a prominent issue for artists, gallerists, and dealers. One artist I spoke with complained of not being able to exhibit or even take outside the country certain works due to their sensitive subject matter. A prominent graphic artist also noted that, because of the impossibility of particular artworks being shown in public, numerous private exhibitions are being held in residential spaces for select audiences. Also, though officials are not cracking down on exhibitions as much as they used to—one dealer having remarked that five years ago, every single work in an exhibition had to be scrutinized beforehand—there is still the fear of exhibitions being closed and cancelled, as well as of artists and gallery owners being subject to questioning. “I’ve been to the Ministry of Information so many times, you don’t want to go there,” one artist told me, mentioning that after her first visit she was afraid to even make calls on her mobile phone out of fear of being monitored. It is not just within Iran that one needs to be cautious, though; while traveling abroad, artists and gallerists need to be wary about their words and actions, lest they attract attention back home and run the risk of having to explain themselves.

Though the issue of censorship still looms over Iranian artists abroad, it is becoming more and more difficult for artists to even travel or exhibit their works outside Iran in the first place. Rising inflation has meant that it is much more costly to travel. Majid Abbasi Farahani, a young local artist, expressed regret at not being able to take advantage of an artist residency he was granted in China because of its

lengthy duration. As well, one must consider the difficulty Iranians face in obtaining visas, particularly for countries in Europe and North America. Despite having been granted an invitation to attend a group exhibition in London, a local artist recently traveled to Ankara to apply for a visa at the British embassy, only to have his application rejected after staying in the Turkish capital for three weeks. In another instance, due to economic sanctions, a number of works by Amirhossein Radaie, a young sculptor, were barred from being allowed into Canada, and it was only after extreme tribulations and efforts that Canada's minister of foreign affairs personally granted permission due to the cultural and non-commercial nature of the event they were intended for. These, of course, are only a few examples of the many trials Iranian artists are facing these days in obtaining international exposure.

Many local artists express concern about works being produced by their contemporaries nowadays. Perhaps in an attempt to emulate the success of international household names such as Shirin Neshat and her now-iconic *Women of Allah* series, a number of artists have been producing what has popularly been termed "chador art": that is, works—of a somewhat Orientalist nature, some have argued—featuring women in chadors, veils, hijabs, and the like, with "exotic" supplements such as calligraphy, much favored by Arab as well as international collectors. Zanjani, as well as Amirhossein Bayani, another local artist, likened these works to souvenirs, and noted that they are largely being produced for foreign tastes and buyers, and as such, are inauthentic. According to Bayani, chador art is but one manifestation of a wave of younger artists looking to make a quick *toman* at any cost. Others have expressed distaste at the number of younger artists copying one another and producing works devoid of any real artistic merit, and at the tendencies of some older, more respected artists, who have recently been producing more commercial works in greater numbers, to the point that their pieces have been likened to mass-produced products. Additionally, others have noted with regret how some artists have sold themselves to foreign dealers and gallerists, who regularly travel to Tehran to take advantage of the favorable exchange rate and younger artists' financial situations.

What this has meant for other artists is that venues for and collectors of alternative forms of art, as well as those in other mediums—especially video and installation art—are harder to come by. That is not to say that all artists have been selling out, though; on the contrary, Tehran boasts a large number of artists highly respected by both collectors and their peers, and, as Bayani noted, in the past two years, many have begun to rebel against norms, clichés, and expectations to produce more serious art. Indeed, the number of artists I met whose financial situations were tight, yet who continued producing art they believed in—and who expressed a bold commitment in continuing to do so—were not few and far between.

If censorship is an issue that surfaced in nearly every conversation I had, more or less, the Tehran Art Auction and what some have termed gangsterism are two others. Despite the reported financial successes of the past three auctions, many have expressed skepticism with respect to the validity and credibility of the sales. According to one dealer, the primary goal of the auction is to set exorbitant prices, and to act as an investment vehicle for a select group of individuals that many are quick to refer to as a gang or mafia. As the same dealer noted, this can also work against artists, as after such inflated and unreasonable prices have been set publicly, the only way forward for artists is downhill. Others are less critical; one individual blamed artists for dealing with ignoramuses in the first place, while another cited false expectations as a major problem altogether. “There are no gangs,” the artist told me. “Artists expect too much. They think elsewhere people become rich and famous easily. The successful ones have earned it. The ones who complain about gangs, their work isn’t that good.” Others, while remaining skeptical about the auction and those involved, admit that there have been positive outcomes of such activities, citing the investment in younger artists, increased exposure on a domestic and international level for the local art scene, and the growing interest in and enthusiasm for contemporary Iranian art—whatever the reasons for these may be.

A Phoenix Ascendant?

For all that is unfortunate, questionable, and regrettable about the present condition of the contemporary art market in Iran, an unmistakable atmosphere of hope is present. Though, one and all, they complained about their myriad difficulties, not a single individual I spoke with expressed a sense of hopelessness or pessimism about the future. Perhaps it has something to do with growing up in the wake of a cultural revolution in an era of war and aggression, and living in the pandemonium of the capital of a country perhaps only second to North Korea in terms of its isolation from the outside world; in other words, things can only get better. “I want to be optimistic,” Bayani told me. “We need hope to stay alive. Things will get better.” Many are looking to President Rowhani for signs of change and progress, and are more optimistic than they were during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency, although only time will tell whether the new government can bring about meaningful change for Iranian artists. Some, like Jelveh, are optimistic to the point that they see international auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s opening branches in Tehran in the near future to capitalize on the wealth of local Iranian art and its growing demand there. Others, like Zanjani, however, while expressing hope in the future, at the same time admit the need for certain developments to take place in order for the art market to further thrive. “We need better curators, better critics,”

he told me a day before flying to Dubai, another hotspot for Iranian art. “It’s getting better, but we’re still not there.”

Iranian art is on the rise, as a result of the passion and efforts of a new generation of artists, who despite everything have retained a sense of hope and optimism for the future. One can sense the gradual establishment of a vibrant, sustainable, and thriving market whose artists will continue to turn heads for decades to come. Having emerged from the ashes of war and revolution, Iranian art is yet again that phoenix ascendant.