

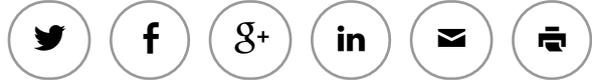


Siamak Filizadeh reworks Persian legends using action movie imagery in the Rostam 2: The Return series.

Dubai art scene's Iranian expressions

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One-page article

After 1945, a popular joke in US military circles was to say that America's technological edge over the Soviet Union just meant "our German scientists are better than their German scientists". Something similar might be said for art in the UAE: the scene is only really as exciting as its Iranians. The Iranian diaspora has flooded the Emirates with some of the best contemporary talent in the region. Their work is varied but has a distinctive flavour: spluttering, sardonic, punkish. One gets the impression of an artistic culture going for broke. It's daring because it's desperate, exuberant because it wants to break out. The Emirati artist Lamya Gargash told me in December: "They've got their mark. If you look at their work you can understand where it came from."

She went on to hope that the UAE's home-grown artists would develop such a signature of their own. It so happens that the Farjam Collection at the DIFC has a pretty good overview of the Iranian situation. Iran Inside Out features work from 29 contemporary artists. The show was put together with the help of the Hafiz Foundation and Art Reoriented and has already played in a couple of American spaces - the Chelsea Art Museum in New York and the DePaul University Museum in Chicago - where it picked up warm reviews.

For its Dubai run, some pieces from Dr Farhad Farjam's private collection are supplementing it. The scene that emerges is not as homogenous as Gargash's remarks might suggest: there's a gulf between, for example, Pouran Jinchi's meditative calligraphy, Iman Maleki's rather earnest narrative paintings and Khosrow Hassanzadeh's pop-art shrines, tongue-in-cheek celebrations of that strain of kitsch called *javad*. But you can see her point: there's a family resemblance among many of these pieces, recurring preoccupations with memorabilia and trash, iconography and the texture of lived experience, the compatibility of various jostling roles.

The husband and wife duo of Shirin Aliabadi and Farhad Moshiri redesign branded packaging to include stinging slogans: bottles of detergent spell out "We are all Americans"; Toblerone chocolate bars are altered to read "Tolerating intolerance". This is polemic blunt as *Adbusters*, and it is echoed in the magazine spoofs of Siamak Filizadeh and Sara Rahbar's embroidered US flags (you can see more of the latter's work at Carbon 12 from March 25). Behdad Lahooti cuts cuneiform texts from Iran's pre-Islamic history into the surface of plastic colanders and dust pans: how else to reconcile the legendary past with the present?

The same dilemma arises in a different form in the fantastical canvases of Rokni Haerizadeh. In his *The Anniversary of the Islamic Republic, Revolution*, a tightrope walker, reduced to a pair of legs, an archaic collar and a head, walks above a courtyard filled with blind and indifferent consumption: his marvellous feat belongs to another world. Ala Ebtakar, meanwhile, marries hip-hop graphical styles and fashion-magazine photography to mythical subjects and Mogul designs, and Filizadeh reworks Persian legends using action movie imagery, as in his *Rostam 2: The Return* series. These artists may not be fellow travellers, exactly; they're too scattered geographically and politically for that. But there are marked tendencies in their approach towards subversion, ironic juxtaposition - even, in the happiest cases, a reconciliation of disparate ingredients.

Aliabadi's solo show at The Third Line gallery certainly appears more reconciled than her previous work, and to a suspicious degree. Her earlier *Miss Hybrid* series - photo portraits of Iranian girls with platinum-blond hair and surgical plasters on their perfect noses, blowing bubblegum bubbles and modelling chic headscarves - asked satirical questions about what modern Iranian womanhood is supposed to be. Her work with her husband, Moshiri, described above, took a still more overtly combative stance. So why is she now making endless pencil-crayon sketches of heavily made-up eyes, accompanied by soppily punning poetry?

"Eye Dream of you / Eye miss you," says the wall-text in her new show. "Eye am a teardrop / Eye am the endless ocean / Eye want to cry." The works themselves stick to a narrow and rather puzzling formula: sheets containing two or three drawings of eyes arranged vertically, each brightly coloured as a bird of paradise. In *Eye Am a Flower*, floral motifs picked out in sequins emerge from their exaggerated lashes. *Eye Am the Endless Ocean* comes with *Care Bear*-cute little designs featuring waves, swans and hearts. The larger examples are flanked by foolscap-sized dry runs. The overall impression is of lovesick doodles in an exercise book, blown up to, if not exactly a grand scale, a disproportionate one.

It's all a bit of a riddle. Moshiri's work sometimes trades in a similar kind of

pallid sentimentality, with its adorable pussycats and iced-gem embellishments and so forth, but the irony feels somehow easier to get to grips with. It's of a piece with Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami and their well-established strategy of quarantining vulgarity between inverted commas. Aliabadi's work here, by contrast, seems unnervingly sincere. Is it simply a subtler expression of the same impulse, a more daring flirtation with naffness? By dwelling so significantly on this trite homophony of "eye" and "I", is she posing as the kind of artist who would in fact think it was significant? It's a dangerous game, especially since this is, strange to say, Aliabadi's first solo show. With some embarrassment I admit I haven't the faintest idea what she's driving at. This may or may not be the desired effect.

The other big Iranian show in Dubai at the moment leaves the viewer in no such uncertainty. I'll Huff and I'll Puff finds the collage artist Ramin Haerizadeh making war on the icons of imperial and revolutionary Iran alike. The artist, grey-bearded, bespectacled and leering, capers demonically in a black chador through scenes of riots and royal pageantry. He lounges on the grass with Farah Pahlavi, and inserts himself into a gallery of news clippings and Time magazine covers.

His alter ego in these compositions is a character from a children's television programme. City of Tales was a surreal show that aired in the 1970s, when Haerizadeh was a child. In one story, an elephant falls over in the town and breaks his tusk. The townsfolk, eager to assist, reattach the tusk but end up sticking it onto the animal's forehead. Making a bad job worse, they cut off his trunk, then explain that, since he no longer looks like an elephant he'll have to register with the government for a new identity. He becomes "Manouchehr", a commonplace name at the time.

Images of Manouchehr's papier-mache face recur throughout the show, now on the shoulders of the Shah, now in place of Haerizadeh's head, disfigured and absurd but definitely not, from the official point of view, an elephant. The political meaning could hardly be clearer but the savage energy of Haerizadeh's images, as comic and disturbing as his source story, throw any concerns about subtlety out of the window. He's trying to blow the house down, after all. No one huffs and puffs like him.

Iran Inside Out runs at the Frajam Collection until June 15. Eye Love You by Shirin Aliabadi runs at the Third Line until April 22. I'll Huff and I'll Puff runs at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde until April 16.



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