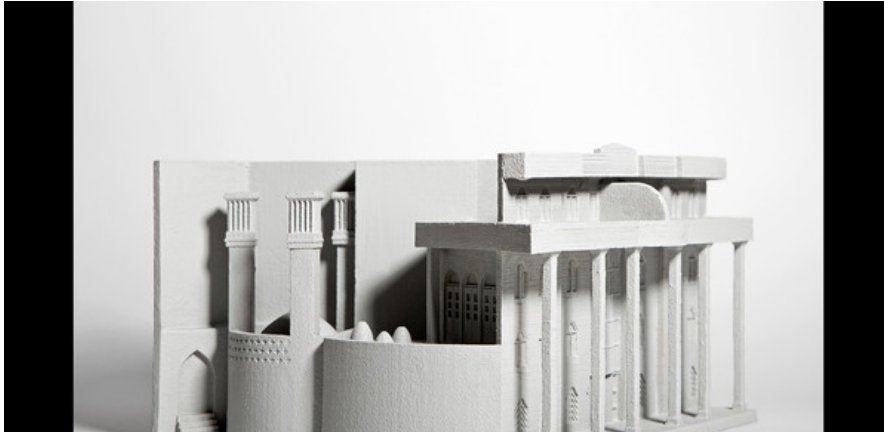


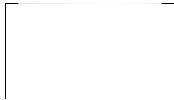
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Post-revolutionary Iranian art at the SOAS

By Gareth Harris



'Residential building with front shops: mosque with courtyard on Resalat highways' (2013) by Nazgol Ansarinia (in collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar)



After a long political freeze between Iran and the UK, a cultural entente is quietly under way in London with the launch of *Recalling the Future: Post-revolutionary Iranian Art*, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Four curators including Hamed Yousefi, an Iranian culture critic, and David Hodge, a London-based art historian, have presented trends, ideas and techniques shaping the Iranian art scene today through the works of 29 established, emerging and late artists.

The 1979 revolution, which overthrew Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the country's last royal ruler, provides the provocative impetus for the show. Participating artist Mahmoud Bakhshi says that his generation are often referred to as "children of the revolution", adding that the tumult of 1979 presents "a rupture point not just for the art history of Iran but for the society at large".

Most of the artists are based in Iran. "The [Iranian] diaspora is part of an international world scene," says Hodge, pushing the point that artists located outside Iran are trained differently, living and working in different circumstances. Pivotal and populist art market darlings such as Farhad Moshiri (his crystal-encrusted "Eshgh (Love)" assemblage from 2007 fetched \$1m at Bonhams Dubai in 2008) are noticeably absent. Hodge emphasises that the exhibition "is not an all-encompassing survey of Iranian artists".

"The artists all reject the idea that 'Iranian-ness' is a single, fixed identity that remains the same throughout history," he adds. The press blurb goes even further, boldly claiming that "the work [on show] calls for a complete rethinking of modern Iranian art history".

Hodge and co-curator Yousefi astutely contextualise post-1979 art with modernist forerunners of the pre-revolution era in an incisive joint catalogue essay. "We would argue that the artists in *Recalling the Future* can be best understood when they are placed in critical dialogue with Iranian modernist art from the 1960s and 1970s," they write.

Under the secularising regime of the last shah, from 1941 to 1979, a loose group of artists called the Saqqakhaneh fused avant-garde theory with Iranian folk culture motifs, producing a strain of 1960s modernism rooted in popular culture. This "spiritual pop art" movement combined lustrous Persian dynastic emblems with numerology and calligraphic forms (examples by Hossein Zenderoudi and Parviz Tanavoli stood out in the exhibition *Iran Modern*, which recently closed at the Asia Society in New York).

Iranian modernism was supported by the royal ruler through state-sponsored festivals. Empress Farah Pahlavi, in particular, fostered a flowering of the arts, say pro-monarchists. The collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, which includes work by Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko and Francis Bacon, was formed under the auspices of the empress. Cultural exchange with the west also stepped up a gear. "The royal couple were trying to move the country forward into the new century and that automatically always comes at a cost," says an anonymous New York-based Iranian collector.

The shah was, indeed, a very public patron of the arts but did he use soft culture-based diplomacy to mask the harsher aspects of his rule? Hodge and Yousefi argue that “the egalitarian desires of Saqqakhaneh and other artists can appear to be almost inseparable from monarchist attempts to cover over the real conditions of social and economic inequality with images of a unified nation”. When contemporary Iranian artists address what constitutes national identity, the bedrock of Iranian modernism, “they are also questioning official state narratives”, say the exhibition curators.

But does this make all post-1979 art inherently political, especially during the two-term tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad from 2005 to 2013? “What is certain is that post-revolution artists have become spokespeople for the country’s state of mind. Pre-1979, there was more art for art’s sake but since then many artists have become activists, fighters, though they may have not necessarily wanted to,” says Maryam Homayoun-Eisler, a Tehran-born, London-based collector and the co-chair of Tate’s Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee.

The works selected are all “implicitly political”, Hodge emphasises. But the artists’ practices stand up to scrutiny, with the various practitioners forging distinctive aesthetic approaches, especially in the fields of photography and photomontage. Mehran Mohajer’s “Tehran Undated” series (2009) is taken with a pinhole camera. The starkly beautiful images, devoid of people, present a ghost town at a time when mass protests took to the streets of the capital during the height of the Green Movement.

Another highlight is mixed-media art by veteran figure Ghasem Hajizadeh, whose body of work, begun before 1979, consists of vaguely disconcerting paintings produced after photographs. Rising star Nazgol Ansarinia has turned fantastical murals commissioned by the Iranian state into a series of absurdist, arresting architectural models made using a 3D printer (“Fabrications”, 2013).

Meanwhile, performance artist Amir Mobed will present a new interactive piece in London. His daring works have unsettled audiences in Tehran; in 2010, Mobed, with a nod to Chris Burden’s 1971 performance piece “Shoot”, invited visitors to the Azad Art Gallery to take aim at his body with a pellet gun.



A print from Mehran Mohajer’s ‘Tehran Undated’ series (2009)

The SOAS show has a handful of important antecedents in the US and Europe. This was remarkable given that restricted trade relations between Iran and the west and Iran’s inclusion in George W Bush’s “axis of evil” created a perfect storm of problems for curators and galleries in the west. Cross-generational Iranian expatriates flocked to *Iran Inside Out* at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York in 2009, the first group exhibition of Iranian artists held in the US since the revolution.



Ghasem Hajizadeh’s ‘Untitled’ (2000)

Iranian Contemporary Art at the Barbican in London in 2001 outlined trends of the Iranian art scene since the late 1950s for western audiences. Pre-revolution calligraphic works by artists such as Mohammed Ehsai and Faramarz Pilaram dovetailed with eye-opening video pieces by younger practitioners such as Ghazel, who was seen waterskiing in her black chador.

The exhibition, the first of its kind in a major institution in Britain, was seminal, says Roxane Zand, Sotheby’s deputy chairman for the Middle East. Look out also for *Unedited History* at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris this year (May 16-August 24), an ambitious sweep of Iranian 20th and 21st-century art.

The artists may well be gaining momentum on the international stage, both commercially and critically, but the domestic art market has been stymied by the country’s isolationism. Restrictions on free expression enforced by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance have also made life taxing for artists.

“The lack of contacts and collaborations with the art world outside Iran have created a system that works by its own rules,” Mahmoud Bakhshi says, stressing that the lack of institutional initiatives in Iran poses a problem. “It is left to the commercial galleries to contextualise the art produced, and it has nearly destroyed the concept of critical peer review in artistic practice.”

This partly explains why the influential Tehran-based dealer Rozita Sharafjahan doubles up in the SOAS show, as both an artist and curator. “It is not unusual in Iran for gallerists to also be artists ... they just don’t have the formalised division of labour that we have, and one person might wear several hats,” Hodge says.

This rather refreshing spirit of informality is in evidence in Bakhshi’s fluorescent light, cloud-shaped sculpture, “TalkCloud 92-03”, emblazoned with a pithy maxim from Andy Warhol: “Art should be for everyone”. A parallel piece shaped like a cloud, a recurring motif in Persian calligraphy, is inscribed with a Farsi text, this time from the hardline leader of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini: “Art must blow a spirit of commitment into the people.”

Art’s social mission is under the spotlight in both pieces. Crucially, where else would you see both the Ayatollah and Andy preaching

propaganda about the power of art?

'Recalling the Future', until March 22, soas.ac.uk/gallery

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