

58TH VENICE BIENNALE

11 May - 24 November 2019
May You Live In Interesting Times
Curator: Ralph Rugoff



At the 58th Venice Biennale, we explore sound, national iconography and post-nationalism across more than 20 pavilions, and include our brutally honest takes on the main show, curated by Ralph Rugoff, both for and against. We venture off-site to find poetic dialogues inspired by Etel Adnan and works by Lebanese artists Nadim Karam and Zad Moultaka. Plus, we present a special highlight on the Iran Pavilion and the presence of contemporary Iranian art at the biennial.

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LIGHTING SPARKS FROM IRAN

Despite difficult circumstances at home, artists from Iran are very visible at Venice this year and not just in the Iranian Pavilion. The German Pavilion is represented by Iranian artist Natascha Sadr Haghghighian, though she hides her real identity as part of the work, and there is a strong Iranian theme in **Parasol unit's** outstanding collateral show *The Spark is You* at the Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello. Here, we take a closer look at that exhibition – the first the Foundation has presented outside London – and its evocations of poetry, sculpture and transformation.

Words by Hannah Jacobi



Nazgol Ansarinia. *Article 44, Pillars*. 2016. Paper paste, cardboard and paint 80 x 100 x 100 cm; *Article 52, Pillars*. 2017. Paper paste, cardboard and paint Each part: 65 x 75 x 33 cm. Collection Olivier G. Mestelan; *Article 55, Pillars*. 2016. Paper paste, cardboard and paint Each part: 80 x 108 x 50 cm. Private collection. At *The Spark Is You: Parasol unit* in Venice at the Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello di Venezia. Berlin. Image courtesy of the artist, Green Art Gallery, Dubai, and Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan

"We are a bit different in Iran," says Ziba Ardalan, director of Parasol unit in London. "There is no other culture where the art form of poetry has been so important in people's everyday life." The use of classical Persian poetry to frame an exhibition of contemporary art is rather atypical. But Ardalan has curated not just one, but two concurrent exhibitions in Venice and London, each of which showcases work by artists living in or originating from

Iran. Her research for the concept led her back to Rumi and Hafez, as well as to Goethe. "When he wrote *West-Eastern Divan* two hundred years ago, the rest of the Western world was fascinated with the exoticism of the Orient," she explains. "Goethe directed people's attention towards Hafez, telling them where to look in order to really understand."

This is a show that's not about using time-worn images or invoking political issues that

reflect a hackneyed understanding of the local culture and society, like many exhibitions about contemporary Iranian art have been doing. Rather, it is about how contemporary Iranian art spans wider influences and art historical representations. *The Spark Is You* turns to poetry as a lens through which to see Iranian cultural connectivity among the works in the show. But how is national or cultural identity given form through art?



Sahand Hesamiyan. *Forough*. 2016. Stainless steel, gold leaf, electrostatic coating. Each of two parts: 290 x 248 x 248 cm. Installation view at *The Spark Is You: Parasol unit* in Venice at the Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello di Venezia. 2019. Image courtesy the artist and Parasol unit. Photography by Francesco Allegrato



Farideh Lashai. *When I Count, There Are Only You... But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow*. 2012–2013. Suite of 80 photo-intaglio prints with projection of animated images. 3:51 minutes. 191.8 x 309.9 cm. Installation view at Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello, Venice, 2019. Image courtesy of the Estate of Farideh Lashai. Projection courtesy of the Farideh Lashai Foundation, Museo del Prado and The British Museum. Photography by Francesco Allegrato

Most of the works presented in Venice cannot be attributed to a particular aspect of Iranian culture; they reflect a contemporary language that belongs to a global art context. This does not, however, exclude a preoccupation with locale, as with Nazgol Ansarinia's works addressing urban fabric and transformation. *Membrane* is erected like the skin of a wall, in a comment on the indiscriminate destruction of houses in Tehran's rapidly developing urban areas, while the series *Pillars* runs like a bifurcated river of marble-like columns across the central hall, a reference to gentrification and a rapidly changing society of extravagance.

Siah Armajani's work, on the other hand, references poetry directly. His installations, *Edgar Allan Poe's Study* (2008) and *Hall Mirror with Table* (1983-84), draw from 19th-century Western writings on philosophy and aesthetics, especially by the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. The function of art

in terms of its political potential arises with Farideh Lashai's last work in 2013 (*When I Count, There Are Only You... But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow*), a title inspired by TS Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Here, she reinterprets Goya's *The Disasters of War*, conjuring the horrors of 19th-century European warfare in a playful and contemporary context that effaces figuration and denounces state violence. YZ Kami also converses with European art history in his work *Chartres III*, wherein the otherworldliness of his signature atmospheric portraits converses with religious spirituality in stunning images of serenity and dissolution.

Both universality and spirituality are addressed in Morteza Ahmadvand's video installation *Becoming*, as abstracted signs of the three Abrahamic religions spin slowly around a central sphere. Geometric abstraction is key to Ahmadvand's work, as it is to Sahand Hesamiyan's *Forough*, two

enormous, abstracted lotus flowers based on geometric principles in Islamic architecture and art. Although rooted in Iranian motifs, by employing the symbol of the lotus flower the work can be read as a truly transcultural symbol. In the same courtyard are Navid Nuur's large-scale painting series, *The Tuners*, which, in deeply lyrical and abstract Cy Twombly-like acts of mark-making, are simultaneously beyond language and yet of it.

This exhibition doesn't just reveal the multiplicity of contemporary Iranian art. Quietly and powerfully, it employs metaphor to offer much-needed alternative readings of the transcultural realities of Iranian artists, many of whom represented here are living outside Iran. The duality that exists in the works, as contemporary responses to a heritage of classical Persian poetry but also in dialogue with European literary traditions, spark conversations that are beyond national identity.