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New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art

Editor
Hossein Amirsadeghi

Essays
Hamid Keshmirshekan
Mark Irving
Anthony Downey

Thames & Hudson

Diasporic Communities and Global Networks: The Contemporaneity of Iranian Art Today

Anthony Downey

The distinction between the so-called 'Occident' and 'Orient' has often been staged around issues of representation and the inevitably thorny subject of culture. Who gets to represent whom and in what manner has been, from at least the 17th century onwards, a source of often rancorous debate and critical contention. In 1978, Edward Said traced the accumulative effect that these historical representations had had on the West's perception and subsequent understanding of the Middle East. Said's argument was relatively radical: the production of systems of knowledge that secured the West's 'imaginative command' over the Middle East, he proposed, went hand in hand with Western economic interests in those territories. Although a highly contentious argument at the time, today the essence of his thesis is widely accepted: Western systems of representation, collectively assembled and disseminated under the aegis of 'Orientalism', set up a binary relationship between West and East whereby the definition of the latter as irredeemably 'other' and exotic rendered it the passive object of knowledge-gathering and thereafter a source of wealth-extraction.

Western images of the Orient produced throughout the 18th and 19th centuries had a number of connotations, not least the notion of a localized population who lived in a 'timeless' hinterland that thrived on religious atavism, cultural intolerance, political extremism and tribal militarism, if not overt barbarism. The Orient, unlike the Occident, could not escape the past and therefore could not progress into modernity. Artistic production from the region was therefore seen in terms of craftsmanship and, in aesthetic terms, predominantly looking towards historical ideals as opposed to the present. Such views, far from abating with time, have proved remarkably durable and are inextricably linked to a strategy that sought to homogenize whole regions rather than examine the particularity and uniqueness of cultural production from individual areas. What was required (and is still required today) was an approach that examines the historical contexts and contemporary ambivalences of cultural output in particular countries rather than forms of neo-Orientalist reductiveness and conceptual abbreviation. All of which brings us to the relatively unique case of modern-day Iran.

If we put to one side the blinkered view of the Middle East as a mono-cultural and monolithic force, the suggestion that contemporary Iranian cultural production is predominantly inward-

Shirana Shahbazi
Farsh-01-2004
from the 'Farsh/Teppiche' series, 2004
Handknotted rug, wool on silk
70 x 50 cm (approx.)
Edition of 3
Courtesy of Cardi Black Box, Milan/London

looking or bound by tradition is simply unsustainable – especially when we consider the emergence of modernism in the region in the 1940s, the level of cross-cultural contact that historically existed between Iran and the West, the diasporic make-up of its international community, and the globalized level of engagement that is the hallmark of contemporary Iranian visual arts. In the context of the visual arts, and in order to more fully understand their contemporaneity, we need to consider not only the heterogeneous cultural practices that exist in Iranian visual culture today, but also the institutional contexts within which Iranian art is being produced, curated, exhibited, collected and ultimately exchanged. To fully understand what is happening in contemporary Iranian art we must factor in the effects of globalization and the way in which contemporary art production follows routes and patterns that until recently were relatively unfamiliar.

The advent of the modern art movement in Iran has been traditionally associated with the forced abdication of Reza Shah and his replacement by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. However, this view needs to be qualified: in the first instance, Pahlavi's removal was largely a Western-led initiative that was in response to his role in inaugurating a form of economic and social modernism in Iran – a modernity that the West had no real interest, literally and figuratively, in either supporting or developing. In cultural terms, the statement also suggests that Iran was culturally closed to Western influences until the 1940s. Yet Iran's Academy of Fine Arts had been founded in 1911 by Kamal al-Mulk (also known as Muhammad Ghaffari), who had studied in Europe and who had introduced many Western ideas to Iranian arts. Furthermore, the internationalist aspect of Iranian modern art in the 1960s and contemporary Iranian art today had already been seen in 1867, 1873, 1878 and 1900, when art from the region was displayed at world fairs in Paris and Vienna. Admittedly, al-Mulk's rather academic style of painting did fall out of favour following his death and further still with the ascendancy, under the direction of André Godard, of the College of Fine Arts. But the point remains that cross-cultural propagation was already a key feature of the arts in the early part of the 20th century. This commitment to the visual arts, moreover, was furthered by artists such as Marcos Grigorian (1925–2007), who in turn taught Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937). Seeking to conjoin an aesthetic that looked to popular culture and the cultural resonances of Iran's past, Zenderoudi and artists such as Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937) developed a uniquely Iranian form of art that sought to reconcile both traditionalist and modernist aesthetics.

Artists working in Iran today have a similar relationship to both the globalized contexts of international culture and the relatively localized concerns of their country. We can see this duality in the work of Farhad Moshiri (b. 1963), who was born in Shiraz, studied at the California Institute of Arts and now lives and works in Tehran. In works such as *Only Love (Faghat Eshgh)*, 2007, we are presented with a relatively traditional-looking representation of a jar that recalls both 13th-century Iranian pottery and the Sassanid pottery found at Susa. Through an intricate process of painting and folding his canvasses, Moshiri's finished works take on the patina and craquelure of the pots he is representing. Although this could be seen to be an exercise in verisimilitude, there is a subtle point being made here about how cultural legacies are used to promote global views on certain regions and their traditions. Often decorated with Farsi calligraphy, which is traditionally associated with verses from the Qur'an or Persian poetry, it nevertheless becomes clear that Moshiri's brand of calligraphy does not necessarily allude to either the Qur'an or to poetry but to everyday Iranian words – popular street slang, the brand names of mass-produced commercial products and drinks, lyrics from contemporary Iranian pop music. The traditional pedagogical forms of the past and the enunciative practices of the present are combined here in a hybrid process that further questions any easy distinction between the two – and, consequently, any simplistic categorization of contemporary visual culture in Iran.

If we examine the work of Shirana Shahbazi this not only becomes clearer but we also register the influence of the Iranian Diaspora that stemmed from the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Born in Tehran in 1974, the artist studied photography in Dortmund and Zurich before settling permanently in the latter city. In *Farsh-01-2004*, 2004, Shahbazi worked from photographs taken in cities as diverse as Harare and Shanghai; these images were subsequently reproduced on a large scale by Iranian billboard painters for the 2003 Venice Bienniale. The enormous images take on a Madonna-like reference. The photographs are also the basis for carpets produced by master weavers, a process that refers not only to the carpet tradition in Islam and Iran but also to formal aspects of prayer mats. What we

have here is the macro and micro, the international and national, the globalized and the local, and Shahbazi's practice, like that of so many of her peers, could indeed be defined within a national context but, importantly, one that takes an internationalist – that is, hybrid and appropriationist – approach to art as a practice.

This brief discussion of two artists, one in Iran, the other in Zurich, could preface a broader debate that would take in a variety of Iranian artists including, but not limited to, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Siah Armajani, Shirin Neshat, Shirazeh Houshiary, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Y. Z. Kami and Shirin Aliabadi, all of whom explore global issues through local practices and also translate the local onto the global. Diasporas not only have an impact on the host communities but also inform the culture of the parent country. Add to this the manner in which globalization reconfigures the idea of the local and indigenous, and we begin to see Iranian visual culture as a fluid and permeable force. The fact of the Diaspora, the transmigration of people, has effectively hyphenated any sense of a unilinear or even univocal national, cultural and social identity. And herein lies one important aspect of the contemporaneity of Iranian art. Nonetheless, to fully understand the phenomenon that is contemporary Iranian art we need also to view it in its broader institutional context. Zenderoudi's work, for example, was exhibited in the Venice Bienniale as far back as 1962 and in the now-defunct Paris Bienniale in 1961, while Tanavoli's work is collected by major museums from MoMA in New York to the British Museum in London. This interest in Iranian art, stemming from the formation and subsequent support of the visual arts by institutions such as the College (or Faculty) of Fine Arts, opened at Tehran University in 1938, and the establishment in 1949 of Iran's first commercial gallery, Apadana, has to be seen alongside other institutional landmarks, not least the Tehran Biennials of 1958 and 1960 and, in 1977, the inauguration of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. It may be a source of surprise to some that the latter institution is home to one of the world's most important collections of Western art, including works by Francis Bacon, Marcel Duchamp, Willem de Kooning, Donald Judd, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. In 1999, the museum held a show of Pop Art that included Warhol and Rauschenberg, and more recently it has held shows of contemporary Iranian photography (2002), Abstract Expressionism (2003), contemporary British sculpture (2004) and a survey of Gerhard Richter's work (2004).

On an international level, the largest grouping of Iranian art outside of Iran is the Abby Weed Grey Collection which was established by the eponymous collector in New York in 1974 to house her extensive collection. Apart from holding important works by artists such as Tanavoli, Zenderoudi and Faramarz Pilaram, the collection has provided a forum for cultural dialogue. In 2002 the Grey Art Gallery staged 'Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture', a comprehensive show that included work by Siah Armajani, Marcos Grigorian and the Iranian photographer Abbas. In terms of Iranian involvement in international shows, it should be noted that a number of international curators have been both responsive to and responsible for some critically important shows in the last decade or so. 'Iranian Contemporary Art', one of the first shows of Iranian art in Britain, opened at the Barbican Centre in London in 2001, curated by Rose Issa and Ruin Pakbaz. In the same year, the first loan exhibition of Iranian art since the 1979 Revolution, 'A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia: New Art from Iran', opened at the Meridian International Center in Washington. More recently, Iranian artists have taken part in Documentas IX, X and XI, and there have been many exhibitions of Iranian contemporary art, including 'Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists' (2004, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, curated by Rose Issa); 'Iran.com: Iranian Art Today' (2006, Museum for New Art, Freiberg, curated by Isabel Herda and Nicoletta Torcelli); 'Word into Art' (2006, British Museum, curated by Venetia Porter); and 'Naqsh' (2008, Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin), which looked at gender and role models in Iran. Included in these exhibitions were artists as diverse as Parastou Forouhar, Shadi Ghadirian, Ghazel, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, the filmmaker Marjane Satrapi and the photographer Mitra Tabrizian. Tabrizian is a another example of an international Iranian artist: born in Tehran in 1959, she left in 1977 for a school in Exeter and thereafter the Polytechnic of Central London, where she studied photography. She now lives and works in London, has a gallery in Berlin, and shows around the world (there was a retrospective of her work at Tate Britain in 2008).

The extrinsic influence of globalization is also felt on sales of Iranian art, and nowhere more so than in the auction houses. Sales of art from the Middle East at Sotheby's, London, in 2007 and 2008

Farhad Moshiri
Only Love 'Faghat Eshgh', 2007
Swarovski crystal diamonds and oil on canvas, mounted on board
170 x 230 x 7 cm

featured Iranian art prominently, with no less than twenty-five Iranian artists in one auction. In Dubai in April 2008, the Christie's sale of Modern and Contemporary Arab and Middle Eastern Art went beyond pre-sale expectations, selling for over twenty million dollars, which was approximately 33 per cent higher than their previous record in October 2007. It was in the former sale that the world record for an Iranian artist was set, with Parviz Tanavoli's *The Wall (Oh Persepolis)* selling for $2,841,000. Of the top sixteen highest-selling works from the Middle East, the top four places are held by Iranian artists (Tanavoli, Zenderoudi, Mohammad Ehsai and Moshiri, the latter being the first artist from the Middle East to sell at auction for over one million dollars), while no less than eight Iranian artists appeared overall (the others being Faramarz Pilaram, Hossein Kazemi, Massoud Arabshahi and Shirin Neshat). It is also significant to note that the collectors of these works are relatively international and that these sales have given a considerable fillip to the development of commercial galleries specializing in Iranian art in London, New York, the Middle East and elsewhere. The list of such galleries is extensive and includes The Third Line (Dubai), the Elahe Gallery (Tehran), the Green Art Gallery (Dubai), Agial Art Gallery (Beirut), Silk Road Gallery (Tehran), Seyhoun Gallery (Tehran) and Sfeir-Semler (Beirut). Needless to say, the list of art galleries outside of the Middle East that regularly display Iranian art is extensive, including Lisson Gallery (London), Kashya Hildebrand (New York), Galerie la B.A.N.K. (Paris), Daneyal Mahmood Gallery (New York) and Gladstone Gallery (New York).

Far from representing an indigenous cultural output that narrowly looks to the past (although the past does play a part), Iranian contemporary art is a nationally and internationally based collection of art practices that, in some instances, draws upon the legacy of modernism in Iran, and yet does so through the lens of a globalized cultural context and through its diasporic constituency. Iranian contemporary art offers a significant degree of complexity when it comes to considering contested notions such as modernity (internationalism) and tradition (regionalism), the global and the local and, perhaps most notably, the aesthetic and conceptual divisions to be found in the so-called Western and Eastern canons. This is not so much to reverse Western critical views and re-engage the hierarchies that were put in place by Orientalist discourse as it is to point out that the long-term diasporic, internationalist and outward-looking forms of art in Iran have long been engaged in that most pressing of cultural concerns: the fragmentation of the present and the ensuing diversification of cultural production.