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Projecting The Legacy Of Iran

Farideh Lashai's artistic voice was a powerful reminder of humankind's struggle for freedom and dignity. She was by turns provocative and formally restrained but never defeated by her struggles. Her spirit and oeuvre will strengthen those who act in the name of conscience.

By Robert C. Morgan

One of the more tacitly moving shows in early Spring in New York was a group of late works by Farideh Lashai, the legendary Iranian artist. Born in Rasht in 1944, Lashai was a committed artist by the age of 20. Throughout her prolific and profoundly influential career, she retained a strong interest in painting, literature, and folk tales from her homeland. Although she spent considerable time in Europe practicing art and literature, Lashai never lost her sensitivity for Iranian culture. As co-founder of Neda in the 1990s, an artists' collective of 12 Iranian women, she held a preeminent role in supporting the freedom of creative expression both within and outside Iran. Having had over 100 solo exhibitions, with work included in major collections in museums from Tehran to Los Angeles, she is considered one of the most important artists in the Middle East. Her death in February 2013 at the age of 68 had an immediate and stirring impact both on artists working in Iran and elsewhere throughout the world. Coordinated by the artist's daughter, Maneli Keykavoussi, two galleries

shared this exhibition: Leila Heller in West Chelsea and Edward Tyler Nahem in Midtown. The Heller Gallery focused on six wall projections used in relation to large abstract paintings and included a single mixed-media animation, *Chasing the Moon*. Together the group of works at the

tions were shown against large abstract paintings, along with two slightly earlier abstract paintings without projections. A third projection was shown against a grid of 80 etchings with images borrowed directly from Goya's *Disasters of War* (1863), but without Goya's tumultuous figures. As

a searchlight moved indeterminately over the vacant etchings, it revealed partial landscapes and wartime accoutrements as if looking for the corpses and emaciated survivors that Lashai had removed from the original prints. Titled *When I Count, There Are Only You ... But When I Look, There is Only a Shadow*, this work is a *magnum opus* to the extent that it reflects not only the emptiness of violent conflict in the Middle East but also the general state of desolation that persists in the artist's homeland. It is a powerful work, an insistent work, capable of

provoking viewers to think in relation to the act of seeing, to become witnesses of a universal tragedy occurring within human history.

During her lifetime, Farideh Lashai had an interesting history of her own. As a young girl she witnessed the exile of Iran's visionary leader in 1953, and the



Farideh Lashai, *I came from the Land of Ideology*, 2010–2012, painting with projected animation and sound (4 minutes 30 seconds), oil, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, 185 x 185.5 cm. All images: Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

Heller Gallery was titled *Thus in Silence in Dreams' Projections*. Each work is part of a narrative that is being told symbolically. There is lightness in these extraordinary works that gives their story an offering to art and to the possibility of what can still be said indirectly.

At Nahem Fine Arts, two projec-

nationalist fervor that followed. It was a confusing time. Therefore, it is no wonder that Lewis Carroll's allegorical tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* would have such a strong influence on her youthful state of being. Lashai foresaw a dream of dreadful equivocation between reality and illusion. As a result, she sought an alternative through her intellectual means that would inform her decision to become an artist. In the early 1960s, she went to Vienna and studied art, and later became immersed in German literature at the University of Frankfurt. Lashai became especially involved in the radically inventive plays of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. One might say that in addition to her immense talent in painting, her strong intellectual foundation served to form a synthesis between the deceptive innocence of Lewis Carroll and the hard-core realities in Brecht's plays.

Still, throughout her career as a painter, and occasionally as a translator, Lashai never lost her sense of historical consciousness or her willingness to become an activist in order to achieve a more coherent and ethical world. At the same time, Lashai employed her art less as an illustration of politics than a formidable presence, filled with mystery, elocution, and intrigue, by which she opened the doors to a reality that would dispel notions of retreat or escape. This is evident in virtually all of her painting/projections, for which a better term is required.

Such works as *Gone Down the Rabbit Hole* (2010–2012) suggest that the



Farideh Lashai, *Gone Down the Rabbit Hole*, 2010–2012, painting with projected animation and sound (4 minutes 30 seconds), oil, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, 200 x 235 cm.

map of Iran resembles a smiling Cheshire cat whose mouth becomes a seductive entry for V-eared rabbits to jump into and eventually multiply. If one studies the painting that supports this projection, the dark abstract surface is both remarkably painted and mythically symbolic. In a similar respect, much can be said of the imposing drips and pours used in *Le Déjeuner au Park-e-Mellat* (2007–2012), a theme based on a theme by Manet, yet fully transformed into a static/kinetic work that serves Lashai's own purposes. The allegory is sufficient to suggest that more is going on than what appears. As an important Chilean artist once remarked during the tyrannical years in her country: "We cannot write our political remarks on the wall. We must sew them between the threads."

In related works in which Lashai uses her combined genres, one catches the pervasive rabbit (undoubtedly borrowed from Alice), the rabid crows, and the rising trees—all symbolic elements that have a recurrent significance in the Middle East. The rabbit appears innocent and curious, but its perennial presence is also cunning and coy, full of intrigue, yet ready to unmask whatever pretense may come to the surface. The rabbit is a silent rebel, a subtle mediator with a purpose, an agent of deconstruction. The crows are more disturbing. While they also carry a perennial aspect, they are seeking control through devious means, never clear or open, always hidden before that confluence becomes unavoidable as in *I come from the Land of Ideology*.

Finally, there is the painting/projection—again on a dark and light abstract surface—in which Charlie Chaplin appears from *The Great Dictator* with his global balloon. Soon a facial profile of the great Egyptian chanteuse, Umm Kalthum (1904–1975), emerges from the upper edge of the painting, looking down on Chaplin, as she sings *El Amal*. The drama is intense as it corresponds to the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Again, Farideh Lashai emerges omnipresent in all her absence. She evokes *l'esprit de temps* as she places her characters within an inventive pictorial allegory. Lashai consistently worked with gentle force, integrity, and substance from a deeply layered perspective that was provocative, yet always contained by a necessary formal restraint. This quality is what gives her art its ineluctable character, a quality that will make it live as a testament of the struggle to liberate the human condition. A

Robert C. Morgan, art critic and artist, is the New York editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.



Farideh Lashai, *Prelude to Alice in Wonderland*, 2010–2012, painting with projected animation and sound (4 minutes), oil, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, 110 x 160 cm.