

The Personal, the Political, the Dead



AGATON STROM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Time decides. When an exhibition scheduled for the winter slot at Grey Art Gallery at New York University wasn't ready, a replacement had to be found, and "Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran," set for a future date, was moved forward. If there was a scramble to pull it off, you'd barely know. Organized by the gallery's director, Lynn Gumpert, the show looks great, thought through, with the improvisatory lift that adrenaline can provide.

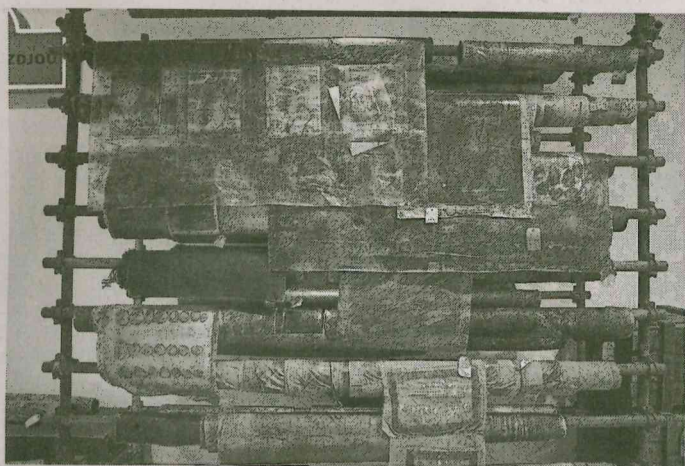
HOLLAND COTTER

ART REVIEW

One thing that made the switch doable was having some of the art already in hand. In the 1960s, the gallery's founding patron, Abby Weed Grey (1902-78), traveled to Iran, loved the new art she found there, bought it up and gave it to N.Y.U. As a result, the Grey has the largest holdings anywhere of work by one of the show's six artists, Parviz Tanavoli, widely considered Iran's leading modern sculptor, and outstanding examples of paintings by his brilliant but unlucky colleague Faramarz Pilaram.

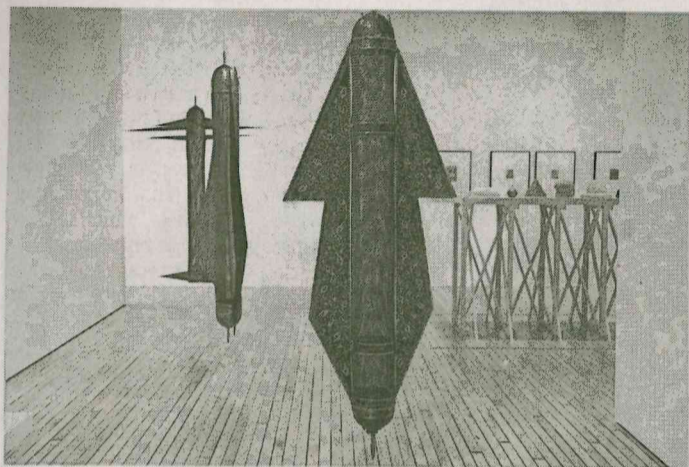
Continued on Page 33

Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran
An untitled painting by Shiva Ahmadi at Grey Art Gallery at New York University.



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Clockwise from above, Iranian art at Grey Art Gallery, "Série E," an installation by Chohreh Feyzdjou; "Song of Life," by Parviz Tanavoli; and "Projectile 10," by Shahpour Pouyan.



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From Weekend Page 27

To these two modernists Ms. Gumpert has added a fascinating figure of a more recent generation, Chohreh Feyzdjou, who died at 40 in 1995. Ms. Feyzdjou hasn't yet registered on New York's radar, though she may well do so now. Finally, bringing the show into the present are three young artists — Shiva Ahmadi, Barbad Golshiri and Shahpour Pouyan — born decades and political worlds away from the pre-revolutionary Iran that Ms. Grey knew.

Contemporary art in Iran has always been politically fraught. When Mr. Tanavoli began making sculpture, he had few local models to follow. The tradition of sculpture in Persia had effectively ended in the seventh century with the arrival of iconophobic Islam. Even with sculpture's return in the secularized 1960s, the question was where to go with it: Should new art be national or international, local or global, in character?

With Iran emerging from a long stretch of Western domination, artists were in the mood to shape a distinctively native aesthetic. At the same time, many of them had visited Europe and wanted to stay at least partly in the global swing. Mr. Tanavoli's answer to these dual demands was synthesis, and you can see him sorting it out. His 1962 "Figure and Hand" suggests a stack of bazaar-bought pots and pans with a Surrealist overlay. A decade later, in his well-known bronze "Heech," he seam-

lessly united three calligraphic characters spelling the Persian word for "nothing" into a single, Brancusi-sleek curve.

Mr. Pilem, born the same year as Mr. Tanavoli, 1937, forged similar hybrids in painting, integrating images from popular culture — the open hand symbolizing the Muslim faith, the shapes of mosque minarets from his home city, Isfahan — with blocks of Mondrian-style abstraction. He had real flair, but his timing was poor, and this cost him his career. Staying unrepentantly cosmopolitan during the 1979 revolution, he was reviled as pro-Western, socially isolated and expelled from his teaching job. He died of heart failure at 47.

Chohreh Feyzdjou was an outsider (or felt like one) all her life. She was the child of secular Jewish parents in Tehran — her family name, changed by her father, was Cohen — and educated in Muslim schools. She converted to Islam to marry, was soon divorced and dived headlong into Sufism, then kabbalah. In 1975, she moved to Paris, where she concentrated on painting until she encountered the archive-based installation art of Christian Boltanski. She spent the last few years of her life — she died of a hereditary blood disease — recycling her work in room-filling ensembles of empty stretchers, packing crates and rolled-up paintings, all covered with black-brown walnut stain.

One such installation has been reconstructed at the Grey. You can see Mr. Boltanski's influence in the insistent gloom, which would look blankly generic were it not for Ms. Feyzdjou's personal touches: drawings in notebooks, identifying labels attached to objects like baggage tags and a purple neon sign reading "Product of Chohreh Feyzdjou." The

sign feels like a joke about art and consumerism; this artist once filled a Paris storefront with funky stained things and called it a boutique. But there's no mistaking the emotional weight of this tomblike self-archive and of the time-haunted politics of experience that it reflects.

Interestingly, the art made by the show's younger artists, Ms. Ahmadi and Mr. Pouyan, while far more political in a literal sense, is much lighter and less personal in tone. Unlike Ms. Feyzdjou, who played down ethnic particulars in her art, both artists spin variations on a specifically Persian style of miniature painting. With references to the royal epic the "Shahnama," or "Book of Kings," Ms. Ahmadi depicts blood-oozing court rituals presided over by faceless rulers and bomb-wielding apes. Mr. Pouyan makes digital copies of historical miniatures and edits out the figures, altering history through elimination.

As a genre, miniature painting, common to Asian cultures, has been adopted by so many artists as a vehicle for political commentary that it's lost the snap of novelty, even become a cliché. Ms. Ahmadi's riffs on it grow more effective the further they expand in scale, as in the mural-size "Safe Haven" from 2012. And Mr. Pouyan is at his best in another medium, sculpture. His "Projectiles" series of suspended steel forms suggest both antique weapons and drones poised to launch.

I admire these things. They're formally ingenious and conceptually tight, and like Mr. Tanavoli's "Heech," satisfyingly graspable even at a glance. But I tend to respond more fully to a different kind of art, less finished, more elusive, more lived. Ms. Feyzdjou's work is an exam-

ple of it. So is that of Barbad Golshiri.

Mr. Golshiri, who was born in Tehran in 1982, focuses attention on a madly huge subject, one with equal local and global presence: death. He takes a near-universal emblem of it, the tombstone, as an art medium. It's one with inherent political and ethical dimensions in modern Iran. Under the current government, and previous ones, enemies of the state, dissidents of all stripes, are officially forbidden to have marked graves. Mr. Golshiri makes it his job to halt and reverse such obliteration.

To that end, he tracks down the graves of political martyrs, victims of purges and repression; photographs the sites; restores shattered memorials; and creates new ones, some in the form of stenciled inscriptions, which can be endlessly reapplied. Given his interest in art as memory, and memory as history — he considers cemeteries and museums to have comparable functions — it makes sense that Ms. Feyzdjou is one of his heroes. They never met, but in 2014 he designed a monument for her otherwise unmarked grave in a cemetery outside Paris. It's a sculpture in the form of a sarcophagus molded from wax and darkened with her signature walnut stain. It could easily be one of her own objects and, being outdoors, is more ephemeral than most of them.

There are two photographs of the sarcophagus hanging near her installation. One was taken the day the marker was put in place; the other, three months later, by which point, time and weather had predictably, but still surprisingly, made something different of it.

"Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran" runs through April 2 at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East; 212-998-6780, greyartgallery.nyu.edu.