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ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

YEAR IN REVIEW  
2015



NOVEMBER

## TOWARDS THE INEFFABLE: FARIDEH LASHAI

21 NOVEMBER 2015–26 FEBRUARY 2016 / FARIDEH LASHAI / TOWARDS THE INEFFABLE / TEHRAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (TMOCA), TEHRAN

Considered one of Iran's most prolific and influential artists, the late Farideh Lashai's extensive body of work spans five decades of Abstractionist and Minimalist techniques, a style she introduced to Iran in the 1960s and which evolved throughout her career. Lashai's paintings express the various circumstances experienced during her life, from the Iranian revolution to a more personal sense of love and loss. This retrospective features works on loan from international collections including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the British Museum in London and Sharjah Art Foundation. *Canvas* spoke to Maneli Keykavoussi, the artist's daughter and Trustee of the Farideh Lashai Foundation, on organising a show of this significance.

### WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES IN BRINGING TOGETHER FARIDEH'S WORK INTO TMOCA, IF ANY?

The director of the museum, Mr Majid Mollanorouzi, very kindly came to see me after my mother passed away in 2013 to give his condolences. He said that the doors of the museum are open to all artists and that the government would support the artistic community in any way possible. I suggested the exhibition at the museum and at first they wanted to dedicate another space. I was not interested. It was also challenging for the management of the museum to dedicate the entire space of the museum to one artist. With the persistence of Faryar Javaherian, the co-curator of the exhibition – and who originally conceived the idea of the show – and then the involvement of Germano Celant and his development of the idea and methodology of the exhibition, the management and the director agreed to dedicate the entire galleries of the museum to my mother's work. It is maybe the third monographic exhibition ever held at the museum and it is the first time for a woman artist. The director and the management looked at the exhibition as an opportunity to change how we perceive and look at art in Iran and hopefully a point of departure for curatorial practice.

### HOW DID YOU PICK THE CURATOR, GERMANO CELANT? WAS THERE A SPECIFIC REASON FOR PICKING A NON-IRANIAN CURATOR?

I fell in love with Germano's work when I saw his exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013* at the Fondazione Prada during the Venice Biennial. To this date, it is the most beautiful exhibition I have ever seen. A few weeks later we sat next to each other at a dinner hosted by Edward Tyler Nahem, our dear mutual friend who has been collecting and exhibiting Farideh's works, and throughout the night we talked about her and my challenge in preserving her legacy and the idea of the foundation. Germano belongs to my mother's generation. They have lived through a historical moment in Europe and in the world, the 60s and early 70s, so they had many shared sensibilities.

All my life I have tried to communicate my mother's work and I was never able to do that. I had a symbiotic relationship with her and all I was doing was to give glimpses of her life and work. Germano looks through a window in history that enables him to bring out the life and work of an artist in its entirety. It was the first time that I felt someone could know my mother



Installation view from Farideh Lashai's retrospective at TMOCA. Photography by Hamid Eskandari. Image courtesy TMOCA, Tehran and Farideh Lashai Foundation, Basel.

and understand her better than me. They did not know each other, but he got her almost immediately. He was able to draw a picture of her that was factual, yet poetic. It encompassed her practice and life, from art to design, from literature to theatre, her political life and engagement to her very personal and individual voice. And he was able to frame that through an artistic and historical context. It's no longer a fragmented image. He lifted a huge burden off my shoulders and now the entire body of her work and her life is there and opens many possibilities for expansion of the work through further research and interpretation. She had a rich life and he brought out that richness in a unity.

The exhibition is co-curated by Faryar Javaherian a prominent cultural figure in Iran who curated one of the most successful exhibitions at TMOCA after the revolution, *Gardens of Iran: Ancient Wisdom, New Vision*. She was a dear friend of my mother and worked with her on many occasions. So she knew the material and context in depth and brought out all the details and works that would enrich the grand framework of the exhibition.

### LASHAI'S WORK IS PRESENTED ALONGSIDE SOME OF THE GREATEST ARTISTS IN THE WORLD (ROTHKO, GIACOMETTI, ETC) IN THIS EXHIBITION – HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

The works from the collection of TMOCA have been used, in Germano's words, "to communicate the context – from America to Europe and Iran – within which Lashai developed her artistic language, her forms and signs, ideas and colours." In this exhibition the entrance hall of the museum, which to some extent reminds us of the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum's whirling structure, is dedicated to the collection. Germano calls this "a contextual introduction" or "the generative historical moment", wherein the artistic language of many artists has been formed. It begins with Franz Kline and spreads out with Agnes Martin and Francis Bacon and then the Pop movement in the US with Warhol, Lichtenstein and Jim Dine. There is a ping pong game between these works and those by Iranian artists across the hall. Bahman Mohasses with Francis Bacon, Sónia Balassanian with Agnes Martin and so on. Then when we enter the galleries, works of Farideh's childhood are juxtaposed with works of historic artists such as Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro. Every child painted in an impressionist style and was influenced by these Masters. Then there is a room where there are works of Rothko, Sepehri and Twombly with Farideh's works. Farideh refers to them and it is at times a similar language. "Forms that are made up only of colors and awaken in my mind purely abstract philosophical concepts have influenced me. Like the works of unrivalled Rothko" she said.