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GLOBAL/LOCAL 1960–2015: SIX ARTISTS FROM IRAN

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GREY ART GALLERY, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY



PARVIZ TANAVOLI, *Last Poet of Iran*, 1962, oil on canvas, 118 × 114 cm. Courtesy Grey Art Gallery, New York.

Other than a few Iranian stalwarts—such as Shirin Neshat, who has lived in New York for the last few decades and has shown her work internationally—the country's contemporary art has been in the limelight only recently. Since the comprehensive exhibition "Iran Modern" opened at the Asia Society Museum in New York, in September 2013, there has been a spate of Middle Eastern shows in the city. "Global/Local," which is currently showing at New York University's Grey Art Gallery (home to local collector Abey Weed Grey's vast modern Iranian art collection), showcases six Iranian artists whose works span from the 1960s to the present. Hardly a survey show or even a compendious representation of Iranian art, the exhibition's success lies in presenting new dynamics of autonomy, identity and authenticity.

Paintings by Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram from the Grey Art Gallery collection explore the commingling of pre-Islamist iconography, Shiite folk art and international formal strategies. Important contributors to the Saqqakhaneh art movement of the 1960s (named after water fountains in local bazaars built in honor of Shiite martyrs), which pioneered a cultural phenomenon in Iran, both artists' works are an outpouring of cogent poetic forms conceptualized prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Tanavoli's painting, *Last Poet of Iran* (1962), immortalizes the role of the poet. Cryptic mythical symbols and birds atop navy-blue stick figures, depicted in a grid-like format, are a salutation to the Islamic poet as a seer. Akin to Egyptian hieroglyphics, the painting's repetitive structure and historic pictography has a timeless, meditative effect. Similarly, in his bronze sculpture *Figure and Hand* (1962), Tanavoli utilizes a talismanic hand and sacred utensils, which have been assembled in the manner of Western modernist sculpture.

Works from Pilaram's "Mosques of Isfahan" series (1962–63) combine geometric configurations of Islamic architecture and motifs. Formal and reverential, the dull gold and silver pillars recreate the sanctity of a mosque, while recalling Piet Mondrian's lattice systems. The martyr's hand appears at the top of these vertical posts as a symbol of tradition. Singularly unique, both Tanavoli and Pilaram paved the way for autonomous expression with their facility for combining Western methodologies with indigenous Islamic references. In Pilaram's *Untitled* (1972), calligraphic swirls reminiscent of the dizzying effects of Op Art became the bedrock of his experimentation with cuneiforms.



SHAHPOUR POUYAN, *Unthinkable Thoughts*, 2014, ceramic objects, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai.

Shahpour Pouyan's elegant series of ceramic sculptures, entitled *Unthinkable Thoughts* (2014), can be seen as a contemporary take on Pilaram's religious architecture. Meticulously carved, dome-shaped objects inspired by churches, cathedrals, mosques and mausoleums captivate the viewer with their proportion, texture and design. Religious iconography and the significance of history are inscribed in the conical, cylindrical and circular forms shaped by Pouyan's aesthetics. These miniature configurations of majestic structures encapsulate the glory of bygone years. Meanwhile, Pouyan's hanging "Projectile" series (2011–), which are reminiscent of artillery used during the Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980s, appear like decorative tokens. Beautifully grooved and chiseled with elaborate Islamic patterns, their embellished quality supersedes the more iconic connotation of the work.

In the works of Shiva Ahmadi the carnage of the Iran-Iraq war is subsumed beneath canvases filled with figures from Mughal and Islamic miniature paintings. In *Safe Haven* (2012), a king sits faceless on his throne, while his subjects, who resemble monkeys and apes, surround him while engaged in combat—many bleeding and limbless. Ahmadi's festive palette turns gory and tinted with scrutiny. From afar, a host of characters seemingly in the midst of a festival are actually embroiled in conflict on the battlefield. Oozing swabs of saturated reds and maroons, painted against an imperial yellow background, highlight and deflect the subject matter. Aimless violence and the pointlessness of war are slowly unleashed upon the viewer.



FARAMARZ PILARAM, *Mosques of Isfahan (B)*, c. 1962, ink, watercolor, gold and silver paint and printed seals on paper, 116 × 88 cm. Courtesy Grey Art Gallery, New York.

Death and martyrdom pervade Barbad Golshiri's tombstone sculptures. Through minimalist marble slabs, such as *Death Sentence* (2011–13), inscribed in braille in honor of three political activists who have been disappeared, Golshiri defies authority by keeping alive memories of the oppressed. Much like Chohreh Feyzjou's dark sculptural installation, featuring 403 copies of blackened Persian books meant as a gesture to revive her lost culture, both Golshiri and Feyzjou's works are potent tributes to their heritage.

While the show might be criticized for its omission of many key artists from Iran, it draws its strength from the inventiveness of the exhibited works, which are steeped in modernity and tradition. Although some works are less poignant than others, much can be said of the artists who are able to straddle a fine line between the past and the present, and the old and the new. Without falling prey to the lure of exoticism, their imagination and integrity toward their culture comes through in their art.



SHIVA AHMADI, *Safe Haven*, 2012, watercolor, ink, and acrylic on aquaboard, 152 × 305 cm. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

"Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran" is on view at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, until April 2, 2016.