

Plemenitash, Ozana. "The Best of Iran at NYU's Grey Art Gallery." *Art Versed*. (February 2016).

# ART VERSED

WORLD ART FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE



*Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran* is currently on view at the [Grey Art Gallery](#), New York University's fine arts museum. As the title suggests, this stunning exhibition brings together six modern and contemporary artists working with their local Persian traditions in Iran as well as internationally, broadening the discourse to current political and social situations. Spanning three generations, the Grey has assembled a critical, thought provoking, and visually breathtaking show that depicts the diverse artistic production stemming from a country whose art is not as accessible to audiences outside of its borders.



A complex yet culturally rich narrative unfolds as we move through the galleries. The show begins with the pioneering modernists of the 1960s and 1970s, [Parviz Tanavoli](#) (b. 1937) and [Faramarz Pilaram](#) (1937-1983). It then moves to [Chohreh Feyzdjou](#) (1955-1996) working right after the turbulent Iran-Iraq War years (1980-88), and ends with the youngest artists [Shiva Ahmadi](#) (b. 1975), [Shahpour Pouyan](#) (b.1980), and [Barbad Golshiri](#) (b. 1982) working within the 2000s up until today.



This show is exceptionally rich and compelling as it brings together a broad and genuine portrayal of Iranian culture based in ancient traditions and forms while simultaneously questioning bleaker themes of power, authority, identity, violence, and military aggression that have all been pertinent throughout the country's history and as well as today. These themes and motifs are handled in such subtle and incredibly clever ways that the resulting affects are illuminating. Through diverse mediums such as painting, ceramics, metalwork, mixed media, photography, assemblage, watercolor, and video these artists manipulate their heritage and history to make intriguing new claims and connections.



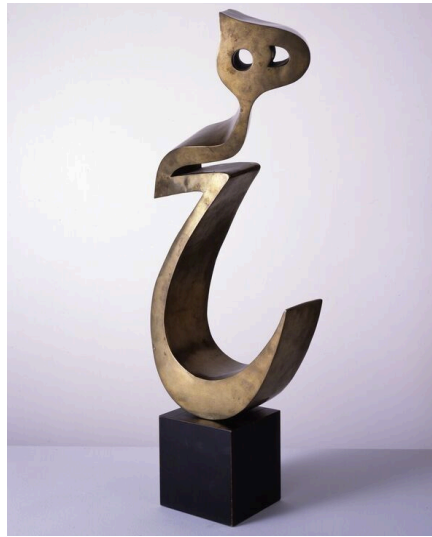


Much of the exhibition is heavy on artistic and curatorial installation that actively engages visitors as they maneuver through the space. The conjoined galleries of Feyzjdjou and Golshiri show the dedication and precision in which the exhibit was planned out. Golshiri, who is interested in tombstones and cultures surrounding death, helped arrange the works within his own gallery in order to have it resemble a cemetery plot. Photographs of cemeteries are hung low with a few resting on the floor and leaning against the walls. A stone cenotaph is snugly fit in a corner while three large rectangular marble slabs are arranged in the middle of the floor. As we walk through these works we arrive at an intimate gallery displaying Feyzjdjou's large-scale installations. 403 scrolls are hung in a grid pattern while rolls, wooden crates, and a large canvas strewn scaffolding resembling an Iranian bazaar display inhabit the rest of the space. These dark, grim objects have been made from reused materials and appropriated works from Feyzjdjou's early art school days. They speak to her quest for identity and represent cycles of destruction and reconstruction.



My favorite artists within this exhibition are Ahmadi and Pouyan, whose works are ground in fine details and toying with the audience's initial perceptions. Nothing is quite what it seems with these two. Both employ past traditions through their use of miniatures, most notably from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), an illuminated manuscript detailing various Persian epics. Ahmadi takes these narratives and recasts them into contemporary contexts. Her works are colorful, alluring, playful, and rendered in watercolor, giving them an ethereal softness. Her subject, however, is corruption. Faceless rulers sit upon bleeding thrones while monkeys and other circus animals present candy-shaped offerings, which are in fact bombs and grenades. Pipes, industrial and traditional Iranian architectural forms surround these mythic scenes creating an apocalyptic play land. Ahmadi loves "sugarcoating" images where they appear beautiful from afar but reveal darker narratives when we step closer. These

works are as mesmerizing as they are grotesque. Rendered with masterful subtlety yet poignant critique, she is commenting on the military aggression that has been present within Iran since the 1979 revolution as a battle over the country's natural resources and the civilian traumas faced at the hands of their own governments.



Pouyan similarly subverts the meaning of the *Shahnama* epics by taking specific illustrated pages and stripping the scenes of any figurative elements. What we are left with is an eerily empty landscape void of the elite figures that would have been a part of the scene. These small-scale works are fascinating and leave us to ponder on the contexts of power and patronage, and how authority can dictate “what is left unseen” within society.

Another exquisite series from Pouyan is his “Projectiles.” These monumental hanging works invade the gallery space as missile-like structures. Inspired by medieval Persian armor he explores how technology has served power throughout history. These first appear as menacing weapons but upon closer inspection reveal Pouyan’s fine calligraphic ornament. They are sharp and suggest violence but are also aesthetically striking and in fact very beautiful.

I have come back and seen this show multiple times and with each new visit I have discovered something new. You are set into a sort of trance as you move through the galleries, mesmerized by the ornately fine detailed works and the variety of mediums. The exhibition as a whole is a feast for the eyes as well as a deeply psychological portrayal of Iran’s past. The artists’ consistent referencing to history and Persian heritage allows us to begin to better understand the country’s complex present.

Beautiful and enlightening from all angles, I highly recommend making a visit to NYU’s Grey Art Gallery. *Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran* is on view until **April 2, 2016**.