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# HYPERALLERGIC

## Tracing Tradition in a Survey of Six Iranian Artists

by Livia Alexander on March 18, 2016



*Installation view, 'Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran' at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, with Parviz Tanavoli's "Heech Tablet" (1973) in the center foreground (photo by Alvia Urdaneta Studio) (click to enlarge)*

Felix Gonzalez-Torres once made the argument that all art is political, even an artist's choice to focus on the purely aesthetic. In the case of work by Iranian artists exhibiting in the West, especially in the US, it could not be more so. Fueled by common misperceptions of Iran as a hotbed of Islamic extremism and long-bearded Haitullahs, a nuclear threat, and the cause of lasting trauma thanks to the 1980 hostage crisis, many Americans think that nothing about Iran or Iranian art can be value free.

[\*Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran\*](#), currently on display at the Grey Art Gallery at NYU, carefully attempts to tread the choppy waters of regional exhibitions related to

this part of the world — where artwork and artists are often expected to serve as enlightened beacons, guiding visitors over a bridge of dialogue between East and West, us and them, allowing us to see a “beautiful” side of an otherwise negatively perceived culture of political violence, intolerance, and irrationality.

Like navigators in the dark, we rely on carefully crafted wall labels to explain, but perhaps more importantly to translate, the artworks on display. The artists from Iran, we’re told, are immersed in their specifically local history, traditions, and context yet operate in a global environment. Except for [Faramarz Pilaram](#) (1937–1983) and Chohreh Feyzjdjou (1955–1996), both of whom passed away, the other four artists in the exhibition — [Parviz Tanavoli](#) (b. 1937), [Shiva Ahmadi](#) (b. 1975), [Shahpour Pouyan](#) (b. 1980), and [Barbad Golshiri](#) (b. 1982) — live and practice between Tehran and the West. The challenge, however, is that what constitutes the “local” is obviously up for debate, since Iran, like other nations, is a modern amalgam of traditions and influences; meanwhile, discussions of the global tend to be framed from a remarkably Western-centered point of view. Consequently, the suggested dichotomy between local and global, as articulated in the exhibition title, raises more questions than it answers — as Grey Director and exhibition curator Lynn Gumpert herself admits in the accompanying catalogue — and could have been done away with altogether.



*Parviz Tanavoli, “Heech” (1972), bronze on*

The show’s temporal starting point is the 1960s, an important turning point in the development of Iranian art. At that time, centuries-old artistic traditions, variations of which could be found in different parts of the region — miniature painting, calligraphy, pottery, metalworking, poetry — began to be celebrated as uniquely local groundings for the attempt to find one’s place within Iran’s brand of modernity, as well as the world at large. It was, ironically, the advance of colonialism and its fascination with so-called local crafts that eventually contributed to the ossification of such traditions, as they became fodder for mass-produced souvenirs

wood base, 22 1/4 x 12 x 8 in, Grey Art  
Gallery, New York University Art, Collection  
Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.54 (click to  
enlarge)

for the Western tourist. Yet the exhibition  
demonstrates diverse strategies undertaken  
by modern and contemporary artists to  
redeploy heritage and craft in their practices

in complex ways.

Tanavoli and Pilararm represent the first of three generations of artists in the show. Gumpert uses the gallery's core collection of works by them as a starting point, welcoming visitors with two spacious rooms dedicated to these father figures of Iranian modernism. Major sample pieces emblemize their contributions to the [1960s Saqqakhana art movement](#), which derived inspiration from Persian folk art and secularized Islamic traditions in a search to define what a modern and culturally rich Iran might be. It was a time of the Pahlavi Shah's accelerated attempts at fraught, Western-style modernization, when the American collector Abby Weed Grey could fly to Tehran to meet Tanavoli and then onward to Tel Aviv before returning home.

Tanavoli's iconic *Heech* project, a calligraphic contemplation of the meaning of the word "nothing" in Farsi poetry and mystic intellectual thought, is well represented here. The movement and fluidity of the carved letters in his classic sculpture "Heech" (1972) shift to immobility and the boxing in of calligraphic elements in "Heech Tablet" (1973). The latter is shaped like a carved door with large padlocks (another iconic feature of Tanavoli's formal language), and is reminiscent of Iran's traditional street water fountains, also called saqqakhana, while referencing the ancient Babylonian Hammurabi tablet as well. Drawing on ancient Persian art found in the early capital of Persepolis for paintings like his "Last Poet of Iran" (1964), the artist pays homage not only to the country's long (and often pre-Islamic) cultural traditions but also to poetry's central role in them, lamenting its later disappearance.





Faramarz Pilaram, "Untitled" (1972), oil on canvas, 47 x 47 in, Collection of Houman M. Sarshar, New York

Pilaram, Tanavoli's contemporary in the Saqqakhana movement, similarly focused his work on Persian heritage and mythical motifs, but emphasized their relationship to abstract modern forms. "Mosque of Isfahan (B)" (1962) is an exquisite abstract painting inspired by Islamic architectural elements, while in "Untitled" (1972), Pilaram turns traditional calligraphy into a meditation on movement; his letters swirl on the canvas, emphasizing the beauty of form itself.

Moving away from Tanavoli and Pilaram's more stately, modernist approach, the works of Chohreh Feyzjdjou — who represents the exhibition's second generation — are perhaps the most personal and intimate part of *Global/Local*. Scores of blackened canvases are rolled into scrolls on a large industrial pipe structure in *Série E* (1989–93); more darkened, rolled-up canvases are stacked in the corner of the room in *Série DB* (1994); half-open wooden crates reveal black masses in *Série I* (1991). The twin senses of melancholy and menace are inevitable, perhaps informed by knowledge of the artist's nomadic existence

and untimely death from a genetic illness at the age of 40. In *Série K* (1992), Feyzджou revisits a book she drew earlier in her career, inspired by Sufi mysticism and, conjuring her Jewish roots, Kabbalah. Painted in the tradition of the Persian miniature, the pages are rolled up into small cylinders, concealed by her signature dark walnut stain, and then mounted on a gridded wall structure, allowing the original miniature paintings only to peer at us longingly from between layers of what appear as burnt-out scrolls. Accessible and inaccessible at the same time, Feyzджou's work speaks volumes about the cultural flux that informs her artistic imagination and practice, although there's no indication of whether the particular qualities of her work are emblematic of broader trends among her peers.



*Installation view of works by Chohreh Feyzджou in 'Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran' at Grey Art Gallery, New York University (photo by Alvia Urdaneta Studio) (click to enlarge)*

The younger artists in *Global/Local* are, on the whole, more direct, unequivocally harnessing past traditions to question current practices of power and politics — though, again, the question of whether this is characteristic of a generation that came of age after the 1979 Islamic revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980–89), or more the result of the exhibition's curatorial choices, remains open. Barbad Golshiri blatantly critiques the current Iranian regime and its practice of unmarking the graves of dead political dissidents. In his series *The*

*Unknown Anonymous* (2011), he photographed such unmarked graves; for his installation "Death Sentence (Memorial)" (2011–13), he lays out blank marble tombstones.





*Installation view of works by Barbad Golshiri in 'Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran' at Grey Art Gallery, New York University (photo by Alvina Urdaneta Studio) (click to enlarge)*



*Shahpour Pouyan, "After 'Portrait of the Uzbek Emir Shaybani Khan'" (2008), mixed media, 5 5/8 x 4 3/4 in (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)*

The works of Shahpour Pouyan, and to a lesser extent Shiva Ahmadi, represent an equally political but somewhat less flagrant approach. The former demonstrates an obsessive attention to detail and brilliant technique in the crafts of the past, from intricate silver work in "Projectile 9" (2013), "Projectile 10" (2013) and "Projectile 11" (2013) to ceramics in "Unthinkable Thoughts" (2014). For Pouyan, too, like Feyzджou before him, miniature plays its own distinct role. Knowledge of the traditional techniques, colors, and dyes used to create Persian miniature paintings is now lost, Pouyan explained to me. In such pieces as "After 'Portrait of the Uzbek Emir Saybani Khan'" (2008) and "After 'Kay Khosrov Converses with Giv'" (2010), he uses digital image

copying, editing, and remastering to painstakingly reproduce the originals. Yet Pouyan's miniatures are not mere replicas of a weighty past, but a rich source of wisdom in their stories and lessons about rulers and power. Pouyan extracts all human figures from the



original paintings, stripping away their authority and instead foregrounding landscape, abstract shapes, and colors. With the emblems of political power removed, Pouyan suggests a clean slate where new and future narratives can be painted afresh.

The anchor of the exhibition is tucked away at its very end, Ahmadi's one-channel video animation "Lotus" (2014). The work brings into focus her earlier *Throne* series — also included in the exhibition — that features a faceless, blood-covered ruler. A mesmerizing rumination on power, "Lotus" shows the Buddha, traditionally perceived as a peaceful figure, gradually transforming into a tyrant. Along the way, his garden, which is initially replete with chirping birds and playful monkeys tossing colorful balls, becomes splattered with blood (the balls prove to be bombs). With a rising crescendo of oil pipes pumping their poisonous content into the garden, Ahmadi poetically yet forcefully comments on the challenges of autocratic leadership and the impact of the oil economy on a country where public gardens and private courtyards are the sanctuary and spatial pulse of everyday life.



Shiva Ahmadi, "Lotus" (2014), single channel animation, 8:44 min, Asia Society, New York, Gift of Anne and Joel Ehrekrantz, 2015.<sup>1</sup> (click to enlarge)

*Global/Local* is simultaneously an ambitious exhibition of evocative works by six outstanding artists from Iran and modest in its recognition that it is not a comprehensive survey of "Iranian art." Although political power, tradition, and identity appear as salient threads throughout the work on view, perhaps the exhibition's greatest accomplishment

is that it puts the onus on us, the viewers, to choose how to make meaning of them. Do we cast these artists as beacons in the light? Do we try to engage with their work beyond the usual stereotypes to which we often fall prey? What is clear is that the artists, like many of their peers worldwide, are as much in dialogue with the diverse traditions that inform their national identity as they are with the world at large — whatever “local” or “global” might mean to them or to us.

[Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran](#) continues at Grey Art Gallery (New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through April 2.