

Carnivals

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

AYK: What was your reaction to the presidential election?

AA: Initially, I felt as if I were in a period of mourning.

AYK: And now?

AA: Once Trump became president, I was ready, as were tens of thousands of others, to break out from that feeling of paralysis.

AYK: What do you think Middle Eastern artists living in the US need to do about this?

AA: All artists have a role to play, but it's not by virtue of being an artist that you're automatically going to have a political position.

AYK: Has your art changed as a result?

AA: I've shifted from inanimate architecture to, all of sudden, people. Figures are entering my work.

AYK: What does this mean?

AA: I think it represents the proximity of what's happening, right here, in my city. So that's a shift that's been very real for me.

AYK: Have you thought about moving elsewhere?

AA: No. I feel an obligation to change things where I am, and where I'm from.



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afruz amighi
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Installation view of *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet* at the Aga Khan Museum.
 Photography by Janet Kimber
 Image courtesy The Aga Khan Museum.



PAST FUTURE

In a new take on what it means to be Persian, the latest show at the Aga Khan Museum – *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet* – explores artistic perspectives from the collection of Mohammed Afkhami. *Canvas* editor-in-chief **Ali Y. Khadra** goes to Toronto to meet the collector and the exhibition curator, Dr Fereshteh Daftari.

Ali Y. Khadra: The timing of this exhibition is just right, given recent political events in the United States. How do you think your show will contribute to the debate?

Dr Fereshteh Daftari: It's been perfect timing, ever since the hostage crisis in 1979. Iran is always in the news. But at this particular moment of such divisiveness, I think it's important to look at Iranian artists, their intelligence, subtlety of vision and humanity, as well as the richness of cultures they draw from.

AYK: Why did you choose to open the show in Canada, rather than the US?

Mohammed Afkhami: Until 2015, there were a few exhibitions taking place over here – as you know, because you went to some of the openings – that were pertinent to Iranian art. I'm thinking in particular of the retrospectives of Monir Farmanfarmaian, Parviz Tanavoli and Shirin Neshat. But funnily enough, it was hard to get interest in a wide-ranging show of Iranian art, especially because we wanted to bring something more holistic, not just individual artists. Canada took the bait first. We weren't prepared to give up our ambition of doing it in the US. So we're anchoring the show in Canada and then we're heading south of the border, barring any artistic ban or new legislative action.

AYK: How did the whole project come about?

MA: From about 2009, it was becoming clear to me that my collection needed room to breathe, and I wanted to showcase it in the right place, at the right time. I was buying a work here, a work there, and at any single moment, 10 to 15 works were on loan for shows around the world. This was a good start, but my idea was to have something larger and a bit more collective, so to speak.

AYK: So it was an organic path that culminated in this show?

MA: Yes, and it resulted in Henry [Kim, museum director] and I meeting in Dubai in 2014. He'd just started at the museum and was developing the programming. We talked about this idea of exhibiting my collection and I thought he was just being gracious and kind, but he was dead serious. We met again in London and I came to the opening of the museum that fall. That's when we decided that's it, we're doing it. And we thought, to make this work, we need a top-tier curator who's not only credible to a Western audience but also has the sensitivity and knowledge of our part of the world and specifically, Iran. There was only one choice: Fere.

AYK: How long did it take and what was the process?

FD: The deadline for submitting a checklist of works was spring of 2016 and in order to do that, I had to do a huge amount of research and travel to see the collection, which was scattered between Geneva, Tehran, Dubai and New York. Mohammed has 300 Iranian works in total and I had to narrow them down to 27!

AYK: What criteria did you use in choosing the works?

FD: I had to think of which works could survive in the critical context of the museum, as opposed to the more relaxed environment of a home or an apartment. Also, I was looking for a cross-section of works that would deal with the major issues in contemporary Iranian art. I don't usually start with a theory and then try to find illustrations of that theory. I let the art speak to me, I listen to it. And when I was looking at what I had picked, I asked what are the narratives in these works? First of all, I saw that there was a lot of humour. That's why you have *Jester*, the artist who weaponised humour to speak truth to power. And of course rebellion is everywhere; you have dissident artists, and not just political dissidents but also those reacting to the environments in which they live. Take Afruz Amighi for instance, who is taking on the medical system in the US – so that's why you have *Rebels*. Then there are artists who do not believe in stressing gender or culture, which they see as divisive. They want a space free of strife, a space shared by all humanity, so you have the *Mystics*, like Mohammad Ehsai, Y Z Kami and Shirazeh Houshiary, to a certain extent. And then there are the *Poets*.

AYK: Would you classify Abbas Kiarostami as a poet?

FD: Yes. Kiarostami is poetic, he's also a mystic, and he's a gentle rebel too because he avoids confrontation with the political situation of where he lives. He is very subtle. He is for life, as opposed to martyrdom and death and war. He is for beauty.

AYK: Fereshteh, you mentioned that some of the artworks may look beautiful in a home but are not necessarily fit for a museum show. Are there other artworks you wanted to show but chose not to, because they were too strong or conveyed the wrong message?

FD: I did not censor anything, there are many works in the show that are



Collector Mohammed Afkhami and exhibition curator, Dr Fereshteh Daftari.

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Dr Fereshteh Daftari

loaded in terms of politics. I might have eliminated some for being overly decorative and not having enough of a message, any kind of message.

Space was also an issue. I really don't believe in the bazaar type of exhibition where you pile up works, salon-style. I wanted each work to be respected, and to have space around it. That's why I picked fewer works.

AYK: What are the main objectives of the show and what do you hope to achieve with it?

FD: To show the diversity of the art world in Iran and what is on the artists' minds. Their main concerns are gender, war, religion, mysticism, and the different media used for expression, like architecture and carpets. It's also important to look at the artists' inventiveness, and how they respond to anything imposed on them. Take Khosrow Hassanzadeh, who reacts to Iran being labelled the axis of evil by hostile governments. In a way, he is claiming the identity of 'terrorist' for himself and retorts, 'Look at this simple proletarian family, do you call us terrorists?' It's important to consider the humanity of these artists, of this nation which has been demonised. Shirin Aliabadi is rebuffing another mandated identity. The woman represented in her photograph rejects her ethnic identity by wearing a blonde wig and blue contact

lenses. She has also had a nose job. The idea of camouflage is very important to me. That's why I kept 'Persians' in the title and not 'Iranians', as they were referred to at the time of the hostage-taking.

AYK: What are the particular associations with the words "Persia" and "Iran"?

FD: As you know, Iran has been known to the West as Persia ever since the Greeks. In the 1930s, Reza Pahlavi, the first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, asked foreign governments to refer to his country as Iran, the land of the Aryans. At the time he was flirting with Hitler and so there was a strategic dimension. He also associated Persia with decadence, with the Qajar dynasty. But in 1979, after the taking of the American hostages, Iranians living in the US started calling themselves Persians. It was an act of subterfuge, to distance themselves from the new regime and avoid contempt and discrimination. So this idea of hiding yourself behind something comes across in many of the works in the show, through layers. It's a very subversive kind of criticism.





Installation view of *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet* at the Aga Khan Museum
Photography by Janet Kim
Image courtesy The Aga Khan Museum

AYK: You said that avoiding politics in art is a political message in itself?

FD: Some people look at art – all kinds of art – as political. And even when you are deliberately avoiding art, such as with the mystics in this show, you could say that too is a political position in itself, not to engage with politics. It is debatable.

AYK: Were there any particular challenges with the installation?

FD: You can't always create a dialogue between adjacent works, but in the first room, I tried to show how differently each artist approaches the same subject, like gender. There's Monir Farmanfarmaian, who is extremely witty; Shirin Neshat, extremely poetic but also rebellious; subversive Parastou Forouhar and Shadi Ghadirian, who is very humorous. So you have all these very different approaches to the same issue. At the same time, I wanted to

have traditional aesthetics like calligraphy so that the conceptual and the traditional are combined.

MA: Also, you've got about seven or eight different media in the show, maybe more. There's video, spherical objects, mirrors, plastic resin so it's quite versatile, which is great because it shows that Iranian art isn't just photography or calligraphy. It's not all about oppressive Middle Eastern scenes. There's a lot of subtlety.

AYK: Mohammed, I heard you're publishing a book about the collection, in addition to the exhibition catalogue?

MA: Every work from this show will feature in the bigger book, which will include about 95 per cent of the works in my collection. It's going to be released in the spring by Phaidon, their first-ever title on Middle Eastern art. In all, there will be about 350 images of works from my collection, of which almost



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Mohammed Afkhami

This spread: (Left) Ali Banisadr, *We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet* 2012. Oil on linen.

(Below) Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled #10* (from the Qajar series) 1998. C-print.

Images courtesy the artists and Mohammed Afkhami Foundation.



300 will be Iranian, and then there are approximately 50 from the Islamic art and Western collections that my mother and I have developed. The two types of art are juxtaposed to show links, such as a black Farhad Moshiri work that is similar to a black Richard Serra dome. So on an aesthetic level at least, you can see the threads of collecting.

AYK: I know that your mother Mariam Masoudi and your maternal grandfather Senator Mohamed Ali Masoudi were great influences on you. Can you tell us more?

MA: We left Iran in 1978, around Christmas, and I didn't return until 2002. I remember so many times, as a child, being dragged reluctantly to exhibitions. I'd be constantly looking at my watch, wanting to get through

it all as fast as possible but the point is, I was exposed to art and informed by osmosis, I guess. I was working for Standard Bank and started going to Iran to visit their Tehran office. On one of my trips there, I made my first visit to one of the city's galleries and that's when it sort of happened. And then of course, there were the auction houses, the generation of publicity around art from this region, as you know. It was a very explosive period, with a lot of excitement, from 2006 to 2009. You felt like this party could just go on and on. Now, as the narratives have become very negative again, it's so important to show a softer, alternative side to Iran. We're in an age where public opinion is swayed by a single tweet, message or image. Sometimes, all it takes is a more humane perspective to change this negative discourse. And that's what I hope the show will do.