

# canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



## WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

Art Basel-Hong Kong • Sharjah Biennial 14 • Ishara Art Foundation •  
Jameel Arts Centre • Osage Art Foundation

Almagul Menlibayeva • Kamrooz Aram • Nikhil Chopra • Soundwalk Collective •  
Umber Majeed • Augustine Paredes • Seher Shah •  
Soraya Sharghi • Tuan Andrew Nguyen • Vivek Vilasini

Saira Ansari • Yaminay Chaudhri • Shumon Basar • Deepak Unnikrishnan

# WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

In this issue, we further articulate the parallels and divergences between the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Linked by history, trade and cultural flows, these regions are all faced with breaking down notions of singular identity. We look at the institutionalizing of Asian visual culture in the Gulf, with the arrival of the Ishara Art Foundation and recent exhibitions at Alserkal Avenue's Concrete and Jameel Arts Centre. Meanwhile, the ongoing Sharjah Biennial 14 examines the larger human condition that spans continents and territories. Writer Stephanie Bailey looks at China's cultural positioning in the Global South, while Art Basel Hong Kong expands its connections to different parts of Asia. Saira Ansari responds to Umber Majeed's project on rapid urbanization that translates across geographies, while Payal Uttam looks at connections between the countries of the Global South.

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Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy,  
HACKLANDER / HATAM. *Untitled (inwardness,  
juice, natures)*. 2019. Performance and mixed  
media installation with audio installation, palm  
stumps, acrylic paint on muslin, ceramic cups,  
coloured acrylic sheets, dimensions variable.  
Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving  
the Echo Chamber*. Commissioned by Sharjah  
Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artists  
and Sharjah Art Foundation.



Soraya Sharghi. *Saqi*. 2018. (Detail). Acrylic on canvas. 167.64 x 124.46 cm. Image courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery Dubai

## ORIGINS & MYTHS

An exciting wave of emerging artists have exhibited at Dubai galleries recently, including Iranian artist Soraya Sharghi, whose first solo show, *Out of Realm*, is running at Leila Heller Gallery until 18 July. Sharghi studied art in Tehran but is now based in New York after completing an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. Her vibrant, technicolour paintings cannot be restricted to a single genre. They belie their myriad influences, which span Asian miniatures, ancient mythology and contemporary literature.

Words by Nadine Khalil

A first encounter with Soraya Sharghi's paintings sparks questions about location and dislocation, and the cultural lenses through which we tend to assess an artist's practice. Her fantastical depictions of young heroines are scripted via surreal neon scenes. In what looks like a series of anime stills, bulls and bears are overcome and serpents wrap like garments around a young and seemingly genderless body – yet the motifs aren't futuristic. These manga-like visions may seem influenced by Japanese animation but when you ask Sharghi about where she derives her visual language from, she will cite both the epic *The Book of Kings (Shahnameh)* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, confounding the viewer further.

The bewilderment comes from how far her visual narratives depart from their sources, formally and conceptually. Perhaps this is because Sharghi wants to steer away from "cultural stereotypes," as she puts it, or the kind of motifs you might expect from an Iranian artist – even though she resorts to miniature painting for inspiration. She points to the parallels between her work and this traditional art form (framing devices and gold, ornate backdrops) but the link isn't immediately obvious. She explains why: "Persian miniature painting was heavily influenced by 15th-century Asian miniatures," referring to the appropriation of Chinese symbols after the Mongol invasions, which meant that the two kinds of styles are cross-referential.



The artist in front of her work *Slay the Dragon*. Image courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery Dubai

As if to prove the point, Sharghi's *Eve* series features elaborate Qajar headdresses and offers different iterations of the creation myth (replete with a red apple and hissing snake). "I couldn't stop at just one *Eve*," she admits. *Beauty of Ashes (Eve 4)* features the magnificent unfurling wing of a Simurgh, the Persian mythical phoenix, around a girl nonchalantly holding an apple. "I see *Eve* as a woman who had the power of choice to say 'yes' to the snake, and go on an adventure," she continues. "Had *Eve* not chosen the fruit of knowledge, life would be heavenly – and boring. We wouldn't be here." Which makes me think that the kind of psychedelia Sharghi envisages posits an afterlife, where humans and beasts morph and find balance, and girls never grow up.

"I've always incorporated children in my work," she stresses, adding that she drew her first nude body in San Francisco. Although you can recognize the lone hairless being that occupies each painting is female, it is desexualized, infantile and malleable. These seemingly supernatural beings morph into creatures, at times spouting beaks (*Out of Realm*) or elephant trunks (*Avoid the Incident*). "I'm inspired by ideas of identity and transformation," Sharghi says.

Her work also revolves around notions of power and shame. The protagonist in *Anomaly* bends over to expose white underwear

under a flower-print dress, her billowing hair, partly covering her face, emerges as bristly cacti. She is inside a circular frame, around which Murakami-like flowers extend to the edges of the painting. In *Standing Victoriously*, an intricate floral pattern fills the body of a girl and a bull. Sharghi was influenced by Joseph Campbell's 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and his idea of the monomyth, or the archetypal hero's journey, shared by many cultures. In her imaginary, Rostam, the hero of *Shahnameh*, is a girl fighting a dragon with red boxing gloves. "I'm not illustrating these myths; I'm trying to recreate them through fictional characters."

In *Out of Realm*, after which the exhibition is named, most of the action takes place inside a circle – bristly animal on the couch, girl with duck face carrying a camouflage rifle, girl wearing a bear's body on a Persian carpet – while Venus fly traps push through the borders. In another work, Sharghi has depicted this circle as melting, its boundaries dissolving. All this makes one wonder if framing art through a particular filter – demarcating art practice in cultural terms – doesn't actually prevent one from taking a more expanded view. Sharghi challenges us to throw aside such shackles.