

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

***The Rule and its Exception***  
***Contemporary Middle Eastern Art***  
**Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, Texas**

**May 9<sup>th</sup> to May 12<sup>th</sup>, All Galleries**  
**May 19<sup>th</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>, Vignette Galleries**  
***Presented by Leila Heller Gallery, New York***



Soody Sharifi, *The Shrine (Qeshm)*, 2012, Archival inkjet print\_42 x 28 in (107 x 71 cm), Edition of 6

Houston, Texas – Leila Heller Gallery will present *The Rule and its Exception* at Deborah Colton Gallery in Houston, Texas, at 2445 North Boulevard from May 9 through June 30, 2012. The exhibition will feature the work of 14 established and emerging contemporary Middle Eastern and Turkish artists and will include painting, photography, prints, collage, and video. The artists will include: Afsoon, Negar Ahkami, Shiva Ahmadi, Roya Akhavan, Ayad Alkadhi, Shoja Azari & Shahram Karimi, Kezban Arca Batibeki, Reza Derakshani, Ghasem Hajizadeh, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Pouran Jinchi, Farideh Lashai, Soody Sharifi, and Firooz Zahedi.

Drawing from traditions of miniature painting, ornamentation, figuration, and calligraphy, the artists in *The Rule and its Exception* present a series of varied practices that speak to the contemporary realities of life in the Middle East.

Irreverently borrowing from and combining cultures, which span centuries and continents, the works presented in this exhibition are complex in the manner in which they seamlessly layer visual queues from politics, geography, society, and art historical references.



Shiva Ahmadi, *Safe Haven*, 2012, Mixed media on aqua board, 60 x 120 in (152 x 304 cm)

**Shiva Ahmadi's** miniature panoramas develop an intriguing set of symbols and characters, which reference ancient mythology and religious iconography. The scenes depicted are suggestive narratives on hybrid infrastructural backgrounds floating between Esfahani mosques and nuclear reactors. The faceless dwellers of these non-places, are tyrant figures, subservient minions, camels, and elephants involved in a series of obscure and at times seemingly shady activities.

**Soody Sharifi's** most recent digital collages stage strange encounters in Tehrani public spaces where young men on scooters meet warriors armed with sticks, stones and daggers transposed from the pages of old manuscripts and miniatures. The work offers a strange layering of gendered violence across histories all through seemingly playful yet eerily offputting imagery.

**Roya Akhavan** creates lush compositions, which make use of symmetry and repetition to create vibrant canvases. The surfaces are then further labored with thread as well as fine line pencil drawing. The resulting imagery is an intriguing array of tattooed guardians, jugglers, and other motifs, which unlock open ended potential for interpretation in viewers' imaginations.

Known for his larger than life paintings, which incorporate grungily screen-printed wrestlers, **Khosrow Hassanzadeh** now turns his attention to the female figure. A focus on lightness and immediacy of gesture creates simple yet captivating nudes, paired with brightly colored repurposed floral wallpaper, which comprise an ornate backdrop. The entire image is then contained within an ostentatious gold frame reiterating the opulence of the poses.



Ayad Alkadhi, *One World*, 2011

Charcoal, acrylic, pen and pencil on Arabic newspaper on canvas  
48 x 72 in (122 x 183 cm)

**Ayad Alkadhi's** approach to painting is a physical struggle in mark making where strata upon strata of content get buried under one another. The work typically starts with a ground of yellowed newspapers pasted onto the canvas, upon which the artist frantically sketches in black and sanguine: bodies, embryos, and faces as well as thoughts and scribbled notes. A second layer obscures this phase with a heavy handed a la prima brushwork, then a third phase overlays controlled and contained bright colored outlines and delicate calligraphic lettering. An Iraqi exile, Alkadhi has for several years now been exploring the complexities inherent in negotiating a life in the shadows of conflict.



Reza Derakshani, *The Rose, The Bird, and the Dark Soil*, 2012  
Black sand and silver paste on canvas  
60 x 38 in (152 x 97 cm)

**Reza Derakshani** is a painter, musician and performance artist. Born and raised in the rural Northeast of Iran, a fascination with the grandeur and beauty of nature has remained a theme in his large-scale colorful abstractions. Often adhering sand directly to the canvas, Derakshani has a mastery of his materials and is well versed in the language of abstraction. Often very large, his work can at times even become full fledged murals and frescoes.

Turkish artist **Kezban Arca Batibeki** creates mixed media paintings which often feature larger than life female figures who range from sexualized nonchalant piles of bodies to empowered muscular heroines dynamically swinging from trees. Batibeki's paintings also sometimes stage more elaborate narratives, where diabolique-style plots seem to be unraveling. Her paintings incorporate sequins, carpet, and embroidery on acrylic. In addition, she creates elaborately composed digital photography.

**Pouran Jinchi's** densely cluttered calligraphic compositions are exercises in composition and entropy, of taking and shedding shape, and of breath and suffocation. Often repeating a singular letter, using a minimal palette of up to 3 or 4 colors and employing repetition and rotation; the works have extraordinary movement, rhythm and charge despite their reductive nature.

Through painting and sculpture, **Negar Ahkami** presents a criticality towards and a fascination with her native Iran and its culture. Melting and softening rigid and erect patriarchal architectures from mosques, nuclear reactors, and discombobulated tile work, Ahkami's world is not dissimilar to a surrealist landscape. Indeed this surrealism speaks to a complicated and at times hard to believe geopolitic, which Ahkami addresses through the employment of Eastern and Western artistic tropes and discourses.

Clearly based on an archive of old photographs, the paintings of **Ghasem Hajizadeh** often carry the material damages of the overly handled pictures they reference. Aged, dog-eared and yellowed, the work depict characters from an era past, and carry within them a sense of loss that is not quite identifiable. These often broad shouldered female figures dwell on the edges of gender, bending it, reshaping it, and casting doubt on the certainty of its segregation.

**Afsoon** is known for her series of portraits of iconic figures in Iranian, Middle Eastern, and international art, culture and society. These digital photo collages draw from pop art, and often feature black and white bust portraits on elaborate and colorful backgrounds comprised of repeated product packaging, album covers and other popular vernacular. The graphically simple portraits range from legendary Iranian singer Googoosh to Winston Churchill.

**Farideh Lashai** is one of the seminal painters of a generation of Iranian artists. Her more recent work has seen her move away from the abstract expressionism that she had become so well known for, in order to push the boundaries of her practice into animation. Still serving as the basis of her artistic practice, her paintings have now become backdrops upon which animated figures are projected. Thus the painted sections actively interact with the content of the video aspect of the work, in order to elaborate on short and simple stories which stand as complex metaphors for the historical and political realities, which have plagued Lashai's native Iran for decades.

**Shoja Azari** and **Shahram Karimi** have distinct practices on their own, the former as a video artist and the latter as a painter. Together they have worked on a series of collaborations which merge their respective sensibilities in order to create layered and rich landscapes. These video projections on painted canvases create kinetically active landscapes which draw inspiration from sources as varied as bustling cities to the shifting of the seasons.



Firooz Zahedi, *Elizabeth Taylor Dressed as an Odalisque I*, 1976, Printed 2011, C-print  
32 x 46 in (81 x 117 cm), edition of 5

**Firooz Zahedi** has built a career as one of Hollywood's top portrait photographers. His editorial work has been seen in a wide variety of magazines ranging from *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Architectural Digest*. His award winning film advertising includes the posters for *Pulp Fiction*, *Get Shorty* and *Edward Scissorhands*. In 1976, Zahedi met Elizabeth Taylor and traveled with and photographed her extensively in Iran and Europe. In February 2011, LACMA presented an exhibition of his photographs of Elizabeth Taylor in Iran shot in 1976. The success of that exhibition led to the museum acquiring those photographs for their permanent collection.

On Tuesday, May 8 at 6:30 p.m., Leila Heller and Gallery artists, Ayad Alkadhi, Reza Derakshani, and Soody Sharifi will be participating on a panel, *Contemporary Middle Eastern Voices: Platforms, Initiatives, and Challenges*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

**The Opening Reception for the gallery show is co-sponsored by the Society of Iranian-American Women for Education (SIawe)**, a nonprofit charitable and non political organization dedicated to providing education support through scholarships and promoting Iranian Culture. A portion of all sales throughout this exhibition will also go to this organization.

**Leila Heller Gallery**, based in New York City, has established a worldwide reputation in both the primary and secondary art markets. Known for an active and innovative exhibition schedule, the gallery's primary focus is the representation of a group of international contemporary artists, with a specialization in artists from the Middle East. The gallery's mission is to inspire vital dialogues among artists, curators, collectors, and critics, and to provide a forum where these exchanges can take place.

**Deborah Colton Gallery**, based in Houston, is founded on being an innovative showcase for ongoing presentation and promotion of strong historical and visionary contemporary artists world-wide, whose diverse practices including painting, works on paper, sculpture, video, photography, performance and conceptual future media installations. The gallery aspires to provide a forum to connect Texas, national, and international artists to make positive change.