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Iranians Shine, Assisted by Expatriate



Reza Derakshani, courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery

Reza Derakshani's "Mixed Identity."

By CAROL KINO

Published: August 12, 2009

IN recent months biennials around the world have dedicated special sections to a hot new field: Middle Eastern artists. And many of the most celebrated hail from Iran, like Farhad Moshiri of Tehran, whose paintings covered with Swarovski crystal-encrusted calligraphy have brought \$1 million-plus at auction, or Shirin Neshat of New York, widely acclaimed since the late 1990s for her films and videos featuring veiled women.

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These artists have something else in common besides their national origin: at one time or another, most have had some involvement with Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller, an expatriate Iranian art dealer who runs a small gallery on East 78th Street in Manhattan.

Since she set up shop in 1982, Ms. Heller has been a major conduit in the West for all things involving Iranian art and artists. "I get over 400 e-mails every week from artists,

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critics and reporters,” she said while showing a visitor around her gallery on a recent afternoon, “all wanting something to do with Iran.”

Although she also shows many Westerners, like the painter Martin Saar, and secondary-market modern work is her bread and butter, Ms. Heller is generally regarded as the only dealer in New York — if not the West — to have doggedly promoted Iranian art for decades.

“She’s been really critical in sustaining Iranian art in diaspora,” said the filmmaker and multimedia artist Shoja

Azari, a member of Ms. Heller’s stable, who also collaborates on the films of his companion, Ms. Neshat. “Now Iranian art is becoming vogue, but it wasn’t like this 10 or 15 years ago. She was really persistent.”

Ms. Neshat said Ms. Heller had also helped foster a strong sense of community. “Many artists give work to her for group shows,” she said, “because she has become a force among us Iranian artists in New York, and we want to be part of it.”

Ms. Heller nurtures this sense by hosting lunches and dinner parties, often at the nearby apartment she shares with her two teenage sons and her husband, Henry Heller, a money manager. And as a social connector in the manner of [Arianna Huffington](#) she attracts guests to her openings from well beyond the Iranian art world, like the CNN reporter [Christiane Amanpour](#), a childhood friend, and former Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#).

“After she opens a show, you go back to her home, and she and her mother have cooked all of this incredible Persian food,” said Lisa Dennison, the chairwoman of Sotheby’s North and South America and another longtime friend. “I hesitate to say no to an invitation, ever. You meet such interesting people.”

The fruits of Ms. Heller’s labors are on view in two exhibitions in New York. She was the primary adviser for the huge group show “Iran Inside Out” at the Chelsea Art Museum through Sept. 5, and there is also “Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art,” her own annual survey, at her gallery through Sept. 10. She organized it with the art historian Layla Diba.

Part of the gallery show is dedicated to influential pillars of Iranian art, like Reza Derakshani of Tehran, a painter whose work is inspired by Persian epics and landscapes, and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and Parviz Tanavoli, originators in the early 1960s of the calligraphically inspired Saqqa-Khaneh school, Iran’s first contemporary-art movement. But it is also full of younger, politically minded talents, including Shiva Ahmadi, known for intricately painted oil barrels, and Mr. Azari, who contributed “The Fight,” a 2009 multimedia piece made with the painter Shahram Karimi, which depicts a burning oil field.

The show also includes a surprising amount of work by women, like Shadi Ghadirian, a Tehran photographer whose portraits of modern women in traditional Qajari costumes are inspired by 19th-century Iranian photography, and the New York painter Negar Ahkami, who uses fantastical harem scenes to explore her own conflicted Iranian-American identity.

Ms. Heller, 54 (“but feeling like 17,” she said), doesn’t seem to have that problem. With her blonde-streaked hair and impeccable jewelry and clothes, she seems very much the self-

assured Upper East Sider. "I have no issues of identity," she said, laughing. "I know who I am."

Her maternal grandfather was a parliamentary minister under Reza Shah Pahlavi, the father of Iran's last shah, while her father was a banker and industrialist. By her own account her childhood was a happy roundelay of art classes; performances by visiting Westerners like Yehudi Menuhin, [Robert Wilson](#) and Margot Fonteyn; and horseback riding with Ms. Amanpour and her sister. Also in the family's circle was the Empress Farah Pahlavi, wife of the last shah, who, in spite of the repressive nature of her husband's regime, is still renowned for having founded museums, art schools and arts festivals throughout Iran. "It was a really cultured country," Ms. Heller said.