“CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART”

ARTIST PROFILE: FARIDEH LASHAI

WORKS BY:
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Throughout a distinguished career spanning over five decades, Farideh Lashai has always juggled with varying means of expression, without recognising any frontiers that might confine her to a rigidly defined identity. A graduate of Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna she worked as a crystal designer at Riedel Studios in southern Austria, and then Studio Rosenthal in Selb, Germany. Prior to going to Academy of Fine Arts, she studied German literature in Frankfurt. While painting and visual arts are her main practices, Lyricism is the central characteristic in her works, whether it is painting, sculpture, crystal design, installation art or recently a combination of video art and painting. Lashai has held many solo shows in Iran, Europe and the USA and has been involved in numerous international biennales and collective exhibitions such as the 18th Biennale of Sydney: All Our Relations (2012), Identity Crisis: Authenticity, Attribution and Appropriation, Heckscher Museum of Art (2011), Hope! Palais des Arts, Dinard (2010), Iran Inside Out, Chelsea Art Museum, NY (2009), Ludwig Museum, Koblenz (2005), and Gardens of Iran, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (2004). Her works can be found in major private and public collections such as the collections of the TMOCA, Tehran; Demenga Public Collection, Basel; Deutsche Bank, Commerz Bank, Germany; National Museum of Fine Arts, La Valette; Dia Art Foundation,
When I first saw Farideh Lashai’s paintings, my immediate reaction was visceral and not intellectual. The furthest thing from my mind was to offer an intellectual analysis. I remember that I felt at a loss for words because, for once, it was easier for me to submit myself emotionally to the paintings than to explain them. I puzzled, “Where do I find the words to express the lyrical complexity of her art?” I found myself fearful of retreating into an art historical analysis and thus, at least to my own mind, contaminating, and limiting the infinity of my feelings about her works. I knew then that the best words to illuminate her productions were poems. Poems as lyrical as her canvases—poems that would run parallel to her paintings, just as her videos emotionally complement and elucidate the vastness of her painted imagery.

Lashai’s depictions of nature are breathtaking. Her landscapes are both beautiful and terrifying. Abstract, general and often hermeneutically violent, they are exquisite and inviting (figures 1-5). Grace is the distinguishing quality of her works. Farideh Lashai’s paintings are clearly the result of an undeniable authenticity, of her refusal to be meretricious. This explains why her unencumberable landscapes feel familiar and heartfelt. The mass of colours and lines in her paintings mirror a primordial poetry that renders her scenes sublime. Her videos projected onto paintings formulate new aesthetic approaches and dissolve the dividing lines between painting, motion pictures, music and literature.

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**Appropriations**

But I am a historian and analyst, after all, to coin a phrase from Lashai’s Rabbit in Wonderland, is my rabbit hole. So, let me begin with her appropriations of Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* (Déjeuner sur l’herbe), painted in 1862-63 and considered the second most scandalous painting in the *Salon des Refusés* exhibition of 1863. The first was James Abbot McNeill Whistler’s *The White Girl* (later renamed *Symphony in White number 1*). Almost everyone who writes about Manet discusses the outrageous quality of the painting, after Zola’s shock and his subsequent critique of *Luncheon* regarding the presence of a nude and a rather realistically rendered woman picnicking with two fully dressed men. However, the shock of Manet’s *Luncheon* was far more essential than his unreasonable assemblage. *Luncheon*’s shock came from how it undermined the Truth-centered values of the old world and had metamorphosed the gods into modern men. It is within this context of change, from one perspective to another, that Jeff Koons also appropriated Manet’s imagery in 1985. Thus I would like to show that, whether the artist is conscious or not of this symbolism, the appropriation of Manet’s *Luncheon* in various forms and techniques by Farideh Lashai should be read and, after analysis, seen as the quintessential sign of Iran’s struggle for a new identity. In fact, the collective of the appropriated images symbolizes Iran’s aesthetic independence from the European empire of modernism.

To clarify the above point, let us remember that to appropriate is both to acknowledge an earlier value and also to recontextualize the original for a different context and setting. To appropriate also acknowledges that the earlier version is not complete and needs to be supplemented and, at times, even supplanted. Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* was an appropriation of Raphael’s painting. Raphael’s painting was composed decades before, and Manet’s painting was an attempt to reproduce the original. The use of an appropriated work. Thus the affinity of an original and renders all ideas and forms as copies of copies—of course, diegetic copies, subject to open-ended hermeneutical constructs.

Let us begin with Lashai’s three appropriations of Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*, painted in 1863. *Luncheon* signaled a phenomenal change in the outlooks and tastes of the western world, especially the shift from a Truth-centered world of gods (symbolized by their classical signs) to the human-centered (nihilistic) world of men. Above all it communicated the brashness of modern man and his ability to shape the course of events and the life of all men on the planet. Superficially, Manet’s painting was seen as a mockery of art as the poet Antonin Proust’s report regarding the “howls of laughter” that were “heard from Manet’s canvases a mile away” indicated. Others expressed vigorous disdain of its bland theme. However, *Luncheon* was audacious not because of the presence of a nude female (of not so classical proportions) picnicking with two dressed, contemporary Parisians, but because
it undermined and deconstructed the role of tradition, gods and all other authoritative structures. Manet’s composition was an appropriation of the feast (or the picnic) of the gods of the ancient world (figure 4). As was the custom of the Christian theologians, these same gods were usurped by Christianity and symbolized Christian ideals. We may thus easily conclude that Manet had kept the female nude, either consciously or unconsciously, so as to maintain the work’s iconographic connection to its profoundly meaningful historical precedents, namely the gods of the Judgment of Paris. Of course, at the time of Manet, the Judgment of Paris by Raphael was lost. However a tapestry copy of the original by Marcantonio Raimondi was available for viewing at the Louvre. Earlier sculptures of the two festive gods and their female companion were also extant in a few other European locations. By appropriating the Judgment of Paris, Manet was re-interpreting the notion of governance as earthly rather than divine and metaphysical. He was erasing the Olympian light of authority and invests the banal and the daily with the powers that be. In Manet, gods become men, ordinary contemporary men. He was disdained because he had overturned history and pointed out the anachronisms of the Truth-centered beliefs and worlds. We know that this was Manet’s theology as he also communicated the same message in Olympia (based on Titian’s Venus of Urbino and clearly a reworking of Goya’s Naked Maja) and also in his painting The Barbery (based on Goya’s Majas on the Balcony). These reveal his obsession to capture history’s myths and to transform them into modern and contemporary realities. In Manet, there is a shift from the metaphysical and the ideal to the earthly and the banal.

Lashai’s appropriations of Manet’s L’Annonciation take place on a number of levels. In one, Manet’s work is projected onto one of her gestural paintings. The gestural acts are far stronger than the faded projection of Manet’s L’Annonciation. This juxtaposition takes Manet’s work across the nineteenth and into the twenty-first century. Of course, history has a way of piling layers upon layers, collapsing randomly and without any preordained plans. Now a new dimension is brought into Manet’s L’Annonciation that only time could have made possible. Yet, these assimilations across time do relegate the work to the uncanny and the mysterious. Moreover, it allows Lashai, through such personal subjective and emotional acts, to claim Manet’s work as her own. In other contemporary terms, as Woody Allen suggests in his brilliant short story, The Eggman: Episodes every reading of a story becomes a part of the text and the reader is forever injected into the story. In another version Lashai projects annotated photographs of Iranian figures, arranged after Manet’s, against a landscape that is remotely reminiscent of Van Gogh’s Starry Night. The lower part of the painting is filled with Persian writing which indicates the shift in the context of its significance. At the centre is a tree reaching up to the sky. Is Lashai referencing the tree of life or the navel of earth? The work binds east and west, past and present, and above all, it communicates a sense of the universality of symbols experienced across time zones and cultural geographies. Most of all, as Manet usurped the ancient models and made them modern, Lashai has taken European models and Persianised them.

This point can be made clear in our discussion of the third and the most significant of the three appropriations of Manet’s L’Annonciation. In this case Lashai has projected a photographic image of two young Iranian men and one Iranian woman (wrapped by a mantle), against a background of inscriptions that repeat the phrase...
Nature versus Being

The contrast between Lashai's vision of nature and her view of beings is revealing. Nature in her paintings is abstract, sensuous, mysterious, unfathomable, open and painterly. One might add, it is also impulsive and emotional. Her humanity and animals are, on the other hand, quite well-defined. They are linear and spatially closed. If her nature is unnamable, her beings fit into nomenclature. The beings in her paintings, by virtue of their realisic appearances, exude a sense of cultural order, imply rational constructions, and appear measurable. On the other hand, nature evokes a sense of primordial ethos. For example, the rocks are ideological and impervious to the inner light, the rabbits are innocent victims of ideology and men appear as various sorts, from clowns to politicians. Her Rabbit in Wonderland, inspired by Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, is a series of six paintings with 4:30 of video projected over painted imagery. The first section of Rabbit in Wonderland is an animation video of two rabbits meeting and having a baby. In the second part of the animation video projected onto her paintings, a raven, an ideological character, joins a father and son (Toto, the Italian clown, and his son, Ninetto). Both characters are taken from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s movie The Hawks and the Sparrows (Uccellini e uccellini, 1966) (figures 7, 8). Of course, in Pasolini’s movie, the political commentators of the raven bore the peasants who kill and eat it. In Lashai’s world, the raven, similar to Kafka’s character in The Hunger Artist, survives. However, Kafka’s hunger artist starved himself because he could not find anything that he liked to eat and Lashai’s ravens (now crows) seem to like everything that they are offered to eat. In the third segment, the rabbit jumps into the mouth of a Cheshire cat whose body defines the map of Iran. Now the rabbits multiply and populate the Iranian territory. In the fourth segment, the ravens turn into crows and feast on dishes designed by Sani’ al-Mulk (figure 9). Then the crows, with book and stick in hand, intimidate the hungry rabbit and imped it to leave. In the fifth segment, the rabbit joins the former Iranian premier, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, and converses with the man, who happens to find everything “quadder today.” What we are to gather from these nonsensical juxtapositions? On the surface, the rabbits are the people of Iran and the raven represents the ideological government. Dr. Mossadegh is a hapless man whose visions could not be fulfilled in a world of madness and avarice. But more than this, through it all, her beings occupy a nature that is beyond their understanding and intellectual approximation. Often her rabbits, like characters struck by a mysterious and powerful force, stand observing nature from an emotional distance. It is almost as if nature and beings in Lashai’s works have arisen from two separate sources of causation (figure 10).

Yet what makes such a diversity so coexistent and even cohesive? On the face of it the vastly different existential senses between man and nature should raise a certain emotional and visual dissonance. It does not because this is simply how we live. We have, through our narratives, become myopic and frozen in both time and space. We try to ignore the flux of nature, though we remain fascinated by it. Look at her rabbits! They are simply astounded by this wondrous landscape, though they are enslaved by their own limitations.

In the last analysis, there is something quite postmodern here. Beneath the serene façade of her imagery there are the Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean dictums that absolute knowledge causes inertia and is a disease. Her raven best exemplifies this view and its innocent victims are the ubiquitous rabbits. Absolute knowledge (ideology) is the ghost that needs to be exorcised out of nature.

Synchrony versus Diachrony

Lashai’s video projections onto canvases are plays of diachrony and synchronous readings and perceptions. These works fuse the sphere of perception across time (music, film, reading novels) with the instantaneous sphere of comprehension (a painted canvas, a photograph of someone we know, etc.). The video of lovers, Layl & Majnun, is diachronic. It plays out like a symphony and needs to be absorbed in a given span of time. The background’s painting is synchronic. So movement and change are played out against a stable and unchanging set design. This scheme is akin to theatrical productions, with one major caveat. Traditionally set designs play a marginal role in elucidating the diachronic theatrical production. They establish the verse and the context within which the unfolding of the story becomes credible. However, in Lashai’s Layl & Majnun, for example, the set design is neither marginal to the story nor elucidating it. If anything, it further mystifies it. Her background paintings magnify the mystery of their love and connection. First, Majnun is shown sleeping alone, then Layl offers Majnun a pomegranate whose seeds fall out and run along the ground. And, lastly, the lovers are in embrace. During their embrace, a dog, perhaps a symbol of their fidelity, walks by, dominating the picture plane and obscuring the lovers. Above the embracing Layl and Majnun appears a two-person version of Lashai’s interpretation of Manet’s Luncheon.

Layl & Majnun is a scene out of Eden. All the identifying paradisical signs are present: love, pomegranate (a symbol of paradise and the self-sacrificing blood of the lovers), a dog (a symbol of fidelity) and nature (the nude goddess). Is this a new version of Jan Van Eyck’s Marriage of Arnolfini? The chasm between the ensigned femalre in the Marriage of Arnolfini (serve to her husband) and the liberated female in Lashai’s Layl & Majnun is phenomenal. All through this essay I have been keenly aware of Lashai’s message of our divided perceptions: of nature and of men. And yet, for me, her Layl & Majnun has overcome the fatality of our divided visions and divided souls.

Endnotes:
2. For an excellent article on the significance of man in Lashai’s art see, NimaSaghiri, I don’t want to be a turtle. I want to be its meaning, catalogue of Exhibition, Contemporary Istanbul, 2008.
4. I am only offering a short summary since Ashok Adicam had already described these steps in his article. See In the Land of Wonder, catalogue of Exhibition, Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde, Dubai, 2010, pp. 2-19.