

ARTFORUM

Passages

Farideh Lashai (1944–2013)

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Farideh Lashai. Photo: Michael Nagle/*New York Times*.

NEARLY FIVE DECADES of artmaking confirms Farideh Lashai's reputation as one of Iran's most prolific artists, a deft and capable painter of gestural abstractions. She was also a moving and perceptive writer, as revealed late in her career with the publication of the autobiographical *Shal Bamu* (The Jackal Came, 2003). Her prose shares the fluidity and restlessness of her paintings: One story gives way to another, chronology is nonexistent, and vivid fragments of personal memory open onto collective history—"like reading a diary in high wind," as one Iranian critic described it. Where her canvases had seemed—as with the work of most of her peers—fastidiously removed from ideological realities, her writing sketched precise and critical vignettes of its social context.

Shal Bamu is a story about matrilineal memory within patriarchal society. Lashai was born into a prominent family from northern Iran, and her book traces their entanglement in nearly every political uprising of the past century: the 1919 public hanging of a dissident reformer that her mother had witnessed as child, her brother's politicization under the Shah in the 1950s, her own imprisonment for leftist student activism in the early '70s, and the tumult of the Islamic Revolution of 1978 and the street demonstrations she joined while pregnant with her daughter. "I didn't want this [bloody line of history] to

pass from me to my daughter," Lashai wrote. "I wanted it to end with my generation; I wanted the next to give their hearts away freely—to not have their sleep disturbed, like mine, with the memory of a body dancing on the gallows, fragments of an image once reflected in my mother's eyes."

In the past few years, until her death from the cancer she had battled for nearly two decades, Lashai created her most explicitly political artworks. Her landscapes became the background for stop-motion animations inspired by the iconography of familiar paintings, films, or books (Goya's *The Disasters of War*, Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). The projections turn her abstract landscapes into stage sets where human actors are present only as ghostly props. They are brave and surprisingly specific political metaphors, a completely new visual experiment begun in the fifth decade of her career.

"All this violence, how do we stand it?" she asks on the last pages of her book. Lashai's writings and late animations are the key to understanding the resolutely quiet abstractions of an entire generation of Iranian artists who painted lyrical landscapes through revolutions, wars, and uprisings of every political stripe. Far from being mute, her work bears testimony to incalculable losses, to senseless historic events that for many years could only be communicated abstractly. Her endurance and courage will be missed.

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