Projecting The Legacy Of Iran

Farideh Lashai's artistic voice was a powerful reminder of humankind's struggle for freedom and dignity. She was by turns provocative and formally restrained but never defeated by her struggles. Her spirit and oeuvre will strengthen those who act in the name of conscience.

By Robert C. Morgan

One of the more tactic moving shows in early Spring in New York was a group of late works by Farideh Lashai, the legendary Iranian artist. Born in Pars in 1944, Lashai was a committed artist by the age of 20. Throughout her prolific and profoundly influential career, she retained a strong interest in painting, literature, and folk tales from her homeland. Although she spent considerable time in Europe and America, Lashai never lost her sensitivity for Iranian culture. As co-founder of Neda in the 1990s, an artist collective of 12 Iranian women, she held a prominent role in supporting the freedom of creative expression both within and outside Iran. Having had over 100 solo exhibitions, her work included in major collections in museums from Tehran to Los Angeles, she is considered one of the most important artists in the Middle East. Her death in February 2015 at the age of 68 had an immediate and stirring impact both on artists working in Iran and elsewhere throughout the world.

Coordinated by the artist's daughter, Maszlik Keykavousi, two galleries shared this exhibition: Leila Heller in West Chelsea and Edward Tyler Nahem in Midtown. The Heller Gallery focused on six wall projections used in relation to large abstract paintings and included a single mixed-media animation, Chasing the Amon. Together the group of works at the Heller Gallery were shown against large abstract paintings, along with two slightly earlier abstract paintings without projections. A third projection was shown against a grid of 80 etchings with images borrowed directly from Goya's Disasters of War (1860), but without Goyas' tumultuous figures. As a whole, the exhibition moved indeterminately over the various paintings, revealing partial landscapes and war-time accretions as well as looking for the corporal and enunciative surviviors that Lashai had removed from the original prints. Titled When I Count, There Are Only You... But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow, this work is a magnum opus to the extent that it reflects not the emptiness of violence or the conflict in the Middle East but the general state of desolation that persists in the artist's homeland. It is a powerful, work, an insistent work, capable of provoking viewers to think in relation to the act of seeing, to become witnesses of a universal tragedy occurring within human history.

During her lifetime, Farideh Lashai had an interesting history of her own. As a young girl she witnessed the exile of Iran's visionary leader in 1955, and the nationalist fervor that followed. It was a confusing time. Therefore, it is no wonder that Lewis Carroll's allegorical tale, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland would have such a strong influence on her youthful state of being. Lashai foresaw a dream of dreadful equivalence between reality and illusion. As a result, she sought an alternative through her intellectual morsel that would allow her decision to become an artist. In the early 1960s, she went to Vienna and studied art, and later became immersed in German literature at the University of Frankfurt. Lashai became especially involved in the radically innovative forms of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. One might say that in addition to her immensity to painting, her strong intellectual foundation served to form a synthesis between the deceptive innocence of Lewis Carroll and the hard-core realities in Brecht's plays.

Still, throughout her career as an artist, and occasionally as a translator, Lashai never lost her sense of historical consciousness or her willingness to become an activist in order to achieve a more coherent and ethical world. At the same time, Lashai employed her art as an illustration of politics rather than a formidable presence, filled with mystery, elocution, and intrigue, by which she opened the doors to a reality that would dispel notions of retreat or escape. This is evident in virtually all of her paintings/projections, for which a better term is required.

Such works as Gone Down the Rabbit Hole (2010-2012) suggest that the map of Iran resembles a smiling Cheshire cat whose mouth becomes a seductive entry for V-caed rabbits to jump into and eventually multiply. If one studies the painting that supports this projection, the dark abstract surface is both marbledly painted and magically symbolic. In a similar respect, much can be said of the imposing drapes and pears used in the Diapason au Parc de Montmartre (2007-2012), a theme based on a theme by Manet, yet fully transformed into a static/kinetic work that serves Lashai's own purposes. The allegory is sufficient to suggest that more is going on than what appears. As an important Chicen artist once remarked during the tyrannical years in her country: "We cannot write our political remarks on the wall. We must sew them between the threads."

Farideh Lashai, Gone Down the Rabbit Hole, 2010-2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm. In related works in which Lashai uses her combined genre, one catches the pervasive rabbit (undoubtedly borrowed from Alice), the rabbit, and the rising tree—all symbolic elements that have a recurrent significance in the Middle East. The rabbit appears innocent and curious, but its perennial presence is also cunning and coy, full of intrigue, yet ready to unmask whatever presence may come to the surface. The rabbit is a silent rebel, a subtle mediator with a purpose, an agent of deconstruction. The crowds are more disturbing. While they also carry a personal aspect, they are seeking control through devices never clear or open, always hidden before that confusion becomes unavoidable as in I come From the Land of Ideology.

Finally, there is the painting/projection—again on a dark and light abstract surface—in which Charlie Chaplin appears from The Great Dictator with his global balloon. Soon a facial profile of the great Egyptian chanteuse, Umm Kalthum (1904-1975), emerges from the upper edge of the painting, looking down on Chaplin, as she sings El Amal. The drama is intense as it corresponds to the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Again, Farideh Lashai emerges unassailable in all her absence. She evokes l'esper de rouges as she places her characters within an inventive pictorial allegory. Lashai always worked with graphic force, integrity, and substance from a deeply layered perspective that was provocative, yet she is contained by a necessary formal restraint. This quality is what gives her art as indelible character, a quality that will make it live as a testament of the struggle to liberate the human condition.

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