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# HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

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## Farideh Lashai: An Artist's Tale

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Storytelling has been an integral part of life in the Middle East -- and Iran in particular -- for centuries. Whether spoken in the streets, played as a game or painted on a canvas, Iranian folkloric tradition, with its uniquely theatrical and magical approach to the question of what it means to be a denizen of the earth, traverses regions and generations. Fairy tales, jokes, religious allegories, and animal legends have long been a part of a continuing oral and visual history, though the number of *Naghals* (traditional Persian storytellers who narrate painted scenes) has dwindled in recent decades. Still, elaborate storytelling in all forms remains ubiquitous, and to be Iranian means having the ability to suspend one's disbelief and succumb to the sometimes troubling, sometimes beautiful details of an oft-told tale.

Today if a story from the East makes its way in a westerly direction, it is not likely a tale from this rich, uplifting tradition but rather a news item that brings with it tragic or politically divisive information. These accounts are often colored by the lens of an entrenched xenophobia and fraught with inaccuracies. Rare are the bits of news that can inspire us with a meaningful artistic charge. But take for example the storied life of Iranian painter and writer Farideh Lashai. The artist, who died in February after a battle with cancer, was nothing short of a national treasure in the country of her birth. A humanist and lifelong painter who also published the memoir entitled *Shal Bamu* (The Jackal Came) in 2003 and translated seven plays of Bertolt Brecht, effectively introducing his writings to the Iranian public for the first time. She was a socially aware artistic presence in one of the planet's many male-dominated cultures. Respect for the artist and renown in her homeland are evidenced by the four days of front page newspaper coverage in Tehran that announced her passing and recounted her artistic life. Several documentary stories were produced within weeks of her death and aired on the Farsi language edition of the BBC as well as *Voice of America News*.

Despite having exhibited her paintings for over 40 years and becoming a favorite of Middle Eastern collectors, in the West Lashai's name is still unfamiliar, and when mentioned, often misspelled. Two recent exhibitions of the work of Farideh Lashai's singularly poetic multimedia creations in New York might go a long way toward correcting any residual oversight. Leila Heller Gallery in Chelsea, a versatile exhibition

space that specializes in Middle Eastern art and acts as the artist's primary U.S. representative, collaborated with the venerable Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art on 57th Street in the presentation of a pair of unforgettable shows of the artist's last works.

At Leila Heller Gallery in the April exhibition entitled "Thus in Silence in Dreams' Projections" viewers could experience several works by Lashai that utilize video projected directly onto her painted canvases as well as music and sound environments to lasting theatrical effect. In creating her allegorical animations and nearly abstracted paintings, Lashai evokes not only Iranian history but also a collective sense of human nostalgia for a less troubled time and place – whenever and wherever that might be. Without simply romanticizing the past or her own fascinating life, the artist uses symbols and metaphor to tell personal stories that are somehow universally relevant.

Moving paintings that flicker and sing. They're graceful, wistful and a bit foreboding, like memories we've yet to experience but feel familiar nonetheless. Several hybrid works by Lashai evoke *Alice in Wonderland* and feature a computer-generated rabbit, which hops through visual metaphors of a turbulent Iranian history. In addition to being an avatar for the artist herself, the rabbit represents the collective curiosity at the core of the soul of the Iranian people. Hares meander across these painted worlds, empty-headed but determined, perhaps hunting for the next meal or adventure. We instinctively realize that each animated rabbit, though confident in its hop, is on an unpredictable path. Other characters – crows, The Cheshire Cat, the moon, bearded and turbaned Mad Majlis – take parts in other compelling tales projected onto original paintings. The gallery became a Wonderland of sound and shapeshifting, dream-like narratives. Although the political essence of Lashai's artistic practice is inescapable, and the modulations and vagaries of contemporary Iranian life pervade the works, the left-leaning artist viewed her creations from a broad, humanist standpoint rather than a political one. Lashai was in fact imprisoned for two years in the early 1970s for her progressive views. While incarcerated she passed the time by staging the plays of Shakespeare and Brecht with other inmates as cast members. Like both masterful writers, Lashai enjoyed an innate ability to temper a bleak situation with meaningful comedy.

The uptown exhibition at Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, entitled "It is It, and It is Only Now..." was another showcase of Lashai's considerable talent. It featured the multimedia work entitled *When I Count, There Are Only You...But When I Look, There as Only a Shadow* (2013), a masterpiece of technology and lyricism based on 80 prints from Goya's famous series of etchings *The Disasters of War* (which were created beginning in 1810 and never printed in the artist's lifetime.) The protest inherent in the gruesomeness of Goya's depictions resonates a century later. Lashai removed the bodies and scenes of death from plates, and banished them to a video projection – gallery visitors witnessed the human suffering only intermittently as a



video spotlight moved across the framed etchings revealing glimpses of history and horror.

Turmoil, as Lashai has long understood, is difficult to put into mere words. Another poignant and theatrical video painting on display was *El Amal* (2011-2012). Created from oil, acrylic, graphite and projected animation on canvas, the work is an artistic response to the Arab Spring and Egyptian revolt that began in 2011 and its Arabic title translates as "hope" and "desire." The video depicts Charlie Chaplin (that silent clown who fascinated Brecht, Beckett and others) dressed as Hitler from the 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. It's a looped tour de force and parody of power: Chaplin-as-Hitler is projected onto the sparsely realized painting and clumsily attempts to control a bouncing orb of light, as the oversized visage of Arab music star Umm Kalthum hovers above him on the canvas, watching, singing the tune of "El Amal," and despite closed eyes, judging his ineptitude. The unseen audience quietly laughs at his dejection. As the catalog described the narrative:

*The Great Dictator* has the desire to devour the world, to make it his own, to possess it, as he plays with the globe that he bounces to touch the moon and Umm Kalthum's earring. In the final act, the dictator's dream and the music come to an end, the globe bursts in his hands and he is left with nothing. The majestic face of Umm Kalthum slowly fades away, leaving a still abstract painting behind, a burnt street, a dark jungle that is now charged with meaning.

To Farideh the canvas is a stage. This animated painting with its filmic as well as painterly magic tricks ranks among the most affecting of Lashai's late works. Its simple, ghostly images and overlapping layers of reality and fantasy are enchanting, even transformative. Like some collective recollection unleashed, the narrative, once experienced, remains etched on one's subconscious. Perhaps those who see it will retell the tale.

The life of late Farideh Lashai is a rich, complex and indeed ongoing story. It is the tale of a grand woman rising. Lashai is like a contemporary female Naghal who even after her death stands in front of her artwork and – histrionic but dignified – narrates the legend. Farideh Lashai will be remembered. For as an artist she was gifted with the unshakably certain belief that whether myth or reality – or tinged with an alchemical dose of both – a story must be told.