The New York Times

Putting New Faces on Islamic History

By CAROL KINO

Published: May 19, 2010

ONE balmy evening this month, a glamorous crowd was packed into the tiny Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery on the Upper East Side for the opening of "Icons," a show of video installations by the Iranian-born filmmaker Shoja Azari that runs through Friday.

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Shoja Azari

It was his first solo show in New York, though Mr. Azari, 52, is no stranger to the high-end art world. The professional and romantic partner of the art star Shirin Neshat, he has been her primary collaborator on films and videos, including the feature "Women Without Men," which opened in Manhattan on May 14. And Mr. Azari's own multimedia installations have been increasingly showcased in galleries and museums around the world.

So that night, in a space whose rooms had been darkened to suggest a shrine, the scene felt comfortably familiar as Mr. Azari and Ms. Neshat chatted with a mix of American and Iranian luminaries including Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art; Lisa Dennison, a chairwoman of Sotheby's North and South America; and Ehsan Yarshater, the director of the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University and editor of the Encyclopedia Iranica.

But there was also an undercurrent of nervousness in the gallery, which specializes in Iranian art. For weeks, its owner, Ms. Heller, had received worried letters from friends, many of whom

suggested that she think twice before showing Mr. Azari's new work. Five glowing five-foot-high video portraits that he made this year, they are based on the brightly colored posters of Shiite imams, martyrs and saints, all of them male, that hang in shops, restaurants and homes throughout Iran. In each, the traditional subject's face has been replaced with a video portrait of a contemporary Iranian woman who blends seamlessly into the painted background (but can also be seen to move and breathe) — a transformation that some pious Shiites might view as sacrilegious.

Although Ms. Heller doesn't see it that way (the videos "trigger a spiritual feeling in you," she said), some of her staff members were concerned. As a result, "I became nervous that some crazy person would misinterpret it," Ms. Heller said, "and use it in a way that the work did not merit."

And though Mr. Azari now dismisses such fears, he initially expressed concern, too. "I hope I don't lose my head over these pieces," he said some weeks ago while still working on the series. "They could raise a lot of anger."

To some Shiites, the portraits may seem "quite provocative," said Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia, who wrote an essay in the show's catalog. "Shoja is taking these religious icons and turning them upside-down."

But, as Mr. Dabashi also noted, many artists are making equally iconoclastic renditions of such posters inside Iran, where Shiite imagery has often been adapted to political ends, a subject he and a co-author explored in "Staging a Revolution," a 2001 book about Iranian revolutionary posters.

To a less educated eye, Mr. Azari's portraits resonate as kitsch — as if a cheesy poster of the Virgin Mary had suddenly come to life — but with a political subtext. "Icon #3," based on a poster of Imam Reza, whose shrine at Mashhad is one of Iran's most visited pilgrimage sites, presents a woman garbed in green (the symbol of Iran's opposition movement), her eyes welling with tears. "Icon #5" recreates a portrait of Imam Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who died — together with the infant son he is shown carrying — at the Battle of Karbala, one of the most significant events in Shiite history; we now see a mother cradling her dead child's body.

While making the work, Mr. Azari, said, he had in mind women like Neda Agha Soltan, the protester killed last June in Tehran during the demonstrations that followed Iran's disputed election, and the many Iranian mothers now mourning others like her. For Mr. Azari, art and politics have long gone hand in hand. Raised in Shiraz, he began making short films as a teenager, and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution he became involved in underground theater, literature and politics. In 1983, as the new government turned increasingly fundamentalist, Mr. Azari, who by then had a wife and son, made his way to New York.

Some years on, divorced and raising his son, Johnny B. Azari (now a rising rock musician), alone in Manhattan, Mr. Azari was working odd jobs and "trying to get it together as an immigrant," he said. He eventually sank his savings into making a feature film, which he never

completed. But in 1997, a friend introduced him to Ms. Neshat, then a sought-after young photographer who was trying to assemble a crew for her first video, “Turbulent.”

Mr. Azari became deeply involved with the piece, a two-screen installation in which a male and female singer face off. Not only did he play the male lead, he also helped Ms. Neshat gather a creative team whose members, including the production designer Shahram Karimi, have often worked together since. Mr. Azari is now co-writer and co-director on all her film and video projects.

Leila Taghinia-Milani (LTMH) Gallery

Mr. Azari’s works at the Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery include “Icon #3.”

“It was turbulent, literally,” he said of that first project. “Shirin was married, and I had a girlfriend. And then everything fell apart. We started to be together.”

The piece won the Golden Lion at the 1999 Venice Biennale and set them both on new careers. She became a film and video artist celebrated for exploring Islamic gender roles; he began making experimental and arthouse films, including “K” (2002), an adaptation of three stories by Kafka, and “Windows” (2005), a series of short films that offer a voyeuristic glimpse into ordinary American lives.

“Windows” had its premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2006, the same year an excerpt was seen in a major museum show in Spain; suddenly, Mr. Azari found himself with an art career. Soon he was showing in European galleries; one of them, Figge von Rosen in Cologne, Germany, opened a show of “Icons” on May 14.

Some of his work so far has consisted of what he calls video paintings. One such series combines painted canvases and video projections to curiously three-dimensional effect; made with Mr. Kahrimi, it is based on video clips of oil fields burning in Kuwait during the Persian Gulf war.

Most recently, his works have gone entirely digital. His "Coffee House Painting" (2009), also included in the exhibition, is a 5 1/2-minute video that opens with an image of "The Day of the Last Judgment" by Mohammad Modabber, a late-19th-century Qajar "coffee house" painting, another Shiite folk art genre that presents the lives of martyrs in detail.

Such works once served as backdrops for Pardeh-Khani, performances in which narrators told stories depicted in the canvases. Mr. Azari created a contemporary version by digitally manipulating the picture to include images from contemporary news footage and video clips. The painting first erupts in flames, then the modern-day tribulations come to life: the aftermath of a suicide bombing in a Pakistani market; Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, giving a speech; an American soldier talking about the music he listens to "when we're killing the enemy" in Iraq.

Yet until the disputed election, Mr. Azari's work never focused on Iran. One day, while examining a Shiite poster on the Internet, he decided the face wasn't what it seemed. "I covered the beard, and I looked at the eyes and the eyebrows, and I realized they are actually females in disguise."

Renaissance painters, he noted, made spirituality accessible by depicting the saints as real people. "I think my impulse is really that," Mr. Azari said. "To take this image of male-dominated religion and to bring it down to earth."