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Artists from all faiths, including Muslims, challenge religious assumptions

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David Wojnarowicz's video called "A Fire in My Belly," removed Tuesday from an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, includes 11 seconds of footage of a small crucifix crawling with ants. Some Christians have objected to the passage as sacrilegious. (Others, however, have had no objections to it, or have advanced positive interpretations.) Many objectors have also made the claim that the art world is always eager to challenge Christian sensibilities, but would never risk it with Islamic imagery.

While it's true that Christianity has been front and center in some contemporary art, that's in part because it's the religion most Western artists know best. Cultural figures from the Muslim world, however, have not shied away from touching on their own traditions. Images of Muhammad, however, still seem off-limits to the artists, if not necessarily to Western audiences. (Artists from other faiths also use contentious religious imagery, but they are less in the news.)

The writer Salman Rushdie is the iconic example of a figure whose works have been reviled as blasphemy by some imams, while the works are supported, even celebrated, by Western culturati. The world of visual art is starting to see similar examples.

Artists in Iran are eager to probe religious icons and symbols, says Shoja Azari, a prominent Iranian artist and filmmaker who lives in New York. "It's definitely going on strongly in Iran - and in Turkey, it's also being done."

And also in the United States, thanks to Azari and others. He was speaking from a Miami art fair called "Zoom," dedicated to exposing contemporary art from the Middle East to Western eyes. The art he's showing there includes staged photos of a conservative Iranian mullah who's getting dressed after having sex with a woman who is shown in bed nude. Azari says he wanted to explore religious figures "whose private life has always been kept secret."

In a much-publicized exhibition in May at LTMH gallery in New York, Azari edged still further toward the edge of blasphemy. In a series of video pieces he called "Icons," he took images of martyred Shiite saints, such as might be seen in any kitchen in Iran (the regime approves of them) and replaced their male faces with the faces of crying women, meant to evoke the female "martyrs" of the failed "Green Revolution" that took place in Iran last year.

"It could be interpreted as sacrilegious," Azari says, even though he insists his aim was not to "insult religious belief" but rather to explore the connection between religion, gender and politics

in present-day Iran. When the show was in the planning stages, he says, "there was a lot of discomfort among people in the gallery." But in the end the decision was made to go ahead.

"We got a few threats," says his dealer Leila Heller, speaking by phone from the fair, "but we ignored them." The work could never be shown in Iran, but in the West, there's little hesitation, and Azari's star is rising - he says his "Icons" show had a "fantastic" reception in Germany, and the New York Times did a large piece on him, illustrated with one of his "sacrilegious" images.

Azari's romantic partner is Iranian-born video artist Shirin Neshat, a full-blown superstar in the art world. Although her art is less explicitly religious than his, it probes the role of women in Islam in ways that don't win her friends among imams. "For sure, the Islamic regime is very troubled by her work," Azari says. Yet once again, the Western art world has embraced her, and her courage, with solo shows in major museums in the United States and elsewhere.

The reception for Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah, one of whose installations includes Western high-heels lying on Islamic prayer rugs - a scene that would outrage many traditional Muslims - has been almost as warm. She has shown at the great Centre Pompidou in Paris and was awarded the prestigious Meurice Prize in France, as well as the Abraaj Prize - of the United Arab Emirates.

If anything, in the West there is an expectation that art from the Islamic world will push Islamic buttons, says Sam Bardaouil, a Lebanese-New Yorker who is the curatorial director of Art Reoriented. It's an organization that stages shows of Middle Eastern artists, and it is about to launch the largest show of their work ever to hit a museum. The exhibition, of new and entirely uncensored commissions, will be shown at the brand new Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar.

When he launched a show of Iranian art at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York, he says the problem wasn't that the local audience was hesitant about offending Muslim sensibilities. It was that, in the Western art world, "people expect [Middle Eastern] art to be always subversive." They're disappointed, he says, if it isn't.