



THE WIND- MILLS OF HIS MIND

SHOJA AZARI



Irony, cultural misunderstandings and consumerism are all regular themes in Shoja Azari's work, underlined by an approach steeped in politics, philosophy and sociology. Melancholy he may be, but a wicked sense of humour is another of his hallmarks, as **Kate Taylor** discovers.



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In the morning that I met Shoja Azari – a month into the Iranian presidential elections in June 2009 which triggered widespread protests in Iran and beyond – a pair of blonde women were walking down New York’s Soho neighbourhood carrying green balloons. Were they expressing support for the Iranian opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, or were they just publicists heading to some environmentally themed product launch at a nearby boutique? Probably the latter, but Azari was amused by the women’s unconscious political statement. “They’re with us,” he smiled, fingering his own green wristband.

These days, Azari and his wife, Shirin Neshat (*Canvas* 3.5), watch the events that unfold in their home country, Iran, with a mixture of hope and trepidation. In July 2009, the couple took part in a three-day hunger strike outside the United Nations, with the intention of raising awareness of the human rights violations in Iran. “At this point, there isn’t much that Iranians in the USA can do,” he says. In the months since the elections, Azari feels that the opposition movement has become more radical. “Right now, the majority of the movement is way ahead of its leadership,” he adds. “I think the regime will crumble, but they’re going to take a lot of people down with them. I think it’s going to become bloody,” he says. “I’m very hopeful, but I also know that they’re becoming more and more violent.” Against the backdrop of events in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Azari’s *oeuvre*, which consists largely of film and video, is dark, politically charged and laden with messages.

Opening spread: Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi. The Heat. 2009. From the Oil Paintings series. Acrylic on canvas and video projection installation. 127 x 226 cm. Edition of three. Edition of five also available in 74 x 132 cm.



A Room with a View, 2006. Beta SP. Farbe.
9 Minutes. Courtesy LTMH Gallery.



*Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi.
What Remains, 2009. From the Oil
Paintings series. Acrylic on canvas
and video projection installation. 127
x 226 cm. Edition of three. Edition
of five also available in 74 x 132 cm.
Courtesy LTMH Gallery.*

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FILM

Born in Shiraz, Iran in 1958, Azari had always been fascinated with the world of film, becoming an actor and playwright, participating in various theatre workshops and performance centres in his home city. In the years following the Islamic Revolution, the regime became increasingly threatening to artists – “on many occasions, they stormed theatres, shut down performances and arrested the entire troupe” – and Azari fled to New York in 1983. With his first wife and a young son to support, he felt that he would not be able to succeed as a writer or actor in New York and pursued a BA and MA in psychology from New York State University and Hunter College respectively. Fascinated by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, author of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Azari admits that, in general, though, “psychology bored me.” And so began his foray into the world of film.

Azari met Neshat in the late 1990s, when she was looking for help with a video, *Turbulent*, which ultimately won the International Award at the Venice Biennale in 1999. After working together on *Turbulent*, they eventually became a couple and Azari has since collaborated with Neshat on all of her art, including her debut feature film, *Women Without Men*, which won the Silver Lion award for best director at the Venice Film Festival in 2009. The couple say that their relationship has changed their lives, in part because together they have been able to gather a community of other Iranian-American artists around them. Neshat’s film and videos are mostly set in Iran – though shot in locations like Morocco, Turkey, Mexico, and New York – so, having a community with which to discuss the work is crucial, believes Azari. “When you’re outside Iran, you have this fear of not understanding, of falling into the stereotypes and recreating the clichés,” he says, adding that for each video that the couple have worked on, “we would go through this really major conversation and discourse and spend days and days talking about every aspect of it.”

METAMORPHOSIS AND MYTH

Neshat believes that unlike her films, which orient to emotional aspects, those of Azari are more intellectual and philosophical. “He makes me think a lot about mystics from Iran, from this tradition where there’s always a level of melancholy,” she



explains. “To Westerners, it may come across as purely dark, but really it’s not. It’s more reflective.”

Azari, who in person is warm and engaging, if also intense, cites Franz Kafka among his influences. His films, which he has shown in both gallery and museum contexts and film festivals, combine a Kafka-esque attention to the themes of power, violence and oppression, with the perspective of an émigré who understands cultural alienation on a very personal level. “I’m at a distance to this [American] culture and now, also to my own culture,” says Azari. “That’s the reality of exile. You don’t belong to any place, not even your own homeland. You’re an outsider.”

One of his earlier films, *K*, made in 2002, is based on three Kafka short stories, including the famed *The Penal Colony* in which a Western official visits a distant colony and observes its savage penal system. *K*, Azari says, was partly inspired by the similarities he saw between the brutally oppressive penal colony of the story and the governments of both Iran and Iraq. But Kafka’s story also reflects the supposedly sophisticated West’s inability to understand the foreign culture that it is both observing and condemning. The two cultures “come into contact with each other,” explains Azari, “one arriving at a sense of superiority, while the other is stuck in tradition, and they really never understand each other.”

A more recent film, *Windows* (2006), which was included in the *Iran Inside Out* (Canvas 5.3)

Shoja Azari and Shahrām Karimi. Burning Moon. 2009. From the Oil Paintings series. Acrylic on canvas and video projection installation. 127 x 226 cm. Edition of three. Edition of five also available in 74 x 132 cm. Courtesy LTMH Gallery.

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PROFILE

exhibition at New York's Chelsea Art Museum in June 2009 (now touring at the Farjam Collection in Dubai) is a series of dark, somewhat absurdist vignettes, in which windows function as not just a persistent theme and framing device but also a metaphor for alienation, isolation and voyeurism. In the most outrageous vignette of them all, *A Room with a View*, a well-fed, but culturally boorish, middle-aged American couple are sitting at a table, munching potato chips and watching what we understand to be – thanks to the soundtrack – the movie, *An Affair to Remember*. With their backs to the window, viewers see what seems to be a pristine park. As the pair snifle and make inane comments during the movie's final scene, through the window, viewers see a female jogger dragged into the park and gang-raped. "The idea of *A Room with a View* is that we really don't want to look at things," Azari says. "We turn our back on reality," he continues, "and instead, choose to interact with a spoon-fed, consumerist culture. [In watching the film] that phoniness starts to really crawl under your skin."

And as we, the viewers, find ourselves in the same position as the couple – passively watching television – "You become an accomplice," adds Azari.

WORKS OF RECKONING

At last year's Art Dubai fair, New York's Leila Taghina-Milani Heller gallery (LTMH) premiered Azari's coffee house paintings done in collaboration with Iranian painter Shahram Karimi. In the early 1900s, traditional folk art, which depicted Persian myths and legends, were popularised in Iran through *Qahveh Khanehei* – coffee house paintings, which relatively unknown artists would paint on walls of coffee houses. At times using tales from the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by the legendary Iranian poet Ferdowsi and at other times inspired by

Persian miniatures, the paintings sought to revive nationalistic pride. In the video, *The Final Judgment*, Azari takes a coffee house painting which depicts roozi qiyamat (Day of Judgment), but against it, superimposes clips from YouTube – a video message from a Palestinian suicide bomber; an interview with an American soldier convicted of torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib; Israeli tanks bulldozing Palestinian homes; Hezbollah marches and street violence during last summer's protests in Iran, among other politically charged images. The piece suggests a continuity between Iran's religious traditions and the clerical regime's moral branding of its enemies — for example, "the USA

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as the 'Great Satan' and Israel as the 'Little Satan,'" says Azari.

In February 2010, LTMH organised *Blazing Grace* at London's East Central Gallery which showed Azari and Karimi's coffee house paintings. Some of the exhibited works included those from the *Oil Painting* series, which feature a combination of Azari's edits of film stills of burning oil fields taken from *Lessons of Darkness*, a film by Werner Herzog following Iraq's retreat in 1991; and paintings of oil fields done by Karimi include obscure verses of his own poetry written in Farsi. In superimposing the stills over the paintings, the works are charged and real, linking media, politics and film all at once. Azari believes that the apocalyptic images represent all the destruction that oil has wrought in the Middle East. "Hopefully," he says,



Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi. Winter. 2007–8. From the Silence series. Acrylic on canvas with video projection. 127 x 218.44 cm. Edition of three. Editions of five also available in 73.66 x 132.08 cm. Courtesy LTMH Gallery.

“that will lead to some kind of emotional effect and possibly a discourse.”

A sequel to this piece will be shown at *Icons*, Azari’s solo show at LTMH in May. Azari maintains that the work will be very subversive. LTMH previewed a work from *Icons* at the recent Art Dubai fair and it attracted a great deal of interest from collectors and institutions alike. While political in context, the work is also a videographic demonstration of female empowerment, “which Azari is saying is not the case with women in Iran now,” notes the gallery’s Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller.

Currently in its developmental phase is Azari’s feature film, *Paradise*, which he hopes to start shooting in August. An “erotic psychological thriller”, *Paradise* takes place in an unnamed, war-torn country in the year 2025, and centres on the relationship between an American journalist and a young man who kidnaps her. From the room in which she is being held hostage, the journalist watches videos of herself being shown on American television, where she and her family quickly become celebrities. Meanwhile, she and her kidnapper develop a more complex relationship, but

their efforts to connect are ultimately thwarted by the violence that surrounds them.

When mentioning that he is often accused of pessimism, Azari also cites the position of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. “One should be pessimistic in intellect, as Gramsci said, but optimistic in will,” he says. “You have to look evil in the eye, but by doing that you will find the courage to fight it.” He goes on to say that the election and subsequent protest movement have de-legitimatised the Iranian Islamic regime. “If the opposition manages to keep the society somehow open, then I think there will be more civil disobedience and resistance in different organs of the government. The other option,” he continues, “is that the regime will become more and more militant and crush all the opposition.” But that will only delay its eventual fall, he adds. “As Napoleon said, ‘You can rule with a sword, but you cannot sit on the tip of it.’” 🗨

Shoja Azari’s upcoming exhibition at LTMH, *Icons*, is from 4–27 May. For more information visit www.ltmhgallery.com