

Shoja Azari: FAKE Idyllic Life

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Shoja Azari, ilm still_The King of Black, 2013. HD color video, 25 min.
(Leila Heller Gallery)

(ArtfixDaily.com) **FAKE: Idyllic Life**

New Works by Shoja Azari

November 14 – December 14, 2013

Leila Heller Gallery is pleased to present new painting installations and video works by Shoja Azari that seamlessly intertwine myth with reality, quotation with intervention in order to examine the integral roles played by history and context in depictions of the Islamic world. Originally trained as a filmmaker and as a video artist, Azari over the last seven years has been incorporating elements of the moving picture with brush strokes to create a distinctive body of work that redefines filmmaking while conceptually and formally subverting the classic definition of painting.

In his most recent video, *The King of Black* (25 min., 2013), Azari defies the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional media by treating his projection screen as a standalone canvas rife with imagery that references classic Persian and Orientalist painting, accompanied by text and audio components reminiscent of Western silent films. Based on a chapter from the learned Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's *Haft Paykar* or *Seven Beauties* (1197), an epic which explores timeless, universal themes involving the impossible quest for perfection and limitations of the ego, *The King of Black* chronicles Sassanid King Bahram V's journey for self-knowledge; a Paradise found and lost. Through staged live action set against tableaus largely formed from digitally reconstructed 16th-century Persian miniature paintings rendered in

hyper-saturated hues, Azari conveys the Islamic conception of Heaven as both extraordinary, enchanted, and yet, merely an illusion.

Azari continues to merge past and present, faith and fable in *Idyllic Life* (2012). In this video projected on canvas, he masterfully moves backwards and forwards through time and space within the narrative, merging digitized vignettes of court and bazaar life taken from 16th-century Persian miniature painting with random scenes of contemporary violence and conflict excerpted from YouTube.

Overtly mythical portraits of the Arab world are also prominently featured subjects in Azari's painting installations on view. Here, classic Orientalist paintings become the fodder for a mischievous, multilayered critique of the traditional Western gaze into Muslim identity and its legacy. In one grouping, two of the genre's most celebrated paintings: Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* (1870) and Eugène Delacroix's *Fanatics of Tangier* (1838) are meticulously replicated, albeit altered by introducing some striking anomalies. Fueled by notions of exoticism, two paintings of the harem – one of the most influential Orientalist tropes championed during the Napoleonic and Victorian ages -- receive an updated, Playboy pin-up style makeover. Papering the surrounding gallery walls with imagery largely composed from Google searches related to select Islamic news topics such as Muslim rage, Azari concludes that the West's inability to move beyond their basic assumptions about Islam is perhaps unavoidable especially in this online age where context often trumps content.

An illustrated exhibition catalogue will feature essays by Negar Azimi, Senior Editor of *Bidoun* Magazine, and Alexandra Keller, Associate Professor of Film Studies and Director of Film Studies Program at Smith College.

Born in Shiraz, Iran in 1958, Shoja Azari is an artist and filmmaker who has lived in New York since 1983. His work has been exhibited globally, with solo shows throughout Europe and North America. Azari has participated in exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, at museums such as the Haus der Kulturen, Germany and the MUSAC, Spain, and at art fairs including Art Basel, Switzerland, ARCO, Spain, and Art Dubai, UAE. His works are in the permanent collections of various museums and foundations, including the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), USA, and the Farjam Collection, UAE. Since 1997, he has collaborated with Shirin Neshat on film and video installations including *Women Without Men*, which won the Silver Lion for best director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. Azari has also collaborated with Shahram Karimi on video paintings, which project video on painted surfaces.

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Leila Heller Gallery has gained widespread recognition for fostering the careers of emerging and mid-career contemporary artists working internationally across a multitude of disciplines and mediums through its cutting-edge exhibitions and programs. Established in 1984 as a pioneer in promoting contemporary Middle Eastern artists, the gallery's mission is to explore current developments taking place in Middle Eastern art within a larger cultural and art historical context. This specialization has positioned the gallery well within the burgeoning Iranian, Turkish, and Middle Eastern art markets. In addition, the gallery is also active in the American, European and Middle Eastern secondary art markets.