

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran **Features Never-Before-Exhibited Work** **by Modern and Emerging Artists**

***Drawn from Remarkable Holdings of NYU's Grey Art Gallery,
Exhibition Opens on January 12, 2016***

Drawing on its unparalleled collection of modern Iranian art, the Grey Art Gallery presents ***Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran*** at New York University from **January 12 to April 2, 2016**. The exhibition presents approximately 90 works, comprising paintings, sculpture, drawings, photographs, video, and a large mixed-media installation, among which are some 20 works from the Abby Grey collection. *Global/Local* is the first major museum exhibition in the U.S. to include both pioneering Iranian modernists and emerging artists working in Tehran and abroad. By featuring works from three generations of artists—**Faramarz Pilaram** (1937–1983), **Parviz Tanavoli** (b. 1937), **Chohreh Feyzdjou** (1955–1996), **Shiva Ahmadi** (b. 1975), **Shahpour Pouyan** (b. 1980), and **Barbad Golshiri** (b. 1982)—the exhibition sheds light on the delicate balancing acts required for those working outside the art world's dominant North American-Western European axis. In particular it illuminates how each of these six artists has participated in international art discourses, merging global awareness with local traditions over a 55-year span that was punctuated by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent eight-year war with Iraq. *Global/Local* is curated by Grey Art Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert.

Background

Interest in modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and Iran has grown exponentially over the past few decades. This has been especially true in recent years, when turmoil in the region and the tense political relationship between Iran and the U.S. have dominated the news. Yet sanctions have made it extremely difficult to see modern Iranian art outside that country. In response, the Grey Art Gallery has devoted increased attention to the Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art, beginning in 2002 with its landmark show *Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture* and accompanying publication that was one of the first overviews of modern Iranian art in English.

"It is an enormous privilege to oversee such rich and extensive holdings of Iranian art," notes Ms. Gumpert. "Mrs. Grey was truly ahead of her time," she continues. "When she travelled abroad in her efforts to collect modern art by non-Western artists, she sought out artists who

were aware of what was happening internationally. It has been extremely rewarding to study this outstanding collection and to collaborate with NYU colleagues and other scholars to situate it in broader cultural and historical contexts. We are proud to have introduced modern Iranian art to American audiences, and are pleased today to also present subsequent generations of artists who have learned from their pioneering predecessors represented in the Abby Grey collection.”

Abby Weed Grey amassed her remarkably prescient collection of some 700 pieces—including about 200 works of Iranian modern art as well as more than 100 from Turkey and nearly 80 from India—on numerous trips to the Middle East and Asia in the 1960s and '70s, undertaken to promote artistic exchange. In 1974, Mrs. Grey established the Grey Art Gallery at NYU as a permanent home for her collection, with the intention of furthering her cross-cultural approach in a global academic setting as well as complementing NYU's Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies. A self-described naïf, Grey nonetheless—as she notes in her memoir *The Picture Is the Window, The Window Is the Picture*—“was able to arrange the first exhibition of original contemporary American art to be seen by Turkish and Iranian artists. Moreover, my informal contacts . . . laid the groundwork for precedent-setting shows in the United States.”

The Exhibition

Although the artists in *Global/Local* have developed their own personal and individual styles, they all acknowledge that they have drawn great inspiration from their Persian heritage—most notably architecture, decorative and folk art, and poetry.

Parviz Tanavoli is arguably Iran's foremost sculptor and, through his close friendship with Abby Grey, helped shape the Grey's remarkable holdings, which include some 80 of his works, the largest grouping in a public institution anywhere. Tanavoli singlehandedly forged new approaches to a medium that had been overshadowed in Iran after the introduction of Islam in the 7th century. Turning to pre-Islamic sculpture and architecture for inspiration, he also helped establish the first Iranian modernist school—known as Saqqakhaneh after devotional Shiite fountains that are found throughout the country—as well as its first foundry (financed by Abby Weed Grey). Living and working alternately in Vancouver and in Tehran, he describes himself as a poet—referencing this incredibly rich Persian medium—and notes, “In our culture, art is in every aspect of life.” As a young artist in the 1960s in Tehran, Tanavoli was also inspired by Persian cultural traditions including folklore, mysticism, and decorated objects found in bazaars—such as grills, locks, and keys—which he also collects. *Global/Local* features 14 of his sculptures, including very early pieces made from scrap and found metal that will be shown for the first time ever. Also on view will be *Heech* (1972), which is just back from a year-long loan to the Art Institute of Chicago, where it occupied a prominent place in the newly installed Islamic galleries. *Heech* is the Persian word for “nothingness,” and Tanavoli has long been intrigued by its elegant calligraphic form and complex meanings, which appear frequently in Persian literature and poetry, including the mystical verses of famed poet Rumi. He has realized numerous variations, and these remain his best-known series. *Global/Local* will also feature several of his semi-abstract paintings—two-dimensional riffs on his three-dimensional works—as well as a more recent series of works he made by painting fantastic forms onto 19th-century lithographic pages found in a Tehran bazaar.

Another key pioneer represented in the Abby Grey collection is **Faramarz Pilaram**, one of the first modern Iranian artists to employ both calligraphic forms and Shiite iconography. Persian architecture, with its highly ornamented surfaces and immersive environments, provided rich territory for the artist. His *Mosques of Isfahan* series, for example, refers to the famed houses of worship in the artist's native city. In these works, architectural fragments and body parts merge to create hybrid beings, and stylized hands may allude to the hand of Hazrat Abbas, which refers to a storied Shiite battle and often adorns *saqqakhaneh*. In this series, generalized domes and minarets not only reference Isfahan mosques, but also provide metallic surfaces onto which the artist stamps traditional Persian seals, creating subtle but important ornamental details. Pilaram's later paintings are more abstract, reinterpreting Farsi calligraphy, especially the *nasta'liq* style of script, which he often made illegible. Also, works on paper from the 1960s—again, exhibited for the first time—are created with marker pens, a new medium that enabled him to experiment with other scripts, including the ornamental, calligraphic, foliated-eye Kufic, and *meshq*, one of the earliest Arabic styles.

Tanavoli and Pilaram were important influences on artists who followed. One of these, **Chohreh Feyzdjou**, also looked to the architecture of Iran, specifically its iconic bazaars, for inspiration, though from a distance. Born in Tehran to a Jewish family, Feyzdjou left for Paris in 1975 to study at the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts and then at the Sorbonne. She remained in France following Iran's 1979 Revolution, intensifying her already instilled sense of displacement. She materialized these feelings in her *Boutique* projects, installations that reimagine the racks of rolled textiles in rug shops and pharmacy shelves displaying jars of herbs found in the bazaar. In reconceiving this quintessential Iranian space, she expresses longing for her heritage. Feyzdjou's installations feature groupings of repurposed drawings and paintings from her student years, many of which she covered in plastic and darkened with walnut stain: paradoxically, this blackness breathed new life into her previous work. In a wry critique on consumerism, she then tagged her rolls of tied canvases, stacks of used stretcher frames, and crude packing crates with a small purple label that reads "Product of Chohreh Feyzdjou." *Global/Local* will present a selection of these products, including *Série DB* (1994), a stack of 67 rolls of the artist's paintings mounted on canvas and wallpaper.

The exhibition's third-generation artists were born either shortly before or after the Iranian Revolution, and grew up during the eight-year war with Iraq. **Shiva Ahmadi** left Iran in 1999 to study in Michigan, where she received MFAs from both the Cranbrook Academy of Art and Wayne State University. Her early works, highly detailed watercolors on paper and Aquabond, referenced the widespread turmoil and destruction during her formative years in Iran. Over time, however, her vibrant paintings and videos have evolved to address current conflicts—especially those associated with war, politics, and social injustice. Informed by Persian miniature painting, Ahmadi's fantasyscapes of mythical creatures and enthroned figures are characterized by ornate patterns, rich textures, and vivid hues. Yet beneath this captivating world lies corruption and violence, a place where faceless abstract leaders inhabit war-ridden territories while minions, in the guise of monkeys and buffoons, juggle weapons. *Global/Local* will also include *Lotus* (2014), Ahmadi's nine-minute video, which adapts her 2013 painting of the same title into a single-channel animation. Incorporating movement and sound into her original composition, Ahmadi takes the viewer deeper into her paradoxical realm, integrating images of bombs, grenades, and

other implements of war with a central depiction of a Buddha who gradually transforms into a destructive tyrant.

Shapour Pouyan was born in Isfahan and grew up surrounded by the same majestic Persian architecture and lavishly ornamented mosques that had also inspired Faramarz Pilaram. At the Tehran University of Art, he studied math and physics as well as art, and earned a degree in painting; he also taught architectural history. In 2012, he received an MFA from Pratt Institute. Currently dividing his time between New York and Tehran, he works in a wide range of mediums. Employing images, symbols, and patterns from traditional Iranian art, he critiques a tradition that, he believes, is mired in the past. *Global/Local* will feature his *Projectiles* series, large suspended sculptures that feature chain mail and traditional metalwork in a classical Persian aesthetic in which more is better. Sporting sharp fins that are entirely covered in highly ornamented designs, they are at once menacing and seductive. To fabricate the chainmail and to adorn the metal forms with calligraphy and age-old decorative motifs, Pouyan employs local artisans and craftsmen. Clearly symboling war, dominance, and power, Pouyan's works are at the same time light, refined, and luxurious. Also on view will be the artist's reinterpretation of the traditional Persian miniature painting. In this series, he removes all figures from digital images of well-known Persian miniatures, painstakingly filling in the resulting voids, and thus drawing attention to the landscape and domestic settings. As a result, the architecture and landscapes of the paintings' backgrounds, once secondary to the narrative accounts, are revealed and become the focus of the works. Haunting and incomplete, Pouyan's transformed miniatures remind us of human foibles that can lead to conflict and death.

The youngest artist in *Global/Local*, **Barbad Golshiri**, belongs to a generation of artists who, working primarily in Iran, are consciously distancing themselves from more lyrical Persian exoticisms. Although he studied painting at the School of Art and Architecture at Tehran's Azad University, Golshiri is a multidisciplinary artist, using photography, installation, video, performance, and graphic novels to address the sociopolitical situation in Iran. The exhibition will feature his sculptural tombstones from the series he has termed *Curriculum Mortis*, which also includes photographs of cemeteries, videos, and performances. In this work, Golshiri has, in effect, created a virtual history of those who have been denied proper burial or recognition. In response, the artist creates ephemeral grave markers, often incorporating calligraphy, that give voice to those who may have been forgotten or have disappeared and/or are presumed dead. In *The Untitled Tomb* (2012), soot is sifted through a large stencil, allowing the family of the deceased to create a grave marker that is temporary but infinitely replicable. Shown alongside his sculptures will be photographs of graves and memorials, typically highlighting those that have been broken, unmarked, or neglected. Some photos feature cenotaphs or memorials created by the artist, which have marked actual graves in cemeteries. In all of these works, Golshiri manages a delicate balancing act, critiquing the current government despite (or, perhaps, because of) repressive conditions.

The Abby Weed Grey Collection

The works in this collection date from the 1960s and '70s, when Abby Weed Grey made numerous trips to Iran, among other countries, to collect modern works by non-Western artists. She traveled throughout the Middle East and Asia, intent on educating herself and promoting international artistic exchange. In 1960, she made her first trip to Iran, where she visited the second Tehran biennial. Captivated by what she saw, Mrs. Grey made numerous subsequent visits, looking past the miniatures and carpets that were geared to tourists to seek art that would “express the response of a contemporary sensibility to contemporary circumstances.” In her visits to studios—in Iran and elsewhere—she found what she was looking for: artists who were not simply practicing age-old traditional arts, often created for the tourist market, but instead were eager to break away from clichés and contribute to the changing world around them. In 1974, Abby Weed Grey donated to NYU some 700 works of modern art that she acquired during these numerous trips, and founded the Grey Art Gallery. Iranian art comprises over one-fourth of this rich collection.

Exhibition Catalogue

Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran will be accompanied by an illustrated print-on-demand book, which will also be available online as a free PDF. This will include an essay by Lynn Gumpert; an essay by New York-based critic and art historian Media Farzin, who examines the ways in which Iranian contemporary art has, from its beginnings in the 1960s, borrowed extensively from ancient visual traditions of the region; and introductory essays on each artist by NYU graduate students Claire Brandon, Julia Pelta Feldman, Kara Fiedorek, Khaled Malas, and Ally Mintz.

Sponsorship

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About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University’s fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City’s Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its

focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge