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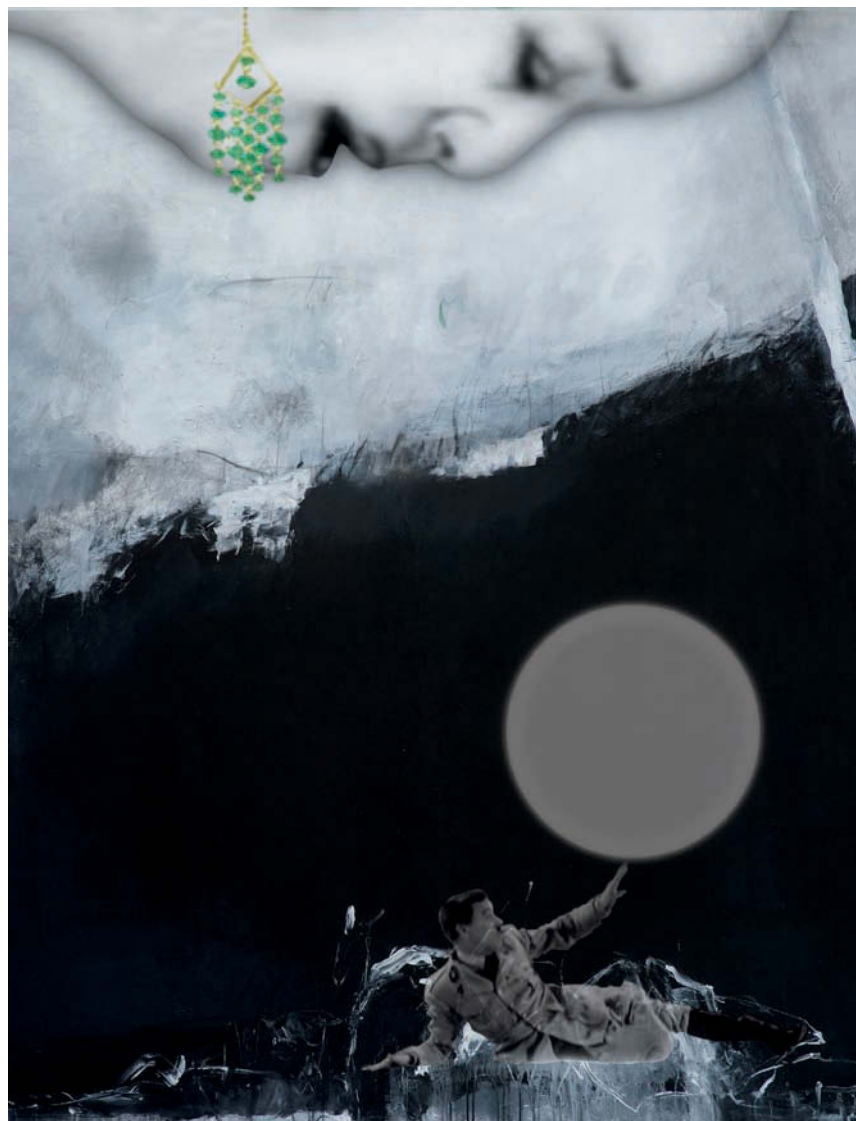
FARIDEH
LASHAI
AND HER
ENCHANTING OEUVRE

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S
UTOPIAN
TOWERS

WINDS OF CHANGE
MIDDLE EASTERN ART
at the GUGGENHEIM
NEW YORK

COMPLIMENTARY COPY

A RABBIT'S TALE



*A major retrospective at the Sharjah Art Foundation traces the life and work of the late Iranian artist Farideh Lashai. **Patrick Martin Lichty** reflects upon the artist's rich intellectual musings as well as poignant visual masterpieces*

Facing page: *El Amal*,
2011-2012. Projected animated
photographic images on
painting (oil, acrylic and
graphite on canvas) and sound
189.2 x 189.2 cm. Collection of
Sharjah Art Foundation

This page:
Untitled. *Circa* 1960s. Oil on
canvas. 99 x 70 cm.
Photography by Hamid
Eskandari
Image courtesy of Farideh
Lashai Foundation



Farideh Lashai, one of Iran's quintessential artists of the late 20th and early 21st century, for a half-century, created a body of art, craft, literature, and translation that established her as one of Iran's great contemporary artists. From her beginnings in Rasht, Iran to studies of literature and art in Frankfurt and Vienna, to designing glass in design studios like Riedel and Rosenthal, to enduring coups and revolutions, Lashai's life is one that has withstood dramatic circumstances. Situated in the historic Bait al Serkal Heritage House at the Sharjah Art Foundation, the Farideh Lashai retrospective represents a unique setting in which, as curator Hoor al Qasimi has stated, places the work in an intimate space in which it can be best appreciated. Artist, writer, designer, translator, poet—her varied career is one that transcended any single definition.

A crucial part to comprehending the work of Farideh Lashai is to understand her influences. The tradition that influences her work is not the visual arts per se, but a lyrical one. In Persian traditional poetry and epics, the role of the miniature or illumination is not an end in itself, but expands on the text that it supports. As the artist states, "Lyricism permeates all Persian culture; it is such an important part of our heritage. The same blood that ties me to the ground also longs for transcendence and words, music, sound, they all rise up and converge in the sky." Her love of literature, poetry theatre, and film is reflected in the calligraphic quality of line in her early works, her translations of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and use of media in her later works. Farideh's passion for his work caused her to become friends with his widow, as well as many members of his Berliner Ensemble. Brecht's desire to address social issues in Weimar Germany also resonated with her own progressivism, for which she was imprisoned for two years in the 1970s. Her love of literature is also reflected not only in her literary translations, but in her novel, *Shal Bamu*, and extensive collections of largely unpublished poetry.

Brecht's influence on Lashai, from her studies in German Literature at the University of Frankfurt to her last media works, *El Amal* and *When I Count, There Are Only You... But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow*, is evident. His revolutionary approaches to theatre, from what he termed "Epic Theatre" to his notion of the "distancing effect" that reminds one that they are merely watching a play, are reflected in installations like *Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow*. The use of multimedia, novel uses of space, distancing from the subject, fragmentation, the treatment of surprise or violence, all address social issues in Brecht's performances, which is reflected in Lashai's later work.

Farideh Lashai studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna where she began to paint her lyrical forms, trees, and landscapes. According to her daughter, Maneli Keykavoussi, Lashai was surrounded by many influences during her time that are reflected in her use of motifs from the East and West. Farideh's linework, for example, has a delicacy that alludes to a synthesis of numerous sources such as Persian illumination and calligraphy, Japonisme, the work of the Viennese Secession and Art Nouveau, all of which surrounded her. Her colour fields are reminiscent of ink washes of traditional Chinese works, but these would expand into more vibrant, energetic canvases of her own unique form of abstractionism from the late 1980s into the 2000s of Eastern and Western appropriation.

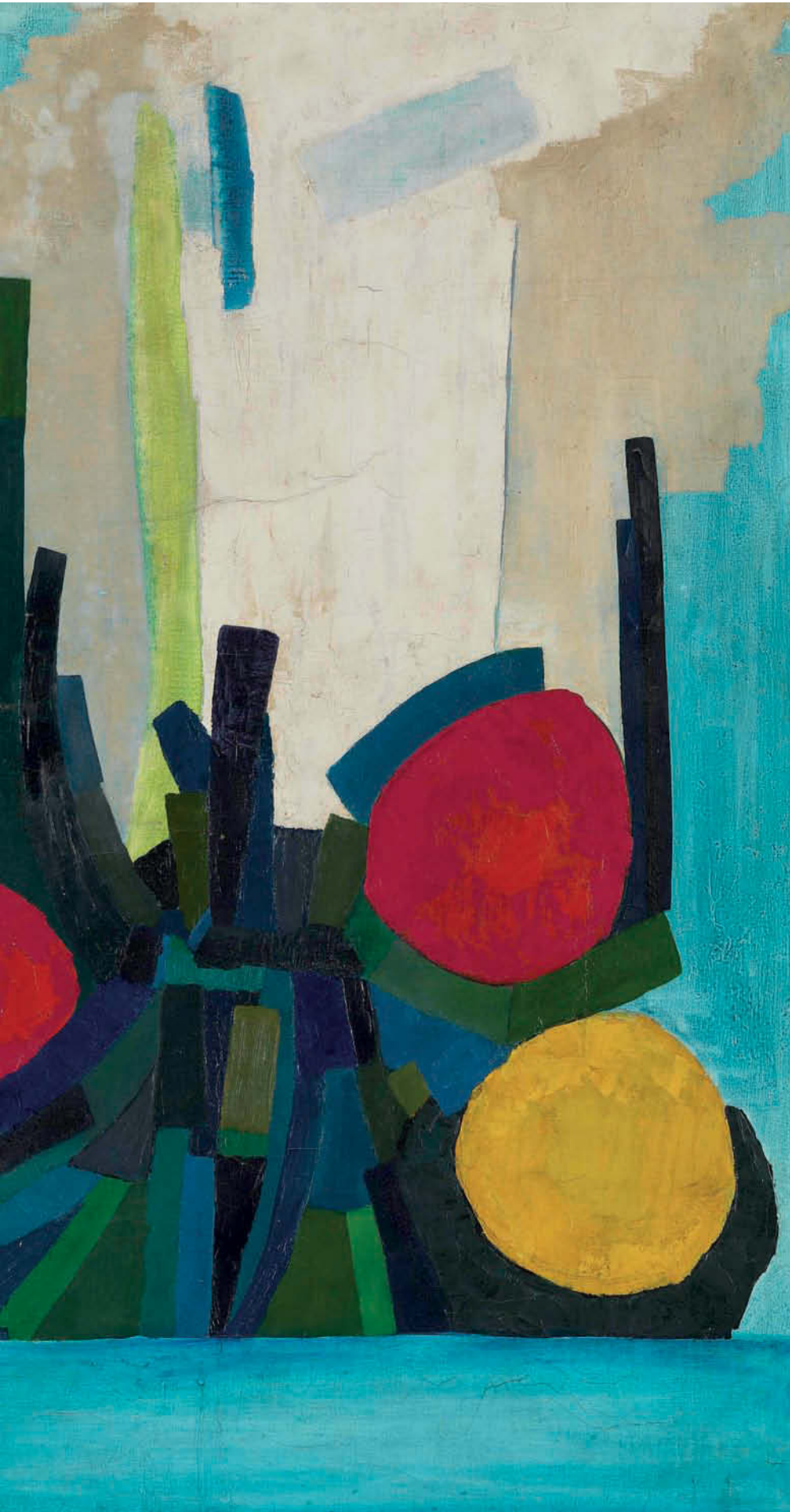


While Farideh's works deal with the concept of violence in many cases, and although she was present during the brief but brutal art movement of Viennese Actionism, Lashai's social engagement came from her tumultuous experiences as an Iranian drawn on the canvas of history, combined with her love of Brecht. This would reveal itself especially in her *Mossadegh* series, the *Rabbit in Wonderland* series and her final media works. It is in such works that the viewer can reflect upon her poetic and lyrical sensibilities predominantly through the rabbit—a recurring theme in her later works.

One of the most poetic pieces of Lashai's career is *Catching the Moon*, a multimedia installation originally projected into a stainless steel container, but shown in one of the central wells in the exhibition at the Bait al Serkal house. The rabbit, looking into a pool, sees the moon and jumps to catch its reflection. He does so and then streaks across the sky like a comet. The rabbit here is the fool, like Rumi's fool who chases the bird's shadow, just like the March Hare in *Alice and Wonderland*—all perhaps examples of the artist chasing their own dream. For Lashai, the artist as a fool is a divine one, as that fool is the one who catches their dream, and in so doing, remakes reality. This rabbit, and many more like it, will appear in the *Rabbit in Wonderland* series. Where Lashai may use the rabbit as metaphor for the fool/foolish, perhaps they also stand for the innocent or victims of circumstance. Then, the hapless rabbits go into the mouth of the Cheshire Cat, standing in for Iranians going down Lewis Carroll's political rabbit hole. Another note is that the Iranian map is also known as "The Cat" for its shape, bringing together Alice with Iranian metaphors. Lastly, Lashai as the rabbit/artist/fool finally converses with Mossadegh himself in the last of the series, wondering what to do, with him giving few answers.

Between the *motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow* is a set of two 15-minute wry media assemblages projected onto opposing paintings. They depict a cabaret scene using period clips from the Film Farsi genre of the 1950s until the Revolution. The scenes consist of a painting of a stage upon which the cabaret is shown, and the other where the acts take place. The sequence begins with a scene from Moghadam's iconic film *Panjereh*, in which the "Pimp" brings his latest acquisition, Taraneh, to perform a song and dance. Afterwards, she retires to a corner of the stage screen, where numbers of similar acts take place. On the other screen,





Facing page: *Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow*. 2012. A still from a two loop video projection on screen and a curtain painting. Image courtesy of Farideh Lashai Foundation

Left: *Untitled*. 1967. Oil on Canvas. 133 x 95 cm. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris

scenes of Tehran cabaret nightlife typical in Film Farsi titles in formulaic styles; the dancer comes across to the other screen and dances on the table of the audience, a fight breaks out, and the singing diva emerges to quell the crowd.

Lashai's use of installation, theatrical space, and Farsi film content all fulfill the Brechtian model. Moreover, her use of the characters as they move between sides of the room breaches the wall of the stage while Taraneh's setting herself apart from the action reminds us of our distance from the events. Furthermore, Lashai's use of Film Farsi is a commentary upon Iranian culture's criticism of its 'lowbrow' quality before the Revolution as well as its relative moral unacceptability after the Revolution. In fact, post-Revolution, actors in Film Farsi releases were banned from acting in Iran indefinitely. *Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow* is a comment upon how she felt criticism towards the genre was at best unfair as Film Farsi constituted, like Italian Neo-Realism, a form of "People's Cinema" that typified part of Iranian culture and regressive attitudes toward culture.

Another technique we see in the works of Farideh Lashai is her play with motifs that are appropriated from one culture to another while juxtaposing them with her own traditional culture. For example, the allusion to Orientalism and Japonisme that influenced the Viennese Secession in the forms of her early works, passed to *Le Dejeuner au Park-e-Mellat*, her Iranian play on Manet's legendary panting to the use of the devices in *Alice in Wonderland* to depict the topsy-turvy nature of Iranian history. Each of these play either with one culture mapping onto another to reclaiming themes in the composition of Manet's, alluding to an Eastern reference through the reclining man's headdress, turning the *mise-en-scene* to an entirely Iranian one by resituating it to Mellat Park in Tehran. While, again according to Keykavoussi, some of these comments were taken on intuitively, what emerges is a deeply reflective view on her identity as an Iranian in a world tradition.

Her last two works, *El Amal (Hope)*, and *When I Count, There Are Only You...But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow* are also two of her most powerful reflections on the state of power in the world. In *El Amal*, made during the time of the Egyptian Revolution, Charlie Chaplin, in his role satirising Hitler from the film *The Great Dictator*, comically dances around with a ball symbolising the earth, wanting to possess it. The image of the great Arab singer Um Kalthoum rises like a moon, as she sings "Al Amal", while the globe bounces off the singer's great emerald earrings and the dictator dances below, unnoticed. Keykavoussi mused that this is what all dictators want, to possess the world, but are nothing in the face of hope. This was also her mother's belief.

When I Count, There Are Only You...But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow is Lashai's last masterpiece, based on Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810-20) in which she meticulously re-etched the plates sans the figures of atrocity in the original. However, in the installation, a spotlight scans over the prints, revealing suffering and brutality. Not only is this a sublime work in its articulation, scope, and beauty, but also is a befitting last rebuke of humanity's injustice to itself, locally, regionally, and globally. "All this violence, how do we stand it?" she writes in the last lines of her book, *Shal Bamu*. With this exhibition, Farideh Lashai answers this question with compassion and also a certain poetic justice. ■

The artist is represented by Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. Farideh Lashai ran at the Sharjah Art Foundation through 14 May. sharjahart.org