

# BAZAAR

Harper's

ARABIA

# ART

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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

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Secrets are often locked away within artworks. These are stories from some other time and place, and their upkeep, something which is done nonchalantly by the artwork itself, relays a beautiful mystery and grace. Brooke Lynn McGowan surveys the secrets in **Y.Z. Kami's** paintings

# The GRACIOUS SECRET

*"The thing which keeps its secret ...  
captures by its grace."*

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

I would ask you to stop staring, but you would not. You cannot avert your gaze. To bear, to behold, to beguile: monumental in scale and displaying only the sitter's face, *Untitled*, a work made between 2011 and 2012 by Iranian-American painter Y.Z. Kami, né Kamran Youssefzadeh, portrays the face of a woman, with long dark hair sweeping to the side, her eyes averted from the viewer, her mouth, barely, almost upturned. Observing her concealing, clandestine, but overt intimacy—a particular withholding as though she has secret—I ask, "Why are her eyes closed?"

Kami smiles, "They are not closed. She is looking away. She is like a Madonna, gazing upon her child."

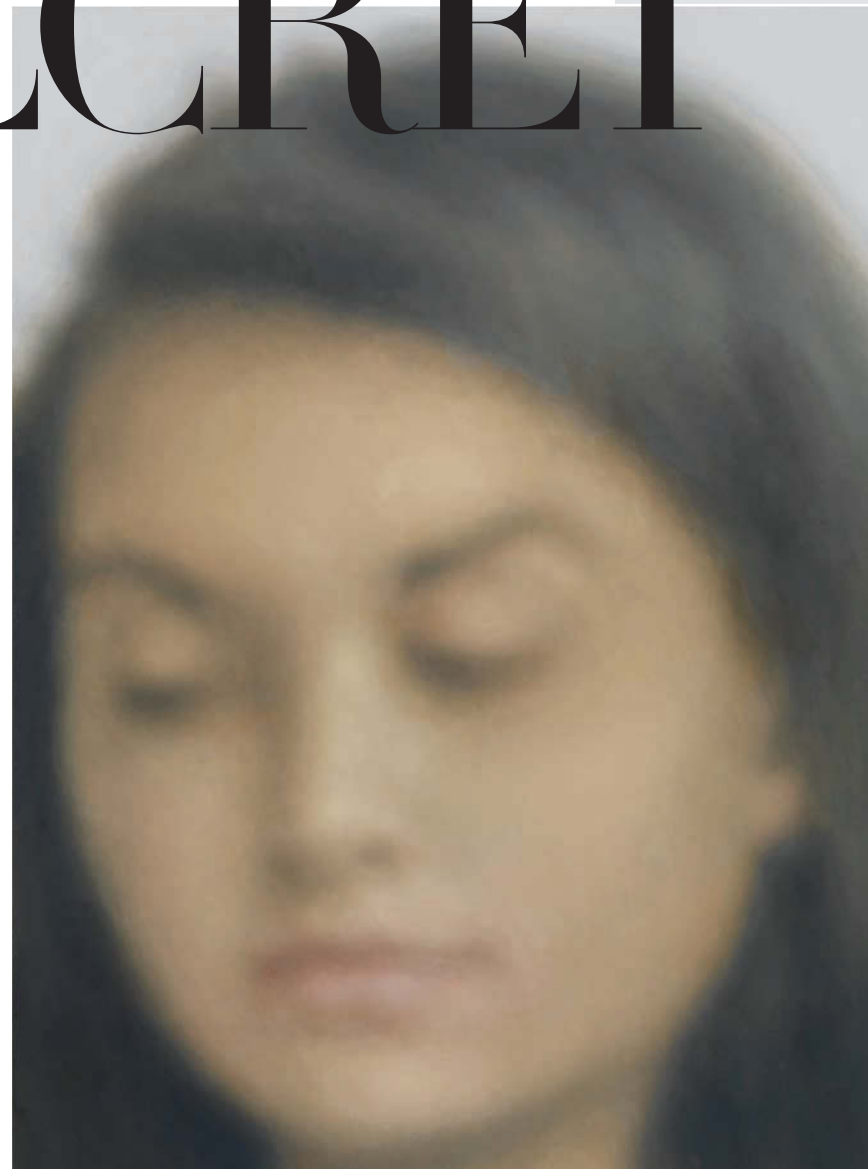
The smile of Mona Lisa has oft beguiled. Millions flock year after year to the hallowed halls of the Louvre's Denon Wing, to stand before the masterpiece of sfumato painting style, to stare. Employing the same technique, Kami recognises the trace of the gaze—as a form or either power or pleasure—such painterly means contain, but it is also a gaze which his painting returns. In the series, *Untitled 18*, exhibited in 1996 at Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, a deep compulsion drives the artist's need to render eighteen portraits of young men, each clothed in simple white t-shirts, each against a neutral background, bearing an expression which is not an expression, save for the penetrating look in their eyes: returning the spectator's look, beholding as well as being beheld. The shallow focus and compulsive repetition reminds one of the

urge towards photography, recalling the work of Walter Evans, writ large, and in soft painterly form.

Yet the lineage influencing Kami's monumental portraits reaches far past any Renaissance or photographic reference to that of ancient Fayoum paintings. On the occasion of an invitation to speak at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2015, the artist recounts first seeing these ancient Egyptian relics, painted in encaustic (a mixture of wax and pigment)

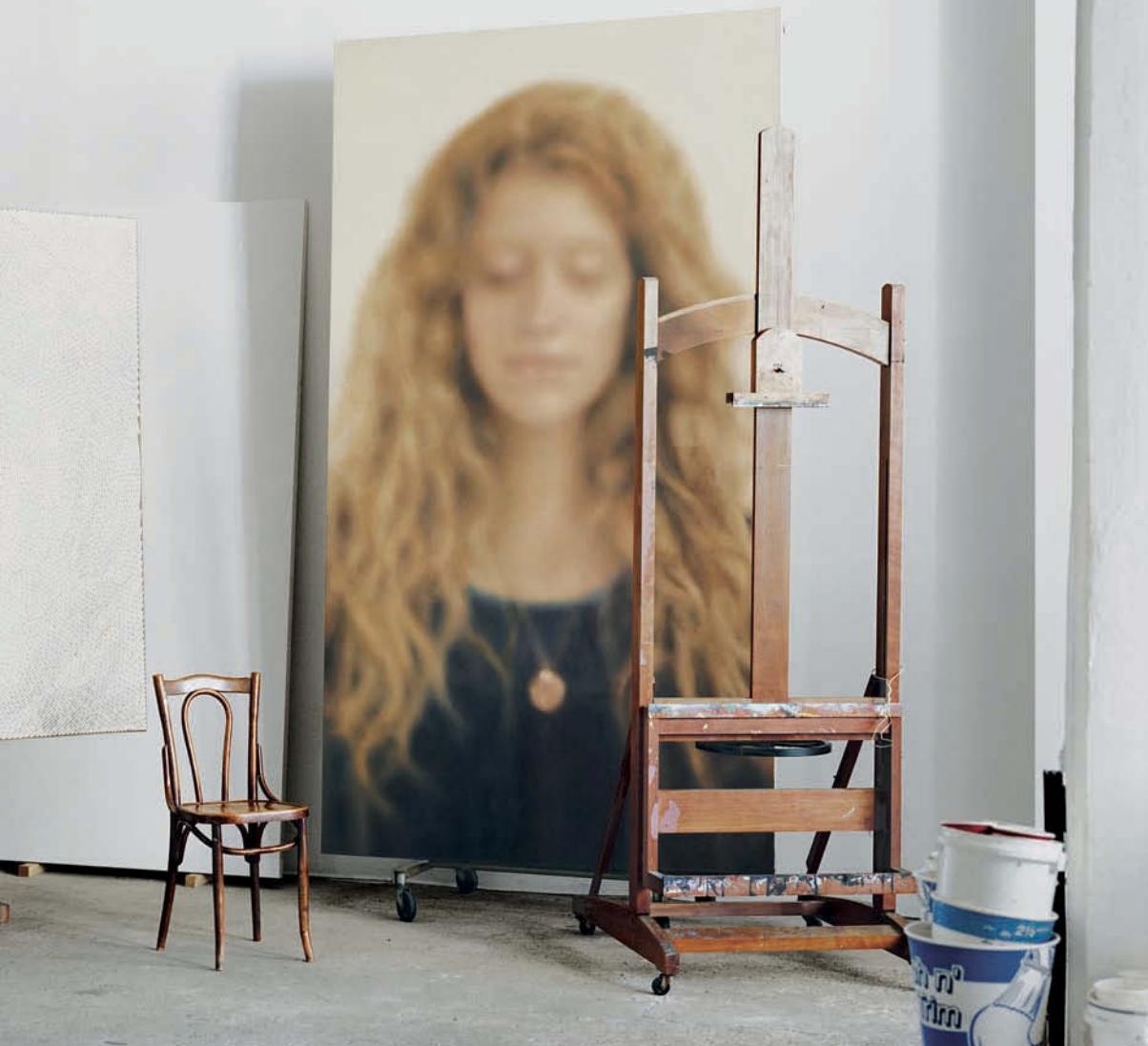
as a representation of the deceased to be placed upon their mummified bodies, as a young boy. "What I remember struck me as a young painter was the eyes that were so exaggerated, so large, but at the same time so real, and so convincing. They're soulful."

Born in the halcyon days of Iran prior to the 1979 revolution, as the son and under the consistent tutelage of a mother who was also a painter, Y.Z. Kami arrived in New York over 30 years ago, in 1984, to follow the pursuit of the painter, by way of



Left: *Untitled*.  
2011-2012  
Oil on linen  
251.5 x 182.9 cm.  
Photography by  
Rob McKeever  
Courtesy of  
Gagosian Gallery

Above: *Ange*.  
2010. Oil on Linen.  
298.6 x 157.5 cm.  
Photography by  
Louis Heilbronne  
Courtesy of  
Gagosian Gallery



an education at the liberally explosive University of California Berkeley. He then attended the deeply contemplative Sorbonne under the auspices of renowned philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, as well as the Conservatoire Libre du Cinema in Paris.

For the catalogue for Y.Z. Kami's 2009 exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens, *Beyond Silence*, Anna Kafetsi asks, "Could painting today approach a spiritual, transcendental situation, visualise the beyond-the-visible, speak of the non-seen or the utterly Other?" Art, she reminds us, since the birth of Conceptualism, has taken over from philosophy—and perhaps, even, in Kami's case, religion. Beyond his practice of portraiture, Y.Z. Kami's *oeuvre* employs the use of Sufi poetry, the prayers and scriptures of all three trinity religions. Byzantine references are found in the production of 'domes', prayers works, and soapstone circles—all of which collectively express the artist's need to at once surpass and remain within the conditions of painting, towards a unique form of the spiritually sublime.

"Otherness is a condition inherent in

Kami's life," Steven Henry Madoff reminds us, as the artist first left his homeland for California in 1973, returning to visit Iran in 1989, to a land utterly transformed, utterly foreign to its native son. Such forced displacement, the sudden thrust-upon condition of being no longer an *émigré* but an exile, reinforces Kami's lived experience as an "other" to his own past, and to the present, driven, flinchingly secular Western milieu in which he now resides. The Middle Eastern man—even as artist—in the gilded hyper-modernity of contemporary New York, is a cypher of fearful fetishism according to the populace and popular discourse. But, as Madoff notes, "the East in Kami's work offers a different opening: an East of spiritual ecstasy, of Rumi's love, of a speculative mysticism"; 'come my beloved, my beloved' hails Kami's work *The Book of Shams e Tabrizi* (2005), composed in circles of soapstone brick recalling the meditative whirling of a dervish, each inscribed with Sufi poet Rumi's Persian verses—'Enter, enter into my work.'

This past March, on the walls of Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai, recently

inaugurated as the largest single private art space in the Middle Eastern region, two paintings stared at the other, never averting their gaze. One: the 2014 inky black *Black Dome*. The other, the namesake of the exhibition: a White Dome. Between them was a divide, which was not actually a divide: the concentric circles of soapstone brick, as previously exhibited at the Roman Agora and Istanbul Biennial. At the center of these circles, a novel addition: a single pillar of salt. "It is an alchemic process," the artist states emphatically, facing me over the expanse of a long wooden table at the center of his studio. "It is about transformation."

On a rigid winter day in New York, when people like the branches on trees stand evermore upright, half frozen, but nonetheless scurrying in long fur coats towards impending dates, flurries of snowflakes assaulting the temples of Askenaz, Gentile, Buddhist, and the New-aged hippy, devote agnostic, Eastern Orthodox, Brahmin, and Sufi alike, I rang the buzzer of a non-descript single steel door, and by transport of a rickety freight elevator disinclined to the hustle of the city, I arrived in the calming enclave of Y.Z. Kami's studio. Passing through the library, the cavernous studio stood beyond. Pointing again at an image of the work again, Kami states, "It is about passing from the dark, consuming center of the black dome, towards the light, the white." The art of Y.Z. Kami represents a spiritual, not just an alchemical, journey.

"But what of the circles themselves?" I enquire. "Are these horizons, spiritual or otherwise, beyond which nothing can be seen—or known?" Kami smiles. Although the artist's domes—rendered in black, white, and blue—reference the architecture of ancient sacred structures, such as the Roman Pantheon or Byzantine temples, the uniformly proportioned 'bricks' of these 'domes' do not betray any spatial depth, but reveal a more abstract gesture, as flat against the canvas as the soapstone lies flat upon the floor. I persevere in my questioning, "Or could the center also represent its own horizon, in the most celestial sense, an event horizon." Beyond which of course, nothing can be seen—or known. Gently, Kami offers no response but this, "I like your interpretation."

Perhaps I will never know, for there is not much certainty of knowability outside of the horizon of the practice of Y.Z. Kami. But need there be? Perhaps his art then represents not just a journey, but a form of love, as one of a slender few representative possibilities of transcendence—or transformation—in our postmodern morass: 'come my beloved, my beloved'...

I cannot look away. ■