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ART REVIEW

3 Knockout Art Shows to See in Los Angeles Right Now

'In the Fields of Empty Days'
Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Detail of Yasmin Sinai's sculpture "The Act of Gurdafarid" in the show "In the Field of Empty Days" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Credit Alex Welsh for The New York Times

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has an exhibition that's hard to imagine being done, at least on the same scale and in the same unorthodox style, in any other big American museum. For the past several years LACMA has been assiduously buying contemporary Iranian art and now has the largest collection in the country. Selections from it make up the bulk of a major show — 125 works — called "In the

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art.”

One of its themes is how political power is embodied in archetypal figures — the hero, the saint — and how those figures, as seen in art, change over time. The earliest images here are illustrations for the “Book of Kings,” Iran’s national epic. In the book, rulers come and go, but the central figure, the one who sets its moral tone, is the warrior named Rostam. He’s a model of moral and physical strength; in a 17th-century manuscript painting we see him gleefully dispatching a devil with his bare hands.

Near that painting hangs a contemporary piece, a digital print from the 2009 series Rostam in Late Summer — Revisited by Fereydoun Ave. The Rostam figure here will be instantly familiar to modern Iranians: it’s the wrestler Abbas Jadidi, who won the silver medal in the 1996 Olympics. In the print he stands, massively flexing — the image is lifted from a press photo — against a ground of giant roses.

What’s interesting here is not so much the notion that an ancient ideal of strong-arm heroism has been Pop-ified and degraded, but that the ideal survives, even thrives, in what we sometimes consider a more enlightened present.



LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

A digital print by Fereydoun Ave from the series Rostam in Late Summer — Revisited (2009) in the show “In the Fields of Empty Days.” The Rostam figure is the Iranian wrestler Abbas Jadidi, who won the silver medal in the 1996 Olympics. Credit Fereydoun Ave/Janet Rady Fine Art

The show — organized by Linda Komaroff, curator of Islamic Art — doesn’t say this directly. In fact, it says nothing directly at all. The galleries are all but bare of explanatory labels. (There are a few informational touch screens halfway through.) Ordinarily, I’d find this lack of history or commentary disturbing, perverse. But here silence works because so much of the art — and particularly the new art, by Pouya Afshar, Shoja Azari, Ramin Haerizadeh, Malekeh Nayiny, Yasmin Sinai, Newsha Tavakolian — is so strong. You may not understand details of specific narratives, but you clearly see that there *are* narratives, old and new, and that they’re related, that they’re about the drama of power clashes and the violent emotions they can stir.

Only the visual language changes. The most extensively depicted historical figure here is Shah Naser al-Din (1831-1896), largely because he introduced photography to Iran and sat for the camera a lot. He ruled for nearly 50 years, did some modernizing, but pandered to Europe, ignored corruption in his own regime and was finally assassinated. Official images of him on view reveal little of any of this. Most show a stiff, reserved, inexpressive, sword-bearing figurehead, a version, only slightly updated, of an antique icon of imperial might.

But we see quite a different Naser al-Din in a 2009 series of digital prints by the Iranian artist Siamak Filizadeh. Using actors and elaborate sets, Mr. Filizadeh presents the story of the ruler’s life as a phantasmagoria of kink and corruption, and the Shah himself as a shameless, let-it-all-hang-out clown. The images are beyond sendup. They’re a pointedly flipped version of old power. The ruler’s a failure, — but he’s also a winner because now he’s a big personality, a folk hero, a star! The images, old and new, say it all.

Chances are good that I’m not going to encounter as offbeat an exercise in art-as-history in any other museum anywhere soon. Maybe they’re only likely to happen with any regularity in a place where art institutions and their conventions are still in a healthy state of flux. I’m glad I caught the show here.

Correction: August 17, 2018

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

*An earlier version of this review misspelled the surname of an artist.
She is Christina Quarles, not Qualess.*

Made in L.A. 2018

Through Sept. 2 at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; 310-443-7000, hammer.ucla.edu.

Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths

Through Dec. 30 at the Fowler Museum UCLA, 310-825-4361, fowler.ucla.edu. (Travels to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington and then to the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris.)

In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art
Through Sept. 9 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; 323-857-6000, lacma.org.

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