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Iran's past is reimagined at the Venice Biennale

An exhibition of artists from the country at Palazzo Pisani reverberates with the city's historic role as east-west meeting point



Sahand Hesamiyan's 'Forough' (2016) © Courtesy the

Jackie Wullschläger MAY 3, 2019

"If history were truly told, if life were nobly spent, it would be no longer easy or possible to distinguish the fine arts from the useful arts." This paraphrasing of the 19th-century American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson is cut out in bold green and gold metal lettering by Iranian conceptual artist Siah Armajani, winding around the frame of a tall freestanding bronze doorway that gives on to a looking glass.

In "Hall Mirror with Table", placed in one of the most evocative settings in Venice, the Palazzo Pisani on Campo San Stefano, Armajani invites us to watch our own reflections in the context of Venetian grandeur and dilapidation. Alongside, a room-sized installation titled "Edgar Allan Poe's Study" — a lamp and three silhouettes of a raven dangling above a coat hung over a chair in a modernist black cube — is Armajani's more sombre musing on function and ornamentation, presence and illusion, on how we reimagine the past.

The Spark is You, coinciding with this year's Venice Biennale and curated by Ziba Ardalan, director of London's Parasol Unit, groups nine Iranian contemporaries in a poignant, fitting exhibition for this palace of putti and frescoes, and white and gold stucco.

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Detail of Nazgol Ansarinia's 'Article 44, Pillars' (2016) and the full sculpture below © Courtesy the artist, Collezione Righi, Bologna, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan, and Green Art Gallery, Dubai



Detail of Nazgol Ansarinia's 'Article 44, Pillars' (2016) and the full sculpture © Collezione Righi, Bologna, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan/Green Art Gallery, Dubai

The Palazzo Pisani boasts in its atrium the three-light lantern that stood at the stern of the galley of Andrea Pisani, admiral of the Venetian fleet. It has airy arcades, a huge ballroom and open courtyards where the final scenes of the 2006 Bond movie *Casino Royale* were filmed. Built by a doge, occupied by Napoleon's viceroy of Italy, used as a barracks in the first world war and now Venice's Conservatory of Music, it is infused with

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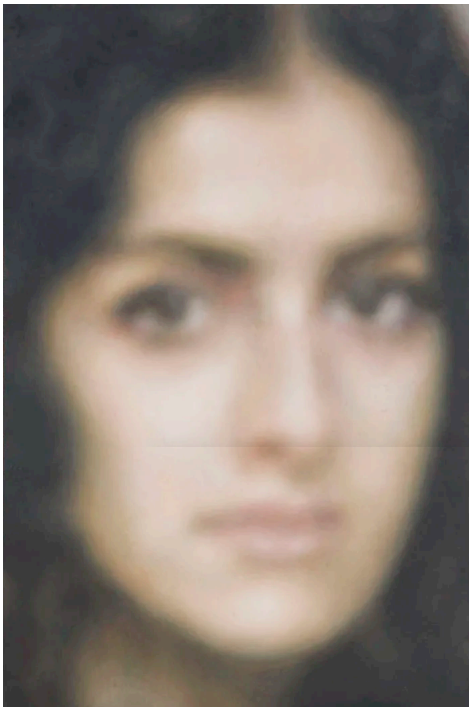
history as layers of conflict versus harmony: a sympathetic backcloth for artists invariably touched by their country's political instability, but also transforming experience of trauma and exile into subtle meditative works.

Like Armajani, resident in Minnesota since 1960, the New York-based YZ Kami belongs to the Iranian diaspora and is a lyricist of emptiness and vanishing. Here he has painted large-scale new portraits in his fresco-like manner, fleeting, remote, eerily still faces recalling Egyptian Fayum portraits, their mistiness and fading grace echoing Palazzo Pisani's slightly tumbledown splendour.

Resonant with Kami's tremulous surfaces is Farideh Lashai's "When I count, there are only you . . . but when I look, there is only a shadow", where a grid of reproductions of Goya's "Disasters of War" with the figures removed, leaving a desolate landscape, is illumined by a roving spotlight, causing missing figures to reappear as momentary flickering animations. Lashai died in Tehran just after completing the film in 2013.

Motifs of memory and forgetting connect these senior artists with the best of Ardalan's younger, Tehran-based generation. Nazgol Ansarinia, born in 1979, year of the Iranian revolution, takes as her subject the reconstruction of Tehran since then, with its development frenzy and accompanying nostalgia. Her spectral white "Membrane", a fragile five-metre wall, handmade by pressing paper paste on moulds taken from 3D scans of the outer layer of an old building, now demolished, is a palimpsest of human traces and marks. The wall stands ghostly, its context vanished.

Ansarinia's "Pillars" series are vast undecorated columns constructed from flimsy materials — paper, cardboard and glue — in a simulacrum of the bland concrete of Tehran's recent buildings. Cross-sections reveal walls lined with script, built from the text of the Iranian constitution's "Economy and Financial Affairs" section. The pillars' interiors intimate Tehran's specific history and geography, while the exteriors represent homogenising super-modernity.



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An opulent opposite to Ansarinia's columns is "Forough" (meaning brightness or enlightenment), Sahand Hesamiyan's monumental steel spiky cones with open tops ringed by shining gold leaf triangles. "Forough" resembles giant lotus flowers, symbols in Persian history — lotus flower reliefs decorated Persepolis; Darius the Great is depicted enthroned holding a lotus leaf. Hesamiyan balances many contradictions: geometric modernism against allusions to the domed magnificence of Persian architecture; the flower's delicacy against the three-cubic-metre heavyweight cones; art as declaration of beauty or power.

Ardalan says her idea for *The Spark is You* grew from her love of Persian poetry and of Goethe's "East West Divan" cycle (1819), a tribute to 14th-century Persian poet-mystic Hafez. Her exhibition, timed for the bicentenary of Goethe's publication, makes a case for conceptual art, with its use of metaphor, condensed expression yet elusiveness, as a form of contemporary poetry. A second instalment launches at Parasol Unit in London this month, but the Venice iteration, reverberating with the city's architecture and historic role as east-west meeting point, is distinctive and one of the Biennale's most appropriate though unusual site-specific projects.

'The Spark is You: Parasol Unit in Venice', Conservatorio di Musica, May 9-November 23; *'Nine Iranian Artists in London'*, Parasol Unit, May 22-August 30, parasol-unit.org