Shoja Azari **&** Shahram Karimi: The Cold Earth Sleeps Below



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# The Cold Earth Sleeps Below

#### On the Invention of Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi's Video Painting

by Phong Bui

And so you grew silent As the earth was growing green in darkness

And then you arew silent As the blue earth immersed in darkness Your image faded.

Traces of your footsteps on volumes of dried leaves.

Disappeared in the dark and forever lost.

With the sapling blossoms in the wind The horse neighs The rider frozen

–Shahram Karimi<sup>i</sup>

#### "I am the last child;

in search of the origins of my belatedness

forever searching

all corners of desire

and the endless roads

of wonder . . . "

-Azadeh Farhmand<sup>ii</sup>

Early Roman landscape and nature paintings—illusionistic frescoes commissioned for privileged owners of villas, including the ones in Pompeii, which were preserved following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D.—provided spiritual comfort and an escape from the stresses of urban life. From the late eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, J.G. Hamann, and Immanuel Kant, among others of the Romantic Movement, along with their American Transcendentalist compatriots like Emerson and Thoreau, celebrated the restorative capacity of nature's "wildness" both for and within the human spirit. Their ideas generated a counterpoint to the unvielding and all-encompassing rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment. Since the advent of photography, film, video culture, and Internet technology, the theme of nature continues to provide refuge and glimpses of the beautiful and the sublime.

Today, many artists and curators harness the infinite subject of nature from a digital index of millions of personal and stock images: from scenes of natural disasters, hurricanes, melting glaciers, and forest fires, to calming fields of flowers or olive groves. More and more, the Internet is structured into a curated domain where digital environments abound, in lieu of discrete objects. Programmed platforms become spaces for a continual dialogue, or perhaps chattering, between artists and their viewers. In other words, the introduction of the Internet makes the distinction between artist, curator, and viewer evermore nebulous.

The Internet is marked by the emergence of a so-called democratic production of digital imagery where amateurs circulate their work amidst the output of seasoned professionals. However different in skill, they

share a similar aspiration towards individual discovery and spontaneity that often takes place in the margin between private and public space; for better or worse, this 'mediascape' is a vast hoard, a collage-like matrix of surprises. The growing centrality of issues of appropriationremixed broadcasting, plagiarism, copyright violations in film, video, music, painting, and photography—reifies the longstanding desire to blur the lines between originality and imitation. As John Donne once wrote, "All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language."

These two topics, nature and technology, can be seen as the most For all their differences, Azari and Karimi never lost the thread of their identifiable conceptual sources in the unlikely but fruitful collaboration friendship. When they were reunited in 1995, so was their art. It was of Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi. The physical construction of their as though nothing had been lost in relocation.<sup>vii</sup> Their collaborations works serves as a "spatial metaphor for all manner of metamorphoses, included "Women Without Men," "Logic of the Birds," "Tooba," switches, transfers, [and] displacements."<sup>iv</sup> I associate this collaboration "Fervor," "Passage," "K," and "Windows," but their greatest with a fable of exile. Both Azari and Karimi were born in 1957 in Shiraz, collaboration, one that demanded an equal contribution from both, a city known for its poetry and literature (Hafez and Saadi), as well as its didn't begin until 2006 in the "Stalker" series (sequences of imagery wine (Shiraz) and flowers (Eram Garden). They quickly became friends from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film "Stalker" were altered, reframed in after their first encounter in 1970, and relished their time together in various speeds, jump-cut, cross-cut, then projected onto the identical movie theaters and university classrooms viewing art history slides. The painted images on the canvases). two read together, wrote poetry and short stories, and practiced their art together, the former making short films on Super 8 and the latter Presented in this exhibit, first at the gallery and the fifth of their making paintings. Against a rich cultural backdrop which included the collaboration, are eleven works. Works in the "Dreamscape" series, cosmopolitan Shiraz Art Festival,<sup>v</sup> Azari and Karimi's pictorial lexicons numbered I through VI, are videos projected on oil and acrylic paintings became infused with their personal and shared experiences. They on canvases. The other works in the "Consequences" series, numbered became especially astute at navigating the intense social/political I through V, are videos projected onto watercolors. The pair made a careful selection of images from the Internet that embodies an tension between the traditional values and progressive secular modernity that formed their cultural reality. uninspired imagination: the product of a fleeting aspiration to capture

Each follows an independent path that accords with his particular artistic temperament. Azari is what Isaiah Berlin would refer to as a classic hedgehog: a person who prefers to filter various life experiences through a single perspective.<sup>vi</sup> He made his home in New York City, and pursued a career as a film and video artist. Karimi is Berlin's other proposed character, the fox: one for whom the world cannot be boiled down in one singular reading. Karimi darts back, forth, and between various materials and mediums, from painting to film, poetry, set design, even curation. His homes are New York, Sankt Augustin, Germany, and Fanelli's Cafe in SoHo New York.

a particular locale or moment, inevitably ending in cliché. Azari and Karimi, masters of appropriation, have mobilized these imaginative but dull spurts to awaken memories, bringing them to bear on the present. In this process of collaboration the sense of beauty or the picturesque is amplified. The works indulge in the aesthetic principles of harmony, balance, and symmetry, particularly in the hypnotic "Dreamscape" series. They're both accessible and grand in size, ranging from 85 x 152 inches to 50 x 89 inches. The "Consequence" series is explicit in its pursuit of the sublime, which often manifests as an attempt to overwhelm the senses with sheer enormity. Each work in the series is constructed like a black box theater where viewers must look through a small rectangular opening in the wall.

The contrast of the two series creates an uncanny effect. The works that aim for the near universal convention of the picturesque and beautiful hypnotize the viewer with size, harmony, balance and symmetry. The works that strive for sublimity thrive on the evocation of foreboding, fear, and imbalance. The artists substitute sublime immensity with attention; viewers peer at the small projected screens for prolonged periods, watching looped images of natural disasters. It is in this juncture that one realizes "[t]he picturesque would be exemplified by variety, the beautiful by smoothness and the sublime by magnitude."<sup>viii</sup>

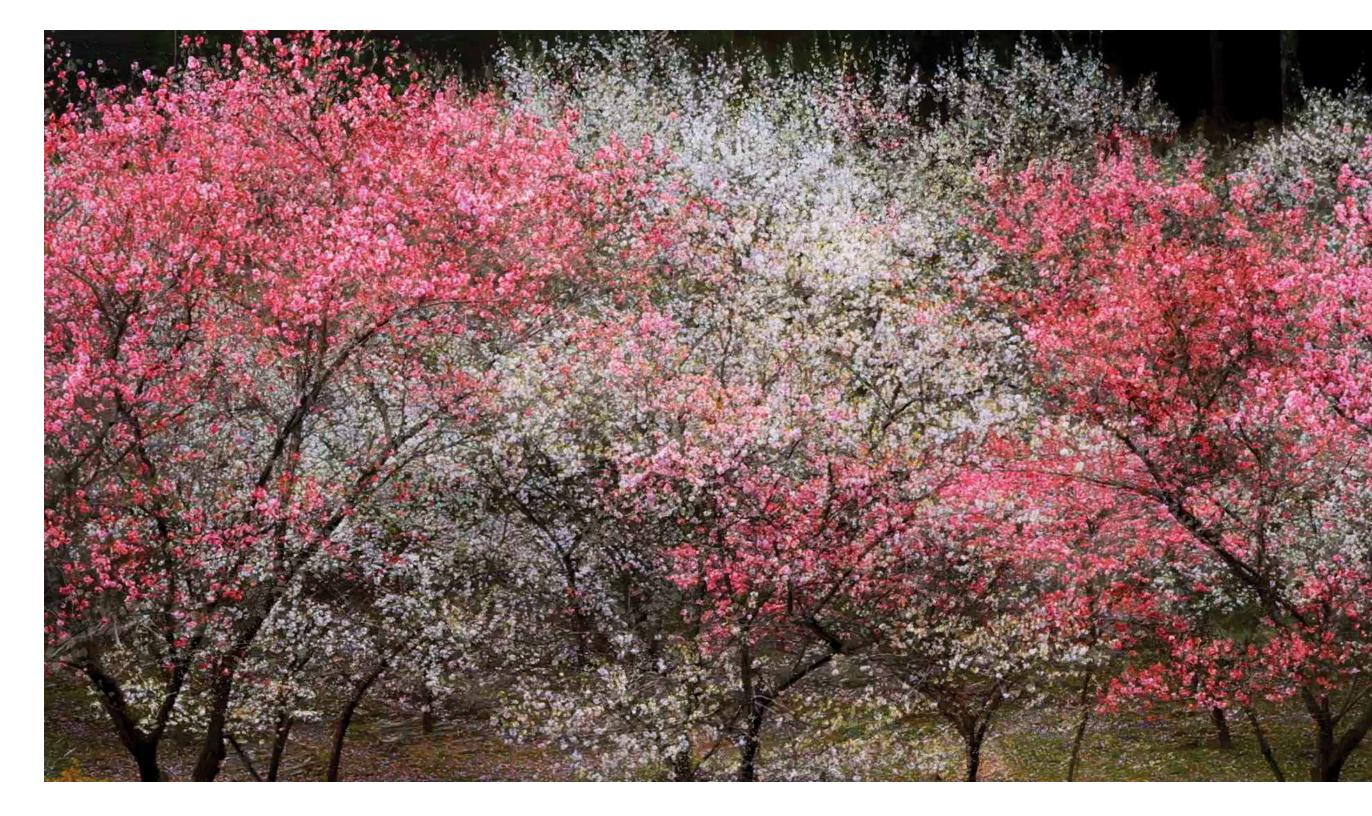
In the "Dreamscape" series, the beautiful or picturesque is filtered by the physical and moral make-up of the anonymous photographer at the moment she or he confronts the particular scene. Light makes its way through the leaves of olive branches, swaying in a soft wind. The trees' old, dark trunks convey their habitat's richness. The camera peers up through the same olive grove, into direct sunlight—a glorious heavenly moment. Another postcard-like photo appears to be Kyoto, Japan shot from a hotel's window; dark pink cherry blossoms mingle with white ones. Another captures the impressive foliage of a maple tree up close. Another captures the blades of grass and wildflowers in morning dew. Scenes aside, the magic begins when Karimi's paintings become impressionistic mirrors for the projected videos.

Each of Azari's images, whether taken from close up or far away, culminates in a perfect distribution of light and dark. He undertakes an extensive and mechanical process to correct colors and light until he achieves a seamlessly looped video. On the other hand, Karimi's paintings are assertively handmade, creating a built-in physical and emotional component that is in synergistic tension with Azari's mechanically reproduced imagery. Karimi responds to each image, however conventional and pedestrian it may appear, with skillful brushstrokes that vary in speed of execution and use of color. In "Dreamscape I," for example, shaded regions have subtle tonal variations. They're loosely infused with darker ocher and brown, which differ from the densely painted broken brushstrokes that cover the whole picture plane. In "Dreamscape V" clusters of wildflowers dance vertically in the foreground. Karimi adopts a bold style, creating strong contrasts that define the individuality of each natural form. In "Dreamscape VII," loosely painted hues of mustard yellow, pineapple orange, creamy beige, light emerald green, and golden brown are predominant. The last essential component is Karimi's spontaneous poetry written directly onto the canvases. They're at times fast and furious, and at other times slow and lyrical. Sometimes poems are repeated if repetition harmonizes with the image. The poems drawn with colored markers intensify the urgency and quickness in the overall composition, like wind blending with the

leaves. The letters, when large and in acrylic, add weight and texture. Interestingly, the five "Consequence" paintings—the natural disasters of a melting glacier, a threatening tsunami swell, a tree bent in torrential wind and rain, a forest fire charring the last debris, and what appears to be an infernal region seized in a dust storm—by virtue of watercolor as a water based media, hardly demand any interventions, except for a light, skating pencil line ushering washes of saturated hues that bathe the paper as well as the forms themselves.

In conclusion, Azari and Karimi's video painting as a form is the first of its kind, a groundbreaking new medium. We have seen the painted image on filmstrip, and the painted image serve video in animation, but here they are equal and equally visible in the viewing experience. Additionally, the unlikely combination provides a solemn platform for two friends, two artists to share their long and ongoing interest in the arts and humanities. The interaction forms a domain to connect all things in the two worlds they traverse, and to mediate their senses of transnational identity, artifice and alienation. Video painting offers a timely and urgent synthesis of the old and new techniques and materials, of both "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"<sup>ix</sup> and the eternal assertion of the manual hand to express Karimi, Shahram, original poem in Farsi, translated by the author into English, February 2, 2016. Farhmand, Azadeh, "The Untimely Traveler," in A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, individuality and authorship. In fact, video painting is a new form of and Essays by Iranian Americans, ed. Karim, Persis M. and Khorrami, Mohammad Mehdi (George Braziller, 1999) 69 collage. It invokes patterns of perception, retrieves fragmented time, Alford, Henry, The Works of John Donne, vol. 3 (John W. Parker, 1839), 574 - 5 iv Taylor, Juliette, "Foreign Music: Linguistic Estrangement and its Textual Effects in Joyce, Beckett, ignores anonymous origins (purposefully), and uses it all in the service Nabokov and Rushdie," (doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, 2003), 40 of personal narrative without compromising independent meanings. v See "Shoja Azari In Conversation with Phong Bui," The Brooklyn Rail (May, 2010), 24 vi Berlin, Isaiah, The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History (Ivan R. Dee, 1993) Their "romantic" postcard scenes (the type that delights tourists and vii Azari first came to New York in 1977 to study film. He then returned, after the Iranian revolution, to New York in 1983 where he lives and works. Karimi left Iran in 1987, and immigrated first to India, annoys artists) paired with their scenes of climate change and natural then Germany where he made his home. Both reunited in 1995 in New York. viii Leighton, Angela, Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems (Cambridge disaster form a frothy mix. There's also an uncomfortable satisfaction University Press, 1984), 12 ix Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations: Essays in the emotional images of horror and disaster. The absence of human and Reflections by Walter Benjamin (Schocken Books, 1969), 217 - 253





Previous page Dreamscape I, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 85 x 155 in

Dreamscape II, 2015 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in



Dreamscape III, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in.



*Dreamscape IV*, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in



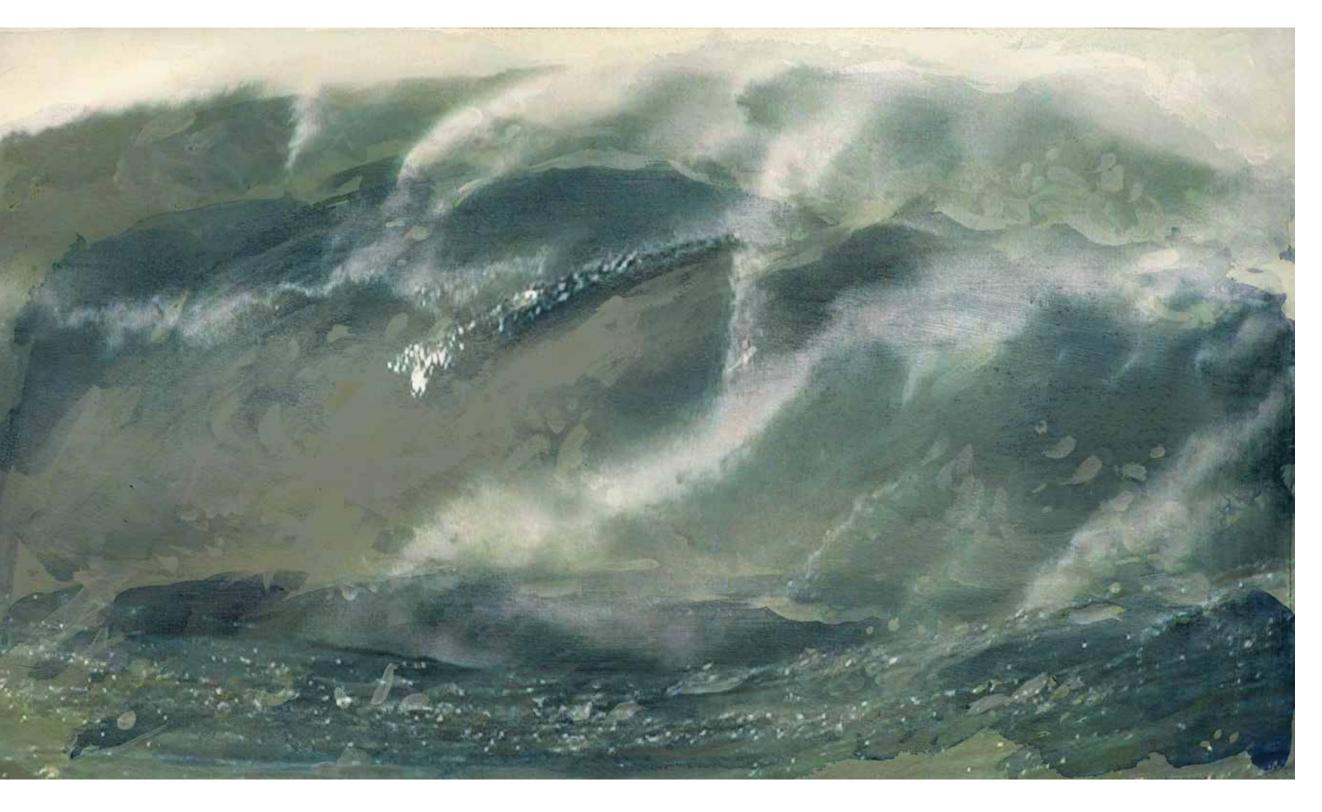
Dreamscape V, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in





Previous page Dreamscape VI, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in

*Dreamscape VII*, 2016 Mixed media on canvas with video projection 50 x 89 in



Consequence II, 2016 Water color on paper with video projection installed in black boxes 13 x 24 in



*Consequence III*, 2016 Water color on paper with video projection installed in black boxes 13 x 24 in

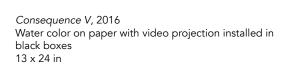




Previous page Consequence I, 2016 Water color on paper with video projection installed in black boxes 13 x 24 in

Consequence IV, 2016 Water color on paper with video projection installed in black boxes 13 x 24 in





# SHOJA AZARI

B. Shiraz, Iran

#### Lives and works in New York

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 King Of Black, Riflrmaker Gallery, London, UK
- 2013 Fake: Idyllic Life, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2011 There are No Non-Believers in Hell, Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris, France VIP Art Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010 There Are No Non-Believers in Hell, Leila Heller Gallery, ZOOM Contemporary Art Fair, Miami Beach, FL *Icons*, Figge Von Rosen Gallerie, Cologne, Germany Icons, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY Blazing Grace, East Central Gallery, London, UK
- 2009 Shoja Azari, Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Turin, Italy Shoja Azari, Leila Heller Gallery, Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE
- 2008 Odyssey, Figge Von Rosen Gallerie, Cologne, Germany
- 2007 Special Project, Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Basel Art Fair, Switzerland
- Convergencias, Helga de Alvear Galerie, Madrid, Spain 2006 Windows, Figge Von Rosen Gallerie, Cologne, Germany Windows, Domus Artium Museum Salamanca, Spain Project Rooms, ARCO, Madrid, Spain Special Project, Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Exitbart, Torino, Italy

#### COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

- The Cold Earth Sleeps Below (in collaboration with 2016 Shahram Karimi), Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- Passage through the world (in collaboration with Mohsen 2015 Namjoo and Shirin Neshat), TPP teatro Pubblico Pugliese, Bari, Italy
- 2014 The Tempest (in collaboration with Shirin Neshat), Dutch National Ballet, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2013 Magic of Light (in collaboration with Shahram Karimi), Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ Blazing Grace, (in collaboration with Shahram Karimi), 2010 East Central Gallery, London, UK 2008 Silence, (in collaboration with Shahram Karimi), Galleria II Gabbiano, Rome, Italy 2006 Two man show, (in collaboration with Shahram Karimi), Galleria II 2006 Gabbiano, Rome, Italy 2002 The Lincoln Summer Festival, in New York, NY Art Angel, London, UK 2001 Logic of the Birds, (in collaboration with Shirin Neshat, Sussan Deyhim, and Ghasem Ebrahimian), in New York, NY; Minneapolis, MN; London, UK; Siracusa, Italy; and Brugg, Switzerland

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016 Islamic Art Now, Part 2: Contemporary Art of the Middle East, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA Home sweet home, (Curated by Carlos Triqueros), travelling 2015 exhibition in ten cities in Spain Look at Me, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY (curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody and Paul Morris) Love Me, Love Me Not: Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan and its Neighbors, Heydar Aliyev Center, Baku, Azerbaijan (curated by Dina Nasser-Khadivi) 2013 Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1, Industry City, Brooklyn, NY (curated by the Dedalus Foundation in collaboration with Phong Bui) Summer Selects, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY

The King of Black, Sconfinamenti, Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds,

56<sup>th</sup> Edition, Spoleto, Italy (curated by Achille Bonito O Love Me, Love Me Not : Contemporary Art from Azerba its Neighbors, Arsenale Nord, Tessa 100, Venice, Italy ( by Dina Nasser-Khadivi)

The Space Between: Contemporary Perspectives on Tra and Society, Middle East Center for the Arts (MECA), Je City, NJ

- 2012 Festival Iranian Arts Now-Les Arts Iraniens Maintenant, Internationale des Arts, Paris, France
- 2011 Art Beat Fair, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY [Dis]Locating Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in Ame Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE (curated by Alalusi)
- 2010 Abu Dhabi, Leila Heller Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE On Rage, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany In Defense, Progetto 107, Turin, Italy Live Art/Expanded, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Lon Art Dubai, Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, UAE Tehran-New York, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY C.O.N.T.R.A.V.I.O.L.E.N.C.I.A.S, Koldo Mitxelena Kultu Donostia, Spain (Against Violence, Koldo Mitxelena Ku San Sebastian, Spain) New Directors/New Films, Museum of Modern Art (MC

New York, NY

2009 VIVA Show, LOOP Alternative Space, Seoul, Korea Iran Inside Out, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY (cu Sam Bardaouil and Fil Felrath) A Room with A View, Kunstfilmbiennale, Centre Pompidou Punto de Encuentro, Havana Biennial, Plaza de San Francisco, Havana, Cuba Urbanea, Fundacio Cultrural Es Convent, Inca, Mallorca

Olivia)		L'Iran sans Frontiere, Galerie Almine Rech, Paris, France (curated
baijan and		by Negui and Kamran Diba)
(curated		Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art,
		Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY (curated by Layla S. Diba)
radition		Kunst Biennale, Cologne Germany
ersey	2008	St. Moritz Art Masters, St Moritz, Switzerland
		Proyecto Civico/Civil Project, Centro Cultural Tijuana, Tijuana,
, Cité		Mexico
		Splash, LEILA HELLER Gallery, New York, NY
		Park and Castle of Acciaiolo-Scandicci, Florence, Italy
erica,		Summer Group Show, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY
		Ma liberaci dal male, Galleria San Fedele, Milan, Italy
Reem		Existencias, MUSAC, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Castilla
		y Leon, Spain
	2007	Camm, Centro Atlantico de Arte Contemporaneo, Las Palmas,
/		Spain
		Video Dia Loghi Festival, Torino, Italy
ndon, UK		The Space Between, Petach Tivka Museum of Art, Petach Tivka,
		Israel (curated by Drorit Gur Arie)
		Pre-opening exhibitions, Contemporary Art Museum, Santra
irunea –		Istanbul, Turkey
ılturunea,		2 Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia
		Kunstfilm Videonale, Cologne, Germany
DMA),	2006	Emergencies: the inaugural show of MUSAC, Museo de Arte
		Contemporaneo de Castilla y León, Spain
		Amerika, Figge Von Rosen Galerie, Cologne, Germany
urated by	2005	After the Revolution: Contemporary Artists from Iran, Koldo
		Mitxelena, San Sebastián, Spain (curated by Octavio Zaya)
u, / Paris, France		

#### SHAHRAM KARIMI

B. Shiraz, Iran

Lives and works between Germany and New York

#### SELECTED SOLO AND COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITIONS

Leila Heller Gallery, New York

Gallery, New York, NY

The Elephant in the Dark, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, India

The Mask and the Mirror, curated by Shirin Neshat, Leila Heller

2012 Magic of Persia, Dubai

2011

2016	The Cold Earth Sleeps Below (in Collaboration with		Art Dubai, Brigitte Schenk Gallery, Cologne, Germany	
	Shoja Azari), Leila Heller Gallery, New York, NY		Art Cologne, Brigitte Schenk Gallery, Cologne, Germany	
2015	Remembrance, Gallery Syra, Washington D.C.	2010	Tehran-New York, LTMH Gallery, New York, NY	
	Longing for Myself, Gallery Brigitte Schenk, Cologne, Germany		Art Dubai	
2014	The Rose Garden of Remembrance, Mah Gallery, Tehran		Art Cologne, Germany	
2013	Magic of Light (in Collaboration with Shoja Azari),		Art Abu Dhabi, LTMH Gallery, New York, NY	
	MANA Contemporary, Jersey City, NJ	2009	Selseleh/Zelzeleh, curated by Dr. Layla S. Diba, LTMH Gallery,	
2011	The Rose Garden of Remembrance, LTMH Gallery, New York, NY		New York, NY	
2010	Museum Siegburg, Germany		Iran Inside Out, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY	
2008	Gallery Brigitte Schenk, Cologne, Germany		Art Dubai	
2008	Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY	2008	Art Paris/ Dubai	
2006	Gallery II Gabbiano, Roma, Italy		Art Cologne, Germany	
	Art Basel, Marco Noire Contemporary Art, San Sebastiano Po/		Art Miami	
	Torino, Italy		Art Bologna, Italy	
2005	Kölner Stadt Anzeiger, Cologne, Germany		LTMH Gallery, New York, NY	
2004	Studio Shirin Neshat, New York, NY	2007	Museum Last Palma (CAAM), Spain	
	Gallery of Modern Art (Chaneh Honarmandan), Tehran, Iran		Art Bologna, Italy	
2001	Pumpwerk, Siegburg, Germany	2006	Art20 - The International Art Fair, New York, NY	
1998	Museum Siegburg, Germany	2003	Poetic Justice, the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul,	
1987	Gallery Taehr, Shiraz, Iran		Turkey	
1981/86	Gallery Wesal, Shiraz, Iran		Gallery of Contemporary Arts, Pancevo, Yugoslavia	
			25 Years of Separation, Iranian Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA	
		2000	Kunstverein Aschaffenburg, Germany	
SELECTE	D GROUP EXHIBITIONS	1997/00	1997/00/01 Grosse Kunstausstellung NRW, Düsseldorf, Germany	
		1994	Kunstforum Bonn, Germany	
2016	Art Cologne, Brigitte Schenk Gallery, Cologne, Germany	1979	Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran	
2015	Abu Dhabi Art, Brigitte Schenk Gallery, Cologne, Germany	1976	Gallery Takhte Jamshid, Tehran, Iran	
2014	Look at Me, curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody and Paul Morris,			

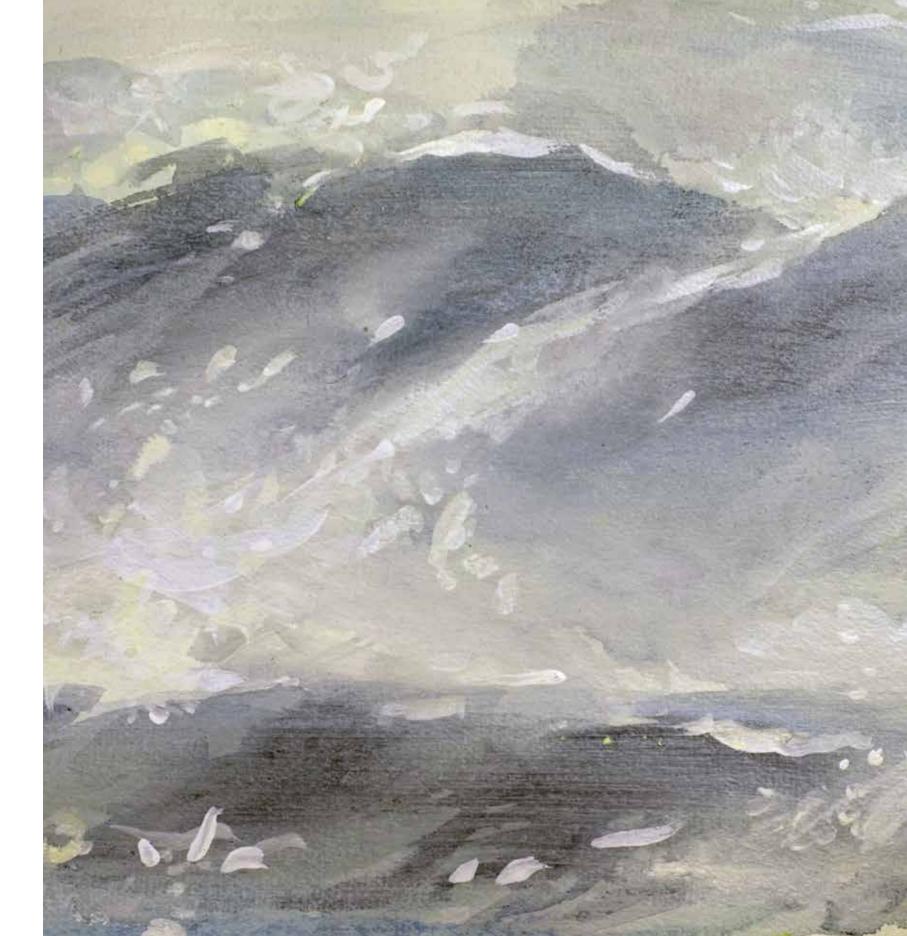
# FILM PRODUCTIONS

Shahram Karimi has collaborated with the visual artist/filmmaker, Shirin Neshat as the key production designer for the following films:

2007	Women Without Men
2003-05	Feature length film, Women Without Men, shot
2002-04	Logic of the Birds, multi-media performance, U
	European tour
2003	The Last Word, shot in New York
2002	<i>Tooba</i> , shot in Mexico
2001	Passage, shot in Morocco
	Possessed, shot in Morocco
	Pulse, shot in Morocco
	Film K, shot in the US
2000	Fervor, shot in Morocco
1999	Soliloquy, shot in Turkey

Shahram Karimi has also been the production designer for filmmaker Shoja Azari in several of his productions, including his feature length film K (2002) and Windows (2006).

ot in Morocco USA and



Covers: Consequence III, 2016 (detail) Water color on paper with video projection installed in black boxes 13 x 24 in

Front image detail: *Dreamscape I*, 2016 Mixed media on canvas 85 x 155 in

Back image detail: *Consequence II*, 2016 Water color on paper 13 x 24 in

Printed on the occasion of Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi's exhibition The Cold Earth Sleeps Below at Leila Heller Gallery, NY which ran from February 18 - March 26, 2016.

Photography by Rodin Hamidi Catalogue design by Carolina Zalles

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

568 West 25th Street I New York, NY 10001 Tel: + 1 212 249 7695 Fax:+ 1 212 249 7693 www.leilahellergallery.com

ISBN : 978-0-9861165-5-1





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