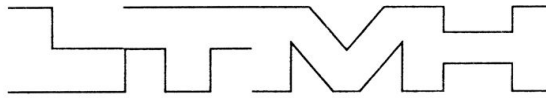


LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY



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SHOJA AZARI: ICONS

Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery

May 4 – 27, 2010



Coffee House Painting, 2009. Video projection on canvas. Digital imaging by Nariman Hamed.

New York, NY – Video work by artist and filmmaker Shoja Azari will be on view at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery from May 4 though 27, 2010. **SHOJA AZARI: ICONS**, the artist's first solo exhibition in New York City, will feature six new video works, which examine the role of saints and heroes in modern society. A fully illustrated catalogue with essays by Sam Bardaouil, Hamid Dabashi, and Benjamin Genocchio will accompany the exhibition.

In the early 20th century, coffee house-style painting flourished in Iran. Based on Persian mythology, the large paintings depicted the heat of battle, the afterlife and

martyrdom, truth and justice, and the apocalypse. The paintings expressed respect for religious and traditional beliefs and served as a backdrop for entertainment in the coffee houses of Iran as storytellers would act out the epic scenes depicted in the paintings. Azari has appropriated coffee house painter Modabber's, *The Day of the Last Judgment*, a painting dense with imagery and symbolism, and transformed it into a video work projected onto a black canvas, *Coffee House Painting*, 2009, infused with images of today's saints and sinners.

In his catalogue essay, Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, writes, "Shoja Azari's invitation is initially innocuous, familiar, and homely. Then things begin to happen. Pictures begin to move, images start morphing and altering into and out of each other. Wars and mayhems begin to change time, space, history, sides. We are on a move—towards the unfamiliar that is (alas) only too familiar, unhomely that is homely."

The *Icons* series, 2010, is comprised of five video works and five photographs on light boxes that appropriate popular posters of saints in Iran. Inspired by how Renaissance painters humanized religious figures, Azari seeks to make icons resonate in a new way.

Dabashi goes on to write, "The raped, burned, and murdered body of Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi, the 14-year-old Iraqi who was gang-raped on 12 March 2006 by the US soldiers from the 502nd Infantry Regiment, was the site of a violation infinitely more sacred than a picture of a saint or an Imam. What is happening to these icons in Shoja Azari's work is in fact entirely in the opposite direction—a cry of defiance, the iconography of a revolt against the obscenity of violence done in the name of or against those who hold these picture sacred. He does not so much de-iconicize them, as he in fact re-signifies them for a new generation of aesthetic, emotive, and political registers."

Sam Bardaouil, an independent curator, notes in his catalogue essay: "Shoja continues on his own odyssey to create work that elevates one's perception of the incomprehensible and infinite through the most simple and mundane, and at the end of the day offers us a glimpse into an iconic world where love, not justice, prevails."

As Benjamin Genocchio, editor in chief, Art and Auction magazine and former New York Times art critic, sums up in the catalogue, "The English word revolution derives from the Latin *revolutio*, which means "turn around." That's pretty much what Shoja does, his versatility and imagination transforming ideas, concepts, images and media so that we see them and the world about face. His ambition is no less than to change art and life."

Iranian-born Shoja Azari has lived in New York City since 1983. His films and video installations have been screened and exhibited widely around the world. Most recently, his video work has been seen in solo gallery exhibitions in London; Turin, Italy; and Köln, Germany, and at art fairs including Art Basel, Switzerland, and ARCO, Madrid. Since 1997, he has collaborated with Shirin Neshat on film and video installations including *Women Without Men*, which won the Silver Lion for best director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. He has also collaborated with Shahram Karimi on video paintings, which project video on painted surfaces.

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