

- Wall Street Journal
- LIFE & STYLE
- AUGUST 6, 2009

EXHIBITION

The View From Here

By [MELIK KAYLAN](#)

New York

The heart sinks when confronted with yet another cultural event—especially one involving Muslim culture—that promises to “break down stereotypes” or “establish dialogue” or “reframe the discourse.” Usually such events assume that Western or American perceptions need correcting, and that the problem lies in perceptions alone. It’s not that the material on offer lacks quality. Rather, as with the recent Muslim Voices festival here, the organizers are at pains to select what Westerners or Westernized elites at home and abroad deem the best of the cultures being celebrated. As for the tastes of the masses, the stereotypes about them may still be true.

Such issues take some sharply ironic twists at “Iran Inside Out,” the splendid contemporary-art exhibition on view at Manhattan’s Chelsea Art Museum. The show coincides with the recent election in Iran and is rather disingenuously subtitled “Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists.” I say “disingenuously” because so much of the show seems a subtle, brave, often funny act of protest by both expatriate and resident artists against life under the mullahs. It would have been a minor bombshell anyway, but as it is the viewer walks around filled with wonder and worry: What will happen to the artists living in Iran if the regime sees these images? How are such rebellious spirits faring now?

What the show doesn’t do is change our perceptions, for this is exactly what we thought. Iranians on the whole, especially young Iranians—and most of the home-based artists are young—despise the regime. If that is a stereotyped perception, the show merely confirms it.

“Iran Inside Out” features some 210 works of 56 artists, 35 resident in Iran. The primary curator on this venture is a Lebanese-Belgian 34-year-old named Sam Bardaouil, who took me around. He has lived in the Middle East, Paris and London, and taught art at the American University in Dubai.

The show is divided into five sections, the first two being the “subversively” named “In Search of the Axis of Evil” and “Iran to Queeran.” I groaned internally at the prospect of a stereotypical politically correct artworld show.

The impression was compounded in the first section by a menacing painting of burly American soldiers in desert fatigues with a plucked chicken dangling below them. Here then was the first stereotype: domineering Americans.

But after that sop to bien-pensant evenhandedness, the show got into its real groove. The next object was a glowingly clean toilet bowl overwritten in Farsi with the Iranian regime's unfulfilled slogans promising better education, housing, and the like. The piece includes the artist's telephone number in Tehran. Has he received a call, one wondered, from the Revolutionary Guards?

Nearby was a triptych of newspaper front pages with evanescent 3-D surfaces comparing the murder of a journalist by the regime to the death of Marat. Underneath ran a long series of flower photographs shot close-up at night, beautiful and suggestive, implying that creativity in Iran is forced to bloom secretly. That artist, one felt, knew how to protest subtly. Nearby, one looked down into a box with projected moving-images of elegant stickfigures, outlines of women in chadors, dancing and being tortured. The artist's parents had been killed some years ago by the regime.

In the "Iran to Queeran" section, one saw how Jeff Koons's style kitsch could be subversive in a place such as Iran where, as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad famously iterated, they have no gay problem. A series of black-and-white photographs followed a truck driver's real-life progression through an officially permitted sex-change. Though antigay, Iranian authorities have interpreted the Koran so as to give out some 6,000 licenses a year for such operations. The curators surrounded this series with gaudy kitsch photomontages by other artists of hairy wrestlers, body builders and similar images, to show how homoerotic imagery remains disguised while sex changes are officially licensed. One of the artists had previously been charged with devil worship for his distorted self-portraits as a mustached Qajar-era warrior.

As one progressed through the show, it became clear that artists in the diaspora referred to traditional Iranian art motifs far more than their in-country counterparts, a younger cross-section who seemed to derive inspiration from art trends in the outside world. Was this shaped by the bias of the curator, Mr. Bardaouil, who wanted to illustrate how young artists in Iran resembled young artists everywhere in loving postmodernist pop and kitsch? Was this another instance of curators tending to show the West the nonstereotypical facets of Muslim culture as practiced by Westernized elites? Alas, no. It seems that young artists in Iran *do* follow global art trends, a bittersweet truth considering the quality of most contemporary art in the West.

As a result, much of the truly sublime, ageless work seemed to come from the diaspora. In the section titled "Iran Recycled," for example, one saw the intricately curlicued pattern paintings of Roya Akhavan and the female nudes in mythical landscapes of Nazanin Pouyandeh. There was nothing programmatic or political in these works. They and the rest of the show proved what we in the West have known for years: that the Iranian people are more worldly and cultured than many of their coreligionists elsewhere, and certainly more than the mullahs who rule over them.

—*Mr. Kaylan, a columnist for Forbes.com, writes on culture and the arts for the Journal.*

Iran Inside Out

Chelsea Art Museum, N.Y.

Through Sept. 5

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page D7

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit

www.djreprints.com