

Shoja Azari: Examining the inauthentic in both past and present



Shoja Azari's Fanatics of Tangier or The Muslim Rage, oil on canvas, 2013.

Shoja Azari's most recent show, titled *FAKE: Idyllic Life*, opened on Nov 14 at Leila Heller Gallery in New York, facilitating further dialogue on the nature of radicalism represented from contemporary Iran.

Azari has not been back to his home country since 1982, consequently cultivating his unique sociopolitical aesthetic of lucid diaspora.

Azari aggressively examines the inauthentic with both past and present, infusing ancient history with contemporary technology. As the title of the exhibition suggests, *FAKE: Idyllic Life* seeks to deconstruct misconceptions and stereotypes perpetuated by politicized media and art historical exoticism. The all-capitalization of the word "FAKE" is suggestive of the illusory confines of so-called good and evil, and delineated, even delegated authenticity.

The gallery is lined with wallpaper that at first looks like mosaic, but upon closer examination reveals itself to be a compilation of Google search results for "dangerous" phrases. URLs for terms such as 'Radical Muslim,' 'Radical Islam,' 'Hezbollah,' among others, line the walls.

American realist painter Karl Koett was commissioned to render versions of works by Pierre Auguste Cot, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Delacroix, customizing modifications of

inputted, controversial satire. Alongside the displayed paintings are the contracts between Azari and Koett, raising questions of ownership in appropriation of art history, as well as purchasing in the art market. The mimicry of possession is further underscored with the fantastically Orientalist original titles — notably, Delacroix's *Fanatics of Tangier* (1838). In addition to gestural research for the studies, Koett read Delacroix's diary to prepare the works.



Shoja Azari's Hijlah or Unconsummated Love, film still, The King of Black, HD color video, 2013.

Two films, *The King of Black* (2013) and *Idyllic Life* (2012), culminate the showcase at the back of the gallery. The first was inspired by the poetry of Nizami Ganjavi (specifically, *Seven Beauties*, written in 1197), referencing pleasure and excess functions in an analysis of conflicting contemporary ideals. The phantasmagoric 25-minute film looks at ancient Persian illustrations of heaven and hell with new eyes, inputting lustful patriarchy into the vivid, ethereal realm, versus suicide bombers and cloaked women in a final hellish scene. *The King of Black* was initially commissioned by the Azerbaijani representation at the Venice Biennale this year, not least because Nizami has been, in Azari's work, "adopted" by the Azeri people.



Shoja Azari's Queen of Houries, film still, The King of Black, HD color video, 2013.

Idyllic Life is much shorter—only five minutes—and yet also serves to inspire the title of the exhibition. The miniature illustration format functions like a video game: frames of the animated castle feature half-hidden windows into revolution and pathos. A bird thumps its wings but fails to escape its frame, a woman's cry echoes from another, and crowds trample in a third. As the sounds escalate, the viewer's eye is forced to scan the film unpredictably, invoking a dual sense of urgency and uncertainty.

Azari is known for his hybrid 'video paintings,' concurrently showing at Mana in an exhibition titled *Magic of Light*, in which moving images are projected onto paintings, rippling through a no-longer two-dimensional frame. *There Are No Non Believers in Hell* stems from a similar jumping-off point to *FAKE: Idyllic Life*, in that Azari literally inflames European conventional old masters with radical statements against mass extremism. The dual-wall projections show burning nudes from Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* and *Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac* by Rembrandt.

Originally from Shiraz, Iran, Azari has lived in New York since he immigrated in the early eighties, and has since been an important figure in the New York-Iranian contemporary art scene that first took root in the early 1980s. His has been a pertinent voice contributing to the sharpening lens trained on contemporary Iranian art today, along with long-time partner Shirin Neshat. Most recently, the two have been collaborating on a film about Egyptian singer and icon Umm Kulthum.

FAKE: Idyllic Life is on view at Leila Heller Gallery until December 14 and the exhibition *Magic of Light* at Mana is on view until December 28.

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