

New Works by Shoja Azari at Leila Heller Gallery in Manhattan

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Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York



Daniel Gauss | NY Art Examiner

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For some time now the Leila Heller Gallery has been adding an important element of diversity to the Manhattan art gallery scene. Since 1984 Heller has been regularly showcasing emerging and established Middle Eastern artists and continues to do so with the current show: New Works by Shoja Azari.

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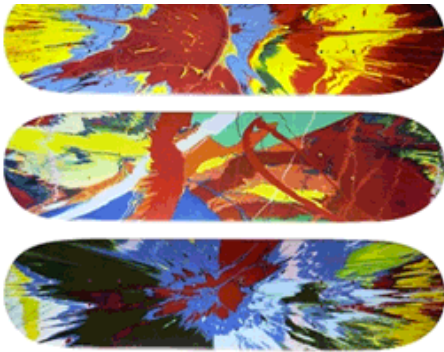
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Surprisingly, not many Americans know that the current map of the Middle East was, basically, drawn by the British and French after World War I. The Ottoman Empire had controlled a wide swath of the Middle East, but after their loss of territory in World War I the English and French merely drew lines across a map and divided the territories according to what they wanted, not by geographical features or by which ethnic group was living where. The nation of Iraq was, for instance, a random construct made from what had been a big chunk of the Ottoman Empire.

Shoja Azari's work seems to imply that, to the West, the Middle East has always been earmarked for colonization or exploitation due to an unrealistic conception of what exactly is over there. In fact, he would seem to drop lots of the blame into the lap of European artists from the 19th century who picked out the most exotic elements of the Middle East and

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Kaws, *Fake/RealFake (single deck)*, 2007

constructed a fairy tale narrative out of the place. To 19th century European artists the most salient features of the Middle East were the harems, dancing girls, the odalisque and the varieties of drugs and dissipation available to European tourist.

Shoja Azari ironically comments on how history has changed this narrative. The narrative has changed, however, it remains far from the truth. In the repainting of the 1870 French painting "The Snake Charmer," we see the introduction of rocket launchers. In an update

of Delacroix's "Fanatics of Tangiers," we see a mob burning an American flag. In "Oriental Bath or Bunnies R Us", overtly pornographic elements are added to the type of "Orientalist" painting that first misrepresented the Middle East. Azari seems to be implying that in understanding 'weaker' or 'third world' foreign cultures we often use a binomial language of sex and violence. Even if those two elements are not really pervasive in the culture, we like them so much that we stick them in there anyway. Indeed, let me delve into the controversial by saying that Azari might have even said we get this binomial sex/violence orientation to weaker cultures from the Bible, where God routinely ordered the destruction of foreign cultures based on a narrative he allegedly provided to those doing His will in the Middle East. Azari does not say this, however.

Interestingly, however, Shoja did not paint these satirical works. He commissioned painter Karl Koett to reproduce the works with the modern elements thrown in. On the walls of the gallery next to the commissioned paintings you see contracts between Shoja and Koett for the works. Whereas 18th century "Orientalist" works were gobbled up by wealthy art buyers who wished to buy into a misrepresentation of a culture, Shoja seems to be saying that the current art buyer likes gobbling up irony. The modern, educated, sophisticated buyer wants to feel that he is in the advance guard, privy to the most recent and progressive social revelations. To mock those who don't get "Islamic culture" is cool and can be commissioned and purchased. To help the viewer get this idea in a more limpid manner, surrounding the commissioned paintings is a type of wallpaper made of teeny tiny little images a person gets from 'googling' the word "terrorism" or "suicide bomber" etc.

The real treat of Shoja Azari's show, however, is the amazing 24 minute videotape that he made based on a story by the Persian poet Nizami Ganjav. Ganjav wrote an epic poem in 1197 called Haft Paykar (Seven Beauties). Apparently this was a poem more influenced by Zoroastrianism than Islam (The Zoroastrian religion contributed greatly to Judaism and Christianity but the religion has, for the most part, died out – it was replaced in Persia by Islam - except for some contemporary followers in India who call themselves "Parsis" or Persians). The poem is an allegory on developing greater self-awareness as a means to attaining moral and spiritual perfection.

Azari takes one tale from this poem and creates a vivid and sensuous short video called *The King of Black*. In this video a King learns of a land where the people are continuously sorrowful and dress completely in black. He journeys to this land to discover what has happened and, while there, is introduced to various kinds of pleasure, especially sensual pleasure among a group of women introduced as *houris*. *Houris* are, of course, familiar to western Islam-bashers as the heavenly courtesans who will allegedly provide pleasure to men (especially martyrs and suicide bombers) in the after-world. While experiencing the pleasures which the *houris* can provide, the King indulges to excess and is banished into the land of sorrow, where he adopts a black garment and becomes the King of Black.

The process of mourning in the video is, however, seemingly equated to suicide bombing. In the video we see a woman dressed in black mourning her son while gazing at the type of photograph made by a suicide bomber before his death. Indeed, numerous of these women sit in a desert lamenting their losses when the King passes through this land. The allegory on spiritual perfection is, therefore, reworked into a contemplation of the putative rewards of martyrdom vis a vis the human suffering caused by such an action. The paradigm of a heavenly paradise becomes the lure to violence instead of an ideal to achieve peace. The desire for concupisence, the promise of sexual rewards in exchange for random violence, leads to a land where all suffer and grieve.