

FAKE: Idyllic Life by Shoja Azari - review

This New York exhibition offers a kaleidoscopic response to the Iranian condition and western stereotypes

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theguardian.com, Monday 9 December 2013 05.13 EST

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Shoja Azari, "The King of Black" (still: "The Mourners"), 2013. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

FAKE: *Idyllic Life* starts out loud. Beyond that emphatic initial term in the exhibition title, there's the work most viewers will begin at: an oil painting of a crowded street scene. At its center stands a man of Middle Eastern mien, bearded, dressed in white, arms upraised, a grenade held heavenward, screaming.

After the scream, a surprise. On the wall beside the painting, where a conventional title plaque might hang, is instead a small contract. The viewer learns that the oil, like the four others nearby to which it relates, has been executed not by the show's attributed auteur, Shoja Azari, but by a painter, Karl Koett, whom Azari commissioned to copy a 175-year-old Delacroix, *Fanatics of Tangier*, "with changes specified." What's the big idea? Got it. FAKE!



Shoja Azari, "Fanatics of Tangier or The Muslim Rage," 2013. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

At first FAKE: *Idyllic Life*, on view at New York's Leila Heller Gallery, feels more a coincidental assembly of three disparate projects than a coherent exhibition. That effect hinges not on the fact that one artist's hand realized part of another's vision. Nor does it come from the variety of media – those five oil paintings, displayed against wallpaper filled with

minuscule web-derived images; a 25-minute narrative video in the style of a (colorful) silent film; a "video painting" in which a projection of a static (though chromatically shifting) base illustration incorporates several overlaid elements in looped motion.

Nor is its cause the breadth of subject matter – swarthy fantasias from the 19th-century heyday of French salon [orientalism](#) into which up-to-the-minute icons of violence and titillation have been disruptively introduced; a didactically tragic classic of 12th-century Persian literature; an array of modern, all-too-real scenes of violence visible and ripening set amid a 16th-century Persian genre miniature of quotidian urban life. Nor certainly is the issue one of conceptual aims – some of the ways in which the show's parts intersect at that level may already be apparent from the foregoing.

The difficulty in bringing those parts into harmonious concert is rather a matter of tone, the chords of which here are so diverse for a notionally solo exhibition that they can trip up a viewer unprepared. That first screaming figure – rotated and exaggerated only slightly from Delacroix's original point man – for all its propagandistic import (amplified by the surrounding wallpaper, with hundreds of images similarly drawn from the iconography of the war on terror) is patently ridiculous. Through its well-considered displacement, the emblem of Muslim rage mocks itself.



Shoja Azari, "The King of Black" (still: "The Heavenly Bed"), 2013. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

Opposite the Azari-Koett-Delacroix are two Azari-Koett-Chassériaus that are even more ideologically complex, and funnier. These are lascivious glimpses into imagined harems, in which the originals' preening concubines have been replaced by Playboyish "models" in all their cliché glory. In one, a porcelain-hued all-American, sporting floppily oversized, Stars-and-Stripes-patterned trainers, is bathed by a dark-skinned attendant as her couture is readied by a servant whose flesh tone is unplaceably ochre. In the other, an already-naked olive beauty helpfully removes her colleague's crimson thong, while seated legacy figures on either side – one black, the other turbaned and in shadow – gaze in ambiguous directions.

The most eyeopening quality of this radical bunny recontextualization is that the blandly generic ciphers of concupiscence by-the-bust-numbers are imbued with a sexiness greater than any actual Playboy centerfold could ever hope for. Given the fine-art setting of the gallery encounter and the grotesqueries of the retained content, this feels wildly inappropriate (you know, BAD!); it's also jolly and thought-provoking. As for the motivating matters of regional, racial, and sexual representation modes, how little they've changed over time, and how little their expressions can vary between the canons of putative "high" and "low," the works' cheeky humour helps those salient shots land without the dull thud of lecture.

Past two Azari-Koett-Gérômes featuring orientalist conceits of exotic performance and such latter-day interventions as rocket launchers, Kalashnikovs, and the face of "mad cleric" [Abu Hamza](#), are the rooms where the show's video components screen. To the right is what the catalogue cover indicates is the main attraction: *The King of Black*, a retelling of a story, commonly known as *The Black Dome*, from Nizami Ganjavi's romantic epic poem [Haft Peykar](#) (Seven Beauties).

Through jewel-like tableaux of fantastical landscapes the eponymous monarch moves, dressed first in royal red, to the air of a gentle, musing keyboard score. The narrative is wordless, save for a few title cards – there are passages minutes long with none. Intrigued by the mystery of a land where all wear black and consumed by desire for the incomparable Queen of Houries, our bright-eyed, winsome king learns

the cruel lesson that the blindered pursuit of an ideal is apt to lead one into despair.

To be sure, *The King of Black* is in part a comment on a certain utopianist venture of modern vintage, as well as the trammeling of an exquisitely endowed culture, but those aspects of the piece peek around the margins of the viewing experience. It is primarily an idyll, in the most traditional poetic sense: a picturesque pastoral. Though it relates a finally dolorous odyssey, its effect is altogether charming and uplifting. The journey is so beautiful, it is hard to deny the temptation to make it again.

While presented as installation art, *The King of Black* would doubtless work in the cinematic realm as well. Operating stylistically not far from certain brands of storybook filmmaking, its attitude arrives at an appealing spot between the sincerity of [Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*](#) and the hyper-self-consciousness of Guy Maddin's oeuvre, much like Pablo Berger's recent dialogue-free take on *Snow White*, *Blancanieves*. An enterprising programmer would be smart to double-bill them.



Shoja Azari, "Idyllic Life" (still 2), 2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

A few steps away is the piece that lends its title to the show: *Idyllic Life*. In both form and furious content it is reminiscent of [Azari's extraordinary Coffee House Painting](#) (2009), which feels as if takes on the entire past four decades of the west's cracked mental and military engagement with the Middle East – plus, with its multiple intimations of the Prophet, the centuries-old fray with what occidentals once called Muhammadism.

Idyllic Life is simpler, as if stripped down, and more grave. Framed by antique suggestions of what can never be regained, it's all about Iran and now. Where *Coffee House Painting* directs one's attention to the very image of 20th-century east-west imperialist accommodation, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the new work angles in on a series of hand-kissing supplicants to his successor as sovereign, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the original supreme leader and ultimate imam. Follow his fundamentalist program, Iranians were told, and an idyllic life was promised for all. The remaining documentary overlays show what they really got. This is one sad sequel.

In an online [video interview](#), Azari describes the work's inspiration in terms of questions that clearly weigh upon him: "What has gone wrong with the Iran that I knew once? What happened that the entire moral fabric of the society is ripped, is falling apart?" Where the exhibit's altered oils could readily have been designed to bespeak anger, but do not, *Idyllic Life* does. Similarly, the grief that *The King of Black* represents yet tonally skirts is here woven deeply through. In Azari's words, it is "a ten-minute story of total breakdown of a society, schizophrenia of a society that is governed by theocracy." The piece draws from an envenomed reservoir, and it is pitched at just enough of an intellectual remove for a viewer to touch that emotionally septic wellspring without drowning in it.

(Screening in proximity, Azari's videos join to evoke an important work of postrevolutionary Iranian literature: [King of the Benighted](#), penned under a pseudonym by Houshang Golshiri, summoned *The Black Dome* into a contemporary setting for a story that asks questions much like those posed above, limning through an unnamed poet's tale the sociocultural disorder *Idyllic Life* portrays).



Shoja Azari, "Idyllic Life" (still 4), 2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, New York

As the color drains out of the video painting, which began with a Persian miniature's near-iridescence, the exhibit – for those who have traced a coterminous path – ends in a hush at once mournful and tense.

Leaving the gallery, I turned to an accompanying friend. Remarking on how much I'd admired each of the show's parts, I concluded, "But I didn't feel the connection between them."

My friend nodded. "I didn't feel it either," he said. "But I sensed it."

Fair enough, and yet not enough for me. Though I was unaware of it in the moment, Azari had said, apparently speaking of the exhibition as a whole, "It is really my emotional reaction to what is unfolding in the

world, the current world that we're living in." I too wanted a singular reaction, to feel what bound its fulsome palette. This took time and mental mastication – a good brain chew. And eventually it all did come together, capaciously so.

We speak with offhand estimation of things that "make a world of sense."
FAKE: *Idyllic Life* offers up a world of feeling and idea both.

FAKE: Idyllic Life is on view at New York's Leila Heller Gallery through December 14