

Paradise Lost and Found

by David A. Willis

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Shoja Azari, at:

FAKE: Idyllic Life at Leila Heller Gallery
November 14 – December 14, 2013

Magic of Light at Mana Contemporary
September 29 – December 28, 2013

It seems as if the prolific filmmaker and video artist Shoja Azari is on a roll, with work in three recent exhibitions in the New York metropolitan region including a solo show at Leila Heller Gallery in Chelsea, titled *FAKE: Idyllic Life*, a collaborative show with the painter Shahram Karimi, titled *Magic of Light*, which ran through November 30th at the Mana Contemporary Art Center in Jersey City, and work in the *Rail's Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1* in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Across this remarkably diverse spread of artwork, Shoja Azari consistently bridges Western and Iranian artistic traditions while also melding the mediums of painting and video in new and inventive ways.

For instance, in Azari's breathtaking short film *The King of Black* (2013), currently on view at his solo show in Chelsea, live actors are superimposed into a digital world rendered in the sumptuous style of a Persian miniature painting. Loosely based upon *The Seven Beauties*—an epic poem by the 12th century Persian poet, Nizami Ganjavi—it tells the story of a king who hears about a neighboring kingdom plagued with sorrow and who then journeys forth to discover the cause of their great sadness. The action unfolds slowly, lingering upon lush landscapes where nymphs frolic and moons rise. As in a silent film, the actors do not speak; a melancholy piano score accompanies them and inter-titles are used to progress the

plot. However, this is not truly a silent film: carefully deployed sound effects—such as echoing footsteps or birds chirping—produce a distinctly synchronized relationship between sound and image that was unheard of prior to the advent of “the talkies.” In this manner, Azari extracts source material from Persian art and literature and re-deploys it through the use of Western cinematic tropes and contemporary technologies such as digital editing and green screen. The end result is simply mesmerizing. Azari lulls us into a dreamlike state, setting us up for a rude awakening when we find ourselves expelled from the garden of paradise and confronted by the harsh realities of life (e.g. death).

In addition to his two recent video works on display at Leila Heller Gallery, Azari also commissioned a painter to create replicas of classic orientalist paintings with specific changes or additions, such as playboy bunnies inserted into bath-house scenes, or RPG launchers and AK-47s inserted into Jean-Léon Gérôme’s iconic painting “The Snake Charmer” (1870). The walls upon which these paintings are hung are papered with thousands of thumbnail images generated through Google searches for provocative phrases such as “Muslim Rage,” which resulted in images of masked terrorists, the Queen of England, Abu Ghraib torture images, and—perhaps even more disturbing than the original torture images—spoofs and memes of torture images, such as a pile of naked Lego men with their heads covered with sacks. By confronting us with these confusing and oftentimes contradictory images, Azari pressures us to reconsider the title of his exhibition, and to ask ourselves just what constitutes a real or accurate representation of Islamic culture, as opposed to a “FAKE” one.

Azari’s exhibition with the painter Shahram Karimi (a lifelong friend and collaborator from their shared hometown of Shiraz) is less political and more absorbed with aesthetic concerns than his other work. *Magic of Light* features eleven projection paintings made by the two artists between 2007 and 2013. They created these pieces by projecting a film still onto a canvas, painting it, and then re-projecting the original film clip onto the painting, thereby bringing the image to life with an uncanny effect. This method works particularly well for the depiction of water ripples, as exemplified in the *Silence* series (2007-2008), four projection paintings of a pond during each season of the year, a clear homage to the water lilies of Claude Monet.

The bucolic mood of the *Silence* series finds a dark counterpoint in “There Are No Non Believers in Hell” (2010), the only piece in the Mana show which was not a collaboration with Karimi: a two-channel video depicting specially commissioned reproductions of old master paintings being engulfed by flames. There is a formal equivalence between the tongues of flame rhythmically licking away at the reproductions of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, and the orange ripples of light moving up and down the surface of Azari and Karimi’s projection painting “Autumn” (2007-2008). Ultimately, Azari reminds us that the power of art to freeze beauty in time is merely an illusion, and that eventually all things will be reduced to dust.