

ARTS IN REVIEW

ART

From Shah to Supreme Leader

Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran

Grey Art Gallery
Through April 2

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD

When you visit New York University's Grey Art Gallery to see "Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran," don't miss the basement. Deep underground, the last work in the show will shake you. Shiva Ahmadi's animation, "Lotus" (2014), is not one of those plodding videos almost everyone avoids. At less than nine minutes, it grabs viewers and immerses them in a terrifying parable of enlightened government turned bad. With remarkable subtlety and stunning beauty, a peaceful world presided over by a Buddha-like leader is transformed by merchants of death into a wasteland of violence and wanton destruction.

Curated by Lynn Gumpert, the exhibition focuses in depth on the six artists to sketch more than half a century of Iranian art. Art-world cognoscenti will critique the issues captured by the title—the globe-hopping debate about whether the art of a particular place can maintain its roots in a local culture and also address global expectations. Everyone else will be fascinated by the ways this art allows us to explore how gifted individuals have responded to Iran's political and cultural landscape from the final decades of the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, through the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and up to the present moment of incipient change in Iranian society. The Grey Gallery is uniquely positioned to showcase this story because the founder of the museum, Abby Weed Grey, assembled one of the largest collections of Iranian art and donated 200 works, including many currently on view.

The 1960s and '70s were a time of aggressive internationalism that reflected both the ambitions of a new generation of artists and the political program of the shah, who sought to establish his authority on a foundation that stretched from the ancient history of the land to the wealth and secularism of the oil boom. In art, the transformative movement was called *Saqqakhaneh* (named after common, traditional fountains). Rooted in Persian, rather than Arab, heritage, Iranian culture layered Islam over far older traditions. Among the *Saqqakhaneh* group, Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram (both born in 1937) embraced



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Shiva Ahmadi's 2014 'Lotus' (above); Chohreh Feyzdjou's 1992 'Série K' (left).

installations of objects from the Holocaust, was crucial for Feyzdjou's portrayal of her own sense of dislocation.

Three artists, Ms. Ahmadi, Barbad Golshiri and Shahpour Pouyan, represent the current generation, those who were born around the time of the Revolution and grew up during the devastating, eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88). Both Ms. Ahmadi and Mr. Pouyan moved to the U.S. in recent years, and both address issues of abusive authority. Ms. Ahmadi's "Lotus" is based on a series of her watercolors that were inspired by intricate masterpieces of 16th-century art: Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden Earthly Delights" and Persian miniatures. Mr. Pouyan's work is driven by conceptual strategies and extends from drawing and photography to sculpture and ceramics. His steel sculptures present an uncomfortable beauty by evoking both the decorative elegance of Islamic design and the spiky shapes of warriors' helmets.

Unlike Ms. Ahmadi and Mr. Pouyan, Mr. Golshiri remains in Iran, and he has forcefully critiqued contemporary politics, despite the danger of censorship, imprisonment or death. His series "Curriculum Mortis" comprises photographs, sculptures, videos and performances that address the history of individuals who, under the Islamic Republic, have been killed and denied proper burial. "The Untitled Tomb" (2012) is a stencil made from sheets of iron that have been perforated with written phrases. When pressed against the earth and sprinkled with soot, it leaves an ephemeral, but infinitely repeatable, memorial to the lost.

both ancient Iranian craft traditions and Western precedents of abstraction to create a distinctive modernism. This range is not as surprising as it may seem. Mr. Tanavoli's revival of sculpture (a medium long neglected by Islamic culture) inspired by folk objects paralleled the American sculptor David Smith's embrace of industrial welding and the crude beauty of ancient Mediterranean utensils. Pilaram blended Islamic symbols with the geometric patterns and luminous colors of Persian manuscript illumination and Paul Klee's paintings.

Meanwhile, under the patronage of the shah's wife, Farah, the government assembled a first-class collection of Western art, from Picasso through Warhol.

The revolution brought a sudden end to this international eclecticism, in part because the shah had used Westernization as one of the primary tools to justify his re-

gime and its many abuses. Mr. Tanavoli emigrated to Canada in 1979, and Pilaram, who remained in Iran, died in obscurity in 1983. A younger generation of artists, represented by

Responding to Iran's shifting political and cultural landscape.

Chohreh Feyzdjou (1955-1996), had already relocated, in her case to Paris.

Drawing on her exceptional childhood as a Jew in Iran, Feyzdjou reflected on upheavals from afar. Her "Série K" (1992) cannibalizes her earlier work as the fodder for a monumental grid of drawings, each carefully rolled and tied with a string, but also blackened, as if singed by fire. Her training with the French artist Christian Boltanski, whose art examines memory and loss through

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