

# BAZAAR

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## THE ART OF HOPE

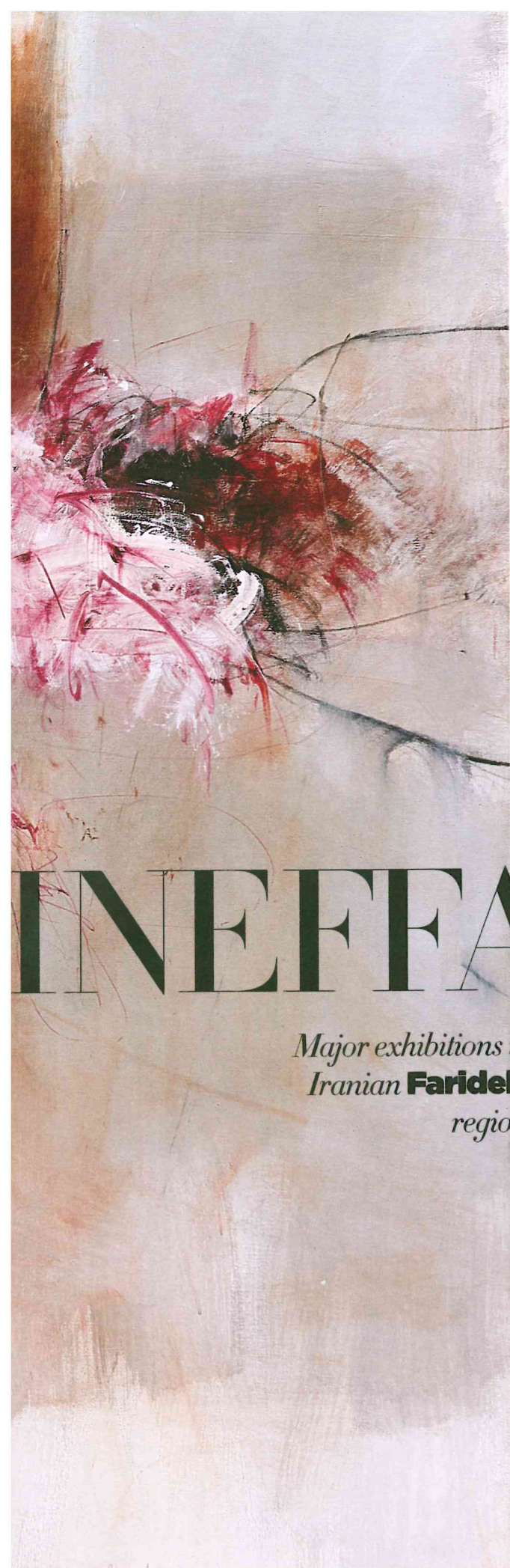
SAFWAN DAHOUL  
AND HIS  
DREAM-LIKE  
CANVASES



# TOWARDS THE

Farideh Lashai. Untitled. 2009. Oil on Canvas. 200 x 200 cm. Private Collection, Rome.  
Facing page: Farideh Lashai. *circa* 1970. Courtesy of the Iranian Handicraft Organisation.





# INEFFABLE

*Major exhibitions in Tehran and Sharjah reveal the enchanting work of Iranian **Farideh Lashai** placing the late artist within a global and regional context, says Rebecca Anne Proctor*

**D**ozens of school children are sketching inside the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA). Found squatting next to the building's long circular walkway and seated quietly in each gallery room, each is intent on the subject of their gaze. The girls don light grey headscarves, perfectly fit to cover their head save for a few locks of escaping hair.

Compared to these girls, I realised that the way I had draped mine was characteristic of a foreigner to Tehran—a woman not used to wearing the traditional headscarf. In a striking juxtaposition of conservative power and the avant-garde nature of contemporary society, with their pencil and paper the children re-appropriated works by Ad Reinhardt, Willem De Kooning, Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, and Iranian Modern and Contemporary artists Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Sohrab Sepeheri, and Farideh Lashai, the artist whose life and art graced the museum walls. Such a scene couldn't be more indicative as to

*the way in which young generations with the world after*



## TEHRAN

It's a crisp autumn day in late November and the museum is an oasis of tranquility within the urban bustle that makes up Tehran. Home to 16 million people, navigate yourself through the traffic, smog, monotonous high rises and old palaces that make up this city and you will feel the incredible energy of a people and a culture on the brink of rediscovery. "There's an opportunity waiting on every corner," said a foreign businessman as we disembarked at the museum.

The friendliness and passion of the Iranians marked a people eager for novelty. The opening of *Farideh Lashai: Towards the Ineffable*, which took place on 20 November 2015, saw a community of international art professionals flock to Tehran to behold, many for the first time, the wealth of art belonging to the museum coupled with the life and career of one of Iran's foremost female artists: Farideh Lashai. Valued at \$12 billion dollars, the collection, which has been hidden away amidst the shadows of the museum's vault for decades, includes such works as Jackson Pollock's 1950 masterpiece *Mural on Indian Red Ground*. At 2.7 by 2.4 metres, it is one of Pollock's largest paintings created in his drip style and valued by Christie's five years ago at \$250 million.

Part of the exhibition along with two wall-size Rothko's valued at \$100 million and \$200 million, respectively, these works are on display near the spiralling inner ramp reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York which takes the visitor down to a series of offices and conference rooms as well as the museum's vault.

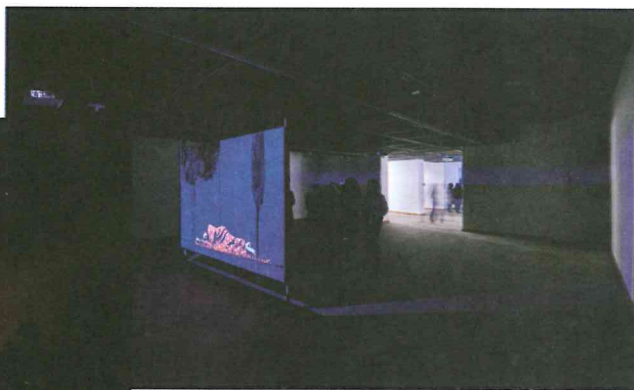
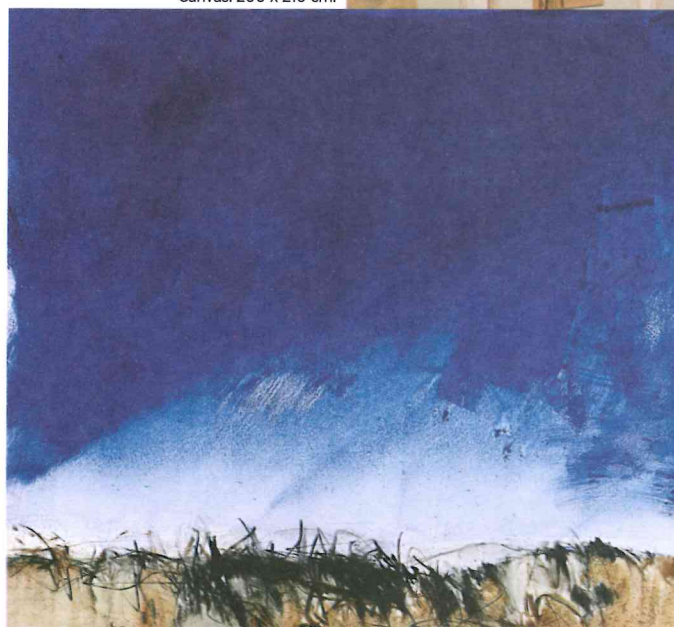
With the dropping of Iran's sanctions in play, many nations eagerly await to get their hands on the collection. The tale of this treasure trove of art begins during Iran's 1970s oil boom with the Empress Farah Diba Pahlavi. During this time, Iran's oil revenue had significantly increased and Pahlavi thought it was best to buy back some of the country's ancient works both internally and from the outside. She also thought it would be good to have a museum where works by the country's Contemporary artists could be displayed. But even during this period most Iranian curators and collectors were interested in the country's traditional art as opposed to Modern art. Pahlavi's love for Western art is thought to have stemmed from her art education in Paris.

The former queen had met artists such as Andy Warhol, Marc Chagall, Henry Moore, and Salvador Dalí. Pahlavi then commissioned Kamran Diba, an Iranian architect and her cousin,

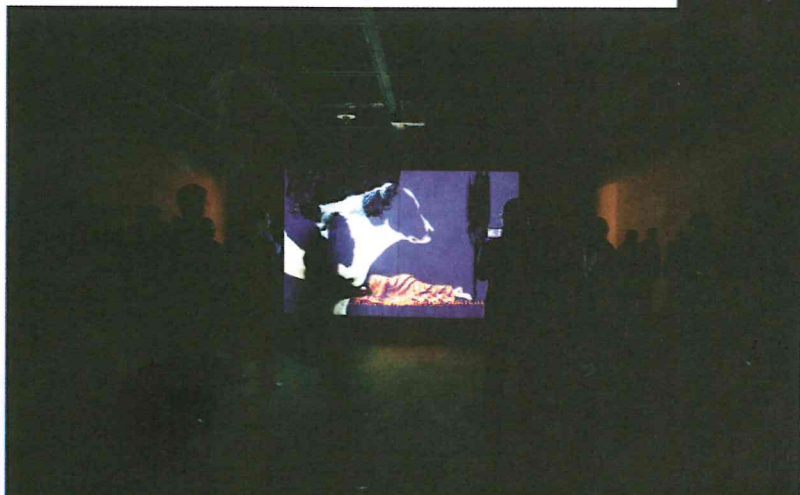
Below: Untitled, Cover of Shal Bamoo. Circa 2000s. Oil and Graphite on Canvas. 108.5 x 118 cm. Courtesy of the Estate of Farideh Lashai.

Facing page, above: An exhibition view of *Towards the Ineffable*.

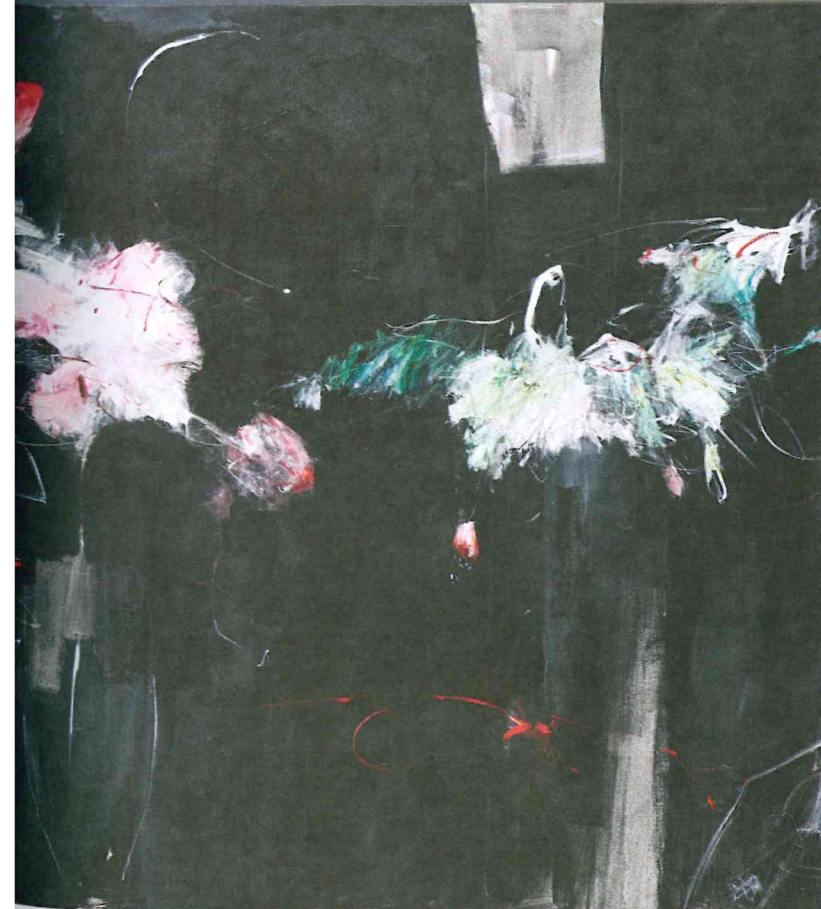
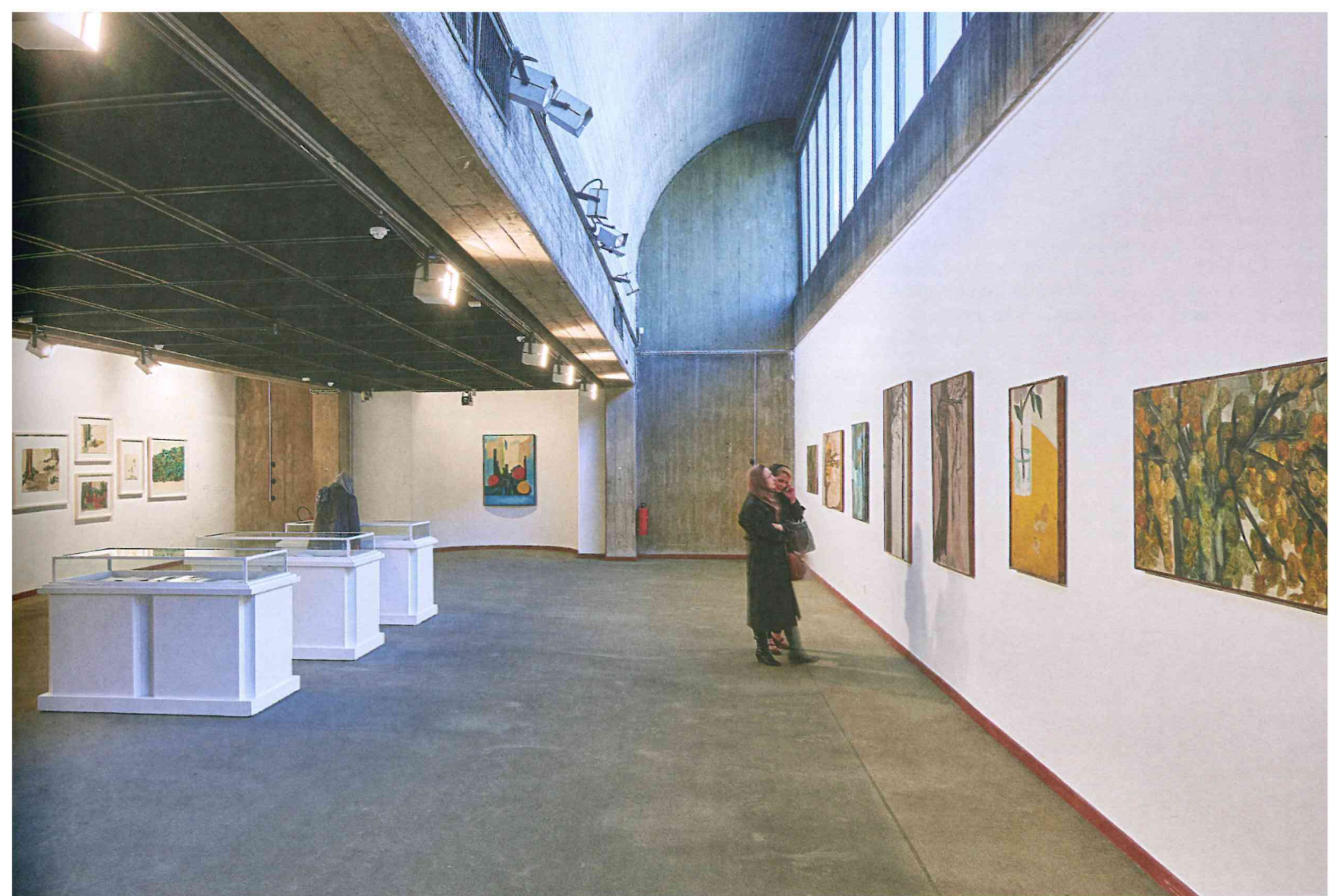
Below: Untitled, from the *Foliage in Darkness* series. 2008. Oil and Graphite on Canvas. 200 x 210 cm.



Exhibition view of *Towards the Ineffable* at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.







to design the museum in the center of Tehran. Much of the American art was purchased by Diba, who had studied architecture at Howard University, with the help of individuals, including presidents of Sotheby's and Christie's. The Empress, who had a preference for European art, commissioned her own buyers to acquire Modern and European masterpieces, including works by Paul Gauguin and August Renoir's *Gabrielle With Open Blouse*. But all of this art buying needed to be done in secret. The museum was inaugurated in 1977 and the works were put on display—much in the same manner of Farideh Lashai's exhibition—eminent Western works were shown side-by-side those by established Iranian names. Just two years later the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown by Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution and the Shah and his family fled in exile. The Empress, who is now 77, lives between Paris and Washington D.C. While her name remains publically unmentionable at the museum, the artwork that she amassed is still intact.

And here it was decades later aligning the lobby walls of the TMOCA when we arrived. The series of works by Post-War Western artists, part of Farideh Lashai's retrospective, provided a sharp introduction into the exhibition. Also gracing the walls were works by important Iranian artists—Behjat Sadr, Bahman Mohasses and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, among others. The abstract language of the works spoke to each other—representative of the artistic dialogue Abstract Expressionism generated internationally during the Post-War period. However, I, as were others, was perplexed as to what role these works played in the retrospective of this prominent Iranian artist. Where were Farideh's works?

Curated by Farideh's long time friend Faryar Javaherian who



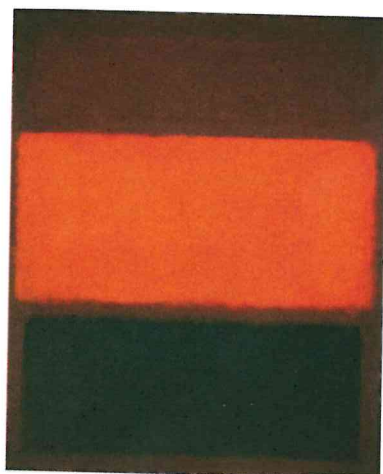
conceived the idea for the retrospective, to stage the exhibition wasn't an easy feat. Authorities were weary of the artist's leftist political views, however, Majid Mollanoroozi, the museum's newly appointed director, agreed to go ahead emphasising the importance of Farideh's art. "In Iran the cultural and artistic scene has been quite patriarchal," he commented. "The focus has been really on men. Hence, it was important for us to show what the women artists of this country have contributed to the artistic development of the scene. Farideh Lashai has been quite significant and contributed differently from many other women artists in that she had multi-faceted practices. She was also a translator and a writer. It was for these reasons that we chose to do this exhibition."

During the summer of 2014, Lashai's daughter, Maneli Keykavoussi, met Germano Celant, Senior Curator at the Guggenheim Museum and Director of the Fondazione Prada, and began speaking with him about the concept for the show. "I am not that informed about Iranian art so when Maneli approached me about doing a retrospective about Farideh I said I was not sure because I don't know much," said Celant. "But when she showed me the works, especially the last part encompassing video and painting, I thought it was very interesting. I was intrigued by the idea of turning off the light—how it relates to censorship, literal and metaphorical shadows, the complexity of the culture here and of being a woman. And so I agreed." Celant apparently accepted to curate the show free of charge—astounding for a curator who was reportedly paid \$1 million dollars for his Milan Expo 2015 exhibition. "I began to see the complexity of her life as a political person, an artist, and a mother," he says. "I am increasingly interested in doing this type of show where one's biography crosses with their art." Celant did similar types of exhibitions with Louise Nevelson and Piero Manzoni at Gagosian Gallery's New York space. "Then I came to the vault and realised I could take out some of the works and juxtapose them with Farideh's to give context to her life," he adds.

"The exhibition is about context," said Maneli at several intervals. It clearly was and as Celant states, "I wanted to use the exhibition as a reference not as a way to put her in competition [with other artists] but in relation to her time." He notes that the grey wall in each space refers to the context—the pairing of Farideh's art with what was happening in her life and in the international art world. "You enter the first room from the walkway surrounding the exhibition where you behold American and European artworks from around 1949," he says. "She was born in 1944 so I tried to contextualise culturally what was happening during her time. Here you can see Action painting, the explosion of Pop Art and also what Iranian artists were doing."

Walking through the remainder of the exhibition, one can behold Farideh's glass work, her writings—some of which are powerfully written as statements on the wall, her passionate nature filling the space with words—and also her translations of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Her art lightens the museum

that is, with its minimal lighting and worn pillars, like Iran an opportunity for renovation. Other rooms continue the intriguing pairing of Farideh's work with those from the museum's collection. "The juxtaposition of Pollock next to Seperhi?" exclaims Mollanoroozi "If an Iranian curator had done that we would have stopped him!" But here it has been deemed valid; it reveals an international curator's perspective. However, the inclusion of Sohrab Seperhi's 1971 *Tree Trunks* can be understood. The artist was Farideh's friend and mentor. But Pollock? That's a tough relationship to ascertain. Context, context.



Above: Mark Rothko. *Sienna, Orange and Black on Dark Brown*. 1962. Oil on canvas. 193.5 x 176.5 cm. Below: Roy Lichtenstein. *Roto Broil*. 1961. Oil on canvas. 172.5 x 172.5 cm. Both courtesy of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

The exhibition ends with Farideh's much-loved video projections on canvases. Here are the shadows that Celant mentioned. In works such the 2011-12 *El Amal*, which means "hope and desire" created during the Egyptian revolution and the Arab Spring, featured is a Charlie Chaplin figure in a scene of his 1940s film *The Great Dictator*. Then the face of Um Kalthoum, the renowned Egyptian singer, in the shape of the moon, is seen on top of the painting wearing her hanging emerald earrings. Her eyes are closed as she ignores the Dictator below who is dancing to the tune of "El Amal." Chaplin desires to eat the world. He wants to own it. He plays with it, bouncing it here and there and then reaches up to touch the moon. He thinks he has the world until it bursts before his eyes and Um Kalthoum fades gracefully away. It is in this last room that you can sit on the floor in darkness and relish in the lights that show up on canvas; the figures that move are at once dreamy, forlorn and passionate—but still lights in the dark.

It is hard not to think about *Farideh Lashai: Towards the Ineffable* within the broader strengthening of ties between Iran and the West. The priceless artworks in the museum's vault have their own role to play in the saga. The treasure trove of Western art is one that hardly any Iranian will lay eyes on in its entirety—at least not while the current regime remains in power. The museum's directors, all who report to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, are careful not to push against government conservatives through the display of

indecent images. So each year, for several weeks, they display a selection of Western works from the museum's vaults alongside the works of a prominent Iranian artist or artists.

"Now they are concerned about the value of the collection," says Celant. "And everyone is trying to get the collection out of Tehran. Berlin is trying, I have tried for Italy, and Washington D.C. as well. All of this is political, of course. Obama wants to have the collection not because of the collection but to say that they are on better terms with Iran." And this is ultimately where politics can meddle in art. Such a move might be seen as a form of cultural diplomacy. And for some, cultural diplomacy goes hand-in-hand with dropping the sanctions. There is also the possibility that a larger and more comprehensive show could follow in 2017 at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. But this would only happen if political and legal circumstances enable it.





Left: An installation view of Farideh Lashai's glass vases in *Towards the Ineffable*. Below: Untitled, from the *Tree* series. circa 1970s. Oil on Canvas. 130 x 90 cm.



## SHARJAH

Farideh Lashai will be further commemorated in an upcoming exhibition curated by Hoor Al Qassimi at the Sharjah Art Foundation. Presented will be paintings, sculptures, installations and stop motion animation works created during the more-than 50-year career of the late Iranian artist in the iconic Beit Al Serkal. "Located in an old historic house in Sharjah, this exhibition will present an intimate setting and allow visitors to experience the vast range of works the artist has created, in different mediums, since her teenage years," says Hoor Al-Qassimi.

The exhibition will trace Farideh's evolution as a multi-disciplinary artist and the influences of her radical views, displacement and return to Iran. Included are paintings on canvas and paper from numerous series, including the *Pomegranate* series, *Trees* series and *Mosaddegh* series. Also displayed will be Lashai's crystal vases, some marked by delicate cypress tree engravings from the early 1960s which she learned to design and carve during her time at Riedel Studios in Kufstein, Austria.

The retrospective will also show *Tyranny of Autumn, Not Every Tree Can Bear*, which was only exhibited only once in 2004 as part of an exhibition at the TMOCA. The work consists of four cylinders that are erected using fishnet, suspending small cypress leaf paintings within them. The four 'trees' refers to traditional Persian gardens that embody the idea of an earthly paradise, which is divided into four spaces by two streams within an enclosed space. The cypress is a symbol of Iran's ability to endure countless historic invasions.

"Sheikha Hoor Al Qassimi had seen Farideh's work in 2010 at her show at Isabelle van den Eynde Gallery," says Maneli. "The plans for an exhibition at Sharjah Art Foundation were suggested right after Farideh passed away, so about three years ago. It is absolutely a coincidence, and also a fortunate one, that this retrospective comes right after the exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. A momentum was created and we can continue that energy. There were a considerable number of works that we could not exhibit in Iran, either because we did not have access to them or we could not show them because of socio-political sensitivities. Now they will be on view at SAF."

The widely divergent approaches of the curators, the entirely

different architecture of the Tehran Museum and the Beit Al Serkal, and the use of the TMOCA Collection in the Tehran show, will set the Tehran and Sharjah retrospectives very much apart. "They are two different shows and I am very curious to see the effect of these various elements in contextualising Farideh's work," adds Maneli. "It is a different way of seeing the work. When the curator immerses him or herself into the universe of the artist, the work almost becomes a new form of art."

Back in Tehran the school children are still in the museum. They sit transfixed as they transfer their perceptions of the art in the exhibition onto their sketchbooks. Perhaps these children have never been outside of Iran. Perhaps they have never been exposed to contemporary works of art. "The collection has been locked away for many years and many Iranians have forgotten that it exists," says Celant. Now the younger generation can learn from it. Here they are in silent dialogue with the world at-large—an experience that is as priceless as the works that they draw. ■

Farideh Lashai runs at the Sharjah Art Foundation from 12 March to 14 May. [sharjahart.org](http://sharjahart.org)