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Tehran's Ab-Anbar Gallery Links the Diaspora and Global Art



Drawings by the Scottish artist David Batchelor, who will have a solo exhibition at the Ab-Anbar gallery in January.
COURTESY OF DAVID BATCHELOR

By GINANNE BROWNELL MITIC

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LONDON — Reza Aramesh had received offers before. Over the years the London-based artist, who was born in Iran, was approached by various Tehran galleries asking if he would like to have his works exhibited. But for a variety of reasons it never felt suitable.

“I always wanted to show in Iran, but it was never really the right situation or gallery at the time,” said Mr. Aramesh, 42, whose works scrutinize oppression and violence in a global context through mediums including photography, installations and sculpture. “I did not show in Iran just for the sake of it because even in London I never did that. With any gallery, it has to make sense.”

But a few years ago when the newly founded Ab-Anbar gallery in Tehran approached the artist, who has been featured in shows in countries including South Africa, Israel, China and Argentina, he was intrigued. “For one, it was a gut feeling,” said Mr. Aramesh, who has a solo show at the Dubai outpost of the Leila Heller Gallery (until Jan. 4) and is featured in a group show “Uncertain States: Artistic Strategies in States of Emergency” (until Jan. 15) at Berlin’s Akademie Der Künste.

“Another was that I met Salman Matinfar a number of years ago and was impressed with him and his knowledge of my work. But also what interests me is that as a gallerist I like his ambition.”



A sculpture by London-based Reza Aramesh, whose works examine oppression and violence in a global context.
REZA ARAMESH, VIA LEILA HELLER GALLERY

Mr. Matinfar, the founder and director of Ab-Anbar (“water reserve” in Farsi), plans for his gallery to be international in scope, not only in its focus to bring Iranian diaspora artists’ work back to Tehran (Mr. Aramesh’s second show with the gallery, “At 11:57 am Wednesday 23 October 2013,” closed in early October) but also to have international contemporary artists exhibited in the gallery, in the downtown district of the capital.

Exhibitions like last spring’s “Mass Individualism: A Form of Multitude” featured works that included loans of pieces from the Gagosian Gallery (Tehran-born New York-based Y.Z. Kami’s “Untitled” installation from 1993) and the Lisson Gallery (three paintings from British-Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiary).

Both galleries will be exhibitors at Art Basel Miami, which is going on through Sunday, with the Lisson Gallery featuring a painting and sculpture from Ms. Houshiary.

This autumn, Ab-Anbar held solo shows for the diaspora artists Avish Khebrehzadeh and Ghazaleh Avarzamani, and Ab-Anbar made its international art fair debut at Italy’s Artissima in November. At the art fair, Ab-Anbar featured works by Ms. Khebrehzadeh and by Raha Raissnia, an Iranian-born Brooklyn-based artist who this year was shortlisted for the prestigious Abraaj Group Prize, an award focused on artists from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

Next year the Scottish artist David Batchelor will have a solo exhibition starting Jan. 27, and a show in June is being planned for the works of Chris Marker, a late French photographer.

Ab-Anbar’s other remit is to exhibit Iranian artists who still live in the country, but have an international following, so local audiences can get a contextualized view of how their work is viewed globally.

“When you think about Iran, in the past people used to think, ‘Well all the doors are closed and there are all these mysterious things that nobody knows about,’ ” said Leyla Fakhr, a London-based curator who worked for Tate Britain for several years and is organizing Mr. Batchelor’s Ab-Anbar show. “But really what they are doing is very accessible; it is an international program trying to have a presence in different parts of the world, even though they are rooted in a country that does not have incredibly easy access. So I think that makes them quite special.”

Art has always been a passion of Mr. Matinfar's, who earned an undergraduate degree in painting in Tehran and then moved to Dubai in 2000 to get his M.B.A. "Back in those days no one could make money from art in Iran or in the Middle East," he said over breakfast in London. "There was no art market, and even famous artists couldn't live from art, selling paintings."



Sculptures by the Scottish artist David Batchelor, who will have a solo exhibition at the Ab-Anbar gallery in January.

COURTESY OF DAVID BATCHELOR

That changed around 2006 when Art Dubai started and auction houses also began holding sales in the region focused on art from the Middle East. During his time in Dubai, Mr. Matinfar began collecting Modernist and contemporary Iranian art, but he was concerned that much of the Iranian art that was being highlighted internationally was not necessarily the best of what the artists had to offer.

"Lots of not historically important artists got attention because of lack of knowledge from curators, from museums, from a non-Middle Eastern perspective," he said. "Like a kind of Orientalism view into the Middle East."

After he moved to Toronto in 2011 with his architect wife, Azadeh Zaferani (who runs the noncommercial art space Platform 28 in Tehran), the couple initially thought of opening a gallery in the city, but in the end decided they wanted to establish something back home.

Their vision was to create a gallery that would give artists — both international and those from the diaspora — a space to show their work. The gallery would also publish catalogs and provide educational platforms to contextualize their art for local audiences.

“What I find fascinating about Ab-Anbar is that they have this extraordinary and wonderful ability to show exhibitions that really almost have an institutional value,” said Roxane Zand, Sotheby’s deputy chairman for the Middle East and Gulf region, referencing a recent retrospective of the Iranian artist Bahman Mohassess, that was a partnership between Ab-Anbar, Tehran’s Aria Gallery and Morad Montazami, an adjunct Tate Modern curator.

“So this kind of collaboration with someone institutional, in the Western context, enables the projects of Ab-Anbar to be lifted from the purely commercial into something that is more public-service oriented, giving a much wider usefulness, importance and significance to the exhibition,” Ms. Zand said.



A painting by the British-Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiary, whose works were shown at Ab-Anbar in a show last spring.
DAVE MORGAN, VIA SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY

While the art scene in Tehran is booming now with more than 150 galleries, noncommercial spaces and projects — gallery hopping on Fridays has become popular — the infrastructure is lacking in terms of updated arts education. And little public funding is available for spaces like the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which owns works from artists as diverse as Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock.

Until recently, there has also been little focus showcasing both international and diaspora artists, many of whom — like Mr. Aramesh — were keen to show their work in their home countries, but could not find a gallery that they felt could suit their work and produce a show on par with international galleries that represent them at global art fairs and exhibitions.

“It was important for me to have an occasion to show my work in Iran,” said Mr. Kami, who until the show last spring had never been exhibited in his home country. “Although I have lived and worked since the early 1980s in New York, my Iranian heritage is part of who I am, and so there are some aspects of that which come through in my work.”

Vali Mahlouji, an independent curator and adviser to the British Museum, agreed. “It is not about being patriotic or nationalistic or authentic or even nostalgic, but you do feel there is always a part of you that is not quite fulfilled if you are not linking yourself with where you are from,” Mr. Mahlouji said.

“Many Iranian artists outside of Iran in the back of their minds have a connection and often a desire to show there without wanting to be labeled Iranian or Middle Eastern,” Mr. Mahlouji added. “Meanwhile, Iranians want to have a connection to interesting things outside of Iran.”

Mr. Batchelor said he felt that strongly earlier this year on a visit to Tehran to begin preparation for his show and to give a talk at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

“They knew more about my work than I did,” said the London-based artist, jokingly, who will go back to Iran at the beginning of December to create new works for his exhibition. “I was exhausted by the end of the talk, there were so many really good questions.”

He said he found everything about Ab-Anbar and its programming intriguing.

“I was very impressed with what they are doing,” he said. “And it felt like Ab-Anbar is getting in on the ground floor because it is clearly an emerging contemporary art scene. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of it?”